

'THE INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION' IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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When two people talk to each other, they do not just *speak* to the other to exchange information, they also *see* the other as an individual and as someone who belongs to a specific social group, for example a 'worker' and an 'employer' or a 'teacher' and a 'pupil'. This has an influence on what they say, how they say it, what response they expect and how they interpret the response. In other words, when people are talking to each other their social identities are unavoidably part of the social interaction between them. In language teaching, the concept of 'communicative competence' takes this into account by emphasising that language learners need to acquire not just grammatical competence but also the knowledge of what is 'appropriate' language.

When two people in conversation are from different countries speaking in a language which is a foreign/second language for one of them, or when they are both speaking a language which is foreign to both of them, a lingua franca they may be acutely aware of their national identities. They are aware that at least one of them is speaking a foreign language and the other is hearing their own language being spoken by a foreigner. Often this influences what they say and how they say it because they see the other person as a representative of a country or nation. Yet this focus on national identity, and the accompanying risk of relying on stereotypes, reduces the individual from a complex human being to someone who is seen as representative of a country or 'culture'.

Furthermore, this simplification is reinforced if it is assumed that learning a language involves becoming like a person from another country. Often in language teaching the implicit aim has been to imitate a native speaker both in linguistic competence, in knowledge of what is 'appropriate' language, and in knowledge about a country and its 'culture'. The concept of 'culture' has changed over time from emphasis on literature, the arts and philosophy to culture as a shared way of life, but the idea of imitating the native speaker has not changed and consequently native speakers are considered to be experts and the models, and teachers who are native speakers are considered to be better than non-native speakers.

In contrast the 'intercultural dimension' in language teaching aims to develop learners as intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity. It is based on perceiving the interlocutor as an individual whose qualities are to be discovered, rather than as a representative of an externally ascribed identity. Intercultural communication is communication on the basis of respect for individuals and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction.

So language teaching with an intercultural dimension continues to help learners to acquire the linguistic competence needed to communicate in speaking or writing, to formulate what they want to say/write in correct and appropriate ways.

But it also develops their intercultural competence i.e. their ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality.

Social identities are related to cultures. Someone who is 'Chinese' will have acquired that identity through being brought up surrounded by other Chinese, unconsciously learning their beliefs, values and behaviours. Similarly someone whose social identities include being 'a teacher' will have acquired the knowledge, values and behaviours they share with other teachers through a process of socialisation. But this is still a simplification because Chinese and teachers have many other identities and there are many different ways of being Chinese or a teacher. So to see only one identity in a person is a simplification. An intercultural speaker is aware of this simplification, knows something about the beliefs, values and behaviours which are 'Chinese', but is also aware that there are other identities hidden in the person with whom they are interacting, even if they do not know what the associated beliefs, values and behaviours are.

Therefore an intercultural speaker needs some knowledge, about what it means to be Chinese or a teacher or indeed a Chinese teacher, for example. However, an intercultural speaker also needs an awareness that there is more to be known and understood from the other person's perspective, that there are skills, attitudes and values involved too, which are crucial to understanding intercultural human relationships. As a consequence, the 'best' teacher is neither the native nor the nonnative speaker, but the person who can help learners see relationships between their own and other cultures, can help them acquire interest in and curiosity about 'otherness', and an awareness of themselves and their own cultures seen from other people's perspectives.

Thus, developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching involves recognising 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.