

Discussion Paper

Introduction

The *Language and Inter-cultural Communication* group (LInC) has been formed as part of the Flinders Humanities Research Centre for Cultural Heritage and Cultural Exchange. It is currently composed of 7 members (from the ESL, French, Italian and Spanish sections of the School of Humanities) whose research interests lie in the areas of Applied Linguistics, Socio-Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition.

Given the members' research expertise, the nature of their pedagogical practice, and their experience as intercultural communicators, the group has chosen to focus its research activities on the development of intercultural awareness and communication competence in second language learning contexts.

The purpose of the present statement is to determine the thematic focus of the group, as it outlines key aspects of intercultural communication, presents the members' current research activities, and identifies potential areas of investigation.

Please note that this document will evolve as the research activities of the group progress.

Intercultural Communication and the LInC Group

“(I)ntercultural communication entails the investigation of culture and the difficulties of communicating across cultural boundaries. (...) Intercultural communication occurs whenever a message produced in one culture must be processed in another culture” (Samovar & Porter, 1982:6).

Of central importance in recent years, the issue of intercultural communication (IC) has arisen in the context of culturally diverse groups living and working within primarily monolingual societies. Advancements in the areas of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and greater mobility and ease of travel have increased opportunities for intercultural contact. As a result of this, growing emphasis has been placed on the development of intercultural communication competence as a fundamental goal of education (see, for example, UNESCO, n.d.).

Since all aspects of communication are both “a response to and a function of our culture” (Samovar & Porter, 1982:14), socialization in a culture determines what communicative behaviours are perceived as appropriate or desirable within a given context. In addition to the use of verbal messages, during face-to-face interaction a great deal of information about the interactants' personality, beliefs, values, and social status is transmitted and interpreted, often subconsciously, through non-verbal channels (Birdwhistell, 1970; Burgeon et al., 1989; Mehrabian, 1969, 1972). The meaning of both verbal and nonverbal messages is drawn upon past experiences, personal knowledge of language and word meaning, and the social context in which a communicative event occurs.

In intercultural encounters, observed behaviours may be interpreted by applying cultural frameworks that are inappropriate to the context in which the communication takes place, thus resulting in misinterpretation and misunderstanding, and even in negative stereotyping (Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie & Young, 1982). While stereotyping responds to a human tendency towards categorisation and simplification of highly complex realities, negative stereotypes and prejudice are definite obstacles to successful intercultural communication and mutual understanding. In order for these barriers to be lowered, learners need to develop awareness and understanding of their own, as well as of their interactants', cultural universe, including "beliefs, values, customs, habits or life styles" (Samovar & Proter, 1982:2)

The main aim of the LInC group is to investigate ways in which these goals can be best achieved. The group operates within the tradition of action research, as research emerges out of the members' practice as language and culture educators, and feeds back into it. As educators and intercultural communicators themselves, LInC group members deal with the difficulties of establishing fruitful dialogue in the classroom, and of communicating effectively with students who may not necessarily share the same cultural backgrounds as their instructors. Cultural differences concern not only ethnicity (for example, Anglo-Australian lecturers teaching Asian students; Italian, French, Spanish lecturers teaching Anglo-Australian students), but also other group cultures that relate to gender, age/generation, social status, and so forth (Scollon & Scollon, 2001:xii). As researchers, LInC members aim to understand how these factors influence the teaching and learning process, and how learners' development of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) can be best promoted in the contexts in which the group operates.

Language Learning and Intercultural Communication

Language is a fundamental tool that humans use to construct and exchange meaning with one another. Meaning making through linguistic exchanges is an activity that is situated in a shared social and cultural context. Therefore, in order to be able to communicate successfully, it is necessary to understand the cultural context in which language is used. Consequently, learning to use the same language as our interlocutors provides us not only with a tool to facilitate interaction on the simplest and most practical level, but also with insight into the other's culture, facilitating mutual understanding. In Samovar and Porter's words, "Language gives people a means of interacting with other members of their culture and a means of thinking. Language thus serves both as a mechanism for communication and as a guide to social reality" (1982:17).

In the world we live in today, the development and learning of languages is a desirable and expedient activity. It is important to note that second language acquisition (SLA) stands in contrast to first language acquisition. SLA research is the study of how people learn additional languages beyond acquiring their *mother tongue* or first language (L1), and constitutes a complex network of inter-related variables that influence success (Ellis, 1999).

There is no single way in which learners acquire knowledge and this holds true in acquiring knowledge of a second language (L2). SLA is the product of many factors pertaining to the learner on one hand and the learning context on the other. It is, therefore, important to recognise the diversity and complexity of the interaction of the two. Different learners in different situations learn a L2 in different ways. While appreciating the individual nature of language learning, in order to understand the processes of SLA it is necessary to focus on those issues or variables that are relatively stable and hence generalisable, if not to all learners then at least to large groups of learners.

Culture learning and the development of Intercultural Communication Competence

The development of a high level of linguistic competence, though fundamental for intercultural communication, cannot be deemed sufficient. In fact, it has been observed that, when non-native speakers are able to display a near-native level of competence in the target language, there is also an implicit expectation that they will behave according to the sociocultural norms observed by the native speakers of that language. If this does not happen, native speakers will tend to consider the resulting failure in communication as a deliberate act of the non-native speaker, rather than as an honest mistake (Gass & Varonis, 1991).

As previously observed, intercultural research has put forward the notion that “culture underlies every part of communication” (Crozet and Liddicoat, 2000:2). Kramsch (1993, cited in Crozet and Liddicoat, 2000:2), for example, argues that “every attempt to communicate in another language is a cultural act”. According to Crozet and Liddicoat (2000:1), Second Language education should focus on the exploration of a “comfortable unbounded and dynamic space which intercultural communicators create as they interact with each other in their attempt to bridge the gap between cultural differences”. This intercultural space (or “third place”), the conditions of its creation and the make-up of its components, should be the research focus of the LInC group.

From a pedagogical perspective, this implies revisiting the traditional notion of culture as “the valued artefacts of a particular society” (Crozet and Liddicoat, 2000), often adopted by language educators in university departments, which tends to present culture in a static fashion, as a series of selected facts, customs and traditions learners need to understand and appreciate in order to become ‘culturally competent’. The main side effect of this monolithic approach to language and culture learning is that, by imposing native-like values and competencies as the norm, it does not take into account *how people communicate across cultures*, or, as Zarate (1993) puts it, how people “relate to otherness” and negotiate their differences. In other terms, it fails to develop intercultural skills.

A more useful way of viewing culture is suggested by Trompenaars (1994), who describes a multi-layered model of culture in which three main areas are identified. The outmost layer includes explicit products of a culture, which are easily observed and constitute “symbols of a deeper level of culture” (1994:23). The core encompasses basic assumptions about life and the world, and implicit ways of dealing with all aspects of human existence. The middle layer is made of norms and values, and determines what behaviours are interpreted as right or wrong, good or bad. Getting to know, understand and respect norms and values observed by a different cultural group is a fundamental step towards becoming effective intercultural communicators.

As similar view is expressed by Hofstede (1991), who identifies four main layers of culture, and also observes that developing ICC involves awareness and understanding of both our own and our interlocutors’ basis for interpretation of reality. In particular, it is proposed that *awareness* of cross-cultural differences should be followed by the acquisition of *knowledge* of the target culture’s symbols, norms and values. In a subsequent stage, awareness and knowledge can be applied to and further developed through *practice*, thus providing opportunities for the development of IC *skills*.

Researching Language and Intercultural Communication

On the basis of the observations made so far, it can be concluded that becoming effective communicators in a second language and culture can be extremely demanding and time consuming. In spite of the great amount of research conducted in the fields of SLA and IC

over the past decades, many questions remain open regarding the variables that influence this process. Some key issues to be investigated are:

- What are the links between language and culture, and how can they be emphasized for learners to become aware of the underlying connections between symbols and meaning?
- How does communication operate across cultures?
- How can learners' development of ICC, including both linguistic and cultural aspects, be best promoted?

Some of the LInC members' current projects already fit in the research scope outlined above. Robyn Najar is currently investigating academic writing across cultures. Colette Mrowa-Hopkins and Antonella Strambi are involved in a comparative study of self-disclosure and emotion communication in French, Italian and Australian settings. Olga Sanchez-Castro's research focuses on Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) as a tool to encourage participation among low self-efficacious students of Spanish; Eric Bouvet has been investigating how foreign language students implement reading strategies; and Javier Díaz has been examining the discursive approaches of language textbooks. All these projects have intercultural implications in the context of language instruction.

In addition to their current research activities, the LInC group members have also identified potential areas of interest from which projects common to the group could emerge. Such areas include:

- Socialisation of students into language communities;
- Verbal and non-verbal communication;
- Native Speaker versus Non-Native Speaker teachers of languages.

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