

CULTURAL CAPITAL IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE PEACE

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ABSTRACT

The question is then to determine the school's positive role. Byram and Zarate (1998: 73) think that "the foreign language learner must be encouraged to move geographically. The practice of language must then lead to situations of contact and exchange with the natives of the target language." I also think that a foreign language programme cannot do without language study stays in the country of the target language. The analysis of the corpus makes a point for this mobility: it evidences the importance of practice and immersion in a German linguistic bath for the learning of the language and culture, for the acquisition of intercultural communication competence, in other words, for **an enrichment of cultural capital**. Yet, Algerian learners find great difficulties in travelling abroad because of the bureaucratic restrictions: visa, formal invitation, grant and all other financial concerns. However, the university and the teachers should not be contented with textbooks and books for the teaching of German. They have to create appropriate conditions, encourage and help learners in all the necessary formalities to achieve mobility; mobility, here, meaning also in German and Austrian milieus in Algeria (such as in Algerian companies).

Students have very few opportunities to get any training abroad outside the limited state administrative possibilities that put restraints on any private initiatives. Nevertheless, it is in a real context of communication that learners get aware of the diversity of languages and cultures. Immersion, which obliges them to make use of their knowledge, know-how and savoir-être to sustain communication, enriches more quickly and easily their cultural capital.

Within this immersion in a German linguistic bath (German or Austrian), students, not only enrich their linguistic and cultural knowledge, but also acquire know-how and savoir-être. Mobility, in both directions, immersion in the target cultural milieu, or exchange contacts with native speakers are the best means to acquire cultural capital for foreign language students **because after misunderstandings which induce incomprehension we reach success of communication, thus a sustainable peace** between participants. This is due to a whole work of adaptation to the other's culture in order to attain intercultural communication by didactic means.

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Assessing the intercultural competence of Algerian students of German being the objective of this paper, I have conducted interviews with 10 Algerian graduate students, holding a 4-year degree in German from the University of Oran, and analysed their politeness strategies with 05 Germans living in Algeria and the problems involved:

- What role does the cultural capital play in this communication event?
- How far does its enrichment contribute to the success of intercultural communication?
- Do these two parameters help the establishment of a sustainable peace?

The concept of cultural capital was put forward by Bourdieu for the sake of describing an individual's symbolic assets. This capital is the set of knowledge and know-how one has in all domains. Cultural capital may be defined according to three characteristics:

- It is quantifiable (one has a more or less significant 'volume' of knowledge'), more or less diversified (one has knowledge about various domains).

- "The more significant and varied it is, the more it grows and diversifies" (Abdallah-Preteuille and Porcher, 1996: 39). For Bourdieu, cultural capital has three states:

- **Incorporated State:** "The accumulation of cultural capital needs an incorporation which, as such, implies a process of instilling and assimilation that requires time, and time which has to be personally invested by the investor."

- **Objectified State:** "Objectified cultural capital in backup materiel such as written texts, paintings, monuments, etc., ... is transmissible in its materiality.

- **Institutionalised State:** Objectification of cultural capital in the form of titles (e. g. a certificate in cultural competence) (Bourdieu 1979: 36).

Cultural capital is a personal wealth; it consists of an acquired capital and a learned one; the 'acquired' being the one transmitted from the family and daily life in a non-systematic way, and the 'learned' rather referring to what is learned, in a systematic way, at school. The notion of instilling and assimilation which need time and personal involvement shows clearly the reality of the learning of knowledge and the acquisition of cultural or intercultural competence: acquired or learned cultural capital becomes a personal wealth over time.

Cultural and Linguistic Capital

Some pedagogues and didacticians make a distinction between cultural capital and linguistic capital. For instance, Coste, Moore and Zarate (1999: 26-43) refer to the concepts of cultural and linguistic capital in multilingual and multicultural competence. The deeper our knowledge of a foreign language and its culture is, the better we communicate with the natives of this language. This idea seems to be obvious and acceptable. However, how important is the relationship between cultural and linguistic competence? This is not quite clear for our learners.

In the interviews, I have noticed that most of students of German are more concerned with linguistic difficulties, and hardly aware of those related to cultural competence. They admit that the language represents the most significant problem in their communication with Germans. Their answer to the question ‘What is your main problem in communicating with Germans?’ is the lack of vocabulary. No one made any reference to culture-based problems.

It is a fact that the linguistic knowledge is essential to communication. In an oral translation work, one unknown key word may obstruct interaction between Algerians and Germans. This, according to the interviewees, is a painful case for mediators. Failure in such a work upsets them and makes them complain about their lack of vocabulary, mostly those words related to technical subjects.

Yet, they seem to be hardly aware of the uneasiness induced by their ignorance of the other’s culture, especially the German. When culture shock occurs, they tend to link it to a linguistic lack rather than a cultural one.

Enriching Cultural Capital

Although students tend to neglect factors related to cultural competence, they do acquire it gradually, and then progress, consciously or unconsciously, in their interaction with natives. Through the analysis of the corpus, one can notice three stages of progression in their communication strategies or in the growth of their cultural capital: beginner stage, intermediate stage, advanced stage.

– Beginner Stage

It is a stage students experience while on grant in German schools, Goethe-Institute, universities, private language schools, where they tend to have recourse to their native cultural capital. This is often the first time they train in German institutions and get in touch with Germans outside the university context.

This is a change in the spatial context and a rupture in relation to the teacher-student rapport they used to have. They are impressed because it is a good opportunity for them to improve their German. They are also nervous and full of doubt because they usually have no experience in this kind of communication and are unconfident with regard to their linguistic and cultural capital: their

knowledge of the German language and people come from books and the media. In the interaction, they look into their knowledge reservoir for what they can convey in a German way as the German language is the medium. Given their poor knowledge of the foreign culture, they make use of their native one.

Some students are used to shaking hands everyday with friends and colleagues, along with embracing and touching of hands, shoulder and back. Germans, however, are rather reluctant to shake hands, and Algerians do not really understand these attitudes on the part of their German interlocutors.

Neuner (1998) describes this phenomenon: “When dealing with elements, units and structures of the country whose language they learn, the learner tries to constantly ‘give meaning’ to the information they receive (including linguistic) according to what they already know, i. e. by drawing on their native background knowledge and experience. Since the two are different, their ‘attempt to understand’ runs the risk of being a failure if they are not helped.”

– Intermediate Stage

It is generally a stage where students have already had some communication experiences with Germans. It is mostly characterised by an enriched cultural and linguistic capital of the target language. In the first stage, they had observed German behaviour, guessed and tried to understand it. Most students find out about the meaning of certain German rituals or behaviour which are distinctively different from their native ones and then try to get accustomed to them. Many of them accept to assimilate or imitate German ways: “Since we learn this foreign language, we must learn its culture and imitate Germans’ behaviour, “ they say.

However, students happen to imitate a ritual or behaviour with no real understanding of their hidden significance or their value as they may encompass a cultural implicit substance. Take the example of the German ‘no’ and the Algerian ‘no’. When the Algerian is invited by a German for a meal, a drink or have something, they happen to say no out of politeness, even if they think the opposite, as they expect the offer to be made again and then agree. The German is not used to repeat the offer and take the Algerian’s no as a definite answer.

Trying to behave like the other is a good attitude for learning and adapting to the environment. Yet, imitating something without being aware of its significance or without taking into consideration the context is quite risky. This often induces opposite results.

Getting close to and behaving like somebody requires understanding the explicit and implicit significance, and most importantly considering, the pragmatic context.

In this intermediate stage, one can notice that certain students enrich their repertoire of stereotypes. After misunderstandings, incomprehension and failures, they tend to generalise a particular case and reinforce their stereotypes

about Germans. The student who says no to an offer finds the German harsh, rigid and even cruel because they did not make the offer again.

– **Advanced Stage**

This stage is about students who have already had several contacts with Germans. They understand better, along communication, their language, culture and behaviour. They accept the ways which are different from their native culture. Misunderstandings get fewer. What is noteworthy here is that they tend to play the role of the good mediator and establish harmonious bridges in the dialogue between both parties since they are between two cultures they more or less know, and thus can predict possible threats of speech acts on the interlocutor of another culture.

It is clear that the intercultural practice plays a major role in the learning and acquisition of intercultural competence and the enrichment of the students' cultural capital. The latter's progress justifies what Veronique and Vion (1995) note: "Communicational know-hows show the subject's complex involvement in the implementation of the code, a semiotic work which is inseparable from the manifestations of a society which expresses itself, it, through a coordinated recourse to methods of interaction, by means of rapports of negotiated positions, and mediated by techniques of self-affirmation." However, it seems that students' progression and the enrichment of their capital are rather marked with self-teaching and self-improvement. In this process, the school appears to have a minor role. Actually, "cultural discovery is not a systematic process triggered by school education, but is, in general, rather the outcome of an individual disposition that requires everyone's relation to otherness." (Coste, Moore and Zarate 1999)

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- How far does its enrichment contribute to the success of intercultural communication?

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