Intercultural communication in business schools: what we can teach and how we can evaluate

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Abstract

The teaching of intercultural communication in business schools has relied quite extensively on the theoretical model developed by Geert Hofstede and his followers. While Hofstede’s dimensions provide clear labels and an apparatus which can be used in the explanation of situations of intercultural conflict, overemphasis on labels can distract one’s attention from the fact that “intercultural communication” is first and foremost a form of communication which, in order to be efficient, has to observe certain rules. This article argues in favour of a return to a discourse-based approach in the teaching of intercultural communication; it also pleads for the development of students’ critical thinking and for their involvement in the learning process by making self-evaluation a part of their learning path.

Keywords: intercultural communication; business schools; teaching; discourse-based approach; evaluation.

1. Introduction

The spread of multinational corporations as the dominant form of business organisation has stimulated an increased interest in intercultural communication as a soft skill necessary for a tolerant and peaceful atmosphere in business offices and the success of negotiations and daily business operations. Increased competitiveness on the global market has come to bring employees together so as to collaborate in multinational teams, either in person or

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virtually. They are required to cope with multiplying and diversifying challenges, to become increasingly flexible and to learn with each other, from each other and about each other. Companies, therefore, are willing to invest in their employees’ intercultural training. Angouri (2010) even argues that there has been an “explosion of interest in culture, cultural diversity and intercultural (IC) facilitation and training in the context of the multinational corporate workplace” (p. 207). In the same line of thought, universities in general and business schools in particular have set the task for themselves to prepare graduates for the culturally diverse labour market. What this means is that the focus is now on developing competences that graduates can use right after leaving school, in the companies that hire them. This article tackles precisely what business schools can teach and how they can evaluate competences.

2. Intercultural communication in teaching practice

Teaching for the purpose of developing intercultural competences and not for the purpose of transmitting knowledge has a few implications: the format and delivery of classes has been changing, and they are now similar to training sessions; there is (or there should be) less weight put on theory and more focus on practical exercises. In addition, the final grade is a reflection of the student’s (or trainee’s) skills and competences, rather than a measure of the extent to which he or she has internalised theories or definitions of culture.

However, there is still a sort of inertia in propagating one understanding of culture as national culture. This lopsided view is perpetuated by the fact that most books on intercultural training contain this reductionist understanding of the concept of culture. To give just one example, in my institution, “AlexandruIoanCuza” University of Iasi, the most popular authors among teachers of intercultural communication or intercultural management are Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars, Edward T. Hall and Harry C. Triandis. Teaching intercultural communication by resorting to the dichotomies elaborated by these authors has obvious didactic advantages: one can better understand and remember when information is presented in a contrastive manner. Yet their approach emphasises a form of “interculturality” where the nation of origin is overemphasised at the expense of communication.

In practice, intercultural communication does not occur only between professionals with different countries of origin, as wide apart as the United States and Japan. We can use the adjective “intercultural” to label interactions between professionals from neighbouring countries, or from the same country, coming from different ethnic backgrounds, among which differences are not radical but gradual. At the same time, what differentiates them is not only nationality or ethnicity, but also their profession, gender, age, and life experience. Thus, every interlocutor inhabits different dialects and sociolects, and professional jargons, which make professional communication in the global economy to be an essentially inter-discursive communication, as Scollon and Scollon (2001) argued in their book *Intercultural Communication. A Discourse Approach*.

In this book, Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon started from their empirical observation that “virtually all professional communication is communication across some lines which divide us into different discourse groups or systems of discourse” (p. 3). Since language is inherently ambiguous, proficiency in one’s own discourse system and awareness of the specificity of the discourse system of one’s interlocutor cannot prevent misunderstandings or blockages in communication. Making quick inferences is one way of dealing with ambiguity. This process depends on one’s ability to decode the context of the communicative situation in which speakers are engaged, by focusing on its main components: the scene, the degree of formality, the participants, the message form and its sequence (p. 11-40).

What sets apart Scollon and Scollon’s *Intercultural Communication. A Discourse Approach* is the fact that unlike texts written from a managerial perspective, the former views culture outside the lenses of the nation state and focuses on the discursive construction of identity. Culture, in this perspective, is not a set of pre-established norms and rules that one would enact in daily life, as Hofstede’s metaphor of the software of the mind implies (Hofstede 1997), but a dynamic, on-going process of discursive co-construction. This understanding of culture agrees with Street’s statement that “culture is a verb” (1993). The emphasis on culture as a process needs to be reflected in our teaching practice, as well. Therefore teaching materials ought to be based on real-life situations rather than on
generalizations about national cultures. Such generalizations run the risk of over-simplification and of perpetuating stereotypes.

In addition, given the multiplication of opportunities for international contacts and in-company intercultural trainings, professionals learn about the national culture of their potential partners and develop expectations that they should behave in a certain way, or adjust their behaviour so as to fit behavioural expectations in their potential partners’ culture. At the same time, the latter are educated in the culture of the former, and will, potentially, adjust their behaviour too, in accordance with expectations of appropriate behaviour in the former’s culture. Thus, it may easily happen that the purpose of intercultural trainings grounded on a nation-based understanding of culture is not entirely met, since communication would fail to run smoothly.

Intercultural competence is a concept that has gained much currency lately. According to Sinicrope, Norris and Watanabe (2007), it emerged in the 1950s-1970s out of research on the experiences of Westerners working abroad in paid or volunteering positions (p. 2). In the 1970s, B. D. Ruben took a behavioural approach to intercultural competence and identified seven dimensions along which it can be described and evaluated: display of respect, interaction posture (ability to respond to others in a non-judgmental way), orientation to knowledge, empathy, self-oriented role behaviour (one’s ability to be flexible and function in requesting information and clarification for problem solving and in using mediation to regulate a group’s status quo), interaction management and tolerance for ambiguity (Sinicrope, Norris, Watanabe 2007: 4-5).

In the European context, intercultural competence has been developed on the model of linguistic competences, for which there is a continent-wide framework of reference. Capitalising on research by Byram (1997) and Risager (2007), a team of European researchers designed an evaluation tool – INCA (Intercultural Competence Assessment) – which conceptualizes intercultural competence along six dimensions: tolerance for ambiguity, behavioural flexibility, communicative awareness, knowledge discovery, respect for otherness, and empathy (Sinicrope, Norris, Watanabe 2007: 6-7). Evaluation of these dimensions assigns the assessed person the “basic”, “intermediate” or “full” level.

Still within the European framework, Paul Catteeuw (2012) traced the evolution of concerns over defining intercultural competence and over designing an evaluation grid for it. In its latest stage, such a grid comprises three elements: attitudes, skills and knowledge, assessed at the following levels: basic (to know), advanced (to understand) and proficiency (to apply) (p. 24). Under attitudes, he listed critical awareness (i.e. one can “deal critically and consciously as an individual with the society in which he/she lives”); openness, right to difference and respect for otherness (i.e. one can “deal with ambiguous situations, is open to others and can accept and respect possible differences”) and flexibility and empathy (i.e. one can “be flexible when dealing with realistic situations and demands and can understand intuitively what other people think and feel in realistic situations”) (p. 37). Skills cover communicative skills (i.e. one can “communicate effectively and correctly with others in realistic situations”) and solution-oriented attitude (i.e. one “can think and act in a solution oriented way in realistic situations”), while knowledge refers mainly to cultural knowledge (i.e. one can “acquire knowledge of a different culture and can use this knowledge in actual situations” (p. 37). These three elements can also be found in Darla K. Deardorff’s (2008) definition of intercultural competence as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 33).

Deardorff’s definition draws attention to two factors that need to be taken into account when designing intercultural communication courses: effectiveness and appropriateness. In Chen and Starosta’s view (2007), effectiveness refers to “an individual’s ability to produce intended effects through interaction with the environment” (p. 217). Effective communicators can identify their goals, the necessary (discursive) resources and strategies necessary to attain them. Appropriateness, on the other hand, refers to the use of a register that observes politeness rules, the social distance between speakers, and their hierarchical relations. Ultimately, effectiveness and appropriateness depend on one’s ability to decipher the context of the communicative situation and to make inferences based on their understanding of it and on their prior experience. Such an ability can be developed by taking a discourse approach to intercultural communication, as Scollon and Scollon had suggested (2001).

In the teaching practice, the focus on effectiveness and appropriateness translates as a shift from transferring knowledge about culture to developing skills to know how to interact in a different culture. Teachers / trainers of
intercultural communication need to design or use activities that, in accordance with the intercultural competence models outlined above, develop students’ critical awareness, openness, flexibility, empathy, cultural knowledge, communicative skills and a solution-oriented attitude. One way of doing it is to complement the use of textbooks with recordings of real-life situations, of case studies or with the use of online simulations that would put students in various situations of professional communication. Such means would allow learners to understand professional communication as a process that unfolds within a community of practice. Dwelling on Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), Angouridiscusses communities of practice as grounded in a joint enterprise continuously negotiated by its members, that functions by mutual engagement and which produces a shared repertoire of routines, artefacts, vocabularies and styles. She highlights the fact that one belongs simultaneously to several communities of practice and that, in a teaching context, we should develop in our students the ability to observe and learn the vocabulary and discourse strategies of various communities of practice that they might be engaged with in their future careers (p. 219). The successful completion of this educational mission depends on collaboration between trainers and practitioners and on frequent exposure of learners to real-life situations of professional communication.

3. Evaluation as part of the learning process: the use of portfolios

If in the former section I pleaded for a discourse-based approach in the teaching of intercultural communication, in this section on evaluation I would like to build a case for the use of portfolios. Be they paper-based or electronic, portfolios include lists of competences and descriptors, as well as reflection documents. In Catteeuw and Coutuer’s view (2005), when they are integrated in the curricula, portfolios “offer students the possibility to become self-directed and lifelong learners and for lecturers they facilitate coaching” (p. 44). They are a most appropriate learning and evaluation tool within a constructivist understanding of learning, which assigns students the central role in this active, goal-oriented, customized and self-directed process. At the same time, a constructivist understanding of learning requires teachers or trainers to assume the marginal role of a monitor or a coach. In this approach, learning is co-operative, i.e. certain tasks require collaborative work in teams, and contextual, i.e. embedded in real-life situations.

In an educational context, portfolios can serve several functions. First, they can be used by students or learners as a tool to monitor their own development, plan it and guide it (development portfolios). Tutors, on the other hand, can use them to check learners’ progress and offer advice and guidance (tutoring portfolios). Following tutors’ advice, students adjust the content of their portfolios and prepare them for evaluation (evaluation portfolios). Once evaluated, students can still build on them so as to use them in their job search efforts, to showcase their work and document their progress, as well as demonstrate the skills that they have acquired (presentation portfolios). An intercultural communication presentation portfolio contains proofread and edited pieces of writing, and corrected and improved versions of projects, as well as a list of competences that were developed (apud Catteeuw, Coutuer 2005: 45).

Electronic portfolios tend to replace paper-based ones, Mahara being one of the most popular applications for the development of e-folios. On Mahara, students can create their profile, with their full name, student ID, self-edited introductory information about themselves, and contact data (postal address, instant messaging or skype IDs). They can also upload profile pictures, write entries into a diary (journal), build their résumé and input plans. Thus, e-portfolios allow students to evaluate their skills and competences, in their résumés, as well as to reflect, critically, on what is realistically achievable in their future career. Mahara also enables students to export or import files, to manage file content and the visibility of posted information. In addition, it allows them to build their own learning path and tailor it to their needs.

The self-evaluation component of portfolios, as well as the critical thinking process behind designing one’s career goals, identifying one’s learning needs and the resources necessary to meet those needs, qualify them as an instrument for life-long, self-guided learning. The autonomy that it develops in learners constitutes a motivator for the latter to work on portfolios not only for the purpose of completing the assignments for the class, but also for the purpose of increasing their employability. As far as intercultural communication competence is concerned, a
learner’s portfolio should include items that reflect their knowledge, skills and attitude to otherness. For instance, they could include essays or articles that they have written, photos and videos, samples of research projects, recordings of intercultural professional communication and lists with the specific vocabulary that they learnt from the samples of recorded conversation. It could also include their reflections on the use of specific jargon, articles that they have read on intercultural, intergenerational, inter-discourse communication, as well as samples of professional writing: various types of letters, reports, announcements, professional emails, newsletters, and reports in which they critically reflect on the learning outcome of simulated situations of professional oral communication.

4. Conclusion

This article started from the observation that in the practice of teaching intercultural communication, extensive care is given to the development of elaborated taxonomies that could be used to describe culture which, in most cases, is identified as national culture. This equation between culture and national culture sets limits to what can be taught, to how teaching and evaluation can be done, and to the competences that can be developed. Increased focus on the demand for professionals who are proficient in intercultural communication has led to a shift in the classroom from teaching about culture towards teaching how to use the discursive and symbolic resources of another culture in such a way as to ensure respect for diversity, efficient and appropriate communication, and openness to learning from others, with others and about others. To put it differently, there has been a shift from transmitting knowledge to students or trainees, to developing the latter’s communicative competence.

Yet, no matter how much one would strive to develop his or her communicative competence, there is always the likelihood that miscommunication would arise, given the inherently ambiguous nature of language. This is why any intercultural training should prepare trainees to deal with gaps in communication, to clarify aspects that they find obscure and to accept differences as a fact. In addition, classes or trainings in intercultural communication ought to develop in students or trainees a predisposition to remaining intellectually alert and to learning about other cultures/systems of discourse. After all, the most successful professional communicator is not the one who has achieved a certain expertise in crossing the boundaries of discourse systems, but rather the person who makes a persistent effort to learn about other discourse systems while recognizing that except within his or her own discourse systems, he or she is likely to remain a novice forever (apud Scollon and Scollon 2001: 25)

References

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