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From native to intercultural speaker and beyond: intercultural (communicative) competence in foreign language education

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1. Introduction

I recently met a group of old friends for dinner in Edinburgh. One of the couples now lives in Paris and they were in Edinburgh for the weekend with some French friends. As several of the 'Scots' have university degrees in French – myself included – conversation should have flowed easily; and for some it did. I, however, found myself silenced and frustrated by a range of conflicting thoughts and emotions. Having studied French at university, I *should* be able to speak fluently, perfectly, with good vocabulary, accurate grammar and a convincing French accent, right? If the 'native' French speakers know that I studied 'their' language, they will expect me to speak it well, but I can't remember anything! And because I *should* be able to speak French, I can't speak to them in English because that would just be rude! The consequence of this thought process was that I ashamedly avoided speaking to them altogether, bar a few words of welcome and farewell at the start and end of the evening; far ruder than speaking to them in 'imperfect' French or even in English. I felt somewhat disappointed with myself.

On revisiting this chapter and thinking about the different aims, methods, and ideologies of foreign language education, I also revisited my feelings and behaviours that evening. I reflected that, despite my understanding of and belief in intercultural communication, my own experience of learning languages at school and university with the focus on lexical and grammatical accuracy and the goal of 'native' or 'near-native' competence had effectively made me less rather than more able to communicate and less rather than more 'interculturally competent'. I remained bound to and by the idea(l) of the 'native speaker', while I longed to be the more open and welcoming 'intercultural speaker', able to interact and communicate without fear of forgetting a word or using a wrong verb form.

The 'intercultural speaker' has been a key protagonist in language and intercultural communication research and practice since the 1990s. Byram (1997) coined the term in the process of redefining the goals of foreign language education away from the often elusive and, according to Davies (2004: 431-2), necessarily 'ambiguous', ideal of the 'native speaker'. The 'intercultural speaker' concept was soon adopted and adapted by many scholars and practitioners to describe language learners with 'an ability to interact with "others", to accept other perspectives and perceptions of the world, to mediate between different perspectives, to be conscious of their evaluations and differences' (Byram *et al.* 2001: 5). Intercultural speakers are, therefore, not only linguistically, but also 'interculturally competent'. In other words, they have at least some command of

the grammar and vocabulary of the language they are learning and are also able to communicate and interact in an 'effective' and 'appropriate' way with other speakers of that language; and, indeed, other languages (cf. Fantini 2012; Jackson 2014; Ting-Toomey 2012). Crucially, intercultural speakers demonstrate both sensitivity towards their interlocutors and their cultural contexts, and awareness of their own cultural positioning, as well as an understanding of cultural 'in between-ness' or 'thirdness' (Jordan 2002; Kramsch 1998a, 1998b; Macdonald 2019; Zhou and Pilcher 2019). Moreover, they are not bound to specific cultures or languages, but are competent in mediating across multiple borders (cf. Byram 1997, 2008; Coperias Aguilar 2002; Kramsch 1998a; 1998b).

Much discussion around the intercultural speaker has centred on the field of foreign language education, principally because this is where the concept was born. This context remains important and is therefore reviewed again here before moving on to examine debates and developments in the field of language and intercultural communication over the last decade, where there has been a concomitant broadening of foci and questioning of the concept and its applicability to different contexts and groups. To reflect on the extent to which the intercultural speaker remains a meaningful and relevant concept as we enter the third decade of the 21st century, this chapter considers this construct alongside more recent concepts including intercultural citizenship, intercultural being, and, maintaining the focus on speaking, the dialogical communicator and cosmopolitan speaker.

2. From 'native' to 'intercultural' speaker: changing goals and concepts in foreign language education.

The 'native speaker problem'

During the 1980s and 1990s scholars in the field of foreign language education began to prioritise learners' acquisition of 'intercultural' as well as 'linguistic competence'. Linguistic competence is broadly understood as a knowledge of and ability to use the vocabulary and grammar of a language accurately and effectively in order to communicate with other users of the same language (cf. Coperias Aguilar 2002: 89; Phipps and Gonzales 2004: 27). Most who have learned or taught a second language in a formal educational setting will be familiar with the methods and materials used to foster this kind of competence: vocabulary drills and games, grammar exercises, listening and reading comprehensions, translation tasks, short writing tasks, role plays on topics such as 'introducing yourself', 'booking a hotel room', 'ordering a meal'. Notably, these activities often provide little in the way of cultural context; this is generic, decontextualized language learning occasionally supplemented by brief details of aspects of life in the country or countries in which the language is spoken – a mere addendum to the core vocabulary and grammar tasks. And where 'culture' is taught, the focus is often on supposedly 'typical' representations of the 'national culture(s)' with which the language is associated; an approach which creates and fosters stereotypes and can make learners *less* rather than more interculturally

competent (cf. Byram 1989, 1991, 1997, 2008; Byram and Risager 1999; Phipps and Gonzales 2004; Piątkowska 2015). This kind of language work prioritises lexical and grammatical accuracy and its ultimate aim is for learners to achieve so-called 'native' or 'near-native' ability in the language, meaning that they should be able to communicate fluently and correctly, and ideally 'pass' as 'native speakers'.

Even in this simplified definition of 'native speaker ability', the problems are clear. Firstly, it suggests a 'perfection' in the language that will be out of reach of many language learners and is rarely necessary for effective and appropriate communication. (Byram 1997, 2008; Cook 1999; Phipps and Gonzalez 2004; Piątkowska 2015) I will return to this later. Secondly, the concept of the 'native speaker' is itself problematic: what is meant by 'native speaker' and who is included in the definition? Those who learned a language from birth or a very young age, for whom it is a 'first language' or 'L1', are usually considered 'native speakers' (cf. Cook 1999: 186-87; see also Davies 2003, 2004). But what of those who speak two or more 'first languages'? Are they native speakers in all of them? And what of the varieties in accent, dialect, and grammar within every language? Which 'variety' do we choose as the 'native speaker standard' and what are the reasons for our choice? All of these questions are not only difficult to answer, but also deeply political (cf. Davies 2003).

Determining who 'counts' as a native speaker of a language is linked with identity

politics and associated processes of inclusion and exclusion – often of the national

kind, as language and nation are so intertwined. As many before me have argued,

the use of language tests as part of the process of applying for citizenship or even

long-term residency in many countries explicitly and problematically links

linguistic competence with national identity and belonging (cf. Byram 2008,

2012; Guilherme 2007, 2012; Hogan-Brun *et al*. 2009; Holliday 2012; Horner

2015; Lu and Corbett 2012; Piller 2001; Stevenson 2006). Many scholars of

language(s) and intercultural communication also draw parallels between the

language element of citizenship tests and the native speaker model of foreign

language education. Byram (2012), for example, explains that the expectation is

that 'new residents should attempt to imitate the natives of the state in a way

parallel to the expectations of language learners that they imitate native speakers'

(p. 89). (See also Byram and Golubeva, chapter 4 in this volume). Moreover, in

both cases new citizens and language learners (who are sometimes one and the

same) are being asked to relinquish something of themselves in pursuit of a new

identity that can never be fully theirs. Not only is failure thus probable from the

outset, but the potential contribution of those who embody different experiences

and backgrounds and speak more than one language is disregarded.

For the purposes of this chapter, I return now to a focus on language learners, but

readers interested in further discussions of language and citizenship can read

chapters 4, 21, and 23 in this volume. Defining a 'native speaker' as an L1

speaker who learns the language in childhood, Cook (1999) highlights the absurdity of positing the 'native speaker' as the pinnacle of language learning, pointing out that second language (L2) speakers 'could never become native speakers without being reborn' (p. 187). We are, he argues, asking for the impossible. Kramer *et al.*(2014) argue further that the problem with the 'native speaker standard' is that students 'are asked to detach from their own culture while accepting the fact that the native speaker holds the power in the interaction. This inhibits growth towards intercultural competence, as the learner is not given equal opportunity to bring his/her beliefs into the conversation' (p. 8). Cook (1999) outlines a far more productive approach, which 'recommends that L2 users be viewed as multicompetent language users rather than as deficient native speakers and suggests how language teaching can recognise students as L2 users both in and out of the classroom' (p. 185). His positive image of 'multicompetent' language users, shaped by and proficient in more than one language, moves us away from the 'native' – 'non-native' binary in which the 'native' speaker holds the power in the interaction, and towards the idea of the 'intercultural speaker'.

The intercultural speaker

In the same year, Byram and Risager wrote:

> We have also recognised that the competence involved [in speaking with
>
> native speakers] is significantly different from that of the native-speaker
>
> because it involves the ability to see the relationships between the learner's

and the native-speaker's languages and cultures, to perceive and cope with difference, rather than attempting to cast off one's existing social identities and pretending to be a native-speaker.

(Byram and Risager 1999: 2)

Like multicompetent language users, intercultural speakers are *not* 'just' 'deficient' native speakers, rather they are different and, arguably, more. In addition to speaking more than one language, they are able to use that language knowledge, along with a sensitivity to cultural and linguistic difference, in communication with others. Notably here, Byram and Risager (1999) refer specifically to L2 learners communicating and establishing relationships with native – or L1 – speakers of the language. More recently, a number of scholars have noted that L2 learners are often interacting with other L2 learners and those who use their learned language as lingua franca, which requires different competences (e.g. Baker 2012; Risager 2006). However, what remains relevant is the 'ability to see the relationships between [the learner's and the native-speaker's] languages and cultures, to perceive and cope with difference' (Byram and Risager 1999: 2). Building on the idea of 'relationships between languages and cultures', I would also argue that intercultural speakers should have 'the ability to perceive (and cope with)' *similarity*. As Holliday (2016) underlines in his recent work on 'cultural threads', (inter)cultural competence should involve seeking points of connection and similarity – threads – with those we meet, rather

than focussing on and then 'coping with' 'differences', which are, by implication, problematic.

Unlike monolingual native speakers, intercultural speakers are able to navigate and negotiate the space between languages and cultures that opens whenever communication takes place between speakers of different linguistic and/or cultural backgrounds. Kramsch and others refer to this as the 'third space' or 'third place' of intercultural communication. (Kramsch 1998a, 1998b; Kramsch and Uryu 2012: 213; see also Jordan 2002). In doing so, they draw quite explicitly on Bhabha's concept of the 'third space'. Writing in and about the postcolonial context, Bhabha (1994) argued the need to 'think beyond' traditional or 'originary' fixed identities and categorisations of 'belonging' (e.g. on the basis of 'nationality', 'ethnicity' or 'race') and to look at what happens 'in between' and 'beyond' these categories, 'in the articulation of cultural differences' and creation of 'new', or 'third', identities and spaces (p. 2). Jordan (2002) similarly defines a 'third space' of (intercultural) communication as 'a highly reflexive and constructive breathing space […] the creative, dynamic space of action and interaction, the space for negotiating worlds through words (p. 101-2). Hers is a 'third space' of 'cultural translation' or 'negotiation' – it is the space of the intercultural speaker who is, according to Kramsch (1998a), 'operating at the border between several languages or language varieties, moving his/her way through the troubled waters of cross cultural misunderstandings' (p. 27). Kramsch's intercultural speaker is thus, like Jordan's intercultural translator, also

an intercultural mediator or, in her own words a 'broker between cultures of all kinds' (1998a: 30), capable of communicating or mediating across borders of language(s) and culture(s) (see also Piller 2017). The ability to mediate and offer new perspectives on a situation (cf. Coperias Aguilar 2002: 92) is what makes intercultural speakers both linguistically and interculturally competent and 'more' rather than 'less' than native speakers (see chapter four in this volume).

Intercultural (Communicative) Competence

In 1989 Byram defined 'intercultural competence' (IC), as 'the ability to establish a community of meanings across cultural boundaries' (p. 5). Two decades later in the first edition of this Handbook he summarises 'intercultural communicative competence' (ICC) as 'the ability to act between languages and cultures' (Byram 2012: 86; see also chapter 4 in this volume). Notable here is the addition of 'languages' and the shift from 'intercultural' to 'intercultural communicative' competence (ICC). This distinction is one that Byram made in the 1990s to clarify that the competence required depends on whether people are communicating and interacting in their L1 or in an L2 (Byram 1997; see also Kramer Moeller and Nugent 2014: 7; Phipps and Gonzalez 2004: 89-90). While both describe 'the ability to interact effectively with people from cultures that we recognize as being different from our own' (Guilherme 2000: 297), only intercultural *communicative* competence (henceforth ICC) acknowledges the fundamental role of language difference, and therefore the need for linguistic as well as cultural competence, in many intercultural encounters. ICC, writes Byram, refers to 'mediation between

mutually incomprehensible languages' (2012: 87) and, drawing on Risager, to 'the competences required for dialogue with people of other languacultures' (2012: 92) (see also chapters 4 and 6 in this volume). Of course, IC and ICC are not distinct concepts and share many features and requirements, as Byram explains:

> The relationship between Intercultural Competence and Intercultural Communicative Competence is one of degrees of complexity and the ability to deal with a wider range of situations of contact in the latter than in the former. (Byram 1997: 71)

Significantly, monolingual native speakers are limited to interactions in their own language, while those who are 'bi' or 'multilingual' (in the broadest sense of the term) have the opportunity to interact with a 'wider range' of people in a 'wider range of situations'. They have the potential to become interculturally communicatively competent, or intercultural speakers.

Fantini (2012) goes further than this to argue that 'many cross-cultural challenges are revealed *only* through access to the host language' (p. 267, my emphasis). He sees language, culture and worldview as so inextricably linked that it is impossible to be interculturally competent without at least some ability in the language(s) of those we are communicating with (ibid: 267). Not only is an L2 fundamental to intercultural *communicative* competence, Fantini suggests, but to intercultural competence *tout court* when we are interacting with speakers of other

languages. If we can only communicate with them in our L1, and therefore on our own terms, our IC is left wanting. There are, of course, many instances of intercultural communication that take place between people who share an L1 (see, e.g., Holliday's extensive work on 'small cultures' (1999; 2004; 2012 and chapter two in this volume). However, whenever there are two or more languages at play, there is 'a complex of abilities needed to perform "effectively" and "appropriately", argue Fantini and Tirmizi (2006:12). Fantini's conceptualisation of ICC shares much with Byram's, but notable is the addition of 'effectively' and 'appropriately'. He explains that it is not enough to perceive one's own 'LC2 performance' as successful or 'effective', it must also be perceived as 'appropriate' by those we engage with. We need to judge our interactions for what they bring both us – an emic or insider's perspective – and others – an etic or outsider's perspective. (see also Guilherme 2012; Spitzberg and Changon 2009; Ting-Toomey 2012)

3. Supporting learners to 'become' intercultural speakers in the classroom and beyond

The acquisition of intercultural competence in the language classroom

There is general agreement in the intercultural communication literature that the teaching of language must be complemented by the teaching of culture, and that for this to be effective we need a broad, anthropological understanding of culture (see, for example, Byram 1991; 2008; Roberts *et al*. 2001; Risager 2006). The tradition in much secondary education is to introduce 'the culture' of 'the foreign

country' through the insertion of 'cultural texts' into foreign language textbooks. These texts, which illustrate, for example, 'typical' national cuisine or 'traditional' festivals, are included in foreign language lessons when time allows, as addenda to the 'real' task of learning the language; however, they are rarely integrated into the curriculum. Byram (1991: 18) pinpoints precisely this problem in his early discussions of the vital role of culture in the foreign language classroom. He argues that it is impossible to separate language and culture as they are part of the same whole; a view shared by Risager and expressed in her concept 'languaculture' or 'linguaculture' (Risager 2006, 2012 and chapter 6 in this volume; see also Fantini and Tirmizi 2006; Fantini 2012 and chapter 16 in this volume). Nevertheless, this separation often continues into the higher levels of secondary schooling and into tertiary education when the teaching of culture becomes associated predominantly with the teaching of literature.

In my own language area, German, undergraduate students have traditionally studied canonical texts by authors such as Goethe, Schiller, Brecht, and Grass in literature/culture modules running parallel to but not incorporated into 'core' language modules. Despite the many benefits and joys of studying literature in a foreign language, this persistent separation often leads students to question the reasons for doing so. 'Why do I need to study literature when I just want to be better at German?' is a common refrain. There are, of course, many ways to better integrate language and literature teaching so that students see and reap the benefits. The use of a discourse analytical approach, for example, enables students

to both analyse the language of the text in question and to uncover its multiple layers of cultural meaning (see Kramer 1990; Kramsch 1993, 1996). I have recently had some success incorporating a novel into a second-year German language module. Reading several short chapters per week is giving students confidence that they can read longer texts in German; the content of those chapters inspires wide-ranging discussion in class; and tailored vocabulary and grammar-related tasks support language learning by encouraging students to engage with sometimes abstract structures and concepts in context.

Phipps and Gonzalez (2004) and Roberts *et al*. (2001: 28-9) argue further that the growth of cultural studies as a discipline has also changed the position of culture in foreign language curricula by broadening the range of texts deemed worthy of study and thereby opening up more of the culture(s) associated with the language(s) in question. This broadening has led to the inclusion of 'popular' cultural texts, including film, which is now almost as prominent in foreign language curricula as literature. Significantly, we have also seen more widesptead use of texts by so-called 'minority' or 'migrant' authors, which often deal explicitly with 'intercultural' themes and issues. The growing 'decolonizing the curriculum' movement in the UK is at the time of writing having significant impact on university curricula across academic disciplines, including modern foreign languages, and has considerable potential to ignite vital discussion which should in turn help to foster students' intercultural awareness.

Phipps and Gonzalez (2004) argue further that effective acquisition of ICC through foreign language learning requires a redefinition of culture in anthropological rather than aesthetic terms. They ask: 'Why should advertisements, songs, magazine articles, recipes, medical advice, radio programmes, theatrical performances not act as texts in this sense?' (p. 95). Risager (2006) is equally keen to underline the importance of a broad anthropological conceptualization of culture in foreign- or second-language learning contexts because anthropology's 'gaze is turned on "the unfamiliar", on unfamiliar cultures and societies, as is language and culture pedagogy' (p. 39). Buttjes (1991) therefore suggests that 'even in the early phases the motivation for learning another language can be raised through cultural awareness, and language acquisition can be facilitated through culturally "thick" and socially realistic textbook presentation' (p. 9). Byram (1991) goes a step further in suggesting that active 'cultural experience' can be facilitated in the foreign language classroom 'when pupils are taught through the foreign language' (p. 27). He provides a number of examples, including cooking lessons in which pupils learn to cook dishes from the country of the language they are learning, or geography lessons featuring aspects of the country's geography in the language of the country and using teaching methods and concepts from that country.

In my own recent experience of teaching German to near-beginners, I introduced an element of 'cultural research' into language classes after observing that student motivation was waning and realising that I was – albeit inadvertently – following

the textbook too rigidly. While I have taught German at more 'advanced' levels in higher education for many years, this was my first experience teaching beginners and, despite my commitment to fostering ICC, I had allowed myself to become caught in a cycle of teaching what the textbook told me were core vocabulary and grammar points. My students were not only getting bored and tired in their three-hour Tuesday afternoon seminars, but they were struggling to see the 'point' of learning German. They had the feeling that they would never know enough to be able to 'use' it outside the language classroom; and these were first-year university students, many from other countries in Europe with a range of first languages, and all with some prior experience of language learning. I therefore set some simple individual and group 'research' tasks, requiring them to find out about, for example, a particular town or region in Germany or Austria, using German-language websites. The aim of the task was twofold: to give them access to more 'cultural content' than was available in their textbooks and to show them that they could, with limited vocabulary and the help of online dictionaries and translation tools, already glean information from 'authentic' German-language texts. The students then used their learned vocabulary and structures to present a summary to the class, and each time I was impressed by what they could piece together and communicate to others. Although linguistic accuracy was not the focus of the task, it was often there anyway as the students wove together what they had learned from their textbooks and what they had found online. Moreover, the levels of energy and enthusiasm in the classroom noticeably increased as students chatted happily in a mixture of languages while absorbed in a range of

tasks. They were, to borrow a now much-used term from Phipps and Gonzalez (2004) 'languaging': exploring and using language creatively to make meaning and to connect both with the topic of their research and with each other. This was at least a step in the direction of intercultural language education.

Byram, Nichols, and Stevens (2001) also suggest that, in language education 'the cultural dimension [has] become the intercultural dimension' (p. 3). While some culturally specific examples may be used, the aim of teaching culture is not to provide exhaustive, or even small, complete parcels of, knowledge of the foreign culture. Byram (1991) criticises this approach for providing 'pupils with a consumer-tourist competence which offers them the opportunity to reach a critical threshold, enabling them to survive in the foreign and, by implication, hostile environment of the foreign country' (p. 19). Roberts *et al*. (2001) similarly argue that 'it is not simply a question of acquiring facts about another country, although such facts are indeed useful. Nor is it about "reading off" from particular events generalised beliefs, values and attitudes in an unproblematic way' (p. 22-3). Like Byram, they believe that this 'cultural dimensions' approach (cf. Hall 1959; Hofstede 2001; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997) 'can only foster the misconception that there is some essential set of national characteristics which add up to French, Japanese or Spanish culture and which are waiting prone to be "discovered" by students on their arrival' (Roberts *et al*. 2001: 22-3). Instead, the aim should be to make students aware of and sensitive to instances of both cultural difference and similarity which they will inevitably encounter through

foreign travel and through virtual interactions with other cultures, i.e. to create intercultural speakers.

Developing Intercultural (Communicative) Competence during Periods of Residence Abroad

For many language learners a 'sojourn' abroad is a turning point in the acquisition of both linguistic and intercultural communicative competence. Living and studying or working in a country where the learned language is widely used gives learners both sustained exposure to the language and the opportunity to interact with L1 speakers, while at the same time observing and participating in a variety of new cultural contexts; large and small. However, residence or 'education abroad' does not automatically churn out competent intercultural speakers, even in situations where linguistic competence improves (see Jackson 2008, 2010, 2012, 2018 and chapter 27 in this volume).

There are many reasons for variations in the development of ICC, and sojourners have differing levels of control over the situations and relationships in which they find themselves. However, there is broad agreement in the research on education abroad that if learners are to take full advantage of their sojourn, they need, to be "well prepared pedagogically" for the experience (Byram *et al.* 2001: 4) To this end, ethnography is proposed as a teaching and learning method (see, for example, Holliday 1994, 2007; Roberts *et al.* 2001). Ethnography is the research methodology of anthropologists: 'professional' observers and interpreters of

'culture'. It usually involves an extended period of fieldwork, during which anthropologist-ethnographers live among the people they are studying, participate in aspects of their daily lives, possibly interview certain members of the society, and keep detailed records of everyone and everything observed. Importantly, however, ethnographers maintain enough of a distance from the culture (large or small) they are observing to enable critical reflection. In other words they do not 'go native' to the extent of being completely absorbed into that culture. Byram (2008: 115) suggests that language learners need to maintain precisely this critical distance during their time abroad if they are to become intercultural speakers. They need the 'third' perspective of the intercultural mediator or 'broker' (|Kramsch 1998a). Teachers of languages and intercultural communication therefore need to train students as ethnographers in order to encourage the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence during periods of residence abroad.

Ethnographic training for students embarking on periods of residence abroad is now fairly well embedded in modern foreign language curricula in universities in the UK (the context with which I am most familiar) and elsewhere (cf. Barro *et al*. 1998; Crawshaw *et al.* 2000; Jackson 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012; Roberts *et al.* 2001). Many university languages departments prepare their students for a year or semester abroad by teaching the principles and methods of ethnography in specially designed 'pre-sojourn' modules, and supporting students to conduct ethnographic research projects and/or write auto-ethnographic diaries while

abroad. The idea behind these programmes is not only to equip students with the ethnographic tools to facilitate general observation of aspects of daily life in the foreign country, but to encourage a deeper engagement with a particular aspect of that culture through researching and writing up a specific ethnographic project.

In institutions that I have worked in, students have engaged positively with such projects and programmes. I have been privileged to read a number of insightful research projects on topics ranging from behaviour management in an inner city German school, to debates around a proposed smoking ban in Austria, to community responses to the recent 'refugee crisis' in Bavaria, to young people's perceptions of the first female German chancellor, Angela Merkel. Based on ethnographic research involving interviews, focus groups, and different forms of participant observation, the projects demonstrated not only the student authors' thoughtful engagement with the researched topic, materials, and people, but also their developing critical self-awareness – vital to becoming intercultural speakers. This self-awareness is also evident in the reflective auto-ethnographies, journals and blogs I have read, in which students chart with impressive care, sensitivity, and humour their developing linguistic and intercultural competence. Even where not asked specifically to do so, students weave 'critical (intercultural) incidents' into their narratives to reflect on experiences of 'culture shock' and 'acculturation' and their shifting 'intercultural sensitivity' (cf. Bennett 1986; Berry 2005). In sum, they, with the right support, become interculturally competent writers as well as speakers.

4. Criticism of the intercultural speaker and alternative concepts

The intercultural speaker has undoubtedly been a significant figure in the development of an intercultural approach to foreign language education over the last two decades. Nevertheless, criticism of the concept and its relevance to different contexts in which intercultural communication occurs or is required has emerged in recent research. An increasing interest in, for example, the potential for and challenges to communicating interculturally in conflict zones (Phipps 2014), in situations of forced migration (Gibb and Good 2014; Hebbani *et al*. 2010; Sorrells 2016), and in the areas of international development and healthcare (Baraldi and Lippi 2015; Piacentini *et al*. 2019; Phipps 2017; chapter 31 in this volume) has encouraged further reflection on the significance of power relations and privilege in situations of intercultural communication and on associated questions of ethics, responsibility and social justice (Crosbie 2014; Ferri 2014; Nair-Venugopal 2013; Phipps 2013; 2014; Sorrells 2016; see chapters 21, 23, and 34 in this volume).

The idea of the intercultural speaker presumes equality and respect between those engaged in an intercultural encounter or exchange. Indeed, at the core of the intercultural speaker model of language education is the desire to redress the imbalance between so-called 'native' and 'non-native' speakers of the language in use (cf. Cook 1999; Gao 2014; Holliday 2012 and chapter 2 in this volume; Lu and Corbett 2012). However, as a number of scholars have pointed out, there are

many interactions in which a marked and often insurmountable power difference makes it impossible to engage as intercultural speakers. In an important and thought-provoking article based on her experiences of collaborative research with colleagues in the Gaza Strip, Phipps (2014) argues that 'concepts which have arisen in contexts of relative peace and stability in Europe are not suited to conditions of conflict and siege' (p. 113). Drawing on Spivak (1988), she elaborates further: 'The experiences of precarity, of persecution and of violence and mass surveillance all have the effect of also rending mute and voiceless. They take us into the place where the subaltern, indeed, cannot speak' (Phipps 2014: 122). Phipps thereby confronts head on the question of 'voice' and whether 'the subaltern' – those who are oppressed and/or unrepresented – can ever be (expected to be) intercultural speakers.

The question of 'voice' is pertinent when considering the 'precarity', 'persecution' and 'violence' experienced by millions of refugees and migrants worldwide, forced into situations where they must learn new languages quickly and often with little support in order to communicate across linguistic and cultural borders. Not only must they be able to acquire essential items such as food and clothing, and deal with their basic needs such as healthcare, they must attend interviews to determine their status and rights, and are expected to read and complete complex documents and forms in the foreign language of the 'host'. Derrida describes this 'imposition' of the foreign language on those seeking sanctuary as an 'act of violence' (Derrida 2000: 15-17) and a violation of the right

to hospitality. In this relationship the host has almost complete power over the guest and his fate, and the guest is effectively rendered voiceless by the unnegotiable requirement to speak the language of the host, leaving little room for the intercultural speaker.

Noels *et al*. (2012) also raise the question of voice or lack of voice more broadly in situations where migrants and language learners have to speak the language of the host: 'This inequity in power relations is inherent in the learning context as the hosts do not necessarily need to hear the voices of the newcomers, but the newcomers do need to be heard and accepted to be members of the society' (p. 56). (See also chapter three in this volume). Here we are reminded that the question of voice relates not only to *speaking* in a foreign or learned language, but also to being *heard* in that language. In much discussion of 'native', 'non-native' and 'intercultural' *speakers*, the emphasis is on the act of speaking, but meaningful communication also requires active listening followed by some kind of response. Without this, communication can be little more than a series of monologic utterances spoken into a void.

Phipps and Gonzales (2004: 90) address precisely this issue in their manifesto for an intercultural approach to language education. Arguing that in much work on ICC there is too much emphasis on the act of speaking, they propose that language learners should also learn the vital skills of listening and responding appropriately, and of thinking about and reflecting on the situations they find

themselves in (Phipps and Gonzalez 2004: 92). Following this, they propose

'intercultural being' as a more complete alternative to ICC or intercultural

speaking. Replacing 'speaking' and 'competence' with 'being' underlines that

learning languages, and communicating and interacting with others goes beyond a

set of 'skills' that can be learned or acquired and becomes a fundamental part of

who and how we 'are' in the world.

Alternative Concepts

 'Intercultural mediator'

Byram (2008) similarly suggests that the intercultural speaker is also an

'intercultural mediator'. Mediator emphasises the ability not only to

communicate, but to facilitate communication between others; something which

requires both intercultural speaking and listening skills. This links to the

'thirdness' of intercultural speaking: the ability to be both 'inside' an interaction

and to remain sufficiently 'outside' that one can observe, reflect, and develop a

critical perspective, different to that of L1 speakers (see also chapter thirteen in

this volume).   However, Byram (2008) maintains that 'the emphasis on speaker is

useful because it reminds us of the importance of language, and the implication

that mediation pre-supposes some linguistic competence' (p. 68). It is not possible

to mediate or negotiate cultural boundaries and differences without some

knowledge of a shared or common language.

'Dialogical Communicator'

Similarly maintaining the emphasis on speaking, Gao (2014) developed a typology of EFL 'speakers' or 'communicators', ranging from 'faithful imitator' – roughly equivalent to the idea(l) of the native speaker – to 'dialogical communicator', which shares certain traits with the intercultural speaker. However, the emphasis on 'dialogue' is important here as it suggests both speaking and listening: 'In inter-subject communication, dialogical communicators converse – speak and listen – on the basis of mutual respect.' (Gao 2014: 68) Remaining aware of the problems inherent in the notion of intercultural dialogue and the fact that 'mutual respect' is replaced by power imbalances in many communicative situations (cf. Phipps 2014), Gao's use of the word 'converse' is important as it emphasises that communication is a two-way process.

'Cosmopolitan Speaker'

In a piece explicitly devoted to formulating an alternative concept to the 'intercultural speaker', Ros i Solé (2013) retains the term 'speaker' but proposes replacing 'intercultural' with 'cosmopolitan'. She argues that inherent in the notion of the 'intercultural speaker' is 'the understanding that there is a fundamental difference between cultures (even though there is always some common humanity between them)' (p. 327). The role of the intercultural speaker therefore becomes to 'mediate' between two distinct cultures. Bridges can be built between them, a 'third space' of intercultural communication can be created or facilitated, but they remain fundamentally different and separate (cf. Holliday's

'indelible intercultural line' in chapter 2 in this volume). Moreover, argues Ros i Solé (2013), intercultural speakers continue to belong to and identify with their 'own' culture, even when they have acquired an understanding of and sensitivity towards the 'other' culture. In contrast, cosmopolitan speakers are 'defined by their multiple cultural alliances and the development of a nomadic and borderless lifestyle' (p. 327). Here, Ros i Solé echoes Risager (2006) who suggests that 'language teaching socialises the learners involved to assume a number of roles or "figures" that are typical in the globalization perspective, such as "the tourist", "the vagabond" and "the cosmopolitan"' (p. 25). Of course, for this to be possible, language education needs to move beyond the 'monolingual and national paradigm' to 'one that deconstructs the idea of the "target culture", that uses the notion of the nation-state as its only cultural and linguistic referent' (Ros i Solé 2013: 327).

The notion of the cosmopolitan speaker is grounded in the idea of 'cosmopolitanism' as developed by sociologists such as Beck and Delanty to describe a world in which individuals have 'multiple loyalties within a proliferation of transnational ways of life' (Ros i Solé 2013: 330). Beck (2006) defines what he calls a 'cosmopolitan outlook' as 'global sense, a sense of boundarylessness' (p. 3). Delanty and Appiah, meanwhile, underline the sense of connection to and even responsibility for distant people and places, defining cosmopolitanism as 'an essentially moral view of the individual having allegiances to the wider world' (Delanty 2006: 26) and 'obligations to others,

obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kin, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship' (Appiah 2006: xv). In other words, the multiple connections that exist between geographically separate and politically distinct places and the groups of people who inhabit them, coupled with the technologies that make it possible for (some) people to travel both physically and virtually across long distances and multiple borders, mean that (some) people no longer feel rooted in and tied to a particular place and all that it represents. It follows, then, that those who learn languages, navigate that world, and make those connections, need special competences or, perhaps better, 'capabilities' (cf. Crosbie 2014) and ways of 'being' in the world. It is for this reason, that Holliday (2010, 2012 and chapter 2 in this volume; 2016) and others prefer the concept 'critical cosmopolitanism' to 'interculturalility', 'intercultural communication' or the 'intercultural'. 'Critical cosmopolitanism', argues Holliday (2016), allows for a more fluid understanding of culture, moving beyond the fixed 'national blocks' approach towards a 'cultural threads' approach in which similarities and connections are sought across all kinds of cultural borders.

'Intercultural citizen'
We can also look at the imbalance of power in intercultural encounters from another perspective if we consider the relative power that comes with ICC. Being able to 'translate', 'mediate' and 'broker' across languages and cultures, to navigate a 'way through the troubled waters of cross cultural misunderstandings' (Kramsch 1998a: 27), gives the intercultural speaker a certain power that others

do not have. If this power is recognised and deployed 'well', there is potential for the intercultural speaker to develop into the 'intercultural citizen'. As Byram (2008, 2012, 2014 and chapter 4 in this volume), Guilherme (2007, 2012 and chapter 21 in this volume), Lu and Corbett (2012) and others have argued, intercultural language education becomes citizenship education when social action is involved; when the intercultural speaker or mediator becomes politically engaged and active.

5. Conclusions: what now for the intercultural speaker?

Given the pertinent critiques of both 'intercultural' and 'speaker' in much recent language and intercultural communication research, some of which is outlined above, is the intercultural speaker still a relevant and useful concept in 2019 (the time of writing)? Within the context of language education, I would argue that it is. Let us start with 'speaker'. Learners want to be able to 'speak' the languages they are learning in order to communicate with other L1 and L2 speakers of those languages. Even when we rightly emphasise the significance of 'listening' in communicative situations, 'speaking' remains an important part of the exchange or dialogue. In order to be able to 'mediate' between different languages and the people who speak them, an element of speaking is required. Maintaining the term 'speaker' also reminds us of the important shift away from the 'native speaker' as the ultimate goal of language education and the related focus on grammatical and lexical accuracy at the expense of learning about the 'cultural' – or, indeed, 'intercultural' – aspects of communication. As teachers, learners, and scholars we

need to be aware of the valid argument that the 'indelible intercultural line' (cf. Holliday 2012: 42 and chapter 2 in this volume) is potentially problematic because it concomitantly connotes connection and crossing and reifies difference and separateness, suggesting, as it does, exchange *between* (*inter*) at least two cultures that exist as definable and more or less bounded entities. With this in mind, Ros I Solé's (2013) 'cosmopolitan speaker' offers a tempting alternative, because it is based on a more fluid understanding of 'culture(s)'. Moreover, the use of 'cosmopolitan' reminds us of the ethical 'obligations' we have to others (cf. Appiah 2006; Beck 2006; Delanty 2006) with whom we speak and communicate, and, as we have seen, questions of ethics, responsibility, and social justice are rightly at the heart of much current research in language and intercultural communication. Nevertheless, I would suggest that the 'intercultural' speaker is still useful because of the emphasis on both the 'cultural', which has been so revolutionary in the context of language education, and on exchange.

It is clear that 'intercultural speaking' is less relevant, or less possible, in situations of conflict and forced migration, where the stark power imbalance renders 'the subaltern' (cf. Phipps 2014) voiceless, while those in control often appear to lack intercultural competence or sensitivity. It is therefore vital that we recognise the limits of the concept and do not attempt to universalise it or use it in inappropriate contexts. If we do, it becomes meaningless. However, used with care within the context of language education and with caution elsewhere, I believe that the intercultural speaker still has a place in our research and practice.

RELATED TOPICS

Intercultural citizenship; intercultural (communicative) competence; intercultural contact; second language learning; education abroad.

FURTHER READING

Byram, M. (2008) *From Foreign Language Education to Education for Intercultural Citizenship: Essays and Reflections*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. (Byram's most recent monograph reflects on and further develops his earlier work on intercultural communicative competence, extending the notion of the intercultural speaker into the area of intercultural citizenship).

Jackson, J. (2010) *Intercultural Journeys: From Study to Residence Abroad*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. (Detailed analysis of the role of study abroad in developing students' linguistic and intercultural competence, providing helpful definitions of key terms and drawing on ethnographic research involving L2 students).

Kramsch, C. (1998) *Language and Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (A detailed study of the changing role and importance of culture in foreign language education and the challenges of educating students to become intercultural speakers).

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