Multipolar intercultural competence

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Developing intercultural competence is considered an asset in foreign language learning. Intercultural competence is usually defined as the ability of foreign language users to understand and successfully handle the foreign language culture in the process of L2 communication. However, foreign language users do not only use the target language with native speakers of the foreign language, but more often than not, with non-native speakers. In such communities of practice, non-native FL users carry over features of their own culture as well as of their own understanding of the foreign language culture. This situation calls for a redefinition of the concept of intercultural competence. In my talk, I will argue that foreign language users should not simply develop intercultural competence, but they should develop multipolar intercultural competence. Multipolar intercultural competence is taken to mean an interlocutor's ability to perceive conflicting/contrasting sets of rules, values and behaviours, etc. in multicultural social encounters and be on the look out to solve misunderstandings and potential conflicts through appropriate language behaviours.

1. Introduction

In this paper I will discuss the concept of intercultural competence in this age of globalization and of newly developing, geopolitical conditions. I will try to redefine it taking into account the new environments of social interaction, the role of foreign languages in this context, and then suggest a suitable term for it.
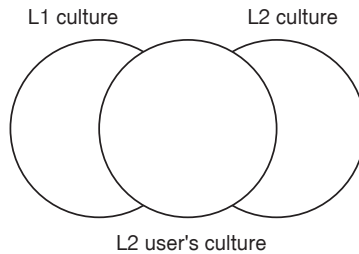
2. Intercultural competence and foreign language learning

In the professions associated with foreign language learning there is a revived interest in the teaching and learning of culture. Developing intercultural competence in foreign language learning is now considered an asset, since the intercultural perspective is highly esteemed (cf. Byram and Flemming, 1998)[1].

However, one may notice that cultural issues have permeated foreign language learning/teaching practices and material in an arbitrary way. They mani-

fest themselves as sociocultural competence, compensation strategies and politeness issues (cf. Council of Europe 2001). On the other hand, McCarthy and Carter (1994) put forward a different categorization of culture in relation to language teaching materials. They provide specific definitions of culture that are discerned in language teaching, namely, culture in art and literature, culture and the daily life of a group of people and culture as social discourse.

As I have argued in Papaefthymiou-Lytra (1996), learners have been provided with fragmented information of the facts about how culture and language in use relate. This information is usually presented as being in a binary opposition. On the one hand, there is the foreign language culture and, on the other, the culture of the learner. Besides, the cultural model the learners have been orientated to has been that of the foreign language culture approximation, while the ultimate goal has been for L2 learners to learn to appreciate and use the L2 culture appropriately in oral and written discourse. Figure 1 below is a visual representation of this view.

L1 culture   L2 culture

L2 user's culture

Figure 1. L2 user's interculturality: The old paradigm.

The standard definition of intercultural competence, therefore, is usually defined as language learners/users' ability to handle the foreign language culture successfully along with their own. In other words, as argued in Papaefthymiou-Lytra (2001), FL users have been conditioned to understand interculturality as the interchange or space between their own culture and the foreign language culture. However, if FL users were to interact only with native users of the foreign language, then this limited definition of intercultural competence, rooted in the bipolar relationship of native/non-native speaker communication, may suffice[2]. It goes without saying that, in this changing world, FL users are nowadays expected to interact with other FL users of the foreign language more than with native speakers. Thus they establish a multipolar relationship with interlocutors of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds when using the foreign language as the medium of communication.

As a result, in recent years the native speaker model has given way to the intercultural speaker model (cf. Kramsch, 1998). In this context, as I have argued in Papaefthymiou-Lytra, (1995), the overall goal in language learning should be to teach culture as difference, not merely as facts about the foreign culture. In other words, learners should be helped to understand the otherness of the foreign language culture not only as product, i.e. outputs or facts about culture, but also as process that determines actions, beliefs and ways of thinking. It is hoped that should language learners understand the cultural orientation of the target culture, it will help them to develop a working hypothesis about the L2 culture for the purposes of comprehension, production, interpretation and creativity.

Moreover, the global spread and use of foreign languages, especially that of English, has given rise to debates "about cultural, ecological, socio-political and psychological questions", as Seidlhofer (2001: 43) very rightly states. The fact that English is the first or second language in many countries in the world while it has developed as an international language has led a good number of researchers and applied linguists to challenge the rights of NSs of English to have custody of what happens to English (Widdowson, 1994). In this sense, it is debatable what constitutes native culture as far as English is concerned[3]. This changing context calls for a redefinition of intercultural competence since FL users are now expected to use the FL to communicate with a great variety of speakers of different L1 cultural backgrounds rather than with native users of the language. It is, therefore, important to try to define the content and role of interculturality in this changing context [cf. Papefthymiou-Lytra (2001) for a discussion about interculturality].

3. Culture in foreign language use

As I have argued in Papaefthymiou-Lytra (1995), all native speakers rely on a particular conceptual framework to make sense of their individual construction of reality. This conceptual framework forms their particular cultural identity. It is claimed that the character and the culture of a people are consistent with analyses of the ecology and history of that country (cf. Triandis and Vassiliou, 1972: 302). Due to their experiences different people have developed a different worldview and cultural orientation. In other words, they have developed different ways of thinking along with distinctive behaviours. After all, culture is not only a matter of accumulation of clearly defined knowledge of facts but also of historical experience, of attitudes and processes that have shaped it over the years. It is from this experience and reality that cultures derive their myths, symbols and meanings[4]. As Hamers and Blank (2000:198) state: "There is a consensus that culture is a complex entity which comprises a set of symbolic systems, including knowl-

edge, norms, values, beliefs, language, art and customs, as well as habits and skills learned by individuals as members of a given society".

Furthermore, research indicates that language users' behaviours and functions are not static unchangeable units. They may change across time or place, across groups and individuals, and even the same individual may behave differently from situation to situation, from addressee to addressee (cf. Smagorinsky, 2001). After all, culture, as Isaacs (1975: 44) argues, looks "like a cell of living matter with a sprawlingly irregular shape" and is characterized by variation (cited in Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 1995: 135-36). Considering things from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, Pütz, (1997: ix) also claims that language users 'construe' their social and cultural reality the way they do because they have access to language alternatives to express it. Language users, however, do not only act upon choices of accepted cultural behaviours, but they also create culture. Culture, in this sense, is a dynamic system, an ongoing, dialectic process. Processes influence the way human beings understand and interpret the world around them in a particular society and play an important role in setting up cultural frameworks for reference in order to interpret human action, namely, verbal and non-verbal behaviours. Processes and the product of processing i.e. the myths, symbols and meanings operating behind the construction of social reality may differ to a greater or lesser extent from culture to culture (cf. Hamers and Blank, 2000).

In an attempt to place cultures in a perspective that will allow us to consider the intercultural speakers' cultures as objectively as possible, I will discuss two of the processes that are at work, namely those of explicit versus implicit communication, and of monochronic versus polychronic time. I will further try to pinpoint how cultures are positioned in a continuum of cultures due to processes conditioning (cf. Ferraro, 1994). In this context, I take processes to mean the distinctive features that characterize cultures. Similarities and differences between cultures, or the distance between them depend on how many of these distinctive features they may share and to what degree.

As explained in Papaefthymiou-Lytra (1996), cultures vary in terms of how explicitly they send or receive verbal messages. In certain societies, for example, effective verbal communication is expected to be explicit, direct and unambiguous. Good communicators are supposed to say what they mean as precisely and straightforwardly as possible. On the other hand, in some other cultures, speech patterns are considerably more ambiguous, inexact, and implicit. Relying on this assumption Hall (1976) put forward the notion of low-context versus high-context cultures.

Low-context cultures rely on elaborate verbal codes and demonstrate high val-

ue and positive attitudes towards verbal language. The primary function of speech in these cultures is to express one's ideas and thoughts as clearly, logically and persuasively as possible, so the speaker can be fully recognized for his/her individuality in influencing others. Verbal messages are important in high-context cultures, too. However, they are only part of the total communication context. Verbal language, in fact, is inseparably interrelated with social relationships, politics and morality. Verbal messages are used not to enhance the speaker's individuality, as is the case in low context cultures, but to promote harmony and social integration (cf. Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 1996).

The notions of high-context and low-context cultures are not 'either-or' categories. They can be found in any speech community, although one or the other mode is likely to predominate. To examine cultures and related processes objectively 12 nationalities are placed on a continuum as far as their communication practices and time orientation are concerned (adapted from Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 1996). See Table 1 below.

Culturally conditioned processes

COMMUNICATION				TIME	
Low context			Monochronic		
		Swiss German			
		German			
		Scandinavian			
		United States			
		French			
		English			
		Italian			
		Spanish			
		Greek			
		Arab			
		Chinese			
		Japanese			
High context			Polychronic		

Table 1. A continuum of cultures.

As stated earlier, apart from communication practices, another process that distinguishes one culture from another is that of time orientation. Research has shown that there are many kinds of time systems in the world. The two most representa-

tive ones are the so-called monochronic and polychronic time. Monochronic time means paying attention to and doing only one thing at a time. Polychronic time means being involved with many things at once (Hall and Reed Hall, 1990).

As maintained in Papaefthymiou-Lytra (1996), people culturally conditioned by monochronic time share certain characteristics. For instance, they like to do one thing at a time, take time commitments seriously and do not like to be interrupted. They also like to follow rules of privacy and consideration, adhering religiously to plans. Monochronic time seals people off from one another and, as a result, intensifies some relationships while shortchanging others. Monochronic time people have developed low-context communication skills and need clear and explicit information, while emphasizing promptness. Western cultures, for example, are generally dominated by monochronic time. According to Hall and Reed Hall (1990), German and Swiss German cultures represent classic examples of monochronic time.

On the other hand, polychronic time cultures are characterized by the simultaneous occurrence of many things and by a great involvement with people. There is more emphasis on completing human transactions than on holding to schedules. They have developed high-context communication skills and change plans easily. They are more concerned with those with whom they are closely related such as family and friends than with privacy, base promptness on the relationship and have a strong tendency to build lifetime relationships. They consider time commitment as an objective to be achieved if possible, and they borrow and lend things often and easily. Chinese and Japanese cultures, for instance, are good examples of polychronic cultures. See Table 1 above[5]. The influence of cultural processes is also attested in classroom research. For instance, Stanley (1998) claims that Hispanic students are accustomed to a polychronic style of communication for discussions and to a more direct, confrontational mode of discipline and pedagogy. Due to culture distance of the kind discussed above, FL users of various cultural backgrounds may end up with intercultural communication problems, which may lead them to conflict. Paraphrasing Nelde (1992), cultural conflict may arise from the confrontation of differing personal or group standards, values, attitudes, identity image, consciousness as well as from upbringing and education.

4. On defining multipolar intercultural competence

Keeping in mind the presentation and discussion about the culturally conditioned processes operating in language in use, let us discuss an example of a multicultural community of practice. Four non-native users of English participate in a community of practice, see Figure 2 below. In this case, the L1 cultures of the par-

ticipants are Arab, Greek, Swiss German and Spanish. According to our discussion in section 3, some cultures are closer to each other, i.e. Greek and Spanish cultures, whereas others are more distant from one another, i.e. Swiss German and Arab cultures. Consequently, five different cultures are at play in the act of communication; these are: English as a FL culture, which all users may share to varying degrees and perceive in different ways, as well as the L1 cultures of the four participants on which they often rely to fill in gaps for understanding and interpretation purposes. It is worth noting, however, that FL users of English may have been trained in one variety or other. This fact may create extra problems in the cultural convergence of the L2 speakers for communication purposes since the two varieties of English (American and British) represent different cultural orientations as Ferraro (1994) argues by placing them in different points in the continuum[6].

Consequently, interculturality in this community of practice is a mixed bag of all these cultures. The more the participants interact, the more the interculturality space becomes enlarged and more complicated, rendering it more difficult for each participant to define and handle. This is because its content rests on (a) the L1 cultures of the communicating participants, (b) the foreign culture they share in common, and (c) the mediated culture product of the communication processes currently in action (cf. Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 2001). See Figure 2 below for a visual representation of the situation in question.
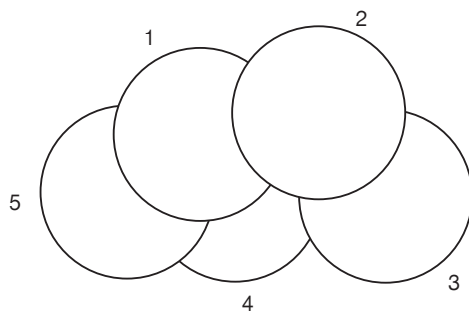
Legend:

1 = Spanish culture   3 = Arab culture   5 = Swiss German
2 = Greek culture   4 = English as a FL culture   culture

Figure 2. A visual representation of interculturality where five cultures interact: The new paradigm.

Intercultural speakers, in this case, do not need to have developed a coherent understanding of the basic orientation of only the foreign language culture in order to communicate successfully, but they also need to be able to handle other cultural inputs present. Hence, the new realities call for the development of a multipolar intercultural competence rather than a bipolar one. Consequently, in multipolar communication speakers are not confined to handling their own culture and the foreign language culture, but they are invited to understand interculturality as the interchange or space between their own culture and a host of other cultures including the foreign language culture(s).

In the light of this argument, intercultural competence should not be merely considered as knowledge of and ability to handle the foreign language culture successfully in communities of practice. Instead, foreign language users' intercultural competence should reflect their ability to handle multipolar intercultural space successfully in the process of communicating with an increased number of speakers of various language and cultural backgrounds. Multipolar intercultural competence, therefore, is taken to mean an interlocutor's ability to appreciate otherness and difference beyond his/her own culture and the foreign language culture, as well as to perceive conflicting/contrasting sets of rules, values, attitudes, behaviours, identity images etc. culturally conditioned in multicultural social encounters, and be prepared to manage conflict graciously. In other words, FL users are expected, on the one hand, to solve cultural misunderstandings through appropriate language behaviours and, on the other, to foresee potential conflicts and try to ameliorate them. The new realities call for diversified action by foreign language users. In their attempt to extend their communication abilities, they can rely heavily on language and culture awareness, metacognition as well as their metacommunication practices[7].

Furthermore, by adopting the concept of multipolar intercultural competence in foreign language learning we can open a window to the world of the other cultures, their inevitable presence in any community of practice and the need to come to terms with them. In my opinion, this can be an interesting way for foreign language learning to dig inroads into other culture appreciation and to value otherness and difference, in short, to accept culture ecology. The viewpoint put forward, I will argue, may have important consequences for foreign language learning pedagogy and practice particularly concerning issues of culture ecology[8]. This issue is beyond the scope of the present paper but it indicates one of the challenges foreign language teachers and trainers, material designers and language policy planners must face.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to redefine the concept of intercultural competence and move away from the bipolar conventional relationship of the L1 versus the L2 to the multipolar, more sophisticated relationship construed by the interaction of a variety of L1 cultures with each other and with the foreign language culture. In doing so I tried to take into account the present-day realities in foreign language use. Due to an increasing demand for communication across countries, languages and cultures participants in communities of practice need to develop multipolar intercultural competence moving beyond the foreign language culture and that of the L1 culture. Foreign language learning research and practice should seriously take into account the close relationship between foreign language learning and use and the concept of multipolar interculturality in communities of practice (cf. de Bot *et al*., 1991; Jeβner, 1997; Hamers and Blank, 2000). In order to serve their purposes, they should try to develop appropriate learning materials and learning practices to that end.

Endnotes

[1] For a discussion about how the various definitions of culture have influenced FLL methodologies see Robinson, 1985; Hamers *et al*., 2000 among others.

[2] For research in relation to language learning and native-non-native communication see Dulay and Burt, 1975; Faerch and Kasper, 1983; Krashen, 1985 among others.

[3] The same argument may apply to other languages such as German. See also Note 6 below.

[4] Of the different definitions of culture see Robinson, 1985; Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 1995 and 1996; Hamers and Blank, 2000, among others.

[5] Of course, as Hall and Reed Hall (1990) argue, these generalizations help to convey a pattern; they do not apply equally to all cultures.

[6] This is also the case with German culture since German has developed as the national language of three distictive centers, namely, Germany, Austria and Switzerland (cf. Ammon, 1997).

[7] For practical implications for FLT see Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 1987a and b; Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 1990; Council of Europe: Common European Framework, 2001 among others. See also Papefthymiou-Lytra (2001) for an application of these principles in teacher education and training.

[8] In my opinion, promoting culture ecology complements Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas' plea for language ecology (cf. Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas, 1997).

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