

## THEORETICAL APPROACH TO (INTER) CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING/LEARNING: DIDACTIC AND PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR A SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

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**Abstract:** This paper puts to describe the didactic and pedagogical challenges and possibilities for the implementation of an (inter)cultural approach in Ivorian classrooms. We can note that despite the abundant literature on the importance of (inter)cultural competence in education worldwide, very few pedagogical and didactic proposals are made to facilitate the integration of activities that set room for the development of this key competence. We have, therefore, suggested a didactic framework favorable to the development of (inter)cultural competence in the language classroom, as well as some pedagogical guidelines for an (inter)cultural approach in line with the new educational objectives.

**Keywords:** Culture; (inter)cultural; pedagogy; didactic; language classroom; foreign language

**Résumé :** Cet article vise à obtenir une meilleure compréhension des défis et des possibilités didactiques et pédagogiques permettant la mise en pratique d'une approche (inter)culturelle dans les classes ivoiriennes. Nous constatons que malgré la littérature abondante existant au sujet de l'importance de la compétence (inter)culturelle dans l'enseignement, très peu de propositions sont faites sur les plans pédagogiques et didactiques pour faciliter l'intégration d'activités permettant le développement de cette compétence. Nous avons donc suggéré un cadre didactique favorable au développement de la compétence (inter)culturelle en classe, ainsi que quelques pistes pédagogiques pour une approche (inter)culturelle en adéquation avec les nouveaux objectifs éducatifs.

**Mots-clés :** Culture ; (inter)culturelle ; pédagogie ; didactique ; classe de langue ; langue étrangère

### Introduction

The problem of taking the cultural dimension into account in language teaching and learning has been at the heart of several scientific studies in recent decades. The school, in general, and the language class in particular, brings together learners from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Hence the need to take this into account in

pedagogical and didactic practices. However, the research carried out so far has been content to insist on the importance of the (inter)cultural dimension in the learning of second and foreign languages while omitting, for the most part, to make concrete proposals adapted to different local contexts with a view to bringing learners to acquire this competence whose importance is no longer to be proven. It is in this context that this study intervenes in order to obtain a better understanding of the challenges and the didactic and pedagogical possibilities that would allow the implementation of an (inter)cultural approach in Ivorian classrooms.

## **1. On (inter)cultural competence**

### **1.1. *What we mean by (inter)cultural competence***

(Inter)cultural competence is generally defined as the ability of a person to act appropriately and flexibly towards people from other cultures. It is also defined as the ability to behave appropriately in highly (inter)cultural situations. (Inter)cultural competence should support the affirmation of one's own cultural identity while helping to establish the cultural identity of others. (Inter)cultural competence is therefore about knowing and understanding other cultural systems without abandoning one's own.

(Inter)cultural competence is related to the attitude towards other cultures, including our own. It consists of a series of competencies in which affective aspects are of particular importance. In its development, the emphasis is on personal attitudes in order to gain new perspectives that encourage reflection on one's own culture and that of others. This requires contact with other cultures, which always happens in a Spanish as a Second Language class, which thus becomes a favorable setting for the development of this skill.

### **1.2. *The place of (inter)cultural competence in education***

UNESCO (2013) proposes some ideas for an operational plan to clarify, teach, promote, implement and support (inter)cultural competence. The aim is to "... contribute to the empowerment of interested groups and individuals and enable them

to relate to others in order to overcome differences, defuse conflicts and lay the foundations for peaceful coexistence” (p. 5).

The complexity of this task lies in the fact that “the acquisition of (inter)cultural competence is an exciting adventure, for no one is naturally called upon to understand the values of others.” (Idem: 5) It thus insists on taking (inter)cultural competence into account so that it “facilitates relations and exchanges between people of different origins and cultures, as well as within heterogeneous groups, all of whom must learn to live together in peace” (Idem: 7). It is possible, UNESCO adds, to “teach students not only aspects of the content of a wide range of cultures, but also a general openness to difference” (Idem: 28).

### **1.3. *Different levels of (inter)cultural competence***

Benjamin Pelletier (2011) <sup>1</sup>proposes a scale of different levels of (inter)cultural competence that informs the teacher about the learners’ progress.

Level 1 (cultural indifference) is considered to be perfectly null in terms of culture. There is a lack of action on the part of the learner with regard to questions of culture which results in an inability to recognize cultural referents specific to the target culture, even if he or she recognizes the referents of the source culture without generally knowing what meaning to give to them. This leads to cultural misunderstandings that can frustrate or shock interlocutors.

Level 2 (cultural knowledge) corresponds to the level where the learner has some idea of the issue of culture, even if it is only a limited knowledge resulting from his or her introduction to the culture. This still allows him/her to identify points of conflict between the source and target cultures. The learner is still exposed to the misunderstandings mentioned in Level 1.

Level 3 (the (inter)cultural competence) corresponds to a level where the learner has reached a stage of (inter)cultural maturity as a result of sustained and reflective effort

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<sup>1</sup> See Benjamin Pelletier’s blog on Intercultural Risk Management, posted on October 18, 2011 and visited August 13, 2019. <http://gestion-des-risques-interculturels.com/risques/risques-interculturels-typologie-et-diagnostic-2/>

with the help of the teacher and more advanced peers. This skill remains moderate, although it allows the learner to express himself by taking into account small details that determine the success of the act of communication. He is thus able to discuss with speakers by making an effort to adapt his speech and arguments to the target culture by asking himself questions about symbols anchored in the target culture to which he gives precise and correct historical answers. Level 3, which is the highest on the scale, is the goal for each learner.

## **2. Relevance of (inter)cultural competence and integration in the context of foreign language teaching**

### *2.1. The relevance of (inter)cultural competence in language teaching and learning*

Martine Abdallah-Preteille and Louise Porcher (2001), cited in Condat (2008: 7), have been concerned with the impacts of cultural diversity on disciplines such as history, literature, and foreign languages. They recognize that culture has an undeniable influence on these disciplines, which are themselves influenced by the growing cultural diversity in schools to the point where cultural realities must be taken into account in the school curriculum.

In language teaching and learning, Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002:11) explain that

to develop the [inter]cultural dimension in language teaching [learning] is to be aware of the following objectives: to make the learner acquire (inter)cultural as well as linguistic competence, to prepare him/her for relationships with people from other cultures; to enable the learner to understand and accept these “other” people as individuals with different views, values and behaviors; and to help the learner understand the enriching nature of this type of experience and relationship.

They add that the development of (inter)cultural competence among learners helps to create a climate conducive to an

informed dialogue between individuals with different social identities as well as interactions between these different people, taking in all the complexity they have as human beings, in their multiple identities and, at the same time, in the respect of the individual personality of each one. (p. 10)

For Martyn Barret et al. (2014:82), (inter)cultural competence refers to

a set of attitudes, knowledge, understandings, and skills that underlie action and enables a person, individually and in groups, to understand and respect people perceived as having different cultural references; to respond appropriately, effectively, and respectfully in interaction and communication with these people; to maintain positive and constructive relationships with these people; and to understand oneself and one's own cultural references through the encounter with cultural otherness

In its mission to promote culture around the world, UNESCO (2013: 5) is concerned with ways to develop in learners the <sup>2</sup>(inter)cultural competencies that it believes,

are the ability to navigate skillfully through complex environments marked by increasing diversity of peoples, cultures, and ways of life, that is, the ability to play one's role effectively and appropriately in interactions with others who are different by language and culture. [...] [Cultural competencies] aim to free people from their culture-specific ways of thinking and expressing themselves, so that they can relate to others and listen to their ideas, sometimes through belonging to one or more cultural systems, especially when they are not appreciated or even recognized in a particular socio-political context.

There are three reasons for the popularity of (inter)cultural competence. First, the important role that this skill plays in and out of the classroom justifies efforts to develop (inter)cultural competence in the classroom. Krasner (1999) argues that most communication problems and other misunderstandings "communication breakdowns typically arise not from the linguistic but from the socio-linguistic differences." (Krasner 1999: 81)"

In the same vein, Sólyom (2014: 352) explains that a foreign language student with the ability to produce well-structured grammatical sentences without appropriate (inter)cultural competence in the target language is unlikely to achieve his or her communication goals. Secondly, the teaching-learning of (inter)cultural competence in the EFL classroom enables learners to become aware of the relevance of cultural considerations in an increasingly globalized world. Therefore, they need to be trained to identify cultural differences between the culture of the target language and that of the source language. Thirdly, (inter)cultural competence is the ideal way to prevent culture shock. To this end, Zsuzsanna Ardó (2008) proposes the sensitization of

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<sup>2</sup> The term "competence" is used in the plural by UNESCO because it covers a plurality of skills, attitudes, aptitudes and many types of knowledge that must be mobilized simultaneously.

learners to the notion of (inter)cultural competence, on the one hand, and the use of activities that enable the development of (inter)cultural competence, on the other.

## 2.2. *The integration of (inter)cultural competence in the language classroom*

In second/foreign language teaching/learning, several approaches exist for integrating culture into the classroom for the development of (inter)cultural competence in learners.

These approaches can be classified in different ways. Saluveer (2004) divided them into two broad categories, including the monocultural and comparative approaches. The monocultural approach focuses only on the target culture, i.e., English, while the comparative approach places more emphasis on the comparison between the source and target cultures, i.e., English and the learner's language.

Drawing on the comparative method for effective consideration of culture in the language classroom with the goal of developing (inter)cultural competence, Risager (1998: 243-252) proposes four approaches to teaching culture. These are the (inter)cultural approach, the multicultural approach, the transcultural approach, and the foreign culture approach.

The (inter)cultural approach advocates the idea that the teaching-learning of culture should be done through the comparison of source and target cultures. Although the main focus is on the target culture, the (inter)cultural approach highlights the relationships between the learners' own culture. This approach aims at developing the learners' understanding of (inter)cultural and communicative competencies, thus enabling them to act as mediators between the two cultures. Risager insists that the use of this technique by the EFL teacher must meet certain criteria, including respect for cultural diversity.

The (inter)cultural approach has come in for a lot of criticism, most notably from Byram (1997) because, as Risager herself (1998: 246) admits, this approach tends to prioritize cultures in order to impose English as a dominant culture in comparison to the learners' other cultures. Moreover, he suggests that teachers use the multicultural approach which aims to overcome the weaknesses of the (inter)cultural approach.

Therefore, the multicultural approach is based on the idea that in each country there are a number of subcultures within the same culture. This approach emphasizes not only the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the target country but also the culture of the learners. The multicultural approach also places a strong emphasis on comparison in the development of the cultural dimension in students. Teachers using this approach in their classrooms are called upon to have a more balanced and anti-racist view of cultures so as not to frustrate or psychologically affect the learners.

As for the third approach proposed by Risager, i.e. the cross-cultural approach, its basic premise is that due to mass communication resulting from globalization and its attendant phenomena, the cultures of the modern world are bound to be closely intertwined. Since many people use foreign languages as a lingua franca, this approach considers the foreign language as an international language, so that it is not at all necessary to link the foreign language to a specific culture.

Even if it makes an effort to be more inclusive of (inter)cultural competence, such an approach seems to pose the problem that the cultures of some countries may be neglected because of the lesser importance or limited exposure found with these countries. In this vein, Byram (1997: 55) argues that while it is possible to introduce topics that are of universal importance in all cultures, such an approach leaves learners without the topics that are characteristic of a particular country.

Risager's fourth approach is the foreign culture approach, and it is based on the concept of a single culture and focuses on the target culture. It focuses only on the target culture and does not take into consideration the learner's culture or compare the two cultures together. What is important here is to develop communicative competence and cultural understanding of the target language. Logically, this approach has been criticized on the grounds that it does not focus on the relationship between the two cultures.

We can therefore retain that in the language classroom, mainly in ESL or foreign language classes where the new role of English as a lingua franca makes it more than likely, and even inevitable, that different cultures will meet and that this could lead to a culture shock, the taking into account of the cultural dimension must henceforth be

based on the need for learners to rediscover their own culture in relation to the culture of others.

In this way, they learn to tolerate differences and other discrepancies in practices between their own cultures and the culture of the English-speaking world. This involves a process in which the teacher is responsible for seeing students as cultural beings who are able to understand the demands of a world that is now firmly focused on cultural education for the development of culturally competent learners in diverse contexts. To do this, the teacher must be flexible in the choice of the cultural approach used in the classroom (Borg, 2006).

### **3. Didactic and pedagogical frameworks for the development of (inter)cultural competence**

#### **3.1. *Didactic framework for the development of (inter)cultural competence***

The appropriate consideration of culture in textbooks requires a didactic framework that provides clear guidance to teachers and learners in order to facilitate the development of (inter)cultural competence in the language classroom. The proposed didactic model is based on two theories, namely sociocultural theory, and cultural pragmatics. The sociocultural theory considers the textbook as an artifact acting as a mediation tool towards the development of (inter)cultural competence. Cultural pragmatics advocates relating the cultural referents of different languages in a comparative perspective so that learners can understand the similarities and differences between these cultures.

This model consists of three (03) phases. It consists of practical activities to be implemented in the language classroom to help the emergence of cultural awareness on the one hand and the development of (inter)cultural competence on the other. The model clarifies the roles of teachers and students at each stage of the EFL teaching-learning process.

The first phase involves activating students' prior knowledge. It is specifically at the level of presenting the points to be covered during the day's lesson. The general objective is to have students brainstorm their prior knowledge related to the topic of the day's lesson. This phase is intended to prepare and predispose students to



complete the tasks that will be presented to them with greater ease. The teacher's role is to suggest the material that he or she feels is appropriate for the type of lesson and the topic being discussed. Students draw on their past experiences to answer a number of questions in preparation for the upcoming activities.

Phase 2 is entitled (re) discovery of cultural references. Its main purpose is to help students discover the cultural references of the English-speaking world and/or the source culture through texts, images, videos, or other media. The teacher's role in this second phase is to guide the students in completing tasks around the target and source cultures in order to facilitate the discovery or rediscovery of cultural referents. In addition to developing or adapting the task contained in the textbook, the teacher plays a facilitating role by giving instructions for the successful completion of the activities.

Phase 3 is crucial in the proposed didactic framework because it represents the moment in the teaching-learning process when students become familiar with the cultural referents and appropriate them through a series of activities. In phase 3, the objective is to get students to put the learned cultural referents into practice by transferring this knowledge to another culture. To achieve this objective, the model proposes the organization of a debate between students with a view to using in a practical situation the referents discovered and learned in phase 2.

The success of this key step also requires ensuring the use of learned cultural referents to discuss the situation being discussed, as well as the identification and analysis of differences between the source and target cultures. The teacher, still acting as a facilitator, provides activities and a discussion situation that allow students to take stock of the differences and similarities between the two cultures involved.

As for the students, they are called upon to make comparisons between the particularity of a source cultural referent and its equivalent or role in the target culture. In this way, the students find themselves in a position to reuse the cultural referents they have learned, as well as the vocabulary and grammar needed to express these referents. Phase 3 thus appears to be a reinforcement stage. However, it goes far

beyond simple reinforcement to allow students to establish a relationship between the target and source cultures.

### *3.2. Pedagogical tracks for an (inter)cultural approach in line with educational objectives*

Our investigation highlighted the fact that most textbooks do not reflect the cultural dimension of the teaching method they are supposed to support. This weakness is due to the fact that despite the emergence of culture-sensitive education in recent decades, textbook specialists, as well as language teaching practitioners in the field of English language teaching and learning, have struggled to propose a pedagogical approach for taking the cultural dimension into account.

Among the four key components of the communicative approach, the sociocultural dimension holds a prominent place in the context of language and culture didactics. It is, therefore, important to propose a pedagogical approach that clearly highlights the cultural dimension of language teaching, which we focus on textbooks as they stand as the main tool students interact with and eventually learn from. Although aware of the importance of the cultural dimension in the training process of their learners, some of the teachers deplore the absence of proposals for teaching it. They, therefore, prefer to simply ignore culture in their various courses.

In order to solve this problem, we suggest a pedagogical approach based on the comparison of cultural referents. Indeed, considering the main objective of teaching-learning culture in the language classroom, which is none other than the development of (inter)cultural competence, it seems important to us to involve students in the accomplishment of learning tasks that involve the comparison of source and target cultures. In this way, students are equipped to make the connection between their own culture and the English language culture in order to determine the subtleties necessary for the interpretation of meaning as produced by native speakers.

In practical terms, the textbook can provide students with texts on an aspect of the source culture and lead them to initiate a discussion on similar aspects in their own culture. The textbook thus becomes a means of highlighting two cultures in order to

determine what they have in common and thus to determine the meaning to be given to the various verbal and non-verbal elements of expression used in that language.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to describe the didactic and pedagogical challenges and possibilities for the implementation of an (inter)cultural approach in Ivorian classrooms. We note that despite the abundant literature on the importance of (inter)cultural competence in education, very few pedagogical and didactic proposals are made to facilitate the integration of activities that allow the development of this competence. We have therefore suggested a didactic framework favorable to the development of (inter)cultural competence in the classroom, as well as some pedagogical guidelines for an (inter)cultural approach in line with the new educational objectives.

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