Educator Insights: A Journal of Teaching Theory and Practice
Volume 01, Issue 03, March, 2025
brightmindpublishing.com
ISSN (E): 3061-6964

ASSESSING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract:
This study examines undergraduate students enrolled in English and German teacher education programs' perceptions of intercultural competency. This was accomplished by having first- and fourth-year English and German undergraduate students at a federal university in Rio de Janeiro respond to two questions meant to help them inductively define intercultural competency and how they would assist their future students in acquiring it. The four groups were compared after the responses were submitted for content analysis. According to the study's findings, the educational backgrounds of the English and German participants may have contributed to their differing views on intercultural competency.

Keywords: Undergraduates, culture, German, multilingual speakers, cultural understanding.

Introduction

Although the emphasis of language instruction has always been shifting, the 1960s and 1970s European migration processes (Piepho 1974) had a greater influence on the region. As cultural conflicts and misunderstandings have increased in frequency and visibility, experts from a variety of fields, including applied linguistics, psychology, and sociology, have joined forces to try to identify the issues (Bredella; Haack 1988, Bredella 1988). Scholars have come to the conclusion that teaching languages cannot be separated from cultural

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awareness (Kramsch 1993, 1998; Altmayer 2004; Koreik 2013). The problem goes beyond linguistic knowledge because it is now generally acknowledged that intercultural competence is necessary for language acquisition. The emphasis should be on "the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills, and attitudes that lead to visible behavior and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions," according to Deardorff (2006). This viewpoint presents a problem for today's pre-service teacher education programs (Krumm 2007), since students are expected to become culturally sensitive and self-aware (Hu 1999; Rösler 2012; Stanke 2014), in addition to learning the targeted language and developing critical thinking skills (Freire 1970). How much these theoretical discussions are influencing the learning environments is the current question. The current study explores whether these theoretical discussions are reaching the students and what undergraduates from two particular teacher education language and literature courses define as intercultural competence. This is accomplished by comparing the answers to a questionnaire provided by first- and fourth-year English and German undergraduate students at a federal university in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in order to see how they define and identify the characteristics of intercultural competence. Fourth graders have been exposed to theoretical texts throughout their studies, while first-year students have had little to no interaction with theory. The purpose of the study is to determine whether or not students' perceptions have been impacted by the theoretical discussions that were conducted during pre-service teaching, or if they continue to remain abstract.

We review some theoretical debates on the concept of culture before talking on the relevance of intercultural competency to language teacher education.

Given the long history of use of the term "culture," it is rather challenging to define exactly what it means. Furthermore, "different political or ideological agendas, in one form or another, still resonate today." [2] "With a little "c" Matthew Arnold (1867) defines it in relation to aesthetic production, separating Culture (with capital "C") or "high culture" from popular culture."[3] Another maintained ideal was a "civilized" society at the expense of more "primitive" ones. Establishing the framework for modern ideas, Avruch (1998) quotes British anthropologist Tyler, who contends that "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." But only in the 20th century

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did anthropologists pay attention to ethnographers Franz Boas and his associates, who maintained that neither high nor low cultures should be set apart. These days, culture can be characterized by six traits, according to Spencer-Oatey (2012):
1) it is multilayered; 2) it influences behavior and how behavior is interpreted; 3) it can be distinguished from both universal human nature and distinct individual personality; 4) it affects biological processes; 5) it is linked to social groups; 6) it is both an individual and a social construct; 7) it is always socially and psychologically distributed in a group, so the delineation of a culture's characteristics will always be hazy; 8) it has both universal (etic) and distinctive (emic) elements; 10) it is learned; 11) its various components are all, to some extent, interrelated; 12) it is a descriptive rather than an evaluative concept.
Such a rationale has implications for teaching Foreign Languages (FL) 1 in that both teachers and students need to understand that culture is a broad, flexible, complex, and changeable concept that shapes our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Additionally, it cannot be characterized by distinct national groups, as was once the case with terms like English, German, Italian, French, and so forth. Since Kachru's contribution in 1986, when he defined the English language as an umbrella term for diverse varieties with local norms in various communities, both native and nonnative, this fact has been widely acknowledged and is particularly true with regard to English. When interacting, members of the so-called nonnative English communities do not use native speaker varieties. On the other hand, "they develop another norm that deviates from native speaker varieties," and the teaching approach in this situation entails "making students aware of this multilingual norm," as the author puts it, and it forms the basis of the idea of International English (IE). Since multilingual speakers negotiate English based on their values, interests, and language repertoires in every interaction, Canagarajah (2014: 769) claims that a recent perspective on IE views it "as a form of practice." Their success can be explained by their adoption of context- and interaction-specific communicative practices that aid in their intelligibility, rather than by the fact that they adhere to a single norm. English is a prime example. Nevertheless, no culture or language is the same. Different perceptions lead to assumptions and beliefs, which contribute to the creation of a complex picture that never establishes what is true or untrue. When it comes to culture, the truth/falsity dichotomy is not applicable.

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English is a prime example. Nevertheless, no culture or language is the same. Different perceptions lead to assumptions and beliefs, which contribute to the creation of a complex picture that never establishes what is true or untrue. When it comes to culture, the truth/falsity dichotomy is not applicable. Altmayer (2006: 55) asserts that the idea is not a singular empirical occurrence. It is constructed from the conversations of various people. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the discourse of several people from a particular context in order to comprehend how culture is perceived. A more comprehensive perspective can be produced by group responses. However, it is important to emphasize that cultural research is situated and requires methods that take into account social behavior at a specific location and time. Accordingly, examining discourse—that is, how people act and speak—may provide a more reliable understanding of how a particular culture is viewed at a particular moment in time.

Intercultural elements were thrust to the forefront of research on teaching foreign languages (FL) in the 1970s, when communicative competence emerged as a key component of language acquisition. In addition to the processes of migration, globalization, and high mobility, the FL classroom was viewed during those times as a venue for promoting intercultural communication. In addition to encouraging cross-cultural communication, organizations like the Goethe-Institut and the Robert Bosch Foundation, among many others, also advanced our knowledge of communication and interpretation processes pertaining to general knowledge and ideas of intercultural values. Both communicative competence and intercultural communicative competence are currently in vogue in foreign language learning. According to Bredella (1988), Pauldrach (1992), and Rösler (2012), the latter should be interpreted as the capacity of an individual to become proficient in both functional and communicative aspects of a particular language while also being able to exchange ideas, reflect, relativize ethnocentric perspectives, and demonstrate openness and interest when interacting with someone from a foreign culture.

In reality, when students consider how another culture is viewed and assessed, it is crucial that they understand that their own perceptions are subjective and that it is best to avoid making assumptions based on preconceived notions. Relativizing, interpreting, and comprehending are thus actions that should be encouraged. By doing this, a third culture is created where two or more already exist. [5]

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One of the most significant models among the theoretical debates and empirical research carried out in the past two decades is Byram's (1997), in which he outlines five elements essential to the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication: (i) knowledge; (ii) comprehension; (iii) learning/fairness; (iv) being; and (v) knowing how to engage. According to Byram (1997), the term "knows" refers to the knowledge that one must possess about one's own and other people's cultures, as well as the processes of social and individual interaction; "knows understanding" refers to the capacity to comprehend and interpret cultures; "knows apprendre" refers to the capacity to acquire new knowledge about other cultures; and "knows être" refers to one's attitude toward other cultures.

This model demonstrates how intercultural competency encompasses interrelated cognitive, affective, ethnic, and behavioral levels.

Lastly, critical cultural education is the main component of Byram's model and is connected to every previously mentioned element. This dimension necessitates a critical assessment of both one's own and the other culture's viewpoints, customs, and output. Students should become "intercultural speakers" during the learning process and be able to mediate conflicts between individuals from various cultural backgrounds by negotiating a communication and interaction style that works for both parties. Through the appropriate use of the language's sociolinguistic and discourse connotations, their proficiency in the language is linked to their understanding of another culture. As a result of the abilities they have gained in the first place, they also have a foundation for learning new languages and cultural understandings.

Based on Byram's framework, which was previously discussed, a questionnaire was created to ascertain how English and German students view intercultural competency. In order to gather information about the participants' profiles, the first section included questions about their age, gender, level of English or German, where and how they learned the language, and whether they were beginners or experts in language teacher education studies. A warning about a position open to flight attendants was given in the second section. Here, participants were asked to list the intercultural competencies they believed were necessary for the position, along with the methods they would employ to hone the abilities they had previously mentioned (refer to Annex).

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Participants included 32 German students (26 female and 6 male) and 70 English students (51 female and 18 male) from Brazilian universities. They were separated into four groups based on their learning stage (beginners or advanced in language teacher education) and language (German or English). They were divided into groups based on how they answered the first question, which asked about intercultural competency.

We were able to analyze the data's content both qualitatively and quantitatively because of the nature of the instrument we used to collect it a questionnaire with open-ended questions. Initially, we used Byram's model to classify the questions and allowed for deviations from it. Later, using a concordance (Ant-Conc), we looked for the frequency of co-occurring words in the corpus. According to van Peer, Hakemulder, and Zyngier (2012), both strategies are a component of content analysis, a methodological technique for data prospection.

Our need to distinguish the four groups under investigation while also tracing their traits led us to make this methodological decision. On the one hand, English language learners appear to be more accustomed to the language and to certain cultures where English is the primary language when they first enroll in college. For example, exposure to English-language songs and television programs is common in our society, which may be the cause of this. German students, on the other hand, graduate with no prior knowledge and little exposure to the foreign culture. As they advance, they become aware of this disparity, which could cause them to place too much importance on things like linguistic or cultural facts. English places a higher value on this variable in terms of capacity.

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