

The Links between Intercultural Communication Competence and Identity Construction in the University of Western Cape (UWC) Community

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Abstract

This paper is part of a longitudinal research in which we investigate the challenges to intercultural communication competence in the use of English as a second language (L2) at a tertiary institution; a higher education learning space characterized by diversity. The paper focuses on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It further looks at spatiality where movements (migration) account for the creation of new spaces and language trajectories that culminate in the construction of new identities. The paper makes use of an integrative model to determine where misunderstanding comes from in interactions. Finally, Author's (2013) concept of integrated intercultural communication competence model is also used to signpost the central role of theorizing in this investigation. Our principal objectives of this portion of the ethnographic study was to investigate/explore how an L2 or foreign language is used to construct identities among the diverse participants of the UWC community. The participants include students and staff from this institution. The main tools that we used for data collection were interviews, questionnaires and participant observation. The significance of such a study is to achieve/promote competence in intercultural communication and language learning where we see language learning could thrive as a social practice.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, competence, Critical Discourse Analysis, identity, space, diversity, L2.

1. Introduction and Background

The traditional teacher-driven classroom has become pedagogically out-dated in favour of student-centred instruction that stresses learners' capacity to learn autonomously or interdependently with other learners. According to Little (2003), autonomy entails decision-making, critical reflection and social interaction with peers. Such a category of learners are responsible for their own learning and are actively involved in the learning process by setting personal goals, planning and executing tasks, and reviewing their progress (Lee, 2011). Based on the above, teachers nowadays seem to play a facilitative role in language learning by encouraging their learners to take an active part in decision-making and problem solving by offering these learners guidance. From a social constructivist point of view, the development of autonomy is a consequence of interplay between social and reflective processes (Little, 2007). Foncha (2013) notes that during social interaction, students work collaboratively with others through which they develop high order thinking skills by observing, analysing and evaluating information.

While there might be many ways to foster language learning, collaborative learning (participation, engagement and involvement) in classroom activities appears in this research to be the most appealing way of learning a new language as well as to gain intercultural communication competence through it (Matveev, 2002 and Author, 2013).

Engagement and participation appears to foster language and intercultural communication competence as students can take charge of making their own decisions as to what, how much and when to share their work (Lee, 2011). In view of this, students tend to develop an awareness of differences in both their languages and cultures with that of others. By so doing, they are in a way acquiring intercultural communication competence. Thus, engagement, involvement and participation can be viewed as a milestone to language learning and intercultural communication competence.

With the aforementioned benefits, engagement and involvement have been increasingly implemented in

second/foreign language learning classroom activities and events by most lecturers. Research findings have shed much light on our understanding of the effectiveness of participation for developing speaking, listening, reading and writing skills and abilities. This is to suggest that in order to promote intercultural communication competence, engagement and participation should be incorporated into conventional class activities and events. The study examined the impact of reflective engagement and involvement on self-directed learning from the participants' perspectives.

To confine the scope of this longitudinal study, it is necessary to factor in guiding research questions that would help us avoid an over-stretched inquiry. We therefore propose the following questions to guide our review of literature as well as the data analysis and discussion.

1. How can engagement and participation help interactants to gain intercultural communication competence and construe identities?
2. What could be the most suitable approach to second/foreign language learning?
3. How can understanding differences in culture help to bring about intercultural understanding among a diverse population?

2. Issues and Insights/Conceptual Framework

Theoretically, this study is structured within Sivasubramaniam's (2011) framework of English as an international language which is consistent with the views of Fonlon (1969) and Banda (2009). Intercultural communication competence can be viewed as an individual's ability to learn about other cultures, apply these skills to unknown situations, understand cultural references together with knowledge of the culture and finally, respect and tolerate all other cultures with the use of any given language. In view of the above, we argue that South African Higher Education favours English as the language of teaching and learning which has made the use of English a social practice in its diverse classrooms. In light of this, English is seen as the language that can unify the diverse Udubs community in their daily social practices. For the purpose of this paper, such an objective can only be achieved if English is learnt as social practice by making the classroom environment affective for its learners. In a multilingual and multicultural University like Udubs, it is apparent that "no educational process is free from the influence of language, and so the role of language is central to any educational process" (Sivasubramaniam, 2004, p. 187). In this regard, the use of the Critical Discourse Analysis can enrich our understanding as to how new identities are constructed as well as how one can gain intercultural communication competence. We propose to further elaborate on this in the methodology section.

With the help of the preceding points, to understand the role that English as the language of instruction plays in intercultural communication competence and Identity construction, it is necessary to reinforce its relevance and the competence in the context where interaction takes place. From this perspective, meaning from language should not be seen as static and objective but rather as a "dynamic and a discursive structure" that has been constructed by these researchers as insiders (Sivasubramaniam, 2011p. 53). This can be explained as the emotional and the affirmative involvement of both researchers and their research participants form the basis of the understanding of the context as a sociocultural phenomenon. In other words, the conceptualization of intercultural communication competence and identity construction can only be seen in terms of context based confirmations rather than as a universal claim of "atemporal" knowledge (Sivasubramaniam, 2004 p. 54). This view is meant to suggest a new perspective of intercultural communication competence and identity construction which is more socially and more sociolinguistically sensitive. Based on this, we propose to formulate a broader title and use diverse methods to attempt and foster an understanding of the identity construction and intercultural communication which are fluid concepts but within our CDA centred framework.

The views mentioned so far have led us to believe that an Ecological view of language can be relevant to this paper because it sees language as connected with the sociocultural aspects of life. That is to say that language helps to signpost/signifies power relations and many other sociolinguistic aspects. Language in this regard is an agent through which any culture is portrayed. Hence, an Ecological view of language looks at every phenomenon of a language as an emergence and not as a reduced set of components that present phenomena in simplistic terms (Van Lier, 2000). Secondly, an ecological view also stresses that the perceptual ability and social involvement of a learner that can be seen in his/her interaction, which may serve as a means of learning in this context. Thirdly, an ecological view of language also supports that a complete explanation of cognition and learning cannot be made on the bases of the process that takes place inside the brain.

Based on the ecological stance, we argue that 'affordances' offer an alternative way of looking at the dynamics of language use. This is to suggest that an ecological approach to language can unite a number of well-established perspectives of language learning. We use the term 'affordances' here to suggest an aspect or quality of an ecology which can facilitate action but not necessarily cause it to happen. In this sense, "affordance" affords action depending on

what an organism does with its environment and what it wants from its environment" (Foncha, 2013). However this does not change the fundamental properties of the organism. In the same way, language can offer different affordances to its learners/users which would be encouraging to use in meaning constructions as well as creating for them identities. In light of this, we wish to say that affordance in this scheme of inquiry is viewed as a dynamism that underlies the relationship between language and its learner/user (van Lier, 2000, p. 252). By the same token, it is seen as an antithesis to the rationalist/positivist positions of language. The accruing ecological view of language challenges the position that language learning is a cognitive process that relies on the brain to process information, thus shifting the emphasis from a scientific reductionism to a notion of emergence. "It says that at every level of development, properties emerge that cannot be reduced to those of prior learning" (van Lier, 2000 p. 246). It can then be suggested that not all cognition is explained in terms of all the processes that take place in the brain. Therefore the perceptual and social activities of a language learner, particularly the verbal and the nonverbal interactions are central to gaining competence in intercultural communication (van Lier, 2000). In view of this, they do not only facilitate learning but they are also a learning process in a fundamental way (van Lier, 2000, p. 246).

In this regard, each learner is immersed in a space filled with meaning making potentials. To sum up the above, cognition and learning rely on both representational (schematic, historical, cultural etc.) and the ecological (perceptual, emergent, action-based) processes and systems (Neisser, 1982). Therefore language is seen as both representational and ecological in nature (van Lier, 2000). The linguistic world in which the learner has access to and in which the learner is actively involved is full of "demands and requirements, opportunities and limitations, rejections and invitations, enablement and constraints- in short, affordances" (Shotter and Newson, 1982, p. 34) that can create, negotiate and form new identities.

It is worthy of note that in recent years, interest in learners' autonomy has grown considerably in the field of language education (Foncha, 2013, Sivasubramaniam, 2004 and 2011). In view of this, we argue that language learning needs to be viewed from a constructivist perspective where a learner's autonomy should be at the fore. Little (2007) observes that autonomy emerges from the concept where an individual takes total control of his or her own learning. In this regard, understanding is often manifested by the individual's ability to take initiative, monitor progress and evaluate learning outcomes. Learner's autonomy is "the product of interdependence rather than independence" (Little 1994, p. 435), which underscores the dynamics between collective and individual actions. Similarly, Sivasubramaniam (2011) states, autonomy is supported by the social constructivism of active learning. Autonomy in this respect does not mean that learners have to work in isolation. In contrast to isolation, the learners should rather construct knowledge socially by actively engaging and participating in the learning process. Based on the above argument, social interactions can help learners to develop a capacity to analyse, reflect upon and synthesize information to create new perspectives. Looking through the same lenses, Little (1996, p. 211) stresses that critical reflection depends on "the internalization of a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interactions". Internalization as a process makes an individual to become a self-regulated learner who takes a proactive role in the learning process rather than simply reacting to external stimuli (Dörnyei, 2005). In this way, such a learner can be capable of making use of both figurative and literal meanings since both meanings involve precisely the same complex comprehension process and contextual information.

Furthermore, other researchers also support the role of self-motivation (Abongdia, 2009 and Gardner, 1985) self-confidence (Weenden, 2002), learning strategies (Oxford, 2003) and self-management (Author, 2013 and Rubin, 2001) in language learning. Lee (2011) argues that there might be some challenges in autonomous learning but she suggests self-directness, critical reflection and cognitive engagement through social interactions as the key principles of autonomous learning for intercultural communication competence and identity construction.

3. Constructivist Perspective

At present, research in intercultural communication competence has shifted from the rationalist perspectives of cognition where in-put and out-put can be measured, to a new paradigm that sees teaching and learning as a social practice. This situates the focus of our study within the CDA spectrum and consequently, a constructivist paradigm of language learning which emphasizes the shared and social construction of knowledge that has been employed as the theoretical framework to support intercultural communication competence (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000). "Learning is a social, dialogical process of construction by distributed, multidimensional selves using tools and signs within context created by the various communities with which they interact" (Duffy and Cunningham, 1996 pp. 181-182). Instead of language learning being a one-way delivery of knowledge from a teacher to the learners, it has rather become an active, social, and participatory process through which learners use a system of symbols (language) to construct knowledge with others in order to accomplish a joint task (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000). In light of this, Kenning (2010) argues that second/foreign language

learning knowledge can only be constructed through collaborative scaffolding. In such a process and with the aid of a facilitator, the learners can expand their Zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). ZPD here refers to the distance between what the learners can achieve by themselves and what they can achieve with the help of others (teacher, peers or community members). As a result of the scaffolding, a learner can then work independently (Donato, 2000).

4. Intercultural Communication Competence

Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) define intercultural communication as two people or two groups of different cultures in interaction who negotiate a common meaning. Meaning making is at the fore in this paper and suits the definition given above.

By the same token, it is worth noting that as communicating is important in interactions; understanding is also equally important (Ting-Toomey, 2005). As a devotee to the social constructivist framework, Author (2013) observes that engagement and participation provide impetus for active involvement in knowledge construction, critical reflection, and collaborative interaction with peers. In view of this, Matveev (2002) states that the three elements above should be considered as prerequisites for attaining intercultural communication competence. Unlike formal classroom learning, engagement and interaction gives students enough time to reflect on their thoughts, which in turn promotes critical thinking. Thus, Lee (2011) concludes that "In addition to cognitive and social dimensions of language learning, affective factors, such as attitudes toward learning tasks affect how learners engage in collaborative learning." Therefore, all their tasks need to be attained by taking account of students' interest and motivation to inspire in them intercultural communication competence.

Many researchers have identified teamwork and participation as very important components of second/foreign language learning. This view is supported by Byram's (1997) intercultural communication competence model which brings out four interrelated components- knowledge, skills, attitudes and awareness. The objective of Byram's conceptual framework is to encourage the learning of other cultures among learners so that this could help them to understand and accept cross-cultural perspectives with respect and positive attitude (Foncha, 2009). In view of this, language learners need to understand and see differences and similarities not as a problem, but rather as a resource. These language learners should understand that that they need to tolerate differences in cultures in order to gain intercultural communication competence.

There are many known approaches to learning and understanding intercultural communication competence. Amongst these many approaches are Sivasubramaniam's (2004) teaching of literature, Matveev,s (2002) intercultural communication competence model among many others. In the context of this study, engagement and participation in the form of teamwork in classrooms and other social spaces around campus have been identified to foster intercultural communication competence through the negotiation of identities (Foncha, 2013).

We believe that the novelty of this paper is based on Le Roux's (2002 p. 37) and Kim's (2004) observation that in a context of cultural diversity, communication is a critical tool of school success because it is the "means and indeed the medium of education"; communication in this regards is the primary instrument by which educators accomplish their teaching objectives. In light of this, a focus on intercultural communication in responding to diversity within the classroom has both a fitting and a fundamental consideration in this paper_(Kim, 2004). One can therefore view that Kim's notion of communication is so inclusive that all communications need to be seen as being intercultural to a certain extent. In order to reduce the degree of interculturalness, Sarbaugh (1988) suggests a four variable taxonomic approach which appears to be suitable for the purpose of this paper. The first category is worldview which is seen as the most stable of the four because of its cosmos view. The second is the normative patterns of beliefs and overt behaviours which help to prescribe a good from a bad person. The third one is the code, which refers to the psychological and sociological processes that influence the meanings attached to codes. Finally, the perceived relationship and intent looks at the relationship and the motive for interactions. Thus, this foregrounds the way that we perceive communication and also shed some lights on how to analyse our data.

In light of engagement, participation and involvement, collaborative learning becomes a very useful tool for this study because of its pedagogical implications. Based on this argument, we think strongly that theoretical issues as illustrated in the constructivist approach, ecological approach through affordances can suggest answers or a rationale for the research questions that have been proposed for this paper. Collaborative interactions are the essential element of any pedagogy which assumes that good learning is collaborative and that understanding comes through modelling, participation in, and reaction to the behaviours and thoughts of others (Foncha, 2013).

5. Methodology

This study is based on an auto-ethnographic fieldwork of a PhD thesis carried out by both researchers who at the time of data collection were supervisor/supervisee. We became interested in doing research on intercultural communication competence and identity construction in this space and subsequently carried out our study over a period of three years from January 2010 to June 2013 for the PhD thesis. Using a social constructivist and an ecological approach to language learning, this study involved 27 students, 12 lecturers and 15 tutors who participated in the responses to questionnaires and interviews to develop their intercultural communication competence over the three years period of this research. The paper is therefore a context-driven, qualitative study of originally collected discursive material.

According to Sofaer (1999) qualitative research methods are helpful in giving loaded descriptions of intricate phenomena, voicing out the opinions of those voices that are seldom heard. Sofaer further claims that these types of methods boost understanding of the context of the events as well as the events themselves. Thus, it can help to identify patterns and configurations among variables and to make distinctions. Therefore qualitative research not only serves the desire to describe, but it also helps move inquiries to more meaningful explanations. A qualitative approach best fits this type of study because the comprehension of social data is not essentially best gained using numerical and statistical methods (Pather and Remenyi, 2005). Thus, this study can only be understood through the subjective perspectives of the participants who are classified as lecturers, tutors or students.

Given that this is a qualitative study, both of us used different research designs to collect the data for the purpose of triangulation. The four principal tools used for data collection included: Interviews, Questionnaires, Naturally Occurring data and Participant Observation. Both the questionnaires and the interviews questions were intentionally left open-ended to capture the subjective views of the participants.

We initially designed two sets of opened-ended questions, one set for the students and the other for the lecturers and tutors. With a little assistance, we shared out the two sets of questions. We distributed a total of 82 questionnaires but had only 64 of returned to us. When we attempted our first sampling of the questionnaires, we noticed that the participants did not say much or said very little about the role of the environment and the motivation for language learning. In this regard, we were obliged to design a new set of 11 questions for the questionnaires that could provoke the perceptions of the three categories of participants on the above themes.

In any case study, interviews are very important because they are targeted and focus directly on the case study topic. Secondly, they are insightful in the sense that they provide perceived casual inferences. They are also easy to conduct since they involve a face to face encounter. They provided us the opportunity to follow up on anything that did not come out clear through the use of questionnaires, naturally occurring data and participant observation.

In view of the advantages pointed out for the interviews, the face-to-face interviews became very important for this study as they helped me to probe the interviewees' subjective views of competence in intercultural communication. At the end of the interview, we further engaged with the participants in general and informal discussions. This helped us to gain more insights into their attitudes and ideologies both from their verbal and non-verbal language that was taken down in the form of field notes. Given that the discussion took place informally, the participants were more relaxed, and expressed themselves better. Code-switching from isiXhosa-English, Afrikaans-English, French-English etc., were common behaviours among all the participants. This way, we were able to capture both naturally occurring data and participant observation.

Ethnographically, it was only through addressing such issues that we could attempt a deep understanding of where misunderstanding and miscommunication might have been coming from, and also how one can gain intercultural communication competence or pick-up/ drop some form of identities when one moves through time and space. We found that the information on the participants' perspectives could possibly be gathered through interviews and questionnaires where they narrated their live experiences and also through observation, field notes and naturally occurring data. As a method for data collection, these tools appeared to be very informative and captured the participants' subjective views which we hope to examine further in the next section.

The data that was collected for this study was a 'case' of such larger categories which in a sense can justify our blending of case study and ethnography. Theory as a result should be seen as the outcome of theorization of the data and generalizations can then be recognised as cognitive processes. This may help to explain why this study needed a theoretical/conceptual framework beforehand to shape and influence the design of the fieldwork and the kind of data that was collected. Thus a unique and situated event appears to reveal a lot about big things in the study of intercultural communication competence in the space of the University of the Western Cape.

The data analysis was based on the application of CDA to the discursive patterns thus extracted, in order for us to identify the discourse power relationship in the data. De Cillia et al (1999 p. 157) note that CDA 'assumes a dialectical

relationship between particular discursive events and the situations, institutions and social structures in which they are embedded'. Examining this dialectal relationship in the data necessitated asking the three research questions that appeared just before the literature review, based on Van Dijk's proposed ways of bridging the gap between the micro (language use, discourse, verbal interaction, etc.) and the macro (power, dominance, inequality, etc.) levels of the social order (Van Dijk, 2001 p. 354).

6. Results and Discussion

To answer the research questions, strands from the ethnographic interviews, naturally occurring data and participant observation for intercultural learning were selected from the participants' points of view. Due to the limited space provided for this paper, we used the interviews predominantly. However, we rarely brought in naturally occurring events and participant observation for the purpose of triangulation. The questionnaires were completely ignored because participant's perspectives that are captured by the interviews appear to be a follow up from the questionnaires. These data strands were considered through exploring key constructs of language learning. Secondly, a discussion of affordances and challenges that the participants might have perceived while engaging and participating in various activities and events that affected how they learned independently and collaboratively in their learning environment was identified as well. It should be noted that only a few selected strands are used for the analysis which we believe can serve as representative samplings.

In this regard, we used the research questions as a guide to both our analysis and discussions for the purpose of saliency based on themes that accrued through the review of literature.

Research question 1. Can engagement and participation help interactants gain intercultural communication competence and construe identities?

I) Collaborative: The constructivist classroom relies heavily on collaboration among students because students learn about learning not only from themselves, but also from their peers. When students together review and reflect on their learning processes, they can pick up strategies and methods from one another.

Q. Can you describe how the classroom is structured during lectures and tutorials? How important is this form of structuring to language learning?

Lecturer 5: Most of the lectures are characterised by a teacher-centred learning, but tutorials are interactive and make students to understand and practice the lectures.

Tutor 4: Lectures are larger groups compared to tutorials. The students do as they please in lectures but they stay under control in tutorials

Student 3: Lectures are not very useful because there is no control. Even when you do not understand something you cannot ask the lecturer. Even when you ask a question to the lecturers, the students will mock at you. Tutorials are cool and you can feel free.

Participant observation and the naturally occurring data affirm this same position as students fail to pay much attention in the lectures but would be busy with other things and discussions unlike the tutorials where they are engaged and involved probably due to their numbers.

According to Sarbaugh's (1988) taxonomic approach, there is justifiable evidence that learning has taken place among the diverse/intercultural interactants which appears to support Ting-Toomey's notion of communicating and understanding. This is to suggest that the differences between the cultures here are not seen as a problem, but rather as a resource. Aside from language, intercultural communication focuses on social attributes, thought patterns, and the cultures of different groups of people. By the same token, Author (2013) asserts that it also involves understanding the different cultures, languages and customs of people from other countries. Thus, it is concerned with the links that exist between "language, context and identity (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Research question 2: What could be the most suitable approach to second/foreign language learning?

II) Active: The student is the person who creates new understanding for her/himself. The teacher guides knowledge, but allows the students to experiment, manipulate objects, ask questions and try things that don't work. Students also help set their own goals and means of assessment.

Q. What really works for your class?

Lecturer 1: What really works for my class is engagement of students in events and activities. This is a little bit difficult to achieve in the lectures. But I can tell you that tutorials can be more successful in engaging students to work together and participate.

Tutor 9: I always throw guiding questions to the students that can help them to reflect. I make sure that everyone in the

tutorial group should always participate. I always encourage them even when they make mistakes.

Q. How can you convince me that engagement and participation helps you to gather knowledge?

Lecturer 5: The confidence in the students can speak for itself. When these students were coming to the varsity, most of them could not speak, understand, read or write English, but now you can see them using English.

Tutor 7: There are students in my tutorial group from Congo, Angola etc., and also coloured students who studied in Afrikaans in school. Even the black students studied in mother tongue, but now all of them are able to interact in English.

Q. How did you gain competence in English as an L2?

Student 7: Through constant participation in teamwork with peers. Practice makes perfect.

Q. How would you account for the fact that your fellow students have been of help to your knowledge of English and academic writing?

Student 7: When I first met my friends, we could not communicate because of language barrier. Because our lecturer always forced us to work in groups, we started trying it in English and now it is working.

Sociocultural theory holds that specifically human forms of mental activity arise in the interactions we enter into with other members of our culture and with the specific experiences we have with the artefacts produced by our ancestors and by our contemporaries (Lantolf 2000 p. 79).

Rather than dichotomising the mental and the social, [sociocultural] theory insists on a seamless and dialectic relationship between these two domains. In other words, not only does our mental activity determine the nature of our social world, but this world of human relationships and artefacts also determines to a large extent how we regulate our mental processes (Lantolf, 2000 p. 79).

III) Reflective: Teachers should create opportunities for students to question and reflect on their own learning processes, either privately or in group discussions. The teacher should also create activities that lead the student to reflect on their prior knowledge and experiences.

Q. How does the teaching help as a resource to language learning?

Lecturer 5: I design activities in such a way that the students have to engage in a discussion. I always avoid as much as possible not to give instructions verbally. What I do is I will put activities and their instructions in writing, then I will ask the students to read, interpret and comprehend before carrying out the activity. This way, I am teaching them all the literacy skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Tutor 3: My role in the tutorials is not to teach but to scaffold students, so they teach one another by themselves.

Student 2: If you are too ashamed, you cannot learn a language. If you are not in an environment where that language is spoken, you cannot learn it. The language of the university is English, so the environment permits English and we are forced to learn.

The goal of learning is to decentre learners from their own culture-based assumptions and to develop an intercultural identity as a result of an engagement with an additional culture (Kramsch, 1993). Here the borders between self and other are explored, problematized and redrawn. We therefore think that the criteria based on which intercultural competence is sometimes identified, monitored, and assessed, are not always clear or consistent.

IV) Inquiry- or Problem-Based: The main activity in a constructivist classroom is solving problems. Students use inquiry methods to ask questions, investigate a topic, and use a variety of resources to find solutions and answers.

Q. Can you comment on how useful group work has been to you?

Lecturer 6: Group work has reduced a lot of grey hairs from my head because the role I would have been playing for language teaching is being done by the students themselves

Tutor 8: I will say that group work makes students to be active and reflective.

Student 4: Group work is good for me because all the students are at the same level like me and I am not scared when I make a mistake in English because they also make the same mistakes.

“What we can and should do is ... recognise that learners are first and foremost sentient beings and, hence, that the quality and scope of their learning is likely to be at least as closely related to their feelings and beliefs about it as it is to their intellectual capacity” (Broadfoot, 2005 pp.138–139). Students bring with them their own conceptions, misconceptions, understandings, experiences and feelings that shape their learning.

Research question 3. How can understanding differences in culture help to bring about understanding among a diverse population?

In a constructivist environment, language learning is:

V) Constructed: Students come to learning situations with already formulated knowledge, ideas, and

understandings. They then integrate new experiences and interpretations to construct their own personal meaning with this previous knowledge.

Q. How do you make sure that your diverse classroom remains collaborative?

Lecturer 4: Given that most of the students come from an English deficient background, I always try to integrate them in classes by making them work in teams chosen by me. The criteria that is often use for team selection is that I pair low performing students with bright ones. This can create opportunities for them to exchange their different understandings to come out with an ideal.

Tutor 5: You see, in group work, students are able to help one another and I can only come in when they get stock with any idea. It is much easier for them to identify each other's problem because there is no fear.

Student 3: I feel very free to ask questions from my team. I also feel free to contribute my idea since the teacher is not there to judge me. It is very easy to discuss with friends than the whole class.

The naturally occurring data also indicated that teamwork appeared to be an affective environment for the students where their focus was on meaning making in the language of instruction rather than grammar and sentence construction. E.g. An Afrikaans L1 speaker would say "[Se jyvir my of ek in pas in die program?] "You tell me if I do fit in your programme" (Do I fit well in your programme?) In the same light, an isiXhosa L1 speaker would say "If you do not bring my book by the end of this week, then you will know who am I." [If you do not bring my book by the end of this week, you will then know what I am up to].

Participant observation also showed that meaning making is the basis for L2 learning in the context under study. The following data elucidates the above observation:

Student 2: "My greatest problem in English is that I translate a lot from my mother tongue into English. When I speak, it is not a problem but the writing is a serious problem because you need to follow grammar of English. The problem is academic writing."

Student 6: I used to be shy when I speak English but I have noticed that my peers also make the same mistakes like me. This has made me to understand that we all make mistakes.

Syntax and grammar has absolutely no role to play here but the focus appears to be on meaning making. Thus their experiential knowledge plays a vital role in constructing sentences.

A professional stance that understands language as a social practice requires students to engage in tasks in which they create and interpret meaning, and in which they communicate their own personal meanings and develop personal connections with the new language. Kramsch (1993:264) notes that: 'talk about talk is what the classroom does best and yet this potential source of knowledge has not been sufficiently tapped, even incommunicatively oriented classrooms'. These learners require learning skills which will give them independence as users and analysers of language (Svalberg, 2007).

By the same token, Fantini (2005) argues that the term and definition used here, however, purposely employ the words "competence" and "performance." In one view, "competence" is abstract and cannot be witnessed directly; consequently, it must be inferred by observing how one performs. Hence, competence and performance are interrelated – one being abstract and the other observable. In this view, then, one infers competence by observing and monitoring performance, rather than by talking about it only in abstraction.

VI) Evolving: Students have knowledge that they may later see as incorrect or insufficient to explain new experiences. As students explore a topic or problem, they draw conclusions, and, as exploration continues, they revisit those conclusions and modify them to support new knowledge or experiences.

Q. How has interactions within your diverse environment been useful?

Lecturer 3: It has helped me to notice differences and also how to deal with these differences.

Tutor 4: You have the chance to learn about other places and cultures through interactions with the diverse population

Student 6: It is good because I have learnt a lot of things from my peers that I did not know before. I can say that the university is a place for globalisation.

Q. Would you recommend or condemn group work in a diverse class like yours?

Lecturer 9: I am in favour of group work because this is the way that I am getting my students to learn about new things through interactions with their other peers.

Tutor 8: Group work is very important because it helps me to be able to identify the problems that students are encountering in their studies.

Student 4: This is a good thing because it makes you to get new friends and also to learn about their places where they come from, the food they eat, their music, the dance etc.

As suggested by the data analysis, the constructivist framework is based on participants' construct of their own knowledge and understanding of the world around them through a reflection of the things that they experience. When participants in a communication interaction come across a new thing, they tend to make an attempt to reconcile this with their prior knowledge. In view of this, the new experience can then be used to change what they already believe in, or to reject it completely as irrelevant information to them. Some of the different ways through which participants can create new knowledge could be through their ability to ask questions, and to assess and explore what they already know. In the context of the classroom, constructivism means encouraging language learners to create new knowledge by reflecting on their understanding. The teacher in this context should only be viewed as a facilitator rather than a producer of knowledge. Teachers in this regard, can provide the much needed motivation, skills and abilities required for understanding the other. Such motivation, skills and abilities therefore help language learners to formulate and test their ideas and then draw their conclusion in a collaborative learning environment, which is what this study considers as intercultural communication competence.

Within the social constructivist framework, participants are being encouraged to assess how their events and activities might be helping them to gain an understanding of a phenomenon. By questioning themselves and their strategies, these participants can become expert learners as they learn how to learn. Thus, they can in turn apply such tools in life-long learning.

A sociocultural approach places a premium on learners' experiences, social participation, use of mediating devices (tools and technologies), and position within various activity systems and communities of practice (Gee, 2008 p.100). Nonetheless, it is suggestive that since culture seems to be part and parcel of our early socialisation in life, we each learn ways of being in the world, of acting, and interacting, thinking and valuing and using language, objects and tools that critically shape our early sense of self (Vygotsky, 1998). A situated/sociocultural perspective amounts to an argument that students learn new academic 'cultures' at school and, as in the case of acquiring any new culture, the acquisition of these new cultures interacts formidably with learners' initial cultures (Gee, 2008 p. 100).

7. Conclusion

This longitudinal study examined how participants engage in cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective dimensions of learning during interactions. The project for the development of intercultural communication competence appeared to have presented both promises and challenges for the study. Overall, the participants found that interaction and participation can support self-directed learning, as they individually and socially construct meanings to develop their intercultural knowledge, abilities and skills. It was evidenced in the findings that engagement and participation promoted learners' autonomy through self-regulation and self-management in a team. In addition, the participants maintained that team work gave them a sense of belonging, as they collaboratively shared and exchanged cultural perspectives, their anxieties and fears through the use of the language of instruction (L2). Furthermore, the results revealed that the participants' inability to speak English might have contributed to a limited level of their participation in team work. Consequently, some participants can become so frustrated that they might not be able to participate actively in classroom activities and events. The findings corroborated those reported in previous studies of intercultural communication competence indicating that teamwork is essential for language learning and influences participants' motivation to connect and interact with others (Foncha, 2013, Lee, 2011 and Sivasubramaniam, 2011).

8. Pedagogical Implication

Our expectation is to understand the practice of collaborative teaching and learning so that assistance could be provided to support instructor/learners efforts to include collaborative interactions in their courses. In light of this, engagement and participation is pursued with an interest of change and improvement. This type of learning acknowledges the interest to contribute to scientific knowledge. As such, it is based on common-sense as well as scientific knowledge as means to improve human practices. The scientific expectation of such learning is to create knowledge of the practical that is practical to the practical (Dewey, 1936). This is to say that both common-sense and scientific knowledge is meant for human practices that should be useful for management and improvement of practices around them.

Thus this investigation can be seen as investigation into one or more local practices. In order to develop scientific knowledge, it is necessary to get close to local practices. Many times, such an inquiry is best performed as intervention, where the practicality of knowledge is tried out in actions.

Collaborative interactions are essential elements of any pedagogy which assumes that good learning is collaborative and that understanding comes through modelling, participation in, and reaction to the behaviours and

thoughts of others.

The purpose of this inquiry through an empirical study on practical matters in local practices is to contribute to general practical knowledge. This kind of knowledge becomes part of the scientific body of knowledge and it aims to be useful for educational and practical affairs. In many situations, this type of learning may also include intervention, of varying degrees, into the studied local practices.

Hence, the novelty of the study is moored in its constructivist perspective where language learning should not rely on cognition based on a simplistic/nonproblematic traditional in-put/out-put notion but rather on meaning making and the affective influence of an environment.

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