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## Intercultural communicative competence in ELT

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### Abstract

Based on a critical review of selected relevant studies and with a historical perspective, this discussion paper, as a piece of secondary research (Nunan, 1992, p. 8), aimed to point out where the world of language teaching is in terms of the competences that learners are expected to gain. It was determined that intercultural communicative competence, i.e. the knowledge, motivation and skills needed to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures (Wiseman, 2002, p. 208), is currently the highly favored type of competence after the sequential dominance of grammatical (linguistic) competence and communicative competence. The major inference drawn from the review was that although a number of particular studies draw heavily on intercultural communicative competence, they are paradoxical or not clear about where and how they differ from the tenets of its much-criticized predecessor, i.e. communicative language teaching, and about whose culture is to be taught along with the language. Taking sides for a pedagogical philosophy predicated on intercultural communicative competence, the author concludes that this is still merely a set of beliefs and procedures in need of multidisciplinary research-driven clarification and maturation and in this respect, he refers to and discusses some fundamental principles and standpoints on which a new model based on intercultural communicative competence can be built.

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### 1. Introduction

It is an obvious fact that any foreign language teaching/learning program is at least officially and/or theoretically aimed to make its learners competent enough to use the target language for effective communication. As a practice that started hundreds of years ago, language teaching has always been in a quest for the best to achieve the abovementioned aim although, up until a certain period, the desired competences were not named, defined or declared in terms of their content, scope or constructs. It took years for linguistics and foreign language teaching to become established and institutionalized as independent and interrelated domains of science that conceptualize and explain language itself as a system and language teaching and learning as interwoven experiences.

### 2. Linguistic Competence

Chomsky (1965) emphasized the study of language as a system independent from any given context of language use, from which the concept of linguistic (syntactic, lexical, morphological, phonological) competence emerged. This provides the linguistic basis for the rules of usage, which normally provides accuracy in comprehension and performance by virtue of the set or system of internalized rules about the language that enables a

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speaker to create new grammatical sentences and to understand sentences spoken to him, to reject “the ate goldfish John” as un-English and to recognize that “flying planes can be dangerous” is ambiguous (Paulston, 1974, p. 350).

A very large part of the criticism against Chomsky concerns the inadequacy of his attempts to explain language in terms of the narrow notions of the linguistic competence of an ideal hearer-speaker in a homogeneous society. Such a speaker is likely to become institutionalized if he/she simply produces any and all of the grammatical sentences of the language with no regard for their appropriateness (Hymes, 1972, p. 277) in terms of the contextual variables in effect.

### **3. Communicative Competence**

Demonstrating a clear shift of emphasis among scholars who work on language, Hymes (1972) coined the term communicative competence as the knowledge of both rules of grammar and rules of language use appropriate to a given context. As reported in Uso-Juan and Martinez-Flor (2008, p. 158), Hymes’s conceptualization of communicative competence has been further developed by several researchers who attempted to define the specific components of the model as grammatical competence (i.e. knowledge of the language code in a way that refers to Chomsky’s linguistic competence); sociolinguistic competence (i.e. knowledge of the sociocultural rules of use in a particular context); strategic competence (i.e. knowledge of how to use communication strategies to handle breakdowns in communication) and discourse competence (i.e. knowledge of achieving coherence and cohesion in a spoken or written text). Pragmatic competence is essentially included in this model under sociolinguistic competence, which Canale and Swain (1980, p. 30) described as ‘sociocultural rules of use’.

### **4. Intercultural Communicative Competence**

An emerging idea about communicative language teaching has been that, even if contextualized and linguistically adjusted, communication may not be sufficient unless it is accompanied by multidimensional cultural awareness supposed to lead to a relationship of acceptance where Self and Other are trying to negotiate a cultural platform satisfactory to all parties involved (Guilherme, 2000). Such ideas engendered the notion of intercultural communicative competence, i.e. the knowledge, motivation and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures (Wiseman, 2002, p. 208).

Following the emergence of the notion, studies about this have been produced with different scopes and focal points. Hypothesizing that communicative competence cannot be achieved without an orientation towards the other’s culture, Akalın (2004) examined the textbooks used in Turkey to teach English. Based on her findings, she suggests that textbooks for especially young learners should firstly be predicated on elements from Turkish and even local culture and move slowly to the target culture so that students would not feel inhibited as we go from simple/known to more complex/unknown in any educational process.

Emphasizing that the objective of language teaching/learning should now be defined in terms of intercultural competence, Atay, Kurt, Çamlıbel, Kaşlıoğlu and Ersin (2009) investigated the attitudes of Turkish teachers of English towards it and their classroom applications. They found that the teachers appeared not to be integrating culture-related classroom practices in their own classes and emphasize that teacher education programs should include a cultural aspect in their curricula, such as a course on intercultural communication, in order to equip prospective teachers with intercultural awareness and intercultural competence so that they will eventually be more able to integrate cultural practices in their teaching.

Penbek, Yurdakul and Cerit (2009) tried to interpret whether students from different university departments develop a required level of intercultural sensitivity. They found that departments giving education supported by international materials such as exchange programs and language courses will help graduates become equipped with sufficient intercultural sensitivity to develop mutual respect with people from other cultures.

Postulating that communicative competence with all its sub-competences would remain incomplete without intercultural competence; Uso-Juan and Martinez-Flor (2008) provide a variety of activities in four language skills to equip learners with intercultural communicative competence like video-taped cultural dialogues, audio or video-taped intercultural misunderstandings, and recorded interviews with native speakers for listening.

Asserting that communication is almost never culture-free; Robotjazi (2008), as a proponent of a system that indirectly constructs teachers' and students' views of a different culture whose language is being taught and of authenticity defined as presenting 'real language created by native speakers of the language in pursuit of communicative outcomes' (Little, Devitt, & Singleton, 1989), discusses curriculum planning, syllabus design and materials development and places the responsibility on competent and unbiased curriculum designers, material writers, teachers and learners (who are aware of their needs and interests) for determining the order in which students encounter and hopefully acquire different aspects of intercultural communicative competence from teaching materials like textbooks. One of his central suggestions is that stereotypes of the people whose language is being taught can be included in the early stages and more complex and analytical portions like relations and affections can be postponed to later levels.

The studies mentioned here and others are motivated by the alleged deficiencies of the communicative competence model mainly because it sees successful communication between people from different cultures as principally a matter of using linguistically appropriate constructs in given contexts ignoring the need for cultural awareness in a world where countless people with different first languages engage in countless interactions in numerous forms via English. As a piece of secondary research, which consists of reviewing the literature in a given area and synthesizing the research carried out by others (Nunan, 1992, p. 8) to serve as a prerequisite to primary research in the form of case and/or statistical studies (Nunan, 1992), the central thesis of this study is that although most of the aforementioned studies refer to the fact that the world is now a global village where numerous different languages and cultures can interact at any moment, they tend to show a particular culture as the one which language learners need to be aware of and that particular culture seems to be either the British or American culture for having English, the lingua franca of our day, as their native language. They say many things worthy of attention about taking culture into account while teaching the language but their valuable pieces of advice seem quite hard to follow without referring to a particular culture and/or society in the myriad of authentic communication situations likely to emerge at any time with a great many sociocultural variables in our globalizing world. For this reason, their eventual message in practical terms can be considered not distinctly different from those of the communicative competence model and especially its subcomponent of sociolinguistic competence, which is the ability to adjust one's speech to fit the sociocultural situation in which it is said. At this point, the view should be mentioned that the communicative competence model tends to teach about such sociocultural situations with a monolithic perception of the native English speaker's culture, by referring chiefly to mainstream ways of thinking and behaving (Alptekin, 2002).

In this regard, it is possible to mention that Alptekin's (2002) study goes one step further. Voicing the severest criticism against the communicative competence model, he questions its idealized figure of native English speaker-listener created in British and American textbooks as a stereotype and emphasizes that this utopia restricts teacher/learner autonomy by leading ELT educators to train their students to "act" in English with even the body language, intonation, and life view of some English speakers (Latulippe, 1999). He draws attention to how inappropriate such tendencies are by asserting that much of the world now uses English for instrumental reasons like professional contacts, academic studies, and commercial pursuits and in this context, much communication in English involves and will involve nonnative speaker–nonnative speaker interactions. Then Alptekin (2002, p.61) asks, and the author believes that we as educators should ask: How relevant are the conventions of British politeness or American informality to the Japanese and Turks, say, when doing business in English? How relevant is the importance of Anglo-American eye contact, or the socially acceptable distance for conversation as properties of meaningful communication to Finnish and Italian academicians exchanging ideas in a professional meeting?

With regard to these considerations, Alptekin (2002) argues that English should be taught in a new pedagogical model as an international language, whose culture is the world itself. To him, such a model should be based on successful bilinguals as exemplars rather than the monolingual native speaker, equipping learners with an awareness of difference, and with strategies for coping with such difference (Hyde, 1998) and materials that involve local and international contexts familiar and relevant to learners' lives and provide suitable discourse samples pertaining to native and nonnative speaker interactions, as well as nonnative and nonnative speaker interactions.

With specific reference to and support of Alptekin (2002) and based on direct experience from Japan, Samimy and Kobayashi (2004) strongly object to the current implementations of communicative English teaching in the country claiming that they were imposed with a top-down approach by political and bureaucratic authorities on the assumption that any idea that seems to work in the U.S. and the U.K. and/or EFL contexts should work equally well

in countries like Japan and/or any ESL context. While the Japanese education system, like the one in Turkey, is characterized by crowded classrooms and masses of students associating the study of English with the university entrance exams, which emphasizes grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension, the authors question how reasonable it is to recruit native speaker English teachers (which is a controversial issue at present in Turkey too) and force Japanese English teachers to fill students with Western values embedded in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), such as the relative importance of process as opposed to content and the emphasis on meaning over form (Ellis, 1996) and native English or American linguistic and sociolinguistic norms. In conclusion, the authors argue that in contexts like the one in Japan with sociocultural and educational factors like limited access to English, restricted communication needs, nonnative teachers, a different learning culture and very dominant university entrance examinations, CLT should be embraced in a culturally sensitive and appropriate way maintaining the contextual autonomy with a paradigm shift that emphasizes intercultural communicative competence.

## 5. Conclusion

Researchers, teachers and students in the world of language teaching have long sought answers to questions like “what competence/competences does a language learner need to have?” and the answers gaining general acceptance have shaped and steered the relevant pedagogical approaches, methods, materials and actions. On this journey, communicative language teaching and the competences involved in it seem to comprise the last broadly conceived, systematized and implemented pedagogy. It can be discussed whether learning about a culture along with the language is a must but as it would be hard to deny the fact that cultural awareness would facilitate interpersonal communication, the communicative approach especially with its component of sociolinguistic competence can be mentioned to be the first to take the cultural dimension of language learning into demonstrable consideration.

However, a review of the pertinent literature suggests that the model has received criticism mainly because it falls short of accounting for the authentic communication situations and needs in the cross-cultural settings of the globalizing world, where English as an international language is the means of communication between people from almost all cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds. The source of criticism is that the model, directly or not, imposes the culture of the major Anglophone countries as the one to be learnt in conjunction with English while an average language learner of our day may well use English without any encounter with an Englishman, for example, in his/her entire life. This has brought about the pursuit of a new pedagogical approach and redefinition of the competences that language learners need to display. We can say that intercultural communicative competence is an impressive result that the pursuit in question has produced. However, we see that this model is not yet well-established or structured. As of now, like Alptekin’s (2002) mentioned above, we can talk about some principles that can serve as a general framework and basis for the model.

As Penbek et al. (2009, p. 3) report, the relevant literature indicates that being interculturally competent communicators requires psychological adaptation, the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behavior to elicit a desired response in a specific environment (Chen, 1990), intercultural awareness and personal attributes like display of respect, interaction posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, interaction management and tolerance of ambiguity (Ruben, 1976). These are supported by Savignon (2002, p. 10) postulating that the success of communication with a general empathy and openness toward other cultures hinges on the “negotiation of meaning” and the “willingness to suspend judgment and take into consideration the possibility of cultural differences” among those involved rather than the adoption of native English sociolinguistic norms.

To this end, it is clear that teaching materials occupy an important place and what McKay (2002, p. 100) stresses about this is the use of those including the learners’ culture, the target culture, and international culture. She asserts that the materials should be used in such a way that students are encouraged to reflect on their own culture in relation to others, thus helping to establish a sphere of interculturality. As it is quite clear that much communication in English involves and will increasingly involve nonnative speaker–nonnative speaker interactions (Alptekin, 2002), discourse analytic and pragmatic studies on data on such interactions and some recurring themes and patterns to be discovered in them might have a lot to inform the development of teaching materials with content that would help learners to be successful intercultural individuals.

The abovementioned considerations suggest that English language courses need to promote awareness of the cultural values underlying languages to encourage students to become cultural observers and analysts, discover the

territory and draw the map themselves. Teachers provide an outline and students fill it in (Fitzgerald, 2003), which shows that teachers and teacher education are significant factors to be meticulously considered and researched in terms of intercultural communicative competence. Another crucial issue to put on related further research agenda is how to test and assess intercultural (communicative) competence (Sercu, 2005; Skopinskaja, 2009).

The tasks to be accomplished on the route to developing a model predicated upon intercultural communicative competence imply that the community of English language teaching and research has quite a lot of work to do. Nonetheless, the author believes that it would not be fair to expect English language courses, teachers and materials alone to give individuals such personal attributes as those mentioned above (display of respect, interaction posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, interaction management, tolerance of ambiguity etc.), and even a properly structured system of intercultural competence-oriented English language education would not suffice unless it was backed up by a broader research-driven educational philosophy and a multidisciplinary policy embracing openness to other cultures within the framework of a keen appreciation of the importance of intercultural communication in our globalizing world.

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