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Reaching intercultural speakers of Spanish as a second language with a new curriculum design

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Abstract

In order to better prepare our Spanish as a second language (SL2) university students to be intercultural speakers (Cervantes Institute, 2007) and to ready them for the intercultural realities of the job market, we are currently internationalizing our curricula. Following the approach of Chávez and Longerbeam (2016) regarding interculturality, we are developing a cultural grammar (Sánchez Pérez, 2009; Guillén, 2016). In this paper, we present the basic concepts and definitions of our approach and conclude by highlighting three characteristics present in our intercultural in-class activities.

1   Introduction

Since 2001, most second language courses and textbooks have followed the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) (Council of Europe, 2001). Based on the CEFRL, the Plan Curricular del Instituto Cervantes "Cervantes Institute Curriculum Plan" (PC) (Instituto Cervantes, 2007) guides many Spanish as a second language (SL2) programs, courses and textbooks globally. Nowadays, one of the main objectives in SL2 teaching is to enable a transition to "intercultural speakers" through authentic language samples (Instituto Cervantes, 2007). At first sight, this goal appears very "attractive" for university level SL2 courses, considering that interculturality is an essential skill required of 21st century university students (Deardorff, 2009).

Unfortunately, 13 years after the publication of the PC (Cervantes Institute, 2007), there remains much to do in order to reach this intercultural goal. SL2 university level courses still do not offer a complete view of the Hispanic world, and thus miss their "intercultural goal". Firstly, although the Cervantes Institute (2007) aims for SL2 students to become "intercultural speakers" through authentic language samples, they produced the PC (Cervantes Institute, 2007) according to the North Central peninsular variant, excluding 10 other peninsular variants as well as 10 additional Hispano-American ones (Lipski, 2012). Secondly, their three inventories related to culture (i.e. the Cultural references, the Sociocultural knowledge and behaviors, and the Intercultural skills and attitudes) have not been exploited at their full capacity regarding the inclusion of the variants. Thirdly, the analysis of 20 SL2 textbooks shows that they largely restrict themselves to Cultural references, leaving out the other two kinds of culture (Potvin, 2020). As Cultural references are part of one's encyclopedic knowledge, not only do SL2 students develop this kind of knowledge, but they also do it via the North Central peninsular variant contained in their textbooks. Thus, by the end of their courses, it seems unlikely that they will have reached intercultural competence (Fantini, Arias-Galicia and Guay, 2001). Faced with this situation, we suggest appealing to the

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internationalization of the curricula in order to facilitate the development of our SL2 university students' intercultural competence.

2   Internationalization of the curricula and interculturality

Briefly stated, the pedagogical concept of the internationalization of the curricula can be defined as the integration of an international dimension in the curricula, the contents of the program and the course, the teaching method and assessment, the investigation, etc., in order to foster the social and professional growth of students who will work in an international, interdisciplinary and multicultural context (Daniels, 2017). Although any language course is in itself part of the internationalization of the curricula, we seek to enhance our SL2 students' intercultural competence through exposure to several Hispanic variants. Here we propose to follow Chávez and Longerbeam's (2016) approach to interculturality[2]. For them, "In a culturally integrated framework, an interconnected, mutual, reflective, cyclical, contextually dependent conception of the world is common, assumed, and valued" (Chávez and Longerbeam, 2016: 8)[3]. The purpose of learning is directly linked with the improvement of people's lives, from our family to the community. It is possible to attain this goal by reflecting on others and the relationships with others as well as by listening to others' experiences. Therefore, in this framework, collective learning is at the center of one's and others' learning. As such, students' interactions are important to highlight others' perspectives and comprehensions of the world. The notions to work on have to be contextualized and connected.

As linguistic competence and intercultural competence go hand in hand (Potvin, 2020, 2018), we now turn to the kind of culture useful for working on intercultural competence in SL2 language courses.

3   Cultural grammar

Because "Connecting culture and language is not new" (Sánchez Pérez, 2009: 307; our translation), there has always been an attempt to teach culture[4] in language courses in one way or another depending on the field in which you consider the concept[5] (Jiménez-Ramírez, 2019). Unfortunately, these earlier attempts were insufficient in facilitating SL2 students' transition to being intercultural speakers. Various reasons explain this long-standing situation, some of which are:

1. For many decades the focus in language courses has been to teach the linguistic components.
2. Culture has long been considered a mere complement and not a real protagonist alongside the linguistic system, while the way the concept of culture is defined should determine the way culture is integrated into language courses.
3. Thanks to the communicative method, the central role culture has to play in acquiring a second or a foreign language is widely recognized. However, a kind of "catalog" of the cultural elements to be taught hand in hand with linguistics forms is still lacking (Jiménez-Ramírez, 2019; Sánchez Pérez, 2009).

This "catalog" would reflect the Cultural grammar an SL2 student would have to master in order to become an intercultural speaker. Although Sánchez-Pérez (2009) and Guillén Díaz (2016)

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[2] Note that this approach could be used to develop the intercultural competence in any kind of course.

[3] Note that the role of the professor has changed to that of a facilitator of a learning experience (Chávez and Longerbeam, 2016).

[4] Plenty of work has been done regarding the definition of the concept of culture. For an overview see Guillén Díaz (2016), among others.

[5] For those from the literary field, culture is reduced to an inventory of historic and artistical facts, while for those from the philosophical field what matters are the psychological mechanisms involved in the learning process (Jiménez-Ramírez, 2019). The concept of culture is only taken in its entirety by those from the forum axis ("eje del foro"), for whom "the language is only a part of a communication which is conditioned by beliefs, values, habits, rites or taboos" (Jiménez-Ramírez, 2019: 246; our translation).

mention such a grammar in their work, they specify that nobody has determined its content yet[6]. Moreover, for an SL2 Cultural grammar to be authentic, it is important to integrate the Hispanic varieties, which is not an easy task. Also, for this Cultural grammar to reflect the junction between the linguistic competence and the intercultural competence, it is necessary to distinguish the kinds of cultures and the knowledge they imply. Adopting Miquel and Sans' (2004) terminology, Culture with a big C contains the encyclopedic notions, while Culture "a secas" contains all the communicative notions proper to a community and, as such, serves to attain the intercultural competence. Now, useful to language courses is the subdivision of the content of the Culture "a secas" in order to create activities which also take into account the linguistic component of the language: there are those non-linguistic elements (i.e., gestures, habits, rites, etc.) and the linguistic ones (i.e., the way we answer the phone, express (in)formality, argue, etc.). This last nuance leads us to argue that there is not only an intercultural competence to develop, but also an intercultural communicative one (Byram, 1997).

4   Conclusion

The promotion of interculturality as well as Culture grammar through the internationalization of the curricula led us to pursue our task by creating activities for our SL2 university language courses. These activities must not only be integrated in order to achieve the intercultural competence, but also be integrated with our students' linguistic competence growth in mind. As such, the two competences must be developed hand in hand (Potvin 2020, 2018); one cannot take precedence over the other. Thus, our beginner SL2 students complete four Missions ("Misión 1", and so on), our beginner-intermediate SL2 students work on the Hispanic movie festival – part one ("Festival del cine – 1ª fase"), while our intermediate students realize the Big project ("Gran Proyecto") and our intermediate-advanced ones participate in the Hispanic movie festival – part two ("Festival del cine – 2ª fase"). All these activities share three basic characteristics that help students to attain the linguistic, cultural or intercultural (communicative) competences:

1. Authenticity: Thanks to authentic language samples (Cervantes Institute, 2007) as mentioned earlier, but also experiential learning, in order to develop the linguistic and cultural competences
2. Interculturality: In order to develop the intercultural competence
3. Collaboration: In order to reach the intercultural communicative competence

Acknowledgements

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[6] One exception would be the Plan Curricular (Instituto Cervantes 2007), but it is based on the North central peninsular variant, as mentioned earlier.

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