

# 8 Intercultural competence in the language classroom

Marilena Minoia<sup>1</sup>

---

## Abstract

The globalised world in which we live demands multilingual and cross-culturally aware professionals. The role of intercultural awareness is now, more than ever, crucial in the language classroom in order to allow students to become competent and independent adults who will be highly employable beyond graduation. The recently published Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018) of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) points out the impact of interculturality on the learner by saying that “the learner does not simply acquire two distinct, unrelated ways of acting and communicating. The language learner becomes plurilingual and develops interculturality. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 43). This paper reflects on the notion of interculturality and gives an overview of the methods used in a class of students from China to foster intercultural awareness. The range of activities implemented, the students’ view on the practice and limitations of the project will also be presented.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, professional competencies, Ningbo China Campus University of Nottingham, CEFR, language learning, higher education.

---

1. University of Nottingham, Nottingham, England; marilena.minoia@nottingham.ac.uk

**How to cite this chapter:** Minoia, M. (2019). Intercultural competence in the language classroom. In C. Gorla, L. Guetta, N. Hughes, S. Reisenleutner & O. Speicher (Eds), *Professional competencies in language learning and teaching* (pp. 89-98). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.34.917>

## 1. Introduction

Statistics published in April 2018 by the UK Council for International Student Affairs ([www.ukcisa.org.uk](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk)) showed that 81% of students studying in higher education in the UK are from the UK, 6% are from the European Union (EU), and 13% are from the rest of the world. Amongst the latter, the number of Chinese students far exceeds any other nationality; almost one third of non-EU students in the UK are from China, the only country showing a significant increase in student numbers; a 14% rise since 2012-2013. The University of Nottingham contributes to this scenario with an established exchange programme in general, and with our overseas campuses in particular: with the opening of its campus in Malaysia in 2000, the University of Nottingham was the first UK university to open a branch campus overseas. This was then followed in 2004 by the opening of a campus in Ningbo, China. Students at the University of Nottingham in China or Malaysia can apply to study in Nottingham for a semester or a year through the Inter-Campus Exchange programme.

Given the University of Nottingham's pluricultural identity and the impact globalisation is having on graduate employment patterns, it is crucial to integrate an emphasis on intercultural awareness and competencies into the curriculum.

Increasing competitiveness in the world economy, the compelling need for viable solutions to global challenges and connectivity offered by social media create challenges as well as opportunities for citizens, businesses, and organisations. The ability to create successful connections with other countries largely depends on whether global citizens possess the necessary intercultural skills to effectively and respectfully communicate in a business environment.

The aim of this study is to explore strategies that may be implemented in the language classroom in order to foster the acquisition of intercultural competence as a crucial 'soft skill' for our students, the professionals of the future. This is a reflective paper that addresses the strategies adopted in an Italian language class to promote and enhance intercultural competence.

The study stems from the challenges encountered in teaching Chinese students in a Western institution. In the past, many scholars have compared the Chinese and the Western education style, and traditionally, it has been argued that Chinese learners tend to rely on memorisation, rote learning, and repetition (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). In contrast, in Western contexts, where problem solving and critical thinking skills are to the fore, students seem to be encouraged to adopt a more Socratic pattern where the knowledge is generated or co-constructed (Greenholtz, 2003; Pratt, 1992).

Learning styles aside, this study focusses on the differences between the cultural profile of language learners, in this case Chinese students, and the culture of the target language, in this case Italian. It looks at the broader issue of teaching interculturalism in the language classroom, taking into consideration the challenges set by time constraints during the course of the delivery of a language module.

The strategies proposed in this study have been used throughout the academic year and they were aimed at promoting a reflection on the concept of interculturality in the learners.

## **2. Intercultural competence: the theory**

Spitzberg and Chagnon (2009) define intercultural competence as “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world” (p. 7).

In the realm of the current higher education scene, the need to focus on intercultural competence has been reiterated by many scholars in the last decades. Alred, Byram, and Fleming (2003) argue that one of the primary purposes of education is to promote “a sense of interculturality, an intercultural competence, which is fundamental to education, perhaps always has been so, but is all the more significant in the contemporary world” (p. 6).

These ideas are finding increasing meaning across higher education institutions with the acknowledgement that intercultural competence is not only important to work in a global context, but is also a valuable skill to have in order to operate in our multicultural local communities (Jones, 2013, p. 97). This requires teachers “to adopt an inclusive approach to [the] curriculum and pedagogy and to recognize and value the cultural insights [that] our students, [as well as] staff, can offer and which might otherwise be overlooked” (Jones, 2013, p. 97).

In order to accommodate the needs of the globalised world in higher education, Green (2012, p. 1) suggests ten drivers for the internationalisation of the curriculum evidencing the strengths enhanced by a practice focussed on interculturality:

- to prepare students for ‘global citizenship’,
- to prepare students for the global workforce,
- to enhance the quality of teaching and research,
- to strengthen institutional capacity,
- to enhance prestige and visibility,
- to generate revenue,
- to contribute to local or regional economic development,
- to contribute to knowledge production on global issues,
- to solve global problems, and
- to increase international understanding and promote peace.

There is a large volume of published work describing the role of intercultural competence in the language classroom. In particular, Deardorff (2006, pp. 166-241) proposes the following model to define intercultural competence:

- **Attitudes:** the importance of valuing others through attitudes such as respect, curiosity, discovery, and openness, intended as a willingness to go beyond one’s comfort zone.
- **Knowledge:** the importance of understanding the world from other people’s perspectives based on sociolinguistic awareness.

- **Skills:** the acquisition and processing of knowledge through the practice of observing, analysing, interpreting, and relating.
- **Internal outcomes:** “these are aspects that occur within the individual as a result of the acquired attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary for intercultural competence [... leading] to an internal outcome that consists of [acquired] adaptability and empathy [towards the listener]” (Guan, 2012, p. 40).
- **External outcomes:** “[t]he [summation] of the attitudes, knowledge and skills, as well as the internal outcomes, are demonstrated through the behaviour and communication of the individual, which become the visible outcomes of intercultural competence experienced by others” (Guan, 2012, p. 40).

### 3. Methodology

The students involved in the study are Chinese students on exchange from the University of Nottingham China campus; they are students of Italian at level A1-A2 of the CEFR taking part in the exchange programme for the full academic year (2017-2018). The study involved an exceptionally small number of students (four) all of which are female and 19 to 20 year olds. This study is a reflection on the activities implemented to engage the students in a process of self-reflection and discovery of the concept of interculturality. The strategies used in class draw on Deardorff’s (2006) model with the attempt to raise awareness of the culture of the self, the culture of the other, and each other’s perspectives. In particular, seven sets of activities were devised following Deardorff’s (2006) model.

#### 3.1. Set 1: reflect on their own culture

This set aims to work on the concept of *knowledge* in Deardorff’s (2006) model as it focusses on reflection on issues of cultural self-awareness. The students were asked to produce a guidebook, poster, presentation, or webpage in Italian

for prospective visitors to their own town, country, or region. The aim of this activity was not only to describe the famous sites and national heritages, but also and foremost, to advise the visitor on cultural differences that could be encountered. As an example, the students chose to present on how to master using chopsticks in socially appropriate ways.

### **3.2. Set 2: become aware of how their culture is seen from another perspective**

To foster critical thinking as a *skill* from Deardorff's (2006) model, the students were provided with a choice of articles and extracts from books, magazines, and websites in the target language and written by people who visited China. As an example, the students were provided with a few paragraphs from the book 'La Porta Proibita' by Tiziano Terzani (1985), an Italian journalist who reported from China for many years. Given the year of publication of the book, this also stirred discussions on changes that have taken place in China in the last 30 years.

### **3.3. Set 3: familiarise with sources of information about the target culture**

Building on the Deardorff's (2006) concept of developing *attitudes* of curiosity and discovery, the students were exposed to films, news, podcasts, TV programmes, books, and magazines in the target language. During the course of the year, the students were regularly asked to discuss the content of something they had enjoyed reading or watching throughout the year.

### **3.4. Set 4: evaluating, observing and comparing skills; a travel photo diary on WhatsApp**

This set of activities was based on the exploration of cultural clues and meanings, analysing and comparing results as *skills* towards the acquisition of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). The students visited Italy during the Easter holidays. The trip was not part of the project, however, it seemed

reasonable to exploit this opportunity in order to promote cultural reflections. The students were asked to take photos of things they considered culturally relevant and they were asked to comment and discuss them using WhatsApp as a common platform. For example, the students photographed little independent shops such as bakeries and patisseries, but also train stations, ticket machines, and bus timetables.

### **3.5. Set 5: increased exposure to Italian native speakers**

To this end, an Italian student from the University of Nottingham was recruited as a volunteer to work on the project. She assisted the students with their classwork and she gave presentations on aspects of Italian culture such as the school system or going on holiday. She organised social events such as Italian cinema nights or outings with the Italian society. She acted as a valuable link to Italian culture at the university. The students benefited from the presence of this Italian student because they had the chance to be exposed to another Italian speaker who was not an academic. In line with [Deardorff's \(2006\)](#) model, this allowed for:

- enhanced listening skills (the student spoke particularly fast as she was not accustomed to slowing down the pace for pedagogical purposes);
- evaluating and comparing skills (comparing student lifestyles at the university); and
- an attitude of discovery and curiosity (students showed particular interest in the Italian students' lifestyles).

### **3.6. Set 6: critical thinking and self-reflection**

Towards the end of the academic year, the students were asked to take part in video interviews in order to reflect on their internal outcomes ([Deardorff, 2006](#)). The students reflected on their experience of learning Italian in a British institution, the challenges, and what they had learned in the UK. All the students

commented on their improved cultural awareness, and they showed a level of self-reflection that was extremely encouraging.

### **3.7. Set 7: the teacher's reflection and observation; a student survey**

This activity allowed the teacher to observe the external outcomes (Deardorff, 2006). The students completed a survey that comprised of two questions. To the question: *Do you think that learning Italian made you think critically about your own culture and cultural differences?* all the interviewees gave positive responses. The students reported that they enjoyed the production of presentations on the geography and customs of their region of origin as this activity allowed them to have a different perspective on their own culture.

To the question: *Do you think you know more about Italian culture now?* the response was also in this case very positive. The students suggested that they felt empowered by the knowledge they acquired on geography, art, and history through the sets of activities adopted. Some students appreciated the opportunity they had to think about the stereotypes they had about Italy and they were able to recognise the similarities between the Chinese and Italian cultures.

## **4. Outcome and concluding remarks**

The aim of this study was to explore and reflect on a range of methods to foster intercultural competence in the classroom. The results of this study show that students appreciated the activities proposed. In particular, they benefited from the reflective nature of the practice as they were able to consider their pre-conceptions and enjoyed engaging in a lasting process of learning on interculturality.

A number of limitations need to be considered in this particular study. Firstly, the small number of students involved in the project. This is a limitation in terms of



the quantitative aspect of the research. More positively, due to time constraints during the academic year, it can often be challenging to explore different methods of delivery and teaching strategies. The small number of students involved in the project greatly facilitated this. Secondly, the study has only covered one academic year, and due to the qualitative nature of the research, it is difficult to verify if the results would have been as positive with another or larger group of students.

Although the current study is based on a small sample of participants, the findings provide evidence from the students' perspectives of the benefits of embedding practice that focusses on intercultural competence in the language class. This is evidenced in participant feedback where it is clear that they valued the exposure to the seven sets of culture-based activities proposed here.

Given the project's positive results, efforts will be made to extend this practice across the university's international campuses. It will also inform future research on the impact of intercultural competence-oriented methods in language teaching and learning.

The acquisition of intercultural competence does not happen over the course of one academic year. It is a lifelong process that requires further investigation in teaching and learning. The adoption of reflective practice may be a suitable method to work in the direction of intercultural competence acquisition.

## References

- Alred, G., Byram, M., & Fleming, M. (2003). *Intercultural experience and education*. Multilingual Matters.
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe. (2018). *Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors*. <https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989>

- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241-266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002>
- Gao, G., & Ting-Toomey, S. (1998). *Communicating effectively with the Chinese*. Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452220659>
- Green, M. F. (2012, April 15). *Universities must be clear and honest about internationalization*. University World News.
- Greenholtz, J. (2003). Socratic teachers and Confucian learners: examining the benefits and pitfalls of a year abroad. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 3(2), 122-130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708470308668096>
- Guan, E. (2012). *Teach Chinese from cultural roots to local school culture: developing the Chinese teacher's and Australian students' intercultural competence*. Master's thesis. University of Western Sydney. <http://researchdirect.uws.edu.au/islandora/object/uws%3A32233/datastream/PDF/download/citation.pdf>
- Jones, E. (2013). *Internationalization and employability: the role of intercultural experiences in the development of transferable skills*. *Public Money & Management*, 33(2), 95-104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2013.763416>
- Pratt, D. D. (1992). *Chinese conceptions of learning and teaching: a Westerner's attempt at understanding*. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 11(4), 301-319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0260137920110404>
- Spitzberg, B. H., & Chagnon, G. (2009). *Conceptualizing intercultural competence*. In D. K. Deardorff (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence* (pp. 2-52). Sage.
- Terzani, T. (1985). *La Porta Proibita*. Longanesi.
- Watkins, D., & Biggs, J. (2001). *Teaching the Chinese learner: psychological and pedagogical perspectives*. The University of Michigan, Comparative Education Research Centre.



Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association  
Voillans, France, [info@research-publishing.net](mailto:info@research-publishing.net)

© 2019 by Editors (collective work)  
© 2019 by Authors (individual work)

**Professional competencies in language learning and teaching**  
**Edited by Cecilia Gorla, Lea Guetta, Neil Hughes, Sandra Reisenleutner, and Oranna Speicher**

**Publication date:** 2019/06/08

**Rights:** the whole volume is published under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives International (CC BY-NC-ND) licence; **individual articles may have a different licence.** Under the CC BY-NC-ND licence, the volume is freely available online (<https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.34.9782490057399>) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

**Disclaimer:** Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book is believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

**Trademark notice:** product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

**Copyrighted material:** every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net  
Cover illustration by © j-mel - Adobe Stock.com  
Cover design by © Raphaël Savina ([raphael@savina.net](mailto:raphael@savina.net))

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-39-9 (Ebook, PDF, colour)  
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-40-5 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)  
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-38-2 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)  
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.  
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

**Legal deposit, UK:** British Library.  
**Legal deposit, France:** Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: juin 2019.

---