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*Estudios de  
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**INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: A STEP  
BEYOND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

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*The concept of 'communicative competence', first proposed by Hymes, referred basically to abilities speakers have in their first language. This term, however, was appropriated and reworked (Canale & Swain 1980; van Ek 1986) within the field of foreign language teaching and new approaches or dimensions (sociolinguistic, socio-cultural, social, etc.) were added to the original idea. Consequently, the prescriptive model based upon native speaker competence started to be put into question and the replacement of the native speaker by the intercultural speaker as a reference point for the foreign language learner was suggested (Byram & Zarate 1994). Stemming from all these considerations, a model was proposed (Byram 1997) for Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), involving one step further in communicative competence.*

*Key words: communicative competence, intercultural speaker, intercultural communicative competence*

**1. Introduction**

Several decades ago, Noam Chomsky introduced the concept of *linguistic competence* as the ideal model for any speaker. In the 70s, Hymes proposed

a new concept, that of *communicative competence*, which corrected<sup>1</sup> and complemented the first term, since the ability to discern when and how to use language in specific contexts was added to sheer linguistic ability when speaking. By paying attention to the way in which the ability to use language appropriately was acquired, Hymes was placing emphasis on sociolinguistic competence, a fundamental concept in the development of communicative language teaching when it was applied to foreign language teaching and learning (Byram, 1997: 7-8).

Communicative methodology is basically focused on acquiring the necessary skills to “communicate” and emphasis is given to functions, role playing and real situations - among other aspects - in the learning process. However, according to Claire Kramsch

After years of communicative euphoria, some language teachers are becoming dissatisfied with purely functional uses of language. [and] Some are pleading to supplement the traditional acquisition of ‘communication skills’ with some intellectually legitimate, humanistically oriented, cultural ‘content’ (1995: 83).

Another question that must be taken into account is the fact that communicative competence is based on the ability speakers have in their first language.<sup>2</sup> It was only when the term was appropriated by foreign language teaching and taken as its basis that it became an aim for learners, a prescriptive model based upon native speaker competence (Byram, 1995: 56). A third aspect we would like to point out is that foreign language learners nowadays are not limited to contact with speakers of the target language and the country where it is spoken; more and more often they are

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of *communicative competence* was also developed in the germanophone world by Habermas; however, his work was much less influential in language teaching, where English is the dominant language, and also probably due to the level of abstraction in his writings (Byram, 1997: 7, 30).

<sup>2</sup> When Hymes proposed the term *communicative competence* he was not thinking of foreign language teaching and learning (Byram, 1997: 9).

involved in situations where they are mediators between different languages and cultures, and where they have to interpret the world from different points of view. The latter two issues are probably connected with the fact that the present educational system and foreign language courses, mostly based on communicative methodology, have not managed to avoid a certain amount of misunderstanding, arising from cultural rather than linguistic problems. Therefore, there are reasons for us to rethink the concept of communicative competence (Aarup Jensen, 1995: 30).

Educational authorities in different countries and at different levels have for some time now been concerned with the objectives that the teaching of a foreign language should achieve. For instance, the law which regulates the educational system in Spain<sup>3</sup> establishes that students, apart from being able to understand and produce oral and written messages appropriately in their own language as well as in a foreign language, should also learn to relate with other persons and take part in group activities with tolerant attitudes, overcoming prejudices. This law specifically values the presence of foreign languages in the curriculum as the knowledge of one or several foreign languages is a necessary condition to facilitate intercultural understanding in a world increasingly open to all kinds of international relationships, and it will allow students to expand the field of interpersonal relationships, contributing to the students' socialization process.

In the United Kingdom, a report issued by the educational authorities about the teaching of a foreign language up to the age of sixteen presented similar characteristics. The objectives established were divided into linguistic and literary, and human and social; the latter set aimed at enhancing the social competence of students by fostering sensitivity towards different social and behavioural habits, encouraging positive attitudes towards other countries and those living there, stopping prejudices, awakening interest towards a foreign culture, and stimulating tolerance (quoted by Dueñas, 1997: 143). In the United States, the National Foreign

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<sup>3</sup> Ley Orgánica de Ordenación del Sistema Educativo (1/1990, 3<sup>rd</sup> October; later developed in Real Decreto 1345/1991, 6<sup>th</sup> September).

Language Center (NFLC) at Washington, has defined four basic missions for language teaching/learning in higher education (Steele, 1996: 76). One of these missions is called the general education mission and it seeks to develop, through the study of another language, cultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, global perspectives, understanding of different modes of apprehending reality, and insight into the workings of language and systems of logic<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. Communicative competence for the foreign language student

As we have pointed out earlier, when Hymes proposed his theory of communicative competence he was mostly concerned with analysing social interaction and communication within a monolingual (and probably monocultural) group. It was Canale and Swain (1980) in North America and van Ek (1986) in Europe who developed the idea of communicative competence (Byram, 1997: 9).

In their seminal article “Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing” (1980), Canale and Swain proposed that communicative competence was minimally composed of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and communication strategies or strategic competence (1980: 27):

*Grammatical competence* includes the knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, sentence grammar semantics, and phonology (29).

*Sociolinguistic competence* is made up of two different sets of rules: sociocultural and discourse. The former focus on the extent to which certain propositions and communicative functions are appropriate within a given sociocultural context, and the extent to which appropriate attitude and

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<sup>4</sup> The other three missions are: the applied language mission, which supports the acquisition of task-specific competences for different purposes; the specialist mission, which ensures the continuity of the profession by preparation for graduate study and an academic career; and the heritage preservation mission, which focuses on the maintenance or acquisition of language for the preservation or enrichment of cultural identity (Steele, 1996: 76).

register or style are conveyed by a particular grammatical form within a given sociocultural context. Rules of discourse are concerned with cohesion and coherence of groups of utterances (30).

Finally, *strategic competence* is made up of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that the speaker may resort to when breakdowns in communication take place due to performance variables or to insufficient competence. These strategies may relate to grammatical competence (how to paraphrase, how to simplify, etc.) or to sociolinguistic competence (for instance, how to address strangers when unsure of their social status) (30-31).

A few years later, van Ek placed emphasis on the idea that foreign language teaching is not concerned merely with training in communication skills but must also involve the personal and social development of the learner as an individual, and, therefore, he presented a framework for comprehensive foreign language objectives which included aspects such as social competence, the promotion of autonomy or the development of social responsibility (1986: 33). The model he presented contemplated six dimensions of communicative competence, each of them called competence also. In fact, they are six points of view of a complex phenomenon, which overlap and are mutually dependent. These six competences are:

*Linguistic competence*: The ability to produce and interpret meaningful utterances which are formed in accordance with the rules of the language concerned and bear their conventional meaning ... that meaning which native speakers would normally attach to an utterance when used in isolation (39).

*Sociolinguistic competence*: The awareness of ways in which the choice of language forms ... is determined by such conditions as setting, relationship between communication partners, communicative intention, etc. ... [this] competence covers the relation between linguistic signals and their contextual – or situational – meaning (41).

*Discourse competence*: The ability to use appropriate strategies in the construction and interpretation of texts (47).

*Strategic competence*: When communication is difficult we have to find ways of ‘getting our meaning across’ or ‘finding out what somebody means’; these are communication strategies, such as rephrasing, asking for clarification (55).

*Socio-cultural competence*: Every language is situated in a sociocultural context and implies the use of a particular reference frame which is partly different from that of the foreign language learner; socio-cultural competence presupposes a certain degree of familiarity with that context (35).

*Social competence*: Involves both the will and the skill to interact with others, involving motivation, attitude, self confidence, empathy and the ability to handle social situations (65).

We can observe that both proposals have some aspects in common. Both of them speak about competences within a competence and consider that communicative competence is a complex phenomenon which involves different faces or approaches, which in fact become new competences. Some of these new competences take into consideration the same or very similar contents: What Canale and Swain call *grammatical competence* is called *linguistic competence* by van Ek, but both of them have to do with grammatical rules; what Canale and Swain call *sociolinguistic competence* is split into *sociolinguistic* and *discourse competence* by van Ek, but again they consider the same issues; as for *strategic competence*, van Ek probably took the concept from Canale and Swain. The main difference then is van Ek’s incorporation of two more points of view, *socio-cultural* and *social competence*, which take into account values and beliefs, on the one hand, and attitudes and behaviours, on the other. Being a more comprehensive model and more suitable for our purposes, we shall take van Ek’s model as a basis for our future analysis.

### **3. The Intercultural Speaker**

Complex and comprehensive as it is, van Ek’s communicative competence model still suffers from some shortcomings. The first one, on which we are

going to base a great part of this critique, is to take the native speaker as a model. As Byram points out (1997: 10), in linguistic and sociolinguistic competence the native speaker as a model is implicit when there are references to “the rules of the language concerned”, “conventional meaning”, “relationship between communication partners”, and also explicit with the very mention of “native speakers”. And even with respect to sociocultural competence, we also take the native speaker as a reference as the “sociocultural context” mentioned is presumably the native one, and the assumed “certain degree of familiarity with that context” is again native.

However, taking the native speaker as a model may not be the right choice and there are several reasons to dismiss him. One reason is that taking the native speaker as a model means creating an impossible target to attain, with the consequent inevitable failure. As Byram explains (1997: 11), the conditions under which a language is learnt and acquired in current educational systems makes the ideal of bilingual speaker an objective difficult to attain. Cook also agrees on the idea “that the prominence of the native speaker in language teaching has obscured the distinctive nature of the successful L2 user and created an unattainable goal for L2 learners” (1999: 185) and she suggests a reconsideration of the learner’s goals as well as the acknowledgement of the student’s cultural and linguistic background. Another reason for dismissing the native speaker as the ideal model is that we may be creating the wrong kind of competence, as the learner would be almost linguistically schizophrenic, relinquishing completely one language and everything else attached to it for another one, in which he would be considered a “native” (Byram, 1997:11-12).

The replacement of the native speaker as a reference point for the foreign language learner by the intercultural speaker was already proposed by Byram and Zarate in 1994. The idea is that foreign language learners are individuals who bring with them to their learning experience their sociocultural identity as members of their native culture, and even if they have acquired advanced levels of proficiency, what is conventionally called “native speaker fluency”, they are nonetheless “mediators” between two cultures. The concept of “mediator” includes aspects both linguistic and

cultural; by communicating in a foreign language, the learner is also becoming a dual-culture person whose native culture will always be part of his or her identity (Steele, 1996: 77). We must observe that the change of goal from the native speaker to the intercultural speaker should not in any way be seen as lowering the standards of achievement currently expected of the language learner; it is just a question of changing the point of view and realizing that the competence of the intercultural speaker and the native speaker is not the same linguistically or culturally. In fact, it may be more complex and demanding to become an intercultural speaker than to try to be up to the level of a native speaker since the former is a dynamic concept which has no final goal (Jaeger 2001: 53). In Byram's words

the more desirable outcome is a learner with the ability to see and manage the relationships between themselves and their own cultural beliefs, behaviours and meanings, as expressed in a foreign language, and those of their interlocutors, expressed in the same language – or even a combination of languages - which may be the interlocutors' native language, or not (1997: 12).

This intercultural speaker has the ability to manage communication and interaction between people of different cultural identities and different languages, and he is also able to come out of himself and take another perspective, which will allow him to bring into the interaction different interpretations of reality.

In Steele's opinion (1996: 79), one of the advantages of taking this intercultural speaker as a model is that this concept places the learner at the centre of the teaching and learning process, something that fits with the learner-centred methodology that has been widely adopted as an effective way of teaching a foreign language, as the interaction, implicit in the idea of the intercultural speaker as a mediator between two cultures, places the learner at the centre of the teaching and learning process<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> This idea is also present in the theory of Cultural Community Building within English language programmes, proposed – for instance – by Margaret Coffey (1999), where a first



#### **4. Byram's model for Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)**

Whatever linguistic competence learners have in a foreign language, when interaction with a person from a different country takes place, they bring to the situation a general knowledge of the world which will probably include – to a greater or lesser extent - knowledge of the country of the interlocutor. But this knowledge also includes cultural awareness of their own country, which is part of the social identity they bring to the interaction. This is an important factor for the interlocutor, as the question of intercultural interaction is not something that has to do solely with the “visitor” or “foreign” speaker, but also with the “host” or “native” speaker, if this is the case. Even if host speakers will often speak in their native language, they still need the same set of abilities as the guest speakers to understand and maintain relationships between the two cultures (Byram, 1997: 32, 41).

Byram (1997: 22) contemplates three possible situations in intercultural communication or interaction:

between people of different languages and countries where one is a native speaker of the language used;

between people of different languages and countries where the language used is a *lingua franca*;

and between people of the same country but different languages, one of whom is a native speaker of the language used.

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step in community building is that teachers should give up some control in the classroom and share power with students (28).

Obviously none of these situations can be approached in the same way as interaction between native speakers, something which often happens when only linguistic competence is taken into account. The success of intercultural interaction cannot be judged only in terms of an effective exchange of information, the capacity of establishing and maintaining human relationships is as important as communication itself, and that capacity depends on attitudinal factors (Byram, 1997: 32-33).

Therefore, we have knowledge of the speaker's own culture and that of the other and attitude as preconditions for efficient intercultural interaction. These factors can, however, be modified by the process of interaction itself by means of different skills that a person can bring into it. These skills should be divided into two groups: those aimed at interpretation and establishment of relationships between two cultures; and those aimed at discovery and interaction. Although Byram acknowledges that these factors can be acquired through experience and reflection, without the intervention of teachers and educational institutions, he supports the idea of integrating the teaching for intercultural communication within the educational system. Therefore, Byram's model for ICC can be summarised as follows (1997: 33):

	Skills Interpret and relate	
Knowledge Of self and other; of interaction: individual and societal	Education Political education critical cultural awareness	Attitudes Relativising self Valuing other
	Skills Discover and/or interact	

Very briefly, we would like to comment on these factors. Regarding knowledge, the awareness we acquire about our own or the other's culture can be by means of primary (family, friends, etc.) or secondary (educational systems) socialization, and in between there is the presence of communication networks which bring us information about almost every country and everything. A second kind of knowledge we have to acquire is that connected with interaction itself, how interlocutors from another group are perceived. This type of knowledge is in fact connected with the skills of interpreting and relating, and using existing knowledge to understand an action or a behaviour and relate it to comparable actions and behaviours in one's own social group. Either positive or negative stereotypes or preconceived ideas can prevent mutual understanding in an interaction, that is the reason why we should maintain attitudes of curiosity and openness in any relationship, which would allow us to relativise our own self and value the other. This may involve a challenge to the norms we have acquired in our primary socialization and we should undergo what Byram (1995: 58, 1997: 34) calls "tertiary socialization".<sup>6</sup> The skills of discovery and interaction come into play when there is no previous background knowledge about another culture or specific situation, they allow us to recognise relevant phenomena in a foreign environment, and understand and relate them to other phenomena; however, the skills of interpretation and relations are based on general knowledge frameworks which will allow us to discover existing connotations in the situation or interaction we have to face. As for education, we will deal with this aspect in the following section.

As a result of this model of ICC and the reflection it involves on questions like discovery, interpretation, or the establishment of a relationship, Byram proposes a redefinition (1997: 48) of some of van Ek's competences more related to the idea of the native speaker:

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<sup>6</sup> This is what some cross cultural psychologists (for instance, Berry *et al.*, [1992] 1994: 18-19) call *acculturation*, mere contact with people belonging to another culture, and *resocialization*, deliberate influence from another culture through some kind of formal education.

van Ek's proposal	Byram's redefinition
<p><b>Linguistic competence:</b> The ability to produce and interpret meaningful utterances which are formed in accordance with the rules of the language concerned and bear their conventional meaning ... that meaning which native speakers would normally attach to an utterance when used in isolation.</p>	<p><b>Linguistic competence:</b> the ability to apply knowledge of the rules of a <u>standard version</u> of the language to produce and interpret spoken and written language.</p>
<p><b>Sociolinguistic competence:</b> The awareness of ways in which the choice of language forms ... is determined by such conditions as setting, relationship between communication partners, communicative intention, etc. ... [this] competence covers the relation between linguistic signals and their contextual – or situational – meaning</p>	<p><b>Sociolinguistic competence:</b> the ability to give to the language produced by an interlocutor – whether native speaker or not – meanings which are taken for granted by the interlocutor or which are <u>negotiated</u> and made explicit with the interlocutor.</p>
<p><b>Discourse competence:</b> The ability to use appropriate strategies in the construction and interpretation of texts.</p>	<p><b>Discourse competence:</b> the ability to use, <u>discover</u> and <u>negotiate</u> strategies for the production and <u>interpretation</u> of monologue or dialogue texts which follow the conventions of the culture of an interlocutor or are <u>negotiated</u> as intercultural texts for particular purposes.</p>

References to a prescriptive model, namely native, have practically disappeared, although, for instance, in the linguistic competence a “standard version” is mentioned; of course it could refer to a native one or to the result

of a combination of some varieties, native or not. In the other two competences, the term “negotiate” is emphasized, along with other ideas like “discover”, or “interpret”.

### **5. Problems arising from ICC**

One of the first problems that must be faced regarding ICC is how to acquire it. As we have seen in the model proposed above, facts or rules that can be objectively explained or learnt by heart, and are therefore easier to teach in a classroom, are a small part of it. However, the kind of knowledge required, the attitudes and the skills proposed by Byram are aspects that have to be developed and cultivated, rather than transmitted in the classroom. If all this has to be combined with what has traditionally been considered as the teaching of a language, complications may increase. Objections made by teachers to the inclusion of intercultural, or just cultural, aspects in the foreign language teaching syllabus have been pointed out by several authors (Müller, 1995: 61-63; Mughan, 1999: 63, 64); however, without necessarily becoming an expert anthropologist or a sociologist, a foreign language teacher should make sure that students acquire some amount of cultural awareness and intercultural competence if they want to provide education in its fullest sense (Tarp, 1995: 147; Mughan, 1999: 63-64). This is an issue supported also by Cortazzi and Jin, who propose that teachers and learners take a more reflective and ethnographic stance towards cultural learning (1999: 196, 217).

Byram considers that some objectives of ICC, for instance discovery skills, can be included as part of the curriculum; however, there are others which may not be compatible with classroom work, especially as it is usually conceived in foreign language teaching. He comments that the ICC objectives may be even more difficult to accept by those teachers with more strictly linguist training than by teachers who have been trained in literary criticism and who will probably find analogies between the skills of interpreting and discovering and some approaches to literature (1997: 64). In spite of these difficulties, he insists in the idea that ICC has to be integrated in the curriculum, and include political education and critical cultural

awareness<sup>7</sup>. Nonetheless, he identifies three possible locations for the acquisition of ICC: the classroom, where there would be a close interaction between teacher and learner; what he calls “fieldwork” (a short or long stay in the target language country, for instance), where the role of the teacher may even disappear; and independent learning, which is part of the personal development of the learner (1997:64-70, 73)<sup>8</sup>.

A subsequent aspect of what we have commented so far regarding acquisition is the question of teachers. As Mughan points out (1999: 64), not all language teachers want to be responsible for intercultural learning, and it is necessary to have committed teachers who believe in ICC and even in peace education or peace studies as the final objective of ICC. These teachers will have to include in their syllabi activities that encourage tolerance for ambiguity, foster empathy and cooperation and build an understanding for cultural values (Coffey, 1999: 28-29).

One fundamental question in Byram’s opinion is whether there is a threshold below which a person cannot be considered to have ICC at all, and if there are degrees of competence beyond that threshold<sup>9</sup>; however, little work has been carried out in this field and more research is necessary to obtain results that will allow us to establish a reliable and useful gradation within ICC, aimed at improving learners’ education. Just as an example, we present Meyer’s three levels of intercultural competence (1991: 142-144); he speaks about:

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<sup>7</sup> Brøgger (1992: 112-124) also presents his “Three-Step Methodology of Culture Studies Teaching” which combines a critical social, cultural and textual or linguistic analysis, and could fulfill some of Byram’s objectives.

<sup>8</sup> Byram (1997: chapter 3 and 4) develops a series of objectives as well as curriculum items, and applies them to a specific teaching case.

<sup>9</sup> As has been pointed above, Jaeger considers that there is not “a time ... when [foreign language learners] can consider themselves fully qualified intercultural speakers” (2001: 53).

the *monocultural level*, a way of thinking which is merely adequate for the learner's own culture;

the *intercultural level*, in which learners are able to explain cultural differences between their own and the foreign cultures, because they can make use of information they have acquired concerning their own and foreign countries, and they stand between two cultures;

the *transcultural level*, in which learners are able to evaluate differences and to solve intercultural problems by appealing to principles of international cooperation and communication.

As we can see, this is a very broad classification, which would need further refining; in any case, if we had to place the threshold anywhere, we should do so between the first two levels.

The last problem we would like to approach is that of assessing; if we have spotted difficulties in acquisition and in gradation of ICC, we cannot escape them in the process of evaluating whether our students have become interculturally competent, and to what degree. Back in 1984, in his book *Teaching Culture. Strategies for Intercultural Communication*, Seelye reflected on ways to assess whether students had changed their attitudes throughout the course, and he proposed a pretest at the beginning and a posttest at the end, and provided some examples (164-189). Byram (1997) also devotes a whole chapter of his book to the issue of assessing and he proposes in a very detailed way several modes of assessment for knowledge, skills, attitudes and critical cultural awareness. We will need imaginative ways of testing, and traditional exams will not be of much use here; we will have to resort to careful interviews, simulations of situations, and activities requiring comment and analysis, for instance. However, one of the main difficulties, in our opinion, may be that of objectivity at the moment of judging our students' competence as such intangible aspects as attitudes are really hard to measure in an objective way.

## **6. Conclusion**

In the same way as linguistic or grammatical competence was considered insufficient at some point and communicative competence was brought to the fore, we should now consider going a step beyond communicative competence and try to make ICC part of our foreign language classes. Jaeger (1995:32) states that the didactics of intercultural communication draws its theoretical background from a wide range of “mother disciplines”: linguistics, foreign language pedagogy, sociology, anthropology or ethnography, among some others, and that its emphasis is on applicational perspectives and its concern with the practice of intercultural encounters. In our present world, where travelling from one country to another has become accessible to a relatively important percentage of people and where we may have to be, directly or indirectly, in touch with people of so many origins and backgrounds, ICC will be an important asset in anyone’s education.



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