Dimensions of Cultural Competence: Implications for the ESL Curriculum

Harry Krasnick, Canada-Indonesia Language Program

While guidelines for teacher training developed over a decade ago recognized the need for teacher cultural competence (see Center for Applied Linguistics, 1974; TESOL, n.d. [1976]), only recently do we find attempts at the measurement of cultural competence, and there are still unresolved conceptual issues. For instance, the NTE Programs' Test for Teaching English as a Second Language (see De Vincenzi, 1987) includes a test of "cultural awareness." What is meant by that term? Does it differ from "cultural sensitivity"? These questions have implications not only for teacher training but for cultural competence as a part of the ESL curriculum.

Terminology: Sensitivity or Awareness?

Some writers do not make a clear distinction between cultural sensitivity and cultural awareness in teacher training:

> ...education designed to develop multicultural awareness or sensitivity (Sutman, 1981, p. 107).

> ...cultural awareness in the sense of being sensitive to the cultural factors which influence both parties in human interaction (Harris & Moran, 1979, p. 132).

> ...increasing trainees' awareness of their own culture with the expectation that such awareness will sensitize them to the key dimensions of cultural difference (Fontaine, 1983, p. 174).

There are, however, different connotations in everyday language. According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, "sensitivity" refers to

> the capacity of a person to respond emotionally to changes in his interpersonal or social relationships

while "aware" means

> marked by realization, perception, or knowledge; showing heightened perception and ready comprehension and appreciation

While *Webster's* does not deal with the role of awareness and sensitivity in *cross cultural* situations, clearly there is a difference between competence for social interaction (sensitivity) and knowledge (awareness). This basic distinction can be seen in many discussions of cultural competence for teaching.

Four Conceptions of Multicultural Teaching Competence

We can distinguish four different conceptions of the teacher's cultural competence, all of which are related to the everyday conceptions of sensitivity and awareness.

Attitude. Brislin (1981) defines attitudes as "people's reactions toward a concept, or, in everyday language, their feelings, beliefs, and readiness to act" (p. 41). Some writers describe competence for multicultural teaching in just such terms:

> ...an interest in the students' history, economy, customs, folklore, language, and so on (Weing, 1973, p. 154).
>
> ...concern for and patience with people of other cultures, and an acceptance of their varied cultural values and patterns of behavior (Sutman, 1981, p. 197).
>
> ...attitudes and values [that] reflect his honest belief in the worth of all human beings (Crane, 1978, p. 15).

The attitudinal version of cultural competence, aimed at the teacher's interpersonal relations with students, implies cultural sensitivity rather than cultural awareness.

Knowledge. Quite a common conception of cultural competence for teaching is knowledge, which is linked to cultural awareness. For example, Tzeng (1983) discusses "the cultural awareness approach, in which the trainees are provided with general information of the target culture" (p. 233), and Hughes (1983) refers to the assumption that "knowledge of cultural differences—even a general knowledge, what's sometimes referred to as *'cultural awareness'*—will improve intercultural relations" (p. 45; emphasis in the original). For ESL teacher education, the most relevant conceptions of this type refer to knowledge of sociocultural factors as they affect the learner's progress (see Center for Applied Linguistics, 1974, p. 3; TESOL, n.d. [1974], n.p.).

Skill. A third conception of teacher cultural competence is that of skills. Brislin (1981) lists six skills for cross cultural contact:

> ...knowledge of the subject matter, language [skills], communication skills, taking advantage of opportunities, ability to use traits in a given culture, and ability to complete one's task in a given culture (p. 63).

This formulation, though it includes knowledge, is aimed at social interaction more than understanding or awareness. Another list of skills (see Harris & Moran, 1979, pp. 129 130) is framed in terms of the "capabilities" to communicate respect, be nonjudgmental, personalize knowledge and perceptions, display empathy, change roles, demonstrate reciprocal concern, and tolerate ambiguity. Here, too, the emphasis is on interaction rather than knowledge.

Trait. While skills can be acquired and lost, traits are considered relatively immutable. As such, traits may be relevant in teacher selection as well as in training itself. We see traits like conceptions of cultural competence in Troike and Saville-Troike's (1982) assertion that cultural awareness and sensitivity is an "*underlying personal characteristic*" (p. 212, emphasis in the original) and in the Center for Applied Linguistics guidelines' (1974) reference to awareness and sensitivity as "personal qualities" (p. 2). Brislin's (1981, p. 70) list of desirable traits for overseas assignments comprises tolerance of different points of view, strength of

personality, the ability to develop relations with others, intelligence, a task orientation, and a willingness to receive and use feedback from others. Again, interaction rather than knowledge is the focus.

Relative Importance of Awareness vs. Sensitivity

That cultural awareness alone is not sufficient is stressed by Wilson (1984):

> Cognitive multiculturalism sometimes conflicts with affective multiculturalism. Some can function intellectually as multicultural persons, but when it comes to demonstration or practice have very little skills in this highly complex art (p. 7).

Bennett (1986), who offers a development model of training for intercultural sensitivity, goes further, limiting the role of cultural awareness to that of helping to overcome trainees' initial denial of the existence of cultural differences:

> At this stage of sensitivity (and only at this stage) the best technique for development seems to be "cultural awareness" activities. These generally take the form of "Mexico Night" or similar functions, where music, dance, food, and costumes are exhibited. In terms of this model, the purpose served by these activities is to create more differentiation of general categories for cultural difference. It should be noted that *not much more can be expected from such functions, even though they are sometimes touted as great contributions to intercultural sensitivity* (pp. 187-188, emphasis added).

Below, we will have an opportunity to examine these writers' view that sensitivity is the ultimate goal by comparing it to sociological studies of both intra and intercultural competence.

What has been argued so far has implications not only for teacher training but for the ESL curriculum because competence for cross cultural social interaction is essential in both cases. Against this background, the typical cultural competence syllabus in ESL—primarily reading passages dealing with topics such as American holidays, famous American cities, and popular entertainers—seems rather impoverished, tacked on conversation exercises notwithstanding. With few exceptions,[1] then, the cultural competence found in the ESL curriculum is really nothing more than cultural awareness. The underlying message seems to be that students either do not need cultural sensitivity, or are expected to get it elsewhere than in the ESL classroom.

Receptive vs. Productive Competence

The reception/production dimension cuts across that of awareness/sensitivity. Generally, cultural competence is treated as receptive competence. Thus the NTE examination on teaching ESL, like the typical ESL cultural awareness syllabus, can measure competence by merely asking questions. The well accepted "culture assimilator," a technique for increasing trainees' ability to make appropriate cross-cultural attributions of the meaning of others' actions (see Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie, & Yong, 1986), also is aimed at receptive competence.

However, ESL learners also need *productive* competence. We do see an emphasis on productive skills in the communicative competence-oriented ESL curriculum, where the student learns how to speak politely, apologize, and perform various other "speech acts," but this emphasis on "acting" is absent in the typical ESL cultural competence syllabus. Below, some viewpoints borrowed from sociology are used to illustrate the need for productive cultural competence in everyday life.

Impression Management: An Example of Productive Competence

The late Erving Goffman, the founding father of microsociology, emphasized the individual's need to actively control the impressions he "gives off"[2] in communicating with others if he is to achieve his specific goals:

> He may wish them to think highly of him, or to think that he thinks highly of them, or to obtain no clearcut impression; he may wish to ensure sufficient harmony so that the interaction can be sustained, or to defraud, get rid of, confuse, mislead, antagonize, or insult them (Goffman, 1959, p. 3).

Note how vivid this sociologist's description seems when compared to the implicit assumptions of many ESL curriculum designers, who treat learners as passive conformists who always seek to follow the rules and meet other people's expectations.

Though Goffman does not take a cross-cultural approach, he clearly describes this "presentation of self in everyday life" as an exercise in cultural competence:

> ...when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole (p. 35).

Though this productive cultural competence can be taken for granted in the case of native members of a culture, it becomes problematic in the case of ESL learners. Let it be noted that this competence is in no sense optional:

> The ability to manage or adapt to diverse communicative situations has become essential and the ability to interact with people with whom one has no personal acquaintance is crucial to acquiring even a small measure of personal and social control. We have to talk in order to establish our rights and responsibilities. (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982, p. 4).

In speech act terminology, this kind of talk is more than performative—it is perlocutionary. The requirement, then, is one of interaction, not merely knowledge.

The importance of cross-cultural differences in perlocutionary speech acts is demonstrated in Danet's (1980) study of persuasive appeals in letters of complaint to customs authorities in Israel. She found that, unlike individuals of Western origin, who employed normative appeals, people of Middle Eastern origin favored altruistic appeals, which were not effective. Similarly, Wodak's (1980) study of social class differences in how defendants

"interpret themselves" to the court in legal proceedings showed that individuals are successful "only if they know the explicit and implicit values and norms [of the justice system] and are able to verbalize and operationalize their knowledge in spontaneous interaction" (p. 373, emphasis added).

Summary

A number of propositions have been advanced in the foregoing discussion of cultural competence:

1. There is a lack of uniformity in terminology.

2. There are conceptions of teacher cultural competence based on attitudes, knowledge, skills, and traits.

3. A distinction between awareness and sensitivity, or knowledge and interaction, can be seen in those conceptions.

4. Cultural sensitivity, not cultural awareness, is the primary goal in conceptions of cultural competence based on attitudes, skills, and traits.

5. Cultural awareness by itself is not sufficient.

6. Effective everyday communication implies productive competence which is cultural in nature.

All of these propositions apply to ESL teachers, yet their implications have not yet been appreciated, much less incorporated into teacher training programs. In fact, new teachers often lack a systematic understanding of even their own culture. The results range from superficial psychological reductionism (Japanese students are "polite," Indonesians are "shy") to the essentially ethnocentric deficit theory (foreign students "lack" study skills). Clearly, cultural competence defined as cultural awareness, even in combination with good intentions, is not sufficient. Teachers must be able to *respond* appropriately to cross-cultural differences in the classroom, not just evaluate students according to Western cultural norms and values.

As for students, the recent appearance on the market of a variety of ESL textbooks purporting to promote cultural competence testifies to the growing recognition that ESL learners, too, need cultural competence. Unfortunately we rarely see anything more than cultural awareness in those books. Instead of "Mexico Night," we have "disco night," or "at the fast food restaurant."

There is no reason to think that ESL learners are satisfied with a lower level of effectiveness in their daily lives than the rest of us are. According to the viewpoint presented above, what learners need in the way of cultural competence is not just cultural awareness but cultural sensitivity; not just receptive competence but productive competence. Without that, there can be no "empowerment" of learners.

Notes

1. See Krasnick (1988)

2. By this term Goffman means to refer to "a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor,

the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way" (Goffman, 1959, p. 2). In other words, the individual also "gives off" information about himself as he is communicating.

References

Bennett, M. J. (1986). A development approach to training for intercultural sensitivity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 10* (2), 179-195.

Brislin, R. W. (1981). *Cross cultural encounters: Face to face interaction.* New York: Pergamon Press.

Brislin, R. W., Cushner, K., Cherrie, C., & Yong, M. (1986). *Intercultural interactions: a practical guide.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Center for Applied Linguistics. (1974). *Guidelines for the preparation and certification of teachers of bilingual/ bicultural education.* Arlington, VA: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Crane, V. A. (1978). *The cultural implications for teaching ESL to Mexican-American college students.* (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 152 069)

Danet, B. (1980). Language in the legal process. *Law and Society Review, 14* (3), 445-564.

De Vincenzi, F. (1987). The NTE Programs' test for teaching English as a second language examination. *TESOL Newsletter, 21,* (5), 7.

Ewing, W. K. (1973). Internships and teacher training in ESL. *TESOL Quarterly, 7,* (2,) 153 159.

Fontaine, G. (1983). Americans in Australia: International training for "the lucky country." In D. Landis & R. W. Brislin (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training, volume III: Area studies in intercultural training* (162-180). New York: Pergamon Press.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.

Gumperz, J. J. & Cook Gumperz, J. (1982). Introduction: language and the communication of social identity. In J. J. Gumperz (Ed.) *Language and social identity* (1-21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harris, P. R. & Moran, R. T. (1979). *Managing cultural differences.* Houston, Texas: Gulf Publishing Company.

Hughes, G. (1983). Intercultural education in elementary and secondary schools. In D.Landis & R. W. Brislin (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training, volume III: Area studies in intercultural training* (pp. 21-54). New York: Pergamon Press.

Krasnick, H. (1988). [Review of *Communicating in Context*]. *TESOL Quarterly, 22,* 319-326.

Sutman, F. X. (1981). Guidelines for program development in teacher education for multilingual settings. In *Proceedings of the eighth annual international bilingual-bicultural educa-*

tion conference (pp. 99-118). Rosslyn, VA: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.

TESOL. n.d. [1976]. *Guidelines for the certification and preparation of teachers of English to speakers of other languages in the United States*. Washington, DC: TESOL.

Troike, R. & Saville-Troike, M. (1982). Teacher training for bilingual education: an international perspective. In B. Hartford, A. Valdman, & C. B. Foster (Eds.), *Issues in international bilingual education: The role of the vernacular* (pp. 199-219). New York: Plenum Press.

Tzeng, O. (1983). The use of the Atlas of Affective Meanings in intercultural training. In D. Landis & R. W. Brislin (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training, volume I: Issues in theory and design* (pp. 224-252). New York: Pergamon Press.

Wilson, H. W. (1984). Multicultural education: More than cultural awareness. *Texas Tech Journal of Education, 11* (1), 7-12.

Wodak, R. (1980). Discourse analysis and courtroom interaction. *Discourse Processes, 3*, 369-380.