

Understanding multilingualism and interculturalism from an Ecuadorian perspective

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of globalization has brought the world closer and has changed the way we live and communicate. Therefore, without the physical barriers that separate countries, people have found new ways to be in touch with the different inhabitants of the world village. In this context, people have seen the need to learn new languages, which takes one to the fascinating field of multilingualism. However, being able to communicate in many languages is not an isolated process, since it is closely related to culture; this fact leads us to the area of interculturalism, that is, being aware of the other – of the different one – being able to understand and feel how the other feels. This paper explores the concepts of multilingualism and interculturalism, along with some considerations of the Ecuadorian context.

Keywords: multilingualism; interculturalism; culture; language

RESUMEN

El fenómeno de la globalización ha dado lugar a que el mundo se acerque cada vez más, cambiando la forma en que vivimos y nos comunicamos. Por lo tanto, sin las barreras físicas que separan a los países, las personas han encontrado nuevas formas de estar en contacto con los diferentes habitantes de esta aldea global. En este contexto, las personas se han visto en la necesidad de aprender nuevos idiomas, lo que lleva al fascinante campo del multilingüismo. Sin embargo, el ser capaz de comunicarse en varios idiomas no es un proceso aislado, pues está relacionado con la cultura, lo que deriva en la interculturalidad, es decir, el ser consciente del otro – del diferente – comprender y sentir lo que el otro siente. Este artículo explora los conceptos de multilingüismo e interculturalidad, así como algunas consideraciones en el contexto ecuatoriano.

Palabras clave: multilingüismo; interculturalidad; cultura; lenguaje

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HORNBERGER (2008) CLAIMS THAT “although multilingualism and multilingual education have existed for centuries, our 21st-century entrance into the new millennium has brought renewed interest and contestation around this educational alternative” (p. 198). Despite this assertion, the question concerning the definition and characteristics of multilingualism remains. With regard to interculturalism, some authors maintain that this term has arisen in response to the criticism of existing policies of multiculturalism. Raltansi (2011) states that interculturalism offers a more fruitful way than conventional multiculturalism for different ethnic groups to co-exist in an atmosphere that encourages better inter-ethnic understanding and civility.

The aim of this paper is to provide relevant information about the concepts of multilingualism and interculturalism. The paragraphs to follow explore these two concepts, starting with a brief historical account, and elucidating them under the light of the relationship between culture and language, and an analysis of the different notions of competence. Finally, some considerations as to how multilingualism and interculturalism are viewed in the Ecuadorian context are provided as well.

Historical Background

Aronin and Hufeisen (2009) explain that early researchers of multilingualism and multiple language acquisition, such as Braun in 1937 and Vildomec in 1963, did not study the phenomenon systematically, but rather identified it as a field of study in its own right. Moreover, Braun and Vildomec were reportedly the only researchers of the time who did not concentrate exclusively on the negative side of the existence of multiple languages in the learners’ repertoires, but emphasized the positive effects of being multilingual, such as enjoying a broader knowledge about culture.

The field of intercultural communication, on the other hand, like any other academic discipline, has been influenced by a series of discourses that change very often and are challenged and resisted most of the time. Intercultural communication as an academic field is relatively new, and one can say that, in Europe, the term sociocultural communication was widely used instead. In addition, it is appropriate to mention that, according to Houghton (2010), Michael Byram and Geneviève Zarate were commissioned in the early 1990’s by the Council of Europe to provide input to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which would allow the assessment of sociocultural competence. Houghton (2010) goes on to state that Byram and Zarate developed together a model that conceptualized intercultural competence – changing the expression to be more precise in meaning – in terms of having the declarative knowledge of a culture, the ability to learn cultures, the ability to apply intercultural skills, and a general disposition of respect and tolerance towards cultural differences. Byram and Zarate’s model had a significant impact on the development of the CEFR and became widely accepted and valued among language teachers, educators, and researchers.

As for the introduction and use of the term intercultural communication in the United States, Kumaravadivelu (2008) mentions that one can trace its origins back to the Allied victory in World War Two. As a result of this event, many American diplomats and army officials were sent overseas, specifically to Europe. As a response to their lack of knowledge of the foreign cultures they were in contact with and the difficulties they faced when communicating, Congress passed the Foreign Service Act in 1946. The creation of the Foreign Service Institute followed and helped solve many of these inconveniences.

Language and Culture

A first aspect worthy of mention when discussing multilingualism and interculturalism is the intimate relationship between language and culture. A good point to start is by analyzing the definition of the two concepts, keeping in mind, nevertheless, the multitude of outlooks on the issue. In attempting to define language, it seems to be a must to consider Saussure's characterization. Saussure (1974) conceives language as a system of signs which consists of a signifier (the sound-image or the written word) and a signified (a concept), in the way that they both are inseparably linked to each other. The sound-image connection cannot be separated from the concept. Hence, language, as a human faculty, can be understood as system of symbols and abstractions, and their essential rules, that individuals employ to communicate. In line with this idea, Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2013) assert that “[a]t the most basic level, language is a set of shared symbols or signs that a cooperative group of people has mutually agreed to use to help them create meaning” (p. 247). The authors emphasize the arbitrariness of the establishment of the sign-meaning relationship.

Concerning culture, the definition of the concept becomes somewhat more complex. The reason is that there coexist several perspectives and notions about culture that range from social sophistication to mental programming (Samovar et al., 2013). It is proper, nevertheless, to indicate that culture could be viewed as the total number of the human-made, innate, inherited and/or learned ideas, attitudes, beliefs, values, and knowledge forming the shared foundation of social action. One can also add that culture is the total range of activities and ideas of a specific group of people with common and shared traditions, or a connection of ideas and feelings accepted by the majority of people in a society. Moreover, Spencer-Oatey (2012) remarks that culture manifests itself in three fundamental layers: observable artifacts, values, and basic underlying assumptions. The first layer refers to the visible and audible behavioral patterns, that is, the first differences an individual notices when entering in a foreign culture. For their part, values refer to socially set standards of desirability, which influence and even determine how people experience social coexistence. Finally, underlying basic assumptions encompass “learned responses that originated as espoused values” (Spencer-Oatey, 2012, p. 3). As individual experience demonstrates that these responses provide solutions for specific problems, they become

ultimate, non-debatable, and taken for granted. Therefore, they influence and determine the two other layers.

In addition, it is necessary to consider other notions of culture, those that represent modernist views of the term. Kramsch (1993) states that culture can be defined as membership in a community with a common history, a common standard language, and common imaginings. However, the same author has also developed newer concepts. For Kramsh (1998), culture has to do with the construction of meaning and imagined communities. The author claims that the speech community has become the discourse community, whose discursive practices both enable and limit the range of possible meanings constructed by the individual. In addition, Kramsch (1998) considers that, created and shaped by language and other symbolic systems, culture is a site of struggle for the recognition and legitimation of meaning.

Finally, the relationship between language and culture has been much debated since the 19th century. Byram (2008), for instance, mentions that Risager's comprehensive and authoritative analysis starting from Agar's notion of languaculture has shown that a language spoken by a specific group of people – be they native speakers or not – is not necessarily tied to a specific set of beliefs, values and behaviors, i.e., a specific culture. Contrastively, the renowned, though misnamed, Sapir and Worf hypothesis maintains that the language either influences (weak version) or determines (strong version) an individual's worldview, and therefore, his or her behavior in a culturally set group. Furthermore, Samovar et al. (2013) remark that “[w]hether they are English, Swahili, Chinese, or French, most words, how they are used, the meanings assigned, the grammar employed, and the syntax bear the identification marks of a specific culture” (p. 42). Besides, one has to consider that language is but a mirror of culture, and, at the same time, culture is transmitted through language.

Understanding Competence

In order to have a clearer idea about interculturalism and multilingualism, it is important to elucidate the different outlooks of the term competence.

In the 1960s, Noam Chomsky developed his seminal work about linguistic competence. According to him, linguistic competence relates to the *ideal* language system that makes it possible for speakers to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences in their language and to distinguish grammatical sentences from ungrammatical constructions. Chomsky (1965) argues that this is unaffected by grammatically irrelevant conditions such as speech errors. Another definition of linguistic competence suggests that it is a system of linguistic knowledge possessed by native speakers of a language, which is used in contrast to the concept of linguistic performance. The latter refers to the way the language system is used in actual communication (Chomsky, 1965).

Although this concept was coined by Chomsky in the 60s, it has been further developed by many contemporary scholars and authors. The term has been used with

different meanings and in different contexts. It is convenient to start by mentioning that most people use it as a casual everyday synonym for ability. Another definition equates competence to the capacity of successfully responding to different types of situations that encompass tasks, difficulties, and/or challenges. In other contexts, competence can be defined as the ability to act between languages and cultures, but also as a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills applied through action in any relevant situation. Fleming (2009) remarks that the word competence has had a checkered history; nevertheless, it is clear that it makes reference to observable behaviors, as well as to the implicit understandings within them.

With respect to communicative competence, one can argue that it is a term which refers to a language user's knowledge of the major subfields of linguistics – phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics – as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately. On the other hand, it is important to mention that this term was coined by Dell Hymes in 1966, as a reaction against Noam Chomsky's 1965 distinction between competence and performance. The approach pioneered by Hymes is now known as the ethnography of communication. According to Hymes, communicative competence entails both knowledge and ability regarding formality, feasibility, contextual appropriateness, and consequential performance (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Moreover, in the 1980s, Carel and Swain introduced a further development of the notion of communicative competence. Richards and Rogers (2001) explain Carel and Swain's conceptualization of communicative competence as one that encompasses four dimensions:

1. Grammatical competence, understood as Chomsky's linguistic competence.
2. Sociolinguistic competence, i.e., understanding of the social context of a particular communication act.
3. Discourse competence, that is, the ability to appropriately produce and understand interwoven texts.
4. Strategic competence, which comprises making use of various tactics and techniques to initiate, continue, repair, and end a communication exchange.

All in all, as noted by UNESCO (2012), communicative competence implies both understanding and producing appropriate words and other communication forms in ways that will make sense not only to the speaker/actor but also to others.

For its part, intercultural competence can be defined as a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding, and skills which are applied by means of action and allow people to understand and respect others who have different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, intercultural competence could be explained as the ability to respond appropriately, effectively, and respectfully when multicultural interaction and communication takes place (Samovar et al., 2013). The ultimate aim of attaining this type of competence is establishing positive relationships with different people and constructing a better world for everyone.

Nevertheless, Byram et al. (2014) remark that intercultural competence does not involve abandoning one's own cultural identifications or affiliations, nor does it require individuals to adopt the cultural practices, beliefs, discourses or values of other cultures. Instead, for these authors, intercultural competence involves being open to, curious about, and interested in people who have other cultural affiliations; this involves the ability to understand and interpret their practices, beliefs, discourses, and values. With regard to this topic, the Council of Europe (2008) reports that an individual's intercultural competence is never complete but can always be further enriched from continuing experience of different kinds of intercultural encounters.

Deardorff (2006) provides another interesting typification of intercultural competence. For this author, the concept refers to observable behaviors that, springing from definite knowledge, attitudes, and skills, are at the same time successful and adequate for establishing and maintaining intercultural exchanges. Each element of Deardorff's (2006) further contains specific constituents. Thus, knowledge encompasses self-awareness, culture-specific knowledge, socio-linguistic awareness, and an understanding of global topics and issues; intercultural skills include listening, observing, assessing, and empathy; and intercultural attitudes cover openness, curiosity, respect, and tolerance.

Multilingualism and Interculturalism

Multilingualism has been defined as the ability to use three or more languages, either separately or in various degrees of code-mixing. McArthur (1992) argues that "different languages are used for different purposes, competence in each varying according to [factors such] as register, occupation and education" (p. 673). Another definition of multilingualism characterizes it as the product of the fundamental human ability to communicate in a number of languages (Franceschini, 2008). Additionally, it is important to consider that, when individuals speak several languages, they are sometimes called polyglots. However, the fact that some people can use many languages does not necessarily mean they have equal proficiency in or over all the languages they employ. Méndez (2013) mentions that accessing other languages prompts awareness of an individual's worldview and the relativity of their way of thinking; in other words, the study of languages can disclose and prompt an appreciation of the different ways in which diverse communities view and interpret each other.

As to multilingual education, it can be said that it is in fact multilingual if it uses and values more than one language in teaching and learning. One can also assert that multilingual education takes place when communication occurs in two or more languages in or around writing. Hornberger (2002) believes that multilingual education is a wide and welcoming doorway towards peaceful coexistence of peoples and especially restoration and empowerment of those who have been historically oppressed.

Furthermore, Byram (2008a) – who is considered by many the father of interculturalism studies in Europe – explains the intimate relationship between bilingualism and interculturalism. He defines bilingualism as the minimum ability to say something in two or more languages. He also mentions that it is the ability to be accepted, or pass, as a native speaker in two or more languages. Byram (2008b) claims that *passing* as a native speaker linguistically implies also to be seen or identified as someone who *fits in* a group of native speakers in terms of behavior, appearance, opinions, and beliefs – in short, of culture.

Complementarily, Byram (1997) characterizes interculturalism as an ideology or belief system. He explains that interculturalism and multiculturalism are not the same, at least in the European context; for Byram (1997), multiculturalism comprises encouraging different social groups with different languages and cultures to live side by side in a spirit of mutual acceptance, each remaining within their own language and culture, that is, essentially monolingual. The author adds that groups living side by side cannot simply ignore each other. Moreover, for Peñas and López (2006), interculturalism involves moving beyond mere passive acceptance of a multicultural fact of multiple cultures effectively existing in a society; instead, it promotes a dialogue between cultures. Besides, one can mention that interculturalism has to do with the need to enable each culture to survive and flourish, but, at the same time, underlines the right of all cultures to contribute to the society they belong to; this means that cultures can survive only if they are in contact with other cultures, not in isolation. Within this context, the development of cultural sensitivity and the encouragement of intercultural interaction and mixing are seen as the responsibility of all members of society.

Accordingly, the Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue states that intercultural dialogue allows individuals to prevent ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural divides. It enables people to move forward together, to deal with their different identities constructively and democratically on the basis of shared universal values (Council of Europe, 2008). Hence, education is intercultural when it recognizes and values understanding and dialogue across different lived experiences and cultural world views.

Multilingualism and Interculturalism in the Ecuadorian Context

So far, this paper has examined multilingualism and interculturalism from a Western – European – perspective. However, it is necessary to highlight some important facts about Ecuador. In 2008, a new Constitution – Constitution number 20 – was ratified by popular vote. This Constitution takes into account the concepts of multilingualism and interculturalism. These words are also included in the Ley Orgánica de Educación Intercultural (LOEI) – Law of Intercultural Education – and the Ley Orgánica de Educación Superior (LOES) – Law of Higher Education. Of course, this is due to the fact that Ecuador, as well as most South American countries, has roots of different ethnic groups, mainly

indigenous ones. Therefore, the relationship among these diverse cultures and the way they communicate are deemed, at least in paper, as very important.

The official language of Ecuador is Spanish, but 14 other ancestral languages are spoken too, especially by those peoples which inhabited this land before the coming of the *white man*, the Spaniards, in the late 1400s. Furthermore, in regard to the country's education system, in the national curriculum, most contents are taught in Spanish; however, the Constitution mandates that one ancestral language must/should be included in the curriculum.

In order to better support the arguments of this paper, it is adequate to make reference to some articles from the documents mentioned above.

The Ecuadorian Constitution, in its article 346, explicitly declares that the government is to guarantee intercultural education in the native language of the indigenous people that are involved in the process, Spanish becoming a means of intercultural relationship. For its part, article 2 of Ecuador's Law of Intercultural Education states that elementary and secondary education in the country is to guarantee the recognition, respect, and value of the different nationalities, cultures, and peoples that inhabit the country. Moreover, the article also remarks that Ecuadorian education ought to acknowledge the right to plurilingualism, that is, the right individuals, communities, and peoples have to be educated in their official ancestral languages, as well as in those that enable relationship with the international community. Finally, the Ecuadorian Law of Higher Education, in its article 8, letter g, proclaims that higher education in Ecuador should aim at developing and strengthening a constitutional nation that ought to be sovereign, independent, unitary, *intercultural*, *plurinational*, and lay.

As seen above, multilingualism and interculturalism are considered in Ecuador as well. Nevertheless, the way they are used and applied in the country's context is completely different from first-world contexts. In Ecuador, these two terms almost exclusively refer to the relationship among ancestral, indigenous, communities and the respect that *mestizos*, and the few white people living in Ecuador ought to have for the former's languages and cultures. Nonetheless, as discussed in the previous sections of this paper, multilingualism and interculturalism are more than that. The relationship between the two concepts comprises respect, tolerance, empathy, and open mindedness, as well as linguistic and cultural knowledge and competence, not only in local contexts – as the Ecuadorian law emphasizes – but also in international ones.

It is interesting to note that, even though the Ecuadorian legislation has traditionally protected ancestral cultures and languages, it was only after 2016 that a National EFL (English as a foreign language) curriculum was implemented. This fact could be interpreted as a contemporary acknowledgement of the importance of this lingua franca. Nevertheless, this recognition is untimely, and it can be seen as one cause – among many others – of the low English proficiency level of the country. This fact can be revealed by the English

Proficiency Index (EPI) Report published by Education First (EF) in 2017, in which Ecuador ranks 55 among 80 evaluated countries.

Conclusions

The fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the improvement in technology have marked the beginning of a new era: globalization. However, the effects of globalization have conditioned the context in which individuals operate, and have profoundly altered people's experience of both formal and informal education. On the other hand, globalization has brought forth the appearance of new terms such as multilingualism and interculturalism, which have also affected the way people deal with the other, with the *foreigner*.

The relationship between multilingualism and interculturalism is a complex one. The interdependence between the two concepts is apparent and almost unbreakable, and it is progressively built on the development of a series of *competences* that enable individuals to become participants of a globalized society. This relationship, furthermore, rests on the connection between a language and its culture; therefore, the more access one has to different languages, the more complex the amalgamation of these languages, their cultures, and one's own experience becomes. Under this perspective, a nationalistic approach to multilingualism and interculturalism, although fostering appreciation for minority groups, can hinder an individual's knowledge and involvement in a globalized society.

In this discussion, we should bear in mind that English has become the indisputable dominant language of the world. It becomes apparent that, due to the importance of English nowadays, third-world governments should concentrate their efforts on improving the conditions for the teaching and learning of this language. Doing so ultimately brings forth both cultural and economic development (Alfarhan, 2016). Hence, to become an active part of this globalized planet, and thus be global citizens, the use of English is a priority. In addition, because of its status as an international language, English can be seen as the most suitable vehicle for knowing about other cultures and becoming an intercultural citizen.

One should be aware that the use of ancestral languages in native communities is important, and that they must be preserved for future generations. Nevertheless, it is imperative to stress that, in order to become globalized and ultimately improve a country's economy and living conditions, citizens should struggle to understand the *foreigner*, that is, cultures and languages outside the local context. This understanding is not only necessary for a harmonious coexistence, but it also nurtures the development of communicative and intercultural skills that enhance social and even economic progress.

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