



Learning to Be Interculturally Competent: New Frontiers for Italian L2 Courses for Students with International Mobility Grants

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Abstract

Student mobility has increased significantly over the past decades, a study abroad experience is still perceived as valuable and important for a future successful career. The phrase 'global competence' has become popular, even if there is a lack of consensual definition on the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences required for such a competence. Other key concepts have been thoroughly investigated, such as Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Intercultural Citizenship, and Education for Democratic Culture. Undoubtedly foreign language learning plays an important role in this arena and is identified as a component of all of these constructs. This paper presents a research project on the impact of targeted educational activities on the development of the ICC of college students with international mobility grants. The activities are integrated in an Italian L2 course, level B1/B2. The acquisition of intercultural communication skills goes through three stages: "awareness, knowledge and skills", for this research project activities aimed at developing the first two steps, Awareness and Knowledge, were designed. Finally, the test results are presented, based on a sample of 58 respondents. The data show a rather low ICC upon entry for the entire sample. At the end of the course the experimental group showed significant changes on the components of the ICC measured with the INCA Portfolio if compared to the control group. The research results confirm that ICC is not acquired automatically, it needs to be learned and practised.

Keywords: Intercultural communicative competence, Intercultural competence, Study abroad, Italian L2, Foreign language learning, Intercultural competence assessment

1. Introduction

Among the competences which enable an individual to participate effectively and appropriately in a democratic culture the 'knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication' were included [1]. Fundamental constructs such as Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Intercultural Citizenship, and Global Competence have been investigated over the past twenty years [2] and have given new meaning and importance to language learning. A strong need for an update of foreign language curricula and goals arose, and experimentations have started. This paper presents a research project on the impact of targeted educational activities on the development of the ICC of university students with international mobility grants, the activities are integrated in an Italian L2 course, level B1/B2.

The theoretical assumptions of the project are: Byram's intercultural communicative competence model [3] resumed by Balboni [4][5], Kolb's experiential learning [6], and Hofstede's culture dimensions model [7].

2. The Research Project

A quasi-experimental investigation was conducted with two convenience samples, a control group and the experimental group. The latter was subjected to the treatment, which consists in carrying out learning activities aiming at the development of ICC. The research sample consists of 58 respondents. For the assessment of the ICC pre- and post-treatment the INtercultural Competence Assessment portfolio [8] was selected. Compared to the original portfolio, some changes have been made: its length was reduced and it was made bilingual. Additionally, in the second round of the data gathering, the QR Code to manage anonymity, and the minimum length of response scenarios were inserted. The final version of the INCA Portfolio consists of: Biographical Information (18 items), Intercultural Profile (21 items), Intercultural Encounters (4 Scenarios). Its estimated time of completion is 30-40 minutes.

The INCA portfolio conceives the ICC's assessment of items related to 4 intercultural scenarios, i.e. descriptions of intercultural-relevant situations to which the respondents should react and explain their responses with open answers. The original INCA instrument distinguishes between three levels of

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competence for each of the scales. This rating scale is hardly discriminating and it would not create enough variance in the respondent answers [9], therefore five levels of competence were identified: basic, lower intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate, and full competence.

3. The Treatment

The research design provides for the experimental group running 5 sessions of 30 minutes each with activities aimed at the development of ICC. The experimental group consists of three Italian L2 courses for Erasmus B1 or B2 levels. The sessions are distributed in the ten weeks of the course duration, usually a session every two weeks.

Hofstede [7] argues that the acquisition of intercultural communication skills goes through three stages: "awareness, knowledge and skills". For this research project activities aimed at developing the first two steps identified by Hofstede, Awareness and Knowledge, were designed. The fact that the research participants are study abroad students allows them to put into practice what was theoretically addressed in class in order to develop their Skills, the third element of the sequence. The study abroad experience, if properly used, constitutes the first phase of the experiential learning cycle of Kolb: concrete experience [6]. The purpose of the teaching activities is therefore to encourage the creation of a process rather than obtaining a standard result identical for all learners.

The experimental group will work to:

- a) Develop the awareness (of the individual values, one's culture, the other culture).
- b) Develop the ability to separate observation (of an event, a situation) from its interpretation.
- c) Learn to observe cultures objectively.

The first session aims at making the students reflect on the concept of culture and to make them aware of its manifestations, particularly the heroes and cultural values. The concept of culture is actually fundamental in order to advance further with comparing different cultures and eventually developing ICC.

The development of awareness of the values is the subject of various disciplines. Here we refer to the work and the materials developed in the Anglo-American area within the social sciences as a support for trainees. In our case the image of the 'onion' (Fig. 1) was presented together with the definitions of the concepts of 'symbols', 'heroes', 'rituals' and 'cultural values' [7][10] and we asked the students, divided into small groups with representatives of different cultures, to make a list of cultural heroes simultaneously indicating which values they represent and / or reinforce.

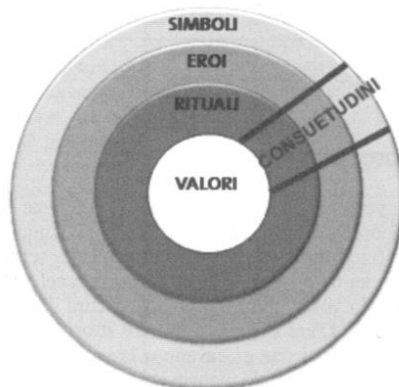


Figure 1: the 'onion' as a representation of culture [7]

From a strictly linguistic point of view, this session allows for the development of the relevant lexical skills, it was initially presented with a list of words related to values and other words / values were later added that emerged during the activity.

From the second session onward, each session is preceded by some theoretical assigned readings, which are the foundation and offer the students appropriate lexicon and structures to discuss such topics in Italian. The readings are excerpts from academic essays, 10-15 lines long. Reading comprehension activities come with the excerpts, in order to guide the readers through the text and to facilitate comprehension.

The second session starts with an activity on cross-cultural awareness: it is based on pictures (Fig. 2), [11]. In particular, we asked students to answer two questions: "Where are we?", "What are they



doing?”. The purpose of the activity is not guessing what the picture actually is, but rather comparing one’s answers with other members of the class.

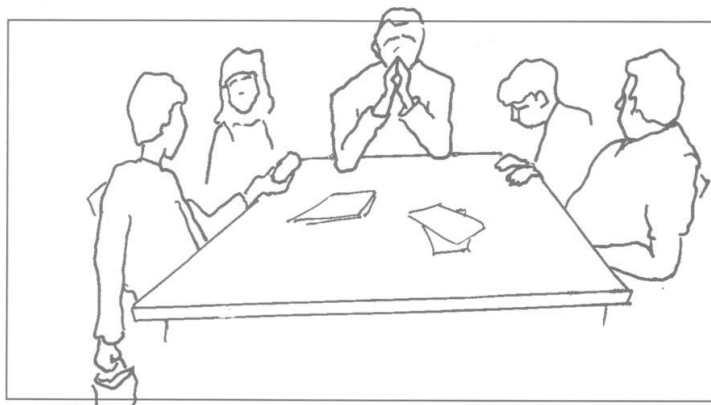


Figure 2: picture to be used to raise awareness [11]

This activity serves to focus on the fact that just by looking at a situation you cannot understand what is happening, because each of us unconsciously applies his/her own interpretation scheme, which is the result of one’s individual and cultural values.

The students need now to learn how to separate observation from its interpretation in order to strengthen awareness, and then proceed in the development of intercultural communication skills. One of the most appropriate learning strategies results from keeping a journal of experiences. In this case, the format of the "cross-cultural journal" [12] was used, in which the diary pages are divided into two columns: the left column describes the fact, whereas in the right column are noted thoughts, observations and emotions.

At the end of the second session the National Culture Dimensions model of Hofstede [7] is presented. This model serves as a tool for us to observe cultures, it is a valid reference framework to decode everyday behaviours that can reveal cultural features. The model is valid for all cultures and once you have learned how to use it, it can be used in all intercultural contexts. In this way the experience of studying in Italy enhances one’s legacy of skills and soft skills that are well spent in relationships, work and social [13].

The third and fourth sessions focus on two cultural dimensions: Power Distance and Individualism vs. Collectivism. The main concepts and features of the dimensions are elicited through open discussion on the assigned readings and references to the students’ personal experience in Italy.

The last session consists of a round table on the behaviours that may be considered evidences of national culture dimensions. At this point the intercultural learners have acquired theoretical knowledge on how cultures can be observed and compared, and also have an appropriate vocabulary to express their views in this area. Exchanging ideas and experiences with their peers is a very good way to increase cultural awareness and keep high motivation towards intercultural encounters. Furthermore through the discussion they realize that the cross-cultural incidents they observed are common among their peers. In the round table the National Culture Dimensions model proved to be an effective tool to observe and compare cultures.

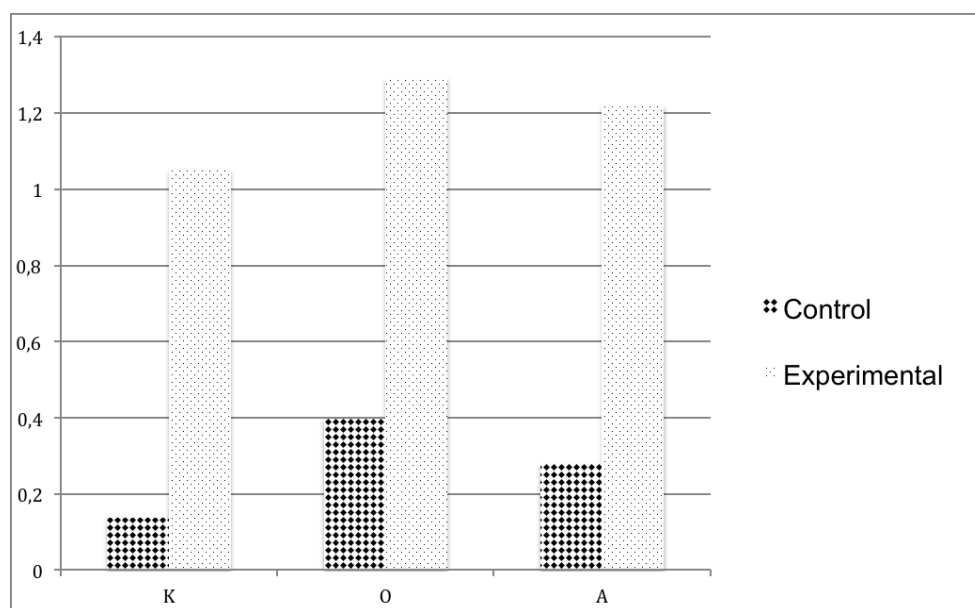
4. The Test Results

The INCA portfolio [8] assesses ICC in terms of 3 main components: Knowledge, Adaptability, and Openness. They have been evaluated with a score of 1 to 5, based on the evaluation grid attached to the INCA portfolio suitably adapted (Tab. 4).

Table 4. Average values of ICC components.

	Control			Experimental			Increase
	pre	post	DIFF	pre	post	DIFF	
<i>Knowledge</i>	2,017	2,155	0,138	1,603	2,655	1,052	0,914
<i>Openness</i>	1,655	2,052	0,397	1,603	2,897	1,294	0,897
<i>Adaptability</i>	1,802	2,081	0,279	1,681	2,902	1,221	0,942

First of all, the low values can be noted in all components, ranging from 1.6 to 2.9, both in pre- and post- test phase. This evidence demonstrates the need to undertake actions aimed at the development of the ICC among students with international mobility grants, and confirms that participation in study abroad experience alone does not guarantee the development of the ICC [14][15]. It is also noted that the experimental group significantly improves more than the control group (Graph. 1). Consequently the didactic activities carried out by the experimental group are considered effective in developing the ICC. There is also a slight increase in the control group, confirming that the Erasmus study abroad experience increases the ICC, albeit slightly.



Graphic 1: Test results

This is the initial phase of data analysis; further analysis is needed in order to understand any correlations between the individual components of the ICC and to see how the model of cultural dimensions influenced the experimental group's responses.

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