

Rodríguez Arancón, P. (2023). *How to Develop and Evaluate Intercultural Competence in a Blended Learning Environment*. Editorial Sínderesis. 336 pp. ISBN: 978-84-19199-66-9
Review

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Received: 04/11/2024
Accepted: 02/12/2024



The monograph *How to Develop and Evaluate Intercultural Competence in a Blended Learning Environment* is introduced to the reader with the quote “The person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool” (Bennet et al., 2003: 237), which prepares the reader for what will be unveiled: the importance of intercultural competence as a deep-rooted feature of language to be acquired by every learner of a foreign language (L2).

In Chapter 1, *Introduction*, Rodríguez Arancón advocates for the importance of understanding and utilising the existing link between language and culture, which is a crucial aspect for any speaker who wants to learn an L2. European identity is defined under three axes: social and economic cohesion, politics, and education and culture. The European Union (EU) is responsible for the support for language learning and thanks to *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), a mutual linguistic policy was established in order to describe language ability. However, the author highlights that culture has been considered along the years a secondary aspect to be taken into account when learning an L2. It has only been within the last few years that we have witnessed the incorporation of the intercultural component in bilingual programmes through *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL). In the following sections, the author justifies the research on intercultural competence as the skill that allows us to adapt to other cultures and avoid national behaviours that can be inappropriate towards other cultural realities; in

addition, the research objectives are summarised in terms of delving into intercultural teaching in an L2. Next, the research methodology (regarded as applied and theoretical) and study (considered descriptive and analytical) with a heuristic purpose are distinguished. Finally, the research structure is presented to the reader by summarising each of the chapters.

Conceptual Framework is the second chapter, which is key to understanding culture in its widest sense. Among the several definitions of culture presented, the author agrees on a definition of it that bonds people together and makes them different from others. Next, Rodríguez Arancón revises the connection between language and culture from the ancient Greeks up to the present. In addition, the evolution of the study of intercultural communication is depicted, a term used for the first time by Edward T. Hall who also considered himself the founder of this field. The most important authors are also referenced here. This section finishes with a definition of intercultural competence, as a combination of knowledge, skills and motivation that help individuals act efficiently in different cultural environments. The sociological approaches to the study of intercultural are described through diverse theories. Next, the most important aspects of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) are illustrated in order to justify the use of the blended learning environment of the project *I-AGENT* (Intelligent Adapted Generic English Tutor), conducted by the research group ATLAS (Applying Technology to LAnguageS). The chapter finishes by emphasising the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the teaching and learning context. Rodríguez Arancón defends the fact that ICT tools cannot be the goal itself, but rather the means to engage learners in their learning process, which requires teachers to be technologically competent, in addition to having the necessary teaching knowledge and abilities. In addition, the blended learning context, understood as hybrid, distributed or flexible learning, among others, is detailed.

Chapter 3, *The Role of Culture in Second Language Policy, Teaching and Learning Objects*, is at the core of this book. In the first place, it approaches how linguistic policies are influencing current teaching methodologies. The linguistic policies in Australia, Japan and the USA are depicted, as well as an illustration of how the European linguistic policy has evolved in the last few years. Two organisations deal with this policy: The Council of Europe and the EU; the former being in charge of undertaking the CEFR, considered a key reference in the European context for language pedagogy. In addition, this chapter analyses the study of cultures based on the most relevant theories of L2 teaching methods. The final section of the chapter deals with the

considerations to be taken into account in Intercultural Language Teaching (ILT) design. The author describes the six aspects of culture that both learners and teachers ought to be familiar with: (1) languages are not to be translated word-for-word, (2) speakers' tones have meaning, (3) gestures and body movements of each culture have meaning, (4) languages make use of different grammatical elements for describing the physical world, (5) taboos are present in all cultures, and (6) the words used for addressing people vary in accordance with languages with regard to personal relationships. Other sections tackle the teaching of linguaculture, the comparison between first and target cultures, and languages and intercultural exploration. The last section develops, from an intercultural perspective, an analysis of printed materials which enable the reader to learn how to elucidate whether intercultural exploitation takes place or not. In order to do so, Rodríguez Arancón provides the reader with samples contrasting different countries situated in different scenarios. Five examples are taken from coursebooks, the first two of which neglect the aspect of intercultural exploitation, while the other three exhibit good practice in these terms. This section enriches the chapter in that the previously presented theory is explored from a more practical angle.

The fourth chapter, *The Design of an Intercultural Blended Learning Course: The Case of I-AGENT*, is another important learning opportunity because of a description of a unit of an intercultural blended learning course designed by Rodríguez Arancón within the *I-AGENT* project, and also because it represents the author's original contribution. The author insists on the fact that the relevance of culture in the L2 class is normally obviated, thereby she strongly emphasises the necessity of its inclusion. The goals of the project through the use of different texts and activities are aimed at helping students: (1) to develop culturally-conditioned opinions, (2) to realise their culture can be as strange as others, (3) to understand that social variables affect people's talk and behaviour, (4) to become aware of conventional behaviour in target cultures and cultural connotations in the form of words and phrases in the target culture, (5) to learn how to improve their ability to evaluate and refine generalisations on the target culture, (6) to locate and organise information about the target culture, (7) to stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture and develop empathy, (8) to respect others' views and traditions, and (9) to compromise and mediate towards opposing views of the world. *I-AGENT* topics are pinpointed and contextualised, being presented in nine units. The software programme characteristics are based on ICALL (Intelligent Computer Assisted Language Learning), that is, Artificial

Intelligence (AI) techniques and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) as well as the sequence of activities, elaborated in eight steps. The cultural theories to support the development and use of *I-AGENT* are described and justified based on previous approaches outlined in the book. This also applies to the intercultural activities of the course, which are supported by thoroughly described theoretical studies.

The cultural sections of one of the units of the course are included in the last section, and therefore meet the intercultural teaching goals of the book. Every single section is described and also examined. To conclude this chapter, the author describes the theory behind the elaboration of rubrics (that can be holistic and analytic) and presents other examples for the assessment of intercultural competence, which she contends cannot be separated from language, which makes its evaluation more challenging. She supports the fact that these types of rubrics must have two important features: paralinguistic behaviour and linguistic behaviour. The rubric she proposes accommodates the levels of the CEFR and has 10 items included in five categories, analysing internal and external aspects of the verbal and non-verbal message and its context. The five categories of concern are: externally provided (context of situation/interpersonal hierarchy), use of language (speech management/language functions), formal structure of (adequacy of vocabulary/accuracy of grammar), manner message is (supra-sentential items/orthographic or prosodic features), and physical space (gestures and body language/physical positioning).

Chapter 5, *Discussion, Conclusions and Further Research*, explores the reasons why the author felt the need to write a proposal, namely so that Spanish students of English as an L2 could gain intercultural awareness, considering the CEFR does not instruct on how to acquire this skill, which allows speakers to interact with others from different cultures and realities appropriately. She revises the objectives of the book as well as the foundations of *I-AGENT* course. Finally, she answers the main question of her research (“How could a blended course help Spanish students of English as an L2 to become more interculturally aware, and how should such a course be designed?”) as well as seven secondary questions based on all the theoretical content developed, and her original contribution (devoted to intercultural competence) to the field of L2 teaching in a blended learning environment.

This monograph is an invaluable resource that every L2 teacher, researcher or student, interested in being fluent or proficient in an L2, should read because

of all the unravelled theoretical and practical content related with intercultural competence, which is not always considered in the elaboration and design of educational curricula. Through the reading of the five chapters, whose theoretical and practical content is intricately discussed and detailed, the reader becomes more aware of the importance of the combination of linguistic and cultural components within the teaching practice and how challenging assessing intercultural competence is. As Rodríguez Arancón makes more than clear, intercultural competence needs to be understood and acquired in an attempt to avoid “becoming a fluent fool” (Bennet et al., 2003, p. 237).

References

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