

Intercultural sensitivity as a part of intercultural competence

Nowadays the necessity to know at least one foreign language has become out of the question. Moreover, the aim of English classes has undergone some changes. Now mastering a foreign language means having communicative competency. That is the ability to correlate language means with the aims and conditions of communication, taking into account social norms of behaviour and the expediency of the utterance.

Undoubtedly intercultural communication is impossible without speaking a foreign language. But this only condition does not guarantee success. Communicating with people of different cultures requires intercultural sensitivity.

Intercultural competence is the ability of successful *communication* with people of other *cultures*. This ability can exist in someone at a young age, or may be developed and improved due to *willpower* and *competence*.

For *assessment* of intercultural competence as an existing ability and / or the potential to develop it (with conditions and timeframe), the following characteristics are tested and observed: *ambiguity tolerance*, openness to contacts, flexibility in behavior, emotional stability, motivation to perform, *empathy*, *metacommunicative competence*, *polycentrism*. The problem with assessing intercultural competence lies in the fact that knowledge and understanding are only part of intercultural competence. Assessing knowledge is thus only a small part of what is involved. What we need is to assess the ability to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, to step outside their taken for granted perspectives, and to act on the basis of new perspectives. Most difficult of all is to assess whether learners have changed their attitudes, become more tolerant of difference and the unfamiliar. This is affective and moral development and it can be argued that even if we can test it, we should not be trying to quantify tolerance. But quantification is only one kind of assessment. If however, assessment is not in terms of tests and traditional examinations, but rather in terms of producing a record of learners' competences, then a portfolio approach is possible and in fact desirable.

The Council of Europe has developed a European Language Portfolio.

It has three parts:

✓ the Passport section provides an overview of the individual's proficiency in different languages at a given point in time; the overview is defined in terms of skills and the common reference levels in the Common European Framework;

✓ the Language Biography facilitates the learner's involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing his or her learning process and progress; it encourages the learner to state what he/she can do in each language and to include information on linguistic and cultural experiences gained in and outside formal educational contexts; it is organised to promote plurilingualism i.e. the development of competencies in a number of languages;

✓ the Dossier offers the learner the opportunity to select materials to document and illustrate achievements or experiences recorded in the Language Biography or Passport.

So the portfolio introduces the notion of self-assessment which is considered significant both as a means of recording what has been experienced and learnt, and as a means of making learners become more conscious of their learning and of the abilities they already have.

The language biography can therefore include self-assessment of intercultural competence as the one given below.

A self-assessment of my Intercultural Experience

A. Interest in other people's way of life

I am interested in other people's experience of daily life, particularly those things not usually presented to outsiders through the media.

B. Ability to change perspective

I have realized that I can understand other cultures by seeing things from a different point of view and by looking at my culture from their perspective.

C. Ability to cope with living in a different culture

I am able to cope with a range of reactions I have to living in a different culture (euphoria, homesickness, physical and mental discomfort etc).

D. Knowledge about another country and culture

I know how to engage in conversation with people of the other culture and maintain a conversation.

E. Knowledge about intercultural communication

I know how to resolve misunderstandings which arise from people's lack of awareness of the view point of another culture.

One of the most effective ways to deal with cross-cultural misunderstanding is training for intercultural sensitivity. That is why it is important to be aware of stages of development in intercultural sensitivity. There are six defined stages. The stages provide a good framework for determining how to work with and improve the capacity for intercultural sensitivity and collaboration.

1. The first stage of the model is "denial." It means that people in this stage are very unaware of cultural difference. The task at this first stage of intercultural sensitivity is to recognize cultural differences that are escaping notice.

2. Whereas in the first stage we do not "see" cultural differences, in the second stage of cultural competence we do perceive cultural differences; however, differences from ourselves or the norms of our group are labeled very negatively. They are experienced as a threat to the centrality and "rightness" of our own value system. This stage is called "defense." The task in the second level of cultural sensitivity is to recognize and to become more tolerant of differences and to see basic similarities among people of different cultures.

3. In the third stage of intercultural sensitivity, minimization, we try to avoid stereotypes and even appreciate differences in language and culture. However, we still view many of our own values as universal, rather than viewing them simply as part of our own ethnicity. The task at the third level of intercultural sensitivity is to learn more about our own culture and to avoid projecting that culture onto other people's experience.

4. The fourth stage requires being able to shift perspective, while still maintaining our commitments to values. The task in this stage is to understand that the same behavior can have different meanings in different cultures. This stage is named "acceptance."

5. The fifth stage of intercultural sensitivity, adaptation, may allow the person to function in a bicultural capacity. In this stage, a person is able to take the perspective of another culture and operate successfully within that culture. This ability usually develops in a two-part sequence. It requires that the person knows enough about his or her own culture and a second culture to allow a mental shift into the value scheme of the other culture, and an evaluation of behavior based on its norms, not the norms of the first individual's culture of origin. This is referred to as "cognitive adaptation." The more advanced form of adaptation is "behavioral adaptation," in which the person can produce behaviors appropriate to the norms of the second culture.

6. In the sixth stage, the person can shift perspectives and frames of reference from one culture to another in a natural way. They become adept at evaluating any situation from multiple frames of reference.

To improve cultural sensitivity ten steps are offered to follow.

1. Take the initiative to make contact with the "foreigner" even if the language is a problem at first. 2. Show respect for their culture and language. Ask "How would I feel if I were in their shoes?" 3. Learn how to pronounce names correctly. 4. Be sensitive to their feelings about their homeland. 5. When speaking English, do so slowly and clearly. 6. Be yourself. Show that you care about them as people and that you honestly want to help. 7. Take time to listen. If you don't understand, or you are not understood, take time to find out why. 8. Be careful about promises. 9. The key ingredient to developing and maintaining a long-term relationship with internationals is old-fashioned friendship built of mutual respect and a desire for understanding. 10. Don't allow cultural differences to become the basis for criticism and judgments

To teach intercultural communication it is necessary to recognise 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 behaviour; and to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience.

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