

English Language as a Cultural Tool for Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: The article emphasizes the theoretical concept of English as international language extensively used in intercultural communication and presents practical implications of the concept for intercultural learning and teaching. More specifically, the article brings an overview of a course of Intercultural Communication designed for international students at Masaryk University with the goal to facilitate their intercultural communication through development of communicative and intercultural competence.

Key words: English as international language; intercultural communication; intercultural communicative competence

Abstrakt: Článek zdůrazňuje pojetí angličtiny jako mezinárodního jazyka široce užívaného v interkulturní komunikaci a zaměřuje se na praktického využití tohoto pojetí ve výuce interkulturní komunikace. Konkrétněji článek prezentuje předmět interkulturní komunikace vyučovaný na Masarykově univerzitě pro mezinárodní studenty, kteří se učí interkulturní komunikaci v anglickém jazyce prostřednictvím rozvoje komunikativních a interkulturních kompetencí.

Klíčová slova: angličtina jako mezinárodní jazyk; interkulturní komunikace; interkulturní komunikační kompetence

1 Communicative Competence and Culture

Communicative competence was traditionally limited to language proficiency: the knowledge of language, particularly grammar rules, was considered sufficient for a successful exchange of messages. Communication is not, however, so straightforward; it is rather ambiguous. The exchange of messages in communication does not equal the exchange of the same meanings as participants in communication may attach different meanings to the same message.

The ambiguity of language can be quite accurately illustrated by the following story: a businessperson from the United States, having enjoyed a conversation with his counterpart from Hong Kong, said “We must get together and have lunch sometime” when saying goodbye to his colleague from Hong Kong. While the businessperson from Hong Kong was ready to put down the lunch date to his diary, the US American had no such an intention. He meant the words just to indicate that he enjoyed the conversation and that their encounter is about to end. In no way did he feel committed to meet his friend from Hong Kong for lunch (Scollon et al., 2011, pp. 10–11).

The two business partners assigned different meanings to the same message. They relied on their knowledge of English and assumed that the same words in English would be interpreted similarly by both parties in conversation. In doing so, they failed to recognize that they attached their own meanings to the same message. In addition, they did not pay attention to the context of communication, they did not recognize their cultures, and they were not aware of how their own cultural perceptions guided interpretation of the message. Because if they had known the culture and cultural conventions of their business partner and if they had been aware of how their interpretation differed, they would have given a similar meaning to the message "We must get together and have lunch sometime."

Meanings are not given and are not transmitted from one person to another unaltered but rather they are "jointly constructed by the participants in communication" (ibid., p. 11). What makes communication effective is then a sufficient overlap in the meanings: we interpret the messages similarly and thus are able to minimize misunderstandings (Gudykunst, 2004, p. 28). It should be clear by now that communicative competence is incomplete without our knowledge of the cultural context of the participants in communication.

Culture and communication are indeed inseparable, they work in tandem (Samovar & Porter, 2003, p. 7) and "all communication, whether verbal or non-verbal, occurs within cultural frameworks" (Johnson, 2003, p. 194). But what is culture? Following the idea of interdependence of culture and communication and the construction of meanings in communication, this paper emphasizes the concept of culture as a group of people who create and share certain meanings based on their experience, beliefs, worldviews, values and mental patterns (Samovar & Porter, 2003; Scollon et al., 2011). Simply said, members of a cultural group are characterized by patterns of meaning, thinking and behaving, and understanding these patterns will help us become competent in communication with the members of the cultural group. It then follows that language learners, in order to develop their communicative competence in the target language, should become conscious of other cultures, their values and cultural practices (Kostková, 2012, p. 65) and they should enhance their "capacity to understand culturally specific ways of speaking" (Barro et al., 1998, p. 80).

It has become an intrinsic goal of foreign language teaching to introduce the learners to the cultures of the countries where the language is spoken. Students take part in various mobility programmes abroad with the objective to become acquainted with the culture and thus improve their foreign language use. Yet this presupposes that the target culture (i.e. the culture of the speakers of the language in question) is one homogeneous national culture whose members speak the same national language.

But in light of today's global integration and cross-cultural migration, the equation "one native speaker, one language, one national culture" is no longer valid (Kramsch, 1998, p. 26). Consider English language use: there is no single entity such as Anglo-Saxon culture, but diversity of English speaking countries and cultures whose members speak different varieties of English. What is more, as Kramsch has observed, it is becoming more and more difficult to associate English language use with geographically and culturally delimited native speakers of English as English has become an international language, "the *lingua franca* between people who do not speak each other's national languages" (ibid., p. 23). Consequently, learners of English cannot "model themselves on native speakers with respect to the learning about and acquiring an understanding of another culture" (Byram et al., 2011, p. 5). Given the plurality and diversity of English language and the cultural contexts in which English is used, whose cultural practices should English language learners acquire to be communicatively competent? To answer this question, the context of English language use needs to be redefined.

2 English as International Language in Intercultural Communication

We have agreed that English is an international language (EIL). For speakers of other languages, EIL is a *cultural tool* they borrow to interact with people from different cultures (cf. Scollon et al., 2011). Communication between people from different national cultures is called intercultural communication (Gudykunst, 2002, p. 179). The context of intercultural communication varies depending on the participants in conversation, their relationships and their membership in particular cultural groups.

Let us take into closer consideration the question of group membership. It is believed that membership of a national culture is the predominant factor defining intercultural communication (Byram&Fleming, 1998; Gudykunst, 2002, 2004). Intercultural communication therefore focuses on cultural identity – the self-concepts of individuals as having certain cultural traits (e.g., a set of beliefs about the world, values, thought patterns) that characterize them as members of a national culture vis-à-vis members of other national cultures. It is assumed that participants in intercultural communication view themselves and others primarily as Czechs, Chinese, or Americans and the similarities and differences they see in one another are attributed to their membership in their national culture. Yet we simultaneously participate in many groups based not only on our nationality, but also gender, age, profession, family background and so forth. We should not, therefore, presuppose that it is always cultural identity derived from membership in a national culture that predominates in intercultural communication, because the enactment of a particular identity by participants in communication depends on their specific relationships in the situation. It could be their personal identity characterized by

individual traits they share or social identity derived from their membership in the same profession that can guide their interaction in a given situation (Janík Z., 2014).

In order to develop their communicative competence, EIL learners need to recognize the rich and diversified context of intercultural communication. Their EIL use must be supplemented by learning how different group memberships and relationships give rise to different cultural practices of interaction and different interpretations. Thus the learners, as intercultural speakers of English, will develop their intercultural competence.

3 Intercultural Communicative Competence

Let us summarize the main ideas so far: the way we construct and interpret messages is a function of our multiple group membership and relationships with others in interaction. What meanings we assign to messages depends on how we see ourselves and others, their behaviour and the way they send messages to us. Intercultural communication is effective when misunderstandings are minimized and a sufficient overlap in meanings is reached.

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) sets the path towards effective intercultural communication by emphasizing the concept of otherness and appreciation of differences: the ability “to interact with others, to accept other perspectives and perceptions of the world, to mediate between different perspectives” (Byram&Fleming, 1998, p. 5) should help us recognize and understand others and their meanings. Recognition of other realities, rather than the assumption that we are all the same, coupled with knowledge of multiple cultures and identities will enhance our capacity to “discover and relate to new people from other context” (ibid., p. 12).

Awareness of others’ perspectives and styles of communication will enable us “to select those forms of accuracy and those forms of appropriateness that are called for in a given social context use” (Kramsch, 1998, p. 27). It would be wrong, however, to infer that ICC strictly means knowing which conventional expression to use in a specific situation. Given the complexity of the context of intercultural communication, ICC implies awareness and recognition of varieties. In Begley’s words, “understanding that greetings vary according to culture helps us speak with people from diverse backgrounds” (2003, p. 409).

Recognition and understanding of otherness is not accomplished by means of “mere exposure to experience of a different culture” (Byram et al., 2001, p. 4). Contact and identification with otherness must involve awareness of similarities and differences, knowledge of others’ cultures, use of skills that will clear up misunderstandings, attitudes that will lower communication barriers and support

competent foreign language use. What is being connected here is development of intercultural competence – cultural awareness, knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Byram, & Fleming, 1998, 2001) with development of communicative competence in a foreign language.

The goal of foreign language learning is then two-fold: improving learners' communicative competence (1) and developing their intercultural competence (2) (Kostková, 2012, p. 65). Communicative and intercultural competence are interdependent and by developing both the competences learners attain intercultural communicative competence (ibid., p. 107).

4 Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in the Course of Intercultural Communication

This chapter describes the components of intercultural competence and explains how the students in the course of Intercultural Communication deepen their cultural awareness, acquire knowledge, utilize appropriate skills, and develop desirable attitudes in order to become competent intercultural speakers of English.

The course of Intercultural Communication was created to help international students studying at Masaryk University integrate into the international community at the university. Knowing that vast majority of the students communicate internationally in English I followed the goal to train the students in communicative competence with an emphasis on the intercultural context of their communication. Development of intercultural communicative competence lies in the centre of the training. The course takes place every semester on a weekly basis in the form of a two-hour seminar, which limits the class capacity to thirty students. Since 2010 almost two hundred students have participated. The students come from countries across the globe but most of them are European students on Erasmus mobility enrolled in different study programmes at the faculties of Masaryk University. This year the course has been opened to Czech students, reflecting the need for their inclusion in an intercultural environment that will enhance their intercultural competence along with communicative competence in English.

4.1 Cultural Awareness

Although all the components of intercultural competence – cultural awareness, knowledge, skills and attitudes – are interrelated, i.e. one will not contribute to intercultural communicative competence without the other, it is the component of cultural awareness that sets the basis for and augments the development of the other components (Kostková, 2012, p. 75).

Cultural awareness means becoming aware of our own culture and how this influences our communication behaviour (e.g. the choice of style of communication)

and interpretations of realities, including views of others. We are normally not aware of our own culture in context that is familiar to us: we presuppose that the members of our group share the same meanings of values and worldviews and express them the same way as we do. But when we encounter members of other cultures we start noticing differences between their and our own culture. This is because we unconsciously use our own cultural frame of reference to interpret new or unfamiliar behaviour and meanings arising in intercultural communication. Shortly said that we see the others through the lenses of our culture.

Cultural awareness has been understood as an ability to critically evaluate “perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries (...) by making learners’ values explicit” (Byram et al., 2001, p. 7). Prior to evaluating other cultures, one must reflect on (i.e. make explicit) one’s own culture (identities, values, cultural perceptions, etc.) in order to relate one’s own culture to cultures of others. We first need to be aware of how our culture influences us and our perceptions of others in intercultural communication and how our culture accounts for the differences in meanings exchanged in intercultural communication. Only then can we approach learning about and critically evaluating others’ cultures.

In the class of Intercultural Communication the students become aware of their own culture through activities designed to reveal more about how they view themselves (self-concepts) when interacting with others. Since all the students are international, and they are seated in the classroom so that none of them speaks with a classmate of the same language group or national culture, their group or pair-based discussions in English are truly intercultural. Through reasoning about their identities the students come to realize their multiple group memberships and that they have unique personality traits (personal identity), for instance, being enrolled in different classes (social identity of a student) or coming from different countries (cultural identity). Having acknowledged their multiple identities, they then can see how they enact their identities in intercultural communication. Their first encounters and conversations mostly start with the question ‘Where are you from?’ (Z.Janík 2014). By asking this question they look for geographical links, searching for meanings by exploring their commonalities and differences across their cultures. It is precisely the cultural identity that guides their interaction here: the students are driven by curiosity and interest in learning about other cultures. Gradually, their communication will be guided by their social identities, when they exchange messages and share meanings as students of the same major or residents of the same dormitory, and eventually it can be their personal desires and interests as well as their personal traits that they will reveal to others in communication. The goal is to make students aware of how their identities affect choice of meanings they assign to messages exchanged in intercultural communication. The students will, among others, realize that misunderstanding might not

have its cause in personality differences (she does not speak much because she is shy and perhaps she can't even speak English well) but in cultural differences (she is rather quiet and does not express her views as openly as I do because she comes from a different culture).

The students further conceptualize their awareness of cultural identity by exploring their perception of cultural differences. For example, the students describe (first alone, then in groups) incomplete and sketchy drawings of people involved in various activities (see Hofstede et al., 2002, pp. 8–11) and find out how their perceptions of the same picture differ as a result of their culturally-induced interpretations. They learn how their ethnocentric perspectives make them see others' cultures as different. Awareness of one's own culture intrinsically entails awareness of one's own ethnocentrism – cultural filters leading us to judge others' cultures from the perspective or centre of our own culture¹ – and is the precondition for learning about and evaluating others' cultures in relation to our culture.

4.2 Knowledge of cultures

Knowledge of cultures implies the knowledge of cultural practices and products in one's own and in one's interlocutor's culture (Byram et al., 2011, p. 6). Attaining such knowledge will shed more light into cultural misunderstandings arising in communication between interlocutors of different cultures (ibid.).

Before teaching the students about other cultures, the course of Intercultural Communication first explains the *cognitive* aspect of learning about other cultures. It builds on the students' cultural awareness, including awareness of their ethnocentric attitudes, to bring the students to a realization of what they first notice when encountering others. They mostly see differences in language use and communication behaviour: for example, turn-taking is indicated by long or short pauses, different non-verbal signals are used to express agreement, some cultures tolerate silence in conversation more than others, and some interlocutors communicate rather indirectly. In short, they see the external culture of others. However, the objective of culture learning in the course is to go under the surface of the visible culture and study cultural values that explain why people communicate and behave the way they do².

The students study the cultural roots of behaviour and communication patterns of members of other cultures by means of exploring others' cultural values, world-views, and beliefs. Guidance in their exploration is provided by Geert Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions (Hofstede et al., 2002). The following is just a brief

¹ For a definition of ethnocentrism, see for example Samovar & Porter, 2003, pp. 6–17; Begley, 2003, pp. 406–411.

² Compare with the Iceberg Analogy of Culture (Morgan, 1998, pp. 224–241).

overview of the theory, as it would be beyond the scope of this paper to present the cultural dimensions in detail. The cultural dimensions – identity, hierarchy, gender, truth, virtue – have been applied in many studies as cultural variability explaining similarities and differences across national cultures (e.g., Gudykunst, 2004). Each of the dimensions has its two opposites: for example, the dimension of identity on the one side is expressed by collectivism, its opposite conveys individualism; hierarchy signifies large power distance, whereas its opposite small power distance, and so forth. The assumption is that most of the world's national cultures inclines to one of the dimension opposites. Following the dimension of identity and hierarchy, Japanese culture tends to collectivism, which in terms of values is defined by giving preference to a group and group harmony over single individuals and their needs and interests, and large power distance, which means respecting authority based on age (seniority) or socio-economic status. US national culture, on the other hand, moves towards the opposite extreme of identity, encompassing individualism with its values of independence, self-reliance, and the privilege of individual before the group. Likewise, the US value of contract based, rather than authority based relationships suggest that the national culture as a whole is characterized by small power distance (for more see Hofstede et al., 2002, pp. 91–113; Gudykunst, 2004, pp. 59–67).

The students use their knowledge of cultural dimensions as a tool to understand the events in external culture, mainly differences in communication behaviour across cultures. So far they have learnt that miscommunication might not have its roots in incompetent English language use, but in their assigning different meanings to messages or using different styles of communication. They further learn that as members of a collectivistic culture they are conditioned to use high-context communication or, they may come from individualistic culture in which low-context communication is more valued³. The students then go under the surface of external culture to find out that it is the cultural value of group harmony and priority of group over an individual that does not allow the members of collectivistic culture to stand out and express their thoughts and opinions directly as the individualistic culture of English speaking countries, with its emphasis on direct style of communication and expressing personal opinion, would have them to do.⁴ Similarly, the students will recognize that long pauses in turn-taking among English speakers from collectivistic culture (e.g. Japanese) do not necessarily signify incapacity in English language use; rather, the pauses might point to

³ High-context communication very simply means preferring implicit code, that is not expressing ideas directly in words but deriving meanings of messages from the context and having internalized understandings of messages and their meanings. In low-context communication interlocutors rely on the explicit code and express ideas and meanings directly (Hall, 1976).

⁴ This approach to acquiring knowledge of cultures is inspired by Gudykunst's theory combining Hofstede's cultural dimensions with Hall's concept of high-context and low-context cultures (Gudykunst, 2004, pp. 57–79).

the Japanese value of silence, an indirectly conveying agreement or disagreement in high-context communication (Janík, 2013).

The students thus immediately apply their knowledge of cultures (namely cultural values as conceptualized in the theory of cultural dimensions) to understand cultural differences in verbal and non-verbal communication and to clarify misunderstandings. In short, the students do not just acquire new knowledge of cultures but operate that knowledge by means of certain skills that help them overcome barriers in communication.

4.3 Skills

Imagine a situation in which a Japanese student asks his American classmate out for dinner. The American student will get confused because she expects her counterpart, based on her knowledge of Japanese collectivistic culture, to communicate indirectly. What is more, the American will evaluate her classmate's behaviour as impolite, believing that there must be something wrong with her classmate to express her thoughts so openly and in a way that is out of the Japanese cultural norm. Yet the Japanese decided to communicate directly precisely because this is the norm in the American individualistic culture. Knowledge of their corresponding cultures did not prevent the two from misunderstanding.

Therefore, besides cultural awareness and knowledge of cultures, intercultural speakers of English "need to be able to see how misunderstandings can arise, and how they might be able to resolve them" (Byram et al., 2001, p. 6). They should develop their skills of interpreting an event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to events from their own culture (ibid.).

Before the students reach this stage of Intercultural Communication learning, they become aware of how their cultural perceptions and ethnocentric perspectives can affect their interpretation of other cultures. Further, having gained new knowledge of cultures, they create expectations of members of other cultures and their behaviour. The next step for the students is to realize that not all of the people who belong to one culture are the same and that such stereotyping may create barriers in intercultural communication, as the misunderstanding between the American and Japanese student exemplified. Likewise, becoming aware of their multiple-group membership and acknowledging multiple identities in others, the students see that they are not fully defined by membership in one single group and develop an ability to be flexible in their opinions of others and to be ready to adjust their expectations.

The intercultural communicative skills the students develop are the following: an ability to be mindful, to tolerate ambiguity, and an ability to empathize (Gudykunst, 2004, pp. 253–263). When in intercultural communication, the students try

to be mindful of the communication process per se, rather than focusing on the outcome that incites their expectations of others' interpretations. They are open to new information and perspectives, rather than let themselves to be constrained by stereotypes. Lastly, they are empathetic by striving to see the world from others' perspectives. The students are then able to more accurately assess which differences lead to misunderstandings.

The students minimize misunderstandings by clarifying meanings during conversation. Therefore, the skills are developed along with communicative competence in English. Following Gudykunst's strategies of effective listening (2004, pp. 184 to 185), the students paraphrase in their own words what others say in order to be sure they do not misinterpret others' meanings (1); during intercultural conversation they are encouraged to ask probing questions and use phrases such as 'I want to make sure I understand what you're saying...' (2); they learn how to indicate verbally (using listener-noise such as 'hmm', 'yeah', 'I see') and non-verbally (through body posture and eye-contact) that they are involved in the conversation and interested in what other participants say (3).

It is essential that the students have reached cultural awareness, gained better insight into other cultures, understood the influence of multiple identities on their enactment in intercultural communication before they practice the skills designed to make their intercultural communication effective.

4.4 Attitudes

Attitudes involve "curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbeliefs about other cultures and belief about one's own", which means for one to have a will "to relativize one's own values, beliefs and behaviours" (Byram, 2001 et al., p. 5).

The course of Intercultural Communication does not 'teach' attitudes desirable for the development of intercultural communicative competence, believing that prompting the students into adjusting their attitudes may inhibit their autonomy in development of intercultural communicative competence. Therefore, the course of Intercultural Communication only facilitates the students' curiosity about other cultures and relativizing their cultural perspectives with the goal to develop self-respect and respect for otherness.

Most of the students come from countries across the globe and while studying at Masaryk University they experience intercultural communication in English on a daily basis: in classrooms, the canteen, the dormitory, when shopping, asking for directions, and so forth. In the class of Intercultural Communication the students study the theories that help them reflect, analyze, and interpret their intercultural experience. This method of experiential learning enables the students to apply knowledge from the classroom immediately in their intercultural reality.

The students keep a record of their experiential learning in Reflective Journals – written assignments they are asked to write and submit throughout the course. In the Reflective Journals the students observe the development of their intercultural communicative competence. For instance, in the first Reflective Journal they deepen their cultural awareness by paying attention to their identities and how these guide their intercultural communication. Based on the relevant theories they answer the following questions: How do you see yourself when you communicate with members of other cultures? Is it your personal, social, or cultural identity that guides your communication? How do your identities influence your intercultural communication? In other journals the students' task is to focus on their ethnocentric perspectives and write how ethnocentrism affects their intercultural talks, or they reflect on their stereotypes and what they do in order to decrease the effect of stereotypes on intercultural communication. In the last Reflective Journal the students systematically apply the skill of mindfulness and empathy to see whether they can minimize misunderstandings. Finally, on concluding their study of Intercultural Communication, the students in final essays evaluate how their reflections of intercultural experience described in their Reflective Journals have contributed to the development of their intercultural competence. Such introspective learning leads the students to questioning and perhaps also changing their attitudes towards a greater appreciation of differences and recognition of otherness.

Conclusion

Learning English as an international language does not emphasize acquiring knowledge of grammar rules; rather, the goal of EIL learning is an appropriate use as well as development of English as a cultural tool in communication with members of other cultures. In the context of intercultural communication English learners develop their communicative competence only if they simultaneously develop their intercultural competence, namely awareness of one's own and others' cultures and their influence on intercultural communication (1), knowledge of the deep structures of one's own and others' cultures that explain the outer behaviour and patterns in communication (2), skills to minimize and resolve misunderstandings arising in intercultural communication (3), and attitudes encouraging self-respect and respect to others and their cultures (4).

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Bionote

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