



Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in Foreign Language Education at a Private University

Desarrollo de la Competencia Comunicativa Intercultural en el Aprendizaje de una lengua Extranjera en una Universidad Privada

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Leidy Girleza Cano García¹

Abstract

This reflective article analyzes a pedagogical experience carried out at a private university in the city of Tunja, Colombia. I worked with mechanical engineering and civil engineering majors enrolled in a second and fourth semester English course, respectively. The study aimed at developing the intercultural communicative competence through communicative activities with North American assistant professors or co-teachers. Data was collected through interviews, video recording, and journals. The findings revealed that activities based on interaction and language strategies can help students develop their intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The study also showed that personality traits were a factor that influenced the development of ICC.

Keywords: Language, culture, foreign language education, intercultural communicative competence, interaction.

¹ *She* was an adjunct professor at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC). She holds a Bachelor's in Foreign Languages and a Master's in Language Teaching from the Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia in Tunja. She is currently working as a full-time professor at Universidad Santo Tomás-Tunja. She belongs to the research group JOIE. Her research interests include language, culture, and technology. *leidy.cano@usantoto.edu.co & leidyganogarcia@gmail.com*.

Resumen

Este artículo reflexivo analiza una experiencia pedagógica, realizada en una universidad privada en la ciudad de Tunja, en el segundo semestre de ingeniería mecánica y cuatro semestres de ingeniería civil. Su objetivo fue desarrollar la competencia comunicativa intercultural a través de actividades comunicativas con profesores asistentes norteamericanos. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de entrevistas, videos y diarios. Los hallazgos revelaron que las actividades basadas en la interacción y las estrategias lingüísticas podrían ayudarles a desarrollar su competencia comunicativa intercultural (CCI). También muestra que los rasgos de personalidad fueron un factor que influye en el desarrollo de CCI.

Palabras clave: lenguaje, cultura, enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, competencia comunicativa intercultural, interacción.

Introduction

Today, we continue to witness students' mobility from one country to another; thus, it can cause social, political, economic, and educational concerns for both the host country and students. For example, students who move to a new country have to face cultural and language differences in the way they communicate. This demands new approaches to handle those communicative constraints in context, especially in the classroom. In that sense, many educative centers such as schools, institutes and universities have incorporated Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in their curriculums because they consider that ICC allows students to understand differences, live in harmony, and accept others who are culturally and linguistically different. Likewise, institutions consider that students need to expand their knowledge and comprehension about the world and recognize themselves as part of it.

For this study, I wanted to reflect on what of aspects of ICC are needed in order to develop it among Colombian students when they interact with North American teaching assistant at a private university. During this process, mechanical and civil engineering majors enrolled in the second and fourth

English courses, respectively. They were selected because they were opened to develop communicative activities in the classroom. In that sense, they were required to talk in English about different cultural topics as a social practice when interacting with native English speakers for learning English as a foreign language.

In the following lines, I explain the importance and components of Intercultural Communicative Competence, as well as the results of this pedagogical experience.

Literature Review

The Importance of Learning English in Colombia

In Colombia, the Ministry of National Education incorporated the National Development Plan (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo), its purpose is to enhance the quality of education and promote bilingualism (English-Spanish). In doing so, more Colombian people and students would have the opportunity to improve their social, economic, and personal situation by responding to the challenges of a globalized world. The Ministry of National Education stated in their Colombia Very Well Program (2014) that,

Estas son aspiraciones que el Gobierno Nacional tiene para Los ciudadanos colombianos, por lo que desde diferentes sectores se han adelantado iniciativas que buscan mejorar los niveles de inglés de los colombianos, para que como sociedad podamos responder a los retos que nos presenta el mundo globalizado en que vivimos. (p. 2)

[These are the aspirations of that the National Government has for its Colombian citizens. Because of this, from different government sectors we have advanced initiatives that seek to improve the English levels of Colombian people that as a society, we can respond to the challenges that the globalized world presents in which we live]. (p. 2)

For that reason, the intervention model design for English language learning in Colombia is based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), and language learning parameters are based on the *Estándares Básicos en Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés* (Basic

Standards of Competences in Foreign Languages: English/) (Ministry of National Education 2006). The Basic Standards of Competences in Foreign Languages: English provide a clear rubric for each level of English taken by Colombian students; however, they have not been updated since 2006. Because of this, language teachers must incorporate aspects of the CEFR to the preexisting language learning parameters. One of these new components is Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). The Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe (2001) explained that learners who are learning a language not only have the linguistic but also the cultural part which allows them to mediate and negotiate among the speakers in the different topics that arise in conversation.

In 2018, the Council of Europe included more descriptions as an answer to cultural diversity in society, such as culture, literature, and online interaction. They included descriptors for all the receptive and productive abilities like interaction, mediation and communicative competence, which provide descriptors for linguistic and cultural aspects for learning a language. Therefore, the CEFR demands the development of intercultural competence to satisfy the needs of a globalized multilingual and multicultural context.

The new politics in regard to learning and teaching a foreign language in Colombia incorporate two main components, language and culture, in order to be a successful student in a language. To master the language, students have to be able to relate these two components.

Importance of Incorporating Language and Culture

Learning a language entails connecting language and culture. Language is a system, but at the same time, it is a formula. We, as teachers, prepare students in language system, which means teachers focus on grammar and pronunciation, which ultimately helps students learn a language. However, in a communicative context, we also need to find a balance between using language as a system and as a formula. The formula is “mastery of systems such as conversational turn-taking, and speech-act sets mean that many set phrases and other formulaic elements of language use” (Soler & Sandford 2007, p.52). Both system and

formula allow us to communicate within the culture. In this process of learning a language, there is also the oral transmission of thoughts, customs, and feelings.

Culture is the representation of what human beings have been constructing during their lives. Scarino & Liddicoat (2013) pointed out that everything that we are in terms of being, acting, interacting, thinking and valuing is the representation of what we have learn in the context we grew up and those shape our sense of self. In this sense, this paper reflects on the communicative environment among the Colombian students and the North American teaching assistant for the students to develop intercultural communicative competence, know the cultural differences related to feelings, customs and beliefs, and reflect on the conversations expressing what they learnt or found in this experience.

Intercultural communicative competence

Intercultural communicative competence has been defined in multiple ways. Byram (1997) defined ICC as the “speaker who is able to interact with people from another country and a culture in a foreign language” (p. 7). Fantini (2000, as cited in Rico, 2012) defined ICC “as the ability to deal with differences in a positive manner” (p. 132). Lázár (2003, as cited in Gómez 2012) described that ICC as “the ability to cope with one’s own cultural background in interaction with others”. (p. 51)

In this paper, I understood ICC as the ability to face different situations in communicative encounters with people from a different context since each student has his or her own culture.

The intercultural communicative competence has two main components. The first one is the communicative component, which entails linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence. The second includes interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) skills, discovering and/or interacting (*savoir appended- faire*) skills, attitudes (*savoir être*), knowledge (*savoir*), and awareness (*savoir engage*). Both communicative and intercultural components join to form the intercultural communicative competence. The following table summarizes the components of ICC.

Table 1: *Components of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC).*

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)	
Communicative competence	Intercultural competence
Linguistic competence	Skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre)
Sociolinguistics competence	Skills of discovering and /or interacting (savoir appended- faire)
Discourse competence	Attitudes (savoir être)
	Knowledge (savoir)
	Awareness (savoir engage)

Note. Components of intercultural communicative competence based on Byram (1997).

Components of Communicative Competence

Byram (1997) mentioned that he took the work of Van Ek in relation to the communicative competences because “Van Ek emphasizes that foreign language teaching is not just concerned with training in communication skills but also with the personal (autonomy) and social development (social responsibility) of the learner as an individual” (p. 9). In other words, Van Ek understood language as a social interaction in which the qualities of a person and their behavior takes place in the interaction. It means that cultural and sociocultural dimensions are immersed in the individual as an intercultural speaker. Likewise, non-verbal communication is required in order to be successful in the interaction.

Taking parts of Van Ek’s original emphasis, Bryam adapted and modified communicative components. In doing so, Byram developed a model of intercultural competence, which I will explain below. Those were taken into account for the development of the intercultural communicative competence in Colombian students.

Linguistic competence is the application of language rules for the production and interpretation of written and spoken language.

Sociolinguistic competence is the ability that an intercultural speaker has to choose the appropriate language form for each context in order to negotiate the interaction.

Discourse competence is the ability to use, discover, and negotiate appropriate strategies of interpretation, especially in texts.

Components of Intercultural Competence

Knowledge or savoir

According to Byram (1997), the knowledge individuals bring to the interaction when they talk with people from another country is described in two broad categories: “knowledge about social groups and their cultures in one’s own country and similar of the interlocutor’s country and knowledge of the processes of interaction at individual and societal levels” (p. 35). The first category is *knowledge related to the process of socialization that a person acquires through time*. It has a different process at an individual and social level. At the beginning, socialization happens within the family. Second, it develops through formal education. In this process, the person acquires different forms of knowledge through socialization. The person has contact with social groups with varying degrees of national identity, ethnicity, and social class. This interaction can also define the person. The person brings this knowledge in interacting with others, and this belongs to the next category, *Knowledge of the processes of interaction at individual and societal levels*. Through this, people can recognize how they act, think, and relate to specific circumstances at individual and social levels with another cultures.

Skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre) & Skills of discovering and /or interacting (savoir appened- faire)

Byram (1997) divided the skill dimension in two sets, which are the skill of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre) and the skill of discovering and interacting (savoir appenedre and faire) (p. 36).

Byram (1997) defined *savoir comprendre* as the ability to interpret the other culture. It is the knowledge of one's own culture and the other's culture; thereby understanding how the other thinks in relation to different topics.

The second is the skill of discovering and interacting. The skill of discovering is the ability to distinguish and understand the communicative phenomena in a foreign environment. In this case, the skill operates at an individual level. The person needs time to construct themselves in beliefs, meanings and behaviors that help them to interact among cultures. In other words, the individual must recognize how the phenomenon works and how to deal with it in different social contexts.

According to Byram (1997), the skill of interacting is the ability that a person has to communicate with other's culture. In this case, the individual is able to identify communicative situations and interact with others to maintain the interaction.

Attitudes or *savoir-être*

Attitudes or *savoir-être* is the way in which each person is willing and interested in seeking out opportunities to engage with others, discover others' perspectives, and holding back disbelief about the other's culture and belief in our own's culture.

Awareness or *savoir engager*

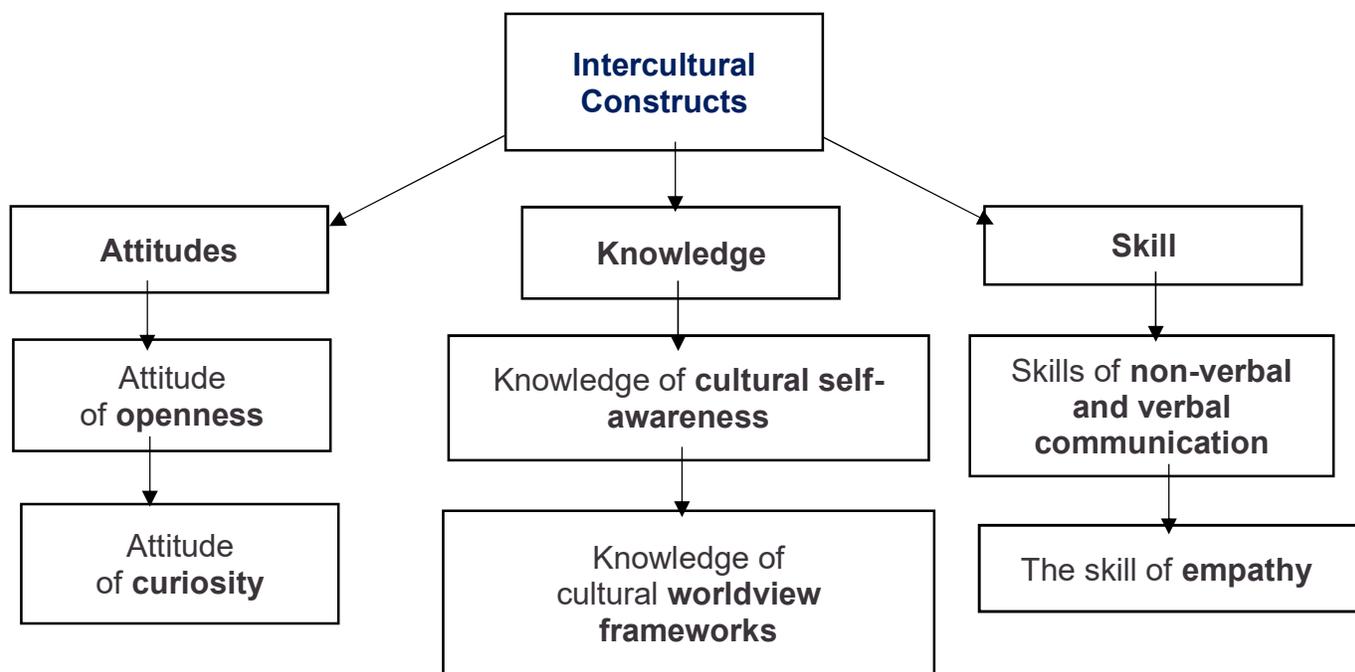
Awareness is the capacity that intercultural speakers have to evaluate critically different topics in one's own culture and other cultures or countries.

Rubric to evaluate and discuss student learning based on ICC

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) developed a rubric to evaluate and discuss student learning in ICC. They called it the Intercultural Knowledge and Competence VALUE rubric. It has the same components mentioned by Byram. Additionally, the rubric helps clarify some of the concepts previously stated. The AAC&U organized the rubric with the following titles.



Figure 2: Intercultural constructs: Attitudes, knowledge, and skills adapted from intercultural knowledge and competence value rubric.



Purdue University presented the following summary of the six intercultural constructs. The first one is related to attitude. The attitude of **openness** is “demonstrated when you are open to initiate and develop interactions with culturally different others. You suspend judgment in valuing your interactions with them” (Purdue University, 2018). In other words, it is the ability to establish an interaction and negotiate those intercultural constraints to maintain the conversation.

The second one is the attitude of **curiosity** (Purdue University, 2018). It means that the intercultural speaker explores other cultures that allow him or her to expand their minds and see the world from the other perspectives to enrich his or her own.

The third one is knowledge of **cultural self-awareness** (Purdue University, 2018). It means that the individual understands other perspectives of living without acquiring them. Furthermore, the speaker critically evaluates and creates the own concept.

The fourth one is knowledge of cultural **worldview frameworks** (Purdue University, 2018). This competence is related to the ability to understand the historical moments that influence culture and explains why it is the way it is.

The fifth one is “when you have the skills of **non-verbal and verbal communication** (Purdue University, 2018). This is the ability to interact with appropriate uses of both languages in order to construct a conversation without misunderstanding.

The sixth is the skill of **empathy** (Purdue University, 2018). It is the ability to connect with others from a different culture. It means that each person has to have to capability to recognize the other´s emotions in order to know what they need and want in order to establish social relationship and personal ties.

Pedagogical intervention

During the time of academic intervention, Colombian students and North American assistant professors (ETAS) met one-on-one for 8 times. Each student created the questionnaire and applied it to the North American assistant professor. The conversations were recorded. The topics were related to food, Halloween, education, Christmas, hobbies, important places, likes and dislikes, and movies. The questions were in English. However, some answers were both languages Spanish and English to understand each other. The purpose was to develop communicative ability as well as intercultural competence between Colombian students and North American assistant professors.

Conclusions

This study concluded that the way Colombian students behave and relate with the North American teaching assistant influenced the development of intercultural communicative competence because relate is the result of the knowledge of what and how they interact with others, and it is reflected in the interaction skills. In that sense, the abilities of interacting are expressed through the personality that each Colombian student and the North American teaching assistant have. Those are important for negotiating and dealing with

communicative constraints which is what allows for a successful conversation. Consequently, those interaction skills which are the skill of non-verbal communication and empathy play an important role because both the North American and Colombian negotiate in the interaction in order for being politeness among them and do not create conflict for their differences.

Empathy and non- verbal communication help students connect with others because it creates an atmosphere of sympathy and confidence to express themselves in the foreign language. Even when students made linguistic mistakes, they were not criticized by the assistants. The assistants helped the students improve and learn more expressions in English. Based on the Colombian students' comments, I noticed that they practiced empathy when conversing with the assistants. Both students and North American teaching assistant treated each other politely and asked for personal information, as well as exchanged ideas. The students and North American teaching assistant felt that they could be themselves in the conversation. Also, they expressed their happiness with the politeness of the assistants. This manner generated self-confidence during the conversation.

The personality trait of openness was seen in both interlocutors when they suspended beliefs and values to understand the other interlocutor. Even when the other speaker did not have the same language level, they could still share different thoughts and topics. This was a sign of politeness and exemplary impression among them, as well as their personality and skills to handle communication and relationships with others.

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