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Intercultural Communicative Competence and the teaching of English: Exploring teachers' beliefs and practices

Over recent years, the central importance of 'culture learning' has been stressed by theoreticians with an interest in language learning as social interaction (e.g. Kramsch, 2004, Sercu, 2005). Despite this, until very recently approaches to intercultural communication were largely absent from language learning curricula and from language teacher education programmes. Theoretical frameworks are now in place to facilitate the incorporation of intercultural competence and language learning (Byram, 1997; Council of Europe, 2001; Risager, 2007). The theoretical landscape is rich and varied, with available frameworks incorporating social psychological perspectives on groups and group interaction, as well as more specifically postmodern approaches to identity and culture as social construction. Such approaches promote critical orientations incorporating relativistic perspectives and a critical internationalism (Byram, 2008). They also stress the importance of resistance to processes of 'otherisation', the reification of culture and the stereotypical representations of target groups.

Empirical investigation of the application of intercultural theory to pedagogy remains surprisingly unusual (Byram & Feng, 2004; Young, Sachdev & Seedhouse, 2009). The multimodal, exploratory study reported here investigated the extent to which one of the more widely known and influential frameworks, Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), is informing English language teaching in three locations in the USA, UK and France. A survey investigated 104 experienced teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the development of ICC on current programmes. The investigation was then extended in diary studies, and in focus group interviews in each of the three locations. Analysis of findings indicated an apparent disparity between teachers' beliefs and classroom content. Teachers generally supported the model as a way forward, and stressed that 'good' learners and teachers tended to exhibit high ICC. However, the development of intercultural competence was given relatively little emphasis in syllabi negotiated with learners, who were perceived as more concerned with developing skills (most especially speaking). Other reasons for the lack of emphasis on intercultural competence included a perceived absence of an ICC element in language testing, a lack of support for effective and non-stereotypical culture learning in published materials, and teachers' beliefs that any critical exploration of intergroup difference might be in some way 'dangerous', especially in multicultural classrooms.

These findings will be outlined and explored in detail. A possible research agenda for the further exploration of intercultural effectiveness in learning languages will also be set out.

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