

Chapter 7

Reconsidering Interculturality in Online Language Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers interculturality in language education using the example of online intercultural exchanges between Danish and francophone university students. The focus is on an intercultural approach in foreign language education that stands apart from the perspective that emphasizes “facts” about a “target culture.” The approach consists of the co-construction of intercultural competences by students in online interactions. The methodology of tracing evidence of intercultural competences in online interactions is questioned, in the sense that the author seeks the complementarity of different processes to trace manifestations of intercultural competences in online pedagogical interactions. This contributes to the description and evaluation of intercultural competences as a complex construct in the field of intercultural education.

INTRODUCTION

*The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes, but in having new eyes, in seeing the universe with the eyes of another, of hundreds of others, in seeing the hundreds of universes that each of them sees.¹ Marcel Proust, 1925, *La prisonnière, À la recherche du temps perdu**

In the area of online higher education, the notion of intercultural competence has been flourishing in the last two decades and has become more popular and more omnipresent than ever. The pertinent question is, just how should one approach interculturality in language education, an area that works with polysemic, problematic, multidisciplinary and highly politicized notions (Dervin, 2016a)? Whatever our understanding, one must deal with important concepts such as culture, identity, representation, alterity, interaction. The approaches are numerous, disparate, and disperse in this field.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-9279-2.ch007

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In this chapter, I use the term “interculturality” in line with some other scholars in the field (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003, Dervin, 2016a), because it contains the suffix *-ality*, which can be defined as a “process and something in the making” (Dervin, 2016a, p. 1). More precisely, those of us who adopt this term are interested in the intercultural approach that

emphasizes the processes and interactions which unite and define the individuals and the groups in relation to each other. It is not a question of dwelling on the self-attributed or hetero-attributed characteristics of others, but of simultaneously carrying out a return to one's self. (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2006, p. 476)

This is exactly how we look at intercultural encounters in our work and how online intercultural encounters are presented and discussed in this chapter. Our didactic approach to interculturality goes beyond culture and identity seen as solid and unique. This approach is not about acquiring knowledge *apropos* cultures because it focuses on the co-construction of knowledge during encounters. In our understanding of interculturality, there is the idea of interaction, *mélange*², negotiation, and thus instability. This approach emphasizes the need to develop in foreign language learners, considered as “social actors” (CEFR, 2001), intercultural communicative competence (ICC). ICC is seen as a complex construct that encompasses attitudes, knowledge, and skills, which are strongly interconnected constituents, in order to communicate and interact (effectively) in intercultural situations. An individual who possesses a certain level of intercultural competence (IC)³ is someone

...who is able to see relationships between different cultures - both internal and external to a society - and is able to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people. It is also someone who has a critical or analytical understanding of (parts of) their own and other cultures - someone who is conscious of their own perspective, of the way in which their thinking is culturally determined, rather than believing that their understanding and perspective is natural. (Byram, 2000, p. 9).

The same idea is voiced by the French novelist Marcel Proust (cited in the beginning of this chapter): a person with some degree of IC is one who can see the world from another perspective, with “new eyes.”

Today researchers and practitioners do not discuss whether to integrate internet and computer-mediated communication in the teaching and learning of foreign languages, but rather how to make the most of new technologies in language classroom. Some authors (Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004; Helm & Guth, 2010) stress the importance of developing online literacies in the very process of foreign language teaching and learning. These two aspects of language teaching and learning—interculturality and Internet and computer-mediated communication—converge in interesting ways in the field of online intercultural exchange, or telecollaboration, which designates the use of different online communication tools by groups of learners residing in different countries to develop their language, and their intercultural and digital skills through collaborative tasks and projects (O'Dowd, 2011).

Therefore, the study described in this chapter aimed to answer the following set of questions:

- What evidence do transcripts of Skype chats and other students' written entries, (i.e., from blogs, Facebook, questionnaires, essays, interviews' transcriptions) give of students' intercultural communicative competence and of its activation through the intercultural encounters and activities promoted by the online exchange?

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