TEACHING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN BUSINESS CLASSES

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Abstract

*Teaching a foreign language goes beyond teaching the language itself. Language is rooted in culture; it reflects customs and sets of values that people display when they speak. So, in the context of globalisation, teaching a foreign language involves the **intercultural communicative competence** as a key component, essential for communicating effectively with people belonging to various cultures, which helps one better understand one's own culture. Teaching **intercultural communicative competence** to our students of Business English is all the more important today, with business going more and more international as an immediate consequence of the recent European integration and as a general consequence of the broader phenomenon of globalisation.*

Keywords: international communicative competence, international speaker, language, culture, knowledge, skills, attitudes.

Motto: "Culture is more often a source of conflict than of synergy. Cultural differences are a nuisance at best and often a disaster."

Geert Hofstede
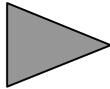
Why teach intercultural communicative competence?

In the current world, in which everything goes global, intercultural communication is a "must". Success in business is nowadays more and more dependent on how well business people understand and develop their relationships with international partners, colleagues and customers. In the context of the recent European integration, we are no longer constrained by state boundaries and thus we have become part of an international network. Hence the need to communicate effectively with various people in various cultural and linguistic environments has become one of our main priorities.

Intercultural communication is also one of the main concerns of the Council of Europe, that is to act towards promoting cultural and linguistic diversity as part of its policy regarding the building of European identity. In this context, foreign language teaching is seen as going beyond linguistic performance and verbal communication by also comprising intercultural abilities and skills.

Another perspective we can take in discussing *intercultural competence* regards students' mobility. More and more students go abroad to complete their studies or to experience different educational environments and more and more students come to our country for the same reasons. Under these circumstances, we, as language teachers, have to cater for various kinds of needs and expectations of students with different cultural backgrounds. Encouraging and promoting intercultural or cross-cultural dialogue is one of the main concerns of education and, at the same time, the most important means of creating an atmosphere of involvement and cooperation. Language is the essential component of intercultural education through which awareness is raised and various cultural and linguistic values are conveyed.
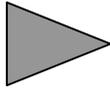
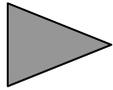## Definition of intercultural communicative competence

What is *intercultural communicative competence* after all? It is quite a complex concept defined as the learners' "ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality." (Byram, 2005). In other words, *intercultural competence* is about understanding and interacting with people belonging to different cultures. The components of *intercultural competence* are thus "**knowledge**, **skills** and **attitudes**, complemented by the values one holds because of one's belonging to a number of social groups. These values are part of one's social identities." (Byram, 2005)

Following Byram in defining the components of *intercultural competence*, we consider that the **attitudes** represent the fundamental aspect of *intercultural competence*. The "intercultural speaker" (Byram, 1997) is open to other cultures, accepts the others and is ready and curious to discover other people's set of values and beliefs. Most importantly, the effective "international speaker" has the ability to look at themselves from an outsider's perspective, an ability which is called "to decentre".

Another essential component of *intercultural competence* is **knowledge**, more exactly the **knowledge** of how social groups from various cultures interact. Knowledge comprises two dimensions mainly: "knowledge of social processes, and knowledge of illustrations of those processes and products; the latter includes knowledge about how other people are likely to perceive you, as well as some knowledge about other people." (Byram, 2005)

Last but not least, we come to the practical dimension of *intercultural communicative competence*, which consists of a various range of skills the effective "international speaker" has to master. The first category of skills, **skills of interpreting and relating**, refers to the "ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own" (Byram, 2005). The "intercultural speakers" also need **skills of discovery and interaction**, that is, the "ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction." (Byram, 2005)

However, it is equally important for an effective "international speaker" to be able to reflect upon their own set of values and the way they are influenced by these in judging other people's values. Thus, **critical cultural awareness** is "the ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries". (Byram, 2005)

The role of the teacher

Teaching *intercultural communicative competence* involves certain *skills, attitudes* and *values* that are essential in understanding and managing intercultural human relationships. The role of the teacher is to help learners become aware of the relationships between their own culture and other cultures, to raise their interest in finding out more about the others and, most importantly, to be able to reflect upon themselves and the culture they belong to from other people's perspectives. Thus, developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching is meant "to give learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence; to prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures; to enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours; and to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience." (Byram, 2005). In other words, the role of the teacher is, on the one hand, to develop skills, attitudes and awareness of values and, on the other hand, to inform students about a particular country and its culture, or about different countries and the culture(s) they belong to. He/she can do that by designing activities that give students the possibility to discuss and debate upon the target culture and draw conclusions. They can do that as part of simulations and role-plays or as part of other task-based activities. An essential role in designing this type of activities is played by authentic materials that offer the students the necessary authentic information about the target culture in a printed, audio or video format. Naturally, the approach to these materials is always critical.

To sum up, the role of the teacher is to provide students with the right type of material and to design appropriate activities in order to encourage them to express their own opinions, to compare the target language with their own, to establish differences and similarities and to draw relevant conclusions from their discussions. The teacher is not supposed to impose their own views and experience, but only to facilitate the students' interaction and establish the rules for discussions and debates, such as taking turns, listening actively, avoiding discriminatory

remarks, showing respect, using polite language. In this new perspective, the language teacher plays the role of a catalyst in the process of acquiring critical intercultural communicative competence.
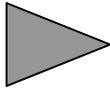
The relevance of intercultural communicative competence in teaching Business English

The *intercultural communicative competence* is even more relevant for students in Business since they are very likely to function in international environments and, thus come in contact with people from different countries. This type of competence is becoming more and more important and is one of the key competences in business because international business relations are increasing, more international joint ventures are being established, the number of multicultural teams is also increasing and, as a consequence, the quality standards in international cooperation are ever higher. This is why they have to be very well prepared and provided with all the necessary tools in order to successfully manage situations of this kind. A successful international speaker has to display certain personal traits, such as self-confidence, openness, curiosity, empathy, reflexivity, tolerance and also social skills: foreign language performance, communication skills, social intelligence, openness to changes, problem-solving abilities.

In business, the *intercultural communicative competence* is seen as a necessary competence in conflict-solving situations, that is in settling the disagreements across cultures that are grounded in the different approaches people take for solving disputes. People from different cultures approach conflicts distinctly. This is why when we teach, for instance, negotiation, besides the necessary language that we provide our students with, we also have to make them aware of some cultural standards that they have to bear in mind when negotiating with culturally different people. To give only two examples, the American cultural standards consist of: individualism, relaxedness, social recognition, minimizing interpersonal distance, achievement orientation and action orientation as opposed to German cultural standards: task orientation, rule orientation, straightforwardness/sincerity, differentiation of interpersonal contact, deference to hierarchy/authority, time scheduling. (Thomas, 2005)
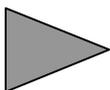
Conclusions

Teaching students *intercultural communicative competence* is part of the wider goal of preparing them for the knowledge society. *Intercultural competence* is one of the key abilities that allow students to function effectively in the current society, based mainly on information and knowledge. It enables our students to develop the critical awareness and intercultural skills that they need in order to understand and cope with cultural diversity, while making them aware of their own cultural characteristics and the way they are perceived by others.

In conclusion, teaching *intercultural communicative competence* is one of the key aspects of teaching a foreign language and the role of the teacher is to facilitate, through various activities, the students' access to other cultures and, equally important, to help students discover and rediscover their identity as significant and valuable representatives of their own culture.

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Roxana Ciolăneanu is a Lecturer in Business English at the Academy of Economic Studies Bucharest. She holds a Master's degree in Theoretical Linguistics, University of Bucharest. She is a PhD Candidate at the University of Bucharest, preparing to defend a thesis called *Interdisciplinarity and terminology in the language of marketing*, which focuses on investigating the language of marketing and its interdisciplinary contacts with other specialized languages. Her current research interests fall into the following areas: semantics, terminology and applied linguistics.