FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE IN THE INTERCULTURAL FIELD: AN ASSESSMENT MODEL FOR THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE CONCEPT

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Abstract: The goal of this paper is to take a further step in bridging the gap between theory and practice in the intercultural field by building a model that could be employed in the assessment of the intercultural communication competence. In order to accomplish this, I will focus on the description of the dimensions and variables describing the interrelated concepts of intercultural communication and intercultural competence underpinning the concept of intercultural communication competence (ICC). In addition, I will discuss the importance of adding to the list of competences described by the Common European Framework of Reference the meta-linguistic competence, as one of the variables describing the ICC concept. Furthermore, based on this, as well as on a brief overview of the existing models used to assess the ICC, I will propose a working model for its development and assessment in contexts like the drafting and use of curricula addressing the intercultural field and the competences it requires, or the development of a model for institutionalizing the individual and group lessons tested and acquired in the intercultural field.

Keywords: intercultural communication competence, intercultural communication, intercultural competence, subjective culture, objective culture, assessment model.

1. INTRODUCTION

Approaching the concept of intercultural communication competence involves focusing on two interrelated concepts underlying the latter's definition, namely intercultural communication and intercultural competence. According to theoreticians (Knapp, *apud* Bakic-Miric, 2008), intercultural communication is viewed as the interpersonal interaction among members belonging to groups that are different one from another in terms of their knowledge and of the linguistic means employed to assign meaning to reality.

The concept of intercultural competence (Bennet, 1998:10-11) is viewed from a contrastive perspective that takes into account a two-fold taxonomy: *subjective culture* and *objective culture*. Thus, the intercultural competence is defined as the ability to understand both the *subjective culture* of the other and one's own culture, that is the

language, the behavioral patterns, and the values that are shared and learnt within a given group. Contrastively, the *objective culture* is a matter of *institutionalizing* culture in the form of artefacts (i.e. economic, political, artistic, linguistic systems). However, knowledge and socialization through the instruments provided by the latter (see for example training curricula that are focused on it) do not guarantee in any way the acquisition of the intercultural competence. Thus, even though a person may have knowledge of the culture (to be read as objective culture) from which the interlocutor comes, all of this does not inherently grant the capacity to interact with that person.

Based on the above observations and using some of the terminology used by the *Common European Framework of Reference* – CEFR, this paper will focus on describing a possible model based on which the analysis of the intercultural communication competence can be performed by researchers or trainers in the

field. However, before actually approaching the proposed goal, I will focus on the significance of the aforementioned document.

Thus, the *Common European Framework of Reference* – CEFR is an instrument employed at the level of the European Union in order to promote linguistic diversity, transparency of qualifications, mobility of the workforce market and continuous learning. Even though it originates on the European continent, it is acknowledged as a system of reference in the definition and evaluation of the knowledge level for foreign languages beyond the borders of the EU. Consequently, given its overall goals and coverage, I believe that the attempt of identifying and describing the intercultural competence needed in a contemporary world characterized more often than not as volatile, uncertain and complex (Ilie, Ion, 2010) should resort to some of the terminology used in the CEFR on grounds of its shared schemata quality. However, I would like to emphasize that for the delineation of the necessary parameters/criteria against which the intercultural competence is to be assessed, the CEFR is nothing but a starting point. Such a decision is supported by the second place granted by the document to the intercultural aspects. Moreover, as its very title suggests, the goal of elaborating and of putting into practice such a document is triggered by the necessity for multiple frameworks to align to a common norm that, in its case, is related to the English model for teaching/learning foreign languages. As a result, even though the CEFR is truly useful when it comes to evaluating the knowledge level of a foreign language, the latter does not prove that efective when used from an intercultural perspective. In addition, the CEFR is not enough if an encompassing intercultural perspective is to communication competence. In this respect, suffices to remind that being intercultural is not solely about working/acting within the EU, nor about learning/teaching in Anglophone cultures.

Consequently, some of the CEFR terminology will be only one of the means to achieve the the ultimate goal of this paper: to build an assessment model for the intercultural communication competence concept based on its defining dimensions and variables.

Moreover, in the long run, such a model could be used in the development of appropriate training programs, as well as of adequate instruments needed to identify the lessons in the intercultural field.

2. THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE: DIMENSIONS AND VARIABLES

Besides all of the above, I would also like to emphasize that communication style and behavior are under the influence of what could be called an individual's 'culturalization' process that is accomplished through the establishment of social relationships or by learning and currently using a foreign language (Cheng, 2003:2). As a result, the intercultural communication competence is defined by two major dimensions: socialization competences and multi-linguistic competences.

As for the variables characteristic of the two dimensions, they are as follows: socio-cultural and psycho-social competences in the case of the socialization competence dimension; linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences (in the CEFR view) underpinning the multi-linguistic dimension (as depicted in Fig.1).
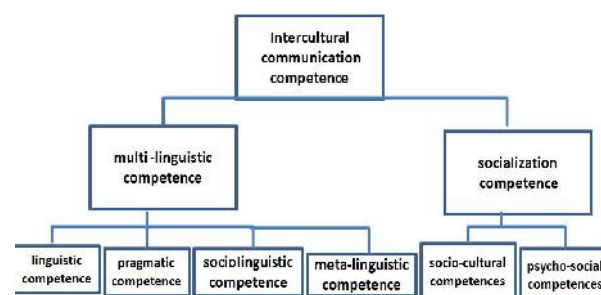

Fig.1. Intercultural communication competence: dimensions and variables

One important skill for intercultural communication to take place consists in *"the negotiation of a common meaning"* (Cheng, 2003:2). For this reason, the competences identified as dimensions and variables of the intercultural communication competence help in assigning meaning to reality through a series of intercultural parameters/criteria that

are used in accordance with the linguistic means chosen for the interaction and with their inherent psycho-social-cultural characteristics.

We will now briefly present the characteristics of the competences defining the overall concept of intercultural communication competence.

2.1 The socialization competence. As already discussed, the dimension known by the name of 'socialization competence' is defined by socio-cultural and psycho-social competences.

2.1.1 The socio-cultural competence. This type of competence is defined by knowledge of social norms, rites, taboos, conventions governing a linguistic community, as well as daily routines, the means by which interpersonal relationships can be established and maintained in a target culture compared to someone's culture of origin. The intercultural characteristic of such a competence comes into play when the interacting actor(s) prove(s) able to 'negotiate' in a 'win-win' manner the likely conflicts or cultural misunderstandings. Consequently, being aware and acting in full acknowledgment of social, cultural, regional diversity is indicative of whether a person is competent from a socio-cultural point of view.

2.1.2 The psycho-social competence (savoir-etre). One of the main goals of the education and training processes resides in the development of the psycho-social competence. As far as the intercultural field is concerned, this type of competence can be developed by acquiring working knowledge of one or more foreign languages. Thus, its components are an individual's values, beliefs, cognitions, all of which influence and shape the use or learning of a foreign language. From an intercultural perspective, all of the above represent the basis for the perceptual process and, in the end, for developing or shunning relationships. As a result, alongside with the socio-cultural variables the psycho-social ones may lead to the success or failure of interactions among individuals coming from fundamentally different cultural backgrounds.

2.2 The multi-linguistic competence. Unlike the CEFR that lists among the communication competences, the linguistic one, I suggest that the ability to speak more than one language may guarantee an increasing capacity to adapt and integrate into varied speech and socio-cultural communities. As a result, the term I coin and propose for further use is the one of 'multi-linguistic competence'. The latter's components are not only those mentioned within the CEFR, namely the linguistic, socio-linguistic and pragmatic competences, but also the meta-linguistic competence required by a multi-linguistic approach.

2.2.1 The linguistic competence. The linguistic competence actually designates the basic grammar, semantic, and phonological structures, as well as the writing and spelling rules that more often than not are acquired as de facto elements and, hence, mistakenly viewed as the only valid and defining for the intercultural interactions. As a result, regardless of the important role they play in defining the accuracy of using a specific language, they can make up the linguistic whole only in relationship with the sociolinguistic components that characterize social relationships and conventions, or trace back one's origin through the dialect, accent, or register employed. Furthermore, for the same linguistic whole to be truly defining for the adequate and efficient (Lesenciuc, Codreanu, 2012) use of language in a given intercultural context, the pragmatic competence should also come into play. The latter is defined by the discursive competence (i.e. the organization and structuring of the written and oral discourse), the functional competence (used for communication purposes), and by the construction competence (defined by the interactionist and transactional schemata characteristic of a given context).

2.2.2 The meta-linguistic competence. The meta-linguistic competence is, in my opinion, a basic requirement for those who, apart from their mother tongue, currently use more than one language. In this respect, I believe that an individual's ability to ponder over the socio-linguistic, linguistic and pragmatic features of the languages s/he currently speaks, as well as his/her ability to self-monitor the verbal behaviour and correct

it accordingly is defining for multi-lingual people. In addition, developing such a competence contributes to preserving the language(s) as part of the speaker's active memory, an essential prerequisite for anyone who can speak a foreign language.

3. AN ASSESSMENT MODEL FOR THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE CONCEPT

The identification and description of the intercultural communication competence do not suffice unless followed by a set of measurement criteria that should underlie a working model to be used in the assessment of the intercultural communication competence and that should describe more than the linguistic aspects already described in a complex and accurate manner in the CEFR. In order to achieve this goal, I will briefly overview some of the instruments already employed in the evaluation of the defining dimensions of the concept under investigation in this paper. Next, I will identify those criteria that are relevant for the operationalization of all the definitions and concepts provided in the previous chapters.

According to specialized literature (Spitzberg, Cupach, 1984), the intercultural communication competence is a speaker's capacity to efficiently use his/her intercultural abilities in establishing relationships by resorting to a verbal and non-verbal behavior aligned to a given communication context. Generally, researchers in the intercultural field (Cui, van den Berg, 1991) agree that any approach to the intercultural communication competence should be a three-fold one: cognitive, emotional and behavioral. All of these are covered, through different terminology, by the models that I am to present next.

One of the first instruments developed to assess the intercultural communication competence (ICC) belongs to Ruben and is known as *Behavioural Assessment*. The latter focuses on seven dimensions of the concept: tolerance to ambiguity; management of interactions; means of showing respect;

knowledge orientation; the management of the roles imposed by interactions; proxemics and empathy.

Another instrument, the *Intercultural Developmental Inventory* (Bennet, Hammer, 1998) is focused on the concept of intercultural sensitivity defined as *"the ability to differentiate and experience the significant cultural differences"* (Bennet, Hammer, 1998:422). Even though the authors believe that this is a criterion against which ICC can be assessed, I believe that this is the ultimate goal of all endeavors aimed at developing the ICC, and not an intermediary level as suggested by this instrument. However, if applied to the ICC model presented in Figure 1, I believe this could be assimilated to the meta-linguistic competence suggested as a variable of the concept.

The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (van der Zee, van Oudenhoven, *apud* Ponterotto *et al.*, 2006) was designed as a psychometric instrument focused on multicultural orientation and adaptability, rather than on the ICC. Nonetheless, the five dimensions it uses to assess the multicultural competence can also be employed when approaching the ICC and they are: cultural empathy, emotional stability, openness to the new, flexibility and social initiative.

In addition to all of the above criteria against which the concept can be assessed, I believe that the parameters suggested by Clyne (1996) to identify and explain the cultural differences that can be perceived at the level of the written discourse, but that are also reflected at speech level should also be part of the ICC assessment model. According to the researcher, these are: harmony, uncertainty avoidance, individuality, the content/form speech orientation, and the linear/loose construction of arguments.

Based on the criteria briefly presented above, the dimensions and variables defining the concept of intercultural communication competence can be assessed against the criteria selected and presented in Table no. 1 below. However, these criteria do not represent an exhaustive list. Even though validated by research in the field, they are open for further discussion and investigation. Moreover,

depending on which of the dimensions of the ICC is emphasized within certain curricula/training courses/other types of endevors in the intercultural field, their ratio/importance/impact is different.

Table no.1. An assessment model for the intercultural communication competence concept

Concept	Dimensions	Variables	Criteria
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE	socialization competence	socio-cultural competence	• management of interactions (individual/collective) • Means of showing respect (power distance) • knowledge orientation • proxemics • empathy
		psycho-social competence	• tolerance to ambiguity (culture of shame/culture of guilt) • management of the roles imposed by a given context (types of transactions accepted by the psycho-social-cultural code of an individual and of the community s/he is part of)
	multi-linguistic competence	linguistic competence	In accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference
		pragmatic competence	Idem
		socio-linguistic competence	• content/form speech orientation • linear/loose construction of arguments
		meta-linguistic competence	intercultural sensitivity

4. CONCLUSIONS

Depending on the goals underlying any theoretical and practical approach to the intercultural field in general, and to the ICC in particular, it is obvious that the model needs to be further expanded. Additionally, for the model to become a comprehensive one it needs the input of sociologists, linguists, anthropologists and not only in order to detail each of the assessment criteria.

For example, if the focus of the model was on a sociolinguistic level, and more specifically on developing/refining the conversational style of those who are to participate in intercultural encounters, then it could be expanded as in Table no.2.

In conclusion, in order to bridge the gap between the existing theoretical frameworks on the intercultural communication competence concept and the endeavors to transfer these into current practice, a set of clear-cut criteria describing in an in-depth manner the dimensions and variables describing the aforementioned concept is required.

Table no. 2: The intercultural communication competence: dimensions, variables and assessment criteria from a socio-linguistic perspective

Concept	Dimensions	Variables	Criteria	Conversation laws/strategies/Indicators
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE	Socialization competence	socio-cultural competence	Management of interactions (individual/collective)	Law of involvement
			Means of showing respect (power distance)	**Law of involvement** Strategy: granting the interlocutor the role of a conversation partner *Indicators*: granting the interlocutor the role of "Sender" in Chomsky's terms; level of indirectness
			Knowledge orientation	**Law of the domino** Strategy: continuous questioning Indicator: ability to go beyond the "yes"/"no" answers
			empathy	**Law of coherence** 1. Interactional strategy *Indicators*: the correlation of one's own story (i.e. narrative, speech, statement) with the interlocutor's story; use of active listening techniques 2. Continuity strategy Indicators: he maxim of quantity; over-generalization
	Meta-linguistic competence		Intercultural sensitivity	**Law of coherence** Interactional strategy *Indicators*: the correlation of one's own story (i.e. narrative, speech, statement) with the interlocutor's story; use of active listening techniques

Once these established, it is of utmost importance to identify the reasons underlying the need to develop/refine such a competence so that the right instruments (i.e. linguistic, socio-linguistic, anthropological, etc.) are developed and adequately employed.

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