

UNDERSTANDING AND ASSESSING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT: A CASE STUDY OF TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMME DELIVERY BETWEEN COLLEGE STUDENTS IN ULPGC, SPAIN, AND ICES, FRANCE

RICHARD CLOUET*

Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

ABSTRACT. *Throughout the literature, researchers use a wide range of more or less related terms to discuss and describe ‘intercultural competence’. They have in common the attempt to account for the ability to go beyond one’s own culture and interact with other individuals from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. In that sense, contact with other languages and cultures provides an excellent opportunity to foster the development of intercultural communicative competence and online transnational programmes play a unique role in offering students the opportunity to put into practice their intercultural competencies. In this article we summarize theory and research on intercultural competence, paying particular attention to existing approaches and tools for its assessment in online educational programmes. We also present the example of a case study: the setting up of a transnational education programme between college students in ULPGC, Spain, and ICES, France.*

KEY WORDS. *Intercultural communication, communicative competence, transnational programmes, assessment, social justice.*

RESUMEN. *El análisis teórico sobre el estado de la cuestión nos lleva al gran número de términos que usan los investigadores para referirse a la “competencia intercultural”. Todos, sin embargo, explican que se trata de la capacidad de ir más allá de su propia cultura y de interactuar con otros individuos de diversos contextos lingüísticos y culturales. En este sentido, el contacto con otras lenguas y culturas proporciona una excelente oportunidad para fomentar el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa intercultural, y los programas transnacionales en línea juegan un papel único: ofrecen a los estudiantes la oportunidad de poner en práctica dicha competencia. En este artículo, resumimos la literatura sobre competencia intercultural, con especial atención a los enfoques y a las herramientas para su evaluación en programas educativos en línea. También presentamos un caso concreto como ejemplo: la elaboración de un*

programa educativo transnacional entre estudiantes de la ULPGC en España y de ICES en Francia.

PALABRAS CLAVE. *Comunicación intercultural, competencia comunicativa, programas transnacionales, evaluación, justicia social.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In our increasingly multicultural society, college students need to be better equipped to function effectively in a diverse environment. Mixing, communicating and living with people from different cultures involves a certain amount of preparation and competence. In this respect, an online foreign language programme is an ideal choice to express this type of educational intervention. To have a good command of a language does not only mean understanding and knowing how to use its grammatical structures, but also understanding the culture in which the language is immersed and learning how to place one culture in contact with the other, the major objective of this being to foster social justice and the equality of opportunities. Consequently, students must continually develop more efficient intercultural communication skills that will help them to participate in intercultural dialogue on equal terms.

For the last two decades, both the Spanish and French educational systems have had to face the challenge of diversity, and a tremendous increase in cultural heterogeneity of educational settings. This change has transformed the nature of the experience of teaching and learning languages to a great extent, since multicultural classrooms create a heightened need for intercultural communication and social justice. This is even more relevant in a small geographical area like the Canary Islands where, over recent years, schools and colleges have witnessed the arrival of a large number of immigrant schoolchildren and students, thus increasing the need for them and their teachers to interact with others who are linguistically and culturally different from themselves.

Online transnational College programmes like those we aim to set up at the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC) and at Institut Catholique d'Études Supérieures de la Roche-sur-Yon (ICES) play a unique role in offering students the opportunity to develop their intercultural competencies. The internationalization of higher education is a growing trend leading to globalization (Leask, Hicks, Kohler and King 2005), this international cooperation experience being aimed at developing effective multicultural practices between the Spanish and French education systems. For this reason, this paper is a further contribution to assess the emerging need to study the acquisition of new competencies that may be important not only for individual enrichment and communicative proficiency but also for providing future professionals with the capabilities necessary for promoting successful, respectful and equitable collaboration across cultures.

In this article, we first give a summary of the theory and research on intercultural competence, paying particular attention to existing approaches and tools for its assessment and trying to contribute to a better understanding of teaching and learning experiences in a multicultural and transnational context. Drawing upon this theoretical

approach, we then propose a model of assessment based on a transnational programme which is currently being set up between ULPGC, Spain, and ICES, France, and consequently argue for an online foreign language programme as an ideal choice to create a multicultural learning community, to maintain the interest and motivation of students and to improve the quality of students' intercultural skills, with an interest in promoting social justice in its broadest sense. We hope this way of assessing intercultural competence with language students at ULPGC and ICES will provide a useful basis to foreign language educators who also seek to understand and improve the intercultural competencies of their students.

2. CULTURE, MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

It is difficult to talk about multicultural and transnational education without first explaining the socio-cultural context of this study and also becoming entangled in discussions on what we understand by 'culture' and the concepts of 'intercultural communication', 'intercultural education', 'multicultural education' and 'transnational education'.

Issues of immigration and multiculturalism in France date back to the late 1970s and early 1980s. "France has received and absorbed various waves of immigrants, who have enriched the country materially and culturally" (Braudel 1990: 203). Apart from the immigration factor, if language alone can serve as a reliable indicator of cultural diversity, France is extraordinarily diverse; its regional languages alone (e.g., Alsatian, Lorrain, Basque, Breton, Catalan, Corsican, Flemish, Gallo, Norman, Occitan and a range of Franco-Provençal dialects) make France the most multilingual nation-state on the European continent (Oakes 2001: 88). It is thus more than obvious that France is, as Catherine Wihtol de Wenden writes, "de facto, a multicultural country" (Wihtol de Wenden 2004: 70)

While cultural diversity as a result of immigration has been an essential part of French history since the 1970s, it is quite a recent phenomenon in Spain, a country which has only been a place of immigration for the past decade. Since the early 2000s, Spanish education has had to face the challenge of diversity, and a tremendous increase in cultural heterogeneity of educational settings. This change has transformed the nature of the experience of teaching and learning languages to a great extent, since multicultural classrooms create a heightened need for intercultural communication.

This is even more relevant in the Canary Islands if we consider the changes that have been taking place in this Spanish autonomous region in the last few years. Over recent years, schools in the Canary Islands have experienced great changes, the most significant one probably being the increasing number of immigrant children in schools. In the south of Gran Canaria, for example, 140 different nationalities were registered in secondary school classrooms in 2010 (data provided by the Teacher Training Centre of the South of Gran Canaria: <http://www.centrodelprofesorado.com/gcsur/index.php>).

The ULPGC is no exception to the rule and the historical background of the Canary Islands makes an interesting multicultural environment where the co-habitation of

different cultures is worthy of study. In addition, as the third most popular destination for international university students from Europe and the American continent, Spain has developed a diverse, multicultural student population which, over time, has made the Spanish education system one of the most attractive in Europe from the point of view of cultural diversity.

Although the Canary Island curriculum now suggests all teachers, particularly teachers of foreign languages and obviously university professors, should become aware of this new diversity and of aspects of intercultural communication (BOC n° 112, 06/06/08), no further explanation is provided and very little focus is placed on the intercultural dimension of language teaching. Generally speaking, Spanish educational policy, as far as language teaching is concerned, simply defers to the Common European language policy standards in teaching languages and cultures, which proposes that learners should acquire certain general and sociocultural knowledge and develop certain communicative and intercultural skills (Council of Europe 2001: 101-130). Thus, special attention is paid to developing intercultural skills which are defined as the ability of the learners to bring the culture of origin, i.e. the native culture of the learners, and the foreign culture into relation with each other; the ability to be sensitive and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures; the capacity to fulfil the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstandings and conflict situations; and the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships.

These education rules and regulations seem to be an instance of giving advance notice to both teachers and professors of newly required competencies. The new multicultural reality has obliged them to revise their curricular projects in order to adapt them to this situation and to teach their pupils to face this new global imperative by reflecting on their culture in relation to others. This is consistent with the development of a degree of cultural sensitivity on the part of students, that is to say, it brings students closer to a reality that, on occasions, might be the same as, and on others similar to or totally different from their own.

Consequently, learning a language no longer means acquiring communicative competence, in other words being able to act in a foreign language in linguistically, sociolinguistically and pragmatically appropriate ways (Council of Europe 2001), but also becoming interculturally competent, which can be defined as being able "to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures" (Meyer 1991: 138). This interaction, according to Byram, does not only imply an effective interchange of information, as was the goal of communicative language teaching, but also "the ability to decentre and take up the other's perspective on their own culture, anticipating and where possible, resolving dysfunctions in communication and behaviour" (Byram 1997: 42).

Nowadays, language teachers can have access to a wide range of studies that provide insights into the linguistic and social skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural contact situations. We can

thus mention studies in the field of social psychology, as well as studies of intercultural communication (Wiseman and Koster 1993). They also have Byram's valuable model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) that emphasises a set of competencies that should be acquired by foreign language students and organizes them around five key factors: Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills of interpreting and relating, Skills of discovery and interaction and Political education including critical cultural awareness (Byram 1997).

This approach was further developed in the work of Meyer (2000), who argues that intercultural competence is a combination of social and communicative skills, including: empathy, ability to deal with conflict, ability to work collaboratively, flexibility, foreign language awareness, awareness that culture causes different discussion styles, speech speeds, interpretation and thought patterns, techniques for handling interactional difficulties, reflection on one's own cultural background and tolerance of ambiguity.

Broadly, intercultural communication involves the ability to cope with one's own cultural background in interaction with others. Byram's model further stresses that ICC requires "certain attitudes" which include "curiosity and openness as well as readiness to see other cultures and the speaker's own without being judgmental" (Byram 1997: 34). However, because culture is context-specific and thus dynamic –Kramersch (1998) reminds us that culture involves membership of a discourse community– intercultural understandings and development are dynamic too. Consequently, if culture is embodied in what people do and the way they use their knowledge at a certain time in a certain context, we may wonder if it is truly possible for teachers to facilitate ICC without giving the opportunity to experience 'other' cultures first-hand and if the development of intercultural communicative competence should not be best facilitated through active production and reflection that relate to real communication contexts and real life.

Our personal 'cultural baggage' as a French native speaker who, after teaching English as a Foreign Language in France and French as a Foreign Language in England for several years, is now an EFL teacher in Spain, leads us to the conclusion that intercultural relationships are very important in constructions of our own identity and that of others, and those relationships are ideally expressed through language. This baggage has provided us a lens through which we have been able to assess our practice, trying to give our students not only the opportunity for a "two-way cultural learning process" (Young 1996: 165) through criticism and discussion, but also multicultural content in the English classroom as a premise for authentic and respectful dialogue. Dialogue with and between students helps everyone expand their cultural knowledge and transform their understanding of otherness. This is precisely why these new cultural encounters that take place in an online multicultural classroom should enable English teachers to transform their professional practice.

More recently, Miquel Rodrigo Alsina (2003) argued that intercultural communication can be understood as interpersonal communication in which the intervention of people with cultural references that are sufficiently different produce an important barrier which alters the efficacy of the communication and should be taken into consideration by the language teacher.

[...] any communication may be defined as intercultural. This could take us to a dead end, as it would become unnecessary to classify the communication as intercultural. The only means to clarify the situation is to emphasise the existence of an adjustment in the cultural difference. Thus, the ways of thinking, feeling and acting of different communities have more or less proximity to one another because they share, for example, the language or some elements of their life style. It is evident that the more elements these communities share, the easier the communication between them. Therefore, we can observe that at one end of the scale there would be a great difference and, at the other, the difference would be almost non-existent. In each circumstance, the intercultural communication will have different characteristics in accordance with the proximity or remoteness (Rodrigo Alsina 2003: 77).

This focus, based on comparisons between the learner's own culture and the target culture(s) and on a reflective attitude to culture difference, is quite recent in the Spanish literature on ICC. With this new approach, it is no longer just a question of presenting static cultural elements according to fixed patterns that must be learned and understood. It is a matter of making pupils aware that the learning of a foreign language will give them the key to an unknown cultural universe and provide them with specific resources to avoid situations of conflict during communication. The ultimate goals aim at developing the ability to behave in a correct and flexible manner when confronted with other cultures. This implies the understanding of differences between one's own culture and the foreign culture, the acquiring of skills to be able to solve intercultural problems as a consequence of these differences and, finally, the capacity to mediate between cultures. Within this framework, the foreign language learner is viewed as an "intercultural speaker", someone who "crosses frontiers, and who is to some extent a specialist in the transit of cultural property and symbolic values" (Byram and Zarate 1997: 11). It will then be the teacher's responsibility to mediate between the native language and target language culture(s) in order to help learners achieve such goals (Byram and Risager 1999; Edelhoff 1993).

This is precisely why it is of utmost importance to delve into the additional knowledge, attitudes, competencies and skills required by foreign language teachers in education systems that tend to give priority to strictly linguistic skills. Among the studies on the acquisition of ICC through foreign language teaching, Castro, Sercu and Méndez Garcia (2005) investigated to what extent Spanish teachers of English supported cultural and intercultural objectives. Results of data revealed that, although the majority of Spanish foreign language teachers were willing to try and attain culture learning objectives in foreign language education, they tended to prioritize the promotion of students' familiarity with the culture and the development of native-speaker-like fluency over the acquisition of an open mind. All three authors also suggested the need for a greater understanding of how to focus on intercultural communication in their own EFL classes. Moreover, they highlighted the fact that there does not seem to be a clear relationship between teachers' beliefs and day-to-day practices, and that the latter's conceptions often shape their behaviour to a large extent and determine the success of their teaching practices.

In the light of all this, all teachers should probably be required to reread the works of Kramersch (1998) and Lo Bianco, Liddicoat and Crozet (1999), where it is clearly stipulated that it is now inappropriate and outdated for language learners to have as their ultimate objective that of developing native-speaker-like fluency. These authors argue that the most desired outcome in language teaching and learning should now be the ‘intercultural speaker’ we mentioned before. It does not simply mean that a language should no longer be learnt in isolation from its cultural roots, but it is rather a new way of thinking and doing, a new orientation and perspective, which influences all decisions regarding curriculum, including the knowledge, understanding and behaviours (Liddicoat et al. 2003: 57) and the intercultural speaker strategies outlined by Scarino (2000).

In summary, culture in the sense of intercultural communication and transcultural teaching refers to behaviour, values, assumptions, meanings, customs and beliefs: in other words, to what Witsel calls “all the facets that determine the way of life of a group of people: their patterns of behaviour, and the ways in which they understand and interpret the world” (Witsel 2008: 14). It is certainly pervasive and very often intangible, but right from 1997, Hofstede helps us understand and define what culture means in intercultural communication: “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes one human group from another” (Hofstede 1984: 51). As this study is concerned with interaction between students from Spain and France rather than comparisons and distinctions between people, the phrase ‘intercultural communication’ is employed when referring to situations where Spanish and French students are together and need to communicate in a programme of ‘transnational’ education through an online context.

The ‘international’ students referred to in this study are French and Spanish nationals involved in an EFL online transnational programme, thus forming a multicultural classroom. Communication within this multicultural classroom can therefore be classified as intercultural communication, since students from two different cultures are together and need to communicate in a language which is foreign to them: English is a foreign language for both Spanish and French students.

In this context, our exploration of the role of the teacher in the global age, informed by our own experience of teaching foreign languages in different contexts (France, the United Kingdom and Spain), has led us to inquire into the necessity of internationalizing education and setting up such transnational programmes for our students in order to provide insights into their conceptions of the intercultural component. The present study particularly focuses on two aspects of the elaboration of an online transnational education programme: syllabus internationalization and the assessment of intercultural competence.

3. ONLINE TRANSNATIONAL SYLLABUS: AN EXAMPLE OF INTERNATIONALIZATION

Like many Spanish universities, ULPGC has collaborative educational agreements with higher education providers in other countries. These agreements can take a variety of forms: educational partnerships, educational collaborations, double degree programmes and, only very recently, online transnational programmes, the Faculty of Translation and

Interpreting being a pioneer in that field with the initiative of setting up an online programme with a French university (ICES) in 2013.

Typically, English language programmes are habitually based on a structural-grammar core with a progression from simpler to more complex structures, as well as the gradual introduction of vocabulary. Such programmes are commonly built into topic-based units aimed at practising a range of skills, traditionally reading, writing, listening and speaking, which have now been extended in the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Teaching, Learning, Assessment* (CEFR) to include written expression, written interaction, spoken expression, spoken interaction and audiovisual comprehension, the prime focus being laid on language as a tool for communication.

Although the term 'syllabus' is variously used in pedagogical terms to describe a teaching and learning programme which may cover anything from an entire educational cycle to the content of a single subject, various definitions can be found (Richards and Rogers 1986). For purposes of clarity, though, we will refer to 'syllabus' and 'programme' as the planning of a module of study, as opposed to 'curriculum', which would refer to an entire degree programme.

If definitions of 'syllabus' vary enormously in face-to-face teaching/learning contexts, it is obvious that defining the concept of online syllabus is still more complicated. It might range from limiting the idea of syllabus to a proffered list of items taught, to the objects required to facilitate the students' learning (such as course materials, books etc, but excluding the academic and the interaction between academic and students, or between students themselves), to any other elements that may include or foster knowledge, skills, and attitudes. We may thus define an online syllabus as a structured learning plan organized as a sequenced combination of modules so that students can achieve specified educational and training outcomes through the use of online collaboration tools that help them share experiences and acquire the expected competences. The syllabus will normally include a teaching guide, an assessment guide and required learning resources.

Given that the notion of 'syllabus' itself is quite diverse, the concept of internationalizing the syllabus has invited much discussion between ICES and ULPGC. This new teaching and learning paradigm had to contain the belief that both universities should grant an equal opportunity for success to every student that they enrol on this course and provide equably for the learning ambitions of all students, irrespective of their national, ethnic, cultural, social class or gender identities, thus complying with the principles of equity and social justice. It also had to develop cross-cultural competence across shared multicultural learning environments through the use of Internet-based tools. This means that we do not merely want to promote a course where students from different countries share an online classroom. Rather, we wish to create a learning environment where teams from two cultures work together to develop a common syllabus, emphasizing experiential and collaborative student learning, providing venues in which students develop their cross-cultural awareness and social justice-based skills.

‘Syllabus design’, ‘equity’ and ‘social justice’ are words that have not traditionally been associated with online transnational education. What does it mean to teach for social justice? What does ‘teaching for social justice’ imply in an online environment? Although the answer to this question is multi-faceted, our objective through this course, a brief description of which we present hereafter, is to help students to understand two essential concepts that relate to this issue: the recognition that there is injustice in our world and the finding of strategies to counter injustice. As students gain cross-cultural awareness, they will also become conscious of the injustice perpetuated around race, class, gender, ability, or sexuality groups that people are identified with. They will also find out that such faces of oppression often differ across time, place, and situation, and that their teachers can help them interrupt (or challenge) oppression. In a nutshell, teaching for social justice in an online environment means recognizing oppression in its multiple forms, and then taking action in the online classroom to interrupt the cycles of oppression.

In order to do this, the course we have developed (*Advanced English: Language and Culture*) attempts to focus on real communication within meaningful contexts, not only to consolidate skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing, but to foster social justice through a series of exercises that work on the concepts of oppression and injustice and that directly contribute to developing the set of competences presented in Byram’s valuable model of intercultural communicative competence, namely Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills of interpreting and relating, Skills of discovery and interaction and Political education including critical cultural awareness (Byram 1997).

Preparing students to solve social problems on local and global levels is nothing new in contemporary higher education (Guthrie & McCracken 2010b). In the increasingly facilitated virtual learning environments that teachers are used to resorting to nowadays, studying with extremely diverse groups of participants is made easier and creates new opportunities for intercultural learning activities constructed to be relevant and focused on real-world problems (McKnight 2000). To effectively implement such social justice pedagogies, Guthrie and McCracken suggest instructors do the following: 1) create virtual environments that enable ongoing communication, interaction, and relationship building; 2) develop a teaching approach that fosters autonomy and collaboration; 3) design and implement methodologies that afford opportunities for critical reflection and inquiry; and 4) deliver curricula through universally accessible technologies which support primary learning goals and the development of secondary skills (e.g., mastering Web site navigation and the use of software and hardware) (Guthrie and McCracken 2010a). This process is fostered through teaching approaches that help students to consider new learning experiences that can enrich individual and intercultural awareness, exploring values and ethics, and applying them in diverse contexts.

For the last decade or so, higher education instructors have become aware of the importance of developing learning environments that value experience along with the acquisition of knowledge in collaborative groups (McBrien 2008; Taylor 2008) and that allow students to engage one another as peers and resources at the same time. This explains the importance of developing online courses based on “reflective practice

through collaborative inquiry and that incorporate methods such as targeted readings, interactive and goal-directed discussions, team and small group activities, reflective writing, and presentations” (Guthrie and McCracken 2010c: 81). This is precisely what will increase students’ cross-cultural consciousness and awareness of social injustice not only in two cultures, Spanish and French, but more generally speaking around the world.

The brief description of the course we present hereafter and that is still in its preparation phase takes all these considerations into account and also reveals the complexity of the teacher’s role in this online environment. Apart from motivating the students and engaging them to participate actively, the teacher’s responsibility is also to facilitate relationships within the collaborative group, to establish the correct partnerships, to help them to tackle and explore new information on both local and global levels that might eventually contribute to changes in their personal development and a critical awareness of the nature of social justice. Meyers (2008) suggests that all learning activities aimed at encouraging critical discourse are especially effective in virtual environments because they extend dialogue beyond the confinement of the classroom through the use of innovative resources that may encourage the exploration of issues related to social justice and equity.

In this online course set up by ULPGC and ICES, technologies have been chosen based on their capacity to facilitate interaction, communication, and collaboration around common learning goals. Students will interact in the target language as they learn advanced grammatical concepts and broaden their vocabulary to enable more in-depth discussions about customs, traditions, stereotypes, gender, personal relationships, technology, and the environment. Geographical differences have been exploited through the strategic use of both synchronous and asynchronous activities. It has been a priority to ensure continuous interaction between all the participants, including students and teachers, with the integration of asynchronous discussion boards, blogs, and email, as well as synchronous chat, telephone usage, and virtual conferencing platforms that enable text, audio, and video interaction. The course will also incorporate mobile learning components through Podcasts, RSS feeds, iPod Apps and Android Apps that will enable students to access course materials from a personal mobile device. As an example, by pairing with native speakers at the partner institution and by working collaboratively, students will be required to analyze and discuss various culturally-related topics, as well as create oral presentations and digital projects using social networking and video-sharing platforms. All their productions, both spoken and written, will be distributed and archived using document and file sharing, and podcasts.

This combination of telecommunications will highlight the ultimate focus of the course which is real communication made possible via collaboration with native speaker peers at the partner institution, with whom students will share perspectives on contemporary intercultural issues and reflect upon their own cultural contexts and how others may perceive them, thus encouraging analytical thinking on the topics of ‘social justice’ and intercultural awareness.

| Module | Central themes | Collaborative work |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| 1. New place, new pace | Pleased to meet you! Autobiography. Home sweet home. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. | Introduction. Write an autobiography in the foreign language. Write about your personality, general physical characteristics, where you are from, where you live, what you are studying, about your family, hobbies, etc. Post to discussion board and record in VoiceThread. You will be responding in English to two partner students. |
| 2. Stereotypes and prejudices | Getting on together. Stereotypes in intercultural communication. Prejudices. | 01 Encounters (Discussion: Cultures). Stereotypes and prejudices. Compare and analyze stereotypes which exist about the Spanish- and French-speaking worlds. Where do these stereotypes come from? What are the risks of stereotyping in intercultural communication? Post at least two responses to classmates' discussions. Joint oral session in Elluminate. |
| 3. Relationship | Gender gap. Home life. Getting on together. Work relations. | 02 Encounters. Relationships. Topics for discussion include description of someone's home, understandings of privacy, parents and children, domestic duties, typical day, gender roles in family life, and work relations. Post at least two responses to classmates' discussions in 01 Encounters discussion boards. |
| 4. Yummy Yummy! | Food and drink. Advertising. | 03 Encounters. Yummy Yummy! Analysis of advertisements. Find two advertisements in your target culture for food and/or drink, one which is successful and another one which is not, in your opinion. Explain your reasoning. Topics for discussion also include going to cafés and restaurants with friends, family members and colleagues. Post at least two responses to classmates' discussions in 02 Encounters discussion boards. 04 Encounters. Yummy Yummy! Designing of advertisements. Design an advertisement to market your favourite national food, dish or drink. |
| 5. Customs and traditions | Traditions. Customs. Holidays. Cultural heritage. | 04 Encounters (continuation) Give an assessment of an advertisement created by your partner, following the rubric provided. 05 Encounters. Customs and traditions. Topics for discussion include customs, traditions, religious and secular holidays, religion and education, and cultural heritage. Post at least two responses to classmates' discussions in 05 Encounters discussion boards. |
| 6. Music and folklore | Music. Songs. Folklore. Dance. | 06 Encounters. Music and folklore. Discuss one song and one piece of folklore which have a strong personal meaning for you. Post at least two responses to classmates' discussions in 06 Encounters discussion boards. |

| Module | Central themes | Collaborative work |
|---|--|--|
| 7. Information and communication technologies | The information revolution. Computers for communication. Communication for work. | 07 Encounters. Information and communication technologies. Topics for discussion include non-verbal communication, informal and formal language, language in the office environment, online versus face to face communication, business and personal relationships through the Internet, effective online communication, the future of online communication. Post at least two responses to classmates' discussions in 07 Encounters discussion boards. |
| 10. Immigration, integration and social justice | Immigration. Cultural diversity. Social mobility. Social justice. | 08 Encounters. Immigration, integration and social justice. Topics for discussion include immigration, diversity, minority experience, intergenerational conflict, demography, employment and social mobility. Film discussion. <i>Welcome</i> (2009). French film about a young Iraqi Kurd who wants to swim the English Channel to get to his girlfriend in the U.K. He is helped by a swimming instructor who faces an end to his marriage. <i>Nameless</i> (2009). Spanish language film about a Honduran family trying to reach the United States and build a life there. Watch the two films on immigration, compare the stories and answer the following questions: 1. Where do immigrants to Spain/France come from? 2. Are immigrants grouped in certain regions or cities? If so, where? 3. Do most immigrants learn Spanish/French? 4. Do you think Spain/France benefits from the presence of people from other cultures? Post at least two responses to classmates' discussions in 08 Encounters discussion boards. |

Table 1. Syllabus for online transnational programme

In this course, discussions will be held in English, the *lingua franca par excellence*. The *lingua franca* must be seen a means of communication which should not be bound to culturally specific conditions of use, but should be easily transferable to any cultural setting. In addition to providing opportunities to practise the target language in a real context and for meaningful communication, these discussion and collaborative opportunities will facilitate relationships, provide participants with a real context for intercultural reflection, both individual and collective, building on their existing awareness of their local communities as well as developing their knowledge of other environments through collaborative inquiry (Holland and Robinson 2008). Our implicit objective is to foster critical discourse and to facilitate engagement through structured reflection, hence the organization of the course in modules and a series of successive

encounters between ULPGC and ICES students that involve complex thinking about highly personal experiences and thus help them to better understand issues related to social justice, action and responsibility.

4. ASSESSING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

Foreign language programmes normally prescribe some manner of assessing participant competence in a variety of academic and professional areas. However, they often overlook or undervalue the area of intercultural competence. Assessing ICC development is consistent with recent trends in higher education to introduce a major focus on developing students' competence across a range of skills related to their possible future professions and to their life as responsible, respectable, socially competent citizens engaged in a life-long learning process. Nowadays, most teachers realize the importance of intercultural communication in their language course syllabus, but few of them actually know how to assess whether their students are reaching the intercultural learning objectives they have established. Indeed, teachers are generally uncertain as to how ICC should be evaluated and some scholars even question the fact that ICC can be explicitly tested (Kramsch 1993). This situation has led Paran and Sercu to publish a collection of papers under a very suggestive title: *Testing the Untestable in Language Education* (2010), the first book to address the testing of four important dimensions of foreign language education which have been left largely unconsidered: learner autonomy, intercultural competence, literature and literary competence, and the integration of content and language learning.

However, if we want to introduce an intercultural component in our syllabus and wish our students to acquire sensitivity to differences in behaviour, attitudes and values of people from other cultures, it is essential that this component is assessed, especially in a programme aimed at developing cross-cultural awareness and social justice-based skills. Moreover, it is worth remembering that teachers always tend to teach what will be tested (McNamara 2000).

As a complex phenomenon, ICC encompasses multiple components to be taken into account in the process of assessment. These include a variety of traits and characteristics, three areas or domains, four dimensions and proficiency in the host language, "for poor foreign language skills can prevent learners from demonstrating high intercultural competence" (Paran and Sercu 2010: 19). Commonly cited traits and characteristics of ICC include: flexibility, humour, patience, openness, interest, curiosity, empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, and suspending judgment, among others. But, following Byram's model (1997), ICC also involves ability in three areas or domains (the ability to establish and maintain relationships, the ability to communicate with minimal loss or distortion, the ability to collaborate in order to accomplish something of mutual interest or need) and four dimensions (knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness).

Many materials exist that can help in designing intercultural programmes and activities based on these three areas and four dimensions. Here are just a few examples: the Experiential Learning Cycle (Lewin in Kolb 1984: 21); fifty cultural and intercultural

activities (Fantini 1997); activities for intercultural learning (Seelye 1996); and cross-cultural training methods (Fowler and Mumford 1995, 1999), among others. Assessing ICC development, however, presents various challenges, since it is much more complicated to assess awareness and attitude than it is to assess knowledge and skills.

Consequently, when assessing ICC, one cannot be concerned with traditional grades, but rather with creative techniques to determine progress towards the development of competencies and with the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Its completion is based on both behavioural observations and performance. In the programme we have set up, we have tried to consider both direct and indirect indicators, some from the students themselves and some from their peers. This is precisely why we have included not only staff evaluation, but also self-evaluation and peer evaluation. All these will hopefully provide information about individual achievements towards ICC and the collaborative programme outcomes themselves.

We totally agree with Fantini (1997) when he differentiates between the words ‘competence’ and ‘performance’ when writing about ICC assessment. In one view, ‘competence’ is abstract and cannot be witnessed directly; consequently, it must be inferred by observing how one performs. Hence, competence and performance are interrelated – one being abstract and the other observable. In this view, then, one infers competence by observing and monitoring performance, rather than by talking about it only in abstraction.

Various attempts have been made to try and measure progress in intercultural competence, the most important one, in our opinion, being the INCA project (www.inca.org) that identifies three levels of performance: level 1 (basic competence), level 2 (intermediate competence) and level 3 (full competence), moving gradually from the will to interact successfully to the ability to intercede and take a polite stand over different issues. Sercu is quite critical with this particular rating scale, as he considers “it does not fit well into school education, and even suggests that school learning without direct contact with other cultures cannot lead to the development of intercultural competence” (Paran and Sercu 2010: 31).

However, since our online programme is aimed at the development of task performance skills such as team and project work skills, negotiation skills and computer literacy, the INCA project has been an important source of inspiration for the setting up of assessment activities for ICES and ULPGC students. In this context, intercultural competence is gained through gradual transformation and assimilation through peer observations, collaborative work, interviews, video recording of interaction and learning diaries (culture logs). Pre- and post-participation comparisons will then be helpful in giving us a general idea of the changes in learners’ performance. Indeed, ICC acquisition is an on-going and lengthy process, with moments of regression and stagnation, that has no real end; becoming completely ‘interculturally competent’ is impossible, because new challenges can arise at any time. There are several stages in this process and none of them is static. Bennett mentions “six stages from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism” (Bennett 1993: 29), but the rhythm at which learners adapt to a second culture, adjust to it and learn to operate successfully in it depends on individual choices, context and identity.

Following Ruben's pioneering work in behavioural approaches to ICC (Ruben 1976), educators will assess students on each of the following seven dimensions, using 4- and 5-point Likert scales: display of respect, interaction posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, self- oriented role behaviour, interaction management, and tolerance for ambiguity. We will also use and adapt Bhawuk and Brislin's Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (ICSI) that was developed to measure an individual's ability to modify behaviour in culturally appropriate ways when moving between different cultures (Bhawuk and Brislin 1992). The inventory was used in comparing behaviour in an individualistic culture (United States) versus a collectivistic culture (Japan), but in the same way, we can compare behaviours in France, an individualistic culture, and in Spain, characterized by a rather collectivistic, even though gradually individualistic, culture.

Over the term in which our course will take place (autumn term 2013), both Spanish and French students will also be required to complete the following assignments that will help us assess the progress of their competencies:

- “Designing advertisements” assignment: students will design an advertisement to market their favourite food, dish or drink, if possible, more regional in origin. It will have to include the following information: name of product, description of product, persuasive text explaining how this product will improve the consumer's life, information on where the consumer might find the product, and general price information.
- Midterm project: after reading and discussing the concept of stereotypes and archetypes, students will create a presentation in VoiceThread in which they will be required to gather a collection of icons/images that they feel best represent their country. For each image, they will be asked to write a few lines in English explaining what the image represents and why it is important. They will upload these documents to VoiceThread and record their descriptions. Students should also post their scripts to the Midterm Drop Box. Students will then comment on how these images seemed familiar or different from their own concepts of France and Spain, whether there is similar iconography for both nations, what the striking differences are, and whether there are noted regional and social differences.
- Final project: students will collaborate with their foreign partners to produce a ten-slide presentation, using either Google Presentation or VoiceThread, on one of the following cultural topics, comparing and contrasting their own cultural context in relation to the topic with their partner's. Topics include any subject related to daily life, hobbies, the media, food, the environment, the education system, family life, and customs. Students will collaborate to present a comparative analysis to the online class and will be expected to post comments on classmates' presentations. They will also be provided a rubric for peer evaluation.

Before starting the course, during the course and at the end of the course, students will be required to regularly record their ideas, perceptions of social justice both in the activities and online interactions with foreign students, as well as the cultural facts they

observe. It is a way of gathering information on the students' intercultural experiences and of keeping track of their progress and of any changes in their attitudes towards other cultures and the concept of social justice. They will also be asked to use a portfolio, in which they keep evidence of their progress, from personal observations to audio or video recordings, for instance.

We believe that the combination of two kinds of assessment, both direct and indirect, will help us understand students' ICC capacities, providing an empirical basis for future studies in three areas: tracking development, examining outcomes, and indicating areas for instructional improvement within the field of social justice through an online environment.

5. CONCLUSION

Despite the difficulties, ICC and its assessment must not be bypassed. It is clear that assessing ICC in foreign language education is anything but straightforward, but it is necessary in increasingly multicultural societies with a growing desire for social justice and fair play.

It is also apparent that it is genuinely rewarding to participate in students' intercultural development as they participate and interact in an online course related not only to foreign language learning, but also to social justice and personal engagement. It is with excitement ICES and ULPGC have engaged in this thrilling project which will hopefully help us, as well as other educators, to explore the potential of teaching intercultural competence in foreign language courses through the example of a pedagogical online experience with higher education learners. One of the main purposes of this online course is, indeed, the increased understanding of the pedagogical practice of both educational environments in order to reconceptualize it as one of social justice educators, which entails the construction of an understanding of intercultural competence teaching and learning in the foreign language classroom.

The abovementioned is not proposed as a thorough analysis of the implementation of ICC assessment in an online environment, but rather it intends to give a sample of how ICC can be assessed in a real online classroom situation, and to suggest that this is a field which deserves further research.

NOTE

* Correspondence to: Richard Clouet, Facultad de Traducción e Interpretación, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. C/ Pérez del Toro, 1. 35003-Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

REFERENCES

Bennett, J. M. 1993. "Toward ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity". *Education for the Intercultural Experience*. Ed. R. M. Paige. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural. 21-71.

- Bhawuk, D. P. S. and R. Brislin. 1992. "The measurement of intercultural sensitivity using the concepts of individualism and collectivism". *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 16: 413-436.
- Boletín Oficial de Canarias. 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.gobiernodecanarias.org/boc/2008/112/015.html>.
- Braudel, F. 1990. *The Identity of France*. Vol. I. New York: Harper and Row.
- Byram, M. 1997. *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M. and G. Zarate. 1997. *The Sociocultural and Intercultural Dimension of Language Learning and Teaching*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Byram, M. and K. Risager. 1999. *Language Teachers, Politics and Cultures*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Castro, P., L. Sercu, and M. C. García. 2004. "Integrating language-and-culture teaching: an investigation of Spanish teachers' perceptions of the objectives of foreign language education". *Intercultural Education* 15 (1): 91-104.
- Council of Europe. 2001. *Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Edelhoff, C. 1993. "English among the other European languages". *English Language Learning in Europe: Issues, Tasks and Problems*. Ed. British Council. Bratislava: ELTECS.
- Fantini, A. E. 1997. *New Ways in Teaching Culture*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.
- Fowler, S. M., and M. G. Mumford. 1995. *The Intercultural Sourcebook: Cross-cultural Training Methods*. Vol. 1. Yarmouth, ME: The Intercultural Press.
- Fowler, S. M., and M. G. Mumford. 1999. *The Intercultural Sourcebook: Cross-cultural Training Methods*. Vol. 2. Yarmouth, ME: The Intercultural Press.
- Guthrie, K. L. and H. McCracken. 2010a. "Promoting reflective discourse through connectivity: Conversations around service-learning experiences". *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. Eds. L. Shedletsk and J. E. Aitken. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Guthrie, K. L. and H. McCracken. 2010b. "Making a difference online: Facilitating service-learning through distance education." *The Internet and Higher Education* 13: 153-157.
- Guthrie, K. L. and H. McCracken. 2010c. "Teaching and learning social justice through online service-learning courses". *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 11 (3): 78-94.
- Hofstede, G. 1984. "National cultures and corporate cultures". *Communication Between Cultures*. Eds. L. A. Samovar and R. E. Porter. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Hofstede, G. 1997. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, London: McGraw Hill.
- Holland, B. and G. Robinson. 2008. "Community based learning with adults: Bridging efforts in multiple sectors". *New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education* 118: 17-30.

- Kolb, D. 1984. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Kramsch, C. 1993. *Context and Culture in Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kramsch, C. 1998. *Language and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leask, B., M. Hicks, M. Kohler and B. King. 2005. *AVCC Offshore Quality Project Report: A Professional Development Framework for Academic Staff Teaching Australian Programmes Offshore*. Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee.
- Liddicoat, A., L. Papademetre, A. Scarino and M. Kohler. 2003. *Report on Intercultural Language Learning*. Canberra: DEST.
- Lo Bianco, J., A. Liddicoat and C. Crozet. 1999. *Striving for the Third Place: Intercultural Competence through Language Education*. Melbourne: Language Australia.
- MacKnight, C. B. 2000. "Teaching critical thinking through online discussions". *Educause Quarterly* 4: 38-41.
- McBrien, J. L. 2008. "The world at America's doorstep: Service learning in preparation to teach global students". *Journal of Transformative Education* 6. Retrieved from <http://jtd.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/6/4/270>.
- McNamara, T. 2000. *Language Testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meyer, F. 2000. "Wir waren, sind ein multinationales Haus: Zur Bedeutung und Aspekten interkultureller Kompetenz am Beispiel eines Dienstleistungsbetriebes". *Ressourcen, Kompetenzen, Qualifikationen: Potentiale von Zuwanderern in Weiterbildung und Arbeitsmarkt*. Hamburg: Gesellschaft für Arbeit, Technik, und Entwicklung.
- Meyer, M. 1991. "Developing transcultural competence: Case studies in advanced language learners". *Mediating Languages and Cultures: Towards an Intercultural Theory of Foreign Language Education*. Eds. D. Buttjes and M. Byram. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. 136-158.
- Meyers, S. 2008. "Using transformative pedagogy when teaching online". *College Teaching* 56 (4): 219-224.
- Oakes, L. 2001. *Language and National Identity*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Paran, A. and L. Sercu. 2010. *Testing the Untestable in Language Education*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Richards, J. C. and T. S. Rogers. 1986. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rodrigo Alsina, M. 2003. *La comunicació intercultural*. Barcelona: Anthropos.
- Ruben, B. D. 1976. "Assessing communication competency for intercultural adaptation". *Group and Organization Studies* 1: 334-354.
- Scarino A. 2000. "Complexities in describing and using standards in languages education in the school setting: whose conceptions and values are at work?" *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* 23 (2): 7-20.
- Seelye, N. 1996. *Experiential Activities for Intercultural Learning*. Vol. 1. Yarmouth, ME: The Intercultural Press.
- Taylor, E. 2008. "Transformative learning theory". *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 119: 5-15.

- Wihlto de Wenden, C. 2004. "Multiculturalism in France". Eds. J. Rex and G. Singh. *Governance in Multicultural Societies*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Wiseman, R. and J. Koester. 1993. *Intercultural Communication Competence*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Witsel, M. 2008. *Transcultural Teachers: Experiences of Academics Teaching Tourism and Hospitality in Multicultural and Transnational Contexts*. Lismore, NSW: Southern Cross University Publications.
- Young, R. 1996. *Intercultural Communication. Pragmatics, Genealogy, Deconstruction*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

