

# HELPING THE CONSOLIDATION OF AN INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: AN EXAMPLE FROM BLENDED LEARNING

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***Abstract:** Nowadays, no one can escape the intercultural exchange, and this is especially true when it comes to foreign language students. If teaching elements of culture in a classroom, often using textbooks is most common, constructing an elearning environment helping the students in discovering the Other and preparing them to an intercultural exchange seems complex. In this paper we would like to identify the elements which will be in contact during the intercultural exchange: civilization and cultures. We will then show how we intended to consolidate the intercultural competence of our beginner students in Romance philology thanks to activities and tasks given through an elearning module.*

**Keywords:** civilization, culture, elearning, intercultural competence, blended learning

## INTRODUCTION

“ learning a foreign language mechanically involves the presence of some cultural insights. The desire to capture a foreign language or the interest animating the learners in the language classroom always seems to have a cultural component, although it is impossible to assess the importance it has to be given”. These words of Jean-Claude Beacco (2000: 17) were about teaching the foreign language in a classroom, but they still apply when this classroom is to be dematerialized. The CEFR itself (2001: 81) insists on the importance of developing an intercultural competency for the learner. Indeed, a mechanical vision of the language is far from being enough in order to understand the other, and learners are more and more confronted to intercultural relationships. The person who learns a language without learning a culture risks becoming a fluent fool (Bennet, Bennet, Allen, 2003: 237). If in the classroom the intercultural competence is developed through the use of textbooks, the interaction between students and the teacher himself, its development through elearning will have to follow a different path. Building the

environment will lead the designer of the elearning activities to carefully choose the materials to be used and the way the learner will have to use them, keeping in mind that autonomy will be the key word.

In this paper, we would like to remind what is “interculturality” and its components, the problems linked to it when constructing an elearning environment, and then to show some examples of activities helping to develop an intercultural competency in an elearning model already used since 2010.

## **1. CIVILIZATION AND CULTURE(S): THE CORE ELEMENTS FOR AN INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE**

Interculturality is the result of what happens when people from different cultures are interacting. The intercultural competence will be the abilities of the learner to “understand and respect people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself ; respond appropriately, effectively and respectfully when interacting and communicating with such people ; establish positive and constructive relationships with such people ; understand oneself and one’s own multiple cultural affiliations though encounters with cultural differences” (Barrett, Byram, Lazar, Montpoint-Gaillard, Philippou, 2013: 8).

We have first of all to clearly define the elements coming in contact during an intercultural exchange. Two main groups of elements are present: civilization and culture. For a long time, the difference between the two elements was not very clear.

A good definition of these two elements is given by Renée Dickason (1998: 5):

“ Culture is generally considered as the intellectual, moral and spiritual development of people and nations, whereas civilization is seen as referring to the materialization, objectification of this culture, whether in material objects or in political or social institutions regulating a society. [...] According to the Platonic model, culture would indeed be the idea, and civilization the physical incarnation, but also in a way the degradation of this idea.”

### **1.1 Civilization: a declarative knowledge (Savoir)**

The first representation of the other is usually based on civilization. When we speak about France for instance, names like Napoléon Bonaparte or Victor Hugo, monuments like the Eiffel tower or Mont Saint-Michel, sportsmen like Zinedine Zidane will be the first cultural aspects to come to the mind of a foreigner. These elements are also called “ general knowledge” or “knowledge of the world” by the CEFR (2001: 82). Therefore, elements like History, literature, geography, sports or cinema will be part of civilization. Learners have to know the realizations of the target culture, not only for their general knowledge, but mainly because these elements will often be referred to during discussions (whether the interlocutor will be a native or not), or will have an impact on the way the communication will go.

Teaching civilization might seem easy to implement, especially in elearning, as it is mainly based on an encyclopedic knowledge: the realizations do not change, and we just need to be up to date.

The main problem is not much about speaking about these elements, but about choosing which ones are the most important and how we will interpret and present them. If for elements of geography there are no particular problems, the relevance of dates in History or authors in literature can voluntarily direct the ideas of the learners about a civilization. Therefore the choice will be very difficult, and often marked by the teacher's preferences, motivations or beliefs and this being or not a native of the target culture himself. If in the classroom context the teacher always have the possibility to correct, explain, redirect or complete the information about civilization he has given, this is not always an option as far as elearning is concerned. Of course, one might do it through channels like a forum or chat, however it will hardly be as efficient because very often there will be the lack of one dimension of the language. For instance, if a student in the classroom does not understand one cultural element, his body language might be a signal for the teacher, even if the student does not explicitly say that he has a problem with it. This is unfortunately not an option in distance learning where we will often depend on explicit reactions from the learners.

Therefore, in our choice of elements of civilization, we do have to consider why they seem so important to us, if they are relevant for an intercultural relationship, but also the relevance to our public and their own culture.

The second main handicap when preparing elements of civilization on a platform will be how we will use these elements to develop the learner's competence: it is not enough to just see a picture of Versailles to comprehend its importance to French history. That is why the use of images, texts and other elements will have to be used in a didactical way.

## **1.2 Culture(s): an existential competence (Savoir-être)**

The second component required for an intercultural exchange will be the culture. As we saw in Gaudé's definition, culture is the idea. Culture is a shared dynamical system of values composed of elements such as moral values, beliefs, rules of behaving and interacting in the society (Abdallah-Preteuille, 1983: 41). Knowing the culture is the key for the learner to comprehend most of the communication, and as Beacco underlined it "to teach communication without describing at the same time the social protocols that make up the fabric of language exchange and which define the conditions of success, is to condemn oneself to be unable to answer to the deepest questions of the learners" (2000: 17). To communicate successfully, we need to understand the beliefs, the way of life and the social codes: to understand the everyday life of the target culture, know how to behave and how to react in society.

Of course, there is not one culture, but cultureS: each individual, each group will have his own, therefore it is hard to simply associate one culture to one country or a

community. Each of these cultures will be indefinitely divided in subcultures down to individuals (Bernaus, 2005: 49). Codes will be different if we live in Paris or in Marseille, in a miner family or a manager family, if we are from a generation or another. Abdallah-Preitceille and Louis Porcher (1996: 14) distinguished five types of cultures when teaching language: sexual cultures, generational cultures, professional cultures, regional cultures and foreign cultures. All of these elements will shape the communication.

This complexity will obviously be a huge factor while we build an elearning activity to teach a foreign language. The designer will first have to ask himself which part of the culture will be needed to be known by the learner, but mainly to which culture the learner can most probably be confronted to.

Indeed, to train young teenagers to use only formal language and codes without working a bit on the slang and social codes used between the teenagers of the target culture is to condemn them to fail partly in communication when they will be abroad. Without knowing the generational culture of the target language, communication will be harder for them or lead to misunderstandings or mistakes.

Just like for civilization, bringing cultural elements into an elearning environment will require a careful selection from the designer as for how to treat this element and present it to the learners. The fact that culture is a dynamical system will also require adaptation with time. What is true now might not be true tomorrow, as “cultures are fluid and mobile” (Phipps and Gonzalez, 2004: 62).

Another potential problem here will be stereotypes, appearing because “the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it (Lippmann, 1922: 16). For instance, the assumption that the French are drinking wine and eating snails is widely known all around the world, even if a lot of French people do not drink wine and have never eaten a snail.

All these elements will have to be kept in mind when conceiving an environment to teach a foreign language.

## **2. ELEMENTS TO DEVELOP AN INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING: THE EXAMPLE OF SPIRAL**

### **2.1 Helping the development of an intercultural competence: skills and know-how (Savoir-faire)**

Five forms of learning and teaching can be effectively implemented to develop intercultural competence: experience, comparison, analysis, reflection and cooperative action (Barrett, Byram, Lazar, Montpoint-Gaillard, Philippou,

2013: 17). These five forms can be used to set up activities inside an elearning environment.

The first form, experience, will be to place the learner in new situations by simulation or contact or showing them how people would act or react in the target culture. In distance learning, many tools are available: chat or video conference with natives, authentic video showing natives in action.

With the second form, comparison, the learner is to be faced with something unusual for him, so that he can compare it with what he knows and try to understand how the Other is constructing. Visual documents and texts can be used for this.

Analysis is another form, where inquiry methods will be used to reflect on practices, values or beliefs. Video or audio resources can easily be used to that purpose.

The fourth form, reflection will be the result of a process following the use of the three previous forms. Basically, written production after having experienced, compared and analyzed will bring the student to form his opinion.

The last form, action, will involve activities with people from different cultures, based on reflection. In elearning, this can be done through chat, videoconferences or any project involving the cooperation of a foreigner.

All of these forms of learning and teaching, and thus forging an intercultural competence, can be backed by acquiring what is called transversal competencies: how to exploit information, solve problems, have a critical judgment, create and adapt, increase work efficiency, use the ICT, cooperate and communicate in an appropriate way. The development of these transversal competencies has been the main goal of the introduction of blended learning in 2010 at the Warsaw University Romance institute for students beginners in French language learning.

In a questionnaire submitted to the 1<sup>st</sup> year students using the elearning module at the end of the year from 04-04-2013 to 24-03-2014 (44 respondents) and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students from 02-04-2013 to 18-01-2014 (40 respondents) we tried to evaluate their perception of the importance of the cultural part of activities and tasks (tasks are only coming during the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, 1<sup>st</sup> year students are working on groups of activities linked by a theme)

**Table 1.**

**1<sup>st</sup> year students (n=44). While learning French language, you pay attention to: (1-very important to 4-least important)**

	<b>Very important</b>	<b>important</b>	<b>Less important</b>	<b>Least important</b>
<b>vocabulary</b>	28 (64%)	10 (23%)	5 (11%)	1(2%)
<b>grammar</b>	21(48%)	15 (34%)	4 (9%)	4 (9%)
<b>Cultural</b>	8 (18%)	20 (45%)	15 (35%)	1 (2%)

aspects				
<b>Written production</b>	12 (27%)	19 (44%)	12 (27%)	1 (2%)
<b>Listening comprehension</b>	29 (66%)	8 (18%)	3 (7%)	4 (9%)
<b>Written comprehension</b>	26 (59%)	11 (25%)	3 (7%)	4 (9%)
<b>Techniques to search information</b>	2 (5%)	11 (25%)	18 (40%)	13 (30%)

*Source: own work*

**Table 2.**  
2<sup>nd</sup> year students (n=40). While learning French language, you pay attention to:  
(1-very important to 4-least important)

	<b>Very important</b>	<b>important</b>	<b>Less important</b>	<b>Least important</b>
<b>vocabulary</b>	33 (83%)	7 (17%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
<b>grammar</b>	24 (57%)	15 (38%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
<b>Cultural aspects</b>	5 (13%)	15 (37%)	17 (42%)	3 (8%)
<b>Written production</b>	14 (35%)	22 (55%)	4 (10%)	0 (0%)
<b>Listening comprehension</b>	36 (90%)	4 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
<b>Written comprehension</b>	26 (65%)	13 (33%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
<b>Techniques to search information</b>	9 (23%)	9 (23%)	12 (29%)	10 (25%)

*Source: own work*

As we can see in table 1 and 2, cultural aspects are not considered as being very important by our students when it comes to learn the language. Mostly will be important the technical aspects, with a big attention to vocabulary and listening comprehension.

And although this makes sense, as a language is to be spoken, these two elements are deeply charged with cultural aspects. Also not considered as very important, the techniques to search for information, which is a transversal competence, is however crucial for us. Indeed, having so much to learn in quite a short time, autonomy in learning is a key factor. When we speak about culture, this aspect is even more

obvious: what one cannot get during lessons must be acquired in other ways. Nobody knows to which culture a student will be confronted, and that is why he must be able to adapt himself and search for clues helping in a better comprehension of the Other. This is also helping to encourage student's curiosity.

## **2.2 Practical examples: leading to autonomy (Savoir-apprendre)**

During the 1<sup>st</sup> year, some elements of French civilization are seen through different subjects. One of them being cinema. In this group of activities, we confront students to the history of cinema where France took a big place. We present a text and a video about Pathe and Gaumont. There, we just confront students to information.

We then show them an extract of a show from a comic from Quebec where the artists simulate what would be a scene of a criminal film first made by Americans, then by French and then by French Caribbean islands. The students are asked to imagine the scene filmed by a Polish film producer. We push the student to reflect first about cultural differences, confront it to what he knows and analyze it.

Another activity proposed here is on an extract of a very famous film among French people. This film is so well known in France, that very often some parts of dialogs are used as implicit during conversations. In this extract, an allusion to a stereotype about Poles is used. Gangsters are sharing a very strong alcohol, and no one wants to look weaker than others. One of them, to show that this alcohol is not that strong says "I knew a Polish woman who took that for breakfast", meaning that in Poland where people are drinking a lot, this is an alcohol for women and so light that it is for breakfast. We then give them to fill gaps in parts of dialogues, representative of the humor presented in film dialogs from the same dialog author. One of our aim was to encourage our students to watch fully the film and to try to understand the way the French play on words and reflects on stereotypes.

As we see, here confrontation, comparison and reflection are used while bringing some elements of civilization.

At the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> year, two groups of activities help the students to discover French territory. Here also, looking for the information is essential. These two groups of activities were designed as a trip in almost all French territories and France itself, showing to students elements not so often shown during lessons. Giving a film about a very small French territory named Clipperton, we asked the students to find the full strange history which took place there at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The story is not so well known but really strange. During chat sessions some clues were given, and most of the students who finally discovered the story were very happy to do so and shared it in the conversations, showing that we indeed encouraged their curiosity, so needed in the intercultural exchange. A reportage was proposed, explaining how people from the islands of Saint Pierre and Miquelon, next to Quebec, are considering themselves and what problems they face. Of course here the activity was pretty easy, as students only had to choose between proposed answers which was the main problem faced by these people. But thanks to

this, they learnt more about this French territory and saw what kind of views and problems one could have in such place. Students also had to reflect on hip hop video clips showing how some young French are seeing their life in the big French cities suburbs and asked them to reflect on it.

During the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, tasks are given. We place students in simulated situations, confronting them to other cultures: Francophone countries such as Canada (Quebec), Switzerland, Belgium and Francophone countries of Africa, as well as economical culture.

In one of these tasks, they had to be the jury for a festival of African art. In this task, students can discover major African francophone artists in most of the artistic fields. A painting of Ismaila Manga where we see people in African traditional clothes and having a tree on the head is showed. We asked our students to imagine the situation painted. Symbol of roots and identity, the tree is a major element in African culture, and many answers underlined this unusual aspects, very few students having been able to understand the presence of the trees. This was then discussed during chat sessions. We are there in both the process of comparison, analysis and reflection. Thanks to specific website about African music, students were pushed to discover and present the work of one artist they would select. Again, we encourage here to look for something they do not know, and encourage eagerness to discover. We also presented there a quite disturbing sculpture for Europeans, students had to write what inspired them. During a chat I then gave them the interpretation of the artist. In the end, students had to choose an artwork form they discovered and say why it would win their vote to win an art competition.

## CONCLUSION

Of course, these examples do not include the confrontation to a direct intercultural exchange with foreigners, there was no common work with foreigners. However, we think that such activities on elements of civilization and culture, as well as the necessity to develop techniques to look for the missing information and be critical about it, helped our students in reaching a bigger autonomy and reinforce their future intercultural competence. When asked what the elearning module helped them to develop, answers were quite clear, as we can see in table 3 and 4.

**Table 3.**

**1<sup>st</sup> year students. According to you, accomplishing the activities helped you to develop:**

	<b>much</b>	<b>average</b>	<b>To a small extent</b>	<b>Not at all</b>
<b>Vocabulary</b>	18 (41%)	17 (39%)	6 (14%)	3 (7%)
<b>Grammar</b>	3 (7%)	17 (39%)	19 (43%)	5 (11%)



<b>Pronunciation</b>	2 (5%)	11 (25%)	11 (25%)	20 (45%)
<b>Spelling</b>	17 (39%)	16 (36%)	7 (16%)	4 (9%)
<b>Cultural aspects</b>	22 (50%)	11 (25%)	10 (23%)	1 (2%)
<b>Written production</b>	9 (20%)	25 (57%)	8 (18%)	2 (5%)
<b>Listening comprehension</b>	24 (55%)	15 (34%)	5 (11%)	0 (0%)
<b>Written comprehension</b>	8 (18%)	23 (53%)	9 (20%)	4 (9%)
<b>Techniques to search information</b>	27 (61%)	10 (23%)	5 (11%)	2 (5%)

*Source: own work*

**Table 4.**

**2<sup>nd</sup> year students. According to you, accomplishing the activities helped you to develop:**

	<b>much</b>	<b>average</b>	<b>To a small extent</b>	<b>Not at all</b>
<b>Vocabulary</b>	12 (30%)	15 (38%)	10 (25%)	3 (7%)
<b>Grammar</b>	5 (12%)	17 (43%)	10 (25%)	8 (20%)
<b>Pronunciation</b>	3 (7%)	5 (12%)	14 (35%)	18 (46%)
<b>Spelling</b>	14 (35%)	12 (30%)	9 (23%)	5 (12%)
<b>Cultural aspects</b>	30 (75%)	8 (20%)	2 (5%)	0 (0%)
<b>Written production</b>	18 (45%)	16 (40%)	6 (15%)	0 (0%)
<b>Listening comprehension</b>	18 (45%)	16 (40%)	5 (12%)	1 (3%)
<b>Written comprehension</b>	11 (28%)	20 (50%)	7 (17%)	2 (5%)
<b>Techniques to search information</b>	22 (56%)	10 (25%)	5 (12%)	3 (7%)

*Source: own work*

Most of them underlined the feeling that their knowledge of cultural aspects and their ability to look for information were much helped. This is only their view, and they might not be fully aware of how deep they learned and what other competencies they used.

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