

BOOK REVIEW

ARND WITTE / THEO HARDEN (Editors) RETHINKING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: THEORETICAL CHALLENGES AND PRACTICAL ISSUES

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Rethinking Intercultural Competence: Theoretical Challenges and Practical Issues

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Despite of being a much discussed issue in the last few decades, cultural differences, the awareness of and the competent dealing with them, namely intercultural skills, still need conceptualisation, continuous rethinking and redefining. The contributors to the 2021 release of Peter Lang Publishing House, *Rethinking Intercultural Competence: Theoretical Challenges and Practical Issues* (264 pages), assume exactly this task by analysing the concept from different angles and adopting even novel approaches, like dealing with intercultural competence in digital pedagogies and learner groups including persons with migration background, considerations regarding its teachability and others.

In their introduction to the collective volume the editors, Arnd Witte and Theo Harden, put up a short synthesis of the following twelve chapters highlighting the main issues in respective studies. They do this beside analysing the concepts of

culture, intercultural competence and sharing their thoughts upon the difficulties in teaching/learning and rendering them, as they refer to a set of values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour, contextually conditioned and even subject to change, quite impossible to internalise in a rule-based system. Picking up the ideas of the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, the editors tend to see culture as “habitats of meanings” extracted by individuals and communities from a “global pool of meanings” to build their own “repertoires” (Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places*, 1996). Considering intercultural competence as a result of negotiation and construction, teaching it should reflect the same attitude and instead of supplying learners with pre-constructed notions of a foreign culture, let them find out from the intercultural encounter their own construals. Thus “The performative approach to intercultural learning puts more emphasis on corporeally experiencing the intercultural situation and on corporeally ‘knowing how’ to (inter)act, as compared to the traditional cognitive emphasis on ‘knowing what’.” (p. 9)

The idea of the sentient body and the importance of un- and preconscious bodily manifestations in intercultural situations are extended upon in the following chapter signed by one of the editors, Arnd Witte. Traditional pedagogy lays emphasis on cognition neglecting thus the role of affections, but cognitive processes also depend on the functions of the living and sensing body they are linked to, conceptualised as embodiment. The linkage between cognition and body manifestations is proven by the findings of different studies demonstrating the role of performing stories while reading in improving reading comprehension. Thus involving multisensory aspects in foreign language learning can be crucial for cognition and for the success of the learning process. But according to Witte’s new approach this sentient body (felt body) shouldn’t be allotted a secondary, complementary role, it should get to the centre of analysis, as language, culture and even reality are rather represented in the interplay of bodies, subjects and environment than in cognition. Concluding, intercultural competence should rather be defined in terms of attentiveness to corporeal manifestations, resonance with other bodies and atmospheres than of rational aspects of understanding and control and this attentiveness is to be trained.

In the following we are confronted with another unusual approach, that of Rob Philburn, comparing communication in general and especially intercultural communication to the interactions between basic forces in the chemical and physical world. According to him the set of different approaches, viewpoints presented in the book should not be seen as competing with, but complementing each other in exploring this vast field in continuous evolution. In his eyes culture is a conversation, cultural traits, the ‘self-construal’ – the way people consider themselves like or unlike, separate from or connected with others – emerge from everyday communicational interactions. The way conversational construals are used to put up conversation, show the level of conversational competence valid for intercultural encounters, too.

Linda Huber, the author of chapter four, tends to see intercultural communicative competence not as a universal item, but rather a fluid signifier. Pointing to the general ambiguity around this notion despite of the long time preoccupation with it,

she analyses the applicability of different models of intercultural communicative competence for foreign language education. However representing different approaches to intercultural communicative competence, all these models agree upon the flexible, content-dependent and fluid character of it, including “knowledge, skills, attitudes, metacognition as well as strategic thinking”. (p. 73) As there is no consensus upon a universal, comprehensive definition of intercultural communicative competence related to language learning, standards for its assessment are missing, too, leaving space for variants referring to and covering different components of these skills, like performance or portfolio assessment, interviews, scenarios, role plays, attitude and personality surveys, diaries etc.

Assessment of intercultural competence is the topic of Beatriz Hernández-Moreno’s study, as well. Concerned with a responsible in-depth analysis, she recommends some questions to be asked before dealing with the topic, like: can intercultural competence be measured, entirely explained, rendered, is it the main key for success in life? In lack of objective, not biased or culturally determined tools, of precisely defined subcomponents of intercultural competence, assessing its level or achievement seems to be quite doomed to failure. If it is still assessed, the test applied for that reason should meet the six criteria for test usefulness, namely: reliability, validity, impact, practicality, authenticity and interactivity, out of which it is quite impossible to comply with the first two ones in case of measuring intercultural competence, as its level is varying across time (moment of testing) and space (environment of assessing) and due to the concerns related to its measurability and relevance. The author’s other concerns related to intercultural competence would refer to the indoctrinating character of any change desirable in the cultural field, as well as transforming it from a cultural into an economic capital created by training and testing.

Using the metaphor of Don Quixote’s windmill for the relation of intercultural competence to foreign language teaching and learning, Theo Harden wonders in chapter six, if the former one were something like the Spanish knight’s imaginary adversary and trying to render it to learners an enterprise as unfortunate as Quixote’s acts. His answer to this question would be “institutional language education is not the place for acquiring intercultural competence and attempts at teaching it will, at best, result in a kind of superficial knowledge which, when applied in the real world, might even result in the very opposite of successful (intercultural) communication.” (p. 107) Concluding, intercultural training can offer only some info about a certain culture, about dos and don’ts in that respective culture (declarative elements), but how to cope with that environment, to proceed in different situations can be learnt only within the specific context by continuous trial and adjustment, when committing mistakes.

In his study entitled *Hotwords as a Didactic Vehicle to Intercultural Competence?* Hans-Jürgen Heringer argues for intercultural communication not containing other elements than communication in general, so not being any different from it. However, in his didactic approach he reveals through wordle.net application by means of hotwords and the lexical field and connotations generated to them in different languages, how awareness of cultural differences can be attained in classroom.

The next study representing chapter eight in the volume, signed by Margit Krause-Ono and Sylvia Wächter, is very similar in approach being probably another chapter of the same book or a contribution to the same conference/project on a certain topic as Heringer's work. Analysing phrases, proverbs, connotations to the term 'weed' in German (Unkraut) and Japanese (zassou), the authors highlight, how cultural values, beliefs, attitudes are mirrored in the language used by each community.

Marta Giralt, Liam Murray and Silvia Benini deal in their study with intercultural communication in the online space putting up the model of Critical Digital Literacies – understood as competencies necessary for working, studying and acting effectively in modern society –, facilitated by virtual exchanges among different cultures. The findings presented in their contribution result from teaching experience in the classroom including, due to an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange programme, virtual exchange as a component. The programme was implemented at the University of Limerick with the aim of enhancing intercultural awareness, developing critical thinking, the ability of collaborating and working in teams, all contributing to a better employability of graduates.

In chapter ten the authors Christiane Hohenstein, Liana Konstantinidou and Aleksandra Opacic approach intercultural competence, – also incorporated into the new version of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for language learning/teaching) as from level A2 – from the perspective of adult and migrant learners, subjects to foreign and second language education. The study presents experiences with and results of applying new teaching materials to classroom with a special focus on diversity, gender, different societal values etc.

The next chapter, *The Impact of Study Abroad on Cultural and Democratic Literacy*, signed by Eva Seidl, highlights the opportunities emerging from such a staying related to cultural outcomes, but raises at the same time issues of social injustice, too, as international study is not available and affordable for everyone. It is – according to the author – very important in a study abroad period, that intercultural educators help students develop a so-called 'intercultural mindfulness' not only during the staying, but preceding and succeeding it, as well. In establishing a global, cosmopolitan worldview with respect to social justice and ecological sustainability, one has to undergo four processes, that of developing critical thinking, intercultural adjustment, intercultural learning and cosmopolitan socialisation, presupposing according to Cicchelli (2019) a cosmo-aesthetic (developing a cosmopolitan taste), a cosmo-culturalist (recognising otherness in different cultural backgrounds), a cosmo-ethical (solidarity, concern for global issues) and a cosmo-political (tolerance for different cultural groups, peaceful living together) orientation. An international study period contributes considerably to accelerate these processes.

Based on the inconsistency regarding the essence of intercultural competence and interculturality at all in New-Zealand's public space, – that of a country hosting over 200 ethnic groups and 160 languages –, the study of Elba S. Ramirez tries to find out ways of implementation of intercultural issues in language teaching and education in general. In doing so, she points out, that 'global citizenship' promoted

by interculturality should be dealt with as a 'public good' and rejects the neoliberal profitability approach to intercultural issues. Furthermore she claims not solely language teachers being in charge of intercultural education, as intercultural pedagogy is much more an independent, pan-disciplinary subject.

The final chapter of the collective volume, signed by María Luisa Sierra Huedo and Almudena Nevado Llopis, contributes with its didactic approach to completing with practical aspects the research in the matter. In their eyes, it is quite impossible to develop intercultural competence in the national and local contexts education institutions are anchored in. Their solution for the problem would consist of an intercultural campus with an internationalised environment and curriculum regarding content and way of teaching, co-curricular programmes done on campus and at local institutions of the community, compulsory study abroad programmes for all students for enhancing intercultural experience, intercultural activities and emphasis on acquiring and using foreign languages with local coverage included, and extending internationalisation strategies to institutional level for a top-down and bottom-up realisation.

Heterogeneous in approach and style, the studies of the volume open, irrespective of some cases of inaccuracy (e.g. pp. 180, 183) or confusion in terminology (e.g. emic versus etic view, p. 78), new paths in the theoretical and pragmatic research of interculturality and competence in it.