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**KEY CONCEPTS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS /  
CONCEPTOS CLAVE DE LA LINGÜÍSTICA APLICADA**

**INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION / INTERACTION**

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“The modern workplace is increasingly globalised and competitive. Communicating with customers, colleagues and partners across international borders is now an everyday occurrence for many workers around the world. Consequently, employers are under strong pressure to find employees who are not only technically proficient, but also culturally astute and able to thrive in a global work environment.” (British Council, 2013, p. 3)

Sentiments such as these, combined with concerns about social integration, have led to a growing interest in the development of competence in intercultural communication/interaction. Since language and culture are so intimately connected, intercultural awareness/sensitivity is included in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) and foreign language teachers are tasked with finding ways of developing it (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). This article outlines some fundamental conceptual issues that present challenges to all those working in this area.

## Conceptualising Culture for the Language Classroom

There are numerous definitions of culture, each incorporating different elements of the multiple facets of culture, and so for language teachers a crucial issue is how it can be best conceptualised, as this will affect the design of an intercultural curriculum. Many scholars in different fields have pointed out that culture has visible and invisible facets and have used the metaphors of iceberg (Hall, 1976) and onion (Hofstede, 2001) to draw attention to this. Moran (2001) builds on this division, arguing that for language teachers it is helpful to conceptualise culture as products, practices and perspectives, in other words, the “3 Ps of Culture” (Spencer-Oatey & Davidson, 2014). *Products* are the ‘concrete’ or ‘codified’ aspects of culture, such as art forms, institutions and artefacts. *Practices* are the patterns of behaviour that we display, including language use, such as how we introduce people or handle turn-taking in meetings. These practices typically reflect the rules, conventions and norms of the social group in which we are interacting. *Perspectives* are the deep-seated and often unconscious attitudes, values and beliefs that we hold about life, such as respect for elders, the need for modesty, and the relative importance of independence and self-sufficiency. Language teachers have traditionally tended to focus on culture primarily as product, studying the history, art forms and so on, of a particular group. More recently, however, there has been a very welcome increase in focus on practices. Needless to say, all three need to have a place in the curriculum and be given an appropriate degree of balance.

Culture is associated with social groups, and so for language teachers a second fundamental question is which social group(s), if any, should be focused on. Traditionally, language teachers have concentrated on the ‘native speaker countries’ of the language they are teaching (e.g., UK, USA, Australia or New Zealand for English-language courses). However, there are several problems with this, both conceptually and practically. Firstly, how can the 3 Ps of culture be explored when, not only are there so many countries but there is also so much variation within each

country? Secondly, since English is used so widely as a lingua franca by people in many different countries, how appropriate (or otherwise) is it to focus on so-called native speaker countries? Is it helpful or necessary to learn about the cultural 3 Ps of specific social groups, or might it be more helpful to develop some more generic (i.e., non-culture-specific) skills and understanding? These are all important questions for language teachers and they bring us to another fundamental question: What constitutes competence in intercultural communication/interaction?

### **Conceptualising Competence in Intercultural Communication/Interaction**

It is extremely important to conceptualise what competence in intercultural communication entails because it not only affects how we understand the goals of intercultural teaching/development, but also forms the foundation for assessment decisions. Numerous conceptualisations have been developed (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009) and yet there is still considerable debate over the construct's main components (Chiu, Lonner, Matsumoto, & Ward, 2013).

One of the best-known conceptualisations within the foreign language field is that of Byram's (1997: 50–53). He identifies five elements: Attitudes (*savoir être*)—curiosity and openness; knowledge (*savoirs*) of social groups and their products and practices; skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*); skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*); and critical cultural awareness/political education (*savoir s'engager*). Building on this and broadening the scope, the INCA project (Precht & Davidson Lund, 2007) identified six components: Tolerance for ambiguity, behavioural flexibility, communicative awareness, knowledge discovery, respect for otherness, and empathy. However, each of these elements, and especially communicative awareness, is extremely broad and so without significant unpacking, it is hard to know what each actually entails. One attempt at such elucidation is the 'Global People competency framework' (Spencer-Oatey & Stadler, 2009), which proposes

sub-competencies associated with each of four competency clusters (viz. knowledge, communication, relationships and personal qualities), along with authentic examples to illustrate each of the sub-competencies.

One of the biggest challenges associated with conceptualising competence in intercultural communication/interaction is identifying a valid developmental trajectory. The INCA project attempted to use ‘can do’ descriptors to operationalise ‘basic’, ‘intermediate’ and ‘full’ levels of intercultural competence. Outside of foreign language education, numerous commercial products are available (for a list see Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009), each focusing on different (combinations of) conceptual components. One of the best known is Bennett’s (1986) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) and its associated instrument, the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), which concerns people’s attitudes towards cultural differences. Bennett proposes six developmental stages: three labelled as ethnocentric (denial, defence and minimisation) and three as ethnorelative (acceptance, adaptation and integration). This is one of the few—if not the only—developmental conceptualisation, but it only relates to one component of intercultural competence. For sociocultural aspects of language use (e.g., cultural practices associated with performance of speech acts), there is—as yet—no ‘ladder of competence.’ Nevertheless, as Ishihara and Cohen (2010) maintain, teachers should still try to assess aspects such as pragmatic ability, and they suggest some practical approaches for doing this. This leads us to a third issue: How can competence in intercultural communication/interaction best be fostered or promoted?

### **Fostering competence in intercultural communication/interaction**

According to Moran (2001: 15), cultural experience consists of four interconnected learning interactions (knowing about, knowing how, knowing why, and knowing oneself). They form an experiential learning cycle and each needs to be fostered in different ways. Yet a pre-requisite

to them all is exposure to/interaction with members of one or more social groups, so this means that teachers need to think how they can achieve this (e.g., by arranging online exchanges or study abroad trips). However, research (e.g., Mak, Brown & Wadey, 2014) makes it clear that contact alone is not enough. On the one hand, the quality of communication and interaction is highly influential and needs to be positive if anxiety and negative stereotyping are to be minimised. On the other, reflection on the experiences is essential for learning to occur. A number of frameworks and tools are available to help with this, including the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (Council of Europe, 2009) and the 3 Rs (report, reflect, re-evaluate) and DIARy (**D**iscern, **I**dentify, **A**adjust, **R**efine) mnemonics for growth proposed by Spencer-Oatey and Davidson (2014). All maintain that concrete intercultural experiences need to be reflected upon and made sense of in order to foster competence in the different facets of effective intercultural communication/interaction.

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