

RODRÍGUEZ ARANCÓN, PILAR. HOW TO DEVELOP AND EVALUATE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN A BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT. MADRID, SINDÉRESIS, 2023, 336 PP., ISBN 978-84-19199-66-9

The term “intercultural competence” – generally understood as the ability to interact with members of cultures different from one’s own in a flexible, appropriate and effective way – is challenging to define due to its inherent complexity, a fact recognized by scholars such as Spitzberg and Changnon (2009), who advocate for a deeper examination. In her latest research monograph entitled *How to develop and evaluate intercultural competence in a blended learning environment*, Pilar Rodríguez Arancón provides a vision that goes beyond mere definitional boundaries. Acknowledging a long-standing terminological gap, Arancón draws attention to the role of interculturality in language teaching scholarship. The author endeavours to substantiate that both language and culture are not only intricately intertwined but also mutually reinforcing components, thereby advocating for a new intercultural approach in foreign language learning (Byram, 1989; Kramsch, 1998; Oliveras & Llobera, 2000).

Intercultural competence does not emerge spontaneously, but must be intentionally oriented and developed (Kohls, 1996; Storti, 1997). It therefore becomes imperative for language educators to facilitate learners’ adeptness at engaging with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. This involves fostering awareness of one’s own cultural identity while simultaneously honing the capacity to navigate and comprehend the cultural identities of others.

Like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001), Rodríguez Arancón argues that governments and educational institutions must encourage policies that foster and develop interculturalism and multilingualism. After reviewing some of the linguistic policies enacted in countries in different continents, the author then focuses on the status quo of teaching practices in higher education and ultimately offers a didactic proposal developed in a blended learning environment. As an example, she hones in on the experiences of Spanish-speaking adult learners of English as a foreign language with an emphasis on intercultural awareness.

Among the many ideas shared by the author is the importance of adapting teaching to different students across different curricula and in different cultures. This calls for the incorporation of multiple perspectives into course frameworks, thereby promoting opportunities for critical introspection

and facilitating substantial intercultural encounters and exchanges that enrich the learning experience. Furthermore, despite the wide availability of curricular materials for language learning, there is still little research on the role of intercultural competence in the creation of foreign language (FL) materials. Rodríguez Arancón's rigorous and systematic book strives to fill this gap and will undoubtedly become a clear reference in the field.

The volume is divided into five chapters, the first one being the introduction, which outlines the context of this study and its research objectives.

Chapter 2 unveils the three pivotal facets of this research: the dynamic evolution of the concept of culture, the application of systemic functional linguistics, and the intricacies of blended learning. The chapter contains a succinct exploration into what is culture and an analysis of its study, followed by a theoretical explanation and the evolution and characteristics of intercultural. After an exhaustive literature review, Rodríguez Arancón focuses on Butt's analysis of linguistic exchanges and describes how his work in systemic functional linguistics reconciles the sociological approach and the linguistic approach to the study of culture. The last section of the chapter is devoted to the use of blended learning, which has proven its great potential in higher education, and is the form of instruction chosen by the author in order to develop her proposal.

Chapter 3 discusses the challenges of incorporating cultural elements into FL teaching. Though Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programs have been introduced to Spanish Primary schools, language educators are still faced with a lack of intercultural awareness and a dearth of substantial guidance in the existing literature. The author provides an interesting revision of how linguistic policy perspectives have shaped pedagogical approaches in Australia (multilingual approach), Japan (monolingual approach), and the United States (multicultural approach). The chapter ends with an exhaustive review of CEFR's (Council of Europe, 2001) taxonomy where the lack of resources for the assessment of intercultural competence is highlighted.

After standing up for Intercultural Language Teaching (ILT) as a paradigm that – unlike previous approaches – connects language and culture, the author focuses on the design of activities that develop intercultural awareness. Her meticulous examination of printed materials is a perfect example of how to assess didactic resources' appropriateness for working on intercultural issues.

Chapter 4 includes a pedagogical unit devised by the author as part of the I-AGENT project for A2-level students of English for Specific Purposes

(see ATLAS (Applying Technology to Languages) Research Group: <http://atlas.uned.es/>), which aims to investigate how face-to-face English classes might be complemented with the use of an innovative software: Intelligent Computer Assisted Language Learning (ICALL). Rodríguez Arancón highlights the relevance of teaching from an intercultural perspective and explains the methodology employed in the course, where I-AGENT facilitates opportunities for students not only to learn about other countries' customs but also to juxtapose and contrast these with their own. This section is particularly compelling, not least because the author explains how the selection of topics in the FL classroom is dependent on students' learning needs and is aligned with the learning objectives, ultimately informing the development of teaching materials. Furthermore, the topics align with the CEFR's seven categories of European society and culture, and strive to mirror real-life situations learners might encounter in their professional endeavours. The vast amount of information on how to develop a didactic unit with contextualised and motivating intercultural activities will be an invaluable resource to educators. Following this pertinent and specific sequence of proposed activities, the sample unit included at the end of this chapter can be interesting and useful to anyone working in the field of language teaching and blended learning. Highly usable, the proposal culminates in a reflection on assessment and provides a detailed ten-item rubric which can be adapted to different levels and delves into both internal and external aspects of the verbal or non-verbal message, along with its contextual elements.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of the book and hints at future research avenues.

Language education is undoubtedly facing a challenge on how to incorporate the interconnection between language and culture into basic transversal skills and communicative knowledge as globalisation demands.

Intercultural competence can meet that challenge and this monograph sheds light on the need for guidance on teaching and on how to systematically evaluate these essential skills, and highlights the benefits of a flexible and autonomous learning approach that enhances exposure to FL.

Grounded in sociological aspects, linguistic foundations, and flexible technology-enhanced learning, Rodríguez Arancón's work makes a very persuasive point, albeit highly theoretical, on a really efficient way to approach intercultural competence in blended learning environments. In reviewing the book, it is evident that chapters 2 and 3 delve into complex conceptual ideas. While this depth of theoretical discussion is undoubtedly valuable for readers with a strong research focus, it may present challenges

for those primarily interested in teaching applications. For educators who prioritize practical application over theoretical abstraction, integrating more examples of didactic practice could greatly enhance their engagement and comprehension. Chapter 4 offers readers a detailed sample unit, providing an insightful glimpse into the cultural sections of one of the nine units of I-AGENT. While the depth of detail in this sample unit is commendable, readers may find themselves yearning for a broader understanding of the remaining units within I-AGENT. Providing a schematic overview or summary of the structure and content of the other units would offer readers a valuable roadmap, enabling them to grasp the overall scope and organization of the curriculum.

Furthermore, after the prospect of delving into the implementation of didactic proposals outlined in Chapter 5, readers will become eager to witness the real-world application of these proposals and to learn from the tangible results that emerge from their implementation. Indeed, the seamless integration of intercultural competence courses for children or young adults would not only be welcomed but also represents a crucial step towards shaping the future of language education.

In an era in which globalisation reveals the importance of speaking multiple languages, more emphasis should be placed on the study of intercultural skills. This is indeed a prominent field that invites serious reflection on the factors that influence the way in which people create their identities and how they see themselves in contraposition to others. This priceless book contributes to this field while facilitating educators' reflective journeys with authentic materials that identify major gaps to address in intercultural competence teaching and maps out an agenda for future ways forward. *How to develop and evaluate intercultural competence in a blended learning environment* will likely become a go-to monograph for educators and researchers alike. The author's expertise shines through in her clear explanations and insightful guidance, making complex concepts accessible to both early-career researchers and those with more experience. This book is a must-have for educators who strive to make their classrooms inclusive and global.

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