Developing Intercultural Competence and Foreign Language Skills with Web-based Tools

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ABSTRACT
Contemporary societies, increasingly complex and diverse, are demanding citizens and workers able to successfully integrate and operate with and within other cultures. This is particularly important in the field of health care. To address this need, college instructors may present assignments/tasks that help develop students’ intercultural competence (IC) by enhancing their knowledge, skills and attitudes. Preliminary results show that in addition to providing authentic language and cultural content, the use of web-based tools in a Spanish for Health Care course helps develop IC by promoting understanding of original documents of a foreign culture \( (\text{savoir-comprendre}) \) and sensitivity towards others and own’s culture \( (\text{savoir-être}) \).

Keywords: Intercultural competence, CMC tools, Spanish for Health care, Hispanics and health care, foreign language skills, instructional technology

INTRODUCTION
Internet and Computer Mediated Communication tools have emerged as a versatile platform for language and culture learning instruction. This trend is the reflection of a shift in the pedagogical focus from language proficiency to a broader notion of communicative competence that has taken place since the early 1990s. The change “expands the focus beyond language learning to an emphasis on culture (i.e. intercultural competence, culture learning, cultural literacy) […] it expands the notion of context beyond the social to include broad social discourses. Third, it problematizes the notions of its own inquiry, namely, communication and intercultural competence” [8].

O’Dowd has noted an increasing demand for “intercultural approaches […] which attempt to fully exploit the interactive features of information and communication technologies in order to provide rich opportunities […] for intercultural acquisition and development” [11]. Both comments indicate that this cultural change that has taken place in the field with the help of web-based learning tools is suited for the delivery and development of cultural and cross-cultural content. This is one of the consequences of the emerging need of qualified workers in areas such as health care, business, criminal justice and education. As a result, colleges and universities are expanding their course offerings or complementing the existing ones with instructional practices that address this demand from society.

Defining and assessing IC is a difficult task considering of all the aspects that have been identified around this concept. In American academia and for a general audience, IC refers to the individual knowledge, skills, attitudes, attributes and behaviors needed to interact successfully with people from different cultures [6], or following Janet Bennett, IC constitutes
“a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural context” [2]. For our research in health care, we understand IC as the ability to deliver “effective, understandable, and respectful care that is provided in a manner compatible with [patient’s] cultural beliefs and practices and preferred language” [5]. This means that one of the keys to providing quality care to patients and family members of a Hispanic cultural background depends on the providers’ acquisition and development of the elements identified above from the core of Hispanic cultures.

This cultural awareness demands, among other features, an understanding of the patient’s perspectives and sensitivity in issues related to health care. A note of caution against generalizations is that not all subjects from the same cultural background hold similar belief and values systems [4]. Therefore, intercultural competence, though consisting of several critical elements, constitutes a process “in which the healthcare provider continuously strives to achieve the ability to effectively work within the cultural context of an individual or community from a diverse cultural/ethnic background” [4].

In practical terms, the absence of this set of features in health care providers, may translate in the presence of prejudice in this professional field. The American Institutes for Research have already stated: “social issues such as stereotyping, institutionalized racism, and dominant group privilege are as real in the examining room as they are in society at large. Therefore, the goal of cultural competence training in health care should be to guide physicians in bringing these power imbalances into check” [1]. Then, in order to guide health care workers efficiently in their encounters with patients of Hispanic background and to improve the quality of communication and the relationship between patient and provider, it is necessary that health care workers develop and enhance their IC. Considering this idea, we emphasize to our students that cultural knowledge and IC need to be used as a starting point in their relationship with individuals from specific cultural groups, and that the connection derived from their interactions will complement and help establish the frame for their individual care needs.

From the different elements of IC proposed by Byram [3], adapted by Sercu [13] for an educational framework, and that Deardorff [6] recently compiled, we focused our research in the assessment of skills and attitudes, in particular the categories that fall under the domains of savoir-comprendre and savoir-être [3]. The former is defined as “the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one’s own [3]. The second is defined as “curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own” [3].

**DESCRIPTION**

Our investigation was conducted in a Spanish for the Health Profession undergraduate college course. We implemented the use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) tools such a discussion board, and a blog to perform web-based tasks. In particular, students were asked to read on-line newspaper articles in Spanish, and write and read blog postings related to health care topics in Spanish that tailored the course content with IC goals in mind. These web-based tools were selected as valuable and accessible sources of information for students since they provide authentic language practice and offer a platform for intercultural exchange and learning. In addition, blogs are engaging and interactive by nature, and they also offer the possibility of negotiating intercultural communication in an on-line environment. This may make the experience more efficient for teaching practices compared to traditional classroom means [7]. Another positive aspect of on-line controlled, mediated tools is that they are not divorced from the rest of the culture since participants apply conventions derived from other forms of cultural interactions [7]. In
this way, with on-line communication in educational contexts, students model their participation in similar ways to forums open to the general public and shown by Kramsch and Thorne [10]. In this sense: “successful intercultural internet discussion depends not on participants progressing towards a common goal but rather on their capacity to shift among a variety of positions, even contradictory ones” [7]. This emphasizes the fact IC acquisition is a process where subjects exposed to specific instruction and learning (such as Spanish for health care) are susceptible of alternating positions in regards to the situations and events presented to them and the tools available may help this process. We also pose that blogs help to accomplish the established goals based on our previous research [12]. For all of these reasons, we decided to assess the efficiency for helping acquire and develop IC of the proposed web-based activities.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. Can we help develop students’ ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, explain it and relate it to documents or events from their own culture?
2. Can we enhance students’ curiosity, openness and respect for other cultures, while changing their perceptions (whenever appropriate) without impacting negatively on the legitimacy of their own cultures?
3. What is the role that technology, such as web-based tools, can have in the development of students’ IC in the field of health care?

**METHODS AND PROCEDURE**

**Participants**

This is a third year, undergraduate level, university course: Spanish for the Health Professions that aims to equip students with enhanced foreign language skills (verbal and non verbal communication), and help them develop their intercultural competence appropriate for this level of language and content instruction. More specifically, students are required, among other aspects, to: learn vocabulary related to the health field; learn, understand and identify differences among the Hispanic cultures in issues related to health care; be able to contrast and compare topics with their own culture and familiarize themselves with on-line sources of information (newspapers in Spanish) that produce content to a mainstream audience.

There were a total of 20 students in this course, native speakers of English: 18 females and 2 males, ranging from 18-46 years old (mean 22.35). A significant number of students (12) had visited or stayed in a Hispanic country for lengths of one week to four months.

**Materials**

Information was gathered through the review of two sources: on-line newspaper articles presented through a discussion board and blog postings, and a questionnaire. The articles were selected from the health sections of online newspapers “El País” and “El Mundo” (www.elpais.es and www.elmundo.com), and were part of students’ coursework. The instructor made them available to the class through the discussion board of a Learning Management System (Blackboard). For each article students had to read and understand the content, produce a list of new words, a summary with the main ideas and a personal reaction/opinion using a worksheet (between 16-20 lines in Spanish). The topics were diverse: changes in Spain’s laws related to smoking in public places, a comparison between approaches to the interruption of pregnancy laws and its results in various European countries, the potential use of genetically altered newborns to save family members from genetic diseases, new research on the remains of emperor Tutankhamun that point to research of genetic conditions. Topics were discussed in class so that students could share their views orally and take notes from peers. The instructor offered feedback in written format to individual learners as they progressed with their work. This task intended to prepare students for the next set of activities. Around midterm, students were asked to perform the same task in groups of two and instructed to select an on-line article in Spanish
and make it available to the rest of the class through the Blog tool in Blackboard. They were asked to post a summary and personal/reaction opinion on the selected topic (16-20 lines in Spanish). All students had access to peers’ group postings with summaries and reactions. Then, each student was required to write in the blog two personal reactions/opinions based on their peers’ postings (6-8 lines each in Spanish). Some of the topics that students selected were: the relation between obesity and depression, the interaction between cannabis and alcohol, obesity and malnutrition, cancer and pregnancy, attempts to reducing the rate of infant mortality, or the use of thalidomide (a sedative) in Spain during Franco’s dictatorship. Finally, at the end of the semester, students were offered a questionnaire to collect information with multiple choice questions and open-ended questions. As the results from the questionnaire of a 46 years old participant did not deviate significantly from the results of others, we made the decision to keep these in the research.

RESULTS

Our first research question is based on one of the elements that integrate the savoir-comprendre domain: the students’ ability to work (read, understand, summarize, and react to topics) with on-line newspaper articles in Spanish. Although 65% of students stated that they could read and understand texts in Spanish from the course textbook better than from the on-line sources, 95% of them said that they also were able to read and understand on-line newspaper articles. One of the reasons that may explain this apparent contradiction has to do with the type of discourse students were exposed from these two sources. Texts from the health care textbook used were simple brochures were the narrative was dominated by bullet points and simple sentence structure, whereas newspaper articles tend to be more literary and follow an information presentational mode. In addition, almost all of the students said that they were able to understand peers’ blog postings (95%), they felt they could write a summary of a newspaper article in Spanish (100%), and they are able to comment in writing on peers’ postings (100%). Finally, 90% of students stated they had read their peers’ postings and that they have learned through them about the Hispanic cultures. In their quotes from the questionnaires and the blog reactions, they referred to this as well: “I was able to follow up on general topics discussed in class”, “I learned more information about current events”, “I learned about cultural differences in family involvement”, “I learned about cultural topics that were not brought up in class”, “I learned about the interaction between culture and people”.

Some quotes from blog reactions illustrate this aspect (translations have been prepared by researchers): “In this article, the scientist is from Spain and it is very interesting because the problem with AIDS exists everywhere, not only in the USA”; “Before reading this newspaper article, I did not think about the relation between depression and obesity”.

Our second research question belongs to the realm of subjectivity since we rely on students’ perceptions about their own attitudes toward other cultures and their own culture. First we tried to establish their departing point when addressing this element of IC. Students were asked about their curiosity, openness about other cultures (90% of strong positive answers). However, only 60% of them want to read more about the health topics selected. They were asked as well whether they felt closer to people from their own culture (40% agree, 30% disagree): “I think it is natural to feel comfortable around like-minded people, I think it is just an unconscious reaction”. We asked if they looked for opportunities to interact with people from other cultures (65% of positive answers). Finally, they stated that they felt comfortable establishing relations with people from other cultures (85% positive answers): “Yes, if they have interest in English”. We also asked students if they felt people from other cultures could teach them something of value (100% of positive answers): “It is important to have a multicultural point of view”. It seems that students have a high regard and respect for other cultures, and that they value and
recognize their legitimacy. However, several factors influence these responses, from individual (social shyness), to group/societal (not having the opportunity to interact with people from other cultures since communities may be very homogeneous).

In relation to this aspect, we also wanted to assess the impact of the on-line articles and blog postings that they read as part of the course assignments on their perception of other cultures. Students indicated in the questionnaire that after completing these tasks they had changed their perceptions about Hispanic cultures (80%). Some quotes from students are: “I understand better how Hispanics relate to health care”, “I am less judgmental”, “We have learned a lot of cultural qualities and they proved to be true when reflected on the professor”, “No, I have always seen it as a fascinating culture”. These comments show that as a whole, students strengthened their impressions in a positive way. They also stated that they have changed their perception about their own culture (90%): “It allowed me to see similarities and differences”, “Understood that we expect and take many things for granted”, “Yes, it shown me that we tend to be disrespectful and impatient”, “I feel that I recognize things that I never realized I was doing”. Since they felt they had been exposed to a different point of view (90%): “I learned how certain medical conditions affect them (Hispanics) and how they feel these conditions should be treated, “They (articles) gave me different points which made me think differently”, “I learned that there are more issues involved: poverty and poor eating” that affect health. Some of the blog quotes refer to this process (translation prepared by researchers): “I learned that behind 90% of those who died [committed suicide] there was a mental problem [psychological issue]. That is why I like that this article allowed us to know more about a topic that is a little taboo in many societies”; “I cannot believe that suicide has become a more common cause of death than traffic accidents in Spain […] I’d rather be a little uncomfortable talking about suicide that having to lose another friend so unnecessarily”.

As part of our commitment to implement better practices that allows us to be more efficient in content delivery, we surveyed our students about the role of the technology used in the course assignments, specifically, the impact of the selected web-based activities. Students’ responses, 90%, are positive about their learning of their culture and other cultures, and as a result 90% of them stated that technology helped them gain cultural competence in the health care field. Some quotes are: “I feel that my vocabulary has improved”, “Technology allows to explore and make new connections”, “On-line articles made the topic more relevant”, “Now I am confident I can understand authentic material”.

CONCLUSIONS

Regular exposure to documents originating from a foreign culture and presented in guided tasks such as the web-based activities proposed are a valid tool that helps students develop their ability to interpret authentic materials. In addition, the on-line newspaper articles in Spanish related to health care seem to have enhanced students ability to relate documents and events to their own culture by contrasting, comparing and reflecting on selected topics. This addresses the acquisition of the savoir-comprendre domain from Byram’s model [3]. Participants are curious about other cultures, some materials they read on line and the topics they discussed in the blogs helped to change their perception or strengthen their positive impression of the Hispanic cultures, and understand better the views of this group related to health care. Some students have changed their understanding of their own culture and were able to embrace opinions other than their own. Regular guided instruction of the proposed web-based activities and students’ work seem to help them reflect critically about other cultures, their own culture, and about themselves. This helps students develop Byram’s savoir-être domain [3].
The majority of participants feel positive about the use of technology (on-line newspaper articles via a discussion board and a blog) to learn about their own culture and others. The implementation of these web-based activities to present specific content related to health issues to students seem to affect positively their interest in the course and their learning.

Further examination of these results interpreting the level of intercultural competence that subjects have achieved in contrast with their departing level may produce significant findings. If, as we said before, IC development is a process, then individuals are expected to advance towards a more complete level of competency through ongoing study, observation and interaction with people from other culture/s [9]. In the group that we examined, one of the subjects showed traits of a more advanced state of IC through the examination of the blog postings and the questionnaire. The departing point for this subject was: “I have considerable experience in meeting and conversing with people from all over the world”, which influenced the following comment about peers’ reactions in the blog: “[I did not learn very much] as the reactions and reviews tended to be rather simplistic”. However, despite this background experience, the same subject reacted positively when assessing the change of perceptions about Hispanic cultures after taking the course: “Yes, particularly in regard to Hispanics and Health care”. This shows how difficult is to meet students’ individual needs when working towards a stage of IC that is proportional in its progress to the stage they had before being exposed to the Spanish for Health Care class.

REFERENCES