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## 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)<sup>1</sup>.

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.

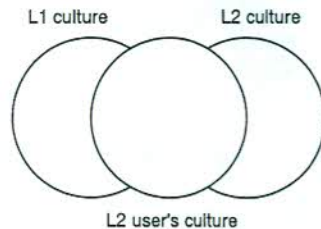


Figure 1. L2 user's interculturality: The old paradigm.

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<sup>2</sup>. 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<sup>3</sup>. 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. Papaefthymiou-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<sup>4</sup>. 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-

