

Intercultural Linguistic Competence Development

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Abstract

With new developments in applied linguistics, especially in countries relying on immigration for population growth, a new approach to intercultural linguistic competence is needed. Newcomers to Canada faced with two official languages and cultures, in addition to their own, require second language teacher preparation programs to cater to these new demands. The proposed second language teaching preparation programs must keep in mind both the different amounts of detail involved in acquiring professional acumen the accurate balance across cultures.

A number of suggestions have been made for the processing of information in an intercultural context through a step-by-step mental approach. In today's global knowledge economy, some parameters take on crucial importance in situational contexts (Barton & Tusting, 2005; Myers, 2012; Olson, 2003). Developing awareness of self and of how people interact in their native language is a crucial aspect of this approach. In order to enhance comprehensibility and for clearer output on language teaching issues, we look at integrating an interactional perspective while simultaneously developing intra-personal intelligence. We investigated future teachers' endorsement of new implementations in an attempt to shed light on 'professionalization at work'.

Data were collected through observations of group discussions and an analysis of written productions to uncover emergent themes. The findings primarily pointed to the perceived importance of the development of linguistic

competence based on new approaches advocated in applied linguistics and a new way to integrate culture knowledge in teaching. We also analyzed Ministry instructional videos intended to demonstrate how to develop intercultural linguistic competence. These findings are discussed in light of the literature and contextual elements. The results were overall positive and indicate that these new implementations required a change in beliefs.

Intercultural Linguistic Competence Development

The objective of teacher education is to instill professional know-how and develop future teachers' awareness of the degree of difficulty in gaining intercultural linguistic competence and the amount of detail involved. This no small task because of the complex aspects it involves. In second language teaching, teaching must be linked to an examination of culture, first, with activities serving as springboards and followed by deeper explorations (Hinkel, 2009). Developing this cultural awareness in one's mother tongue and also in another language requires enhanced comprehensibility, clearer output, and an understanding of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural aspects (Barton & Tusting, 2005; Myers, 2012; Olson, 2003).

Theoretical context

Future teachers must develop socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic competencies (Myers, 2004). At times, future teachers are able to take giant leaps while others encounter a great deal of resistance. The problem is that fixing goals is easy but redefining goals in light of different people's needs requires more basic social changes. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) stipulates that students are to develop the ability to "recognize that cultures use different patterns of interaction and apply this knowledge to their own culture" (1996, p. 216). Students reaching this objective are said to understand their home culture as distinct and will be able to develop some understanding of the

concept of cultural specificity and continually discover “perspectives, practices and products that are similar and different from their own culture” (p. 216). Moreover, according to Knutson (1996), “The reality that culture as content or product cannot ever be adequately ‘covered’ is important to recognize; acceptance of that reality can free educators to focus on fostering understanding of the cultural dimension of thought, values, and communication” (p. 12). Developing reasoning of the co-existence of culture and language without an emphasis on grammar forces the teaching of the target language to include the integration of cross-cultural aspects of communication. This can be achieved by the planned and careful selection of a language inventory that includes both linguistic and extra-linguistic aspects of the target culture (Morlat, 2009).

Language is described as the linguistic manifestation of human behavior and culture as patterned behavior. It is recognized that each culture has its own unique behavioral pattern, linguistic or otherwise, as well as cultural icons, artifacts, histories, etc. However, learning a foreign language and culture does not necessarily alter the learner’s behavior to inject new ways and values of life into the already established behavior of the learner. Students and future teachers of French do not have an easy task when dealing with such delicate issues, especially since French and English stem from different families of languages, namely Romance and Germanic groups.

In Canada, we have problems just like in other countries. One has to think of the difficulties entailed in this process of accommodation and gradual integration of similar or different concepts shared by different cultures. Such concepts are impregnated by relations between language and culture and are also reflected in the relation between the form and the content of a language as well as beliefs, values, and needs of both the learner and teacher. Teachers’ discourse and culture in language classes have been an interesting topic for researchers because of their wide scope of use and their cultural diversity, often influenced by the clash of two languages and cultures, First and Target Language Culture. Cultural

integration into language classes is so important that some emphasize the idea that teachers should not only be language specialists, but also culture professionals who are able to build cultural bridges between a the two languages. Because the latter is an unaffordable luxury, we are faced with finding a happy medium. Keeping in mind the need of communities of practice (Barton & Tusting) and looking at the lexical approach for the development of linguistic competence without ignoring grammar, we are trying to have future teachers endorse a communicative action approach around innovative activities and creative risk-taking (Myers, 2012). Of concern, is the possibility of bias when gaining the desirable new competencies. As Robinson (1998) describes, “past experience influences meaning which, in turn affects future experience, which in turn affects subsequent meaning, and so on” (p. 11).

The study

Background

In Ontario, Canada, the Ministry of Education regularly provides updated curriculum guidelines taking into account the latest developments, one of which is an emphasis on intercultural linguistic competence. The implications of the recommendations on future teachers’ ways of integrating the new curriculum were studied through an observation and analysis of students. The Ministry instructional videos were also critically analysed for what they had to offer to the topic at hand. The purpose of the study was to measure if the interplay of official recommendations, assigned theoretical course readings, professional field experiences and the future teachers’ approach to culture, enhances outcomes in intercultural linguistic competence.

Findings

Overall, students in this course put on “new lenses” and most of them accommodated in their minds’ eye. While 88% of participants reflected favourably upon the new way to look at ‘grammar in interaction’ from a lexical approach perspective and 80% expressed their support to the importance of teaching culture, only 60% were able to actually demonstrate that they had internalized the mandated strategies. Often the lesson activity was still focused on grammar as evidenced in their unit plan assignment, followed by finding a text that would support the intended development.

The author stressed engaging in a number of steps and planning for differentiated learning in order for additional plans to be made. This, in turn, would require additional skills and new specific knowledge from the students. While a significant number of students chose a cultural topic for their ‘culminating cumulative’ unit task assignment, they were more concerned by a theme rather than the development of intercultural linguistic competence.

The identified knowledge representations stemmed from a variety of awareness levels, background knowledge, perceptual perspectives, and ability to negotiate based on preparation, ability and comfort levels in French L2 use or language use in general. Only three out of the 10 groups showed unusual ways of doing and being.

One group (P2) consistently stood out as representative of group members who see and do things differently than the rest of the groups. This group clearly looked at knowledge with a more open perspective. They demonstrated collaboration between speakers but appeared to have a dominating narrow perspective as regards to language teaching. This may be due to the fact that they were faced with low achievers during their practical school placements or related mostly to learners at a lower beginners’ level, concentrating their dialogues on how to cater to such

learners' needs. However, they embraced a dialogic approach to developing linguistic competence. There was a more pessimistic attitude on the part of the members of this group in regards to the ability of schools to promote success in second language learning and gain intercultural linguistic competence.

Members of Group P1 appeared not to share the views of other groups, which was problematic as only surface learning took place. The deviations noted in P1 stemmed from a lack of engagement seemingly as a result of their failure to complete the assigned reading. Therefore, they could only discuss topics in general terms and rather vaguely, although their use of French was fluent. Did this language ability make them overconfident to the point of not engaging into deep learning during their discussion of theoretical textbook contents?

Members of group P3 displayed different attitudes towards knowledge. They did not believe in knowledge gain from sources outside the classroom text and they did not trust the integration of language skills for learning. Instead, they implied that each language skill had to be practiced separately. They were of the opinion, however, that over time things will fall in place.

Discussion

Linguistic competence through pragma-linguistic activities

In the new Ministry curriculum guidelines for French as a Second Language, a 'new communicative grammar approach' and an emphasis on culture are stressed. Future teachers are expected to understand that pupils' natural communication skills need to be sustained, developed, and to continually expanded in order to meet the challenges of constantly having to adapt to difference. It would enable them to approach interactions with the purpose of coming to an understanding and acceptance.

In regards Group P2, in light of the research, it would appear that they cleverly used a combination of the lexical approach and a creative risk-taking approach on what would be considered “language patterns”. This might well be a solution when attempting to develop less advanced learners’ intercultural linguistic competence. Substitutions and transformations were not made on mechanical grammatically based utterances, but centered on spontaneous engagement in dialogue. Decisions must be made regarding best practices in communication with grammar taking a secondary position, yet playing a more important role in sustaining all spontaneous interactions in the L2.

As for Group P1, they avoided the difficulty of integrating an interactional approach to learning about culture and mainly explored cultural themes and content. The idea behind the new Ministry approach is to ensure a certain balance. Overall, students took these new trends into stride although there was resistance. More support was needed because the new approach was beyond the comfort zone of this group. In order to remedy this situation, the author showed how grammar could be used creatively in an interactional approach based on traditional substitution exercises along the lines of a pattern drills but placed in dialogic contexts with socio-pragmatic elements. The students with more traditional mindsets were open to this option and mentioned that, given that in classes they have students with minimal skills and several exceptionalities, this was a viable solution.

Group P3 showed characteristics indicative of different learning styles, evidenced by limitations in their ability to negotiate difficulties, gaps in prior knowledge, and insufficient preparation. A more traditional attitude towards language teaching is reflected here due to cultural influences and, possibly, lack of open mindedness towards the introduced classroom concepts. This group attempted to use of the implicit cultural elements embedded in the proposed dialogues and pictures in the provided text. The concerns in this group were time constraints and the need to cover the assigned curriculum.

Intercultural competence through the development of socio-pragmatic competence

Although there is evidence of embracing a ‘cultural approach’ in the students’ papers, further research into ways of conceptualizing the strategies for improved outcome and culture integration is necessary. Perhaps the intended goal of inclusivity was achieved, but some of the internalization of teaching cultural knowledge could have remained “tacit and invisible” as Tang reports (2006) and only time will tell. Damen (1987) leaves us with hope saying, “cultures and cultural patterns change [and that it] is more important to learn how to learn a culture or adapt to these changes than to learn the ‘facts’ and ‘truths’ of the moment” (p. 88).

Pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic aspects in instructional videos

The Ministry provided a series of videos for practitioners with the claim that they illustrate the newly recommended strategies to be implemented. These include different perspectives on learning and an autonomous evaluation criteria measuring each student’s personal progress and learning over time. A critical review of these videos reveals that they may be confusing. The videos attempt to portray the new guidelines but the ‘cultural teaching’ segments reveal flawed pedagogical practices and a lack of understanding of the new methodologies. The videos stressed additional effort required by teachers to implement such demanding approaches not only at the level of lesson preparation, but also in terms of classroom demonstrations, organizational skills, and language feedback for students. The findings on ‘culture teaching’ supported the thinking found in the Common European Framework of Reference for promoting cultural awareness and respect for diversity as evidenced by the statement:

The learner does not simply acquire two distinct, unrelated ways of acting and communicating. The language learner becomes *plurilingual* and develops *interculturality*. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by the knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skill and know-how. They enable the individual to develop an enriched, more complex personality and an enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences (Council of Europe, 2001, p.43).

Overall our study shows that our students are very aware of the complexities involved in teaching their students to acquire further degrees of intercultural linguistic competence.

Conclusion

The results point to the perceived importance of the recently advocated grammar approach and way to integrate culture knowledge in teaching in order to gain intercultural linguistic competence. Those new implementations required a change in beliefs. The students' attitude towards the new guidelines depended on their understanding of the situation. There were cultural and personal constraints in place that made them see what they expected to see through the selection of information that fit their expectations resulting in varied reactions. I observed a lack of flexibility and a contradiction: this was evidence of a quite demanding attitude and showed resistance toward a more lenient approach to grammar that also takes into account diverse ways of being, doing and learning.

We know that the domain of change allows a deep learning cycle. Given time, changes can be found at the level of aptitudes and capacities, connected to new awareness-raising and increased sensitivity, and will bring about new attitudes and beliefs. If for some future teachers, developing intercultural linguistic competence in their students was only corollary to the main emphasis in their teaching, they were on the right track as some of these aspects would be implicitly acquired by their students.

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