Pragmatic Intercultural Communication Teaching Methods within a Constructivist Paradigm

Magne Dypedahl

Intercultural learning in educational settings

- Influenced by scholars such as Karen Risager, Claire Kramsch and Michael Byram

- A major aim: Learn to decentre
The intercultural speaker

- “a language learner who also acquires knowledge and skills of cultural mediation or interpretation, and not just a linguistic competence modelled on a native speaker”.
  (Geof Alfred, Michael Byram and Mike Fleming, 2003:2)

Intercultural competence

The ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality.

(Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey. 2002. Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching: A Practical Introduction, p. 10.)
A more traditional (pragmatic?) definition

The ability to communicate appropriately in a given situation involving people with a different cultural background.
Cultural background and identity

- National identity
- Ethnic identity
- Regional identity
- Socioeconomic identity
- Gender identity
- Family identity
- Professional identity
- Corporate or organizational identity
- ...
- Individual identity

Do Byram et al represent a flexible approach to culture?

- Yes

- But often not reflected in the national curricula: a traditional relationship between language and homogenous national culture is assumed
What about the field of intercultural communication?

"Intercultural communication involves interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event" (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel 2007:10)

To study intercultural communication means to study the «mechanisms» that may lead to different perceptions.

The Paradigm shift of the 1990s

Before - Essentialist/Functionalist paradigm: static (including value dimensions/scales)

After - Constructivist paradigm: dynamic, flexible
Becoming intercultural

- Knowledge
- Reflection
- Attitudes

How do we learn to «decentre»?
Major points / Reflection tools

1. Ethnocentrism
2. Stereotypes and prejudice
3. Culture and cultural background
4. Verbal differences
5. Non-verbal differences
6. Values
7. Culture shock / Acculturative stress
8. Communication and context
9. Loss of face

1. Ethnocentrism

According to the British intercultural expert Richard Lewis, Norwegians typically hold the following view: “There are only two types of people; Norwegians, and those who wish they were Norwegian”
*Ethnos* = people; *centrum* = centre

→ putting one’s own perspective at the centre of things; viewing one’s own habits, views, ways of doing things etc. as better than those of others

It is probably impossible not to be ethnocentric in the sense of “viewing things from one’s own perspective”

→ We are all “tainted by [our] own personal and cultural orientations” (Samovar & Porter)

This does not mean, however, that (extreme) *cultural relativity* should be the goal

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The idea is to try to view other people’s world views, norms, values, beliefs and practices with and *open mind* and as *objectively* as possible before judging them
2. Stereotypes

2.1
- oversimplified views of other people or groups of people
- generalizations often built on a single perception
- preconceptions applied to all members of a group regardless of individual variations

2.2 Ingroups and outgroups

- The fundamental attribution error: to attribute negative events to outgroup’s personal features and underestimate situational factors
3. Culture and cultural background

Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by people as members of society

(Edward Tylor, 1871)

Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another

(Geert Hofstede)

A new culture is established whenever people meet (the theory of the third culture)

The cultural iceberg

Culture is dynamic

Culture is a process, not a state

Culture is not a rigid mental mode of thinking which follows the individual until the day she dies.

4. Verbal communication

4.1 From linear to circular communication

Learn not to be distracted by what is being said. Find out what is meant.
4.2 Other dimension/scales

- From low-intensity to high-intensity communication
- From formal to informal communication
- From direct to indirect communication

**Do scales make us essentialists?**

- Not necessarily, if used at the individual level
- Can also be used to adjust antennas without judging in advance
5. Non-verbal differences

5.1 Generally

- Gestures, facial expressions, body movements
- Body contact
- Eye contact
- Smell
- Appearance and dress
- Use of voice
- Use of silence
- Distance and space
- Time
5.2 Monochronic vs polychronic (Edward T. Hall)

**Monochronic**
- time is tangible
- time can be "saved" and "lost"
- schedules and tasks are important

**Polychronic**
- time is less tangible
- people are more important than schedules

6. Values

- World views
- Values
- Norms
6.1 Hofstede’s original value dimensions

- Power Distance
- Uncertainty Avoidance
- Individualism-Collectivism
- Masculinity-Femininity

6.1.1 Power distance

To what extent do we accept that other people have more “power” (in companies, schools, organizations, etc.)?
6.1.2 Individualism-Collectivism

- In individualistic cultures people will to a larger extent define themselves with focus on "I" rather than "we".
- In collectivistic cultures loyalty to the group and focus on "we" is more important than the individual, or "I".

6.2 The car and the pedestrian
You are riding in a car driven by a close friend. He hits a pedestrian. You know he was going at least 35 miles per hour in an area of the city where the maximum allowed speed is 20 miles per hour: There are two witnesses. His lawyer says that if you testify under oath that he was only driving 20 miles per hour it may save him from serious consequences. What right has your friend to expect you to protect him?

What do you think you would do in view of the obligations of a sworn witness and the obligation of your friend?

a  Testify that he was going 20 miles an hour.
b  Not testify that he was going 20 miles an hour.

7. Culture shock / Acculturative stress
8. Communication and context

8.1 Hall’s High- and Low-Context Communication

- High-context / implicit cultures
  - Information conveyed implicitly (context-dependent)
  - Non-verbal cues important
  - General and fluid information
  - Emphasis on oral communication
8.1 (cont.)

- **Low-context / explicit cultures**
  - Emphasis on explicit information
  - Information should be specific
  - Information is generally detailed and fragmented
  - Emphasis on written communication

9. *Loss of face*
Pragmatic approach

Examples of scales which can help us to decentre:
- Non-hierarchical vs. Hierarchical
- Direct vs. Indirect
- Individualistic vs. Collectivistic
- Guilt vs. Shame
- Task vs. Relationship
- Emotional vs. Neutral
- Universalism vs. Particularism

A balance act?
- Yes!
- But, a pragmatic approach can contribute to more effective intercultural learning for non-experts
- It is better not to understand than to misunderstand