Promoting intercultural communicative competence in ESL classes

By Alireza Pourdastmalchi

Introduction

In a globalized world, ESL teachers are increasingly urged to consider developing students' intercultural communicative competence in language classes. This paper starts with the definitions of communicative competence (CC) and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) from different perspectives. It then explains what teachers need to teach to help their students develop their ICC. Next, the paper touches on the appropriate method that teachers need to adopt when incorporating ICC into their lesson plans. Finally, drawing on the fundamental elements of ICC in this paper, one classroom activity is offered to show how ESL instructors can encourage students to practice the concept of ICC in their daily life situations.

Communicative competence

Different perspectives on communicative competence

Hymes (1972) coined the term communicative competence as the knowledge of both rules of grammar and rules of language use appropriate to a given context. In other words, people who have communicative competence, besides using the correct grammar, also know how to behave and act in different situations. Hymes identified four parameters of communicative competence—possibility, feasibility, appropriateness, and performance—which are delineated as follows (p. 281):

- Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;

- Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;

- Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;

- Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails.

Motivated by Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980) proposed their influential theory of communicative competence which was refined by Canale (1983a, b). In their initial framework, there were three components of communicative competence: (1) grammatical competence, which includes knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology; (2) sociolinguistic competence, which is made up of two sets of rules: sociocultural rules of use and rules of discourse; and (3) strategic competence, which includes verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication. Subsequently, Canale (1983a; b) revised the model and added another component (i.e., discourse competence) to distinguish it from sociocultural competence. Discourse competence refers to the knowledge of the connections among utterances in a text to form a meaningful whole.

Although Canale's (1983a, b) models of communicative competence provided the main theoretical framework for communicative language teaching and testing, it failed to point out how its various components interact with each other and with the context in which language use happens. This problem is addressed in Bachman's model of communicative language ability (CLA) which was slightly altered by Bachman and Palmer in the mid 1990s.

In Bachman and Palmer's (1996) communicative language ability (CLA) model (Appendix A), organizational knowledge is composed of abilities engaged in a control over formal language structures, i.e., of grammatical and textual knowledge. Grammatical knowledge includes several rather independent areas of knowledge such as knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phonology, and graphology. They enable recognition and production of grammatically correct sentences as well as comprehension of their propositional content. Textual knowledge enables comprehension and production of (spoken or written) texts. It covers the knowledge of conventions for combining sentences or utterances into texts, i.e., knowledge of cohesion (ways of marking semantic relationships among two or more sentences in a written text or utterances in a conversation) and knowledge of rhetorical organization (way of developing narrative texts, descriptions, comparisons, classifications etc.) or conversational organization (conventions for initiating, maintaining, and closing conversations).

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

Different perspectives on intercultural communicative competence

According to Lustig and Koester (2006) ICC refers to "a symbolic, interpretative, transactional, contextual process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings" (p. 46). They continue, "ICC may break down when large and important cultural differences create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about how to communicate competently" (p. 52). ICC seems to focus on the challenging nature

of the communicative process between people from different cultural backgrounds among others. However, misunderstandings may also occur for non-cultural reasons as well as occurring between people from similar language and culture backgrounds. This paper proposes that the study of ICC should be integrated into language education to help facilitate both language learning and effective communication.

Byram (1997) believes that interculturally competent learner displays a range of affective, behavioural, and cognitive skills which involve the following five elements (Byram, 1997):

•**Attitudes**: Curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own. This means a willingness to avoid a self-righteous attitude, i.e., not to assume that one's beliefs and behaviors are the only correct ones and to be able to see from an outsider's perspective.

•**Knowledge**: Knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction. It follows that knowledge can be seen as having two major components: a sum of abstract knowledge of social processes and concrete knowledge of realizations of these processes in interactions.

•**Skills of interpreting and relating**: Ability to interpret a document or an event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own.

•**Skills of discovery and interaction**: Ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.

•**Critical cultural awareness**: An ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries.

These components are interrelated and help the intercultural speakers develop their ICC. The foundation of intercultural competence is in the attitudes of the intercultural speaker and mediator. Intercultural speakers need to be able to see how they different cultures and beliefs might look from an outsider's perspective who has a different set of values, beliefs, and behaviors. When they acquire the attitudes of decentering, they need to seek the knowledge of how social groups and identities function and what is involved in intercultural interaction. In order to gain the knowledge of social groups and their products, intercultural speakers need to acquire the skills of finding out new knowledge and integrating it with what they already have. They need to especially know how to ask people from other cultures about their beliefs, values, and behaviors. Moreover, since intercultural speakers/mediators need to be able to see how misunderstandings can arise, and how they might be able to resolve them, they need the attitudes of decentering but also the skills of comparing.

By putting ideas, events, documents from two or more cultures side by side, and seeing how each might look from the other perspective, intercultural speakers/mediators can see how people might misunderstand what is said or written or done by someone with a different social identity. Finally, however open towards, curious about and tolerant of other people's beliefs, values and behaviors are deeply embedded and can create reaction and rejection. Because of this unavoidable response, intercultural speakers need to become aware of their own values and how these influence their views of other people's values.

Once we understand the concepts of ICC, we need to discuss what teachers need to teach in their classrooms when incorporating ICC into their lesson plans, and what students need to learn so that they can communicate more effectively to avoid communication breakdowns.

Developing students' intercultural communicative competence

As it was shown above, Byram (1997) lists five essential elements (i.e., attitude, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness). This section of the paper explains briefly why teachers should consider these elements when incorporating ICC into their lesson plan. As for attitudes, teachers should teach students not to assume that they are the only possible and naturally correct ones, and to be able to see how they might look from an outsider's perspective who has a different set of values, beliefs, and behaviours. In order for students to understand this concept, first they need to question their preconceived ideas before entering into a process of discovery about others' beliefs and values with the intent of becoming more willing to seek out and engage with otherness in order to ultimately experience relationships of reciprocity (Byram, 1997). Here, students need to explore the national identity of the home culture and the target culture in relation to history, geography, and social institutions (Byram, 1997). Once students begin to identify ethnocentric perspectives and misunderstandings related to cross-cultural situations, they become able to understand and then explain the origins of conflict and mediate situations appropriately in order to avoid misinterpretations (Byram, 1997). In addition, students need to know that skills in discovery and interaction allow intercultural speakers to identify similarities and differences between home cultures and foreign cultures resulting in successful communication and the establishment of meaningful relationships (Byram, 1997). Teachers should inform students that a successful intercultural speaker seeks out opportunities to meet individuals from diverse cultures to share information through communication in a foreign language. Once teachers understand the importance of these elements, they should consider the appropriate methods to help their students develop their ICC.
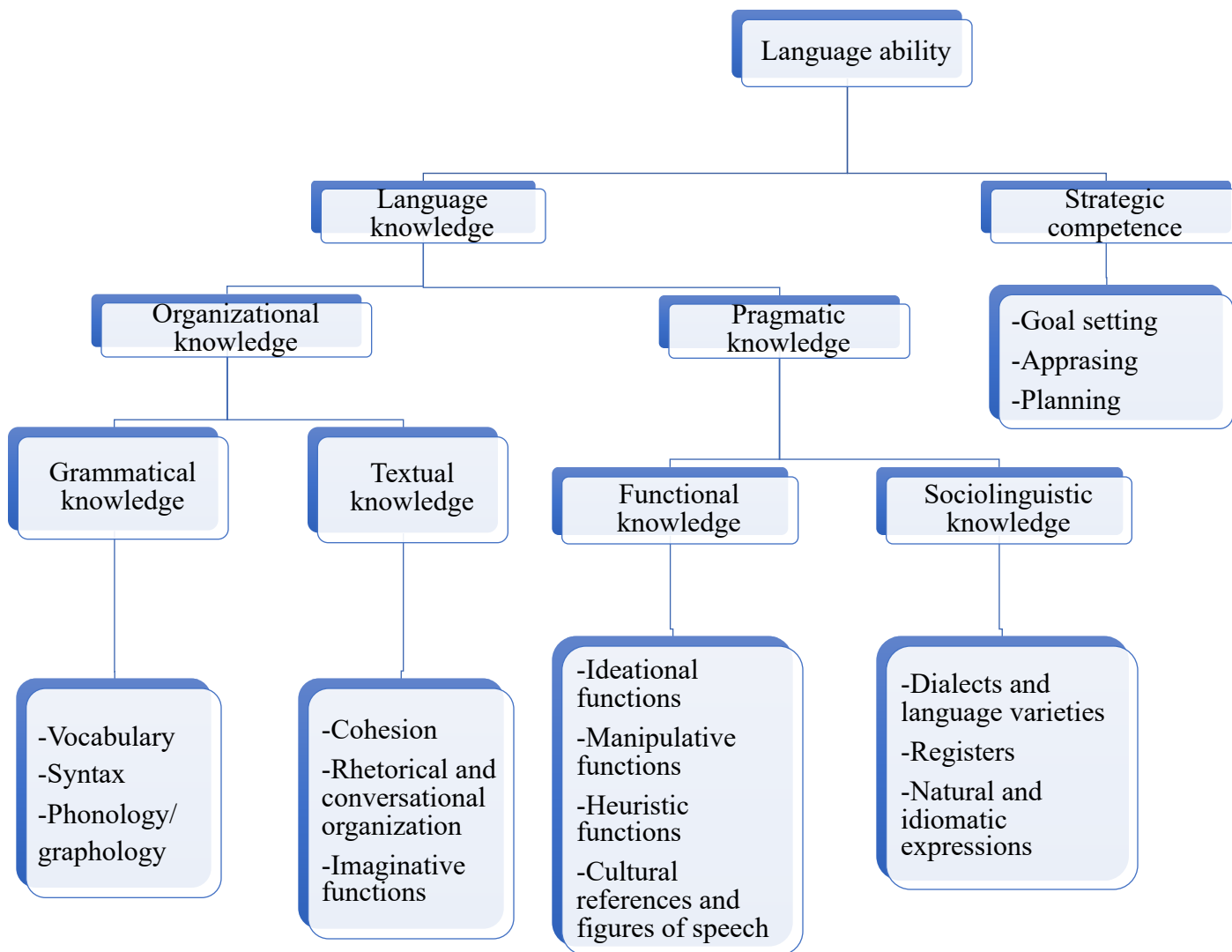
Intercultural communicative competence and ESL settings

Based on the information provided in Byram's Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (1997), foreign language teachers must reconsider methods for teaching language and culture in the classroom if the goal is to create true interculturally competent speakers of the language. Traditional methods for teaching foreign languages emphasized the importance of students practicing language structures, pronunciation, and vocabulary to become native-like speakers. Byram (1997) explains that putting the focus on the creation of native speakers sets most students up for failure because they are asked to detach from their own culture while accepting the fact that the native speaker holds the power in the interaction. This inhibits growth toward intercultural competence, as the learner is not given equal opportunity to bring his/her beliefs into the conversation. Rather than pushing students toward using a foreign language like a native speaker, language teachers should guide students toward using language that structures new discoveries about the other and about themselves (Byram, 1997). The focus shifts from preparing students to communicate without error in order to survive a foreign culture to communicating openly in order to build relationships so that they can thrive in a foreign culture. When teachers include intercultural communicative competence in their lesson plans, students experience the mutual discovery of another language and culture, and language classrooms become places where students and teachers consider questions of values and morals (Byram, 1997).

Appendix A

Communicative Language Ability (Bachman & Palmer, 1996)

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                                    Language ability
                                          |
                ┌─────────────────────────┴─────────────────────────┐
          Language                                             Strategic
          knowledge                                            competence
                │                                                   │
        ┌───────┴────────┐                                  -Goal setting
  Organizational       Pragmatic                            -Apprasing
   knowledge           knowledge                            -Planning
        │                   │
  ┌─────┴─────┐       ┌──────┴──────┐
Grammatical  Textual  Functional  Sociolinguistic
knowledge   knowledge knowledge   knowledge
    │          │          │            │
-Vocabulary  -Cohesion  -Ideational  -Dialects and
-Syntax      -Rhetorical  functions   language varieties
-Phonology/   and        -Manipulative -Registers
graphology    conversational functions -Natural and
              organization -Heuristic   idiomatic
             -Imaginative   functions   expressions
              functions    -Cultural
                           references and
                           figures of speech
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Alireza Pourdastmalchi, an educator with expertise in TESOL, earned his MA from Colorado State University in 2018. With over 15 years of teaching in Iran and the USA, he has prepared students for the IELTS and TOEFL exams. Additionally, he has presented his insights on various topics, including technology integration, cross-cultural competence, rhetoric and composition, academic reading and writing, innovative pedagogical approaches, and the utilization of graphic novels at conferences in the USA and Canada.