

Intercultural Competence a New Goal for English Learners

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Abstract

The use of language in the appropriate social and cultural context is a must. Whenever we travel abroad and meet people of different cultures we may encounter difficulties in understanding and adapting to their way of thinking, which may lead to misunderstanding and conflicts. Nowadays we must have the ability to understand people of different social profiles and accept individuals of different culture. Teaching a language by including the intercultural dimension keeps helping people to acquire linguistic competence to communicate as well as the intercultural competence. Nowadays, it is widely accepted that linguistic competence are not sufficient to have a successful communication with individuals of different culture. Intercultural competence is identified as a key point in learning a foreign language by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Intercultural competence is not only related to Teaching of foreign languages, but is part of our life and it affects all the fields. The main aim of intercultural competence is not to learn some information about the culture of that country, but how to develop skills of interaction, skills to accept new ideas and being open-minded, being tolerant, prevent misunderstanding etc. In Albania reality, the teaching of a foreign language is mostly focused in developing linguistic rather than intercultural competence. These because the teachers are not trained on how to develop it, aren't motivated to integrate new theories in the curricula etc. In a survey resulted that most of the English teachers in secondary and high schools don't mention or avoid cultural topics. In my opinion, culture and language are interrelated and we cannot separate them. It is time to improve the goal of teaching a foreign language. To be proficient in a language doesn't mean you have intercultural competence for a successful communication. With the development of intercultural competence in teaching a foreign language will bring a new effective teaching method. The main aim is to enrich the process of teaching English language with intercultural competences.

Keywords: intercultural competence, communicative competence, culture, curricula

1. An Innovation in Teaching English Language

Nowadays, under the light of a wider international interaction, the use of language in the appropriate social and cultural context is a must. Learning a foreign language means you must learn also the culture. In our life we will have the opportunity to interact with people as a complex human being with numerous identities but with their particular features. In Albania, the teaching of foreign language is mostly focused in developing linguistic competence, which means they are more focused in aspects of grammar and vocabulary. Teachers' aims are that the students should reach a proficient level in English rather than acquiring intercultural competence. Of course, language competence still has a key role in learning a foreign language, but it does not stop here.

A dramatic change has occurred if we compare the actual process of teaching with the previous years. The advance of technology and methods has had a positive impact in teaching-learning methodology. The English books have changed, in every unit there is a section dedicated to culture, where the students can learn different cultural facts. Based on a survey done for High schools and Secondary school it resulted that most of the teachers avoid the Culture Corner, some of them just focused on reading the information and answering the question below without stopping to make a deep analysis. It is true that texts treat the culture aspect, but do not develop the learning of the culture. Most of teachers are not very familiar with the term intercultural competence, let alone to develop it during foreign language classes. Some of them have information about its definition, but never thought how to include it in their process of teaching. The traditional way of learning culture does not develop Intercultural Competence. By analyzing this, I have reached to the conclusion that it is important to change the aim of teaching a foreign language. We need an innovation in teaching-learning process. A very effective way to develop intercultural competence is through learning a foreign language.

I will try to explore the opportunities that offer a foreign language to develop intercultural competence. It is time to change the aim of teaching a language, and I will try to analyze, how we can develop this competence through the foreign

language to create a more successful strategy of teaching. It is widely accepted that developing only linguistic competence is not enough to have a successful communication; it is also important to develop intercultural competence. Language and culture are interrelated, culture is important to understand better a language, to have a successful communication. Learning of culture is very important because it encourages understanding of another culture, you can interact with people of different cultures and be more open-minded and tolerant.

2. The Importance of Intercultural Competence

The term culture is a key point that develops intercultural competence. We never stop to think about culture because we take it for granted. We inherited it and follow certain rules, values without ever stopping to analyze it. Only at the moment that we encounter individuals of different cultures we continue to reflect on our own culture. In the North of Albania, we have a tradition that men eat in a different room while the women in another room, or parents who live with their children even when they are over 18. All of these are Albania traditions and it seems quite normal for us. Of course, we are used to it. In order to understand the culture of another country, first of all we need to analyze our own culture and then compare it with the other cultures.

Intercultural competences are very useful to understand that every individual belongs to different cultures. The term intercultural competence is used in different academic discussions without stopping to reflect how we can include it in the current curricula of teaching. Taking in consideration the actual changes occurring in the world, I might say that Intercultural Competence is a key point for the communication between individuals of different cultures. An effective communication means to have linguistic and intercultural competence. We have often experienced misunderstandings, when we have travelled to different countries and met people of different social identities from ours. Intercultural competence is related to every field of our life. Doctors, businessmen, politicians, students everyone who enters into contacts with individuals of a different culture need to acquire intercultural competence.

In this way the development of intercultural dimension in teaching a language makes it possible to provide students with intercultural and linguistic competence; make them able to understand and accept people of different cultures as individuals with other perspectives, behaviors' patterns and values and consider this as a rich experience.

Why do we need this competence? 1) to have success when we encounter individuals of different cultures 2) to avoid conflicts 3) to learn to be open-minded and accept different cultures 4) to show self-respect.

According to Byram (1997) Intercultural competence is composed of four elements:

- 1) **Knowledge** "*knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction*" (p. 51)
You should have knowledge about a country, to establish relationships between individuals of different cultures, to learn about their history.
- 2) **Attitudes** "*curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own*" (p. 50)
You should accept other individuals; you should feel equal, be open-minded and accept new beliefs, values, views etc.
- 3) **Skills** "*Ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own*" (p. 51)
You should be able to identify misunderstandings and try to avoid them.
- 4) **Critical awareness** "*An ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries.*"¹
You should be able to reflect on source and target cultures.

According to Byram (1997), the teachers should guide the students to acquire these four elements: knowledge, attitudes, skills and critical awareness. Through different activities and exercises teachers will be able to transform the students' point of view.

All of these are very important elements that help to develop intercultural competence. These skills should be the new goals of teaching a foreign language. In the English Curricula of High Schools is clearly mentioned the importance of

¹Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*.

cultural communication and cultural education of the students.²

We must accept that the teachers of the foreign language are the mediator of two different cultures. The problem with the most of teachers is that they don't have the right qualification to develop intercultural competence. They are not trained; some of them have no idea about this competence, while the others think it is more important to develop linguistic competence.

In a survey conducted with students, it resulted that most of the teachers in High schools and Secondary schools avoid the Culture Corner, or they just read it in order to answer the questions without stopping to compare the source language culture to the target language culture. According to them this happens because their texts are more focused on factual information about history or geography of the countries and are not very interesting. Only a few teachers read the Culture Corner but without knowing how to encourage to the students the ability to interpret on their own the difference between cultures. 70% the students have received information about England or USA from films, music, documentaries, which they have seen on their own. The mental image they had for English people was from Internet or films, not from the school.

In fact, the English teachers are the one who should help the students to develop intercultural competence. They should increase the students' interest in the foreign language culture. Some teachers have the will to change the methodologies and try to develop intercultural competence.

3. How to develop Intercultural Competence

Developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching involves recognizing that the aims are: to give learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence; to prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures; to enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours; and to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience.³ (p.10)

As I mentioned in the previous paragraph the teacher, who is the mediator of the culture, should develop the four skills of Byram (1997) which are knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical awareness. It is very important to know that the teacher is not the transmitter of the information, but the one who encourages the students to understand and reach conclusions on their own. The teacher should prepare students how to communicate with individuals of different cultures, to be open-minded and tolerant toward different cultures. It is a very effective method, if during the classes are organized cultural exchange experiences, as a result students can learn from others experiences and reflect from their experience. It is important to keep in mind that culture is not learned within a day, but it is a process that accompanies us through the entire life. Teachers can encourage intercultural competence by making them reflect on the topics they have got in their books. For example, Christmas Topic, they can find out how people in UK or USA celebrate Christmas in these countries and compare it to the way Albanian celebrates Christmas. They can learn how to compare and analyse different topics on their own. Other topics can be for example, Post Cards sent for holidays which are a tradition in many countries, while in Albania it is not very common. Sport is another theme, for example Rugby is a sport not played in Albania. They can learn whether this sport is played by men or women, how many people are needed to play it etc. An intercultural dimension involves learners in sharing their knowledge with each other and discussing their opinions. There need to be agreed rules for such discussions based on an understanding of human rights and respect for others. Learners thus learn as much from each other as from the teacher, comparing their own cultural context with the unfamiliar contexts to which language learning introduces them.⁴(p.46)

They can develop this intercultural competence in a very simple way from the topic they have in their books by the help of the teacher. Of course, additional materials would be very effective. It is important to remember that the teachers don't have to know everything about the culture of the country, because they are not going to teach factual information. The teachers' job is to ask open-ended questions in order to let the students independently discover the world, to develop skills of interpreting and analysing. What language teachers need for the intercultural dimension is not more knowledge of

²Ministria e Arsimit (2010) *Programe mesimore per kulturen e pergjitheshme te arsimit profesional-teknik, drejtim i iarsimit profesional-teknik; te gjitha drejtimet Lenda e Gjuhes angleze.*

³Byram, M. Gribkova, B. Starkey, H. Council of Europe 2002. *Developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching a practical introduction for teachers.*

⁴Byram, M. Gribkova, B. Starkey, H. Council of Europe 2002. *Developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching a practical introduction for teachers*

other countries and cultures, but skills in promoting an atmosphere in the classroom, which allows learners to take risks in their thinking and feeling. Such skills are best developed in practice and in reflection on experience.⁵(p.34)

If language skills and intercultural competence are linked together, during the teaching of foreign language, they will help the students to learn how to communicate easily and avoid conflicts with individuals of different cultures. Nowadays, through the Internet it can be very easy to interact with students from USA or UK, or to communicate in different blogs.

One of the main problems is the assessment of students. How to evaluate students about the intercultural competence? According to Developing Intercultural Dimension in Language Learning, a practical introduction for teachers (2002). The most difficult part is to evaluate the learners change attitudes, whether they have become tolerant or not towards beliefs, values, attitude. It can be argued that even if we can test it, we should not be trying to quantify tolerance.⁶Evaluating the four skills of Byram is difficult. The teachers should make open-ended questions, multiple-choice question, discussions, and activities. The role of assessment is therefore to encourage learners' awareness of their own abilities in intercultural competence, and to help them realise that these abilities are acquired in many different circumstances inside and outside the classroom.⁷ (p.32)

4. Methodology

The methodology that I have used is questionnaires with students and teachers. The reason why I choose this methodology is to prove whether the teachers of foreign languages develop the intercultural competence or not. It resulted that intercultural competence are not developed during the teaching of a foreign language. Teachers do not know how to develop it or they do not consider it very important. They are not trained how to develop intercultural competence or are not motivated to integrated new theories in their curriculum.

5. Conclusions

If teachers want to prepare students to face the real world on their own, they need to develop intercultural competence. At the moment that the students have acquired intercultural competence they will be able to know how to create relationships with people of different cultures. They will be able to analyse different beliefs, values etc. and will know how to avoid conflicts or misunderstanding that may arise. In this paper where presented some of the activities that the teachers can use to develop Intercultural Competence. Let's keep in mind what Alvino H. Fantini said, *that intercultural competence is commonly a longitudinal and ongoing developmental process.* (p.49)

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