

## On Building FL learners' Intercultural Competence: Why and How?

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### Abstract

*This article is an attempt to provide arguments on the necessity of giving more attention to intercultural communication in foreign language classrooms to build up learners' intercultural competence. Some consideration is provided to the why and how of building foreign language learners' intercultural competence in Algeria. Teaching a foreign language should no more be limited to developing learners' basic skills such as reading, writing, speaking or listening, but Some cultural elements should also be incorporated as they are interwoven with language itself. Moreover, some practical suggestions and techniques are offered to deal with culture in foreign language classroom and build up learners' cultural perspicacity, empathy, objectivity and respect of one's and other people's cultures.*

**Keywords:** *Intercultural competence, intercultural communication, culture, foreign language, LMD, global citizen.*

### Résumé

*Cet article argumente sur la nécessité d'accorder plus d'attention à la communication interculturelle dans les classes de langues étrangères à fin de construire la compétence interculturelle des apprenants. Plus particulièrement, certain soin est accordé au pourquoi et au comment du développement de la compétence interculturelle des apprenants Algériens. L'article souligne également que l'enseignement d'une langue étrangère ne devrait plus être limité au développement des compétences de base comme la lecture, l'écriture, l'expression orale ou l'écoute. Certains éléments culturels devraient être incorporés en tant qu'ils sont étroitement liés à la langue elle-même. En outre, certaines techniques et suggestions pratiques sont offertes à fin de mieux aborder la culture en classe de langue étrangère et construire chez l'apprenant la perspicacité interculturelle, l'empathie, l'objectivité et le respect de sa propre culture et celles d'autrui.*

**Mots clés :** *Compétence interculturelle, communication interculturelle, culture, langue étrangère, LMD, citoyen du monde.*

### ملخص

*يبرهن هذا المقال على أهمية إعطاء اهتمام أكبر للتداخل الثقافي في عملية التواصل في أقسام اللغات الأجنبية من أجل بناء و تحفيز قدرات التداخل الثقافي لدى المتعلمين في محيط بلدنا الجزائر. يسلط هذا المقال الضوء أيضا على حقيقة أن تعليم لغة أجنبية ليس محدودا بتطوير القدرات الأساسية كالقراءة و التعبير الكتابي أو الشفهي أو السمع فحسب بل بإدماج بعض العناصر الثقافية الملازمة للغة بحد ذاتها. بالإضافة إلى ذلك بعض التقنيات و الاقتراحات التطبيقية معطاة بغرض تفعيل العنصر الثقافي في أقسام اللغات الأجنبية و تكوين رؤية للتداخل الثقافي و للموضوعية عند المتعلم ثم ضرورة احترام ثقافته و الانفتاح على ثقافة الآخر و تقبلها .*

**الكلمات المفتاحية :** *مهارات التداخل الثقافي، تواصل ما بين الثقافات، الثقافة، لغة أجنبية، ل م د ، مواطن عالمي.*

## **Introduction**

The implementation of the LMD system in the Algerian universities in 2004-2005 was a valuable attempt towards the "internationalization" of higher education in our country. The challenge, then, for higher education institutions is to graduate students intellectually and culturally viable in a fast changing world. Students should be prepared and trained to compete in the global marketplace and stay up-to-date with the deluge of knowledge and possibilities for national and international contacts made available and possible by the quickly growing and very accessible means of information and communication. Obviously, the new pedagogic situation seems to be very demanding of the participants in the pedagogic activity (teachers, learners, and administrators). Therefore, for a successful "internationalization" of the Algerian university, many changes are to be made at all levels. First, the roles played by both teachers and learners are to be redefined. Second, a reformulation of the objectives of every discipline taught at university has become an urgent matter.

In the domain of foreign language teaching, the LMD reform has enforced a new perception of the objectives of teaching and learning languages in higher education. Undoubtedly, the ultimate objective of teaching foreign languages (FL, for short) is no more limited to the development of learner's grammatical competence but also other competences necessary for communication in general and intercultural communication in particular. Learners have to be equipped with enough skills and knowledge to become "interculturally competent students" or "global citizens". This new orientation in FL teaching draws its arguments from a deep belief that in our contemporary world, "intercultural competence" (IC, for short) is vital to a better understanding of the world. It prepares the students for physical and virtual exchanges. Moreover, it permits a better grasp of others' cultures and ensures mutual understanding. However, even the concept of IC has received a lot of attention in the literature in the domain and in many language departments overseas (mainly in Europe); it is still not given its due importance in language departments in our country. Therefore, in this paper, an attempt will be made to define the complex and multifaceted concept of IC so as to remove some of the confusion around it. Furthermore, some arguments on "why" we should focus on building FL learners' IC will be provided. Finally, some suggestions are made on "how" to explicitly integrate IC in the didactic process at the same level as other language contents and skills.

## **Definition of IC**

It is commonly accepted that learning a foreign language without learning about the culture in which it is used will not enable the learners to communicate successfully with speakers of that culture. So communicating with other people requires not only the mastery of grammar, vocabulary and colloquial phrases but also knowledge and understanding of those cultures. Cunningsworth states that "a study of language solely as abstract system would not equip learners to use it in the real world" <sup>(1)</sup>; it is clear that language learning is inseparable from its cultural context.

In their definition of a competent communicator, Scarcella and Oxford <sup>(2)</sup> highlighted four competences: linguistic competence (mastery of grammar and familiarity with language forms), sociolinguistic competence (to know how and where to use the language i.e. ability to be appropriate through linking form with function), discourse competence (capacity to construct discourse relevant to particular

communication situation), strategic competence (ability to cope with breakdowns in communication). Nonetheless, according to Byram and Fleming<sup>(3)</sup>, Tomlinson and Masuhara<sup>(4)</sup>, learners' communicative competence should incorporate a fifth element which is cultural awareness or "intercultural competence". So, what exactly is intercultural competence?

Over decades of research, this question has been debated by experts and a myriad of terms have been used (often interchangeably) to describe IC including: cross-cultural adaptation, multicultural competence, transcultural competence, global competence, intercultural sensitivity, to name only a few. Each of these concepts has contributed to the confusion around IC. Thus, for the sake of consistency the term "intercultural competence" will be adopted and used throughout this paper.

Byram, for example, defines IC as the capacity "to see relationships between different cultures - both internal and external to a society - and to mediate; that is interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people. It also encompasses the ability to critically or analytically understand that one's "own and other cultures" perspective is culturally determined rather than natural"<sup>(5)</sup>.

For Deardoff, IC encompasses "Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self"<sup>(6)</sup>.

It is clear that, for both Byram<sup>(7)</sup> and Deardoff<sup>(8)</sup>, inherent to IC definition a set of abilities, skills and knowledge that learners require to effectively interact with those from other cultures. Thus, in one of his efforts to concretely define those specific skills, attitudes and knowledge that are necessary to build IC, Byram<sup>(9)</sup> included the following:

- Awareness of the self and the other
- Communicating across cultures
- Acquiring cultural knowledge
- Sense-making
- Relationship-building
- Assuming social responsibility

So, Byram<sup>(10)</sup> insists on the individual possessing :

- awareness of self and otherness (cross-cultural awareness),
- skills to comprehend and interpret interactional and situational factors, documents, facts, or any kind of emerging cultural artifact.
- flexibility and openness when evaluating others' beliefs, behaviours and opinions.
- willingness to take a more objective view of one's culture.

In relating IC to FL education, Byram<sup>(11)</sup> highlighted three general goals of FL instruction:

- 1-** the development of communicative competence for use in situations the learners must encounter;
- 2-** development of awareness of the target language; and
- 3-** the development of insight into the foreign culture and positive attitudes toward foreign people.

Obviously, for Byram<sup>(12)</sup>, developing IC in FL classrooms is as important as developing any other linguistic knowledge. Therefore, in a model of IC designed for

FL education, he included, in addition to learner's linguistic competence, which plays a key role, two types of knowledge and two types of skills to target in FL classrooms:

Two types of knowledge:

- 1- knowledge of social groups and cultures of one's interlocutors; and
- 2- Knowledge of the processes of interaction at societal and individual level.

Two types of skills:

- 1- The ability to interpret a document or event from other culture, to explain it and relate it to documents and events in one's own; and
- 2- Ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.

However, developing those skills and knowledge is not enough unless it is conjugated with positive attitudes towards the target language culture. The more positive is the attitude, the more knowledge and skills developed and the more often intercultural situations are reflected and controlled constructively, the more probable it is that a higher degree of IC is achieved (Byram)<sup>(13)</sup>.

On the basis of the discussion above, IC is defined, in this paper, as FL learner's knowledge of the culture(s) of the target language in particular and of the world that surrounds him in general. For instance, a learner of English as a FL is not only supposed to accumulate cultural knowledge about English and American people, but also knowledge about the whole nations that are using English as L1 or L2, for everyday or/and official communication or for any other purposes. However, as knowledge of FL culture alone is not enough to constitute IC, developing skills in interpreting and making meaning of communication events and documents is also an essential component of our definition. We specifically focus on learner's skills and abilities at interpreting written documents because they are the most available means of contact with the FL culture. In the case of learners of English, for example, opportunities to meet and communicate with native speakers are not abundant, if not inexistent. Therefore, developing their skills to only manage the constraints of face to face communication with native speakers is not enough, as many of them will never have the opportunity to meet one in person. It is learner's capacity for "sense-making"<sup>(14)</sup> (Byram and Alred 2002:341) that should be targeted. That is, his capacity to interpret written documents featuring FL culture, such as literary texts, historical documents, weblogs...etc. In addition to his capacity to relate those FL culture documents to documents in his own culture.

In short, developing IC involves developing skills, knowledge and attitudes that permit a better understanding of the target culture, of the world and of the FL learner's own culture.

### **FL learner's IC building: the why**

It is evident that one should not insist on developing FL learner's IC just because it is a fashion. Focusing on IC is an absolute necessity for the LMD learner and this is justified by the many advantages it has to offer.

Within the LMD framework (as summarized in the Guidelines of the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education 2004) diversity and international cooperation through student mobility are encouraged via different types of exchanges such as grants, short and long stay training courses....etc. The question that needs consideration here is: are our FL learners enough prepared to profit from these opportunities? Having

personally experienced the problem of intercultural incompetence and disorientation during the few contacts we have had with people from other cultures (mainly native speakers of English), we can confirm that, beyond doubt, the answer is no, they are not. Being linguistically competent does not, in any way, prepare to deal with otherness, ambiguity, unexpectedness that generally result in culture shock. So, as Davis states: "In order to survive today's complex world, people need to understand different cultures. Understanding different cultures helps people adjust to unfamiliar environments in which they meet, work and live with other people who have different cultures. Adjustment and positive attitudes toward different cultures prompt people to take active roles in the diverse society. Therefore, acquisition of intercultural competence, which is the capacity to change one's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors so as to be open and flexible to other cultures, has become a critical issue for individuals to survive in the globalized society of the 21st century"<sup>(15)</sup>.

It is clear that IC is a component of the learner's overall language competence that must no longer be neglected in FL classes. An interculturally competent learner captures and understands, in interaction with target language cultures (either through face to face communication and/or reading books, attending civilization/cultural studies lectures....), their specific concepts in perception, thinking, feeling and acting.

Furthermore, there is, currently, a common held view that learner's interest in FL learning is extremely reduced when language is decontextualised, and that exploiting IC could be a valuable source of motivation and interest to FL learners. For that reason, opportunities to discuss, analyze and explain intercultural aspects should be prompted and multiplied in our FL departments.

### **FL learner's IC building: the how**

As already mentioned earlier, Byram<sup>(16)</sup> insists on the direct relationship that exists between FL teaching and the development of learner's IC. Accordingly, IC should be given its due importance in FL courses as any other language skill. FL learners should not only be taught the language needed to communicate but also be confronted with the "experience of otherness"<sup>(17)</sup> (Byram). FL courses need to promote the building of learner's IC; they need to provide opportunities to analyze materials and critical situations that involve intercultural communication.

In the FL curricula, in our departments (such as departments of English, French, Spanish...etc), the responsibility for teaching the target culture, usually, falls on the shoulders of the teachers of civilization, literature and cultural studies. Generally, in their lectures, teachers present culture as "factual knowledge". The main learning goal is the acquisition of knowledge about the target language culture as a set of identifiable facts. It consists solely of providing information about the geography, history, educational and political systems of the country of the target language. However, Ramirez<sup>(18)</sup> observes that in addition to this approach that presents culture as a "set of information"(or dos and don'ts about people from different cultures), there is another approach that presents culture as a "process" that involves engaging learners in different types of performance behavior. Within this approach, the learner is not only presented with facts about target language culture but, furthermore, is made aware of the cultural differences that exist between his culture and the culture of the other. Tomlinson and Mashuara<sup>(19)</sup> insist on raising learner's cultural awareness as it implicates "understanding of our own and other's cultures, a positive interest in how

cultures both connect and differ. Such awareness can broaden the mind, increase tolerance and facilitate international communication". Thus, providing the learner with opportunities to develop cultural awareness will contribute to developing his cultural sensitivity, empathy, flexibility, and above all to building his IC overall.

The discussion so far indicates that some changes should operate in the way culture is tackled in our FL classes. It seems that to incorporate interculturality into our classroom practice, a number of strategies, resources and activities have to be designed and included in FL syllabuses. Topics such as cultural values, generalizations, stereotypes should also be dealt with to prevent from cultural shock and misunderstandings. The roles played by both teachers and learners are to be redefined i.e. the learner should be prepared to be more active, more critical and most importantly ready to take part in classroom discussions and defend his opinions. For their part, teachers are no more expected to lecture about the target culture but to prepare activities, tasks and questions to incite learner's curiosity about the FL culture(s) and aspects of their own culture.

In what follows, some of the prevalent teaching practices (and we can only discuss a few here), in relation with teaching culture in our FL departments, are reviewed highlighting their benefits and limitations. Moreover, a number of practical intercultural raising-awareness activities are suggested to help teachers integrate explicit intercultural training in their classes and develop their FL learner's IC.

### **Presence of native speakers on teaching assignments**

The presence of native speakers in FL classes appears to be the ideal solution to solve some of the problems associated with interculturalism in the classroom or outside classroom. Unfortunately, we all know that the possibility to find native speakers of the target language around is rare, if inexistent. Therefore, the responsibility to teach IC could be delegated to some members of the teaching staff who have obtained some personal experience with intercultural situations. Generally, in all the FL departments, there are teachers who have studied and attended training courses abroad; those experiences could be exploited by creating opportunities to tell about events and personal anecdotes. In this way, the analysis and explanation of the elements that are a source of misunderstanding in comprehension and breakdown in communication have more effect and veracity if compared, for instance, to simulation.

### **Simulation activities**

Simulation in FL teaching environments is generally used to promote the learning of communication skills. Teachers adopt simulation activities for a number of reasons mostly related to their potential to creating an environment that encourages learner's active participation and communication. Moreover, simulations are powerful ways to translate teacher's explanations into practice. Rather than entirely relying on the teacher to model the different situations under study, it is the learner who is encouraged to create his own communication reality. Simulations, as expressed by Sharrok and Watson<sup>(20)</sup>, are effective means for "declassrooming classroom" i.e. they extend the number of experiences usually made available to the FL learner by allowing the communicative use of the language in a self-directed and purposeful way. Above all, simulation activities are intrinsically involving because they provide the learner with an attractive and exciting environment in which he can work collaboratively with his peers to sort problems, make decisions, negotiate agreements, etc.

The most pertinent aspect of simulation that interests us is the possibility it offers to illustrate FL culture and interculturality. Through simulating target language culture, the learner temporarily experiences membership in the FL culture. To express the same idea Saunders and Crookall<sup>(21)</sup> state that “simulation and game designs familiarize participants with the cultural and social significance of a second language”. Through taking part in the different simulation activities in the classroom, the learner’s awareness and understanding of the differences that exist between his own culture and the target language culture will increase. Moreover, these activities are also valuable opportunities to explore the problems of “real” intercultural situations. Every time, the teacher and the learners together may agree to make a list of areas of possible misunderstanding during intercultural encounters and simulate situations with the aim to brainstorming and suggesting appropriate solutions. In short, simulations provide the FL learner with a safe learning environment in which, with his peers, he can practise and build intercultural skills.

However, it should be noted that many obstacles arise from the endeavour to create situations with a cultural content and most importantly in putting them into practice. One of the difficulties occurs because of lack of time available for such activities. They are generally not part of the syllabus; consequently, time is not allocated to them in the timetable. Another difficulty stems from the nature of the “cultural content” which is not practical. It is very difficult for both teachers and learners to shift from theory and explanation to practice of cultural items that are totally different from one’s own culture. It is clear that simulation of cultural content is not an easy task and above all depends on the expertise, skills, and experience of the teacher in making it realizable.

### **Creation of cultural dossiers**

Creation of civilization/ cultural dossiers is an interesting individual activity that could be exploited in the classroom as it could be a classroom activity that is made an individual one. In this activity, the learner is encouraged to look and search for materials on the FL culture under study, and by implication to critically reflect on the complexity of some aspects of that culture and civilization. Topics like “cultural values”, “normal and abnormal behavior”, “food habits”, “ways of greeting”, “male-female relationships”, “time”, and the like can make interesting and involving topics of research. The teacher can exploit the content of these dossiers to generate classroom debate and reflection on target language culture compared to the learner’s own cultural behavior and practices.

### **Open - discussion workshops**

Evidently, FL learners meet a lot of difficulties of comprehension and empathy with the different complex cultural situations encountered and described throughout. To overcome, systematic group discussions can be arranged for analysis of specific situations, documents/texts, documentary films, songs...etc Explanations accompanied with examples can be provided and case studies can also be attempted. Here again, the expertise of the teacher in organizing and managing those meetings is unquestionable. In the literature, many suggestions are made on how to manage these kinds of meetings; one model however seems to be recurrent and proposes the following steps:

- Teacher and learners identification and negotiation of a problematic topic;
- Search for information to solve the problem using cooperative learning;

- Debate possible solutions, considering advantages of each proposal;
- Establish an action outline which may be followed to solve the problem; and
- Produce a written text to defend the action outline.

The insights gained through these discussions can be transferred to face intercultural situations in real life situations.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, one of the key motivations for writing this paper was to gain some understanding of the construct of IC in general and the FL learner's IC in particular. The insights gained from the different researchers' points of view and definitions of IC seem to point for a need to revise our perception of culture and mainly the way it is tackled in our FL classrooms.

One of the insights indicates that a better understanding of the world is an essential condition for the education of an efficient global citizen. Increasing intercultural understanding has become a must, a prerequisite for success in global communication. Another insight seems to point out that regardless of the difficulty to define IC, and the controversy about its components, it remains a vital competence to target in FL learning and teaching. Thus, we believe that if such insights are taken into account, a lot will be saved and learners will have more chance to become more sensitive to otherness, and by consequence, more prepared to succeed in global communication.

However, it is worth mentioning that developing learners' IC in FL classes cannot happen if teachers are not made aware of the importance of increasing intercultural understanding in the world; thus incorporating the theoretical and methodological elements of IC studies in teacher training programs can be one of the first steps in this process. In addition, it is necessary to ensure that FL official curricula include IC among the learning objectives laid down for the different levels.

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