

Judith Mader, Rudi Camerer

Culture is a Verb

The training and testing of intercultural communicative competence

In an illuminating essay published in 1999, Brian Street coined the phrase we have chosen as our title: „Culture is a Verb“ (Street 1993: 25). Based on a constructivist view of culture he maintained that it is not what culture **is** but what culture **does** that is important. Culture, he points out, is not a thing, but a process of collective meaning-making. A great number of misapprehensions and controversies arising about concepts of ‚intercultural‘, ‚cross-cultural‘, ‚trans-cultural‘ communication may be attributed to using a noun to describe what is in fact a verb.

Similarly language, linked to culture, may be described as a process of collective meaning-making rather than as a system of linguistic rules the mastery of which will assure understanding. It is precisely this view of language, which the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) uses for its description of communicative competence. The CEFR’s non-dogmatic approach, underlined by constant reminders that „Users of the Framework may wish to consider...“ is one of the many strengths of the CEFR, which have undoubtedly led to its widespread acceptance in large parts of Europe and beyond. The non-dogmatic approach of the CEFR does not however mean that it is without a standpoint, as is made clear by the authors in their insistence on language as a means of practical communication. This understanding of language is further reinforced and exemplified by the 54 descriptive scales, of which only 4 (!) have linguistic accuracy as their focus. A yet unanswered question is that of the relationships between these scales. Does a hierarchy of language skills exist? Are some of the scales more important for successful communication than others? There is no descriptive scale for intercultural competence as such. Is there a reason for this? The declared intention of the

Council of Europe (CoE) in producing and promoting the CEFR was to encourage and further plurilingualism in Europe and with it, mobility and mutual understanding. There can be little doubt that intercultural competence must play a role in the achievement of these aims. Intercultural competence may be seen as a hybrid competence, comprising mental and intellectual abilities on the one hand and practical communicative skills on the other (CEFR: 104f.). However the claim of the CEFR that intercultural competence can be viewed in terms of active language use raises several questions, the answers to which have far-reaching consequences for teaching and assessment. These questions can be posed as follows:

1. If language competence and intercultural competence belong inextricably together, they cannot be the same thing. How do they overlap, what do they have in common and in what ways are they different?
2. How far does personality play a part in successful intercultural communication?
3. How can intercultural communicative competence be defined?
4. How much knowledge is needed to be interculturally competent?
5. Is there a progression in the acquisition of intercultural competence, similar to that in the process of acquisition of language?
6. Can intercultural competence be tested?

This paper attempts to go some way towards answering these questions, referring to a project in which training and test material has been developed and used in the context of training courses for Chambers of Commerce and Industry in Germany and Austria.

1. Language competence and intercultural competence

This is closely linked to a possible hierarchy of the descriptive scales of the CEFR. We have no doubt that in most intercultural encounters it is aspects of politeness and cooperation, reflected in actions such as turn-taking, compensating or mediation that are more important than, for instance, sustained monologue and creative writing. Depending on the context of use, some scales are clearly more important than others. For our purposes the scale for *Sociolinguistic Appropriateness* proved particularly useful and in particular the remarks of the authors on the difficulty of producing such a scale:

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Judith Mader: M.A., Head of Languages Frankfurt School of Finance and Management, Chief Consultant for elc – European Language Competence, Frankfurt/Main. J.Mader@elc-consult.com.

Rudi Camerer: PhD, elc – European Language Competence, Frankfurt/Main. R.Camerer@elc-consult.com.