DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH PRACTICAL AND DIGITAL ACTIVITIES

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Abstract: *In the context of an increasingly globalized world and of the emergence of the "global village" (McLuhan), nowadays, great importance is awarded to the teaching of intercultural communication skills in ESL courses as well as to students in different fields of the humanities such as communication studies, journalism, international relations, etc. Fostering intercultural communication skills in young adults helps them cope with contemporary issues like intolerance, cultural shock, fear of differences, discrimination, and religious prejudice. This article explores some practical activities that can be used in order to help students become more emphatic and more flexible towards those of different cultural backgrounds, and generally more flexible in their use of communication strategies in their home communities. Methods such as role-play, "critical incidents" and focus groups are believed to bring more benefits to an intercultural communication course owing to the fact that most people are inclined to learn more by experiencing than by simply hearing and/or reading.*

Keywords: *intercultural communication, culture, practical activities, multiculturalism, skills*

Introduction

Intercultural communication represents a relatively new object of study in academia, which has been mostly developed in the last half of the century. As an academic discipline it has stemmed from the incipient research of American anthropologists Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Gregory Bateson, and Clyde Kluckhohn. These scholars laid the scientific foundation for our views of culture, personality and character, while the linguists Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir formulated the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, which holds that people perceive the world differently according to the way their language encodes cultural and cognitive categories (for example, given that the Old Norse lived in a climate with long winters they counted the years as winters. E.g. "when he was two winters old" = "two years old"). The founding father of intercultural communication is considered by many to be the anthropologist Edward T. Hall, who was one of the many scholars employed by the US Foreign Service Institute to help in the post-war rebuilding effort (Jackson 19). The importance of this field of study has been recognised in Geert Hofstede's seminal work, *Cultures and Organizations – Software of the Mind,* where it is asserted that, without intercultural communication, humanity would be unable to put into practice any of the solutions to the problems which plague mankind: "Ecological, economical, political, military, hygienic, and meteorological developments do not stop at national or regional borders. Coping with the threats of nuclear warfare, global warming, organized crime, poverty, terrorism, ocean pollution, extinct ion of animals, AIDS, or a worldwide recession demands cooperation of opinion leaders from many countries. They in their turn need the support of broad groups of followers in order to implement the decisions taken" (Hofstede 4). Intercultural communication skills help opinion leaders collaborate with other leaders and also helps them maintain their own supporters. Hence, it facilitates horizontal and vertical

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communication among culturally diverse structures, without which the implementation of any policy or solution among these would be impossible.

According to Samovar and Porter, the most often quoted theoreticians of intercultural communication, "Scholars who look at it from a mass-media perspective are concerned with such issues as international broadcasting, worldwide freedom of expression, the Western domination of information, and the use of modern electronic technologies for instantaneous worldwide transmission of information. Other groups investigate international communication with an emphasis on communication among nations and governments; this is the communication of diplomacy and propaganda. Still others are interested in the communication inherent in international business, which includes such diverse concerns as negotiations within cultural organizations" (2). To these three examples of scientific viewpoints, we must add the development of cultural competences, or cross-cultural communication skills, in second language classes (L2) for young learners as well as young adults, or for those who are obtaining an education in tourism and hospitality, or even in health care (see Coroban 328).

Given this multitude of understanding of the role of intercultural communication, it is not surprising that there are many definitions of this concept, each denoting the author's background and propensity. Samovar and Peter regard intercultural communication as entailing "the investigation of those elements of culture that most influence interaction when members of two or more cultures come together in an interpersonal setting", while an applied linguist such as Müller-Jacquier considers it denotes a "peculiar communication situation: the varied language and discourse strategies people from different cultural backgrounds use in direct, face-to-face situations" (295). Nevertheless, for the communication studies expert as well as for the linguist, the key terms that stand out when attempting to define the field of intercultural communication are: interaction, culture, and difference/variation.

The Importance of Intercultural Communication Skills

Intercultural communication skills are the basis for the formation of a "global citizen" in today's interconnected world. According to the recommendations of UNESCO, intercultural competences encompass the skills that allow a person or organization to valorize both knowledge and attitudes in cases of interaction between different cultures, as well as representing "general knowledge about the sorts of issues arising when members of different cultures interact, holding receptive attitudes that encourage establishing and maintaining contact with diverse others". Thus, UNESCO distinguishes between these separate skills: *savoir* (knowledge of individual cultures), *savoir comprendre* (interpreting/relating abilities), *savoir apprendre* (discovery/interaction abilities), *savoir être* (propensity towards openness/curiosity) and *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural acknowledgement, mindfulness).

The key competencies endorsed by the European Commission (2018) for lifelong learning touch on intercultural communication skills in more than one set of recommendations: they are part of the Commission's set of recommended skills as regards Communication competences (33), Social and Civic Competence (34) and Cultural awareness and expression (35). Working papers of the European Commission where the results of a public consultation are presented suggest that "the global and intercultural dimension should be strengthened in the new reference framework. The civic competence received a lot of attention with a high number of input papers, and there is clearly a need for this competence

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to gain more prominence in the new framework. Input papers and other consultation events referred to the Paris Declaration and the Council of Europe and UNESCO Frameworks as sources of inspiration. There were also comments about the need to strengthen critical thinking, active democratic participation and sustainable development" (European Commission). In respect to Cultural awareness and expression competences, the European Commission acknowledges "the need to include modern (including digital) forms of cultural expression, inter-cultural awareness, and the global perspective" (35). This proves that European citizens are awarding higher importance to intercultural skills, and furthermore are perceiving them as part of the formation of a well-informed citizen, who is able to take decision on his own, who thinks critically and who participates in democratic processes. According to Pearce (1989), when properly assumed and put into practice with sense and expressiveness, intercultural communicative competences allows coordination between groups that come from different, even totally opposite, social realities, which is what the world currently lacks. The last statement is not a value judgement or a personal opinion, but a fact based on the worldwide constant rise of support for populism in recent years. Populism, which relies on anti-pluralism, promotes antidemocratic practices, the exclusion of minorities and is anti-elitist by pretending to represent the interests of the "true people" (Müller 2-10), should be limited by the promotion of intercultural skills and values through the media (Munteanu & Petre 2011).

Approaches to Intercultural Communication Skills in the Classroom

Communication and culture are indispensable tools of the teacher, educator or professor. Access to knowledge and knowing is essentially enabled through language and communication. There is a prevalent perception that in traditional educational settings, students adopt a passive role. Their role is to listen quietly while the teacher is the one who assumes the active role, and the right to speak must be obtained from the instructor. The "discourse structure" of the traditional classroom entails minimal emotional manifestations, maintaining eye contact with the teacher, it involves little or no physical movement, keeping silence, raising the hand in order to announce the intention to speak and avoiding overlapping with other speakers; the student must use full, logically-structured and grammatically correct sentences (Gay 322). While this individualistic didactic style is prevalent in European and North American schools, research has demonstrated that in cultures where there is more emphasis on collaboration, on working together, and where there is a stronger feeling of community, students perform better. Treisman (qtd. in Gay 325) has found that using didactic methods which imply group study ("communal problem solving and the communicative impulse") leads to a radical improvement in students' results. His finding was based on the observation of the studying habits of Chinese American students, who had performed best in high-level calculus classes in a Mathematics Workshop Program at the University of California, Berkeley.

Another aspect that should be explored in adapting intercultural communication skills to the classroom is the use of digital, web-based teaching methods. The importance of including these into an instructional process which seeks to promote intercultural communication skills is obvious because

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> the rise of digital media is constantly changing our perception of the world in the aspects of politics, economies, social lives, and culture. In the realm of culture, traditional cultural texts, forms, and scholarly works are transformed, while new cultural practices are created. The emergence of virtual/augmented reality, as well as *community* (emphasis ours), has generated new cultural forms and interactions, which in turn intervene and reshape the non-virtual reality… With the development of new media forms, it is clear that our lives, both personal and social, have come under the mediation of digital representation. The advent of digital technologies has greatly impacted the way society functions and how culture is (re/)mediated, (re/)produced, consumed, interpreted, and manipulated (Tso 5).

This is in tune with the dictum that culture, digitalized or not, is something that must also be experienced, not only studied about in the classical setting of nationalized boundaries. Likewise, the following recommendation was expressed by curriculum experts for the higher education system in Australia: "programmes should be designed in a way that embodies this ethos of interculturality, so that they reflect the communicative agenda of internationalisation as a process through which individuals or groups learn better to communicate their aspirations, values and attitudes in intergroup situations, and to appreciate those of others" (Eisenchlas & Trevaskes 416).

Practical and Interactive Teaching Activities

After having provided some reasons why it is important that students take part in interactive and web-based teaching activities, it is time now to exemplify and to analyse such didactic endeavours. One of the methods proposed by intercultural education experts is the use of "critical incidents". The term was coined by Harry C. Triandis in his seminal contribution, *Culture and Social Behavior* (1994), and it refers to didactic tools

> for increasing our awareness and understanding of human attitudes, expectations, behaviours, and interactions. They are intended to engage participants at a meaningful, personal level as they examine attitudes and behaviours that might be critical to their effectiveness in the roles they are already performing or preparing for (in the workplace, in educational settings, and in society at large)… Critical incidents in intercultural communication training are brief descriptions of situations in which a misunderstanding, problem, or conflict arises as a result of the cultural differences of the interacting parties, or a problem of cross-cultural adaptation and communication. Each incident gives only enough information to set the stage and then describes what happened and possibly manifests the feelings and reactions of the people involved. It does not explain the cultural differences that people bring to the situation; these are meant to be discovered or revealed as part of the different activities outlined in this guide. (Apedaile and Schill 7)

These activities are based on the theory of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which is based on the existence of three enthnocentric and ethnorelative stages. The three ethnocentric stages are *denial* (when a person refuses or is not interested in distinguishing between different ethnicities), *defence* (this refers to an "us vs. them" attitude)

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and *minimization* (a situation where a member of an ethnicity is likely to think "we are all the same"). Ethnorelative stages describe the changes that occur in a person who has acknowledged that cultures have to be understood in a wider context and in relation to each other, and who has abandoned the seeing his own culture as the exceptional one. The ethnorelative stages are *acceptance* (adopting a global perspective on different cultures), *adaptation* (being able to act according to the norms of a different culture) and *integration* (when a person has become bicultural, i.e. is able to switch between multiple cultural codes effectively) (Apedaile and Schill 10). It is important to realize that each student or participant in an intercultural communication class is different, so, for example, different types of activities should be facilitated for those who are in the enthnocentric denial stage (which, in this specific case, emphasize cultural similarity rather than difference). Conversely, students who are in the minimization stage should focus on cultural differences and how to overcome them in order to advance towards integration (Apedaile and Schill 11).

Students may hold surprising views and expectations of activities which involve digital resources and are web-based. According to a survey carried out by Ke and Chávez:

> students expected different learning experiences from an online class. Online learners who seemed to equate online learning with independent study reported peer interaction as unexpected and unwanted: "I don't care for the student-to-student interaction. If I wanted that, I would take a classroom course. I'd rather focus on the subject and learn straight from the instructor." Other students reported peer interaction as a valuable form of learner support that broadened their knowledge base by getting them to "read about the experiences," helped them refine comprehension and understanding by "bouncing ideas off of other students, gaining valuable insight from others," and enabled peer benchmarking "to ensure that we are all on the same page. […] During the survey and interviewing, student participants frequently complained about social "chit-chat" interaction and characterized it as "aimless." Yet they also reported the lack of online presence of "the personality" and the need for "interfacing with peers" during online interactions (Ke and Chávez 69-70).

Attitudes such as the reluctance to embrace peer interaction are a major deterrent of any endeavor to promote intercultural communication skills (Codău 2016). Therefore, caution should be taken to specifically encourage student-to-student interaction within web-based activities in the classroom and to avoid the situation where the on-line setting turns to a traditional "duplex" communication system in which the student interconnects with the instructor only. This would be counterproductive use of digital humanities, given the objectives and aims of an intercultural communication course.

Activity 1 (Critical incidents)

Activity type: consolidation.
Time resources: 60 minutes.

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Physical resources: classroom, whiteboard and markers, classroom with desks positioned to form two circles, sheets of paper.
Human resources: instructor, assistant (if available), 8-14 students.

1. (Prerequisite) Make sure that in the previous activities or lessons, students have been introduced to the concept of discrimination, racism, prejudice, stereotype and cultural shock.

2. The students are divided in two equal groups. Each group is handed a sheet of paper with a short story where a "critical incident" is described. Each group has to appoint a member to read the story (students should be instructed to do this in such a way that the groups do not disturb each other, do not instruct the students how to achieve this, offer them the opportunity to come up with a solution and commend them if the result is agreeable, if not, explain them that 'grouping' in two team can lead people to think that they are in a competition, while the activity they are performing is actually a collaborative one)

First group: "A man in his early twenties was walking home from school one day when he passed by a small group of girls of junior high school age. The girls laughed at him, and he felt very upset and disrespected. If he had been at home, he would have disciplined them right there in the street and then taken them home to their fathers and the fathers would have supported him. He knew that he couldn't do that here" (Apedaile and Schill 59).

Second group: "A man was walking past a cemetery when he noticed something very odd. To make sure he wasn't mistaken, he went in to take a closer look. He was very surprised to see two names on the tombstone he was looking at. One was the name of someone who had already died, and next to it was the name of someone who was still living. The tombstone had a birth date but no death date on it. He just couldn't believe it!" (Apedaile and Schill 59).

Time: 10 minutes.

3. Each group is handed this list of questions:

- Do you recall any event or seeing any person in a situation relatable to that in the example?
- Can you explain what were the different expectations of the man in the story?
- Try to describe how the main character reacted without using adjectives.
- Try to describe the context (bigger picture) of the event using the diagram below:

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(Source: https://akgtcanada.com/if-i-really-knew-you/)

- Do you think the encounter you have read best fits which of the categories below? Explain your answer.
  a) cultural shock b) prejudice c) racism d) discrimination e) stereotype
- Imagine you are the friend of the main character and he tells you what he has just witnessed. How would you reassure him if a) you belonged to the same culture as him?
  b) you belonged to a different culture, but not the one of the country both of you are in?
  c) you belonged to the culture of the home country?

Students are told to discuss the questions with other group members and to try reach a common viewpoint before writing down any answers.

Time: 5 minutes.

4. The instructor allows the groups to work out their answers to the questions and steps in to clarify any terminological uncertainty.

Time: 30 minutes.

5. Each group designates a rapporteur for each question, and after each answer is given, the teams are asked to comment each other's answers.

Time: 15 minutes.

The aims of the activity presented above are to increase the participants' ability to understand cultural diversity and how cultures are different from one another from the point of view of rules of behaviour and norms; to help them better identify the cultural roots which are responsible for misinterpretations, problems, and even conflict, and to understand how their own cultural background can influence the way they interpret the "critical incidents"; and also to improve their ability to grasp the phenomenon of cultural difference and to cope with situations that may be similar to those described in the "incidents" by facilitating their

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understanding of how the peculiarity of each culture is reflected in the manner we react. The next activity hereby proposed is a portfolio/project evaluation activity which uses a freely accessible digital tool and it has been adapted from a guidebook of The Intercultural Communication Institute (Portland, USA) signed by Bennett (2016).

Activity 2 (Evaluation Portfolio)

Type of activity: evaluation (project based).
Time resources: at least two weeks for project completion.
Physical resources: classroom, computer, projector, internet access (Photovoice website: http://www.photovoice.org/).
Human resources: instructor, assistant (if available), students.

1. (Prerequisite) This evaluation activity should be implemented at the end of an intercultural communication class or even as a midterm evaluation.
2. The on-line platform Photovoice is presented to students (this kind of portfolio could be created using other virtual classroom websites, for example Moodle, Blackboard or eCurs). Each of them must create an account and build their own portfolio using their telephone camera and the other research tool available on the platform. Photovoice is a tool used for "participatory action research". According to the Photovoice Manual, "The actions taken through photovoice, taking photographs and telling stories as they relate to the photographs, are empowering. With these feelings of empowerment, community members are likely to possess greater authority to advocate for an improved quality of life for themselves and for other members of their communities. Photovoice requires that community members take on multiple roles. As a photovoice participant, individuals share ideas and concerns about their experiences and their community. They also take on the role of photographer where they have the responsibility of capturing photographic evidence. Additionally, participants assume the role of co-researcher with responsibilities around setting research goals, data collection, data analysis and sharing research findings" (Photovoice Manual 9).

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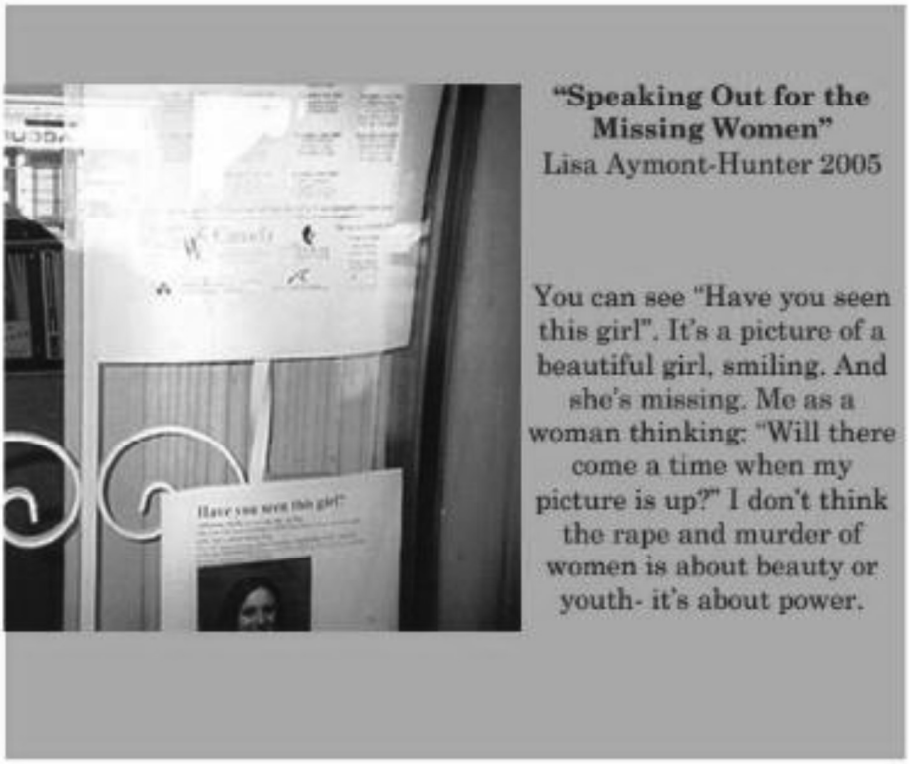

Figure 1: Example of using Photovoice for raising public awareness towards societal issues. Source: Photovoice Manual 63.

For Romanian students, a version of the manual in Romanian is available at http://cere.ong/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Manual_PV_web.pdf

3. Learners should be encouraged to approach issues which result from cultural diversity, such as minority rights (Roma discrimination, LGBTQ discrimination), women's rights, freedom of speech (see Tocia 2018), poverty, corruption, access to education and healthcare, distance to power structures, etc.
4. Students present their portfolios in class and their classmates are invited to ask questions on the issues raised during the presentations.

Advising trainees to use Photovoice presents a set of advantages. It encourages students to develop their inquisitiveness about the issues which affect contemporary society, it builds up their ability to understand the cognitive complexity of cultural and social phenomena or issues, and finally, it also helps students to think emphatically, improving their ability to judge a situation from different perspectives and to avoid preconceptions and bias (Bennett 3).

Further research that we intend to carry out includes applying questionnaires or conducting focus groups and interviews in the classroom in order to attempt to evaluate the progress of the learners according to the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which, as mentioned, distinguished between three different ethnocentric and ethnorelative stages of cultural acceptance. Such a quantitative study would be helpful in consolidating the hypothesis that intercultural communication skills should be taught using up-to-date interactive methods, because a didactic activity which involves culture, which is

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constantly changing, ought to include up-to-the-minute developments in terms of didactic resources and methods.

Conclusions

According to Chiper, "The introduction of new teaching methodologies, modes and media of learning has led to changes in evaluation. We are no longer concerned mainly with checking and assessing students' understanding of concepts and theories but with assessing competences. One convenient and student-friendly way to develop competences is the creative use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the educational process" (Chiper 1643). The wide availability of information in the digital environement also means that the task of filtering, organizing and tanking information now falls on the student (Petre 127), which implies that, presently, intercultural encounters as well as information sources are much closer to learners than before, when studying was carried out in the library and exchange students were a rarity. Hofstede also points out that intercultural communication skills can only be taught through practice: "The acquisition of intercultural communication abilities passes through three phases: awareness, knowledge, and skills. *Awareness* is where it all starts: the recognition that I carry a particular mental software because of the way I was brought up and that others brought up in a different environment carry a different mental software for equally good reasons. […] *Knowledge* should follow. If we have to interact with particular other cultures, we have to learn about these cultures. We should learn about their symbols, their heroes, and their rituals; while we may never share their values, we may at least get an intellectual grasp of where their values differ from ours. *Skills* are based on awareness and knowledge, plus practice. We have to recognize and apply the symbols of the other culture: recognize their heroes, practice their rituals, and experience the satisfaction of getting along in the new environment, being able to resolve first the simpler and later on some of the more complicated problems of life among the others" (Hofstede 420). This article has included a brief introduction into the evolution of the field of intercultural communication followed by the presentation of the importance of developing intercultural communication skills in young adults today, coupled with theoretical observations on the importance of teaching these skills using interactive and computer-based methods. In the last part of the paper two activities have been proposed. The first one is a consolidation activity which aims to increase the student's ability to identify, analyse and differentiate between discrimination, racism, prejudice, stereotype and cultural shock. The second is an evaluation activity for the midterm examination or the end of the semester and is based on working with the digital platform PhotoVoice in order to carry out research into a societal issue and create a portfolio which includes expressive photographs and various investigational data. The strengths of applying learning activities of these types include their interactive and innovative character, which valorizes the many opportunities of reflection offered by the subject of intercultural communication. Finally, this benefit the learners by building up their sense of intercultural sensitivity, and, in plainer terms, by learning "how to" instead of learning "about" from a teacher who more likely takes the role of a "know-how coach" rather than that of a depositary of knowledge.

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