Improving students’ Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) through email activities

Mª Elena Gómez Parra

E-mail: elena.gomez@uco.es
Universidad de Córdoba (Spain)

Abstract

Much has been discussed and written about the Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). The general frame, Intercultural Competence (Byram and Zarate 1997) [1] or (Byram 1997) [2] is no longer a new concept in education or language teaching. Its definition encompasses five elements (Byram 2000) [3]: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical awareness. Intercultural Education, therefore, is the context in which we are working. It is an educational context in which several cultures could be present, not necessarily just two of them, (the source culture which can be multiple, and the target culture - that of the second language). Hence, the target culture is a unifying factor, since the pupils (regardless of their origin and source culture) start out from a situation of equality in second language learning, which we believe is extremely beneficial for cultural integration. In this plural setting, the task of language teachers is not only to convey knowledge about the target culture; their primordial function is to be able to integrate the target culture with the students’ different source cultures. In this integration (in the praxis of Intercultural Education), we find the values of heterogeneity, diversity, equality, interaction, solidarity, respects and empathy.

Once the frame has been established (ICC), we will explore the possibilities of improving students’ ICC through the use of ICT (especially email activities) in the classroom. We will also deal with the evaluation of the ICC which, due to its less tangible nature, has been a controversial topic for many years.

Keywords

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), ICT-email activity, assessment.

Introduction

Surprising as it may seem, Intercultural Communication is not a new phenomenon as it exists since the man felt the need to communicate with others who did not speak their own language. M. Grein (2007, 9) [4] puts it easy: ‘There are today approximately 6900 languages spoken in our world. Dialogue across the boundaries of languages, countries and cultures has become an unavoidable necessity of our life in the 21st century’. Nevertheless, what is new is the analysis of Intercultural Communication and its understanding in the process of communication among people from different cultural backgrounds. In spite of the fact that the need exists, there is not a real consensus on what Interculturality means in practical terms, not only regarding formal learning contexts, but also for all factors that go beyond the classroom. Thus, it is important to understand how intercultural relationships are established inside political contexts (considered as an educational process) where power relationships clearly determine vertical decisions and where socio-cultural discrimination is common practice. Thus, intercultural work must be focused on institutional grounds: we must be
aware of the way we behave inside educational contexts and how everything taught and learnt outside the classroom conveys a model far away from the intercultural proposal.

To fully understand where we are, our first point will be to outline the current trends and challenges for the learning and teaching of the Intercultural component in Foreign Language Teaching/Learning. This is the frame which we will call Intercultural Education and it is there where our proposal makes sense.

The Intercultural approach to language teaching/learning should refuse the teaching of culture as just an ‘exotic’ part of the language class. The goal of the 21st century language classes must pursue the commandment of Intercultural Communicative Competence on the student’s part, which is the necessary ability to deal with otherness in multilingual and multicultural societies.

Byram and Zarate’s (1997) [1] concept of Intercultural Competence encompasses five elements, as described by Byram (2000) [3]: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovering and interaction, and critical awareness, to which some others could be added (emotional and mental, for instance).

Let us, then, establish the frame and its main components.

**The Intercultural Approach**

According to Byram (1997) [2] being intercultural competent means to be able to interact effectively (using linguistic and non-linguistic resources) with people from another country in a foreign language. This means, of course, to be able to overcome stereotypes (which are a real barrier for cultural understanding), to be empathic, to understand otherness, to avoid and deal with misunderstandings and to have a certain willingness to learn from the other with the purpose of knowing oneself. It is a fact that the mere contact among cultures makes the individual get a deeper understanding of his/her own cultural values and, also to understand the reasons why people behave in a particular way. There appears a ‘recommendable distance’ that allows the individual to see him/herself.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) [5] takes a multi language approach that establishes and describes the competence levels that the speaker of a language can achieve. Every type of knowledge and linguistic experiences contribute to the development of the general communicative competence and, of course, languages are interrelated because they interact.

The curriculum of foreign languages must efficiently deal with the otherness and the difference. Diversity in languages and cultures must be defended (Europe is not that rich) because every language constitutes the natural vehicle for the transmission of the culture. Kramsch (1997) [6] argues that language plays a crucial role in the emergence of a cultural change.

**ICT and email activities in the Intercultural Approach**

So, one of the main objectives for 21st century language teachers is to foster the development of their students’ Intercultural Competence. Email activities (and the use of ICT in general) must not be underestimated for the achievement of such goal. Our students (even more than many of us) show a very good command of such skills and the imaginative use of these tools will highly benefit its accomplishment.

Our starting point will be one which assumes that not all students will have:

a. **A good command of the L2**: it is commonplace to find a heterogeneous level of the L2 in our classes, as well as find that most of our students do not show a very good level of English.

b. **A positive attitude towards the L2 (and its culture)**: students’ affective filter (Krashen 2003) [7] regarding the L2 (English) and its culture is not always (and again, not homogeneously) low.
Their negative emotions about the L2 frequently affect not only the language itself, but also their knowledge about L2 culture, which prevents the correct processing of language input.  
c. **Communicative competences**: not all students are equally skilled regarding their communicative competences, so some of them will prove more successful than others in communicative settings (following Gudykunst & Mody 2002, [8] this means that some students will develop the correct behaviour to properly and effectively communicate).

**Warming-up: Cooperative Learning Methodology**

The activities that we set here can be implemented in the classroom, irrespective of the content subject. They are framed in an ‘Interactional Model’ where students from different cultural backgrounds will interact in a formal educational context. Our goal is to make them aware of the fact that they can feel fine when making an intercultural exchange (in a controlled setting), so they can do it later independently (taking their own initiative). It is also important to give them consistent support and feedback (according to the behaviour and values we are planning to teach). And, finally, we will show coherence between the educational goals and teaching practices.

We outline the need to introduce changes that affect the classroom, where we face two main questions:

- **Teaching practices**: we as teachers know that these are not always adjusted to the elementary principles of the *Education for Tolerance*. We will start from simple exercises based on the Cooperative Learning Methodology, by means of which we will be able to introduce in the classrooms elements that endow more presence of intercultural principles.

- **Social and Communicative Abilities**: they refer to those dexterities for the interaction with others that facilitate maintaining positive social relationships. These skills are usually learnt in the socialization process and most individuals develop them in a natural way. They range from a greeting or a smile to the handling of conflict, going by tone of voice, the attitude of listening or body posture.

Cooperative learning is a successful teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement. Students work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it. Used under certain conditions, this strategy has demonstrated to be effective to reduce the prejudices in the classroom and to improve the interaction among students; at the same time it produces a half increase in the yield and an increment in motivation to learn. It is not at all a specific tool for multicultural contexts, but more over it can be used in all the teaching/learning contexts.

The reasons that endorse cooperative learning as a didactic strategy are:

- **Distribution** of the possibilities of academic success (when a student is rewarded for their individual progress).
- **Stimulation** in the ZPD - ‘zone of proximal development’ (Vygotsky 1934) [9], thanks to the interaction among children in the teaching/learning process, they feel closer to each other than to the teacher. Vygotsky, like Bandura and Chomsky, views learning as a process that requires environmental input and social interaction. His theory shows how, within a set environment, individuals serve as each other’s monitors, supporters, and guides. His take on language as an actively-learned behaviour will similarly agree with the views of the previous philosophers. Yet, what sets Vygotsky’s theory apart is the notion of scaffolding, or building upon a foundation, through a process of constructivism which takes place at a developmentally appropriate and prime learning zone, and where peers act as motivators to reach the next higher level of capacity and potential. This view, needless to say, is extremely appropriate in an *Intercultural Interactive Model*, where peer students will support each other in the learning (and construction) of each other’s tolerance.
• Imitation and observation of behaviour models and viewpoint exchange (this means richness and need of change for all pupils).
• Stimulation of appropriate processes of social comparison (showing the student that not all matters or subjects have got an equal level or importance, and to foster comparison with those that have a similar one to themselves).

One Cooperative Learning activity example: the Jigsaw.

The jigsaw classroom is a cooperative learning technique that reduces racial conflict among school children, promotes better learning, improves student motivation, and increases enjoyment of the learning experience. The jigsaw technique was first developed in the early 1970s by Elliot Aronson and his students at the University of Texas and the University of California.

Groups with five students are set up. Each group member is assigned some unique material to learn and then to teach to his group members. To help in the learning, students across the class working on the same sub-section get together to decide what is important and how to teach it. After practice in these “expert” groups, the original groups reform and students teach each other (Wood 1987, 17) [10]. Tests or assessment follows.

Email Activities

Intercultural email activities are devoted to improve students’ intercultural behaviour. We will focus our objectives in the teaching and learning of general social and communicative abilities, pursuing the final goal of fostering and developing students’ verbal skills which have proved useful for intercultural communication.

1.1.1. Objectives

The specific L2 goals will be:

• To learn to write (and speak) in an accepted version of colloquial English for email style: for example, using ‘Ace!’ to mean ‘Excellent!’
• To limit the use of contractions: for example, ‘can’t’.
• To write complete sentences: avoid verb ellipsis.
• To avoid full caps: in Internet this is equivalent of shouting and screaming.
• To have a beginning and an end: it is advisable to have a pre-planned goal when writing an email (and follow it in text structure).
• Avoid overusing adverbs, adjectives and long sentences: this makes understanding difficult for readers. Follow the ‘3s-maxim’: ‘make it simple, short and smooth’.
• Take advantage of punctuation. English norms are not the same as Spanish ones and students must be aware of the differences (which, by the way, are part of the intercultural knowledge also).

The specific Intercultural goals will be:

• To overcome negative emotions towards the difference: students must learn to recognise the difference and make it a positive feeling.
• To become enthusiastic about cultural variety.
• To develop an interest in other cultures.
• To begin to work on the study of other cultures.
• To realise that most behaviour is culturally conditioned.
• To try different ways of doing things.
• To empathise.

1.1.2. Materials

We will need the following:

• A classroom with:
o a.1. Internet access.
o a.2. A computer for each student.
o a.3. A printer.
o a.4. A webcam.
o a.5. A projector.

- An assessment grid for each student.

1.1.3. Procedure
We will organise an intercultural activity through email and, context permitting, we can organise virtual meetings of participating students from different countries via videoconference. Our activity will have three different phases where:

- Students will talk about their own culture and way of doing things.
- Students will compare their way with others’ way.
- Students will learn to appreciate the difference (by experimenting) and, if possible, friendship is promoted.

Timing: 3 sessions (1 hour each).

1.1.4. Assessment materials
- Students’ tables.
- Students’ reflections.

1.1.5. Methodology
First session: 1 hour.

We will first explain the activity to our students. The first step will be a brainstorming activity to make students identify the meaning of the concept ‘culture’.

Activity: ‘What is culture for you?’

We will give them some core areas (Towns, Routines, Food and drink, Social life, Language, and Politics) and we will ask them to give us a word that suits each of these areas. For example, typical answers from our Spanish students could be:

Towns: house, flats, church, City Council...
Routines: lunch time in Spain (14.00-15.00), daily family lunch ...
Food and drink: paella, restaurants, important social events ...
Social life: street life, hospitality, family life ...
Language: Spanish, Catalan, Galician ...
Politics: democracy, political parties, elections ...

Once they can identify themselves inside their own culture (critical culture awareness in Byram et al. 2002, 9) [11], we will make the same questions for different cultures (Chinese, German, British, American). Very probably they will realize they do not know much about these, so it is quite probable that they are interested in getting more information. According to their interests, we will set up different groups (as many as school contacts from different cultures we have).

Then, our students must write a short email for their ‘epals’ (email pen pals) with the following structure:

- Brief introduction
- Exposition of objectives
- Cultural questions
- Closing salutation

We will remind them of using colloquial accepted expressions (email writing style), to use
paraphrasing to explain concepts (for example, ‘paella’) and to follow the basic rules for email writing set up in the above ‘Objectives’ section (3.2.1). Of course, they will be advised to be clear and polite to avoid intercultural misunderstandings. Students will prepare the email and will send it first to the teacher (for grammar, content and style review, check spelling...)

Second session: 1 hour

One of the students will be asked to make a short exposition of the activity made in the last session. The teacher will send students the reviewed version of their emails and will give them appropriate feedback on their mistakes (if any).

Every group will now send the emails to the pre-appointed epals (British, German, French ...)

Then, students will make a short report on the type of information they asked in their emails and also the answers they think they will get from their epals. They can gather information in the school library or by using Internet.

Third session: 1 hour

Students are expected to have received answers from their epals. If this is so, the students will be set up in their original groups and will be asked to organise the information received to make a report that they can give to the rest of the students. The teacher will announce which students have received answers and from which country these emails are. So, these will be the students giving the report to the classroom. The rest of the students (those who have got no answers from their epals) will be asked to put in a table (see Table 1) their source culture information (2nd column) and what type of information they expect to get from the target culture (3rd column). They will leave the corresponding blank spaces for the target culture (4th column). More than probably, the target culture information (3rd column) will be based on cultural stereotypes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Source culture (Spanish)</th>
<th>Target culture (my expectations)</th>
<th>Target culture (report from ss)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Towns</strong></td>
<td>Houses, flats, church ...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Routines</strong></td>
<td>Lunch time, family lunch ...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Food &amp; drink</strong></td>
<td>Paella, restaurants ...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social life</strong></td>
<td>Street life, hospitality ...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
<td>Spanish, Galician ...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Politics</strong></td>
<td>Democracy, political parties ...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Table 1 – Critical culture awareness and cultural stereotypes)

Students will take notes and will be asked to reflect on the information obtained to compare it with their previous expectations.

If our students have not received any answers from their epals, the teacher will have planned a videoconference session with some of his/her colleagues from different countries, where all cultural questions can be made.
Conclusions

The departure point of our work is the deep conviction that the intercultural approach must be incorporated to teaching in a modern society. Europe is changing its face and, if we are the responsible agents for language teaching, we must necessarily shift the focus. The important thing to be learnt nowadays by pupils is not only contents (though still being aware of the importance of information for the 21st Century). It is also relevant nowadays to teach (and to facilitate the learning of) Intercultural communication. Children in our schools are frequently not of the same nationality, the same cultural background and, sometimes, they do not even share their first language. The teacher, thus, should be the first person to cope with this new situation. Of course, things are not easy and it is really important to establish and design a careful and conscious plan to cope with this new reality. Such a plan, needless to say, should run from the initial training of teachers to the lifelong learning programmes for in-service teachers (meeting in their middle stages the pupils at schools, who are the main characters of this story, as they will be the future responsible managers of our new society).

References