A Useful Cliché? Towards a Pragmatic Interpretation of Intercultural Communicative Competence

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Abstract. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), famously defined as “the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language” (Byram 1997: 71) has now become a generally accepted fact in teaching ESP and BE (Hofstede 1991). The growing popularity of ICC models, such as Byram’s, at the same time, attracted a number of critics who accuse these models of perpetuating the ideas and ideologies connected with essentialism and the so-called national culture (Matsuo 2012), Cartesian rationalisation, as well as a more general lack of attention to the social and thus necessarily dynamic nature of language (Ferri 2014; Hoff 2014; Matsuo 2015). In an attempt to reconcile a theory with its practice, the paper seeks to find a middle ground between the practitioners, who tend to see ICC and its models through a more pragmatic lens, i.e., as a useful pedagogic tool, and its critics, who seem to be waiting for their chance to discard it as a collection of clichés.

Key Words. Intercultural Communicative competence, Hofstede, essentialism, ICC pedagogies.
Stressing the need for a systematic development of training of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) within the area of language learning and international management has, over the past 20 years, become a bit of a cliché. According to Cambridge Online Dictionary a cliché “is an idea or expression that has been used too often and is often considered a sign of bad writing or old-fashioned thinking”, and, therefore, it is something to be avoided; at the same time it has the potential of being something instrumental, a confirmation bias, a proof of our tendency to think in terms of similarities.

Understanding clichés as potentially productive tools on the one hand and products of a certain way of “old-fashioned” thinking on the other, the purpose of the article is to critically explore selected patterns of thought underlying the current trends in ICC in light of some most prominent concerns raised by their critics. After introducing major ICC models and discussing the criticism they have been subject to, the text looks at cultures and intercultural communicative competence from the educational perspective and considers to what extent intercultural clichés can foster or limit the development of student intercultural skills in higher education (HE) in today’s fast global, national and/or regional interdependences, almost daily cross-cultural contacts, and individual variables. The aim of the discussion is to explore the conditions under which the dominant ICC models and frameworks can be both effectively and efficiently utilised in the development of intercultural communicative competence in Business and Economics, and Project Management students at a School of Business at a technical university.

**Intercultural Communicative Competence**

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), famously defined as “the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language” (Byram 1997: 71), has now become a generally accepted fact in teaching English for Specific Purposes including Business English (Hofstede 1991). Accordingly, the acquisition of a foreign language goes hand in hand with not only the acquisition of communicative competence (CC) but also with the expectation that competent users of a foreign language have also developed competence in intercultural communication (Byram 1997; Hofstede 1991). The increased attention paid to intercultural approaches in education dates back to 2001 and the introduction of policy documents of Council of Europe which included sociocultural components, perhaps most notably in the Common European Framework on Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). Consequently, in order to better exploit the educational potential of interculturality and
offer students different perspectives they can meet with in various intercultural encounters, a somewhat shallow approach to culture based on communicative themes – travel, food, hobbies, eating habits, etc. – experienced a massive expansion into more sensitive and sophisticated intercultural subject areas such as gender, power distance, or different approaches to space and time.

Although theorists such as Edward T. Hall, Geert Hofstede, Richard Lewis, Darla K. Deardorff, or Michael Byram introduced a great variety of different descriptive and performance-oriented models, many educators and researchers tend to rely on Hofstede’s model of national culture (Straub et al. 1994; Myers and Tan 2002). This is perhaps not surprising, given that despite widespread criticism, which will be addressed below, Hofstede’s typology of culture has been one of the most popular in many professional occupations including the various fields of business and management (Myers and Tan 2002). The reason for this development appears to be that the concepts and values outlined by Hofstede seem clearly visible and its categorization is obvious and relatively easy to grasp. At the same time however, if we examine the concepts and values more closely, we can easily find that there is a good amount of flexibility.

Cultural models mostly serve as predefined archetypes which enable us to predict a culture’s behaviour, clarify and explain away behavioural preferences and patterns, search for varying degrees of unity, standardize policies, and perceive neatness and order (Lewis 2006: 29). As a result of these trends, much of the criticism of Hofstede’s model might be equally well applied to other cultural models.

**Defining Culture**

ICC models necessarily rely on at least a provisional or functional definition of culture. Culture, however, is not a theoretical subject, although it may sometimes seem that way, and many people are inclined to relate the theory to their own personal experience, social, cultural, or economic background, and intercultural encounters they may have first-hand experience of. In HE, especially within the field of business, economics and international management, theories explaining culture may be of some interest to students; being business professionals they are primarily interested in their practical application which means developing ICC skills without necessarily directing too much of their attention toward complex theoretical or philosophical frameworks. This is especially true because much of the discussion related to the theorizing of culture and controversies surrounding intercultural issues result from various academic areas.
including anthropology, psychology, sociology, economics, organizational theory as well as applied linguistics and thus to a great extent reaches beyond students’ field of interest and/or expertise. This is especially true because the approaches championed by academics from these fields often differ as they conceptualise both culture and intercultural communication from different and sometimes perhaps incompatible angles.

Accordingly, ICC finds itself facing a whole array of semi-conflicting definitions and standpoints. Boyacigille et al. sees culture as a powerful social construct (2004: 99) while Hall offers a communication-oriented perspective on culture through stories and observations, arguing that “culture is communication and no communication by humans can be divorced from culture” (Hall 1992: 212). According to Kramsch (1993), culture is always context-specific and thus necessarily dynamic whereas Leung (2005: 357-378) defines culture as a set of more or less static values, beliefs and norms and behavioural patterns of the given group; yet other researchers suggest that culture includes more explicit and observable artefacts including norms and practices (Hofstede 1991: 26), as well as ideology, rituals, and myths (Pettigrew 1979: 570-581). An important conceptualisation of culture is the one focusing on group or individual identity; Camerer and Mader (2012: 13-15) give five key characteristics of culture, describing it as acquired, shared by a group of people, mostly unconscious, dynamic, and part of a person’s identity.

Amidst the complexity of theoretical approaches, a number of authors and critics of ICC stress that the biggest danger in trying to understand culture is to oversimplify it as “it is tempting to say that culture is just ‘the way we do things around here’, ‘the rites and rituals’, ‘the company climate’, ‘our basic values’. These are all manifestations of the culture, but none is the culture at the level where culture matters” (Shein 2009: 21).

While we are quite convinced that it is valuable for economics and management students at Business Schools to acquire at least some degree of knowledge about the theories and philosophies behind culture, intercultural communication, or, for that matter, communication in general, practice shows that they are rarely motivated enough to discuss this theoretical background in greater detail. For them and their purposes ICC models simply provide the condensed information they feel they need to do the best job possible within their professional context. Eight years of teaching ICC in academic and professional settings has taught us that for HE Business School students as well as for in-service professionals, real-life intercultural communication is always seen as an exchange of information for a given purpose, no matter whether business, official, romantic, or other. Thus, to be interculturally competent requires possessing the knowledge of necessary attitudes and reflective and behavioural skills, which
can then be used to behave effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations. This involves the acceptance of some further circumstances we consider important for intercultural training purposes:

1. Culture and communication are closely related; intercultural competence without language is hardly possible.
2. We never deal with theoretical cultures; we always deal with individuals.
3. There is no such issue as general interculturality.
4. Cultures and intercultural communication affect business and may have serious consequences on people’s careers.
5. Mistakes are often related to perception, interpretation, evaluation, and judgement.

**Measuring Cultures: Geert Hofstede and Beyond**

Working in the 1970s as a management trainer and personnel research manager for the global IBM company, Geert Hofstede explored the reasons for reoccurring misunderstandings underlying strict corporate identity in IBM subsidiaries all over the world. Based on a statistical analysis of self-answer questionnaires presented to the staff in sixty-four countries, Hofstede introduced a system of measuring cultures at a national level as he started to identify cultural phenomena distinguishing specific cultures – rather than individuals – from each other. Drawing on additional data provided by other in-depth studies including Danish and Dutch organizations, in 2011, he famously identified altogether six dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, long/short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint.

It is the ubiquitous nature of his empirical findings that has made Hofstede’s name pre-eminent in intercultural theory and makes it impossible to avoid him and the influence of his research in the field, especially when applied to the fields of international management. Unlike Hall’s observation approach in the 1960s, Hofstede collected an immense set of data, although from a limited number of organizations, and introduced an influential comparative dimensions paradigm. Importantly, he organised his findings in the form of ranked tables (Hofstede, G. and Hofstede, J. 2005), later modelling them into scored charts and an online interactive 6D model. This approach helped to direct attention to deeper layers of culture-based identity in which values play a major role (Hofstede 2001: 23). For non-commercial purposes, Jan Gert Hofstede

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even offers an online application which features a revolving globe displaying any of Hofstede’s dimensions, including scores for any two-dimension comparison.

Following Hofstede’s research and findings, the current Hofstede Centre with country offices worldwide develops quite attractive analytical and up-to-date data-driven online tools offering more personalised and pragmatic insights into the consequences of culture such as the Culture Compass, 6D model and a Multi-focus model of organizational culture. Still, the improvements of culture measurement have remained limited to developing better item sets, improving scale reliabilities, and refining scoring schemes.

Concerning the methods applied for describing cultures, Fig. 1 shows a brief overview of the cultural dimensions employed by some other scholars and institutions in their empirical research.

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In view of this variety of cultural dimensions all other studies, with the exception of Hall, who built on critical incidents of his own and others, used self-answer questionnaires based either on psychological constructs, namely Hofstede, Trompenaars/Hampden-Turner and Schwartz, or social science, namely European Values Study and the World Values Study. It is worth noting that only the users of the European Values Study and the World Values Study are frequently reminded that any interpretation of their findings should be based on a learnt consideration. This reminder is noticeably missing in the other cultural frameworks and dimensions based on statistics – including Hofstede’s – which have gained much greater popularity.

As discussed below, quantitative culture frameworks have been criticized by a large number of scholars who pointed out that cultures are not limited to values, that they have become unstable in the rapidly globalizing environment, and that cultures can be seen as effects and not only causes; others point out that geographical boundaries are not optimal criteria for clustering cultures and maintain that scoring and ranking may create a false perception of cultural homogeneity (Taras and Steel 2009; McSweeney 2002 and 2009).

Whether quantitative methods are sufficient in defining and describing cultures remains doubtful; the above-mentioned approaches have helped to raise cultural awareness, and the quantity of detail that confronts learners while cultivating curiosity about other cultures (or subcultures), building rapport with co-workers and business partners, recognizing cultural variables that affect the way people speak and behave, and developing the ability to better understand the culturally-conditioned images that are evoked in the minds of people when they think.

**Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence**

In the 1990s, the most frequently cited intercultural concepts included Kelley and Meyers’ Cross Cultural Adaptability Inventory (1993), Byram’s Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence (1997) and Hammer and Bennett’s Concepts of Intercultural
Communication (Bennett 1998). In her classic study *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* (1993), Claire Kramsch introduced the intercultural dimension of culture in language teaching. The first decade of the 21st century saw an advent of more person-centred instruments and methods and it was Deardorff who in 2006 referred to intercultural competence (IC) as “possessing the necessary attitudes and reflective and behavioural skills and using these to behave effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations” (242).

The development of IC is well illustrated in figure 2, where the pyramid-shaped model shows five fundamental elements which build upon each other, starting at the base with the requisite attitudes, followed by the acquired knowledge and skills, and resulting in internal and external outcomes. Moving from the personal level at the base of the pyramid, expressed by individual attitudes (e.g., being aware of your own cultural background and values), to an interpersonal and more interactive level (e.g., collecting opinions and habits of schoolmates and looking for common artefacts seen as local or global), learners discover a new variety of perspectives through culture-specific knowledge (different attitudes to emotions, haptics, or proxemics). Then they build on the newly gained intercultural knowledge and develop skills such as listening, observing and interpreting.

Involving an individual in the process of interaction and orientation, the acquired competence, i.e., the use of knowledge, skills, and individual experience, leads to internal outcomes which can enable learners to respond more effectively in intercultural situations in which they analyse, evaluate, and relate appropriate communication styles and behaviours – direct or indirect – in different contexts. External outcomes should then be visible through observable behaviours (e.g., being less judgmental) as indicators of implicit understanding. Curiosity and the willingness to step out of their comfort zone, respect for other cultures, openness, and awareness of diversity are the main requisites together with critical reflection being an inevitable strategy for ongoing intercultural development.
Fig 2: Pyramid model of intercultural competence (Source: Adapted from Deardorff [2006])

Intercultural communicative competence in this sense builds on IC and brings additional dimensions as it requires acquired competence “in attitudes, knowledge, and skills related to intercultural competence while using a foreign language” (Wilberschied 2015: 3). As such, it is a combination of not only knowledge and personality but also communicative skills, like being able to deal with situations and resolve difficulties using language. In other words, it integrates the communicative competence in a foreign language. Similarly, Byram's performance-oriented model of ICC emphasizes a set of competencies that should be acquired by foreign language students and organizes them around five key components: Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills of interpreting and relating, Skills of discovery and interaction and Political education including critical cultural awareness (Byram 1997: 71).
Intercultural Communicative Competence and its Critics

Over the years, the criticism of various ICC models has taken all conceivable shapes and forms, ranging from ontological, epistemological (Matsuo 2012 and 2015), methodological (Williamson 2002, McSweeney 2002 and 2009), or discourse-focused (Fougère and Moulettes 2007) to what can be seen as purely philosophical (Roy and Starosta 2001; Ferri 2014) or even a bit-too-personal lines of criticism (McSweeney 2002 and 2009, Hofstede 2002). Rather than attempting to present an exhaustive list of theories and their respective critics, we will focus on what we see as the most pertinent lines of criticism in relation to pedagogical best practice and the training of ICC in HE students. In this inquiry, we will focus on two of the most popular and widely used ICC frameworks, i.e., ICC models conceptualised by Geert Hofstede and Michael Byram as outlined above. Both of these models have been widely used in international management curricula of Business Schools (Myers and Tan 2002) as well as in the field of ELF (Hoff 2014: 55).

Perhaps the most pronounced and often articulated criticism of ICC models – including Byram’s and Hofstede’s – targets at the fact that these models function within a fixed or stable framework of the so-called nation-culture. The over-reliance on the idea of a nation-culture tends to be interpreted as a revival of mythological and idealist notions of romantic collectivism and national-state identity which can be traced all the way back to Rousseau and the German romantic movement, starting with Herder’s Ideas towards a Philosophy of the History of Mankind written in 1785 (Popper 1947: 50). Consequently, the rather unfortunate matrimony of ICC and nation-culture has been described as a relic of (neo-)essentialism and scientific positivism, or as a posthumous brainchild of Cartesian rationalism and the Enlightenment project and its blind trust in rational agency and moral autonomy (Ferri 2014: 8). As suggested above, critics have further pointed out that using a nation-culture as a linchpin of the model is simply untenable within the changing realities of the globalised world at the beginning of the 21st century (Hoff 2014: 57).

ICC theories which rely on the nation-culture paradigm have consequently been described as guilty of perpetuating a whole host of faulty and misleading assumptions and clichés, or at least of opening space for potentially harmful misinterpretations, which can be, if not pedagogically addressed, too easily adopted by ICC students or trainees. Consequently, it has been argued that such ICC models at best simplify complex intercultural communicational situations, and, at worst, perpetuate post-colonial, Eurocentric (or “Anglo-Germanic-centric”) ways of thinking, or are simply wrong (Fougère & Moulettes 2007: 4) and therefore represent
a way of thinking and seeing the world which no teacher would encourage their students to uncritically embrace. The nation-culture line of criticism is epitomised by one of Hofstede’s most vocal critics, Brendan McSweeney, who ironically remarks that thanks to ICC “there is a significant literature which assumes that each nation has a distinctive, influential and describable ‘culture’” (2002: 89).

Such conceptualisations of culture and intercultural communication are further problematised by critics who accuse nation-culture models of ICC of various forms of reductivism essentialism. As Popper famously argued, “to an essentialist, knowledge or understanding [of a concept] must clearly mean knowledge of its essence or Spirit” (1947: 35) which would, in a classical Platonic interpretation, be understood as something that remains stable and unchangeable, or, to use Hofstede’s own words, “stabilised over long periods of history” (2001: 2). Consequently, within Hofstede’s ICC model, to know the essence of a nation-culture would mean to understand a “societal norm [which] is meant to be a value system shared by a majority in the middle classes in a society” (Hofstede 2001: 97). Importantly, this essence is for Hofstede bound to individual nation-cultures and defined as “a cultural average” which in some sense exists despite the fact that “individuals … vary widely around the norm” (2001: 97) and forms a territorially unique “collective programming of the mind”, defined “as the totality of cultures, within a nation” (2001: 2). According to Hofstede’s critics, such objectivization of nation-culture infuses it with uniformity and continuity, however, at the cost of “variety and variation” (McSweeney 2009: 934) and becomes a frame which encapsulates “interlocutors within a national tradition” (Ferri 2014: 10). A similar line of criticism targets Byram’s model in which, as Matsuo shows, “national cultures are treated as facts in cognition” (2015: 351). The tendency towards “equating cultures with national cultures is the result of thinking of cultures as ‘containers,’ i.e., as hermetically sealed units” (Matsuo 2015: 351). This type of thinking – and the discourse it produces – has both ideological and philosophical implications.

Analogically to the criticism of nation-culture, a more subtle philosophical line of criticism examines the ICC model of communication and the model of knowledge in general. Focusing on the level of communication, critics seem to agree that besides reducing culture, or, more specifically, nation-culture to a “collective programming of the mind” (Hofstede 2001: 2) which can reliably be measured and turned into a pattern of behaviours and trainable responses (Ferri 2014: 9), monologic and essentialist ICC models – including models proposed by Hofstede or Byram – tend to disregard the socially constructed and intersubjective nature of meaning in favour of a functional approach to communication (Ferri 2014: 18). Such reductive
approach understands intercultural communication (and communication in general) as a rationally managed exchange of information and – something Kern described as a “fax machine model of communication” (Kern 2015: 23), disregarding the hybrid and shifting nature of self and society and socially constructed nature of meaning and language (Ferri 2014: 18).

Consequently, ICC models tend to rely on a monologic model of communication which presupposes that meaning somehow pre-exists in the mind of individual speakers prior to being communicated, ignoring any intersubjective adjustments and “ecologies of interaction” (Kern 2014: 22). Quoting Moon, it is Ferri who reminds us of the potentially “colonial undertone” of intercultural communication based on “the dichotomy self/cultural other” and focuses on “communicative exchanges in elite situations, such as business and management, in which recognition of the other is essentialised” (2014: 9). Similarly, by establishing the above-described fixed essentialist frameworks, monologic ICC models tend to reinforce a passivist approach to knowledge, also famously referred to as the “bucket theory of mind” (Popper 1947: 201) inherited from the tradition of philosophical empiricism which seems to ignore that “knowledge is not a collection of gifts received by our senses and stored in the mind as if it were a museum but that it is very largely the result of our own mental activity” (Popper 1947: 202).

Hand in hand with this come two methodological assumptions shared by a number of ICC models, i.e., that (1) human behaviour is to a large extent predictable, and that (2) culture-determined mental programming, values, and culture can be successfully measured (Hofstede 2001: 2), as mentioned above, typically through surveys and questionnaires, and in turn generalised. Once again, this is true precisely because the observable manifestations or behavioural patterns do not seem to change significantly. This assumed stability and iterability of observed patterns of behaviour form the core of Hofstede’s predominantly inductive method that many critics – perhaps justly – perceive as “imprisoned within the terms of a scientific positivism that only permits things to be ‘really real’ if they are measurable and solid” (Riggs 2021).

Instructive in this sense seems to be the following quote from Hofstede’s Culture’s Consequences. Discussing the “general societal norm” behind what he calls its “low-PDI” (Power Distance Index) and “high-PDI” syndromes, Hofstede comments on his method and observes the following:

It is now time to step back from the data […]. This is an exercise in induction, which means that I complete the picture with elements based on intuition rather than empirical
evidence, much as an archaeologist completes ancient pottery from which shards are missing. (2001: 97)

It is easy to see why this and similar moments in Hofstede’s texts provoke his occasionally all-too-eager critics, who see them as a clear proof of overreliance on essentialism and scientific positivism and why these and similar moments are perhaps too easily interpreted as moves that “legitimate [Hofstede’s] claim for extended relevance […] beyond his rigorous quantitative approach” (Fougère and Moulettes 2007: 3).

Rather than commenting on the “overconfidence in the quantitative methods’ capacity of delineating […] a scientific truth” (Fougère and Moulettes 2007: 23), which the extract clearly lends itself to, one may focus on the metaphors which Hofstede employs and which ostentatiously open the door to further criticism. By comparing himself to an archaeologist who reconstructs a piece of ancient pottery, Hofstede implies that the societal norm he “inductively” and “intuitively” discovers is just as solid, stable, and – in a strong, Platonic sense – objectively pre-existing, as an archaeological find. Consequently, it is something one can uncover or dig up using the correct – understand scientific – methods.

Such discourse naturally lends itself to an anti-essentialist criticism. However, if the above-quoted extract from Culture’s Consequences reads as a proof of Hofstede’s essentialism, the following extract sets a rather different tone. Commenting on the arbitrary number of the dimensions included in his model, Hofstede half-jokingly asserts the following:

People sometimes wonder how many more dimensions there are. One should realise that dimensions do not “exist”. Like “culture” itself, they are constructs, products of our imagination, that have been introduced because they subsume complex sets of mental programs into easily remembered packages (2001: 71).

By openly declaring that both the norms and (nation) cultures are mere constructs which in a strong or absolute sense do not exist because we “define them into existence” (2), Hofstede not only – albeit in passing – acknowledges the limitations of his own research method but also endorses the arbitrariness and instrumentality of his and implicitly other similar ICC models. This becomes even more vocal in his response to McSweeney’s criticism of the nation-culture concept when Hofstede bluntly responds that although nations are not an ideal unit in the study of ICC, “they are usually the only kind of units available for comparison and better than nothing” (Hofstede 2002: 2).
Just as in the case of the abstraction of nation-culture, the societal norm, defined as “a value system shared by a majority in the middle classes in a society” (Hofstede 2001: 97) does not exist in the same sense as a fragmented-and-reconstructed vase; these two objects do not share the same ontological status and do not exist in the same sense. Perhaps paradoxically, although Hofstede appears to clearly acknowledge this, other aspects of his model and the discourse he uses seem to, at least according to his critics, imply otherwise.

Further, just like there is, in some sense, no monolithic or homogeneous nation-culture – because the very term nation, famously defined as an imagined community (Anderson 2006), remains rather problematic – there is, according to a related line of criticism, no causal relationship between being a member of a given nation-culture, albeit vaguely defined, and one’s behaviour patterns as indicated by some ICC models (Ferri 2014: 9). Therefore, even if we accept the problematic definition of a nation, of a monolithic nation-culture, and of a simplified communication model, it remains rather problematic to prove any causal relationship between nation-culture and individual behaviour. Commenting on the paradoxical outcomes in the case of Great Britain and its home nations, McSweeney simply concludes that such an approach equals endorsing national cultural determinism (2002: 5).

**Pedagogic Implications: Towards a Critical Model of ICC**

Speaking from a pedagogical perspective the criticism outlined above is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, on the more general level, essentialist and determinist approaches reinforce fundamentally conservative conceptualisations of (cultural) identity based on territoriality, national mythologies, tribalism, otherness, and forms of political and racial exclusivity which tend to stand in opposition to what Popper famously described as an “open society” (1947: 28–30). Secondly and in line with these observations, as Roy and Starosta argued using elements of Gadamer’s philosophy, a positivist and scientistic approach applied in explaining complex phenomena such as communication – including intercultural communication – is necessarily reductive and is likely to “introduce oppositional dichotomies, foster hierarchies, objectify phenomena” (2001: 17). Consequently, it appears rather all-too-easy to argue that the concept of nation-culture stands too close to another both politically and philosophically problematic construct of a nation state, which is not only inapplicable but “is an irrational, a romantic and Utopian dream, a dream of naturalism and of tribal collectivism” (Popper 1947: 49).
In other words, the conservative – or old-fashioned – way of thinking and discourse some of the most prominent ICC models perpetuate seem to pronounce for these models to be applied and taught uncritically, i.e., without being pointed out and hinted at by teachers and educators. Claiming that the nation-culture model is the best available alternative (Hofstede 2002: 2) and ignoring its consequences seems, at least in this sense, rather insufficient as – pedagogically (if not philosophically) speaking. Instead of accepting arbitrary, ready-made patterns, we should “actively engage ourselves in searching, comparing, unifying, generalizing, if we want to attain knowledge” (Popper 1947: 202). One only needs to remember Borges’ Chinese encyclopaedia mentioned by Eco or Foucault (Foucault 2002: xiv).

Although we agree with Williamson, who, assessing McSweeney’s critique, argues that rejecting Hofstede’s model would mean to “throw away valuable insight” (2002: 1392), we maintain that the critique of the nation-culture model in ICC becomes highly relevant from a pedagogical perspective. If it is true that critical models of intercultural competence, i.e., models that would bypass the above-outlined deficiencies, are “far from becoming embedded in the practice of language teaching [and that] learning a foreign language still rests on the idealised notion of the nation-state, built on the ideal of a common language and of a native speaker reflecting a homogeneous national culture opposed to other national identities” (Ferri 2014: 12), it seems highly pertinent that educators and instructors avoid a situation in which the abstracted and artificial notion of national cultures further emulates a monologic teacher discourse and turns ICC instruction into an “authoritative delivery of facts where cultures and people are ‘in’ the objectified because talked about in ‘ready-made form’” (Matsuo 2015: 351).

The question thus stands, as to how we as educators and instructors relate ICC in a dialogic, non-authoritative and non-essentialist manner, and avoid passive reception and consumption of meaning.

One way to approach the problem might be to embrace dialogic models of instruction and communication in which we depart from an individual situation and invite inter- and transcultural communication based on dialogue, avoiding monological pedagogies and communication models. This would entail discarding monological, transmissive pedagogies and direct instruction in favour of constructivist approaches to learning in which “individuals create their own new understandings on the basis of an interaction between what they already know and believe and ideas and knowledge with which they come into contact” (Resnick 1989, as cited in Richardson 2003: 1623-24). Such critical ICC pedagogies would invite reflection on and criticism of individual ICC frameworks and assumptions behind them and present ICC as a reflective skill rather than a collection of rigid rules.

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On a task design level, this approach calls for a careful task design which avoids “monologism […] as self-interested instrumentality, short-circuiting the intended exposure to alternative perspectives” (Kern 2014, 343). This is especially true in the so-called virtual exchanges (VE) which on the one hand become a facile and well-accepted tool in developing ICC (O’Dowd 2015) but at the same time, being technology-mediated, introduce a new set of constraints that can produce misunderstandings (Kern 2014, 342). In such situations, teachers in HE should carefully consider their task design, ideally preferring what has been called comparison and analysis tasks, and collaborative tasks to mere information exchange tasks (O’Dowd and Ware, 2009: 173-178), thereby supporting learner autonomy which “requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others” (Little 2003: 2). This seems particularly pertinent as VEs offer a unique chance to teach ICC in a culturally heterogeneous setting, which seems to be one of the key requirements for achieving a critical, dialogic environment.

Another way should be to embrace the principles of relational pedagogy which “adopts an ecological model in that it takes relations rather than things as primary units of analysis” and move towards pedagogies that focus “attention on subtle interactions between medium, genre, register, and culture so that students can be prevented from jumping to facile conclusions about the way others think, feel, or express themselves that are based on surface language forms alone” (Kern 2014, 353).

Further, by studying the codes and values of other cultures and their impact on behaviour, one automatically learns more about oneself. As it is hardly possible to separate culture and personality, understanding our own ‘mental software’ while simultaneously recognizing other ways of behaving and thinking – a sort of ‘cross-cultural swinging’ (Schmidt 2012) and deciding on what we consider ‘normal’, what has influenced us up to now and how we represent our own culture, is the paradox of knowing oneself. This remains an integral part of any ICC training.

**Conclusion**

The research findings undoubtedly illustrate the complexity of ICC, and many educators could be discouraged by the numerous challenges that may emerge, be it unforeseen variables, ambiguous answers and multiple solutions or insufficient training and experience. Nevertheless, running an ICC training with the aim of making learners into competent intercultural communicators need not be difficult. It is important to remember the variety and
richness of learning and the dynamic and everchanging nature of intercultural communication which implies that ICC must be seen as dynamic and ever-changing as well. In other words, no ICC course can claim to be a ‘complete’ course. Involving a variety, having learners identify, understand, and contrast various intercultural concepts related to models of culture, cultural values, global and local identities, perception, and interpretation, as well as their own personal cultural programming can contribute to improving learners’ (business) communication in intercultural contexts and overcoming a number of barriers including cross-cultural stereotyping, a low level of language proficiency, or a lack of confidence.

**Works Cited**


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