

INTERCULTURAL APPROACH AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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Abstract

The first aim of this work is to measure the potential of interculturality in teaching and learning foreign languages. According to author's strong opinion, speaking, using and comprehending a foreign language requires to go beyond the control of morphosyntactic and lexical structures, to include some crucial extra-linguistic aspects too that, if neglected, can produce serious problems in terms of mutual understanding: the use of voice, more or less accentuated prosody, time and pause management, kinesics, proxemics, etc.

The second goal is to investigate the possible connection between intercultural approach and experiential learning. Such a connection would represent a strategy for reinforcing an integrated attitude to foreign languages, that combines formal, pragmatic, cultural, cognitive and emotional factors.

Key-words: intercultural approach, experiential learning, communicative competence, intercultural pragmatics.

1. Introduction

In the daily research and didactic activity, the author tries to develop and experiment new educational practices. These are based on an innovative idea of foreign languages, that is detached from exclusive obedience to the linguistic formal categories and structures. Indeed, it is a strong conviction of the author that these theoretical-methodological schemes, although important, must be necessarily combined with: *i*) an ongoing aspiration for the expression correctness, and *ii*) a continuous check for its adequacy, that is, articulating the speech acts and ordering the textual framework in a way consistent to the context, the actors and the purposes of the communicative event.

Hence, knowledge, as traditionally understood, should be integrated with sociolinguistic and pragmatic skills. Also, it has to be conformed to extra-linguistic factors and to the definition proposed by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*: «Communicative language competence can be considered as comprising several components: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic. Each of these components is postulated as comprising, in particular, knowledge and skills and know-how. Linguistic competences include lexical, phonological, syntactical knowledge and skills and other dimensions of language as a system, independently of the sociolinguistic value of its

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variations and the pragmatic functions of its realizations. This component, considered here from the point of view of a given individual's communicative language competence, relates not only to the range and quality of knowledge (e.g. in terms of phonetic distinctions made or the extent and precision of vocabulary) but also to cognitive organization and the way this knowledge is stored (e.g. the various associative networks in which the speaker places a lexical item) and to its accessibility (activation, recall and availability)». (Council of Europe 2011: 13)

As it can be argued, the discussion deals with a social and collaborative vision of learning, that makes the students group the main actor of didactics. Also, mutual communication, social coexistence and student interaction within the group promote the collective growth process.

Bringing intercultural pragmatics to the classroom of foreign languages could ease the development of this *forma mentis*, by pushing students to critically reinforce their mutual relationships, and thanks to it, the meaning of the concepts, the object of interpretation and negotiation, is consciously processed and interiorized.

The author's main daily challenge is to identify strategies to maximize the correlation between the theoretical principles related to linguistic-formal aspects, and real situations of language use, in order to effectively select the structure, form and mode of linguistic expression according to the contextual and communicative needs.

However, the intercultural competence could be promoted and strengthened during the classroom activity only if it is combined with the experience directly made by the learners, in order to stimulate cognitive and affective mechanisms at the same time. These mechanisms can be a highly motivating factor for the access to the inclusive and integrative dimension that the intercultural approach naturally brings with it.

2. Interculturality, communicative competence and interlanguage pragmatics

“Speaking a foreign language” means going from the control of lexical and morphosyntactic structures, to the extra-linguistic and socio-cultural aspects. In fact, these aspects, if not properly managed, may create serious difficulties in terms of mutual understanding. Example of such aspects are: the discourse organization, the sense of humour, the order of information transmission, the semiotic interactional elements (kinesics, proxemics, prosody), the pragma-linguistic elements (verbal courtesy, verbal register, verbal strategies, etc.), the time and pauses managing.

Celce-Murcia highlights the need of completely rethinking the meaning and role of communicative competence for the foreign languages teaching, by proposing a model that promotes discourse competence, crucial subareas of which are cohesion, deixis, coherence, generic structure. A practical outcome of discourse competence would be the ability to select and match words and linguistic structures to ensure coherence and cohesion of the messages. (Celce-Murcia 1995) On the other hand, it is worth noting that many linguistic choices are made more according to socio-cultural values (social hierarchy, prestige and respect for senior people or for some professional positions), than to grammatical rules: typical cases of the relationship between the social structure and the linguistic form are courtesy formulas. Furthermore, the use of some pragma-linguistic and cultural-grammatical structures (superlatives, verbal person, the use of the imperative mode *vs* the use of softeners, etc.) and some extra-linguistic resources (tone of voice, physical distance of the interlocutor, corporal movements, etc.) indicates the openness towards the world and the more or less formality of human interactions. Therefore, the way of constructing written and oral texts (e.g. tendency for parataxis and hypotaxis), sociolinguistic factors, pragmatic communicative movements (e.g. exposing, ordering, proposing, summarizing, verifying comprehension, changing the topic of discussion), and the way of discussing certain subjects (e.g. sex, politics, religion) derives, in many cases, more from a social and cultural orientation, than from linguistic aspects.

In particular, House advocates for an interculturality that surpasses the past paradigm of learning centred on the interlanguage (Selinker): «intercultural actants need to be convinced as independent of both their native culture (and language) and the new culture (and language) which they are trying to

link, mediate, reconcile. They are creating something new and autonomous in-between, hybrid, third way. What is seemingly deficient can thus be turned to advantage. The notion intercultural would thus be liberated from a link with what was described as potentially deficient and norm-deviant learner». (House 2007: 15)

With reference to this subject, Kasper defends the urgency of studying interlanguage pragmatics as an area of investigation in second language acquisition, claiming its autonomy as well («Interlanguage pragmatics, the study of the development and use of strategies for linguistic action by nonnative speakers, has a peculiar status in second language research. Unlike other areas of second language study, which are primarily concerned with acquisitional patterns of interlanguage knowledge over time, the great majority of studies in ILP has not been developmental. Rather, focus is given to the ways NNSs' pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic knowledge differs from that of native speakers (NSs) and among learners with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To date, ILP has thus been primarily a study of second language use rather than second language learning. The main reason for the concern with language use over development derives from the disciplines with which ILP has predominantly aligned itself. ILP's main field of reference has not been second language acquisition research but empirical pragmatics, especially cross-cultural pragmatics. The research issues examined in ILP have thus essentially been the same as those studied in cross-cultural pragmatics (cf. Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989): What are the strategies and linguistic means by which particular speech acts are realized? Are such strategies universally available? What are the contextual factors that determine speakers' choices from speech act sets? What is the contextual distribution of realization patterns? How does contextual variation differ cross-culturally? These questions are precisely those that have been asked in cross-cultural pragmatics». (Kasper & Schmidt 1996: 150).

Moreover, a more complex intercultural dimension has to be faced. In fact, while including a series of specific skills related to the individual aptitude to interact with others (organizing and managing discourse in a creative and autonomous way, and, above all, at a distance that is halfway between the starting and arriving languages and cultures), it has to confront itself with a global scenario and ever-wider needs: «alla fine degli anni Novanta in Italia, ma già da tempo altrove, la prospettiva è diversa: si studia l'inglese non più per parlare con i sudditi di sua maestà, ma in una logica ELF, English as a Lingua Franca: quindi la dimensione interculturale non è più uno-a-uno, un italiano che interagisce con un francese e quindi deve conoscere la cultura di quel popolo, ma è uno-a-x, in cui l'incognita x include il turista brasiliano come il venditore cinese, l'oligarca russo come lo studente finlandese...». (Balboni 2015: 3)

Therefore, according to Balboni, it is impossible to teach the intercultural competence and communication in the classroom, but you can only teach to observe it. In this perspective, the primary objective of the teacher is to make the learners familiar with the complexity of interculturality: for this reason, he could only transfer the conceptual tools useful to learn to observe communication.

Moreover, it is necessary to monitor and analyse these changes, also using more authentic materials, with the aim of extracting from them not only the formal content, but also the way in which these materials convey the information. In other words, the most important thing is to choose and propose a reliable and valid method of observation. (*Ibidem*)

3. Experiential learning

During the last years, several experts have proposed educational experiential approaches. In particular, Dewey, at the beginning of the twentieth century, emphasized the need to promote a new interpretation for the educational practice, thus centred on experience, experimentation and freedom, as the central part of so-called “progressive education”, a reaction and overcoming of the traditional one: «the traditional scheme is, in essence, one of imposition from above and outside. It imposes adult standards, subject-matter, and methods upon those who are only growing slowly toward maturity. The gap is so great that the required subject matter, the methods of learning and of behaving are foreign to the existing capacities of the young. They are beyond the reach of the experience the young learners already possess. Consequently, they must be imposed; even though good teachers will use devices of art to cover up the imposition so as to relieve it of obviously brutal features». (Dewey 1938: 7)

Experiential learning turns out to be a circular process that integrates experience, reflection, conceptualization, and action. To learn something, everyone needs to be motivated to elaborate it through a conscious effort. The integration of cognitive, emotional and social aspects underlies the construction of a holistic model and an approach to learning that completely involves the learner.

Experience is the basis of a method where learning is achieved through an active experimentation and practice, that provides also concrete material for the reflective activity. On the other hand, theoretical concepts can become part of the individual reference framework, only after they have been perceived significant from an emotional point of view. In this way, reflection throws a bridge between experience and conceptualization: «Experiential learning theory proceeds from a different set of assumptions. Ideas are not fixed and immutable elements of thought but forms and reformed through experience. [...] learning is described as a process whereby concepts are derived from and continuously modified by experience. Learning is an emergent process whose outcomes represent only historical record, not knowledge of the future». (Kolb 1984: 26)

Kolb, among the most eminent experts on this subject, organizes his experiential learning theory into four stages on an imaginary circle (fig. 1):

- concrete experience: learning is based on direct and subjective perception (CE);
- reflective observation: it derives from and is based upon the previous concrete experience (RO);
- abstract conceptualization: this process is promoted by the reflective stage and leads to the generalization of principles that are related to the concrete experience and reflection (AC);
- active experimentation: it is the processing of the previous conceptualization through action (AE).

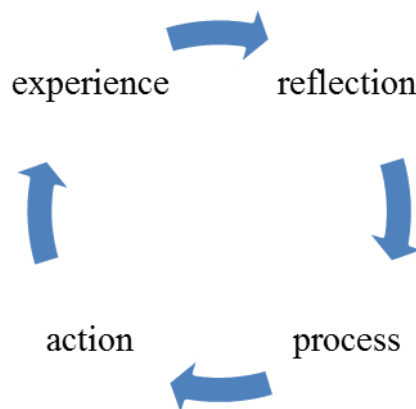


Figure 1

Hence, learners are completely involved into new experiences (CE), and are able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives (RO). At this point, they are able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logical theories (AC), and able to use these logical theories concretely, to make decisions and solve problems (AE). (*Ibidem*: 30)

According to Kolb, the learning process occurs as two kind of activities come into play: perception and processing. More concretely, in the first phase (CE) learning is obtained by first-hand experiences; in the second one (RO) the previous experience is observed; in the third phase (AC) reflection gives new information; in the last phase (AE) the new information is processed -by doing-. Each one of these ways we perceive and process information (1. perceiving, 2. thinking, 3. observing, 4. doing) could generate knowledge and learning, according to different skills, because: «Knowledge is the result of the transaction between social knowledge and personal knowledge. [...] The theory of experiential learning provides a perspective from which to approach these practical problems, suggesting a typology of different knowledge systems that results from the way the dialectic conflicts between adaptive modes of concrete experience and abstract conceptualization and the modes of active experimentation and reflective observation are characteristically resolved in different fields of inquiry». (*Ibidem*: 38)

Furthermore, four different learning and aptitudes styles derive from the combination of these functions of the organism (thinking, feeling, perceiving, behaving):

1. divergent style, an inductive method, from particular to general (concrete experience and reflective observation): you prefer perceiving and observing;
2. assimilation style, an inductive method (abstract conceptualization and reflective observation): you prefer thinking and observing;
3. convergent style, a hypothetical-deductive method (abstract conceptualization and active experimentation): you prefer thinking and doing;
4. accommodating style (concrete experience and active experimentation): you prefer perceiving and doing.

Moreover, some authors pinpoint the role of 'relevance' in foreign language classrooms. This can be achieved by introducing the real world in the language, and turning the language into a tool of communication and growth, hence connecting contents with the students' everyday lives and experiences: «the formal components of the language — its sounds, its vocabulary and its grammatical structures — are inevitably going to be tied to affective components». (Stevick, cit. in Fernández-Corbacho 2014: 1)

But this process would still be incomplete, if learners are not directly involved in it: «Learning requires abilities that are polar opposites, and the learner, as a result, must continually choose which set of learning abilities he or she will bring to bear in any specific learning situation. More specifically, there are two primary dimensions to the learning process. The first dimension represents the concrete experiencing of events at one end and abstract conceptualization at the other. The other dimension has active experimentation at one extreme and reflective observation at the other. Thus, in the process of learning, one moves in varying degrees from actor to observer, and from specific involvement to general analytic detachment». (Kolb 1984: 30)

The aforementioned quote stresses that personal learning experiences, both positive and negative, have an impact on learners, on their awareness, and on their desire to continue studying the language. Being helped to improve their self-esteem, the learners will be able to use their learning full potential. Teachers not only have to teach the foreign language, but they are to be good learners of foreign languages too. In this perspective, experiential learning offers a holistic and integrative didactic approach, that aspires both to the intellectual and the personal development of the learner. At the end of this cyclical process the initial experience has become something new.

The experiential communicative approach allows the teacher to introduce the affective dimension into the didactic planning. For this reason, when Knutson says: «the personal input, initiative, and self-differentiation in the learning process is stimulated and fostered in the learner» (cit. in Fernández-Corbacho 2014:1), alludes to the fact that when learners use their own experience, they are self-oriented and self-directed, building knowledge according to their needs. While basic communicative teaching is mainly related to students' knowledge and skills, the experiential communicative approach enriches the learning process reinforcing personal identity, aptitude to reflection, beliefs, self-esteem, motivation, respect of differences. (*Ibidem*)

4. Matching models

The Kolb's approach has been applied by several scholars to many teaching planning proposals. Besides the models specifically applied to second language acquisition (see for instance Kohonen, Legutke and Thomas and Kenny) (Fleming & Walter 2004: 60), relevant to this research is the model provided by Bernice McCarthy, based on the incorporation of pedagogical activities of all four learning styles previously analysed: the "4MAT model".

This project is constructed on four key moments (each of these consisting in two further steps): 1. experimentation (connecting to an experience and reflecting on it); 2. conceptualization (sharing information on ideas and definitions); 3. application (applying these ideas and definitions to add own elements); 3. creation (analysing the relevance and utility of these to apply and adapt them to new and more complex situations). (Gómez Pawelek)

Hence, moving forward on this research topic and combining the intercultural approach and experiential learning, we propose a didactic plan, conceived specifically for Spanish teaching as foreign language, organized into the following steps:

1. in the first step, students are presented with written and/or oral texts dealing with the lexical and morphosyntactic structures, that the teacher intends to present during the course and according to the program. During this phase several different kinds of texts and manuals will be used, however the authentic ones will be preferred as these will make more apparent the context of use of the individual expressions;
2. in the second step, the students are required to practice an individual and collective reflection on what has been perceived and understood during the previous direct exposition. The class is organized in groups with defined communicative tasks to perform. The previous selection of individual roles and operating assignments will reinforce the sense and respect of each position, skill and responsibility;
3. in this stage, from experience and reflection, a new process is generated. It allows learners to generalize and conceptualize what it has been just learned, detecting also general rules and functions in the foreign language studied;
4. in the final step, students are encouraged to find in their everyday lives concrete linguistic and pragmatic examples corresponding to the things they have previously observed in the foreign language. They will simulate, above all, real-life activities, focusing, therefore, on the contextual use and communicative objectives. At this point, the students are asked if there were any difficulties in terms of comprehension during the process, and if there were cases of total misunderstanding and incommunicability.

As intercultural approach, thought as an individual attitude and propensity to diversity, is not exclusively rooted in theory, but in a continuous linguistic contextualization, thus, it derives from a continuous improvement cycle.

In this intercultural task oriented model, experiential learning steadily generates knowledge through experience, and, then, the new information acquired are validated by the following new practice and by a contrastive approach between the mother and foreign tongue. Hence, practice and information process effectively alternate in a model of reciprocal and constant exchange and conditioning, whose key point still remains the action.

5. *Conclusions*

If the objective of language education is the development of communicative competence, it should necessarily be integrated by cultural education and cross-cultural education, in which discourse plays an increasingly primary role, along with all the contextualization forms and strategies of the language and the meanings. According to Celce-Murcia (2007), a course that pursues this objective should teach how to combine linguistic, anthropological and sociolinguistic approach, through a marked process of contextualization of discourse and texts. Therefore, didactic materials should be focused on learners, implementing interactive activities and tasks, and using all kinds of technical supports (radio, video, email).

In this course teacher should encourage the speaker's ability to develop and enhance his/her use of linguistic functions: asking for information by phone or email; giving information; summarizing texts and speeches; constructing blocks of speech acts based on role-playing; learning to imitate advertising strategies to persuade; writing a class diary that shows the differences between the starting point and target linguistic competence achieved.

Obviously, the adoption of this model modifies the evaluation phase as well. In fact, it is necessary to evaluate not only the learning object, but also the learning process, whose guidelines will not be only grammatical principles and canons, as well as Riley evidences, but also the pragmatic ones: «Pragmatic errors are the result of an interactant imposing the social rules of one culture on his communicative behaviour in situation where the social rules of another culture would be more appropriate». (cit. in Pohl 2004: 4) Meanwhile, it should be pinpointed that the opportunity for an intercultural approach does not necessarily coincide with an assimilationist process by the object culture, but rather with the search for '*the third place*', as defined by Laddicoat, Crozet & Lo Bianco (1999). Specifically, it means to understand the meaning of what that native speakers say, without

replicating their habits, and, hence, placing themselves between the native and the target languages and cultures. As it can be argued, interculturality represents the match point between many disciplines and multiple factors, whose common thread is an action-oriented approach.

‘Teaching’ intercultural skills turns out to be difficult, as these skills can only be learned requiring a modification to the cognitive and social attitude of the learner: it is rather a long-term goal and the teacher can only show how to create experiential contexts, through which internalize ideas and values. Hence, it is relevant the contribution of the experiential component to this intercultural task oriented didactic model: it helps to make learning tangible, thus enhancing the participation and the affective-emotional dimension of the process. This, in the author’s opinion, encourages the learning process and consolidates knowledge, avoiding that it is, only, theory.

Finally, this methodology may have interesting perspectives in the teaching of foreign languages, because it includes extremely suggestive and, above all, motivating activities, that, among other things, could develop a good level of self-esteem, and promote a conscious learning process of foreign language and culture. According to a circular movement, the constant balance between experience, that leads to generalization and conceptualization, and reflection, which origins new information, closes with a functionally equivalent phase to the first one, that is, again, the practice, that crystallizes conceptualization and theory through action.

Within the proposed intercultural approach, the experiential activity is, at the same time, the motor, the tool and the result of a new learning mechanism, capable of maximizing the stimuli derived from experience and the positively critical attitude toward the others, the different ones.

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