Reflections of Own Vs. Other Culture: Considerations of the ICC Model

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine Byram’s Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model (Byram, 1997), one of the most influential models particularly in language education in Europe, from a pedagogical perspective. Although the model has opened up various innovative and creative teaching practices beyond a model that uses the native speaker as a goal in language learning (e.g. Byram, Nichols & Stevens, 2001; Coperías Aguilar, 2007, 2009), his conceptualization of “culture” has been criticized by various scholars as being a rather static and discrete entity, particularly as it is based on national boundaries (Block, 2007; Dervin, 2010). This study examines the conceptualization of “own” and “other” cultures in Byram’s model from local pedagogical practices based on the data obtained from two different foreign language classrooms, an English classroom in a Korean university and a Japanese classroom in a UK university. The data from both classrooms show some degree of both fixity and fluidity in the illustration of “own” and “other” cultures. This study argues that, despite the pedagogical contributions of Byram’s model, the categorization of “own” and “other” cultures can pose problems in interpreting fluidity and ambiguities identified in both classrooms. This study also points to the risk that the continuous use of his current model could result in reproducing fixed categories of “own” and “other” cultures by the teachers themselves. While acknowledging the ICC model’s pedagogical contributions, this study argues the need for a pedagogically viable model that does not rely on binary distinction between “own” and “other” cultures.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural Communicative Competence, Japanese, Korean, Learning Journals

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine Byram’s Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model (Byram, 1997), one of the most influential models particularly in language education in Europe, from a pedagogical perspective. In the language education and pedagogy field, there is a growing need for incorporating considerations of culture into the classroom and developing students’ intercultural competence to enable today’s language user to draw upon all their linguistic and cultural knowledge for communication and mediation between and across cultures.

Although this model has opened up various innovative and creative teaching practices beyond a model that uses the native speaker as the ideal (e.g. Byram, Nichols & Stevens, 2001; Coperías Aguilar, 2007, 2009), his conceptualization of “culture” as a rather static and discrete entity, especially based on national boundaries, is criticized by various scholars (Block, 2007; Dervin, 2010). Byram (2012, 2014) himself has pointed out the need for critical reflection on his model. This study joins the
growing literature by providing additional evidence from a pedagogical perspective. Motivation for the current study stems from the teacher-researchers’ difficulties and challenges in using his model in the language classroom, considering today’s growing needs for the consideration of fluidity and dynamicity of culture.

The study examines the conceptualization of “culture” in Byram’s model based on the data obtained from two different foreign language classrooms, an English classroom in a Korean university in Seoul and a Japanese classroom in a UK university in London. It examines how students in the both classrooms discursively illustrate “culture” to see the applicability of Byram’s model in the foreign language classroom. This study argues that, despite the pedagogical contributions of Byram’s model, the continuous use of his model may have a risk of overlooking students’ important reflections on fluidity of culture; and the reproduction of fixed ideas of “own” and “other” culture by teachers themselves. This study gives additional evidence for a need for a pedagogically viable model that does not rely on the binary distinction between “own” and “other” cultures.

BACKGROUND

Intercultural competence has been a much debated topic since the 1970s and 1980s. Around that time, governmental, educational, and business sectors recognized that successful communication cannot be guaranteed by linguistic fluency alone, but requires intercultural readiness (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 9). In the field of language pedagogy, Byram’s (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is considered to be one of the most influential models of intercultural competence, especially in Europe. He proposed the intercultural communicative competence model comprising of five components as follows in Table 1 (p. 34):

According to Byram (1997, pp. 49-53), “attitudes” (savoir être) refers to curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own, and “knowledge” (savoirs) means “knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one’s own and in one’s interlocutor’s country.” Byram (1997, p. 33) maintains that “attitude” and “knowledge” are preconditions for the establishment and maintenance of human relationships. Then, there are two types of skills: (1) “skills of interpreting and relating” (savoir comprendre), that is, “ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one’s own”; and (2) “skills of discovery and interactions” (savoir faire), that is, the “ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction” (Byram, 1997, pp. 49-53). According to Byram, these skills are mobilized in the process of intercultural communication and influence and modify “attitude” and “knowledge.” Finally, there is “critical cultural awareness” (savoir s’engager), which refers to the “ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives,

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<th>Skills</th>
<th>Knowledge of self and other; of interaction: individual and societal (savoirs)</th>
<th>Education critical cultural awareness (savoir s’engager)</th>
<th>Attitudes relativizing self valuing other (savoir être)</th>
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<td>Skills</td>
<td><strong>Skills interpret and relate</strong> (savoir comprendre)</td>
<td><strong>Skills discover and/or interact</strong> (savoir apprendre/faire)</td>
<td><strong>Skills interpret and relate</strong> (savoir comprendre)</td>
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<td><strong>Knowledge</strong></td>
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<td>of self and other; of interaction: individual and societal (savoirs)</td>
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