

A Review of the Scientific Monograph *Međukulturna kompetencija u nastavi stranih jezika. Od teorijskih koncepata do primjene* *(Intercultural Competence in Foreign Language Teaching: From Theoretical Concepts to Applications)* by Ana Petravić

1 Introduction

Međukulturna kompetencija u nastavi stranih jezika: Od teorijskih koncepata do primjene, a reference book written by respected scholar and experienced language teacher Ana Petravić, presents in one volume an up-to-date guide to the core areas of intercultural competence in foreign language teaching.

As soon as I picked up this manuscript, which is 369 pages long (together with a fifteen-page long extensive bibliography), I thought that reviewing it would be a demanding but important task. I was right. The monograph is very comprehensive, as it examines numerous central areas and key concepts of intercultural competence and their applications in foreign language teaching. Despite its comprehensiveness, the topics are dealt with and future developments mapped out in a very accessible way. In a matter-of-fact but supportive tone, the author clearly, thoroughly, and incisively discusses the relationship between language and culture and leads the reader to consider all the essential theoretical, empirical and practical principles underpinning our understanding of culture and its role within language teaching methodology. By working towards an understanding of culture in foreign language education, the book examines how foreign language culture teaching has developed, where it currently stands, and what directions to take for future research on this topic.

The book as a whole resonates with the recognition of an unbreakable bond between language and culture that motivates foreign language teaching profession's implicit commandment that *'thou shalt not teach language without also teaching culture'* (Higgs 1990, qtd. in Lessard-Clouston 1997). Thus, if our premise is that language and culture are from the start inseparably connected, then ineluctably we must also grapple with the notion that *language teaching is indeed culture teaching*. Or, as Maley (1993, 3) puts it: "These are educational issues which reach out well beyond mere language teaching. Culture teaching is an aspect of values education. As such it offers a welcome opportunity for transcending the often narrow limits of language teaching."

2 How is the Book Structured?

The book is divided into seven main chapters, each identifying and addressing the many facets of culture teaching and intercultural competence that influence foreign language methodology. As such, they give a wide perspective on 'culture as language and language as culture' pedagogy, and how understanding culture aids in successful and enriching language learning. The chapters comprise the following topics:

1. Introduction (*Uvod*)
2. Conceptualisation of intercultural competence in foreign language teaching – the horizontal level of theoretical models (*Konceptualizacija me ukulturne kompetencije u nastavi stranih jezika - horizontalna ravan teorijskih modela*)
3. Conceptualisation of intercultural competence development – the vertical level of theoretical models (*Konceptualizacija razvoja me ukulturne kompetencije – vertikalna ravan teorijskih modela*)
4. The applied models of intercultural competence – European instruments for supporting the development of intercultural competence (*Primijenjeni modeli me ukulturne kompetencije: europski instrumenti za podupiranje razvoja me ukulturne kompetencije*)
5. Research-supported conceptualisations of intercultural competence – the horizontal and vertical levels (*Empirijski utemeljene konceptualizacije me ukulturne kompetencije - horizontalna i vertikalna ravan*)
6. Example areas and instances of application of intercultural competence models (*Egzemplarna podruja i primjeri primjene modela me ukulturne kompetencije*)
7. In lieu of a conclusion (*Umjesto zaključka*)

The chapters are organized thematically, from general to specific, from global to local. The author helps the reader cross 'the intercultural competence river' by means of three main stepping stones: theory, research and practice, addressing in turn the conceptualisation of intercultural competence on these three distinctive levels.

Chapter 1 serves as the foundation for the succeeding sections. It *meticulously* summarizes and discusses three main notions or constructs – *intercultural competence*, *culture* and *interculturality*. The author makes us aware that these constructs are extremely complex, as they integrate various academic disciplines and the traditions of those disciplines. As a result of the vast literature, the author narrows down the analysis of these interdisciplinary constructs to traditions in foreign language teaching and applied linguistics. Special attention is devoted to clarifying the confusing overlaps in terminology. The need for clarification of terminology is important as it is far from being a harmonious and stable pool of significations. Because recent years have resulted in ample research on communication across cultures often carried out within the context of different academic traditions, the meanings of terms used by authors often differ. Some time ago, for example, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1954) found over three hundred definitions of culture in their study (Lessard-Clouston 1997), which clearly illustrates the difficulty and scope of the issues involved in culture and teaching about culture. Thus, to avoid confusion, this chapter critically analyzes the diversity of nomenclature, and finally clarifies how the terms are used in this work.

The chapter also summarizes, in a nut-shell, the evolution of intercultural competence and how it has been positioned in different intercultural contexts, including in Croatia. I find highlighting

the evolutionary perspective of intercultural competence crucial because, despite the fact that, today, culture teaching may reflect almost an axiom in second- and foreign-language pedagogy, it often remains unclear to many foreign language educators just how this has come to be the case and what impact this has on their classroom practice.

The construct of communicative competence has been subject to constant evolution in the past five decades, and continues to be so. Globalization has, namely, presented language teachers and learners with the challenge of coping in all the more frequent *intercultural* situations. The most frequent term to describe this type of communication is *intercultural communication*. A growing interest in intercultural communication has led to the expanding of the construct of communicative competence and resulted in a new construct called *intercultural competence* or *intercultural communicative competence*. In the light of these changes, in many foreign language curricula objectives have shifted from developing the learners' communicative competence to developing their *intercultural* (communicative) competence (Dombi 2013).

As a point of departure for the operationalization of communicative competence in foreign language pedagogy, the author sets out to identify the key theoretical, applied and empirical models of this construct. Proceeding from pedagogically motivated models (i.e., those well suited to foreign language teaching) of intercultural competence, the author deploys the following guiding principles/criteria for a critical overview: an adequate horizontal differentiation of the component parts of intercultural competence; the inclusion of a cognitive, affective and pragmatic dimension of the construct of intercultural competence; the incorporation of the vertical elaboration with regard to the progression of learning; the transparency of the relation between foreign-language and intercultural competence, and between language and culture; and finally, an adequately – in foreign-language teaching terms – defined notion of culture upon which a model is based.

In the monograph's core chapters, the author, using these criteria, analyzes numerous *theoretical component models* (Chapter 2), *theoretical developmental models* (Chapter 3), *applied models* (Chapter 4), and *research-supported models* of intercultural competence (Chapter 5). Chapter 5 gives an overview of empirical research on intercultural competence (e.g., Šenjug Golub 2013; Eberhardt 2013; Liddicoat 2006, 2011; Liddicoat and Scarino 2013) within different age groups of learners (primary-school children, teenagers and young adults and adults); emphasis is also on presenting directions of research and identifying current trends.

This extremely comprehensive, thorough, trustworthy, critical and incisive discussion of the models or frameworks of intercultural competence includes both the most relevant and well-known existing models, as developed by Byram (1997, 2009), Bennett (1986, 1993, 1998), and the *CEFR* model (*Common European Framework of Reference*; Council of Europe 2001), as well as several other less well-known ones, including Caspari and Schinschke's model (2007 and 2009), Roche's model (2001), Witte's model (2006 and 2009), and the *FREPA* model (*A Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures*; Council of Europe 2012).

In the detailed and up-to-date analysis of models of intercultural competence, the author presents what features these models share and what makes them distinct from one another, and thus makes it possible to fathom the importance of the construct in language education today. The text is interspersed with and supported by many excellent visual representations (diagrams and graphs), which makes the reading much easier.

The different levels and aspects of intercultural competence models outlined and discussed in these four chapters clearly show that our understanding of what culture means in foreign language education is extremely varied. The analysis recognizes that the context for language, culture, and communication is society, and thus emphasizes the social sciences as a foundation. Through the analysis of the theoretical frameworks, which have greatly influenced current foreign language pedagogy – in both theory and practice – the author provides different ways of defining culture, stresses various dimensions of culture at different points, and highlights major differences between varied and unique intercultural contexts. For foreign language teachers and learners in their own unique (intercultural) teaching situations, different aspects of culture may well be more or less important at various levels of language proficiency, the degree of cultural proximity between the source language and the target language can influence the acquisition process, and different levels of intercultural competence can be distinguished.

In Chapter 6, the author exemplifies the function of the analysed models in four separate areas: (1) language policy documents regulating language education (i.e., curriculum design), (2) instructional tasks for developing intercultural competence, (3) intercultural competence assessment tools, and (4) pre-service and in-service training of foreign language teachers. These four areas are looked at and presented from two perspectives – the European language policy perspective, and the perspective of the situation in Croatia. In other words, the chapter presents how the issues discussed on a European level are relevant to language education in Croatia.

In terms of the methodology of culture teaching, the author makes it clear that a *laissez-faire* approach is not adequate. Lessard-Clouston (1997) puts it clearly – “Just as we are intentional in terms of what grammatical structures we teach and how, so, too, must we be systematic about our culture teaching. A whole range of techniques exists, but our learners benefit most when our culture lessons and the cultural aspects of our language teaching are well planned and developed.”

We evaluate our students’ language learning, but, in the same way, “evaluation of their culture learning provides them with important feedback and keeps us accountable in our teaching. Culture learning assessment has been neglected in foreign language education, and this is something that must be addressed if we are to enable students to truly understand and profit from this aspect of their foreign language classes” (Lessard-Clouston 1997).

In terms of both pre- and in-service teacher training, the author states clearly that language “teachers ought to receive both experiential and academic training, with the aim of becoming mediators in culture teaching” (Singhal 1998; qtd. in Thanasoulas 2001).

3 Concluding Remarks

By way of conclusion, we should reiterate the main premise of the book: the teaching of culture and the development of intercultural competence should become an integral part of foreign language instruction (Thanasoulas 2001). Or as Peck (1984) put it, ‘Culture should be our message to students and language our medium’. Although culture creates and solves problems, “we need not be wary of culture in the foreign language context, even though it is also evident that there are still aspects of culture in foreign language education that do need further research and understanding” (Lessard-Clouston 1997).

The structure of the book is designed to allow different groups of readers to focus on different

parts of the book according to their interest and need. Taking into account the monograph's theoretical, empirical and applied character, it seems a perfect choice for anyone professionally involved in foreign language teaching – for beginning and practising foreign language teachers, students on undergraduate and postgraduate courses, mentors, coursebook authors, language policy makers, curriculum designers, test developers, and finally, scholars in the field of applied linguistics and foreign language teaching. As this book offers an important contribution towards an understanding of culture in foreign language education, I am sure it will transform its readers' personal views on what intercultural competence dimensions should be included in foreign language teaching, and how they should be taken into account.

Unique among other texts that mostly offer a reduced (or even simplified) view of intercultural competence only, this monograph gives, by addressing the conceptualisation of intercultural competence on three distinctive levels – theory, research and practice – a much more comprehensive, in-depth, all-round and multifaceted treatment of culture teaching.

From all the above, it is evident that this top-of-the-range monograph will serve as an important resource and guide for anyone professionally involved in language education in general, and in foreign language pedagogy specifically.

References

- Dombi, Judit. 2013. "A Mixed-Method Study on English Majors' Intercultural Communicative Competence." PhD diss., University of Pécs. http://pea.lib.pte.hu/bitstream/handle/pea/.../Dombi_Judit2013_disszertacio.pdf.
- Lessard-Clouston, Michael. 1997. "Towards an Understanding of Culture in L2/FL Education." *The Internet TESL Journal* III (5): n.p. <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Lessard-Clouston-Culture.html>.
- Maley, Alan. 1993. Foreword to *Cultural Awareness*, by Barry Tomalin and Susan Stempleski, 3. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Peck, Deborah. 1984. "Teaching Culture: Beyond Language. Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute." <http://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/1984/3/84.03.06.x.html>.
- Petravić, Ana. 2016. *Međukulturna kompetencija u nastavi stranih jezika: Od teorijskih koncepata do primjene*. Zagreb: Školska knjiga.
- Thanasoulas, Dimitrios. 2001. "The Importance Of Teaching Culture In The Foreign Language Classroom." *Radical Pedagogy* 3 (3): n.p. http://www.radicalpedagogy.org/radicalpedagogy/The_Importance_of_Teaching_Culture_in_the_Foreign_Language_Classroom.html.