

Chapter 50

Target Language, Target Culture: Intercultural Competence in the SSL (Spanish as a Second Language) Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Learning a language must result in becoming competent in a new culture because accessing the culture language stands for and being able to share its cultural content requires learning not just the meaning but also the historical and social background of its vocabulary. Words reveal the linguistic and social behavior of native speakers and give students a full understanding of the target language. This chapter deals with different concerns present in foreign language classrooms, a space where language and intercultural competence must be developed. It describes some linguistic competence-related concerns (Section 1), then it deals with specific intercultural related aspects of grammar and perception which are part of the linguistic competence to be developed in class (Section 2) and it finishes with a general description of three basic ways used in the Spanish-as-second-language (SSL) classroom in order to teach language and culture so as to help students to develop intercultural competence (Section 3).

INTRODUCTION

Globalization shrinks the world, bringing a wider range of cultures into closer contact than ever before (...) As a result, cultural diversity and intercultural contact have become facts of modern life, so intercultural competencies become a requisite. (UNESCO, 2013, p. 7)

The issue of globalization has triggered an exceedingly high academic interest and it is addressed in the most diverse ways:

1. Buendía et al. (2004) focuses on the process of social integration of immigrants and the intercultural competence they need to reconstruct their identity in a new country.

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2. Bourn (2011) deals with it from a point of view of the internationalization and effectiveness of graduates in a globalized world.
3. Huber and Reynolds (2014) address it by offering an educational rationale for the development of intercultural competence in and through general education.

In turn, second-language teachers have their own professional concerns regarding ways to help students to be linguistically proficient and culturally fit so they now see cultural knowledge and intercultural competence—recently referred to by several researchers in the ELT field as intercultural communicative competence— as a must (Oliveras Vilaseca, 2000; Byram et al., 2001; Alptekin, 2002; Kubota, 2004; Honna, 2005; Byram, 2009; Álvarez González, 2010; Nikleva, 2012).

Professionals teaching Spanish as a Second Language (SSL) now seem to favor the implementation of intercultural contents and objectives, but such contents may vary depending on the country chosen to learn it, since there is a wide range of different Hispanic cultures represented by both Spain and all Latin American countries. Based on what is usually done in case studies (Duff, 2014), this Chapter has a practical language-learning approach intended to describe the experiences, issues, insight and performance of instructors who:

1. Teach multilingual and multicultural classes at the Center for Foreign Students of the National University of Mexico (CEPE-UNAM), and
2. See the classroom as the space of both cultural and linguistic encounters having Mexican language and culture as the targets foreign students learn either because:
 - a. They relate and interact with Mexicans and Mexican Institutions.
 - b. They are sent to Mexico by their companies to take job positions, or simply because.
 - c. They travel to Mexico.

The professional performance of CEPE instructors indicates that they fit into the image of the liberal multiculturalism studied by Kubota (as cited in Norton & Toohey, 2004) since they impart information about cultural values, customs and way of life of Mexicans and compare them among the ethnic groups present in class; instructors seem to appreciate cultural differences and values and support the idea that all people are equal so they promote mutual tolerance, acceptance and respect.

So in order to give an idea of what teachers do at CEPE this Chapter has been divided in three different parts. Section I deals with the concerns intercultural competence has triggered in linguistic studies by means of a brief account of communicative competence and the emergence of Pragmatics as a background to understand intercultural language teaching. Section II deals with an intercultural related aspect of grammar and perception which is part of linguistic competence. And Section III deals with three specific SSL-classroom ways that have been used at CEPE-UNAM in order to favor intercultural competence development.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

CEPE's multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment offers instructors the opportunity to see how intercultural issues, comparisons, confrontations and communication of diverse kinds arise. Its classrooms are full of different cultural reactions, which demand for adaptation, tolerance and mutual understanding

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