BENCHMARKING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE ASSESSMENT TOOLS FOR ESP TEACHING

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In an international professional environment, knowledge of the language alone is not a guarantee of success, as a result, recent language research emphasizes the intercultural component of foreign language education, and the development of tools to assess intercultural communication competence (ICC) towards the design of courses and training material.

ICC research has produced a wide range of frameworks of analysis and assessment models to measure interculturally successful behaviors, such as adaptation, appropriateness, and effectiveness of intercultural interactions. However, tools and instruments to assess intercultural communication competence vary depending on whether their focus is on language learning or on cultural aspects and international or intercultural differences, but with regard to foreign language for specific purposes teaching, these tools do not seem to take into consideration the specificity of the context of learners.

Therefore, the objective of this paper is to propose a framework of analysis specifically targeted for ESP learners based on existing ICC assessment tools and instruments, with a twofold purpose: to assess learners' awareness and

to apply it towards ESP syllabus design, and thus align ICC assessment with teaching objectives.

Key words: *ICC assessment tools, English for specific purposes, European higher education area, intercultural communication competence, specialized languages.*

En un entorno profesional internacional, el conocimiento de la lengua únicamente no es garantía de éxito. Estudios recientes destacan el componente intercultural en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, y el desarrollo de herramientas para evaluar la competencia comunicativa intercultural (CCI) con el fin de elaborar cursos y material didáctico.

La investigación en CCI ha generado modelos basados en actitudes y competencias para evaluar conductas interculturalmente aceptables, como la adaptación, o idoneidad y eficacia en las interacciones interculturales. Sin embargo, los instrumentos para evaluar la CCI varían dependiendo de si están orientados al aprendizaje de lenguas o a aspectos culturales y diferencias internacionales. No obstante en el campo de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, estos modelos no parecen tener en cuenta el contexto específico de los estudiantes.

Por lo tanto, el objetivo de este trabajo es diseñar un marco de análisis partiendo de instrumentos de evaluación de CCI existentes dirigido específicamente a los alumnos de IFE, con una doble finalidad: evaluar el grado de concienciación de los alumnos y aplicarlos al diseño de programas IFE, y por tanto alinear la evaluación en competencia comunicativa intercultural con los objetivos de aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: *Competencia comunicativa intercultural, espacio europeo de educación superior, herramientas de evaluación de CCI, inglés para fines específicos, lenguas de especialidad.*

1. Introduction

If there is one thing that characterizes the early years of the 21st century it is undoubtedly the expansion of communication networks, social media, exchange of information and international interaction throughout the globe. As Fantini (2009: 456) puts it: "More people than ever before in the history of the world now have both direct and indirect contact with each other, and increasingly, this contact includes people from a variety of diverse language and cultural backgrounds."

Language and culture are inevitably associated in the process of learning a foreign language, but the mastering of both does not seem to go in parallel as much as it would be desirable, according to Zaharna (2009: 190) "it is possible to be fluent in the language yet ignorant of the culture."

The first studies on intercultural communication competence (ICC) trace back to the 1970s (Shuang, 2012: 270; Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009: 6), however the debate on the complexity to define ICC remains open (Han, 2012: 168; Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009: 45), as well as the different approaches to its study, as evidenced by the diverse terminology in the ICC literature: intercultural awareness, intercultural effectiveness, international competence, transcultural communication, to name just a few (Fantini, 1999: 456).

However, this apparent lack of consensus (Fantini, 2009: 456) confirms not only the complexity of the study of intercultural communication competence, but the need to address its study from a multidisciplinary perspective depending on the context in which the intercultural interaction takes place. Furthermore, to date it appears that there is no universal ICC assessment model and the successful foundations for ICC assessment tools shall lie in the specific focus on the purpose and the target user of the intercultural communication competence. As Van de Vijver and Leung (2009: 413) point out: "Given the complexity of assessing intercultural competence research, Deardorff (2004) has shown that it is important to use a multimethod, multiperspective approach when assessing intercultural competence. This kind of approach has been rarely used to date."

Therefore, this study aims to revise established frameworks of analysis for assessing ICC from different perspectives and adapt them to the context of teaching English for Specific Purposes with a twofold functionality: 1) to increase and assess learners' ICC awareness and, 2) to apply it towards ESP syllabus design. All this, from the perspective of the Bologna process and European Higher Education Area (EHEA) objectives for 2020, which clearly establish as priorities a professional and employability approach and a social and mobility dimension (Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009).

In order to achieve this aim, this work starts with a revision of inventories of ICC assessment tools from the literature of intercultural

communication competence (Fantini, 2009; Han, 2012; Intercultural Training and Assessment Tools, 2015) in order to identify their main elements in common, the most suitable aspects for the context of ESP students object of this study, and finally, to identify the drawbacks most frequently mentioned in the literature.

This work continues in the line of a preliminary study on ICC for ESP students (Candel-Mora, 2015) from the perspective of attitudes and knowledge of intercultural communication competence, which, among other things, revealed that in addition to the traditional dimensions taken into consideration in most ICC theoretical constructs (Arasaratnam and Doerfel, 2005; Byram, 1997; Spencer-Oatey, 2014; Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009), special emphasis was made on the relevance of intercultural communication for the students' future business and professional contexts. Findings also revealed a strong association between intercultural communication and foreign language learning —some participants even pointed out intercultural communication competence as a means to learn languages—, and the need to adapt to international interactions in other languages apart from English, thus minimizing the current predominance of English as a global language.

2. Methodology

Therefore, with the preliminary survey mentioned above in mind (Candel-Mora, 2015), the first step towards the benchmarking analysis of intercultural communication competence assessment for ESP teaching consisted in revising the bibliography on ICC assessment tools (mostly focused on the cultural component only) and then, identify the tools and instruments that make special emphasis on the professional and language components adapted to the ESP students' environment and extract the main elements of their constructs.

Secondly, from the variety of options already established by the ICC assessment tools available, it was determined the most appropriate assessment format and type to assess ESP students.

One of the advantages of revising different approaches from a multidisciplinary perspective to ICC assessment tools is the possibility to avoid what the literature identifies as common potential drawbacks of

existing tools, like for example the lack of alignment of ICC assessment with teaching objectives mentioned by several authors.

3. Aligning Intercultural Communication Competence to the ESP Teaching Context

Following the scientific, technological and industrial expansion after World War II, and the influence of English-speaking countries, especially the United States, English became the lingua franca that allowed the transfer of knowledge, innovations and new developments, which resulted in a movement within the teaching of this language aimed at responding to social and professional demands called English for Specific Purposes. The influence of this methodological approach has had a direct effect on the selection, design and adaptation of teaching materials, which tend to be connected to both the specificity of the subject itself and the language skills common in such fields, but always based on the specific needs of students.

Course design is then a crucial point in ESP teaching methodology, thus the first step usually consists in the identification and specification of goals. For this, it is necessary to previously identify the communicative needs of students within a professional or academic situation (Alcaraz, 2000; Dudley Evans and St. John, 1998; Hutchinson and Waters, 1996; Jordan, 1997; Robinson, 1991).

Therefore, most ESP courses need to be customized and updated according to the academic context, social demands and professional profile of students. This update is even more necessary in professional languages that need to be in pace with society's demands and in the case of higher education – keeping in mind the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area. The professional profiles that society demands are already established in the corresponding white papers of the university degrees. White papers include graduates' employment surveys, European study models, surveys on generic and specific competences of professional training, which facilitated the establishment of professional profiles. These are intended to serve as a basic justification for the proposal of the degrees and, from them, define the objectives and the structure of such studies.

In addition, current trends in foreign language teaching methodology are based not only on the structure and functioning of the

language, but take students, their variables and their motivation as a starting point. Thus, the process focuses on the student as the main protagonist. From this learner-centered language teaching approach, needs analysis contributes to identify learners' training needs and their expectations, interests or requirements as future professionals to successfully undertake their professional career.

4. Intercultural Communication Competence Assessment Tools and Instruments

The multidisciplinary approach to ICC (Van de Vijver and Leung, 2009) has led to complex definitions that range from conceptualizations for language teaching like Byram's (1997: 7): "an individual's ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries; versatile definitions, like Fritz, Möllenberg & Chen's (2002: 166) who define ICC as the ability of individuals to develop a positive attitude towards the foreign culture; to more neutral definitions adapted to different contexts like the definition by Spitzberg and Chagnon (2009: 7): "the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent cognitive, affective, and behavioral orientations to the world."

Extensive study has already been carried out so far towards specific conceptualizations of intercultural communication competence and foundational models as the compilation by Spitzberg and Changnon reveals (2009: 3). Thus, for this work efforts will concentrate on existing inventories of ICC assessment tools that already provide a preliminary in-depth discussion on ICC theoretical conceptualizations and present an overview of different tools and instruments selected from a number of sources and adaptable for different purposes and contexts (Fantini, 2009; Han, 2012; Intercultural Training and Assessment Tools, 2015). The rationale for this selection is based on the appropriateness of the sources of the inventories studied to the context of ESP learners outlined above: mainly academic and professional. In particular, the selection of the research work carried out by Han (2012), has been decisively influenced by the fact that it includes both students and professionals among the potential target users of the assessment, but especially because it deals specifically with the technical communication environment, very closely related to special languages and therefore with English for Specific Purposes.

The first noticeable fact upon revising the three inventories is the wide range of designations for ICC assessment tools; as Han points out (2012: 86) "different instruments may bear the names of inventories, scales, or surveys". Among the wide range of existing ICC assessment tools and instruments differences can be found mainly in 1) their method of assessment: self-assessment tools, discussion questions and workshops, psychometric instruments, and questionnaires; 2) their purpose: to determine future success, the person's ability to adapt to any culture, to explore level of comfort, awareness raising, to assess personal qualities, or to measure how people respond to conflict; and 3) their field of application: training, consulting, program evaluation, or assessing international assignment candidates. Thus, the combination of methods, purposes and fields of application results in a countless number of different tools. As reported by Fantini (2009: 456): "Some instruments focus on lingual rather than cultural aspects; some do the opposite. Other instruments stress international rather than intercultural and thereby exclude differences within national boundaries; still others are simply ambiguous and their intent is unclear."

In addition to the variety of tools, there is also a wide range of assessment formats and techniques to obtain data: closed and open-ended questions, matching items, true/false questions, multiple-choice questions, cloze or gap-filling items, oral and written activities, interviews, role-plays, and simulations, questionnaires, or a combination of some of the above (Fantini, 2009: 464). With regards to test types, designations are also varied: readiness tests, placement tests, diagnostic tests, aptitude tests, attitude tests, formative tests, or achievement tests, for example.

In sum, everything seems to confirm that there is no universal tool for assessing the degree of adaptability to another culture that is applicable to any user and purpose, corroborating the initial hypothesis of this paper and justifying the revision of the most directly related tools to the profile of ESP students and extract those elements that best align with it.

5. Results and Discussion

An exploratory review of the three inventories under study in this paper shows that there are no clearly established criteria for the classification of

tools. Thus, Fantini, (2009) proposes as factors for ICC assessment quality elements like the purpose, target audience, outcomes, and alignment of assessment with learning objectives, along with common aspects of the tests used, such as scope, efficiency, length, validity and reliability. However, Fantini's (2009) classification is simplified and it only includes the name of the tool, a brief description, with the type of scale, the format of the tool —questionnaire, interview, scale, field instrument—, whether the tools is web-based, a diagnostic tool, or a self test, for example, and the source where the tool can be accessed.

Han (2012: 169) does not make a classification of the tools per se, but proposes a review of the main elements of ICC assessment tools with examples of specific tools and sources interspersed, and provides a description of nine different intercultural competence assessment methods, to later evaluate the strengths and drawbacks of each one, and finally, discuss their potential applications in technical communication.

The list of tools from the *Intercultural Communication Institute* (Intercultural Training and Assessment Tools, 2015) uses a classification format that includes the name of the tool and its acronym, the persons responsible for its development, a brief description of approximately 50-70 words, which describes the type of tool (i.e., 50-item psychometric instrument, self-assessment process, questionnaire); their use (i.e., training, consulting), its user (i.e., for organizations, for employees). However, these descriptions do not follow a established pattern, and sometimes information on specific classification criteria does not appear, or has to be deduced from the text.

With regard to the inventories, Fantini identifies 44 tools and instruments or "External Assessment Tools", as they are called in the article (2009: 456). The sources of instruments range from academic journals (like the *Cross-Cultural Counseling Inventory* from the journal *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, or the *Multicultural Counseling Inventory* from the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*), online access (for example, *Cross-Cultural Assessor* available from www.crossculture.com, or *Peterson Cultural Awareness Test & Peterson Cultural Style Indicator*, accessible online from www.acrosscultures.com), available commercially or from specialized agencies or organizations (*ACTFL Proficiency Scale & Guidelines* from the *American Council for the Teaching of Foreign*

Languages, or th*e Living and Working Overseas Inventory* from the *Canadian International Development Agency*).

Without any doubt, the most interesting classification criterion in this inventory of tools is the purpose of the tool or what the tool measures, which ranges from Foreign language proficiency (*ACTFL Proficiency Scale & Guidelines*), Intercultural competence and language proficiency (*Assessment of Intercultural Competence*), cross-cultural behavior (*Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Communication*), or the Individual potential for cross-cultural adaptability (*Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory*) to name just a few.

However, this inventory does not provide further guidance with regard to the appropriate target user in all of them —as in some cases where it clearly indicates that the tool is intended to conduct business effectively in 35 countries (*GlobeSmart*) or that has been designed to help employees "assess their readiness to take on the challenges of living and working in another country" (Fantini, 2009: 472). Finally, the source and the year of the tool are also useful data because they help to trace the academic or business origin of the tool, and this allows to assign the purpose of the tool and the target audience.

The website of the *Intercultural Communication Institute* (Intercultural Training and Assessment Tools, 2015) provides a link to a document with 12 tools, although it refers the reader to a more exhaustive listing. However, one significant pitfall is that it does not indicate the selection criteria of the tools at any time. The classification format includes a brief description presenting the type of tool, its purpose (training, consulting, i.e., *Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory* or the *Diversity Awareness Profile*; target user (for organizations i.e., *Diagnosing Organizational Culture* or the *Overseas Assignment Inventory*; or for employees, *Discovering Diversity Profile* or the *International Candidate Evaluation;* and method of assessment (self-assessment tool i.e., *Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory*), etc.

Finally, Han's inventory (2012) focuses on classroom assessment methods and bases the study on the literature from different fields, including foreign language, communication studies, intercultural studies, business, and health care, which confirms our initial premise of a multidisciplinary

approach. Due to this teaching background, from the beginning of the description of tools, the author takes into consideration alignment, which Han (2012: 169) calls "disconnections between participants' teaching objectives and their assessment methods."

Han (2012: 176) distinguishes between assessment methods, like paper and presentation, case studies and portfolio assessment, and cultural instruments, or tools, such as inventories, scales or surveys, which are more commonly used in intercultural competence assessment and can measure the students' knowledge and attitudes over the course of a program. These instruments can be self-reporting, or traditional testing formats such as multiple-choice or fill-in blank questions. Other assessment instruments include personality tests, sensitivity instruments, awareness test, interviews and observations. In addition, some instruments can be commercially purchased, others are provided in academic publications, and still others are developed in-house for particular programs or companies (Han, 2012: 176).

Apart from the lack of a universal assessment tool (Arasaratnam, 2009; Deardoff, 2009; Fantini, 2009), with respect to the relationship between intercultural communication competence and teaching English for Specific Purposes, several drawbacks are reported in the literature. For the purpose of this work, it is particularly significant Fantini's findings with regard to language (2009, 459), who emphasizes that "it is interesting to note that target language proficiency is frequently ignored in many models of intercultural competence." This fact makes it even more complicated to adapt ICC assessment tools to the context of teaching English.

One of the main points in common in ICC studies already pointed out by authors like Zaharna (2009) is *Global Assessment*, or the tendency to generalize and attempt to extrapolate ICC research results to all cultures, when the focus should be specific to each case. As noted by Zaharna (2009: 189) in the case of Arabic: "For nonnative speakers of Arabic, communication competence may be better demonstrated by their social fluency rather than linguistic ability". Or the opposite approach, the anglosaxon bias (Spencer-Oatey, 2014: 166; Zaharna, 2009: 190) which restricts ICC research to those tools with an anglosaxon referent.

Authors like Deardoff (2009: 487) and Fantini (2009: 459) emphasize the fact that intercultural competence is a longitudinal and

ongoing developmental process and it evolves over time, however most ICC assessment tools do not evaluate the assessment plan and the learning process. In this same line, with regard to the overall learning process, instructional objectives, course design and implementation, and ICC assessment are most of the times not aligned, which according to Fantini (2009: 460) compromises the educational process.

From the perspective of the participants in the assessment plan, a couple of drawbacks refer directly to the bias of carrying out self-assessment and the identification of a "socially desirable" response.

Finally, upon revising the available ICC assessment tools, the last step consists in aligning ESP teaching needs with the common elements of the ICC assessment tools studied in the three inventories. To do this, from the initial needs analysis mentioned above (Candel-Mora, 2015) and upon identifying that the main components have to be related to the academic and professional environment, subsequent work focuses on the compilations from the two types of sources coherent with this analysis: academic (Fantini, 2009; Han, 2012) and professional (Intercultural Training and Assessment Tools, 2015). The three sources provided a list of selected intercultural communication assessment tools that streamline the decision making process and pave the way for the conceptualization of ICC basic concepts.

In the case of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching, concepts such as intercultural teams, international meetings, geographical mobility, worldwide negotiations, and globalization to name just a few are intrinsically associated to the professional profiles of graduates and reveal the need to include ICC contents in their foreign language courses syllabi. Therefore, language teaching and professional context are the main criteria which can be further subdivided into specific tool design selection criteria like foreign language strategies, culture learning strategies, cross-cultural adjustment, world knowledge in specific areas, intercultural skills, workplace and working overseas, or intercultural living and working.

On the other hand, the common characteristics of most tools can be classified into four categories: purpose, target audience, background and aspects evaluated. Thus, among the purposes are: to determine preparedness for an intercultural experience, to ascertain compatibility with specific cultural contexts, to determine which areas of competency

are strong, and to investigate one's disposition toward a specific culture. Similarly, target audiences can be narrowed to: undergraduate students, job candidates, and international professionals. Taking into consideration the twofold background, the source of the tool can either be professional or academic. Finally, from the aspects evaluated: language level and job placement would be given priority.

6. Conclusions

This project arises from the need to update English as a foreign language training to the current global context of its users, and is based on the following initial assumptions: knowledge of the language alone is not a guarantee of success in an international professional environment; emphasis is placed on the professional approach; intercultural competence is regarded as a means to learn languages.

The different approaches to the study of intercultural communication competence and their different degrees of emphasis on cultural or linguistic aspects, or international differences, to name only a few, suggest a necessary update of the debate on the definition of ICC.

This multidisciplinary approach has also led to an unequal development of research on ICC in terms of focus: foreign language, communication studies, cultural studies, business ... together with the target user and the purpose of the assessment. In the case of foreign language teaching, the alignment between instructional objectives and ICC assessment should be regarded as a priority.

Everything suggests that "one-size-fits-all" ICC assessment models fail to meet actual requirements, and it does not seem to exist a universal instrument for measuring the degree of multiculturalism, therefore it is necessary to conduct a needs analysis as in ESP courses and teaching material design, and devise a tool for a specific group, which offsets the lack of alignment drawback. In this case, ICC assessment would take into account the teaching objectives from the beginning.

After consulting different inventories of ICC assessment tools, it can also be concluded that there are no established criteria for the classification of tools, which reaffirms the multidisciplinary nature of ICC

research. A more standardized and detailed classification would allow to further refine the selection of the most suitable tool for a specific target user, for example, and therefore, this will ensure a higher degree of accuracy of the results obtained.

With regard to format and the assessment technique for ESP teaching, it would be preferable to use any method like composition o portfolio, common in language classes so that course or syllabus are not affected.

Finally, within the context of ESP, further research is suggested towards the study of the correspondence between learners' language proficiency levels with their intercultural communication competence, to verify whether their learning process takes into consideration language and intercultural communication aspects in parallel.

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