

ICT FOR INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT

EL USO DE LAS TIC EN EL DESARROLLO DE LA COMPETENCIA INTERCULTURAL

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En este nuevo siglo, existe una verdadera necesidad de comunicarnos satisfactoriamente con personas de otras culturas. Los docentes somos responsables de la formación intercultural del alumnado. Es más, los profesores de inglés tenemos mayor peso en esta capacitación puesto que nuestro aula es el lugar perfecto para el desarrollo de habilidades comunicativas interculturales. Asimismo, debemos tener presente que los avances tecnológicos han ejercido una influencia determinante en la enseñanza del inglés. Por tanto, este artículo aboga por el uso de Internet como instrumento eficaz en la formación intercultural del alumnado. Así, presentaremos las páginas web y los recursos más útiles para el desarrollo de las competencias interculturales del alumnado.

Palabras clave: comunicación intercultural, TIC, competencia comunicativa intercultural, aprendizaje de idiomas

The changes brought about by globalization have determined the success of intercultural communication studies in our age, since there is a pending necessity to interact with people from other cultures. Educators are responsible for an adequate instruction and as L2 teachers we feel our class is the right place to work on specific abilities such as intercultural communicative competence. Moreover, we should bear in mind that the growth of ICT has influenced and reshaped the English language teaching and learning. This paper advocates the use of Internet as an effective tool in intercultural training. Thus, after some theoretical considerations, we will introduce the most relevant web pages and activities to develop our students' intercultural abilities.

Keywords: intercultural communication, ICT, intercultural communicative competence, language learning

1. Introduction.

Our daily routine reminds us that we live in a global world: technological advances, international media, the Internet, European rapprochement, international cooperation... In this globalized society there is a pending necessity to interact with people from other cultures. Today's citizens must be able to communicate effectively with individuals from different cultures. However, this is a difficult ability to develop since «intercultural contact does not automatically breed mutual understanding. Rather, it confirms the groups involved in their own identities and prejudices» (Gordon & Newbury, 2007, p. 254). Then, students can (and must) benefit from formal instruction in educational institutions. As educators, we are responsible for an adequate instruction because without this training, they will not be competent professionals. As L2 teachers, our class is the right place to provide intercultural training and to promote intercultural communicative competence. This article will start discussing the background of intercultural communication studies; then, we will move on to the issue of competencies, where we will analyse the notion and components of

intercultural communication and we will mention training methods. On the second part of this paper, we will deal with the growth of ICT and the contribution of new technologies to the English language teaching and learning. Lastly, we will present the most relevant web pages and online resources to support intercultural training in educational contexts.

2. Intercultural communication: an academic discipline.

The phrases «intercultural communication» or «cross-cultural communication» have been widely used in many different disciplines since the 1950s, mostly as synonyms. The globalization process and the movement towards European cooperation have heightened the interest in the area and, as a result, intercultural communication has become an academic field of study. This independence seems to be confirmed by the extensive number of scholars, publications, conferences, dissertations, etc. that are devoted to intercultural communication research. The dispute arises when we have to quote its theories or methods, because this field has drawn on many other disciplines. However, these other perspectives are vital to a comprehensive analysis of intercultural communication. Thus, intercultural communication is a field of interdisciplinary research, accommodating different subject areas: anthropology, social psychology, sociology, communication studies and linguistics.

Research within the different areas took aim at designing frameworks to study and compare the regularities of culture. Next, we will review the main contributions in psychology and anthropology since cultural paradigms in the other areas, interestingly enough, are beyond the purposes of this paper.

2.1. Cultural background.

Edward T. Hall is the father of Intercultural Communication. Guillén-Nieto (2009, p. 33) explains that the U.S. Department of State created in 1946 the Foreign Service Institute to help personnel

develop language and cultural skills in a foreign language. Hall, who was a social anthropologist, was the head of the project that would lay the foundations for this field. According to Rogers, Hart and Miike (2002), he was influenced not only by cultural anthropology, but also by linguistics, ethology and Freudian psychoanalysis. Hall coined the phrase “cross-cultural communication” in his book *The Silent Language*, published at the late 1950s.

His following publications continued his work to describe dimensions of cultural differences that could be used to compare cultural groups. Hall focused on dimensions of behavioural difference (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, p. 23): time (monochronic-polychronic), context (high-low) and space.

In the 1970s, scholars of different fields contributed to the topic with several publications. However, the most relevant contribution was to come. Hofstede, a Dutch social psychologist, published *Culture Consequences* in 1980. Research within social psychology determines fundamental values in order to identify dimensions that could be used to compare different cultural groups. Hofstede (1980, 1991) conducted surveys and collected data of work-related values of IBM employees around the world. He established a five-value dimension framework: individualism, power distance index, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance index and long-term orientation.

His work was highly innovative since it pointed at a close relationship between culture and management practices. Besides, his studies on national culture made possible the comparison of different cultural communication styles and methods. This research had a massive impact on the study of cultural groups. Nevertheless, much criticism has been laid on his work regarding the characterization of whole countries rather than individuals (McSweeney, 2002). The controversy seems to imply that Hofstede’s research equates culture with country (Jameson, 2007) and that national values predict individual behaviours. In this context, Poncini (2003) asserts that we need something else besides the national component, since cultures are not homogenous and the individual may not act as the standardized representative of that culture.

Despite these concerns, Hofstede is one of the most quoted authors in the field and his dimensions

have been adopted in many studies.

Some years later, Shalom Schwartz, another social psychologist, developed a framework to compare cultures that accounted for the individual level. His framework (1992, 1999, 2004) consists of ten individual-level values (conformity, tradition, benevolence, universalism, self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power and security) and seven cultural-level values (embeddedness, hierarchy, mastery, affective autonomy, intellectual autonomy, egalitarianism and harmony).

Management specialists relied on psychological and anthropological frameworks to contribute to research in international business. There are two remarkable frameworks in the business area: Trompenaars (later Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997) and the Globe Study of 62 societies. The first paradigm consists of seven values and the Globe Study uses nine dimensions of cultural variability. Both frameworks rely on Hofstede's previous work.

2.2. Intercultural communication: a definition.

As much as we have used the phrase «Intercultural Communication» in this paper, so far we have not offered a proper definition. Targowski and Metwalli (2003) believe that intercultural communication analyses the communicative process between people of different cultures. Another explanation of the term is provided by Lustig and Koester: “(intercultural communication is) a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which the degree of difference between people is large and important enough to create dissimilar interpretations and expectations». (1998, p. 51). This perception presupposes an intercultural continuum for every communicative instance.

Vilá (2004) thinks that intercultural communication takes place when people of diverse cultural backgrounds overcome their cultural and personal differences and reach a basic mutual understanding. Vilá also brings into question the willingness of the speakers in the intercultural exchange. A successful communicative act between people of different cultures accounts for the

participants' will to overcome the existing barriers stemming from cultural distance or cultural novelty. Then, the speakers' willingness and motivation come as the main difference between a multicultural and intercultural act. While the multicultural exchange is a passive action, the intercultural process suggests active cooperation between people.

3. Intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence.

Throughout this paper we have insisted on the idea that teachers are responsible for developing students' intercultural competence:

Intercultural competence shows itself in the ability to recognise, respect, value and use productively –in oneself and others- cultural conditions and determinants in perceiving, judging, feeling and acting with the aim of creating mutual adaptation, tolerance of incompatibilities and a development towards synergistic forms of cooperation, living together and effective orientation patterns with respect to interpreting and shaping the world (Thomas, 2003, p. 143).

But also, we have already mentioned that as L2 teachers this intercultural training should go beyond general competences and focus on communicative skills. Chen and Starosta state that intercultural communication competence is «the ability to negotiate cultural meanings and to execute appropriately effective communication behaviours that recognise the interactants' multiple identities in a specific environment» (1996, p.358).

This definition emphasizes the importance of appropriateness and effectiveness. The first draws attention to the capacity of being contextually flexible in one's behaviour. The second refers to the complexity of the process, to the complex layers involved in successfully co-constructing and conveying meaning.

A common goal for researchers of different disciplines has been to identify the components of intercultural communicative competence (ICC ahead). There is a wide array of frameworks of ICC elements. Nevertheless, regardless the academic field, most models point at the distinction between

cognitive, behavioural and affective components. On account of our academic area, we are just going to consider closely the contribution of foreign language education specialists.

3.1. ICC components in foreign language teaching/learning.

Contrary to what many may think, there has not been much research into the constituents of ICC in the field of foreign language education:

Hymes' notion of communicative competence stresses the cultural in the development of communicative competence. (...) However, despite its roots in Hymes' work (...) communicative competence has come to be interpreted somewhat narrowly and prescriptively, as appropriate language use rather than competence in the social and cultural practices of a community of which language is a large part (Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan & Street, 2001, p. 26).

The most prominent scholar who has centred his research on ICC is Michael Byram. His framework (1997) draws on the theories of Canale and Swain (1980) and Van Ek (1986):

ICC	
Linguistic competence	
Sociolinguistic competence	
Discourse competence	
Intercultural competence	Attitudes Knowledge Skills of interpreting and relating Skills of discovering and interacting Critical cultural awareness/political education

Table 1. Intercultural Communicative Competence

Byram inspired the framework of intercultural competence designed by the INCA project in 2007. Nevertheless, this model is also influenced by contributions from other fields: psychology, communication styles and also management studies. Precht and Davidson Lund (2007) identify six components (tolerance for ambiguity, behavioural flexibility, communicative awareness, knowledge discovery, respect for otherness and empathy) that work in a threefold dimension (motivation, skill/knowledge and behaviour).

3.2. Training methods to develop ICC.

We mentioned earlier that the components of ICC are often grouped in three categories (cognitive, behavioural and affective); then, the expected outcomes are usually assorted as knowledge, skills or attitudes. Depending on the desired outcome, there are different methods we can use to develop our students' ICC. We are going to list the taxonomy outlined by Fowler and Blohm (2004) because, in our opinion, it is the most comprehensive.

CATEGORY OF METHOD	METHOD	OUTCOME
Cognitive (acquire knowledge)	Lecture Written Material Computer-based material Self-assessment Case studies	Knowledge Knowledge Knowledge, skills Knowledge Knowledge, skills
Active (learn by doing)	Simulation and games Role-play Exercises	Knowledge, skills, attitudes Skills, attitudes Knowledge, skills
Intercultural (develop cultural self-awareness and promote intercultural competencies)	Contrast culture Critical incidents Culture assimilator Culture analysis Cross-cultural dialogues Area studies Immersion	Attitudes Knowledge, skills, attitudes Knowledge, skills, attitudes Knowledge, skills Knowledge, attitudes Knowledge Knowledge, skills, attitudes
Other	Art and culture	Knowledge, skills, attitudes

Table 2. Intercultural training methods.

4. The unfolding of ICT: a new stage for L2 learning.

The changes brought about by the development of technological advances have reshaped language learning and teaching. The growth of ICT provides students with multimedia and interactive resources that are strongly motivating. The computer has become an essential means in education since it offers a large array of resources: CD-ROM, DVD-ROM, software to create teaching/learning material, assessment tools, the Internet, etc. Among these capabilities, the Internet is the most popular and powerful means due to the constant update of resources and contents (Teeler, 2004). Nowadays, teachers use the Internet to update linguistic and communicative skills,

to find new and interactive resources, to develop ICT applications, to plan lessons, to manage educational projects, etc. Students also benefit from the educational use of the Internet:

- enhances/improves motivation
- promotes self-learning
- brings flexibility to the learning process
- incorporates both productive and receptive skills
- keeps learning and teaching contents update

Nevertheless, being the Internet an effective tool as well as an unlimited source of possibilities for the learning of capabilities, we need to put forward a cautionary note: this vast potential make absolutely necessary a careful selection of resources, purposely designed to fit our goals and the proficiency level of our students (when dealing with activities in another language).

We started this paper emphasizing that intercultural abilities are a must in today's society since we need to interact and communicate with people from different cultures. Thus, we have argued that students should receive an appropriate training to develop such skills. L2 classes are more than suitable for this instruction, since the teaching of a foreign language allows access to a different culture. Then, we are going to put into practice the educational use of the Internet for the intercultural training.

To assist and support the daily teaching practice, we have conducted a thorough research to gather the most useful web pages to promote such skills. Therefore, the final section of this paper will examine online web pages and point at activities that can help teachers promote intercultural training.

4.1. Teaching materials for intercultural training.

These are the most relevant web pages that offer a variety of free resources for intermediate and advanced students (except otherwise mentioned):

4.1.1. Resource 1.

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

This page embraces the intercultural component within the online second language learning site *eslflow.com*. It can be useful to promote intercultural skills both in general and business contexts. The culture and cross-cultural lessons are worthy to explore since they introduce lesson plans, games, useful worksheets, cross-cultural quizzes and many other practical resources. You can also explore the resources on specific topics such as “Culture and celebrations” or “Body language & gestures” that are on top of the page.

The link “Cultural lessons for ESL students” shows different culture lessons by Macmillan featuring relevant aspects such as food, global English, etc. We suggest the lesson on culture shock «Do the right thing» and the culture webquest.

It is also interesting the heading «Excellent cross-culture quizzes and answers», since it opens an impressive list of quizzes on intercultural matters. The quiz «Hat Trick» reviews clothing around the world and «Language and Dialects» deals with linguistic varieties.

4.1.2. Resource 2.

<http://www.projectbritain.com/behaviour.html>

This website is a valuable tool if we want our students to learn everything that is to know about cultural matters in the United Kingdom, especially in England. It is a good site to gather information. The «Dos and Don'ts» and «Customs & Tradition» pages are really helpful. The downside is that it does not provide learning games or training activities to put into practice all that knowledge. However, you can use the Q&A section as a quiz for your students.

4.1.3. Resource 3.

<http://www.everythingsl.net/in-services/crosscultural.php>

Everythingsl.net is a website that offers tips, lesson plans and training for teachers. The page we are reviewing here deals with cultural and intercultural topics: «ESL teacher as cultural broker». On this page, we can find different activities to train teachers in cross-cultural abilities. We particularly recommend «What's in a gesture», an activity to work on kinesics, and «Keep an Arms-length away», to discuss proxemics.

4.1.4. Resource 4.

<http://www.mislinks.org/topics/icc.htm>

This Internet page is about cross-cultural communication in general contexts. It gathers several links that lead to different resources: theoretical reviews, journals, bibliographies, databases, etc., although the most attractive section for the teaching practice is «Simulations/Training Exercises». «Albatross», for example, is a simulation exercise that poses the first contact between members of imaginary culture and a group of foreigners. As students infer meaning from what is happening, they are given an opportunity to learn by cultural observation and analyse cultural assumptions. It works better with intermediate and advanced students. Also on this section, «Multicultural Experiential Exercises» gathers motivating multicultural exercises, such as «Implicit culture», where students reflect upon cultural interactions.

4.1.5. Resource 5.

<http://www.thiagi.com/freebies-and-goodies.html>

Here we can find plenty of exercises, games, tips and interactive lectures. On «Web Games Shell»

we have access to some free games, such as a quiz on Australian English. The link «Training games» contains more than 200 training games and activities. We would like to point at two exercises: «European neighbours», an activity that works on the discovery of differences and similarities among six European countries, and «I'm a...», a short exercise that draws attention to cultural variables.

4.1.6. Resource 6.

The British Council promotes English through a teaching and a learning section. The teaching angle:

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/try>

This is a useful page for educators, since it has activities, lesson plans, tips, literary references, and many other resources. An interesting lesson plan is «Different kinds of cities», <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/try/lesson-plans/opencities-%E2%80%93-lesson-1-different-kinds-cities>, which explores issues associated with cultural and environmental adjustments. There are also lesson plans focused on England, Northern Ireland and Scotland (<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/try/lesson-plans/destination-scotland>). Finally, students may find out about what their partners know about other cultures in «Other cultures» (<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/try/activities/other-cultures>).

The learning side:

<http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/uk-culture>

We can improve our students' listening skills and intercultural abilities with the podcasts featured on this page. They can learn about contemporary culture in the UK: leisure activities, dialects, climate, etc.

<http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/games>

It has a variety of games. The students can play “Refugees” or “Restaurant” to approach intercultural issues.

4.1.7. Resource 7.

<http://www.culture-at-work.com/contents.html#culture>

The website above displays effective theoretical and practical contents such as «What is culture» and «Cross-culture Exercises». This last link leads us to «Exercises in Cross-cultural interaction».

We suggest the critical incidents in «What just happened?»

As we have stated earlier, our research has focused on free materials but there are plenty of more resources dealing with intercultural matters if we choose to pay for them: games such as Diversophy, BARNGA, or Redundancia and videos like «A World of Differences-Understanding Cross-Cultural Communication», just to mention some of these materials and packages.

5. Conclusion.

Intercultural issues are crucial to address in this time and age. As future professionals and citizens are brought up in educational institutions, teachers are responsible for their adequate training, focused on developing skills and self-awareness. Without a deep understanding and a conscientious instruction, students are likely to keep worthless stereotypes.

The technological revolution we have witnessed has influenced education and, in particular, the English language teaching. ICT has entered the foreign language class, we hope not to ever leave, given the teaching/learning potential it has unfolded. The Internet has become one of the most useful and motivating tools. This paper has aimed at promoting intercultural training through the available resources on the Internet. To that purpose, we have considered the most relevant web

pages and activities that will enable students build the proper intercultural skills for a successful interaction.

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