ICT TOOLS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION CLASSES IN ENGLISH

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Abstract:
This article focuses on intercultural communication in the classroom, on how it has been done in my home institution and on how it could be improved. The quality of intercultural communication classes is assessable based on students' acquired intercultural competence. Starting from definitions of cultural competence, the article outlines relevant dimensions to be considered when designing intercultural communication classroom activities and when evaluating students' intercultural competence. Based on participant observation and classroom ethnography, it suggests how ICT tools can contribute to developing intercultural competence in a way that empowers students to take control of their learning process and become creative learners.

Keywords:
Intercultural communication, intercultural competence, ICT tools, classroom ethnography.

Introduction

In the context of globalisation, higher education institutions worldwide are increasingly facing demands to prepare graduates for the challenges of international markets. One's employability nowadays depends not only on hard (technical) skills but also on soft skills, on one's ability to communicate within one's culture and across cultures. As Darla Deardorff, Dawn Thorndike Pysarchik and Zee-Sun Yun argued,

"*to succeed in today's global environment, students, regardless of their citizenship, increasingly need to complement their academic and career preparation with international knowledge, skills and attitudes that allow them to understand and respect others' cultures and to work effectively and appropriately with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.*"[1]

In particular, one's success as an effective intercultural communication can significantly boost his or her employability on the global market. This explains the growth in intercultural communication courses in graduate programmes worldwide. This article dwells on the author's experience of teaching intercultural

[1] Deardorff, Pysarchik, Yun, 2009, p. 23.

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communication in "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi and it highlights the notion of intercultural competence and current trends in the teaching of this subject. In addition, it lists a few ICT tools that can be used in the intercultural communication class and provides examples of how they can be used.

Intercultural communication in the Romanian academia

Intercultural communication in Romanian universities is a rather recent curricular innovation. For historical reasons, it was not taught before 1989, when Romania's collaboration and exchanges were with similar countries from the communist block in Euro-Asia or from Africa. In that period, emphasis was laid on commonalities among communist countries while Western (capitalist) countries were demonised as mean and anti-human, therefore not worthy of contact and cooperation. The fall of communism in Europe, the expansion of communication technologies and the globalisation of businesses, financial markets, social vulnerabilities and risks, have heightened contacts between persons from different cultures. In so doing, they have also revealed barriers to communication and collaboration that stem from differences in attitudes to time, space, ancestors or progenitors, valuations of family connections, individual or collective interests, rules and regulations, and so on. Courses in intercultural communication aim precisely to prepare graduates to be aware of intercultural difference, to value it as diversity and to overcome barriers.

In "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi, intercultural communication is currently taught in the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration and in the Faculty of Letters, as a component of other courses or as a separate course. In the Faculty of Economics it was taught as a separate course at BA level, in year 4, prior to the implementation of the Bologna system. Subsequently, classes in intercultural communication were taught at MA level for four semesters (Master of International Business and Intercultural Strategies) and for three semesters (Master of Economics and Corporate Law).

In the early 2000, the focus of lectures and seminars in intercultural communication was theoretical, and culture was interpreted through the lenses of Goert Hofstede's, Fons Trompenaars,' and Trianidis' dimensions. Their approach lends itself easily to a higher education context because these authors establish categories and classifications. Hofstede called culture the "software of the mind"[2], as if it were a pre-set, ethnically-based range of internal commands that dictate how one behaves in a certain situation. This perspective conceptualises culture as static and descriptive; it is schematised and highly problematic and it tends to

[2] Hofstede, 1997.

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"*essentialise culture and identity*"[3]. What is more, it fails to consider the context of intercultural communication and the particular features of discursive interaction.

After 2008, the requirement to develop competences rather than pass on knowledge has shifted the focus from teaching theories and data to training students how to react and interact in real-life or simulated situations of intercultural contact. Thus, the main goal of intercultural communication classes is to develop intercultural competence. For the achievement of this goal, other conceptualisations of culture seem more appropriate. Scollon and Scollon, for instance, taking over the title of an article by the anthropologist Brian Street, develop the idea that "*culture is a verb*"[4]. What they mean by this is that

"*Culture is not something that you think or possess or live inside of. It is something that you do. And the way that you do it might be different at different times and in different circumstances.*"[5]

For the teaching of intercultural communication, this conceptualisation of culture as action and not as a pre-defined set of features has several implications. It mainly requires that the unit of analysis in the teaching of culture is not an underlying system of values and perceptions but the way in which individuals enact values and perceptions in their daily actions and interactions. Thus, according to Scollon and Scollon, the unit of analysis is "people doing things" and the implicit "tools" from their systems of culture that they can rely on in their performance[6]. Such tools can range from physical things (instruments, items of clothing, gadgets) to abstract things such as linguistic codes, concepts, social conventions, institutions and structures[7].

1. Intercultural competence

Research on intercultural competence has been inspired by research on linguistic competence. In a project aimed precisely at modelling intercultural competence on the European framework of reference for languages, Paul Catteeuw identified seven competences (each with one, two or three descriptors) according to which one could be evaluated as a basic, advanced or proficient intercultural communicator. These competences are:

Attitudes:

1. Critical awareness (can deal critically and consciously as an individual with the society in which he/she lives);

[3] Young, Secombe, 2010, p. 182.
[4] Scollon, Scollon, 2012, p. 5.
[5] *Ibidem.*
[6] *Ibidem.*
[7] Scollon, Scollon, 2012, pp. 5-6.

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2. Openness, right to difference and respect for otherness (can deal with ambiguous situations, is open to others and can accept and respect possible differences);
3. Flexibility and empathy (can be flexible when dealing with realistic situations and demands and can understand intuitively what other people think and feel in realistic situations);

Skills:

4. Communicative skills (can communicate effectively and correctly with others in realistic situations)
5. Solution-oriented attitude (can think and act in a solution oriented way in realistic situations);

Knowledge:

6. Cultural knowledge (can acquire knowledge of a different culture and can use this knowledge in actual situations)[8].

Catteeuw did not state what intercultural competence is, but what it does:

"Intercultural competence enables you to interact both effectively and in a way that is acceptable to others when you are working in a group whose members have different cultural backgrounds. The group may consist of two or more people including you. 'Cultural' may denote all manner of features, including the values and beliefs you have grown up with, your national, regional and local customs and, in particular, attitudes and practices that affect the way you work"[9].

A more descriptive and focused definition is the one provided by Darla K. Deardorff, who sees intercultural communication as

"*the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes*"[10].

In addition to knowledge, skills and attitudes, her intercultural competence model comprises internal outcomes (flexibility, adaptability, an ethno-relative perspective and empathy) and external outcomes (appropriate behaviour and communication that is culturally sensitive and complies with cultural norms).[11]

[8] *Apud* Catteeuw, 2012, pp. 22, 35.
[9] Catteeuw, 2012, p. 14.
[10] Deardorff, 2008, p. 33.
[11] Deardorff, http://www.nafsa.org/_/file/_/theory_connections_intercultural_competence.pdf.

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Ideally, intercultural competence is developed by doing, *in situ,* just as the best way to learn a foreign language is to go to the country in which it is spoken. Nowadays, however, it is no longer necessary to travel miles away from one's location to meet *the other* and learn about his or her values, attitudes, heroes, ways of doing things, perceptions and orientations. The internet, mobile and satellite technologies have brought the "there" here and now.

2. ICT tools in the intercultural communication class in English

The opportunities for cross-cultural contact provided by the internet and the web 2.0 tools create the appropriate context for the acquisition of intercultural communication skills. The shift from knowledge *about* cultures to knowledge *how to* interact in a multicultural environment, together with the technology-driven changes in teaching methodology, modes and media of learning, have several implications for classes in intercultural communication.

The most obvious are the changes in teachers' and students' roles: teachers are no longer supposed to teach but to coach and facilitate. Learning is no longer a top-down, controlled and unidirectional activity, but a participatory process in which learners and facilitators develop themselves as persons, identify their learning needs and outcomes, take various learning paths and reflect on their experience. The focus of education is on students, on their needs and employability, as well as on the development of a context in which they can learn from their peers and develop as autonomous learners and critical, responsive and responsible citizens. Evaluation, on the other hand, is on-going, focuses on competences and it includes elements of self-evaluation. In the student-centred class, assessment is not done post-factum, after a set of knowledge or skills has been acquired, but it is part of the learning process, in which it acts as progress check and incentive.

The degree of freedom that a coach/facilitator enjoys comes with responsibilities: the responsibility to design or use activities that, in accordance with the two intercultural competence models outlined above, develop students' critical awareness, openness, flexibility, empathy, cultural knowledge, communicative skills and a solution-oriented attitude, in a way that leads to internal and external outcomes that can be self-perceived or perceived by others in situations of intercultural communication.

In what follows I shall mention some ICT tools that can be successfully used in intercultural communication classes. First, teachers or trainers of intercultural communication can use the course formats provided by the educational platforms Moodle, Blackboard or Edu2.0 to upload course materials, post useful links, communicate with students and schedule events and activities. Blackboard has the extra option of allowing teachers to design and run multiple-choice tests, for which

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students' performance is evaluated automatically. It also has options to design self-evaluation and peer evaluation instruments, as well as open ended questions that students can answer in an essay form, on the platform. Its forum option encourages the free discussion of topics among students registered for a course. Moodle has similar functions, it is more user-friendly and it has the advantage that it is free.

Second, teachers or trainers of intercultural communication can rely on students' new media literacy and design tasks that capitalise on the latter's proficiency with Youtube, Facebook, Skype and Yahoo groups. Other user-friendly programmes that teachers/trainers can consider when assigning tasks are Windows Movie Making, Audacity and Twitter. In Windows Movie Making, students can create their own films from original photos or from images downloaded from the internet. In Audacity, they can work on the sound track that they wish to use with their images, and set the time when the sound should start or stop, or when it should increase or decrease in volume. After creating their own films, they can upload them on Youtube or on Facebook, and thus showcase their work to friends or family. Viewers' comments constitute invaluable feedback, and thus film-making is no longer perceived as an imposed assignment, but as a significant task that can be used in real life and thus contribute to a person's sense of belonging to a group, and to his or her self-esteem and confidence.

Another very efficient programme is Twitter. Though less popular than Facebook or Yahoo groups, Twitter can be used to check students' comprehension of a reading assignment. The limited number of characters that can be entered in a twit develops students' writing skills and naturally teaches them to be concise, to select and highlight the main points.

As an open source, customisable and multi-purpose tool, Mahara provides equally realistic opportunities for learning and evaluation. Mahara enables students to create e-portfolios, which can be seen by both teachers/trainers and prospective employers. On Mahara, they can upload their CV, compile a creative and representative webfolio with evidence of their learning, post journal entries, state their career development goal, design personal development plans, evaluate their own skills, and be active in social networks. Users are in control of how they organise information, when it is released and to whom it is made visible. At several levels, Mahara is an empowering tool that increases learner autonomy.

3. Quality in the intercultural communication class via ICT tools

In my opinion, quality in intercultural communication depends on learners' awareness of difference and diversity, on the realistic nature of their assignments and on assessment *for* learning rather than *of* learning. A critical part of intercultural competence, critical cultural awareness is, according to Michael Byram, the "ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria

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perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries (1997, p. 53)"[12]. The ability to think critically of one's own culture, and then to un-think one's prejudices and ethnocentrism, are the most valuable inner and outer outcomes of intercultural communication learning, and they prepare graduates to be global citizens. Intercultural competence is mandatory in the workplace as well as in any of the multiplying contexts of cultural contact, which makes it a life skill, in general.

The tasks that best develop intercultural competence are authentic, contextualized and related to students' lives. Intercultural learning needs to be experiential; it requires a stage of experiencing, one of reflective observation, of abstract conceptualization and active experimentation[13]. Reflecting on one's learning experience is very important not only because it is a stage in a larger process of learning, but also because it develops critical thinking. By sharing their reflections, learners can realize that they might experience similar learning difficulties, or they could become aware of issues that they had not thought of. It is therefore relevant to use ICT to increase the venues of learner interactivity in the reflection stage. For instance, one can ask students to post what they learnt or failed to learn, or to ask them to write blog entries about their learning process.

ICT also have the advantage of allowing for the design of multi-dimensional tasks through which multidimensional learning can be assessed. Thus, students can be asked to design interview questions, conduct an interview, record it, contextualise it with their own comments, translate it, edit it, and turn it into a film with subtitles and a musical soundtrack. Once uploaded, the feedback from their peers contributes to a natural, organic definition of standards: the trainer/teacher does not need to rank videos; the number of "likes" on Youtube or Facebook, the number of times a clip has been shared, if done in honesty and not upon request, can highlight the top videos that viewers found compelling and well done.

4. Examples of good practice

In the last section of this article I shall dwell on two examples from my teaching practice which have shown the efficiency of blended learning in intercultural communication classes in English. The former is a Moodle course developed within the framework of a Leonardo da Vinci project called Office InterActors – Developing Transferable Basic and Professional Skills for Business and Administration through Internet-based Problem-solving Role-play that lasted from December 2008 to November 2010. Two rounds of courses were delivered to adult learners from Romania, Spain, Belgium, Bulgaria and France

[12] *Apud* Baker, 2011, p. 200.
[13] Kolb, Kolb, 2005, p.194.

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(students, graduates, employees and persons seeking employment in Business and Administration).

Learners were divided into two groups, according to their linguistic abilities, and they followed learning paths that were made, occasionally, to intersect. Thus, advanced learners were identified as entrepreneurs who, in national teams, had to create a new company, design its mission statement and visual identity, create a new product, market it to the other national teams, negotiate with the others via Skype and reach an agreement as to what product they will manufacture, together. In addition, they had to create the company structure, describe the production line and create a blog for online company promotion.

Less advanced learners were identified as consultants and in this position, they had to create a consulting company and its visual identity, the company structure and a job description, describe a food trolley for their own country per month, provide tips for conducting successful business in their home country, a compilation of usual expressions in their native languages and a report on equal opportunities. The report had to be delivered as a presentation that was filmed, edited and posted on the Moodle platform.

The design and delivery of the course were in compliance with its methodology, which was based on staged release of information, role play scenarios, negotiation and teamwork, collaborative creation and sharing of files, and self and peer evaluation. The tasks that students mostly enjoyed were the Skype negotiations, when they got to see and hear their counterparts in the other national teams; for consultants, the most rewarding experience was the recording and editing of their presentations, and the feedback after posting them.

The other example is the result of a personal initiative to establish an e-twinning partnership between "Alexandu Ioan Cuza" University and the state university in Kaunas, Lithuania. Together with my Lithuanian colleague, we decided to schedule our classes on the same day and at the same hour, so that our students could interact in real time. The tasks that we designed for them were to create their own companies, to describe their profile and create their visual identity. Students worked in groups, and partnered with the group of students from the other country, with whom they wanted to business. They had to write business letters (letters of inquiry, of offer, of complaint and of adjustment), and negotiate contracts. Students went far beyond the assigned tasks and communicated extensively on Skype and Yahoo messenger, in their free time. They started learning each other's language and one student was even teaching Romanian to the mother of a Lithuanian student.

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Conclusion

The two examples illustrated above show the added value of using ICT in the teaching of intercultural communication class: they allow students to develop as autonomous learners, provide venues for interaction outside of the classroom, and for learning experiences that go beyond any pre-established plan. Thus, learners can acquire intercultural competence (attitude, knowledge and skills) in a creative way, and they can reflect upon their inner and outer learning outcomes. Via e-learning platforms, students of intercultural communication can become more aware of their own culture-driven predispositions and attitudes; they can become proficient intercultural communicators by testing out their intuitions and knowledge in on-line cross-cultural interaction, and thus meet the demand for "global-ready graduates"[14].

Tele-collaboration can increase students' engagement in the learning process and improve their learning outcomes when it is combined with classical, class-room teaching. This is so because, as Ron Owston, Dennis York and Susan Murtha argue, "students have greater satisfaction with blended courses, compared with both traditional face-to-face and fully online modes of education."[15]

The new technologies transform the way we think, learn, communicate and act in our communities. The fact that we live in a global e-culture makes the use of ICT in education a must, which enables pedagogical experimentation, the training of global citizens and the emergence of inner and outer learning outcomes that can creatively go beyond any educational facilitator's predictions. Via ICT, culture is experienced, indeed, as a verb, and becoming a proficient intercultural communicator also means mastering the protocols of internet communication.

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