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Intercultural and Global Competencies

Introduction

In this chapter I examine key theoretical concepts related to culture and the development of intercultural and global competencies, paying particular attention to L2 speakers. After defining the multifarious concept of culture, I explore the relationship between interculturality, intercultural contact, and the constructs of “the intercultural speaker” and “intercultural mediator.” I then review current theoretical models that address the following questions: What are the attributes and behaviors of an interculturally competent communicator? What does it mean to be globally competent? What roles do intercultural sensitivity and host language proficiency play in the development of intercultural communicative competence? I conclude by reviewing empirical studies that center on the developmental trajectories of L2 sojourners.

Culture and agency

Culture has been defined in numerous ways by scholars from a variety of disciplines. Among intercultural communication theorists, it has traditionally been thought to encompass the learned and shared values, beliefs, and behaviors of a human group (Gudykunst, 2004; Lustig and Koester, 2006). Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952: 181) offer the following definition, drawing on more than 150 interpretations of this construct:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments
in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action.

This set of collective meanings and understandings (e.g., learned ways of thinking, expressing emotions) is believed to provide a common frame of reference to help members of a culture adapt to their environment, make sense of their world, coordinate their activities, and construct cultural identities. For example, behavioral expectations and scripts (e.g., “cultural knowledge” about norms of politeness, greeting rituals) help people function in their social, cognitive, and physical environs. This view of culture as “accumulated, shared knowledge” is in accord with the following definition that was formulated by Seelye (1997: 23), an applied linguist, who sought to capture the relationship between language and culture. He defines culture as:

the systematic, rather arbitrary, more or less coherent, group-invented and group-shared creed from the past that defines the shape of “reality,” and assigns the sense and worth of things; it is modified by each generation and in response to adaptive pressures; it provides the code that tells people how to behave predictably and acceptably, the cipher that allows them to derive meaning from language and other symbols, the map that supplies the behavioral options for satisfying human needs.

Challenging traditional notions of culture as “unproblematically shared,” Moon (2008: 17) vigorously argues that individual voices are neither recognized nor validated in this orientation, as “differences within national boundaries, ethnic groups, genders, and races are obscured.” From this critical theorist’s perspective, the “contested nature of ‘culture’ often gets lost in homogenizing views of ‘culture as nationality’ where dominant cultural voices are often the only ones heard, where the ‘preferred’ reading of ‘culture’ is the only reading” (ibid.: 16). Kramsch (2002: 277) concurs, noting that “hegemonic” definitions of culture fail to fully capture its “fluid, changing, and conflictual” nature. Giroux (1992: 26) also maintains that culture involves “lived antagonistic relations within a complex of socio-political institutions and social forms that limit as well as enable human action.” Along similar lines, Sehlaoui (2001: 43) prefers to define culture as “a dynamic