

A Reference Model for Analysing Intercultural Communication between the Italians and Sudanese

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The relevance of this study in the field of linguistic education lies in the concept of communicative competence and in the continuity between the model of communicative competence and that of intercultural communicative competence, which has been previously analysed (Balboni, Caon 2015).

To briefly summarise this correlation, we begin with the affirmation that the instruction of second or foreign languages aims at communicative competence and that communicating in a second and foreign language necessarily implies the presence of two interlocutors with different *softwares of the mind* (Hofstede 1991) and cultural matrices. Therefore, the intercultural dimension, that is the interaction between two cultures (or more precisely, between two people who interpret these matrices in unique ways), is the main focus within a communicative exchange, and to the fullest extent possible, when teaching.

1 Intercultural Communicative Competence

Here we will present the Intercultural Communicative Competence Model on which this volume is based (Balboni, Caon 2015).

This model (like the communicative competence model from which it derives, see Balboni, Caon 2015) distinguishes between the competences located in the mind and the skills that enable us to perform during the communicative events that take place in the world. Here's how to read the diagram:

- a. like in the communicative competence model, in our “minds” we have a certain expertise, or a “rule” system to respect, that enables us to understand if there are any critical intercultural factors:

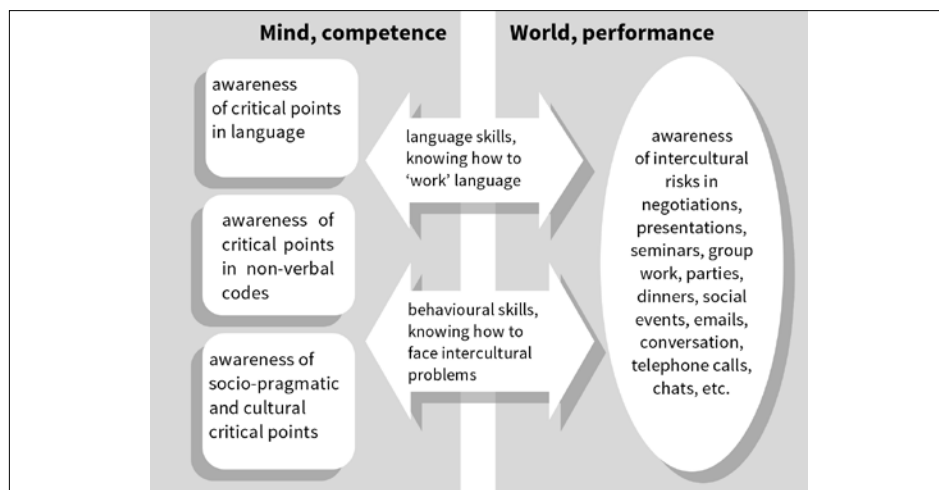


Figure 1. Diagram of the Intercultural Communicative Competence Model

language, codes, cultural values. In the “world”, the same respect must be given to the structures that regulate communicative events. These components in the diagram have a descriptive purpose and can guide our observations.

- b. between the mind and the world, there is a bridge in the communicative competence model that includes not only one’s linguistic capabilities, but also one’s relational competencies. The latter must be developed by modifying one’s mindset in relation to the emotional reactions to the actions or words of interlocutors from other cultures. We may consider them to be incomprehensible, inappropriate or unpleasant in light of what we perceive as offensive, careless, or indicative of bad manners. This feature of the diagram has a processual purpose to intervene in the way that we manage our own thoughts, emotional states and therefore interactions with the interlocutor.

2 A Model for Analysing Intercultural Communication: Functions and Limitations

In a book entitled *Eccessi di Culture* (Excesses of Cultures), Marco Aime (2004) writes: "It is not cultures who meet and clash, it is people".

As an introduction to a series of studies held together by a reference model, it seems essential that we draw attention to the potential risks of reading this volume and the contributions that are to follow (and that have generated an evolution of Balboni's model (1999, 2007) to that of Balboni, Caon 2015). This risk is reading the information in a 'rigid' way, and by 'rigid' we mean absolute, as if the information contained herein was of indisputable certainty.

The words of Aime represent an important key to reading what is written: if it is people and not cultures who meet, and if people are unique and rework cultural stimuli in a personal way, then the information – as much as it is documented by competent individuals through qualitative surveys (questionnaires and in person interviews) – is inevitably an approximation.

The observed categories (verbal, nonverbal, core values, communicative events) thus provide important insights which the intercultural communicator can take into consideration to avoid or reduce the risk of misunderstanding, incomprehensibility, conflict with the other, or at the very least, to manage potentially problematic situations that arise in multicultural or international contexts.

However, the information presented should be read with a well-balanced attitude between trust and mistrust, so that a 'verification in the field' is always necessary to avoid falling into preliminary generalisations. The reason for this approach is the fact that cultures are dynamic and relationships are influenced by contingent factors, each specific and unable to be 'isolated' in any essay or volume.

Therefore, the information, examples and any anecdotes that are presented in the various contributions should not be interpreted as 'normative' indications applicable to the behaviours of possible interlocutors. This type of interpretation can generate misunderstandings regarding values and meanings. We risk doing the very thing that we want to avoid, assigning static classifications to cultures and predicting people's behaviour based on their geographical and cultural belonging.

In practice, the main objective of these studies is to favour, by way of example, the construction of a personal manual by the reader. A dynamic, layered and evolving 'do-it-yourself' manual, reflective of people, relationships and cultures.

This recommendation is clear, even going back to the origins of the model (Balboni 1999). It speaks explicitly about a "model of observation, of analysis" which, by nature, must be concise and cognitively manageable, but that must maintain the aforementioned characteristics. Observing and

analysing are strategies to more effectively manage a relationship that is in itself creative and not preordained or fixed in immobile patterns. Having strategic 'points of observation' can possibly facilitate this observation. In fact, this is the objective of the model, for the intercultural communication map that it derives from (<http://www.unive.it/labcom>), and for the volumes that will be released in due time for the various countries featured in this series.

As our reflections evolved, the usefulness and limitations of the model as part of the analysis became apparent, and we have therefore decided to combine an explicit, processual dimension to the cognitive dimension.

This choice is due precisely to the fact that, as we said, situations are dynamic and respond not to rigid preordained rules, but to a series of contextual variables that make such situations sometimes unpredictable and require the communicators to negotiate meaning in real time.

The model introduces a series of relational skills that lie between mental competences and communication during actual events. These skills can help the reader to frame the information through an awareness of its limits: in this way, it can be a useful tool for orientation, but without creating and applying prejudice to the reading of reality.

It is therefore with the spirit of necessary relativism that we can put forth the information in a positive light and can again invite the readers of all the contributions to write their own intercultural communication manual.

3 Relational Competence in the Intercultural Sphere

Due to the innovative value of the relational skills established in Balboni's model, and above all, the fact that they will not be specifically dealt with in the various volumes in the series, we will name them here and refer the reader to Balboni, Caon (2015), for a more detailed analysis.

According to our perspective, the fundamental relational skills are:

- a. *knowing how to observe (decentralise oneself)*
- b. *knowing how to relativise*
- c. *knowing how to suspend judgment*
- d. *knowing how to actively listen*
- e. *knowing how to understand emotions (empathise and 'exotopizzare', as referred to in Italian)*
- f. *knowing how to negotiate meaning.*

The skills listed here can help develop the ability to negotiate meaning, which is the objective for this part of the model.

The ability to negotiate meaning moves from the attribution of meaning to behaviours (culturally contingent and consequently with high variations in their expression), to co-constructing a communicative

exchange that, to the best of our abilities, makes explicit those implicit cultural components that often create communicative problems in the intercultural sphere.

Yet another objective for us is represented in the proposal of the concept of 'culture of belonging', to be understood as a basic category of which one must become fully aware in order to build relationships. The culture of belonging is a subjective construction; the self-perception of one's own unique way of living and reinterpreting norms, values and cultural patterns in society.

It cannot be described as an absolute as each of us constructs a sense of belonging through our intersubjectivity, or in the context of our relationships with others and how the knowledge that we acquire and our life experiences manifest themselves.

To become aware of ourselves while communicating with others, of the paradigms that we often take for granted (and often deem a priori correct or as the only possibility), is the first main objective. It gives us an option to choose that otherwise, remaining statically in our cultural frame, we would not have.

The great possibility that intercultural communication offers us is that of looking at others better and more accurately, but first and foremost, to look at ourselves better through others. We are able to have plural and unexpected viewpoints, and to valorise the great potential of difference that is represented in diverse languages and modes of expression.

We base all of the volumes that will become part of this series on these premises, and it is on them that we may deepen our knowledge and our analyses of the complex and fascinating field of intercultural communication.

