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INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE TEACHING OFFOREIGN LANGUAGES

Abstract: This article aims to clarify what is meant by intercultural competence in the teaching of foreign languages. In a first introductory section, reference is made to various works that have dealt with investigating the relationship between language and culture and the reasons that have led to the need to promote an integrated teaching of both. Subsequently, some key concepts about the intercultural approach or dimension applied to language teaching are pointed out and a conceptual framework is provided in which this dimension is supported. The article concludes with a brief indication about the role of teachers.
Keywords: foreign language teaching, intercultural competence, curriculum, teacher training.

Introduction

For a couple of decades, it is not uncommon to find in theoretical studies on the teaching of foreign languages terms such as "cultural component", "intercultural dimension", "intercultural competence", "intercultural communicative competence" and also continuous references to the important role that corresponds to culture in the teaching-learning process of a language. We can mention, among others, the works of Buttjes and Byram (1991), Byram (1997), Byram, Morgan and others (1994), Byram and Risager (1999), Byram and Fleming (2001), Kramsch (1993, 1998 and 2001), Sercu (2005), or Zárate (1986 and 1995). To these we must add the important role played by the Council of Europe in its division dedicated to the study and promotion of language teaching, one of whose publications, the European Reference *Framework for Learning, Teaching and the evaluation of languages* (Instituto Cervantes, 2002), has become a kind of “lighthouse” by which the teaching-learning of languages in Europe must be guided, whether as foreign languages or as second languages.

Of the studies mentioned, it should be noted that all of them address the question of the relationship between language and culture, providing orientations and expositions about the need to approach the teaching of both in an integral way. The evolution of a teaching that placed the emphasis on communicative competence towards an intercultural orientation would obey the new social context in which we are immersed. On the one hand, there is the internationalization of markets and cultural globalization, which have considerably increased the need to establish exchanges with people from different countries; on the other, and as a consequence of migratory phenomena, we find ourselves, within the context of each country, with an important cultural diversity, with people belonging to different latitudes with whom we come into contact in our daily lives. Our societies have become increasingly multicultural. Thus, for example, the constitution of the European Union has given rise to a circulation through the different countries that make it up of numerous people who wish to find work in a country other than their own. Tourist or study trips have also increased significantly. These facts explain why knowledge of community languages is promoted within the Union and why it sets as a goal that European citizens learn more than their own. It is clear, then, what is the reason why learning languages is seen as a necessity that entails new methodological and didactic approaches in this field.

1. The intercultural approach in language teaching: concepts clue

As we have pointed out in the previous paragraph, most of the language curricula in European countries include, in some way, other functions to be carried out by them at the present time, beyond the simple acquisition of linguistic competence. This was confirmed, some years ago, by a study on language teaching in the European school context (Eurydice, 2001) released the same year that the *European Framework of Reference* was published (Instituto Cervantes, 20021). According to the aforementioned research, practically all of

the European school programs already contemplated in their formulations the close link between learning a foreign language and opening up to the culture(s) of the community or communities where is spoken. This opening would not only enable the acquisition of new cultural knowledge, but would also facilitate the development of attitudes of respect, tolerance and understanding of the "other" in their difference. As a general rule, the programs in force at the time the research was carried out began with an invitation for students to become aware of the existing relationships between language and culture. However, there was a great variety, depending on the country, when it came to specifying the cultural knowledge to be acquired by the students, which could refer to the uses and customs of daily life as well as to the geographyand political institutions of the country or countries where the target language was spoken. Some programs alluded to the development of a critical and reflective spirit in students, an aspect that could be favored by studying the cultural elements of other countries. Thus, it was thought that this reflection could lead the students to develop a more objective and critical view of their own culture. Thus, together with the communicative and reflective interests, the curricula underlined how through the study of the different facets of a culturethe development of attitudes of respect and understanding towards otherness is favored, this being a general objective to be achieved that could be presented different shades:

It is possible to inscribe all the nuances of this general objective within a continuum framed, on the one hand, by the idea of curiosity and openness of spirit, and, on the other, by that of empathy for the other. Between these two extremes, there are invitations to greater tolerance, to greater openness towards the values of others, to overcoming stereotypes, to accepting others in their differences. The acquisition of values such as solidarity or even the adoption of positive attitudes regarding European values are also present in some programs. (Eurydice, 2001: 167).

2. Conceptual framework of intercultural competence

We will now analyze the theoretical framework on which intercultural competence is based through the study of the *European Framework of Reference* (Instituto Cervantes, 2002) and the texts of various specialists who have also dealt with this topic.

The *European Framework* echoes a new conception of the communicative fact that places emphasis on the role of individuals as social actors endowed with multiple identities (national, local, regional, professional, etc.) and a wealth of knowledge about the world and aptitudes and skills that come into play in communication.

Communication appeals to the human being as a whole... As a social agent, each individual establishes relationships with a broad set of overlapping social groups that together define identity. In an intercultural approach, one of the fundamental objectives of language education is the promotion of the favorable development of the student's personality and their sense of identity, in response to the enriching experience of facing what is different in the areas of language and culture. (Cervantes Institute, 2002:12)

In any communicative act, as stated in chapter 5 of this text, two types of competencies would come into play: general and *communicative competencies* . This distinction does not mean that there is a set of differentiated competencies that overlap or juxtapose. In reality there is a single complex competence that the speaker uses in his communicative interactions. Both general and linguistic competences would enter into this communicative competence. The general competences, which are the ones that refer more specifically to the intercultural dimension, are divided, in turn, into four sub-competences: *declarative knowledge or knowledge, skills and abilities (knowing how to do), existential competence (knowing how to be)* and *the ability to to learn (know how to learn).*

Within *declarative knowledge* we would find *knowledge of the world* or general culture, *sociocultural knowledge* and *intercultural awareness.* We will go on to explain in detail what these three aspects comprise.
Knowledge *of the world* (whether derived from experience, education or different sources of information) includes: a) places, institutions and organizations, people, events, objects and interventions in different areas. Of special importance for students is factual knowledge of the country or countries where the language being learned is spoken, such as its geographical, environmental, demographic, economic and political characteristics; and b) classes of entities (concrete, abstract, animate and inanimate, etc.) and their properties and relationships.

For its part, *sociocultural knowledge,* that is, knowledge of the society and culture of the country or countries where the language is spoken, constitutes, in reality, an aspect of knowledge of the world, but it deserves special attention because it may not be part of the previous experience of the students and is distorted by stereotypes. This subsection would therefore include the distinctive characteristics of a specific society and its culture, including, for example, the following topics: 1) Daily life: food and drink, schedules, manners; holidays; the world of work; and leisure activities. 2) Living conditions: living standards (including regional, social and cultural diversity); the House; and social assistance. 3) Personal relationships: family structures and relationships; relations between sexes and between generations; race and community relations; relations between political and religious groups; social structure and relationship between its members.

4) Values, beliefs and attitudes regarding social class: wealth, regional cultures, institutions, history (representative characters and events), ethnic and religious minorities, politics, arts (music, literature, theater, popular songs, etc.), religion. 5) Body language: knowledge of the conventions that govern this aspect, which is part of the sociocultural competence of students. 6) Social conventions: punctuality, gifts, clothing, appetizers, drinks and meals, conventions and taboos related to behavior and conversations, farewell. And, finally, 7) Ritual behavior in ceremonies and religious practices; birth, marriage and death; public behavior at performances and ceremonies; celebrations, festivities, dances, etc.

We thus arrive at *intercultural awareness,* an element of primary importance in the intercultural approach and which refers very directly to the attitudes of students with a very political-ideological connotation. In English the adjective criticism *(critical culture awareness) is added to this expression.* In French the expression *savoir s'engager is used,* which is knowing how to commit, get involved. This component of declarative knowledge includes the facet of connection between cultures and analysis of one's own culture and the foreign one. This intercultural awareness supposes, according to the *European Framework,* an awareness of the way in which the community or communities appear from the perspective of others, frequently plagued by stereotypes (this vision against which it is intended to fight). Thus, knowledge, perception and understanding of the

relationship between one's own world and that of the community whose language is studied (similarities and differences) produce an intercultural consciousness that encompasses the awareness of regional and social diversity in the two worlds. .

4. The role of teachers

When developing intercultural communicative competence in students, teachers must be clear about the objectives they must pursue. we must keep in mind that the intercultural dimension appeals rather to the world of attitudes, skills and values, although it also includes knowledge of the foreign culture(s). Foreign language teachers are responsible for the exercise of professional mediation between cultures. To this end, it must bear in mind that the following objectives must be included among its objectives:

1) to make students acquire both linguistic and intercultural competence; 2) prepare him to establish relationships with people belonging to other cultures and accept these people as individuals with different points of view, values and behaviors; 3) help you appreciate the enriching nature of this type of experience and relationship; 4) make him understand the relationship between his own culture and other cultures; 5) arouse in him interest and curiosity towards otherness; and 6) make him aware of how others perceive him and his culture (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002).

It is important to note that, to achieve the above objectives, it is necessary to use a range of teaching resources that are as varied as possible: original texts, audio and video recordings, photographs, graphics, drawings, tourist brochures, songs, films, newspapers, magazines. , etc. Today the Internet provides an inexhaustible source of materials, which is why we consider the incorporation of new technologies essential. The students themselves must be involved in this task of searching for information.

In another order of things, teachers must be critical and reflective professionals, capable of promoting tolerance and respect for the "other". Their role is not that of a mere transmitter of knowledge of foreign culture. He himself must become an "intercultural learner", capable of promoting the autonomous work of the students and of acquiring the same skills and attitudes that he intends to develop in the latter.

Finally, returning once again to the foreign language curriculum in force in Spain for the Compulsory Secondary Education stage, we find that it refers to various basic skills that students must acquire: skill in linguistic communication, skill in learning to learn , social and civic competence, competence in the treatment of information and digital competence, cultural and artistic competence and, finally, autonomy and personal initiative. Despite the fact that all of them are related, in our view, to the intercultural dimension, we would like to focus on two: social and civic competence and artistic and cultural competence. (Royal Decree 1631/2006: 742-743).

As can be seen, these two competencies highlight methodological aspects of language teaching that clearly point to the formation of democratic citizens, respectful of diversity, tolerant and aware of their own cultural identity and that of others.

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WORDLY KNOWLEDGE