Intercultural communication as a challenge in work with migrants

1. Competency

1.1 Introduction

We could say the same of competency as we say of information; namely that it is a "conceptual chameleon". Even its status as a concept can be misinterpreted: the notion of competency has for some time been part of our common language and it is used daily by those who do not question its meaning. This is indeed one of the challenges of the notion of competency: that it is a familiar term easily confused with its true meaning.

The definition of competency can vary according to the organisation or work situation it is used in. As such we cannot be limited by one definition:

- According to Levy-Leboyer, competency refers to "a collection of behaviours that enable a person to be efficient in any given situation";

- According to Tardif, competency is "a conditional and procedural knowledge-based system organised in a structured pattern" that enables problem resolution;

- According to Toupin, competency consists of "the ability to bring together everything that applies to a situation such as knowledge, empowerment and attitudes".

For the purpose of this study, however, we shall use **Guy Le Boterf's** definition. Le Boterf[1] is the author of several works and has provided consultancy to numerous organisations on the subject of competency.

1.2 The measure of competency

We can consider that competency evolves like a cursor moving between two poles:

➢ One pole represents repetitive and routine work situations.
➢ The other pole represents confrontation, initiative-taking, complexity and innovation.

When the cursor is nearer the first pole, competency is defined in terms of "know-how". It consists of carrying out one or a number of instructions according to fixed guidelines. Such a definition lends

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[1] Le Boterf, Guy (1994) Of Competency: essay on a strange attraction, Paris: Editions d'Organisation; Le Boterf, Guy (1997) Competency and professional navigation, Paris: Editions d'Organisation

itself perfectly to training situations that lead to certification and "know-how" can be considered as a fundamental elemental component of competency.

When the cursor is nearer the second pole, competency tends to be defined more as an ability to know how to behave and react to different situations. Under these circumstances, being competent is to know what to do and when. Faced by unexpected events or complex processes, the professional would need to know how to:

Take initiative and make decisions,	**take risks,**
negotiate and arbitrate,	**react to problems,**
make choices,	**be innovative on a daily basis and take responsibility.**

To be recognised as being competent, it is no longer sufficient to be able to follow instructions. One now also needs to be able to go **over and beyond instruction**. One should however note that professionals can find themselves both in situations where they are required to go over and beyond and also in situations where they need only follow simple instructions. It is misguided and ill-advised to wish to define competency as behavioural in a context or situation where the tasks are repetitive or simple to execute. However it is also misguided to reduce competency to simple know-how in organisations seeking to encourage responsibility, initiative and versatility.

If competency must always be defined in terms of action (know-how, knowing how to behave and react …), this definition will always be relative to the workplace that both demands this and makes it possible.

1.3 Understanding why and how we behave.

Professionals are not only able to behave pertinently in a particular situation, but also understand why and how they behave.

According to Piaget, understanding a situation consists of constructing a conceptual representation of it, or an "operating model". This representation enables us to simulate various outcomes and to form hypothetical courses of action. To construct one's own operating model, professionals need the

ability to **distance themselves from the situation**. They need to be capable of reflection and able to clearly communicate the way in which they have reached their conclusions. They must also be able to apply the results of their reflection to any other work situations that arise.

Kolb's Curve Revised and corrected
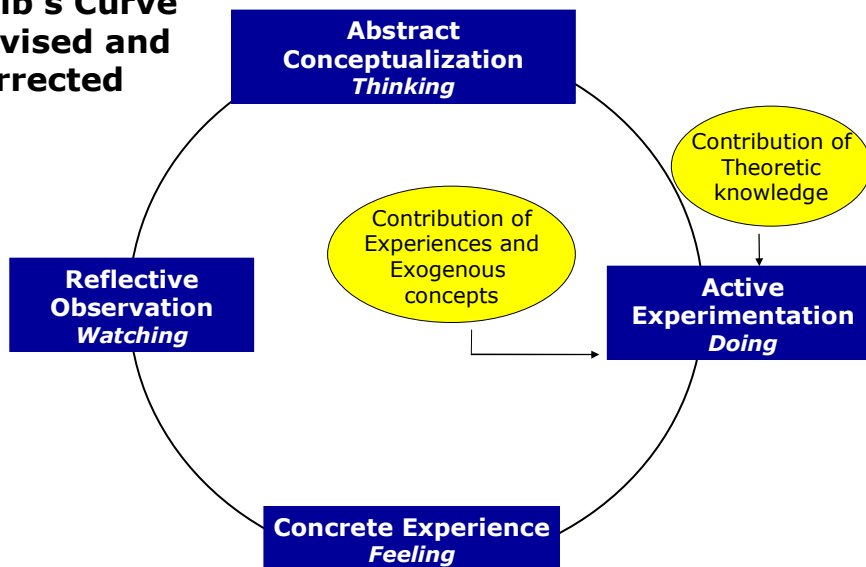
And yet they also need to be able to step back from their experience. They must not only **observe and take note** from their previous professional experiences, but must also **think and be capable of communicating** their experiences. Communicating their way of working and their approach will enable them to **transfer these to other situations**. The author describes four stages in the experiential learning cycle.

1. Firstly, the moment of **real life experience corresponds to direct action** and to the learner's interaction with diverse learning situations. But this phase is not sufficient for learning and knowing how to transfer skills. Indeed, **by only behaving, the adult risks creating automatisms** which cannot be applied to other work situations without being adjusted.

2. The second phase of the learning cycle, according to Le Boterf, corresponds to the clarification and setting of context of the experience. As such, it is not sufficient to simply observe and take note. Learners are led to **make sense of their actions**. "This signifies the necessity to describe a train of thought, to propose a dynamic version of the facts, to understand where the players

stand, to understand the stages and key moments and to reason in terms of scenarios."[2] And so, as well as describing a situation, it is important to organise the elements of the situation. The author reflects therefore on the difficulty of describing an experience alone. Again, a tutor or any other person can act as a mediator or guide for the learner.

3.   The third phase, **conceptualisation and modelling, should conclude with the construction of models permitting an understanding of situations experienced in professional life**. Learners will therefore elaborate their theories by trying to eliminate the context, generalising their acts and constructing a model applicable to numerous situations. According to the author, they can for example be led to research certain invariables such as:

- The types of problem,
- The types of risk,
- The terms of action,
- The priorities and sequences to respect,
- The sources of information to take into account etc …

4.   Finally, the fourth phase consists of transfer and return to the situation and putting the solution into practice. Learners behave, therefore, by taking into account lessons learned from previous experiences. They will put into action the models that they have constructed from each of the previous phases. "Assimilation" can then take place, in Piaget's sense, of new data if the context differs only slightly from those constructed on the basis of theories and courses of action. In the opposite case, learners will proceed, if necessary, to an "accommodation" by modifying these courses of action. However, as the experience and chosen courses of action established by the learners are occasionally not sufficient to resolve the problem, the subject will also need to make reference to other external theories that they may have learned prior to this training.

1.4 The relationship between learning and transfer

Numerous studies show that transfer, in the field of pedagogy, can be subjected to three different approaches, each at differing levels of complexity:

- **On a first level, the concept of transfer can be defined as applying a contact, a competency or expertise from one situation to another.** This assumes that learners have identified similarities between the two situations in question and that they are attempting to "de-contextualise"

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[2]   Le Boterf, G. (2000, p.86)

what they have learnt from one situation in order to "re-contextualise" this elsewhere. Such an approach can, in fact, form part of training where the tutor makes sure to consistently provide opportunities for the learner to think in the future of how the learning points picked up during training could be applied. This can also be facilitated by encouraging the learner to think of past experiences when trying to solve a new problem.

- **On a second level, the concept of transfer can be defined as "making bridges"**, as in bridges between different disciplines, between the learning environment and the learner's culture or between academic knowledge and "real world" experiences. As such, we are considering not only a "transposition" or a transport of a mechanism from one situation to another, but even more so a veritable reconstruction of a series of actions according to what has already been learnt. Also taken into account are any new elements that one encounters based on the particular environment that one finds oneself in, as well as the social codes, habits and specific history of the subject. This is far from the first level of transfer which isolated in quite an artificial way a rational segment in the learner's mind, applying it very simply and without context to one logical outcome. Here again we can see that training can favour this type of transfer by encouraging learners to modify situations of social engagement by working on the complexity of what exactly we are transferring.

- **On a third level, the concept of transfer can be defined as integrating "dead" personal knowledge and learning from one's own actions.** Indeed, as demonstrated by Bernard Rey "*it is not enough for learners to possess cognitive competency that enables them to resolve a problem. It is also required for them to have enough of an understanding of the situation to conceive how to use this competency".* Suffice to say that transfer, in this instance, is not at all "mechanical" but is a process or an "intention", according to the author, that analyses the relationship between the content being transferred and the individual's identity. As a regular principle of pedagogical practices, transfer is considered as the mechanisms by which knowledge can be assimilated by people and therefore contributes to their individual and collective development.

1.5 Competency: a combination of resources to produce a result

A task therefore is an objective that must be achieved under specific conditions. The more complex the task becomes, the harder it is to apply a precise process to it. Eventually a task becomes "personal" in that it is left entirely to the discretion of the person performing it.

Definitively we can say that:

- **Competency comes from an individual or collective in a given situation**

- **Competency is recognised socially; it is validated by its environment**

- **Competency corresponds to a number of resources being mobilised into action: knowledge, know-how and aptitudes combined in a specific way and completed through environmental resources being mobilised, with a result of generating a predefined result**

Competency cannot be reduced into being simply a targeted performance or be broken down into the resources that are required to produce it. **The term represents the process which drives a result.**

Example:

If the professional sector recognises that a tutor has the ability to animate a course (i.e. an identified skill), this implicitly implies that the tutor is able to combine a number of skills and knowledge such as knowledge of the subject and having the ability to choose course materials and content according to both the target audience and target objectives. The tutor clearly also knows how to speak confidently within the classroom and facilitate a productive learning experience for the subjects.

The **synergy of these skills** allows the tutor to conduct a productive lesson. We can break this down into elementary know-how, but competency should not be dismissed as such. There exists a dynamic relationship between all of these elements. Competency is organised as a system: it must be thought of in terms of connections and not isolated components or "fragmented ingredients".

We can therefore conclude according to Guy Le Boterf's definition that:

We recognise that a person knows how to act competently if equipped with:

- A knowledge of how to combine and mobilise a number of pertinent resources,

- An ability to deliver results to professional standards within pre-determined timescales

2. Intercultural Competency in Learning

2.1 The notion of culture

As with the notion of competency, culture is also subjected to varying definitions. In 1952, Kroeber and Kluckholn listed 164 different definitions. As such there cannot be a consensus on the definition of culture.

In this section, we will base our definitions of culture on an article by **Rakotomena Mialy Henriette**[3]. She defines culture in broad terms as:

A system of meanings learnt and shared between members of a group

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Meanings are made up of:

- **beliefs** (elements considered to be true)

- **values** (preferences concerning others or one's self or the universe),

- **standards** (set of rules created and shared by a group of people)

- **artefacts** (these refer to immediately observable realities such as: behaviour, dress, diet, status etc … that characterise a set of individuals. These reflect the main "explicit and tangible" part of culture. The essential idea is that culture is composed of an **implicit dimension** [more profound and therefore more difficult to observe] and an **explicit dimension** [immediately observable].)

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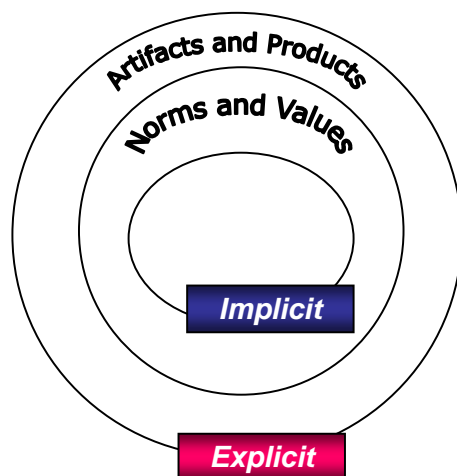
The strata of culture, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997)

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[3]   Rakotomena Mialy Henriette (October 2005), Individual resources for individual intercultural competency, International Review on Work and Society

2.2 Culture = System

Culture is the product of **constantly interacting** components that make up a coherent whole (Cuche 2004). It is the result of a process of construction.

This process of construction is influenced by numerous denominators such as family, language and communication, religion, government, politics, education, technology, society, climate, topography and economic systems (Baligh 1994). Reciprocal relationships of influence exist between environment and culture. Culture can therefore also influence the denominators mentioned above.

There are two important notions:

1. *The notion of group*

   Culture is shared between the members of a **group**. This group can be a country (national culture), an organisation (organisational culture), a family (familiar culture), a religion (religious culture), a sport (a sports culture), a building trade, a generation, a region or a socio-professional category.

2. *The dynamic aspect*

   Culture is not a fixed concept. It evolves and changes through interaction. This evolution is, however, slow and happens only through external influences such as the forces of nature (e.g. climate change) or mankind (e.g. colonisation, conquest, scientific discovery or commerce). This transformation of *mental programming* occurs through the changing of its behaviour.

2.3 Cultural Characteristics

As described above, culture is a complex system and should not be reduced to a description of a few visible aspects. Hence, simply to list some characteristics of certain cultures lead to the omission of the implicit dimension, of the hidden facets of this notion. Any such attempt at listing would need to make use of the stereotypes and generalisations which circulate within one culture concerning another.

The notion of the 'intercultural' implies the idea of inter-relations, of relationships and exchanges between different cultures. In a world in which these different cultures interact daily, it seems necessary to distance oneself from a definition of culture as an objective and rigid set of data and move towards a dynamic understanding of culture which perpetually evolves. A theoretical and unalterable knowledge of the characteristics of a few major cultures will not give the student the

necessary resources to develop competency in intercultural situations. In fact, it is not cultures which interact, but persons or groups belonging to different cultures. Priority does not reside in the cognitive process, but in the inter-personal relations, the capacity to observe, describe and to be conscious of that which constitutes culture, including one's own.

To this end, in the following section of this module, we have decided to describe some criteria which will be taken into consideration to create a list, based on the important underlying principles in the context of an intercultural situation, and not specific characteristics linked with certain cultures.

2.4 Relationships between different cultures

There is a relationship between cultures in an intercultural situation. An *intercultural situation* is a context in which individuals and groups of differing backgrounds meet and interact.

1. **Hofstede's notion of "culture shock"**

   Culture shock is the result of a difference of values or opinions of the **implicit** section of a culture. The shock appears during the first impression of the culture and can be accentuated by appearances.

   From this incident comes the feeling of insecurity, fear of the unknown and realisation of difference. Mutual comprehension will often be necessary in order to move on to a phase of adaption without which the relationship can end in failure or result in interpersonal judgments and hasty conclusions.

   Hofstede classes *"culture shock"* in the second phase of the **process of cultural integration** which is a process of reciprocal adaptation between cultures (Hofstede 1994).

Acculturation Curve (Hofstede, 1994)

Positive +

Sentiments

Negative -

Euphoria of

Culture

Acculturation

Stability
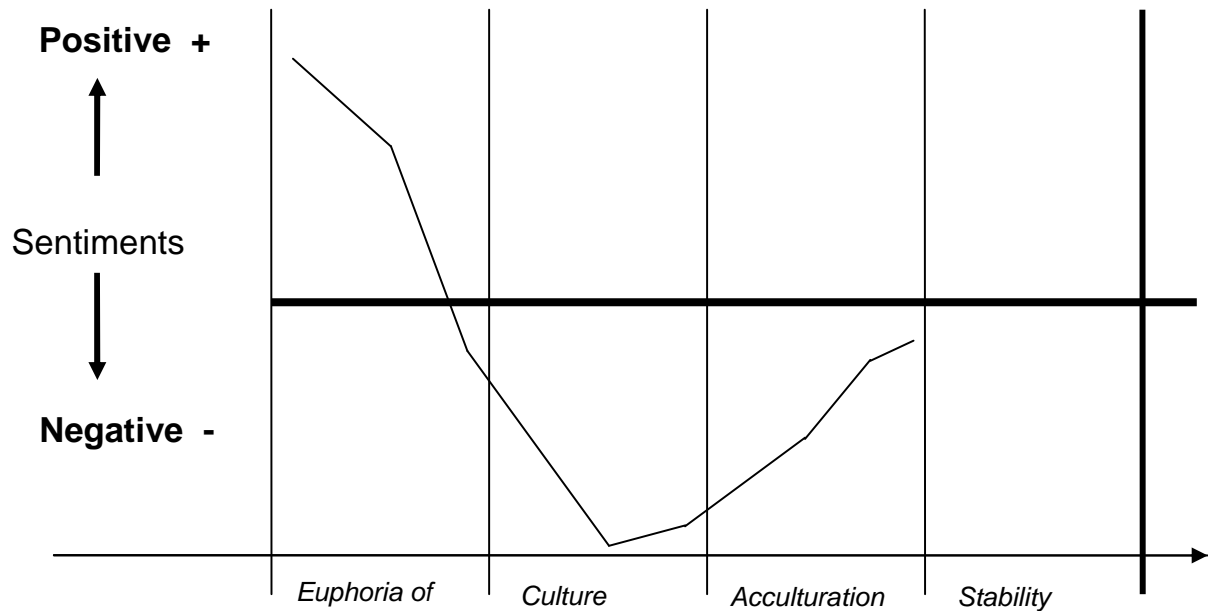
- The first phase is known as the **euphoria of discovery**, during which one only discovers the explicit section of the culture. This phase does not yet give rise to an interactive process of encounter and as a consequence does not cause any issues as such.

- Following the **culture shock** phase during which efforts are made by both cultures to understand each other comes the **adaptation phase** where all parties attempt to understand the communication codes of each other.

- Finally the stability phase comes during which all parties are able to strive and undertake joint activities regardless of differences.

The effort of understanding when faced with the perceived difference of another culture is an essential aspect of an intercultural situation. Understanding is a key as each party is generally convinced of having a good sense of judgment. As Lainé (2004, p. 55) puts it: indifference is a negative response to difference and culture is the milestone of our judgement.

1. The notion of intercultural

Several prefixes can be attached to the notion of culture such as multi- or trans-. The inter- or intra-prefixes suggest *a situation between two positions*, where on one side there is an idea of connection and reciprocity and on the other an idea of separation and disjunction (e.g. prohibition). These ideas can be associated with the term *intercultural*.

We can therefore define the term intercultural as a relational process stemming from the interaction between two cultural groups and resulting in complex relationships and reciprocity of exchange.

All forms of human relationship can be considered as intercultural as all humans stem from a culture. There are many approaches we should consider in an intercultural situation:

- Firstly an **anthropological** approach that suggests that all humans are universal with common characteristics (e.g. biological needs).
- Secondly, a **psycho-cultural** approach that suggests that a human belonging to a particular group shares things in common with the other members of this group (e.g. religious faith).
- Finally, a **psychological** approach that suggests that all human beings have something unique (e.g. personality) (Lainé 2004).
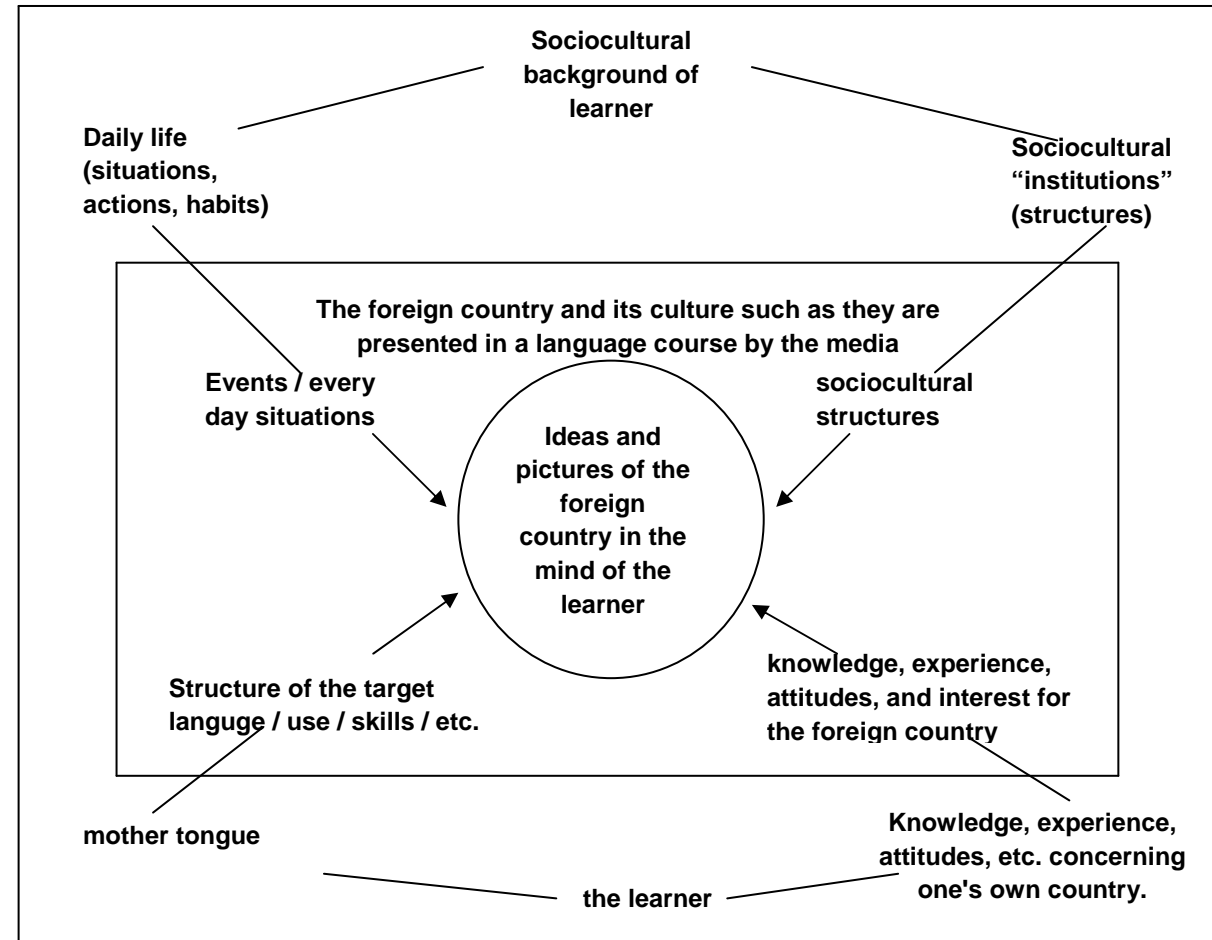
2. Intercultural conflict or the resistance to change

To interact in a significant way with one or several people from a culture different from our own is fascinating and enriching, difficult, frustrating and exhausting. Other than discoveries on the surface (architecture, music, traditions etc …) which can be enriching from the start, in a situation of intercultural communication, in the sense of a "negotiation of common ground" as defined by Stella Ting-Toomey (2007), deeper discoveries (underneath the iceberg) often generate a period of uncertainty, anguish, resistance and destabilisation before being seen as positive, interesting and integral to a new enriching dimension to one's life and identity.

Our values, beliefs and standards have generated in us behaviours that allow us to live our cultural identity. If, considering an alternative cultural scenario, we are made to believe that our own values and beliefs are inadequate if not unacceptable, then the new culture will be perceived as a menace to our very identity, that on which we base all reality.

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Human beings resist any change that can generate such magnitude of uncertainty.

Figure 1[4]

There can therefore be no doubt that the socio-cultural background of the learner contributes a great deal to the regard he or she will have of the country in which they are learning the language. We can draw the following conclusion:

- That learner has already forged their own opinions of the country before beginning to learn the language. Once tutors have familiarised learners with the socio-cultural content of the language, they no longer have "blank pages" in front of them: they must take into account the knowledge of the learners;

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[4]   Gerhard Neuner, « Sociocultural competency in the apprenticeship and teaching of languages », Article studying the role of sociocultural competency in the apprenticeship and teaching of living languages, 1998, page 45 à 108, Council of Europe Edition.

- That learners will resort to categories and models of perception that they know in order to try and interpret the socio-cultural facts of the country of whose language they are trying to learn;
- That the learner's perceptions are not immutable and are therefore susceptible to change.

To open one's self to another does not require sacrificing one's own identity in order to absorb the other's. But once we are at the resistance stage, we do not know this yet … or have forgotten.

The following are examples of resistance to cultural change:
- Insisting that a person gives us eye contact when meeting when that person considers not giving eye contact a sign of respect.
- Insisting that a student decide for themselves on their future, when they come from a family where the future of the community is more important than that of the individual.
- Taking back one's daughter to have her married despite the fact that she is well integrated in her new country where she is studying and is happy.

If we are so ill at ease with change, it is because it provokes a sense of loss. We risk losing:
- the certainty that the way we chose to live is normal if not the best
- the certainty that our teaching technique is normal if not the best
- the certainty of being able to express one's self and be understood by the other
- the conviction that our medical practices are the best.

The section on "culture shock" below highlights that the loss of sense, orientation and of identity is part of the daily routine during a prolonged intercultural experience.

When we no longer see that things make sense and our identity is thrown into question, resistance to change becomes a natural survival strategy. If human beings are by nature conservative, however, they equally have the capacity to adapt and a well-managed transition process allows this resistance to be overcome, to be supportive of the sense of loss and disorientation and to reconstruct little by little a new direction and self-confidence.

Three stages of transition

William Bridges (2006) highlights the difference between change (external) and transition, an internal process that permits one to make sense of change. He proposes three stages of transition: mourning, emptiness and a new beginning – three stages recognised for millennia by traditional peoples who, for all the important changes in life, ritualised them as rites of passage.

Tannenbaum and Hanna (1985) suggest very similar stages when they speak of "clinging on – letting go – going forward". To understand that cultural transition is a staged process allows us to conceive resistance to change as part of a much greater phenomenon and also allows us to manage it, for ourselves and others, with more empathy.

1. **Giving up / clinging on:** something disturbs that which gives sense to our lives, our identity is threatened and we resist. We try to cling to the world with which we were formerly familiar, but when that becomes impossible we give up. The world seems incomprehensible and we retreat from it.

2. **Neutral zone / letting go:** we let go, stop clinging to previous structures and our former identity. We are between our former life and that to come, and we are in neither the one nor the other.

3. **New beginnings / Going forward:** New structures and a new sense of self progressively being established. A new identity is constructed, which constitutes elements of one's previous identity.

To recognise losses linked to change is the best method for managing resistance to change, in one's self and in others. We can then support ourselves personally and mutually, in an appropriate manner, during the various phases of the transition process.

Appropriate / suitable support for the phases:

- **Giving up / clinging on.** One must differentiate between superficial changes and deep-rooted changes. It is the latter that threaten fundamental values. One must recognise loss and the fact that anxiety, suffering and resistance will be present. Say goodbye to your previous way of life, your previous hopes. Realise that this process will take some time.

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- **Neutral zone / letting go.** Recognise that this period is a potential source of great learning and try not to go through this phase too quickly. Be aware of the parts of your support networks that have not changed and the experts who can help you. Dare yourself to enter the void in order to become conscious of the fuller picture and heighten your expectations. Be patient with yourself and others.

- **New beginnings / going forward.** Be open to the possibility of achieving objectives different from those you would have normally achieved. Take the initiative; try out new things; get involved and identify yourself in this new light. Remain flexible and good to yourself and others. Be aware of the continuities even at the heart of change.

It is therefore advisable to be attentive to connections/links, articulations, subtle transitions and projections that allow learners to build for them selves a largely unforeseeable story, and which make them into true learners.
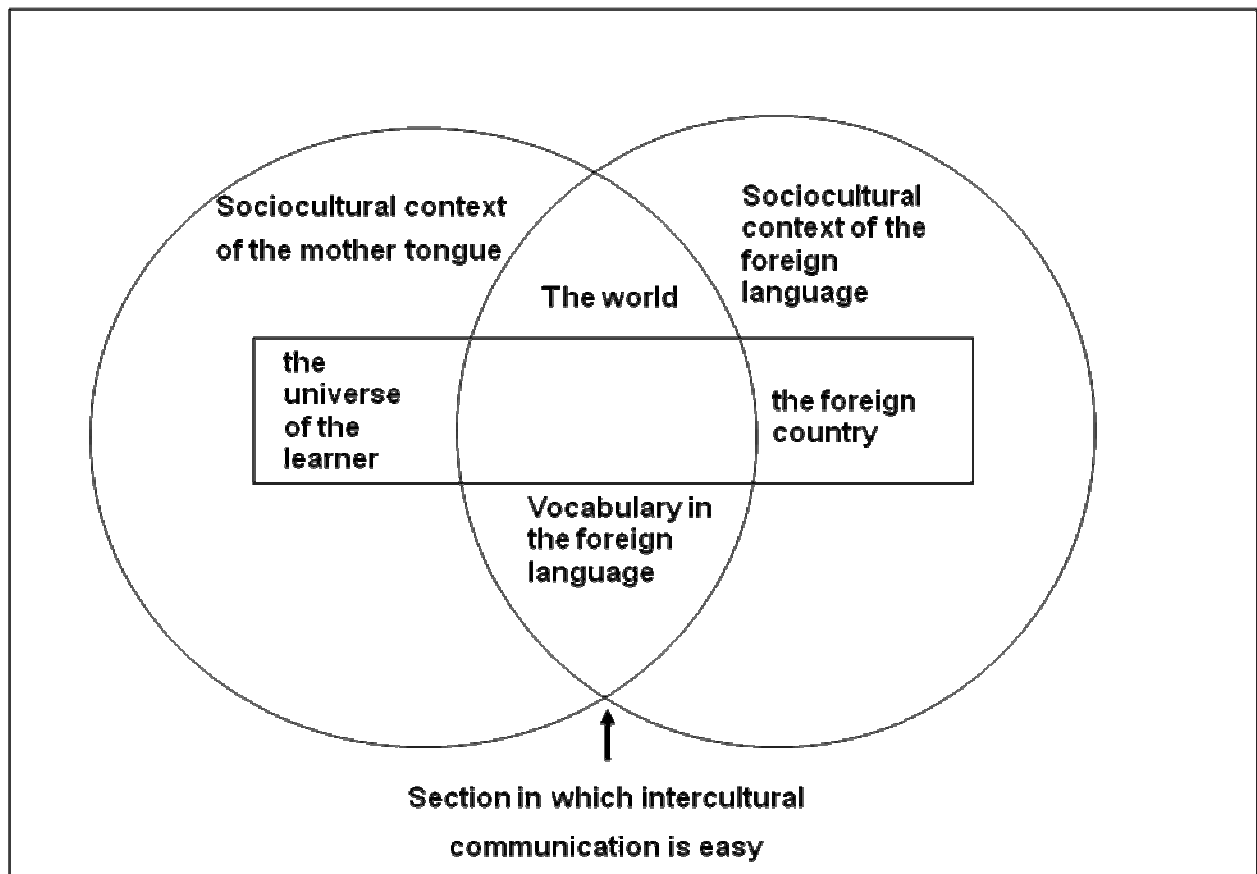

Figure 2[5]

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[5]   Gerhard Neuner, idem

Mutual understanding; tolerance and the spirit of cooperation; interest in other ways of life; acceptance of cultural differences and all those other "qualifications" necessary in order to surmount political, religious, ethnic, social and cultural barriers: all these are simply impossible to prescribe. Learning to live as much as a citizen as a member of a community is a never-ending process – a long quest for equilibrium between personal aspirations and collective responsibilities.

It is important to note that in a course setting, or any other exchange between individuals, conflicts can have multiple sources, even when these involve people from different cultures. The cultural dimension is not the only dimension concerned and it is often not the only source of a conflict. Therefore, it becomes important to adopt behaviour without judgement for the resolution of a conflict, no matter its source. It is our opinion that family factors should be treated in the same manner. These can be linked to an intercultural situation, but we propose to include them in a wider set of factors such as social factors.

2.5 Intercultural competence

The notion of intercultural competence appeared about ten years ago. As far as we know, few studies have taken place to shed more light on this concept. As a result of internationalisation and globalisation requiring more and more officials and managers of mobility and diversity, intercultural competency is one of the complementary abilities to be developed for expatriates, international managers or those responsible for managing multicultural staff (Earley 1987; Schneider and Barsoux 2003; Lainé 2004).

Gersten (1992), in adopting an evaluative approach to this competence, has shed light on its different dimensions. Three evaluative, complementary approaches have been analysed:

1. By the capacity to adapt within a culture or country
2. By personality traits
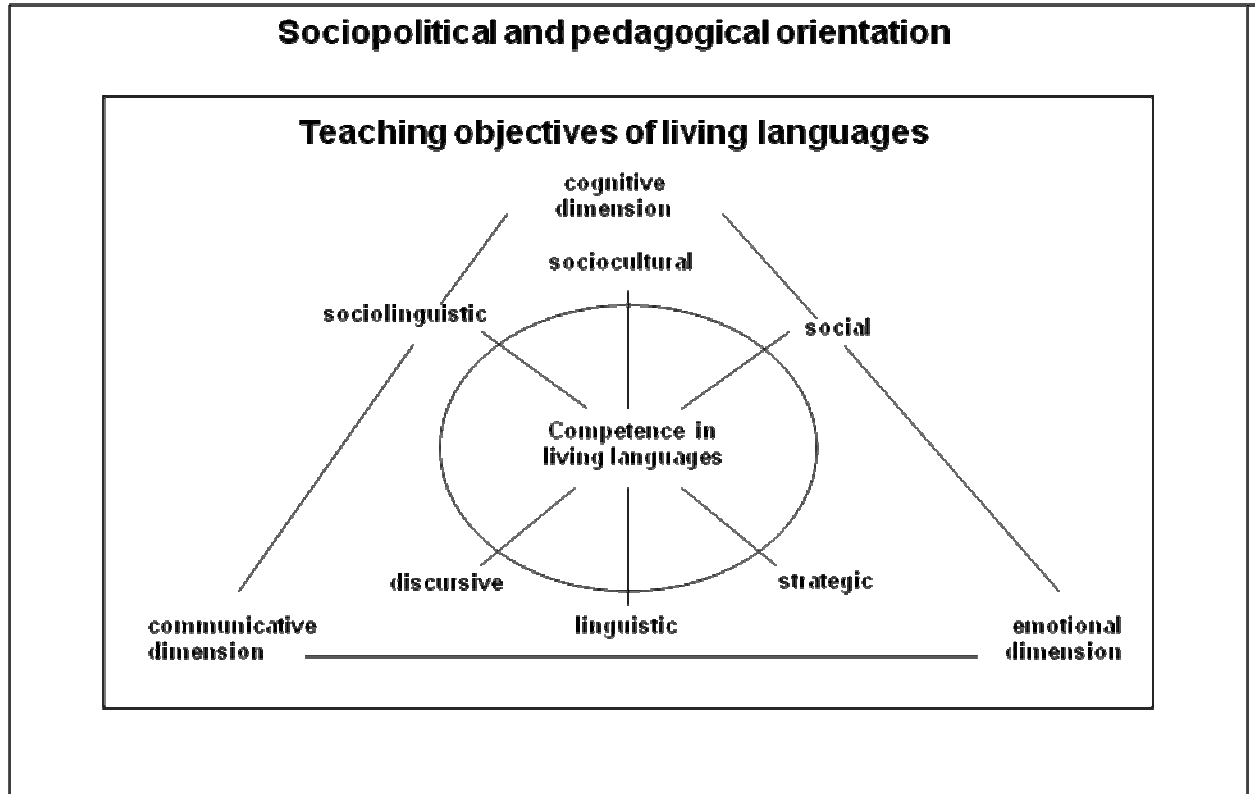3. By people's knowledge of the characteristics of a culture

Intercultural competence therefore results in interaction between:

- **A communicative dimension** (everything relating to verbal and non-verbal communication: the tongue, expressions and gestures, for example) and behaviour (everything relating to knowing how to be: respect, flexibility and listening, for example)

- **A cognitive dimension** (everything relating to having a notion about culture: for example, someone else's culture and one's own culture)

- **An emotional dimension** (everything to do with sensitivity and understanding in relation to the other culture) (Gersten 1992; Iles 1995)

Communicative competence constitutes the first objective in learning a foreign language. Those who limit themselves to only linguistic competence are, nevertheless, numerous. Linguistic ability is sometimes sufficient for giving simple information. It is not sufficient for communicating.

Communicating is not just about knowing how to use the lexical and grammatical structures of a language. In order to communicate, it is equally essential to understand attitudes, the system of values; behaviour, points of view; the whole cultural context of the person one is speaking to. One needs to be able to correctly decipher the other person's message and to know how to position oneself in relation to him/her when referring to one's own cultural context. To communicate, it is necessary to have mutual understanding and not just exchange and interact at a linguistic level. Success in intercultural communication does not only rest with the level of linguistic competence. Without intercultural competence, the simplest communication will turn out to be sometimes impossible.

Sociopolitical and pedagogical orientation

Teaching objectives of living languages

cognitive dimension

sociocultural

sociolinguistic

social

Competence in living languages

discursive

strategic

communicative dimension

linguistic

emotional dimension

Figure[6]

To make the learner sensitive to difference and develop his/her capacity to communicate effectively with those who are different, the methods and aids used must go beyond a theoretical framework, for we know that theoretical learning does not guarantee know-how when faced with difference. It is necessary to add practical intervention through interaction with authentic representatives from other cultures and languages. The teaching/learning of intercultural competence must therefore be based on the common accomplishment of concrete tasks carried out in real situations during which the use of the language is real and justified.

In order to look deeper into the notion of intercultural competence we have made an inventory of a series of definitions from different authors:

- Ability to work effectively in another culture

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[6]   Gerhard Neuer, idem, page 55

- Ability to understand the context of contact between people and groups who come from different cultures and at the same time to know how to handle these situations

- Ability to distance oneself enough in relation to a culture clash in which one is implicated, in order to be able to locate and understand how the process plays out so that one can call up one's resources.

- Ability to adequately manage the intercultural aspects of one's work and preferably be able to also profit from working together with other people from different cultures

- Ability to cope in this new environment and solve problems that may arise from this

- Ability to not only understand the difference of another culture but to be able to continue to communicate effectively through these differences and fit in

- Analytical aptitudes and strategies which increase the range of interpretations and actions of the individual in his/her interaction with members of other cultures

- Critical awareness of the distinctive characteristics of another culture as opposed to one's own

- Attitudes that are treated with interest and open-mindedness as well as a disposition to seeing other cultures, including one's own, without judgement.

Knowledge acquired is of two types: on the one hand knowledge of social groups – their products and practices – in one's own country and in that of the interlocutor; on the other hand knowledge of general processes of individual interactions as well as interactions appertaining to a society. Therefore the necessary aptitudes comprise the capacity to interpret and make contact, to discover and interact, as well as having a critical awareness/political education.

Qualities which are most often attributed to the intercultural speaker are respect, empathy, adaptability, patience, interest, curiosity, openness, motivation, a sense of humour, tolerance of uncertainty, avoidance of judgment. Empathy, not to be confused with sympathy, is seen as an attitude that allows one to understand other people's emotions or state of mind.

On this basis, let us propose a primary definition:

> Intercultural competence is an ensemble of abilities necessary for successful interaction with a person or a group of people from a different culture.

In order to define the concept, some other authors have placed the emphasis on the result of intercultural communication (Gersten, 1992; Barmeyer, 2004; Bittner & Reisch, 1994). Intercultural competence is "empirical" know-how (knowledge gained and practices enriched thanks to lessons drawn from experience), thus a total mastery of different intercultural situations.

Flye Sainte Marie (1997) stressed the importance of behavioural aspects. Intercultural competence is linked to certain personality traits or qualities.

> **Intercultural competence is the capacity to understand; to analyse the differences of another culture; to adapt, evolve and reach one's goals within this different culture.**

3. Intercultural communication

3.1 The hidden side of intercultural communication

As Edmond Marc Lipiansky[7] tells us, in meeting a foreigner, once the language barrier has been surmounted, the obstacle of a "hidden dimension" still remains – that of the codes and rites of each person, representations and stereotypes, indeed, conflict between countries…

In communication between individuals belonging to separate nationalities, the difference is more evident and more sensitive – often signified by the use of different languages. In addition, communication has both objective and subjective aspects.

❖ In respect of the objective aspect, as well as language, the difference is anchored to the specific "habitus"[8] of the speaker, which results in a process of enculturation and

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[7] Article dans « La communication – Etat des savoirs», Editions Sciences Humaines, 1998

socialisation: ways of life; system of values; customary ways of feeling, thinking and acting; rituals of interacting characteristic of the culture one belongs to. All these elements constitute one's "cultural identity" which in turn dictates conduct and, notably, ways of communicating

❖ In respect of the subjective aspect, one can find emotional and cognitive mechanisms brought about by contact with a person who is perceived as unfamiliar. This perception alone will provoke reactions which will influence the relationship with the other person

1. Cultural codes

We often have a tendency to reduce the difficulties in communication between people of different nationalities into a question of the mastery of each other's language. We might therefore believe that, from the moment we speak the other person's language fluently, there will be no more problems. Of course, this linguistic ability is necessary for intercultural communications, but it is not sufficient. It does play a central role, but in conjunction with other codes: rhythm and intonation; non-verbal codes; conversational and narrative techniques (how to lead a conversation; interact with the other speaker; give an account; argue…) and ritual codes (that are currently marked out by "knowing how to behave", "good manners"). All these codes vary from one culture to another and therefore pose problems in translation and interpretation, in the same way that there are problems with language. However, those aspects are less evident than the strictly linguistic dimension. They risk being unnoticed and being the source of misunderstandings or incomprehension more complex than the speakers are aware of.

2. The hidden dimension

Another "hidden dimension" is personal space when communicating. Edward T. Hall[9] showed that it varied according to culture. He noted, for example, that in Arab countries it is habitual for one to

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[8]   According to Pierre Bourdieu this includes behaviour and lifestyle acquired in one's original social milieu which inform ones daily practice.

[9]   La dimension cachée, Editions du Seuil, 1971

position oneself very close to the speaker and even to touch him/her, whereas such behaviour would put Americans or Europeans ill at ease.

Silence in communication is not the same between civilisations: in Asia silent moments within a discussion are very well tolerated (seen as a sign of reflection), whilst Europeans, for example, might find these silences unnerving.

The rituals of interaction, often responding to similar principles, also vary from one country to another. In Germany, it is impolite to give a bouquet of flowers wrapped in cellophane whereas in France this is the preferred method. The French are quite happy to put up with several people speaking at the same time and occasionally interrupting each other in an animated discussion whereas this behaviour would be judged as rude in other countries. However, certain differences are more subtle: the observation of group discussions between Germans and French tend to show that the former centre more on the content of the exchange whilst the latter are also attentive to the relational dimension. Additionally, the latter found the Germans to be a little bit "coarse" and too direct in discussions/debates. However, the Germans for their part thought of the French as "seducers" and "manipulators".

3. Communication styles

We have seen the manner in which one expresses oneself with words – communicating with words varies strongly from one culture to another and indeed from one person to another within the same culture. Speaking the same tongue is not in fact synonymous with speaking the same language (based on the Palo Alto school, cf. Paul Watzlawick, 1972, 1980).

Each person has a preferred way of communicating. Cultural values and styles of communication, for example, offer us strategies for engaging in conversation with others, standards for interpreting and evaluating the manner in which we perceive communicative experiences and the way in which we evaluate them.

Styles of different communication have been developed over centuries and generations – closely connected to cultural values, norms and behaviour of the groups/people concerned. To know these styles is to be aware of one's own styles of communication. To know how to recognise the styles used by our interlocutors contributes greatly to a better intercultural understanding.

Knowing how to recognise the styles of communication and respecting them is a first step in the development of intercultural competence. To know how to modify one's listening in order to make sense of a message communicated in a style of communication other than ours is the next step. The final step – even more difficult, but proving intercultural competence – is to know how to adapt one's own style of communication to the context and, little by little, to learn to communicate using the styles of the other person.

No one style of communication is better than another, just as no one perception is more justified than another. All these styles allow all subject areas to be discussed. The difficulty appears in the meeting between people practising different styles who do not understand or respect each other's style.

- Linear - circular

  People who communicate in a linear way say very precisely and explicitly what they want the other person to understand. The circular way presents all the elements of contexts necessary for the person listening to be able to make links between these elements and understand what the speaker is saying, but the speaker does not say explicitly what they want the other person to understand.

- Direct – indirect

  With the direct style, the message is to be found in the words used and not in the context. A person using this style says exactly what he/she thinks. This style tends to prioritise the content of the exchange. The indirect style favours the use of proverbs, metaphors and silence. The message is to be found outside the words used: hence, in this style of communication, the context is also important for transmitting meaning. This style tends to prioritise the relationship, the harmony between those present.

- Expressing emotion – expressing little emotion

  People who communicate by showing their emotions think that to respect the other person and create a real relationship, they show him/her what they are feeling. The other group of speakers prefer to keep their emotions to themselves and manage them from within. The fundamental idea is that, to respect the other person, to protect the harmony of the relationship and to avoid invading that person's space with one's own emotions, we do not show what we are feeling.

- Concrete - Abstract

  The concrete style of communication prefers to use examples of stories, real cases and true situations in order to convey its message. The other style prefers to express itself by using theories, concepts and abstract thoughts.

In each seminar the participants explore the manner in which their styles of communication influence their perception of other styles. Then they develop strategies that may allow them to interact in a more enriched way with other styles.

- Suggestions to develop competences in terms of styles of communication

Linear style Circular	Circular style Linear
Be patient, do not interrupt too quickly; stop waiting for an explicit conclusion.	Ask questions if the response appears to be too brief.
Listen in order to interpret and make connections between the elements of the context provided.	Listen in order to be able to synthesise and reformulate.
Do not forget the importance of the relational aspect.	Try to pre-select and prioritise what one is going to say and perhaps give a linear response to which one can add context.

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Direct style Indirect	Indirect style Direct
Stop having confidence in words alone and read the meanings between the lines.	Remember that direct people appreciate direct communication – they tend not to think or take things on a personal level.
Learn to use metaphors and proverbs to convey a message.	Try to use as many facts as metaphors.
Reflect on the impact of words that are used: develop a diplomatic approach.	Try to say exactly what one is thinking.

Expressing emotions expressing little emotions	expressing little emotions Expressing emotions
Listen to the needs of the other	Listen to one's own emotions and attempt to express them.
Think about the impact which one's emotions can have on the other.	Open one's self with confidence in the other, while respecting one's own sensitivity.
Concrete abstract	**Abstract Concrete**
Reformulate in order to develop concepts and theories.	Think about Theory while daring to make links with examples or concrete experiments without being too personal.

A good interpreter is capable of not only translating words but equally the styles of communication. That explains why quite long phrases are at times better shorter when translated and vice-versa.

It is not necessary, however, to be a diplomatic interpreter to learn to respect and appreciate the variety of communication styles. We can begin by recognising our own styles and learning to interact in a respectful and appropriate manner with other styles which we come across. These steps are important for the development of intercultural competences.

3.2 Non-verbal communication

Just like verbal communication, non-verbal communication in an intercultural situation requires care, knowledge and specific competences.

One could qualify verbal communication as digital and non-verbal communication as analogue. If verbal communication consists of numerous, well-understood dimensions (choice of words, styles of communication, pauses, intonation, context…), the constituent elements of non-verbal communication are even more numerous and often neither the person speaking nor the person listening is aware of them.

The list below demonstrates that non-verbal communication takes place simultaneously on very different levels and that it can be seen, understood and/or felt.

Given that the numerous aspects of non-verbal communication are outside the remit of linguistics and that, additionally, non-verbal communication can simultaneously be intentional and non-intentional, it can generate emotional senses and misunderstandings which neither the speaker nor the person listening comprehend.

The key dimensions of non-verbal communication are:

- ❖ Facial and body movements – use of the arms, hands, head, eyebrows, mouth – in a conscious or unconscious way

- ❖ Visual contact (looking)

- ❖ Tone of voice and volume

- ❖ Space – at what distance or how near do people stand when talking to each other? Are they face-to-face or at an angle/slantwise?

- ❖ Environment – style and decoration of rooms, furnishings and architecture

❖ Time and how it is conceived and used during conversations, meetings, etc.

❖ Silence

Different research Projects (Mendoza, 1995, Larroche, 1994) carried out by eminent specialists in intercultural communication show that 65% to 90% of the message of all communications is taken from non-verbal communication.

Even more impressively, most of the research demonstrates that the non-verbal message influences/affects the verbal message and that it can reinforce or contradict the latter. That signifies, for example, that if a person says, "Welcome. It gives me great pleasure to see you again", but his/her non-verbal message (tone of voice, eye contact, the way he/she holds his/her head; hand or arm gestures) indicates that we are not really welcome, the non-verbal dimension of the message has more credibility and we will trust that non-verbal message more than the words.

If diverse cultures and diverse peoples have different preferences in terms of communication styles (verbal), it is the same with non-verbal communication. We make use of non-verbal messages to communicate feelings, nurture relationships; express friendship, humour and irony; power relations, questions, trust; or to be alerted to danger.

It is in our earliest infancy that we begin to absorb the norms, fine distinctions and sense, often inarticulate, of the non-verbal language of our original culture. However, it can be very difficult to identify and decode non-verbal codes used by someone from another culture. It is so easy to confuse them with our own codes or to read them using our own standards (often inappropriately).

Certain gestures, for example, are similar from one culture to another, but their significance and message can be totally different in each culture. On the other hand, similar values or messages can be expressed by different non-verbal expressions. In certain cultures, for example, to show respect, children are forbidden to look at adults when they are speaking to them.

Learning to read and understand non-verbal codes from another culture can be as difficult as learning another language and at least as important.

Even if there is not a simple answer, there is a golden rule: observe, try to understand and adapt one's non-verbal communication so that it contributes to mutual understanding in the process of intercultural communication.

Development of competency at a non-verbal level

The following practices help us to develop our competency in non-verbal communication:

- Become more conscious of the functions of our non-verbal codes and the norms and cultural values underpinning them.

- Observe, without judging, the non-verbal language of the people around us.

- Conscientiously adapt our non-verbal language (eye contact, personal space, tone of voice, touching) when the person we are interacting with operates in a very different way to us. Also try to be conscious of the effort required in doing this and the uncertainty that this will generate in us.

- Watch films with an eye on the non-verbal communications. They can be a rich source of learning without judging.

- Keep on trying to understand the 'why' and the 'what for' of non-verbal expressions, rather than judging them.

The non-verbal dimension of intercultural communication is fascinating and difficult. In effect, as with an iceberg, we can only see the visible part and we are often too little aware of the invisible dimension which gives meaning to the visible part. Our perceptions and interpretations of non-verbal communication are therefore often inexact – based on our own norms and values and not on those of the person with whom we are interacting.

4. The important principles of intercultural pedagogy

According to Gerhard Neuner (1998), the implications of a socio-cultural approach are evident. It is necessary, in effect:

1. To develop exercises that allow flexibility and creativity, which focus on the active use of the foreign language and inspire the learners to experiment with the foreign language

2. To develop tasks which focus both on reading comprehension and the interactive use of the language

3. To present a socio-cultural theme from various angles in order for learners to be able to qualify their judgement and make up their own minds

4. To encourage comparison between the two countries (the learner's country and that of the target language) in order to favour reflection and discussion in the way in which the learner perceives the foreign country and his/her own.

Once learners have dealt with the elements and structures of the country whose language they are learning, they try to "make sense" of the information they receive (comprising linguistic data) by first likening it to what they already know; that is to say, by drawing on the bank of knowledge and experience they have of the culture of their country. As the two countries are different, the learners' "attempt to understand" has a strong risk of ending in failure if help is not at hand.

The first two fundamental principles of intercultural pedagogy are therefore:

- **Interaction with real characters**
- **Task based learning**

The learner must, more than ever, be involved in the process of learning. He/she must be aware of the targets and be capable of dealing with a new intercultural situation. The other two fundamental principles of intercultural pedagogy are:

- **Student centred learning – his/her autonomy in the learning process**
- **The consequent new role of the trainer**

5. Conclusion

Many language trainers are afraid of teaching intercultural competency for they do not feel sufficiently competent themselves. Others think that, in order to learn intercultural competency, it is necessary for the learners to have already acquired quite a high language level. In both cases nothing could be more incorrect.

Education in intercultural competency does not mean endowing the learner with a multitude of facts about the culture of a foreign country. Louise Damen (1987) refers to Hall when she states that cultural awareness consists of discovering and understanding that behaviour and beliefs are culturally conditioned – ours as well as those of others. Therefore, the process not only involves observing the similarities and differences between cultures but also recognising the distinctive features of the maternal culture, or, to use Hall's (1959) expression again, the distinctive features of our own "hidden culture".

Intercultural competency consists of a certain amount of "knowledge", but it is above all the know-how and knowing how to be that decide **the capacity to establish a relationship** with others; to communicate and interact with them. The learner does not need a very high level of language to learn the most basic know-how and knowing how to be. **One does not learn intercultural competency, one lives it in interaction with representatives of other languages and cultures.** The tutor is, therefore, not obliged to have all sorts of knowledge and know-how in respect of the culture of the country whose language they are teaching.

It is necessary, above all, to possess an intercultural awareness that will allow tutors to encourage learners to realise there is diversity; open their minds to it; teach them how to relativise their points of view; and present a fact in its cultural context by always referring to their own culture.

Intercultural competency is a lifelong learning process and no teacher ever ceases to be himself/herself a learner. On the other hand, any learner can become, at each stage of learning, a teacher to others.

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