Winter January, 2014

Cultivating Intercultural Communicative Competence in the Age of Internationalization

Li Jin
Cultivating Intercultural Communicative Competence IN THE AGE OF INTERNATIONALIZATION

In 2007, the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages called for new structures in foreign language education at the postsecondary level in the United States. The committee broadened the goals of foreign language education to include cultivating students’ translilingual and transcultural competence. This aligns with the “intercultural communicative competence” model that was proposed in 1997 by Michael Byram and has been promoted in European foreign language education in the past decades.

This new goal elucidates a more realistic level of competence that our students are expected to achieve: to function as an educated and skillful intercultural communicator who is sensitive to the interlocutor’s identities and his/her own identities in particular social contexts. In other words, competent language learners should not only develop the necessary knowledge and skills to communicate using the target language in a socially acceptable way, but also possess a profound understanding of underlying values and beliefs inherent within a variety of social practices that will help them appreciate and perceive native speakers of the target language as members of foreign societies. Additionally, learners will learn to better understand their own culture (i.e., as Americans). To achieve this goal, the Ad Hoc Committee proposed an integrative approach that situates language learning in “cultural, historical, geographic, and cross-cultural frames” at the postsecondary level. In other words, content and intercultural reflections are integrated into language classes at every level.

Six years have passed since the Ad Hoc Committee issued its proposal. It is time for language educators in the United States to reflect on what has been achieved and what further actions need to be undertaken to reach this new goal. Here I share the findings of a university department’s annual learning outcome assessment project that focused on graduating majors’ intercultural communicative competence. Based on these findings, I offer specific curricular and pedagogical suggestions aimed at helping students develop intercultural communicative competence, something that is challenging to do in a regular four-year foreign language curriculum.

My department offers seven BA-granting programs: Arabic Studies, Chinese Studies, French, German, Japanese Studies, Italian, and Spanish. Students majoring in these programs are required to take advanced-level, language-focused courses, as well as content-focused (e.g., literature, phonology, media, translation) courses taught in the target language. In addition, unlike regular language-focused programs, the Arabic Studies, Chinese Studies, and Japanese Studies programs allow students to fulfill half of the requirements through language-focused courses that are taught in the target language and to fulfill the other half through content courses (e.g., philosophy, political science, religion, arts) that are taught in English by faculty from other departments on campus. This stems from the lack of upper-level literature or other content courses taught in the target languages. Thus, culture education is consistently integrated in language education in the department.

In spring 2012, a departmental cross-language assessment project was conducted to assess graduating seniors’ intercultural communicative competence based upon their skills of discovering relevant information before and during intercultural interaction as well as their attitude toward intercultural interactions—two important aspects of intercultural communicative competence as listed in Byram’s model.

Data were collected from one Likert-scale survey and a list of scenario-based questions. The survey solicits students’ self-evaluations of various statements demonstrating attitudes toward intercultural communication and differences. It contains a total of 21 statements adapted from the Intercultural Sensitivity Survey developed in 2000 by two researchers at University of Rhode Island (see box on next page). The scenario-based questions are included. Scenario 1 assesses whether and how students can use various resources to discover necessary information and prepare for a study abroad trip. In scenario 2, students are asked to choose their preferred housing arrangement abroad and provide their rationale. It assesses students’ willingness to tolerate intercultural differences. Scenario 3 evaluates how students interpret and handle unexpected behaviors of new friends from the target culture, a more direct way to assess their attitudes toward intercultural interaction and differences.

A total of 31 graduating seniors participated in the project. The vast majority of the assessed students demonstrated acceptable or better skills of discovering relevant information for intercultural interaction.
as well as an acceptable or better attitude toward intercultural interaction and intercultural differences. However, there emerged two issues that deserve the attention of language educators.

First, 29% of the assessed students majoring in our BA-granting programs self-reported that they were not confident enough when engaged in intercultural interaction, indicating their anxiety in these situations. The second issue was revealed in one scenario-based question where students reflected on what they would share with a classmate from the target culture and their own family members when a friend from the target culture failed to call to invite him/her for a pre-arranged weekend visit due to some family issue. This question aimed to assess what attitude American students have toward otherness when they encounter unexpected behaviors in another culture. The findings show that 27.8% of the assessed students thought their foreign friend was lying and 50% chose not to share the unexpected behavior with a third person or with their own family—assuming the unexpected behavior was not a big issue. However, both groups of students expressed willingness to remain open to future invitations. Thus, both types of answers indicate these students’ lack of sensitivity to intercultural differences rather than negative attitude toward otherness.

The project findings send a message to all postsecondary-level language educators that: (1) many of our students haven’t developed sufficient confidence in intercultural interaction; and (2) many of them have not developed sufficient sensitivity and the ability to analyze intercultural differences in certain intercultural interactions. Interestingly, among the 31 assessed students, 28 (96.8%) of them have studied abroad in different types of programs with various lengths of time. This indicates that the regular language curriculum and pedagogy in the department, in conjunction with the actual study abroad experience, were not successful in helping many students develop certain intercultural communicative competence. Students’ lack of confidence may stem from their personalities, lack of interaction with native speakers of the target culture, or, more seriously, a significant lack of certain knowledge and skills needed in successful intercultural interaction. Considering the fact that the majority of the students have studied abroad, the lack of confidence may also be attributed to their lack of conscious reflection and intercultural sensitivity when engaged in intercultural interaction. Therefore, putting aside students’ individual differences, we as language educators should not only create opportunities to engage our students in intercultural interactions with native speakers of the target culture, but also cultivate within them the habit to critically reflect upon their intercultural communicative experience.

---

**Questionnaire: Intercultural Sensitivity Scale**

*(Adapted from the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale developed by Chen and Starosta, 2000)*

Below is a series of statement concerning intercultural communication. There is no right or wrong answer. Please work quickly and record your first impression by indicating the degree to which you agree or disagree with the statement. Thank you for your cooperation.

5 = strongly agree  4 = agree  3 = uncertain  2 = disagree  1 = strongly disagree

( Please put the number corresponding to your answer in the blank before the statement)

1. I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.
2. I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally distinct counterparts.
3. I am open-minded to people from different cultures.
4. I often give positive responses to my culturally different counterpart during our interaction.
5. I don’t avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally distinct persons.
6. I often show my culturally distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues.
7. I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally distinct counterpart and me.
8. I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.
9. I try to obtain as much information as I can when I interacting with people from different cultures.
10. I am sensitive to my culturally distinct counterpart’s subtle meanings during our interaction.
11. I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures.
12. I feel at ease to talk in front of people from different cultures.
13. I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.
14. I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.
15. I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.
16. I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.
17. I don’t like to be with people from different cultures.
18. I cannot tolerate the values of people from different cultures.
19. I cannot tolerate the ways people from different cultures behave.
20. I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.
21. I think my culture is better than other cultures.

To tackle the quantity issue facing intercultural interaction revealed in the assessment project, I propose two strategies to increase direct intercultural interaction between language learners and native speakers of the target language.

First, language students are encouraged to partner with international students on campus in order to augment their face-to-face interaction with native speakers from the target culture. For many years, international students on American university campuses have been an untapped resource for foreign language learning. In the past decade, an increasing number of international students have enrolled in colleges and universities across the United States. Many of them are still building their English language skills and desperately need help to understand U.S. social practices and perspectives. Building long-term and meaningful partnerships among our language students and these international students would help both parties develop a deeper understanding of both cultures as well as have personal and sensible experience with intercultural interaction.

The second strategy is to take advantage of technology to increase the quantity and quality of intercultural interaction. Today's technologies have made intercultural communication a venture that is just one click away. Faculty members in a language department, particularly those who are technologically savvy, should be encouraged to develop course projects to encourage and guide digital connections between language students and native speakers of the target culture. Common technologies that can be adopted in intercultural communication include social media such as Facebook (multilingual), Google+ (multilingual), Instagram (multilingual), Pinterest (selected languages), Twitter (multilingual), and Weibo (Mandarin Chinese); synchronous communication tools, such as Skype, WeChat (with social media features), and WhatsApp; and asynchronous communication tools like email.

Forging partnerships between our language students and native speakers of the target language is only the first step in intercultural learning. To ensure the quality of intercultural interaction, certain thoughtful pedagogical and curricular strategies should be implemented to ensure our students can develop sensitivity toward intercultural differences as well as other skills required in successful intercultural communication. These include:

- **Encouraging both language and content instructors within the department to design various intercultural learning projects that will stimulate language students’ sensitivity to and critical analysis of intercultural differences reflected in their real-life or technology-enhanced social interaction with native speakers of the target language.** For example, each intercultural interaction encounter should be followed with a reflective journal in which students reflect on the intercultural similarities and differences that they encounter as well as critically analyze the causes behind the differences. The topics can be about any social practices (e.g., holiday rituals, social structures) or perspectives (e.g., views about success and happiness) that are of interest to students. Periodic classroom discussions can also be held to encourage students engaged in intercultural interaction to collectively reflect on their experiences, thoughts, and concerns.

- **Implementing systematic assessment projects at the program or the departmental level.** There are a wide variety of commercial and free instruments assessing various intercultural communicative competences. Besides the intercultural sensitivity survey mentioned earlier, other widely used surveys include the Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (ICSI), the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), and the Intercultural Sensitivity Index (ISI). Some instruments directly assess users’ actions, like the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (BASIC). Based on distinct assessment needs, educators and administrators may adopt or adapt one or more of these existing instruments and conduct formative or summative assessments. Portfolio assessment has attracted increasing attention in recent years. It focuses on both learners’ learning process and outcome over a given period of time. Thus, it helps elucidate the learning trajectory each student experiences during their 4 years of foreign language learning. In addition to formal instrument-based assessment results, students’ coursework, such as a course project or an essay, that demonstrates their intercultural communicative competence at one point of time during their learning process, can also be included in their portfolios. Both language learners and teachers can choose what to include in a portfolio. The advent of technology enables convenient access to various digital portfolios where students can upload as much exemplary coursework as they prefer. Digication (www.digication.com/) is a popular digital portfolio website among K–16 educators. It is important that the assessment results should always be shared with foreign language educators to gauge future curriculum design and teaching.

Intercultural communicative competence has been considered a primary goal of language education for many years. To address some of the issues facing postsecondary-level language learners, I have offered some strategies that can be adopted either in each language and content course or at the departmental level, aimed at increasing direct intercultural interaction and stimulating meaningful and learning-conducive intercultural communication between our language students and native speakers of a target language.

We are now living in the golden age of internationalization. The conveniences of international travel and the latest technologies have increased intercultural interaction to a significant degree. Language educators in the United States should learn how to tap the resources that have been underused or ignored to help our students grow into successful intercultural communicators.

Li Jin is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Modern Languages at DePaul University, Chicago, IL.