Ildikó Némethová

Building Intercultural Competence through Language Education

Ildikó Némethová:
Interkulturális kompetencia a nyelvoktatásban

Összefoglaló
A tanulmány elsősorban az interkulturális kompetencia fontosságát hangsúlyozza az idegenyelv-oktatásban. Rámutat arra, hogy a megfelelő interkulturális kompetencia lehetőséget kínál a helyes döntések meghozatalához az eltérő kultúrával rendelkező egyének számára. Továbbá hangsúlyozza, hogy minden interkulturális kommunikáció alapvető követelménye a kontextus-érzékeny, kultúraspecifikus tudás és a valódi humanista látásmód.

Kulcsszavak: interkulturális kompetencia, nyelvtanulás, kultúra, emocionális és kulturális intelligencia

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to highlight the importance of intercultural competence in language learning and teaching. All intercultural encounters incorporate communication between individuals who, rather than belonging to only one culture, belong to a diverse array of different cultures at the same time. They share some of these cultures with the people they are talking to, and some of them they do not. And some of these cultural variations and affinities will influence the way they communicate, and some of them will be totally insignificant.

Key words: Intercultural competence, language learning, culture, emotional and cultural intelligence

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural knowledge has become an integral constituent of effective language learning and teaching through the expansion of cultural and societal horizons, and the cultivation of global knowledge and engagement. The ability to engage successfully in intercultural encounters has become one of the most significant skills individuals have to develop because in the twenty-first century they are challenged by a future in which they will have to interact with people from a wide range of diverse cultural backgrounds. Developing effective and mindful intercultural knowledge and skills will require that an individual acquires new ways of thinking and interacting. This will not be easy, for two very pertinent reasons. First, because an individual's vision is formed by the perspectives of his own culture, it is often very difficult to comprehend and appreciate many of the actions originating from other individuals of divergent cultures. Second, an outstanding intercultural communicator must be open to new and different communication experiences, have empathy towards dissimilar others, develop a universalistic, realistic worldview, and learn to be tolerant of views that differ from his own. It is the individual's ability to change, to make adjustments in his communication habits and behaviour, which gives him the potential to engage in successful and effective intercultural encounters.

2. CULTURE, CULTURAL SYSTEMS, AND INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE LEARNING

All intercultural encounters incorporate communication between individuals who, rather than belonging to only one culture, belong to a diverse array of different cultures at the same time. The problem for intercultural communication is that communication never takes place between cultures, but between individuals. Individuals, and the contexts in which they interact, are exceptional, dynamic, and changeable. Based upon this definition, culture is somehow tied to group membership. The versatile conceptions of culture help to explain different features of human conduct by directing individuals to advance very constructive questions. Perceiving culture as a set of rules motivates individuals to examine how these rules are acquired. Perceiving culture as a set of traditions drives individuals to explore why some features of behaviour withstand to be transmitted to later generations and some do not. Perceiving culture as a specific way of thinking urges individuals to scrutinise how the human mind is formed and the association between individual cognition and collective cognition.

Any group of individuals that has specific ways of thinking, behaving, communicating and learning can be said to be associated with a particular cultural system. A cultural system is composed of four main elements: ideas and beliefs about the world, established ways of dealing with other individuals, forms of communicating, and methods of learning how to utilise these tools. Cultural systems constitute an autonomous system of communication with a shared jargon, with schemes in which people comprehend what they need to achieve to emerge as participants, with an ideological standpoint, and with distinguishing forms of interpersonal relationships among members in these groups.

Intercultural language learning should focus on the analysis of situations in which individuals from diverse cultural groups participate in social interaction with each other, and the discursive methods they must exploit to understand each other in those encounters which are the obvious situations of intercultural communication. In many situations certain features of the so-called cultural difference are of no significance at all, whereas other aspects assume central importance. The main focus of intercultural language learning should be on socially-driven interactions, on how they generate an inherent logic of their own, and how individuals interpret those social interactions in making decisions and in taking actions.

2.1 Building Blocks of Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is defined as the overall internal capability of an individual to manage key challenging features of any intercultural interaction such as cultural differences and unfamiliarity, inter-group posture, the accompanying experiences of stress. Five components of intercultural competence influence the individual's ability to interact effectively and appropriately in a particular cultural system, i. e. motivation to communicate, an appropriate pool of knowledge, appropriate communication skills, sensitivity, and character. A motivated communicator aims to relate to others at a personal level and develops an international perspective when interacting with individuals from diverse groups of people. An appropriate pool of knowledge means that individuals manifest self-awareness and understand the rules, norms, and expectations associated with people with whom they are interacting. Appropriate communication skills refer to an individual's ability to listen, observe, analyse, and interpret and apply these specific behaviours in a manner that enables the individual to achieve goals. Sensitivity involves being flexible, patient, emphatic, curious about other individuals, open to diversity, and comfortable with others. Empathy is closely connected with sensitivity and social competence. It is the ability to recognise and understand the other individual's perceptions

and feelings, and to accurately convey that understanding through an accepting response. Character is the sum and total of an individual's choices and it is composed of both personal history and how that history is exhibited.

Communication with culturally different individuals is associated with adverse emotional responses leading to feelings of awkwardness and anxiety. The root of this problem is that language is fundamentally ambiguous. The ambiguity of language is not the result of poor learning. The ambiguity of language means that language can never fully express our meanings. Communication works better the more the participants share assumptions and knowledge about the world. If two individuals have very similar histories, backgrounds, and experiences, their communication works fairly easily because the inferences they make about what the other person means will be based on common experience and knowledge. The ambiguous nature of language is one major source of difficulties in intercultural communication. Where any two people differ in their cultural systems because they are of different genders, different ages, different ethnic groups, different educational backgrounds, different parts of the same city, different income or occupational groups, different personal histories, they will find it more difficult to draw inferences about what the other persons mean. Successful communication is based on sharing as much as possible the assumptions we make about what the others mean.

The introduction of the intercultural dimension into language learning and teaching is intended to ensure the acquisition and mediation of effective intercultural skills. Fundamental to intercultural language learning is the acknowledgement of an inextricable link between language and culture. Language frames the expectations of individuals and directs their perceptions. Language is an arbitrary, symbolic system that names ideas, feelings, experiences, events, people, and that is governed by the multilayered rules developed by members of a particular speech community. Culture shapes the pragmatic or situational rules (what to say, how to say, to whom to say) that govern language usage in a particular culture. Language has a central role in the transmission of cultural codes, and it is responsible for the provision of cultural knowledge through distinct language forms and messages. Intercultural language learning and teaching identifies culture as the authentic experience of individuals through intercultural interactions. These interactions between individuals are context-sensitive, negotiated, mediated, and variable. Learners engage in understanding their own language and culture in relation to the culture and language of different groups of individuals. Though linguistic knowledge is essential to communication, culture plays a referential function and leads to effective communication and understanding. Culture is inseparable from language learning and teaching since it recharges language activities with meaning and context.

2.2 The Role of Cultural and Emotional Intelligence in Intercultural Language Learning

Intercultural competence is closely associated with cultural intelligence, i.e. the knowledge of culture, mindfulness and behavioural ability to interact effectively across cultures (Ting-Toomey, 1999, Samovar et al. 2011). This means understanding what culture is, how cultures vary, and how culture affects behaviour. Culture is developed, transformed and transmitted through the conscious and unconscious activities of groups of individuals. Culture is learned, and it is through this learning potential and process that individuals can cultivate this unique domain of intelligence known as cultural intelligence (Hooper and Potter, 2011). Cultural intelligence focuses on intercultural settings, and on an individual's ability to grasp and reason correctly in situations characterised by cultural diversity (Early and Ang, 2003). Cultural intelligence is not a culture-bound or culture-specific model, and therefore it does not represent capability within a single culture. It is regarded as a multidimensional set of four abilities that includes metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural dimensions (Sternberg &

Detterman, 1986). Individuals with heightened metacognitive cultural intelligence consciously examine their own cultural statements, meditate during interactions, and adjust their cultural knowledge when dealing with culturally diverse others. Metacognitive cultural intelligence supports active reasoning about people and situations in different cultural settings; it precipitates active challenges to rigorous dependence on culturally-bound thinking and judgements; it urges individuals to adapt and modify their strategies so that they are more culturally efficient and more likely to achieve coveted outcomes in intercultural encounters. Cognitive cultural intelligence reflects knowledge of norms, practices, and conventions in different cultures. This dimension of cultural intelligence refers to an individual's level of knowledge of the cultural environment. Motivational cultural intelligence reflects the ability to direct attention and energy toward learning about and functioning in situations characterised by cultural differences. Behavioural cultural intelligence refers to the extent to which an individual acts effectively, both verbally and non-verbally, in intercultural encounters. Each of the factors of cultural intelligence is multidimensional in nature and needs to be understood at the sub-dimension level. Metacognitive cultural intelligence includes the cognitive processes of awareness, planning, and controlling mental models. Cognitive cultural intelligence includes knowledge of cultural systems as well as cultural norms and values. Motivational cultural intelligence embraces intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy. Behavioural cultural intelligence includes flexibility in verbal and nonverbal actions as well as flexibility in speech acts.

Mindful cultural intelligence refers to a behavioural ability through which information about other cultures is approached with an open mind and without stereotypical categorisations of individuals of diverse cultures. Any form of stereotyping is potentially an obstruction to successful communication, because it blinds individuals to real differences and similarities that exist between the participants in an interaction. The most obstructive form of stereotyping is often called negative stereotyping. In such a case, the first step is to contrast two cultures or two groups on the basis of a single dimension. For example, some might say that all Asians are inductive and all westerners are deductive in their introduction of topics. Such a statement may have some basis in observation, but it ignores the fact that members of both imagined communities use both deductive and inductive strategies. The second step in negative stereotyping is to focus on this artificial and ideological difference as a problem for communication. Unfortunately, focusing on this assumed therefore ideological difference has become common in intercultural communication analyses. An example of such stereotyping would be to say, following on from the observation described above, that because all Asians are inductive and westerners are deductive, it is difficult for them to communicate with each other easily or successfully

Mindfulness in intercultural encounters is primarily a question of awareness. If individuals are aware of the need to be sensitive to and respectful of differences among cultures they will be more likely to carry out the necessary steps to gain the knowledge required to communicate mindfully. Individuals with no knowledge of other cultures but with an awareness of the importance of cultural mindfulness can begin their journey to developing an intercultural mindset. These individuals have to display a strong sense of respect and empathy for the cultural frames of reference of diverse others.

Emotional intelligence similarly to cultural intelligence is an important component of intercultural competence (Goleman, 2005). It includes the ability to identify and express emotions; however, culture can influence rules of emotional display. Emotional intelligence is a product of and limited to the culture in which it was developed. The three main components of emotional intelligence involve self-awareness, social awareness, intrapersonal and interpersonal management of emotions. Emotional intelligence requires self-awareness

and emotional literacy which is obtained by observing, learning, perceiving and understanding one's own feelings and emotions.

3 SOME TIPS FOR TEACHING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Intercultural language learning attempts to engage students in a lifelong learning process of culture-universal and culture-specific knowledge with the aim to enable them to acquire in-depth knowledge, heightened mindfulness, and intercultural skills and apply them to a diverse range of intercultural situations. Without culture-sensitive knowledge, learners cannot become aware of the implicit culture-specific meanings which are used to evaluate behaviours in an intercultural context. Comprehensive knowledge about those cultural elements that influence interaction is important for the development of adequate behavioural patterns in intercultural settings. Language abilities are helpful but not sufficient for the achievement of intercultural competence.

The goal of intercultural language learning at the Faculty of Applied Languages of the University of Economics in Bratislava is to engage learners in critical thinking activities to help them develop mindful intercultural competence. Films positively affect intercultural language learning through their unique abilities to appeal to learners' emotions and senses. The entertainment value of this genre allows students to relate to the content, form bonds with characters and develop a better feel for the relevant history. We strongly believe that, should students become emotionally connected to certain characters, they will become motivated to learn more about cultural forces. It is argued that the visual immediacy of films often results in increased interest in a certain culture-related topic. To a greater extent, films help students achieve historical familiarity and create enthusiasm, raise interest levels, and increase comprehensibility. The effectiveness of films in

the process of intercultural language learning is largely determined by how teachers choose the way in which they should be incorporated. If teachers wish to convey feelings or attitudes about a certain historical event or time period, films can have an extremely positive impact on intercultural learning.

The cultural exploration of Ireland through *The Field* directed by Jim Sheridan (1990) acquaints learners with significant aspects of Irish culture such as the importance of land ownership and rural values, and the assertion of national identity in Ireland. In setting the film in the 1930s rather than the 1950s, students understand the earlier decade's dramatic socio-economic woes, grim realities to which the newly freed 26-county territory made an inadequate political response. There is a strong cultural statement in the film on the Irish obsession with land ownership rather than the use of land. Sheridan's film illustrates a post-colonial Ireland. *The Field*, due to its engagement with a number of Irish culture-bound themes, including the tension between tradition and modernity, the psychological effects of colonialism upon the individual and community, and the role of the Catholic Church in the disenfranchisement of Irish citizens, is a perfect revelation of the national identity in Ireland.

Research on intercultural language learning has revealed that most miscommunication does not arise through mispronunciations or through poor uses of grammar, which are perceived as important aspects of language learning. The major sources of miscommunication in intercultural contexts lie in differences in patterns of cultural systems. Research has also indicated that intercultural miscommunication and even hostility arise when diverse groups fail to interpret the intentions of the other group as a result of misinterpreting discourse conventions. The power of political discourse lies in its unique ability to deeply involve the learner both at a cognitive and emotional level. Political texts enhance individual involvement and enjoyment and thus lead to the increased motivation of learners. Such texts, through

their linguistic properties, interact with the process of language acquisition, facilitate the understanding of linguistic structures, and enhance their use and extend semantic scopes. They also develop cultural awareness, since adequately selected texts are seen as a reflection of culture and society, portraying beliefs and values in a credible way. Categories of political discourse include parliamentary debates, constitutions, and laws. A significant criterion for utilisation of political texts in intercultural learning is that the language is closely associated with culture, and that culture is combined with the practice of politics in a particular society. Political discourse is conceived as a set of capabilities people have, as a set of socio-cultural resources used by people in the construction of meaning about their world, and their activities. They are authentic sets of capabilities whose presence is inferred from their realisations in activities, texts, and speeches. One of the main goals of our intercultural language learning classroom is to analyse discourses about national identity in Britain. It focuses on the way politicians choose to utilise language to define and construct a vision of the world which gives meaning to Britain as a nation-state.

4 CONCLUSION

Successful intercultural language learning develops individuals who acknowledge the limitations of their own perspectives and remain open to the differing perspectives of others. Intercultural interactions conducted in such a spirit allow the individuals to change their respective views in light of what they learn from each other. Intercultural encounters create entirely new social situations, and since the rules necessary to govern intercultural encounters do not yet exist, they can only be created through a communication process in which all individuals are given equal opportunities to participate. It is insufficient for one culture to simply force its own norms on other cultures or for one culture to uncritically adopt the norms of the other group of individuals because the relationship between the two cultures would then be based on domination and control. There should be a dialectical process of reflection to reach an agreement and negotiate a shared meaning in which the participants are able to criticise existing cultural principles and norms, to integrate the positive features of those principles and norms, and to create entirely new principles and norms to effectively deal with anomic situations.

Intercultural communicators need cultural and emotional intelligence to cope successfully and mindfully with cognitively understood interaction standards. They are regarded as prerequisites of intercultural competence enhancement through changes in ethnocentrism, intercultural communication apprehension and international awareness. Thus, incorporating cultural and emotional intelligence training into the development of intercultural language learning programmes in tertiary education has been observed as immensely beneficial. Effective intercultural communication relies on three forms of intelligence: rational, logic-based intelligence, cultural intelligence, and emotional intelligence.

No individual incorporates all of the characteristics of a particular culture, and every individual in any cultural system is only a partial or peripheral participant. Individuals are all synchronously attendants of diversified cultural systems. Comparisons between groups of individuals should always take into consideration more than a single dimension of contrast. Ideological statements function as obstacles to successful communication. They obscure the obvious differences and similarities that exist between the individuals in a social interaction.

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