
Intercultural Communication: The good, the bad and the ugly

Dr. Juan Ferretti*
Universidad del Salvador
Argentina

What follows is a brief summary of the presentation delivered by Dr. Juan Ferretti at the opening of the annual convention held by Escuela de Lenguas Modernas at Universidad del Salvador (USAL) on 18 August 2022.

Introduction

Intercultural communication ideally refers to the study of communication across cultural contexts (Bennett, 2013). The author affirms that this discipline delves into domestic cultural differences (ethnicity, gender, etc.) as well as international dissimilarities (nationality, region, etc.). Intercultural communication is an approach seriously focused on the acknowledgment and respect of cultural differences, as it fosters mutual adaptation —central to the existence of biculturalism— rather than a simple act of one-sided adjustment.

It is only logical that this should be closely associated with the study of language in general, and with foreign language teaching in particular. Hard as intercultural communication experts have tried to develop intercultural sensitivity and proficient coordination of action across cultural diversities, the presence of power in what has been termed *dominant culture* (Marshall, 1998) has been a major obstacle still present —overtly or stealthily— in routine teaching procedures.

This presentation purports to examine the concepts of culture, the language-culture interface and intercultural communication, with a view to problematising these notions. The strong presence of asymmetrical relationships of power will make it necessary to adopt a critical perspective with regard to a basic set of empathy-promoting strategies.

Culture

The Latin verb *colere* (to farm), its past participle *cultus* and the noun *cultura* are initially almost exclusively tied to agriculture (Tucker, 1931). Culture refers to knowledge, experience, meanings, beliefs, values, attitudes, religions, concepts

*

of self, the universe and self-universe, relationships, hierarchies of status, role expectations, spatial relations, and time concepts accumulated by a large group of people over generations through individual and group effort. "Culture manifests itself both in patterns of language and thought, and in forms of activity and behaviour" (Samovar & Porter, 1972).

In his seminal work, *The Silent Language* (1959), Edward T. Hall states that culture is not one thing, but rather a complex series of interrelated activities with origins deeply buried in our past. He treats culture in its entirety as a form of communication. Culture is communication and communication is culture.

Culture gives humans their identity. It is the total communication framework for words, actions, body language, emblems (gestures), intonation, facial expressions, for the way one handles time, space, and materials, and for the way one works, makes love, plays, and so on. All these things and more are complete communication systems. Meanings can only be read correctly if one is familiar with these units of behaviour in their cultural context (Novinger, 2001).

Intercultural Communication

The term *intercultural communication* is difficult to explain in just one way. Here are two working definitions:

"Intercultural communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process, in which people from different cultures create shared meanings" (Lustig & Koester, 2006: 46).

"Intercultural communication refers to the effects on communication behaviour, when different cultures interact together. Hence, one way of viewing intercultural communication is as communication that unfolds in symbolic intercultural spaces" (Arasaratnam, 2013: 48).

In general, we cannot not communicate. All behaviour is communication, and we cannot not behave. Even a person who does not want to "communicate" — who sits huddled with arms folded and head down — communicates that s/he is trying to avoid communication. By nature, communication is a system of behaviour. [...] All communication takes place in the matrix of culture, therefore difference in culture is the primary obstacle to intercultural communication.

Studying a language is an ideal example of intercultural communication. [...] Language should be considered a mirror of its culture. It reflects the culture's content and nature (Novinger, 2001).

Problematising the concepts

On the one hand, Jackson Lears (1985) states that culture is "the pattern of meanings embodied in symbolic forms, including actions, utterances and meaningful objects of various kinds, by virtue of which individuals communicate with one another and share their experiences, conceptions and beliefs"

On the other hand, there is another important concept — associated with the above term — which merits discussion: *dominant culture*. The above author

uses the same opening for a definition, in that dominant culture also comprehends the pattern of meanings embodied in symbolic forms, including actions, utterances and meaningful objects of various kinds, but by virtue of these meanings dominant groups impose on their subordinate groups their beliefs, values and norms (without repression, through daily consent).

For example, in several “prominent” English-speaking countries, their dominant cultures have usually and traditionally displayed, fostered and even romanticised elements associated with:

- Patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity,
- Economic well-being, that is, “well-offness,”
- A white European ethnicity,
- Able-bodiedness,
- A monotheistic faith (of late, perhaps not including Islam),
- An ideological affinity, perhaps, with imperialism/colonialism.

As a general rule, minority groups, that is the “out-groups” that do not conform to the above standards, have been traditionally “muted,” treated as if they were not part of a social group or simply invisibilized. It is in these areas of contact that intercultural communication has sometimes failed to address asymmetrical relationships.

All this can be seen in some materials well-known to many: the language textbooks.

Language textbooks

It seems unclear whether language textbooks help accomplish or bias intercultural communication. No doubt that textbooks play a major role in language teaching and learning, as they are considered an important vehicle for foreign language learning. However, they also carry beliefs, interests, values and cultural messages (Canale, 2016). The author states that “textbooks as curriculum artifacts are just one of the many domains of discourse implicated in the representation of culture in teaching and learning practices” (p.239).

Indeed, the use of English textbooks in language classrooms is an efficient means of transmitting culture and ideology. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) state that a textbook serves as “a teacher, a map, a resource, a trainer, an authority, and an ideology” (p.243). By the same token, Rajabi and Ketabi (2012) affirm that “the textbook can be a major source of cultural elements besides providing linguistic and topical contents which necessarily reflect the ideology inherent in the EFL context of a particular circle” (p.708). Therefore, delving into cultural elements in foreign language textbooks might help promote intercultural and intracultural awareness.

A quick look at English textbooks published not long ago may present their readers (more often than not young learners of English) with some of the following characteristics (among others):

- A strong situational focus on the affluent middle-class of the English-speaking country,
- A focus on easily visible ethnic differences in “foreign visitors” to English-speaking countries.
- Absence of women in important positions (company CEOs, etc),
- Presence of women in such positions as receptionists, secretaries or housewives,
- Highly sporadic presence of ethnicities other than white,
- Complete invisibilization of poverty in almost all of its manifestations,
- Complete invisibilization of certain minorities, e.g. those based on sexual orientation.

Admittedly, an important effort has been made by publishing companies to minimise these elements over the last decade. However, a critical stance still seems necessary.

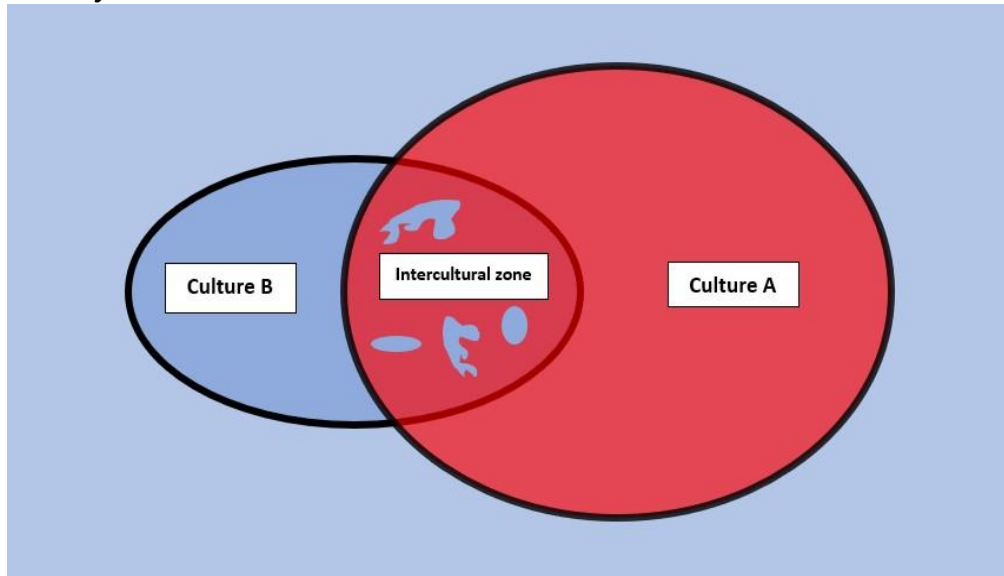
Ultimately, there are no such things as “innocent” books for learners.

Critical Intercultural Communication

A *critical* intercultural communication perspective provides a comprehensive and dialogic view of intercultural communication, culture, and identity. [...] The common element threaded throughout these dimensions is *power*, the constraining force by which dominant structures, groups and individuals are able to gain position and achieve their aims and interests over the will of others. (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010). In this respect, the authors pose two central questions:

- Why do intercultural scholars so often assume that each culture has a set of characteristics shared by all members equally (even though much research has demonstrated that cultures are not typically homogeneous)?
- Why does intercultural communication sometimes fail to address asymmetrical relationships (see figure below) between cultures? (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010)

Typical asymmetrical communication



Conclusion

Cultures are not typically homogeneous. Making a culture into a homogeneous block helps create or reinforce stereotypes, and helps invisibilize cultural minorities, geographically remote or powerless groups, etc. Intercultural communication would be impossible unless there is a solid knowledge of the cultures in contact.

On the other hand, intercultural communication cannot be dissociated from the presence of power, which often creates asymmetrical forms of communication. Critical intercultural communication is a relatively new discipline aimed to raise awareness of the multiplicity of exchanges that were not regarded as intercultural communication in the past, and of the all-pervasive presence of power, which can control, slant, bias or obstruct many forms of communication.

Intercultural communication is indeed a noble —albeit complex— discipline. However, by adopting a critical position to explore and achieve cross-cultural encounters, we will gain and raise awareness of the potential elements that might endanger them.

References

- Arasaratnam, L. (2013). Intercultural communication competence. In A. Kurylo *Inter/cultural communication* (pp. 46-68). SAGE Publications.
- Bennett, M. (2013). *Basic concepts of intercultural communication: paradigms, principles, & practices (Revised Edition)*. Intercultural Press.
- Canale, G. (2016). (Re)Searching culture in foreign language textbooks, or the politics of hide and seek. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 29(2), 225-243.
- Cortazzi, M., & Jin, L. (1999). Cultural mirrors, materials and methods in the EFL classroom. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Culture in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 196-219). Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, E. T. (1959). *The silent language*. Doubleday.
- Halualani, R. T. and T. K. Nakayama (Eds.) (2010). *The handbook of critical intercultural communication*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Jackson Lears, T. J. (1985). The concept of cultural hegemony: problems and possibilities. *The American historical review*, Volume 90, Issue 3, June 1985, Pages 567–593, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/90.3.567>.
- Lustig R. and J. Koester (Eds) (2006). *Among US: Essays on identity, belonging, and intercultural competence*. Pearson.
- Marshall, G. (1998). *A Dictionary of Sociology*. Oxford University Press.
- Novinger, T. (2001). *Intercultural communication: a practical guide*. University of Texas Press.
- Rajabi, S., & Ketabi, S. (2012). Aspects of cultural elements in prominent English textbooks for EFL setting. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(4), 705-712.
- Samovar, L. A., & Porter, R. E. (1972). *Intercultural communication: A reader*. Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc.
- Tucker, T. G. (1931). *Etymological dictionary of Latin*. Ares Publishers.