



Multiculturalism

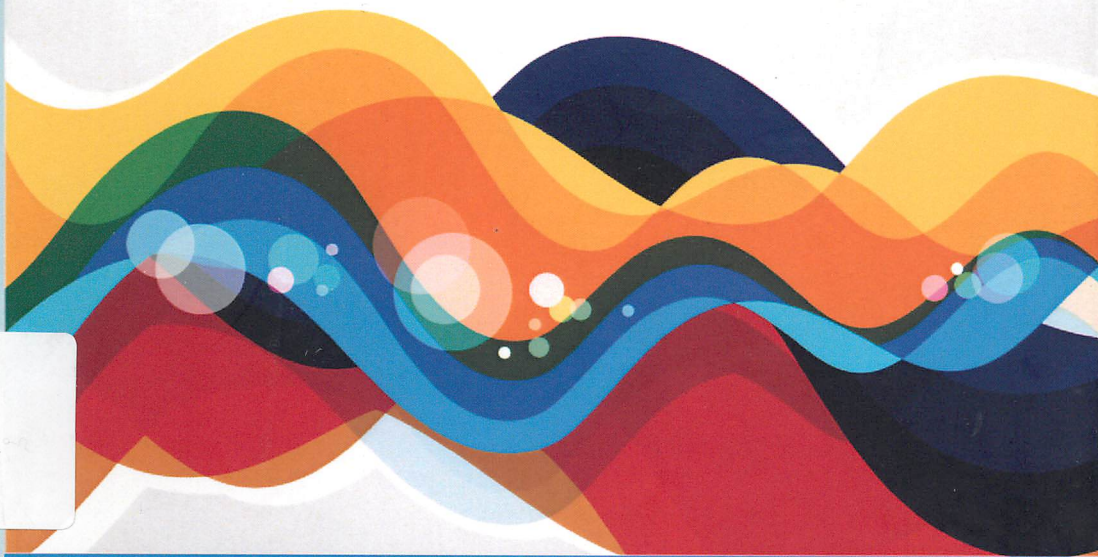
DYNAMICS AND CHALLENGES

Edited by

Sanjay Palwekar

Hatice Sitki

Qingxin Jiang



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**Online Communication and
Intercultural Competence in
Foreign Language Teaching and Learning**

Rosa Maria Sequeira

Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, the issue of immigration gained prominence in Portugal due to the changing characteristics of the immigrant population. A country of emigration in the past, Portugal has recently become one of immigration. This phenomenon began after the democratic Revolution in 1974, as a result of decolonization and the return of the Portuguese that lived in the former colonies. According to Rocha-Trindade, more than half a million and perhaps as many as 800,000 Portuguese were repatriated (1995: 199). The migrant phenomenon from Africa increased with other ethnic groups after the state joined the EEC (1986), and this still occurs.

Immigration to Portugal has grown considerably since the 1990s. Countries like Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, which are former colonies and now independent countries, play an important role in Portugal's migration history. Despite growing diversification, immigrants from PALOP (Portuguese-Speaking African Countries) continue to benefit from certain legal preferences (for example, the period

of continuous residence in Portugal required to request Portuguese citizenship is shorter than for other nationalities). However, since that time, the new phase in Portugal's immigration history has been marked by the arrival of thousands of mostly undocumented immigrants from Brazil and Eastern Europe, particularly the Ukraine, Russia, Moldova and Romania. According to Fonseca and Caldeira (2002), in just five years, Ukrainians have become the third-largest group of foreign residents, after Cape Verdeans and Brazilians.

In fact, migrant groups (who make up approximately 3.4 per cent of the total population) are currently more diverse than ever, in terms of national origins and settlement patterns.¹ The Portuguese policies designed to manage this situation and promote future social and economic stability, have several important orientations. In education, health and social security, important steps have been taken to ensure equal rights, and the media continue to express concerns about the many undocumented workers smuggled into the country via trafficking networks. In schools, teachers are facing new challenges. Teachers cannot afford to ignore problems concerning pupils from different African origins (who have Portuguese as a second language) and continue to teach a learning programme geared towards the standard Portuguese pupil. Despite patent difficulties, the high rate of school failure and dropouts (caused not only by the linguistic shock between school and home but also by the poor socio-economic conditions in which they live), teachers could no longer overlook new pupils attending classes without knowing a word of Portuguese.

If we do not value the African migration phenomenon and the long tradition of exchange between Portugal and Africa, we can say, like Cordeiro did, "the Portuguese of Portugal have always lived in a country that can be defined as monocultural,

weak in interactions among different cultures" (Cordeiro 1999: 2-3). Certainly, the ideology of the old regime had emphasized transcontinental sameness and schools practised pedagogy of cultural homogenization and assimilationism, reflecting a "process leading to the elimination of cultural barriers between people belonging to minorities and the majority" (Cardoso 1996: 12), which requires suppression of some cultural values of the minorities. Bastos remarks the social discourses of today that celebrate a "Lusophone community also re-enact imperial nostalgia" (Bastos 1998: 24). What we can undoubtedly say is that the memory of a transcontinental nation sits uneasily with the problems faced by African migrants in Lisbon, and there is a need for adjustments towards more recent migrant groups.

As such, legislation and curricular organization have been modified to take this new situation in Portuguese schools into account. This is particularly evident in legislation regarding education and in changes in the curriculum in recent years. Intercultural education and education for diversity in the initial training of teachers of Portuguese has made some progress. Accordingly, the most significant changes in research on Portuguese as a Foreign Language are related to the country opening up to immigrant populations with innovative developments in legislation and syllabus programming. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, largely as a result of pressures from NGOs and immigrant organizations, the Portuguese government responded with several important measures, including the creation of a Ministry of Education secretariat in 1991 to promote the development of multicultural education at elementary and secondary school levels.

Educational policy was thus based on two main premises: (1) legislation that guarantees the right to difference and education for all (examples of this are Law 46 / 1986 and new syllabus plans

in 1989, which provides the means and opportunities to integrate foreign minorities into the Portuguese educational system); (2) the importance given to Portuguese as a Foreign Language, first as a programme for inclusion (2005) and then as legislation initiated with various regulations (for example, Despacho-Normativo 7/2006) that implemented this new discipline in schools.

Despite such measures, there was a gap between the social discourse that sees diasporas, migration and different identities as dynamic opportunities that enhance a nation's history and culture (Knott & MacLoughlin 2010: 5-6) and the perspective of teachers who see it as a problem because they feel insufficiently prepared. A teacher can have twenty pupils of different nationalities aged between 10 and 16 with different levels of linguistic competency in the same class. Universities have recently started offering postgraduate courses in Portuguese as a Foreign Language that are well attended but the difficulties remain, as the reality is not easy to manage: "Intercultural awareness-raising has a different impact, however, depending on whether it occurs within the theoretical sphere, as in the case of teacher training, or in the practical sphere" (Afonso 2011: 132).

According to international surveys, the Portuguese case is not fundamentally different from others elsewhere. Educational field reports indicate positive attitudes in teachers toward cultural differences and culturally relevant teaching techniques but also say that teachers lacked confidence in their knowledge of these differences and their abilities. This conclusion from Cusher and Mahon (2009) regarding the international situation is in the same vein as the Branco's field work in Portugal (2011).

Although the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*, published by European Council in 2001, intends to provide the necessary tools for

assessment and to help teachers cooperate, especially in Europe, it supplies neither methodological paths to promote intercultural competence nor a description of the competencies involved.²

Intercultural awareness as the basis for intercultural competence is a major issue in intercultural education, as we can see in the CEFR: "In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote the favourable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture" (European Council 2001: 1). However, this main objective is not developed further. Some competencies related to intercultural awareness are described and included in general competencies of the user/learner:

- 1) The ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other;
- 2) Cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures;
- 3) The capacity to fulfil the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations; and
- 4) The ability to overcome stereotyped relationships. (Ibid. 104-5)

These could be more easily ignored by language teachers since they are not registered as descriptors in the scales for communicative competencies. Also the role of intermediary between cultures or mediator is not developed in the CEFR but in the works of Zarate and Byram. These two scholars have systematically developed intercultural awareness in instructed foreign language learning, including the civic dimension on an

international or supranational level that CEFR also ignores. Deardorf has another much-discussed model for intercultural competence; however, there are some problems with models in general, as Byram himself points out:

Because the model is a schematization and does not specify in every detail an intercultural speaker, the prescription of how learners should develop is limited. The specifications of what an intercultural speaker can do and what attitudes and knowledge they need are detailed, but they are not exhaustive. This means that the ideal is not defined, the perfect exemplar, and there is no definition of levels or degrees of ability, knowledge, and attitudes, of stages on the way to perfection. Only a minimal “threshold” can be determined for a given context, and no general statement of a threshold level makes sense (2009: 325).

Another difficulty that Byram mentions lies in the lack of explicit objectives that go beyond the simple acquisition of knowledge (2009: 329). The need for a strong commitment to the development of cultural understanding within the language programme is clear but to extend this to the requisite adaptation across cultural contexts is the problem: If conceptualizing communication competence is difficult *within* a given culture, the challenge is clearly multiplied when extending such concepts across distinct cultural milieus (Spitzberg and Changnon 2009: 2). The importance of interculturally trained teachers is highlighted but the conclusion of Cushner and Mahon is understandable when they say “that there is no exact blueprint for building intercultural competence” (Cushner and Mahon 2009: 304).

That is perhaps the reason why the most common four anecdotal formats (see, for instance, Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009: 348-9) in cultural instruction can be also recognized in intercultural work. These are:

- 1) The Frankenstein Approach (based on isolated pieces of information: a taco from here, a flamenco dancer from there, a gaucho from here, a bullfight from there);
- 2) The 4-F Approach (folks, festivals, foods and statistical facts);
- 3) The Tour Guide Approach (based on the identification of monuments and cities);
- 4) The “By the Way” Approach (based on sporadic lectures or bits of behaviour selected indiscriminately to emphasize sharp differences).

As is often pointed out, nowadays, cultural orientation is common to all language courses in all countries. However, most of the times, it is no less than a trivia game based on isolated pieces of information.

In the area of language instruction, there is a long list of scholars who have emphasized the importance of helping students recognize and understand the cultural schemata associated with the phenomena they encounter. The difficulty lies in designing cultural activities in an integrative fashion and in finding proper materials to develop intercultural awareness. Spencer-Oatey gives useful suggestions, but there is a distinction to be made between the simple teaching of culture in the language classroom and the development of intercultural competence, as Bennett and Allen clearly illustrate:

The goal of intercultural competence is not simply the knowledge of another culture, nor is it just the ability to behave appropriately in that culture. Developing an intercultural competence demands a mix of culture-specific approaches that stress the apprehension of a particular subjective culture approach combined with culture-general approaches that address the larger issues of ethnocentrism, cultural self-awareness, and general adaptation strategies (Bennett et al. 2003:245).

The synoptic review of intercultural competence theories and models made by Spitzberg and Changnon shows that these models tend to have five components: motivation, knowledge, skills, contextual competencies and outcomes and presuppose not only positive attitudes toward foreign people, but also global skills like adaptability or flexibility in a context of internationalization. The desired main outcome of this is appropriate communication and behaviour in intercultural situations (2009: 44). These authors also conclude that “few efforts have been made to systematically test the validity and cross-cultural generality of the models posited to date” (Ibid. 45). I would add that there has also been little discussion on the materials and methodologies suitable for building cultural awareness.

The European Centre for Modern Languages and researchers like Byram sometimes explore the issue of intercultural awareness as reflected in contemporary foreign language instruction with regard to teaching materials.³ I have very briefly systematized the suggested areas in two main domains:

- 1) Knowledge of history, geography, national cultural heritage (for instance, cultural artefacts perceived as emblems of national culture), socio-political institutions and life cycle (for instance, families, schools, religion, employment);
- 2) Ways of socialization and social interaction at different levels of formality, identity and social groups (social class, regional identity etc.), conventions, connotations, comprehension of behaviours and stereotypes as symbols of national traits.

The question we may ask is, What this proposal can really teach? Underlying the whole issue is how it shapes the possibilities for intercultural competence and if it is possible to go beyond the simple knowledge. I can accept that, in terms of intercultural

awareness, learners can acquire certain knowledge and certain attitudes and dispositions, being aware of how a society acts in context and why, especially if they can compare different situations, as Byram suggests. But this proposal barely covers the cognitive, procedural and experiential skills (knowing how to do and to know how to react and adapt on the basis of previous knowledge).⁴

That is why I cite the first sentences of Geoffrey Hartman’s *The fateful question of culture* (1997), a meditation on how an aesthetic education can play an important role in the imaginative life of our civilization:

Art has always enjoyed some autonomy because of its ability to put into play a sympathetic imagination independent of political directives and social decorum. Literature (my special concern) can reach vastly different kinds of people, even across national boundaries. It has the power to move – and offend – as well as instruct (Hartman 1997: 1).

Literature, however, always intercultural by definition, seems to be absent from any educational debates regarding intercultural competence. “The sympathetic imagination” that literature puts into play, as Hartman mentions, and its transformative potential, is mostly ignored, perhaps because of its independence from political directives: “the question ‘how German / French / English / American is it?’ depends for its answer on genial individuals and never on government authority” (Hartman 1997: 9). Yet, the reading of literature presupposes openness, a tolerance towards ambiguity, flexibility, constant adaptation and the formation of hypotheses, an understanding of multiple perspectives and differences in multiple contexts that are also associated with intercultural competence. It is in literature, perhaps more than any other artistic domain, that individual and collective life is well represented. Literature is most suitable to

promote reflection and discussion of ideas, life options, codes of conduct and different values.

One particularly successful example of work with traditional narratives at a secondary school in Portugal with multicultural classes, mostly from Portuguese-speaking African countries, has shown that an appropriate choice of materials and strategies can have positive results. In this experience, learners have to collect traditional stories and proverbs within the family and community they live, explore the parallels in different languages and cultures and comment or adapt some proverbs that were no longer relevant to the present. They must also prepare a joint exhibition of work at school using computer-aided techniques. The result was a fall in dropout rates and learners became more tolerant towards differences and more involved in the school.⁵ The strategy of linking the school, family and community worked. The use of computers was also positive, possibly because of the learner's belief that computer skills are necessary to future success.

The development of both intercultural competence and second language proficiency is achieved more easily with strategies that can enhance learning beyond traditional classroom settings, through content delivery and content creation for a community broader than the one within the four walls of the classroom. The web offers a good opportunity to do that involving literary communication.

Intercultural competencies in a global world presuppose a context of internationalization and sometimes require the use of technology and computer literacy.⁶ If we follow Pierre Lévy's train of thought in *Collective Intelligence* and his view of a unified human consciousness enabled by computer networks, we must believe that web-based content can meet educational goals, as well as being useful in promoting not only language competence but also intercultural competence. In other words, online communication

can encourage intercultural awareness through a good linguistic and cross-cultural syllabus.

Several universities have adopted web 2.0 tools for content delivery or simply for reproducing lectures. Others use it mainly for interaction and discussions. However, the advantages of certain new pedagogical devices like podcasting⁷ are still to be proven, in spite of their potential in disciplines such as music and foreign languages. The conclusion of the survey carried out by the Duke University Center for Instructional Technology was that "although iPods and other MP3 players are common with students, the use of audio files as an educational device is still debated and has not undergone rigorous pedagogical research" (Guertin et al., 2007). The Scottish Council for Educational Technology and the Laboratory of Distance and E-learning of Universidade Aberta (Le@d) in Portugal also explore this in the context of e-learning.

The lesson of Pierre Lévy is that not only is it important to read all web content critically but to be able to participate in collective intelligence by sharing knowledge. The conclusion is that it is necessary to produce content or at least to write on the web. That is why the linguistic and intercultural nature of online communication is desirable for promoting both language learning and intercultural competencies. From a foreign language teaching perspective, online communication represents the link between cross-cultural settings and it is also an opportunity to create real interactions in a broader context that can more easily motivate the learners because these interactions are not mere exercises. From the point of view of literary communication, web-based content can also provide real literary communication in a real situation, instead of the scholarly exercises traditionally associated with literature within the classroom.

In a blog, pupils can share their views about the literary works, extend the possibilities of the literary text via hypertext, which enables the addition of all sorts of comments and information related to the texts and facilitate research through tags. Web 2.0 tools that facilitate the publication of web-based content like Webquest (<http://webquest.org/>), Questgarden (<http://questgarden.com/>) and Wikispaces (<http://www.wikispaces.com/>) can systematize readings and motivate learners, especially those who tend to resist traditional classes.⁸ A programme like Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/?lang=pt>) can facilitate the making of online videos that are related to the literary texts. The web is full of these examples. For instance, Kafka's parable "Before the Law" has some curious versions on You Tube that can be discussed. Online communication is changing contemporary reading styles and many culturally significant innovations are inevitable in this area. This highly intercultural phenomenon calls for urgent attention in the field of literary pedagogy.

Notes

1. While migrants from PALOP states are highly concentrated in the Lisbon area and boast few formal qualifications, Eastern European migrants display relatively high levels of education (upper-secondary school and college degrees, frequently in technical areas) and are spread throughout the country (cf. Fonseca and Caldeira, 2002).
2. The former classification, based on Van Eck's model of communicative competence, adopted previous by European Council, addressed cultural competencies. However, in the CEFR, the components of communicative competencies are distributed only by linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences.
3. See, for example, Shopinskaja (2003).
4. These aspects of the notion "competency" are described in some publications of the European Council. In Keating-Chetwynd (2009) this notion involves not only knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and dispositions, but also procedural skills - knowing how to do-, cognitive skills - treating information, critical thinking and critical analysis - and

experiential skills - to know how to react and adapt on the basis of previous knowledge and social skills - (Keating-Chetwynd, 2009: 15).

5. The experience is described in Oliveira and Sequeira (2012).
6. The Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education (Banks and Banks, 2004) makes a valuable contribution to the historical legacy of intercultural education in the United States. It is clear that the problem is that many teachers feel that they are not sufficiently prepared. I think this can be applied to other contexts.
7. A podcast is an audio and/or video file that is available as an internet download or online streaming content. A podcast no longer refers to files specifically placed on an iPod but to any audio file placed on any portable audio player, even a mobile phone. Portable digital players allow the user to download music and any other audio / or video file from a computer to the device.
8. An example of one network-based class using literary texts is the work of Águas (2010).

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