

An Online Workshop for Intercultural Training

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Abstract

The shape of our society is changing rapidly towards a multicultural mosaic for which our students need to be prepared. Intercultural dialogue is at the very center of the future of Europe and the world.

Language learning seems to be moving in that direction, taking into account that the concept of culture has been present in the classroom for years. For decades now, the concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has replaced and improved the well-known Communicative Competence. We agree with Byram when he foresees that the main goal in a second language is to attain communication among cultures. Knowledge, skills and attitudes are needed to achieve this objective.

Foreign language classroom is the ideal environment to implement these values within the educational framework for many reasons, but mainly because the students often encounter a different culture there for the first time. However we believe the place of intercultural education remains throughout the whole curriculum, as a crosscurricular topic.

In order to put these ideas into practice, teachers need to be trained specifically. Lack of knowledge and negative attitudes towards the target culture seem to be two of the greatest problems hindering this process.

Initial training, at least in the Spanish case, is not up to the task. Intercultural values, permanently present in political speech, are absent when the degrees are designed, thus disregarding a multicultural context which demands proper action. Students must be educated to become respectful and tolerant citizens if a common future is to be sought.

Once we define the theoretical background, we will give an example of how language teachers can be trained interculturally using all the tools ICT provide. We will use this paper to present an online workshop in intercultural communication, designed with in-service teachers and undergraduates in mind. This workshop is intended to develop skills, improve knowledge and raise awareness towards "otherness" and one's own culture.

KEYWORDS: *Teacher training, language learning, Intercultural Education and ICT.*

1. Introduction

The shape of our society is changing rapidly towards a multicultural mosaic for which our students need to be prepared. Intercultural dialogue is at the very center of the future of Europe and the world. Logically, intercultural education would provide the plural and democratic dimension that is unfortunately still lacking.

In the case of language teaching, it is no longer enough to just teach the language itself. Teachers must also be able to transmit the values, concepts and realities encompassed and reflected by that language. Furthermore, their role is no longer limited to the target language and culture. They must

also be able to respect, understand and compare the various cultures present in the classroom with the target culture. Therefore, the foreign language should be viewed as a bridge to other cultures, as a sign of education sine qua non European citizens will be considered to be illiterate. M. Byram (1989: 24) [1] explains the importance of language learning for the individual's education, introducing students to and helping them understand "otherness".

Today's teachers must have their professional curriculum immediately adapted (Kelly, 2004) [2]. The new challenges are here and their immediate consequences are already making their presence felt. We have analysed in depth the necessities and curriculum of the foreign language teacher, although we feel that most of the assertions can find parallelisms in other specialties. The teacher profile needs to change completely (Sercu, 2006) [3]. Moreover, the foreign language classroom is the perfect environment in which a student can first encounter cultural difference. Kramsch (1997) [4] argues that language plays a crucial role in the emergence of a cultural change. Byram (1997:50-53) [5] establishes the curricular objectives for intercultural competence in five areas: knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery, and interaction and critical cultural awareness. The objective, in general terms, must be to develop an intercultural competence through the communicative competence.

The new needs help us design a new professional profile for foreign language teachers in which we cannot forget the following:

- i. Competence in L2
- ii. Pedagogical expertise.
- iii. Development of ICC (Intercultural Communicative Competence)
- iv. Knowledge regarding L2 culture, as well as one's own.
- v. Positive attitude towards diversity
- vi. Skills regarding awareness raising
- vii. Willingness to accept difference and empathize
- viii. Cultural mediation skills

Unfortunately, Inter-culture is not one of the priorities in terms of education. There are not (or will be in the new degree) any compulsory credit bearing courses related to Intercultural education. There seems to be a fracture between political speech and reality (Esteve, 1997) [6]. Furthermore, there is a difference between reality and the training teachers are being given to be up to the challenge.

Even if the new competence model sketched in the new Degree for Primary School Teachers (Orden ministerial ECI/3857/2007, de 27 de diciembre de 2007) were to change dramatically the state of affairs, which is not, we still would have thousands of teachers, graduated in the former degree, working in our schools for more than forty years, with no intercultural training whatsoever.

These teachers need to be trained where their degree failed to do so. Intercultural education will have to be a pillar of 21st century society, if we have any chance to educate our pupils for peace and respect towards others. With this paper, we will try to exemplify how language teachers can be trained interculturally using all the tools ICT provide. We will present an online workshop in intercultural communication, designed with in-service teachers and undergraduates in mind. This workshop is intended to develop skills, improve knowledge and raise awareness towards "otherness" and one's own culture. Some of the items presented in the new profile sketched above will be reinforced by means of this workshop.

2. Practical implications

In order to improve this training deficiency, we will propose online activities to promote intercultural education in its three aspects: knowledge, skills and attitude.



We must refer to the study carried out by Fowler and Blohm (2004: 37-84) [7] introducing methods for intercultural training, following typology regarding methodology:

- COGNITIVE: Lectures, written materials, computer-based materials, films, case studies and critical incidents.
- ACTIVE: Role-plays, simulation games and intercultural exercises.
- INTERCULTURAL: Contrast culture training, cross-cultural analysis and dialogues, and area studies.

Cognitive methods focus on knowledge acquisition; active methods engage learners in active learning; intercultural approaches are devoted to intercultural learning.

2.1 Cognitive Methods

If acquisition of knowledge is the most important goal, we can use the following methods:

Lectures: It is a common and recurrent method. The trained person can present information, clarify ideas, introduce new topics, etc.

Written Materials: They are commonly used in training sessions to transmit facts, ideas and concepts. The materials can be as diverse as readings, textbooks, articles, workbooks, letters, etc. These written texts are used to illustrate issues about different cultures.

Computer-based Materials: Although they are frequently used to acquire conceptual information, we can also find materials that develop skills and /or modify attitudes. The training takes place by means of CDs, DVDs, online programs and web sites. We will offer plenty of examples in which intercultural training can take place on the internet. On these web pages, we can find information about different countries and diverse cultures, together with quizzes, cultural profiles, intercultural tests, articles, forums, etc.

Films: Educational films or commercial films are a motivating material to transmit knowledge and provide scenarios for cultural debates. In our area of studies, teachers can be made aware of cultural values of English speaking countries such as *The Queen* (analysing the role of the Royal family in the British society and culture), *Real Women Have Curves* (Hispanic minorities and the role of Hispanic women in USA), *Monsoon Wedding* (Indian customs and idiomatic usage of the language) or *East is East* (an Anglo-pakistani family struggle between tradition and the need for rebellion in 1970's Northern England), which will be used as an example in this paper.

Case Studies and Critical Incidents: Case studies pose a situation and students must work on assessing the problems entailed and finding possible solutions. Some cases are based on real-world dilemmas so the students get the opportunity to deal with concrete situations and specific cultural problems. This method is highly productive to train business executives. The following web page offers some intercultural cases that can be helpful for classroom practice: <http://www.businesscommunication.org/resources/InterculturalCommunicationCases.html>

Critical incidents are shorter than case studies and refer to cross-cultural misunderstandings, problems and clashes. The incidents do not illustrate the cultural differences of the interacting parties; rather these are discovered as the activity is carried out. The use of critical incidents can bring about students' understanding of their own personal and cultural identity.

2.2 Active Methods

These methods involve learners in active tasks to build up specific skills. Students learn by doing.

Role plays: Role playing puts information and skills into practice in a safe context and can be focused on content or processes. Participants have the opportunity to rehearse diverse roles in real-life situations for a specific purpose.

Simulation games: They are highly motivating and versatile. Educational and entertaining elements combine to build knowledge and develop skills.

Intercultural exercises: These activities usually combine two or more techniques (physical response, discussion, or written assignments) and involve learners in content while providing practice. Intercultural exercises are commonly used to raise awareness about cultural differences and develop strategies to adapt to diverse working environments. As an example of intercultural exercise, 'The Cocktail Party' (Blohm, 1997) [8] puts in action non-verbal behaviours unusual to western culture.

2.3 Intercultural Methods

The aim of these activities is to develop cultural self-awareness, promote intercultural competencies and achieve effectiveness.

Contrast culture training: This method has been widely used in the U.S.A. It turns to an experienced actor as the foreigner 'Mr. Khan' to point at cultural differences and elicit a reflection on the learners' own culture.

Cross-cultural analysis and dialogues: Cross-cultural analysis is an experiential exercise similar to the previous method but it is not dependent on an actor. Students deal with cultural analysis from their own cultural perspective and from the point of view of one or more target cultures. The discussions also involve a person from the target culture so the participants take note of contrasting dimensions from a member of this target culture. In business, dimensions incorporate differences in management and organization. Cross-cultural dialogues are short conversations between two people of different cultures. Each dialogue shows the speakers' values, attitudes and points of view and includes a subtle mistaken assumption in the conversation.

Area studies: Most commonly called culture-specific training, these studies build expertise about a specific country. They are highly appropriate for people who plan to live or work in the target country providing an excellent resource for understanding and interacting with people from that culture. Most of these studies have been carried out (and financed) by governments and multinational corporations.

3. Online workshop

As an example on how we can use some of these methods we suggest mixing them in a unit which can be carried out with the help of ICT at home or in the classroom:

3.1 Part one

In order to raise cultural awareness and the problems that might arise from wrong cultural decoding of a message.

In the first part, the students are presented with different inference activities (<http://www.dh.id.au/InfTest1.htm>) in order to: show them how easily we jump to the wrong conclusions, to analyze the origin of this deduction process and to study the errors brought about by it.

A second activity at <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/cultural-services/articles/crosscultural-blunders.html> help them became aware of the importance of intercultural knowledge and the consequences of insufficient training.

This whole part is devoted to increase the motivation level in the student by presenting Intercultural Education as an interesting and important topic in today's society.

3.2 Part two

The central part of the unit is related to the viewing of the movie East is East. "A mixed-race family live in an overcrowded, red brick terraced house in a white, working class area of Salford in the early 70s. The Pakistani dad owns a chip-shop and runs his family with iron discipline. The English mum is

forever trying to reconcile her husband's rigid ways with the needs of her six kids - who, to varying degrees, all reject the values their dad grimly thrusts upon them" [9].

This movie is an example on how cultural clashes can occur even within the same family. The struggle among different beliefs and traditions is at the center of the narrative. The film gives the student an opportunity to perform several tasks:

- i. Discuss in groups (using chat rooms available at Moodle) the origin of the conflict and its implications. Thus, students put together ideas regarding intercultural clashes and lack of communication.
- ii. In order to deepen on the understanding of the different cultures. We would provide sites such as:

<http://www.business-spotlight.de/intercultural/fact-file>

<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/pakistan.html>



In this section of the unit, each individual student should learn about an specific culture (British and Pakistani in the case of this movie) in order to understand the cause of the conflict, referring back to the discussion held after watching East is East.

3.3 Part three

The student's progress will be assessed by means of an essay and a questionnaire. They will have to relate the ideas presented in the film with the information and real cases both from their own experience or published on the media. It is essential to use a questionnaire in which we evaluate the unit itself and its weaknesses and strengths. The only way to check and improve is by testing and assessing.

3.4 Part four

In the last part of the workshop, we will provide the teachers with some ideas for their own classroom. For example, some extremely helpful resources can be found at the following web pages:

<http://www.gertjanhofstede.com/>

Hofstede offers advice, theoretical content, simulation games to develop intercultural skills and attitudes.

<http://www.eslflow.com/interculturalcommunication.html>

We can access "Are these customs similar to or different from customs in your culture", which is a worksheet to work cultural awareness in class, deepening the understanding of the culture of others as well as our own.

<http://www.peacecorps.gov/wvs/educators/lessonplans/section.cfm?sid=4>

In the section "Cross-cultural understanding", we find several lesson plans designed to help understand cultural diversity and promote intercultural communication.

<http://www.everythingsesl.net/inservices/crosscultural.php>



A very useful resource for the teacher, it offers tips and activities such as “What’s in a gesture?” or “Culture Quiz”, in which we are given culture-produced conflicts that we have to analyze, as for example:

You are a 4th grade teacher with a new boy in your class from Syria. He speaks very little English. He is having a problem getting along with the other students. He has fights on the playground every day which he seems to provoke by constantly touching the other boys.

KEY: American boys in grades 4-6 do not touch each other except during contact sports or when fighting. This is the way they are socialized. In Middle Eastern countries boys playing on a playground are constantly touching each other. When a Middle Eastern child does this on an American playground, he will end up in many fights. The American boys see this as “sissy” behavior.

4. Conclusions

The change in the teacher profile that is needed in today’s classroom is not offered yet at university level, and teachers arrive at schools unprepared for a multicultural classroom in a multicultural world. The role of the foreign language teachers, particularly but not solely, is becoming more complex [10]. It is our belief that the foreign language classroom represents the ideal context to work intercultural values, but not the only one. Only by placing them crosscurricularly we can achieve our goal. The design presented is a mere example and can be easily extrapolated to other areas.

This paper intends to find a creative solution to this lack of training in an already overloaded curriculum. We have used this paper to present an online workshop in intercultural communication, designed with in-service teachers and undergraduates in mind. This workshop is intended to develop skills, improve knowledge and raise awareness towards “otherness” and one’s own culture. This is a humble example on how ICT can be used to improve intercultural knowledge, attitudes and skills.

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