

# APPROACHES AND ACTIVITIES TO DEVELOP INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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## Abstract:

The article describes the role of approaches and activities to develop intercultural competence in teaching and learning process. Approaches and activities generally integrate language and cognitive skills, connect to real-life problems, generate high learner interest, and involve some cooperative or group learning skills.

**Keywords:** pedagogical approaches, project-based education, experiential learning, multiple perspectives, cooperative learning.

## Introduction

In a language description we generally deal with three essential parts known as phonology, vocabulary, and grammar. These various ranges, or levels, are the subject matter of the various branches of linguistics. We may think of vocabulary as the word-stock, and grammar as the set of devices for handling this word-stock. It is due precisely to these devices that language is able to give material linguistic form to human thought.

Robert Lado wrote that language functions owing to the language skills. A person who knows a language perfectly uses a thousand and one grammar lexical, phonetic rules when he is speaking. Language skills help us to choose different words and models in our speech. Linguistic studies of recent years contain a vast amount of important observations based on acute observations valid for further progressive development of different aspects of the science of language. The conception of the general form of grammars has steadily developed. What becomes increasingly useful for insight into the structure and functioning of language is orientation towards involving lexis in studying grammar.

Today linguists have well-established techniques for the study of language from a number of different points of view. Each of these techniques supplements all the others in contributing to theoretical knowledge and the practical problems of the day. Components of intercultural competence that the activities develop are highlighted in the descriptions for the sake of clarity and easier orientation. At the end of this section, a sample activity is described in detail to help readers follow the procedure and understand the aims of the activity and how its processes and expected learning outcomes support the development of some of the components of intercultural competence described in section two of this research.



### **Pedagogical Approaches**

As described in the previous section, research has shown that teaching can be significantly more effective when lecturing, or transmitting knowledge to passive receivers, is reduced to a minimum. Where real changes in attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills and action are desired, lecturing does not have much of an effect. For instance, lecturing about democracy, respect and the importance of intercultural competence will not be credible and is not likely to have an impact if teachers do not apply and model the same principles in their communication, and general approach to the teaching and learning process. On the other hand, **experiential learning** or 'learning by doing' involving experience, comparison, analysis, reflection and cooperative action are most effective in non-formal and formal education if these teaching and learning methods are supported by the official national and local curriculum and education authorities.

In the last two or three decades there has been a change of focus in education as competence development gains ground. Many innovative teaching techniques and work forms are now increasingly widespread with the aim of facilitating the learning process in both non-formal and formal education today.

### **Project-based Education**

Project-based education is an instructional approach that seeks to contextualize language learning by involving learners in projects, rather than in isolated activities targeting specific skills. Project-based learning activities generally integrate language and cognitive skills, connect to real-life problems, generate high learner interest, and involve some cooperative or group learning skills. Unlike instruction where content is organized by themes that relate and contextualize material to be learned, project-based learning presents learners with a problem to solve or a product to produce. They must then plan and execute activities to achieve their objectives.

Projects selected may be complex and require an investment of time and resources, or they may be more modest in scale. Examples of projects include a class cookbook, an international food bazaar, a folktale-based story hour at a local library, a neighborhood services directory, or a class web page. In the selection of projects and activities, it is important to include learners' input, as well as to consider carefully how the project will fit with overall instructional goals and objectives.

**Project work**, for example, has become very popular in the teaching of many subjects in schools. It involves topic or theme-based tasks suitable for various levels and ages, in which goals and content are negotiated by all participants, and learners create their own learning materials that they present and evaluate together. Naturally, with such new work forms and new approaches to the learning process, teachers' and learners' roles have also changed.

When pedagogical approaches, methods and techniques that encourage learners to become actively involved in experience, discovery, challenge, analysis, comparison, reflection and cooperation are implemented, learning activities tend to be very effective as they engage learners as whole persons and address their intellectual, emotional and physical potential. Such



a specific approach to learning and teaching that has proved to promote the development of intercultural competence regardless of the subject matter is cooperative learning. [1. 56]

**Cooperative learning** refers to the way the learning process is organized and it does not only mean that learners often collaborate in groups in non-formal or formal classroom settings. Cooperative learning is a specific kind of collaborative learning in which students or participants do not simply work on unstructured tasks in pairs or small groups but work together on activities that have specific cooperative principles built into the very structure of the tasks. In cooperative learning, pupils, students or participants are individually responsible and accountable for their learning, and the work of the group as a whole is also assessed. The smaller the group, the more likely it is that all members will contribute, which ensures personally inclusive interaction.

Cooperative groups work face-to-face or online and this teamwork ensures that there is constructive and encouraging interdependence among the group members leading to improved social skills and conflict resolution strategies, and a gradual decrease in labeling and exclusion of individual members. In this pool of attitudes, knowledge and skills, every member brings their strengths to the work but also acquires new knowledge and develops regardless of whether the subject matter is linked to the humanities and social sciences or to mathematics and the natural sciences.

In order to create an environment in which cooperative learning can take place, learners need to feel safe and comfortable, and the task and its goals must be clearly set for them to feel appropriately challenged and to work together efficiently. Learners participating in cooperative tasks soon realize that in order to be efficient, they need to be respectful, attentive, honest and empathic. When cooperative groups are guided by clear goals and the task requires positive interdependence, group members engage in numerous activities that improve their understanding of equal access and participation as well as the topics explored.

Cooperative learning applies some of the principles of constructivism and lends itself well for an inquiry-based approach. Since cooperative techniques revolve around small group work, they can be used complementary to almost any other educational strategy, approach or teaching method, and as described above they develop many of the components of intercultural competence regardless of the subject matter where they are implemented.

What follows is a brief description of activity types which are suggested as conducive to the development of intercultural competence through education.

#### **Activity types** 1) Activities emphasizing multiple perspectives

Activities to raise awareness of different perspectives will develop learners' skills of observation, interpretation and decentering as well as their openness and non-judgmental thinking. These activities may take the form of a verbal description or visual recording of an event, action or phenomenon that can be supplemented by or juxtaposed to descriptions or visuals of the same event, behavior or phenomenon provided by others who see these from different perspectives. For example, it is interesting to read, compare, analyze, discuss and perhaps even act out three different accounts of the same day's events in a school or summer camp written in a diary form by three children coming from very different backgrounds with



different values, norms, skills and knowledge and perhaps with different languages. The debriefing of the activity is important to reflect and conceptualise the experience and to show how the genre and the language used affect the understanding of the experience. Facilitators need to discuss with the members of the class or group why people tend to see the same phenomena, events or actions differently and what happens if we misjudge people on the basis of first impressions and widespread but often misguided assumptions.

Such activities that analyze multiple perspectives can be used in non-formal or formal educational settings to develop intercultural competence. For example, historical events are often described differently by two historians living in different parts of the world and writing in different languages. As much as portraits of the same person are painted differently by two artists, drawings of a classroom sketched by people sitting in different corners of the same classroom will also be different. World maps based on projections not usually encountered, or using maps upside down, may stimulate discussion on points of view that are frequent or dominant, and others that are less customary. The same is true for descriptions of natural phenomena that are often presented in natural science classes. While variations on this activity develop participants' observation and communication skills, they also promote analysis from multiple perspectives, enhance empathy and non-judgmental attitudes, and highlight the misleading nature of first impressions and stereotypes. Comparing perspectives can also be used in the treatment of real conflicts among the members of any group or class, or even within a family, to develop the same skills and attitudes while solving the involved persons' own conflicts or problems.

Multiperspectivity can also be enhanced through storytelling and the construction of narratives by learners. The narration of stories, which could be real or fictional, involves the ability to narrate whilst taking the perspective of specific people involved and distinguishing these from one's own perspective. Such narrations help participants to decentre from their own values, norms and beliefs and from what is normally taken for granted, and the explanation of matters that would otherwise be omitted. [2.114]

This process may be fuelled by an audience's questions in informal settings, but it can also be designed as such in non-formal and formal education. Stories in the latter settings could be purposefully drawn from the learners' own biographies, which can also be pulled together (e.g., through 'American quilt' or 'puzzle' activities where each biography forms a piece of the puzzle) to exemplify the group's diversity and to facilitate learners in exploring each other as complex individuals beyond over-simplified identities and labels which constrain members' understanding of each other. Finally, beyond the discussion of each individual biography or story, the compilation of all of them creates yet another level of rich pedagogical material which can be further analysed, discussed and reflected upon in relation, for example, to the kinds of diversity encountered in the group, whether or how it is related to the broader social context, or the kinds of socio-historical influences that brought it about.

## 2) Role plays, simulations and drama

Role play, simulation and drama activities in foreign, second or native language and literature classes or in non-formal educational settings can help develop learners' intercultural competence. For example, teachers or facilitators can give out role cards according to which



learners have to act completely differently from their usual ways, norms and standards, and they have to solve a problem, carry out a task or discuss an issue in groups following the norms of their assigned 'new identity'. [3.90]

The benefits of role plays, simulations and drama for the development of intercultural competence are numerous. Learners experience what it is like to be different, to be looked on strangely, to be criticized or even excluded. They can also discover that, although people may show differences in every aspect from eye-contact through language use to basic norms, beliefs and values, these differences do not make them less valuable as human beings. As a result, such activities can help to develop attitudes of openness, curiosity and respect, as well as a willingness to empathize and suspend judgments. They also develop skills of observation and interpretation, skills of learning about one's own culture and discovering others as well as skills of adapting and empathy. [4.67]

Though the whole range of these experiences can be useful, facilitating and guiding participants' reflection upon these experiences is of key importance. Incidents of miss- or difficult communication can be seen as pedagogical challenges for further improvement, rather than be conceptualized as 'problems' or 'obstacles'. Discussions over what went wrong, what intended or unintended messages were harmful to the communication and how future communication can be more intercultural sensitive will entail more appropriate engagement in such encounters in the future.

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