

**Improving English Communication for International Tourism: Linguistic and Intercultural Competence**

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We will discuss the significance of communicative competence relative to the field of international tourism and explore the importance to increase students' intercultural awareness. The contribution of concepts as relevant as that of inter-cultural and linguistic competence constitutes the theoretical essence for the exploration of the mechanisms and processes involved in the teaching of English as a second language in the specific context of tourism, where the knowledge of language and the inter-cultural element co-exist in an intrinsic way.

Effective English communication for international tourism requires total communicative competence and deep intercultural understanding. Basic ability in grammar and vocabulary is not enough to be able to communicate properly and effectively. People using English as a second language need a concrete understanding of these base elements. Further, they need total communicative competence which includes a mastery of grammatical, discourse, strategic, and sociolinguistic factors. The absence of one or more of these factors may impede intercultural understanding on a professional level within the international tourism and service industry. Communicative competence and better intercultural understanding are also essential for individuals who would like to travel abroad and use English for interpersonal communication.

The studies for the Diploma of Tourism for the provision of the activity in our surroundings enable the students to work in the sector immediately: hotels, travel agencies, wholesalers, transport companies; services complementary to tourism: sport, cultural, tourist guides, among others. The environment of the activities in which the

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majority of these students find themselves, future holders of the Diploma in Tourism, makes the use of English necessary in a personal, applied, immediate and direct manner. In a hotel reception they must be able to communicate even in a simple though understandable way with citizens from any part of the world in English as an international language.

We know that behind each culture there is a language and vice-versa and that both influence each other mutually and reciprocally. Each language gives support to the way of life of its speakers, its history, its customs... to its culture, definitively. There has always been the sensation, doubtless accurate, that it is necessary to know a language to get to know the mentality, the way of life and the culture of the people that speak it; reciprocally, there is no doubt that one cannot arrive at a profound and authentic knowledge of a language if one does not know those elements of its native speakers.

The importance of the knowledge of foreign languages as an indispensable requisite in diverse professional environments, for example that of tourism, which is what now concerns us, has been greatly emphasised from different perspectives. Contact with the public stands out as a basic difference between the language of tourism and professional communication in general (Calvi, 2001). Students of tourism have to be prepared to establish communication both with tourists and professionals of the sector. In the majority of business environments communication takes place between specialists. Nonetheless, the communicative dimension of tourism is broader because of its aspect orientated toward the clients that use its services. This aspect has its educational implication in the importance of spoken and written skills, which must be taken into account in the process of acquisition of English for tourism.

People who intend to use English professionally in the tourism and service industry or for personal travel need to develop productive and receptive language skills. Learners need to develop proficient ability in the four basic skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In addition, a higher level of understanding regarding appropriateness must be addressed in detail. Gumperz (1972: 205)) explained that:

“whereas linguistic competence cover’s the speaker’s ability to produce grammatically correct sentences , communicative competence describes his ability to select, from the

totality of grammatically correct expressions available to him, forms which reflect the social norms governing behaviour in specific encounters.”

Considering the fact that English is also used by non-native speakers in international tourism situations around the world, communicative competence and intercultural understanding are becoming more and more essential.

The English language is one of many necessary elements for the international tourism and service industry. Total communicative competence is essential for anyone choosing to use English in any situation. Indeed, for professional situations, such as the international tourism and service industry, communicative competence is crucial. People need to understand how to express themselves in

“ . . . ways deemed appropriate by the group in which we are doing the learning. These ways also differ from group to group; consequently as we move from one group to another or from one language to another, we must learn the new ways if we are to fit into that new group or into that new language”, (Wardhaugh, 1992: 248-249).

Bosch Abarca and Jiménez Moreno (2001) emphasise the importance of the necessities of the tourist when activities are designed in English classes for the Diploma in Tourism. According to these authors a correct response to the needs of the consumer in the tourist industry entails taking into account three different levels of training: a level of response to the basic operative demands, a level of response to the complementary informative and promotional needs and a level of response to personal and subjective needs. Students of tourism need an objective focus on the tasks in which they will have to use the English language in the professional context and a subjective focus on how the language and skills have to be used in an effective manner in a determined specific situation. This is to say that the focus in English classes for tourism has to establish a balance between the capacities related to procedures and the complementary personal skills that respond efficiently to the needs of the clients. Barriers of language create misunderstandings at times and a certain feeling of frustration, which can be avoided if the personnel of any sector related to tourism have a good knowledge of foreign languages as an integral part of a quality service (Dale and Oliver, 2000).

The development of linguistic competence is essential for the development of cultural competence and both are a condition *sine qua non* for the acquisition of a true communicative competence in a foreign language, so that the student feels comfortable in that new world being unveiled.

Canale and Swain (1980) provided a more detailed, practical model of communicative competence. This model includes grammatical, discourse, strategic, and sociolinguistic competence. They argue that the neglect of any of these four main components will inhibit an individual's ability to communicate effectively. Grammatical competence refers to knowledge, understanding, and ability to use correct sentence structure, semantics, and syntax. Discourse competence is the ability to use a language above the sentence level and being able to communicate cohesively and logically. Strategic competence is about being able to manage breakdowns in communication and how to better negotiate meaning and understanding. Finally, sociolinguistic competence pertains to being able to use language appropriately depending on the culture, social position, and situation.

Basic English ability is the first step toward overall communicative competence. The first factor, grammatical competence addresses this issue. Without a doubt, grammatical understanding is a key element. A second-language user must be able to understand what is being said to them and how they should reply. Corder (1976) supported communicative competence and suggested that knowledge of grammar increases as a result of communicative needs. In addition, learners would also increase their knowledge of the linguistic system while learning how to communicate and negotiate meaning on a higher level.

Discourse competence, the second major factor, requires communication ability above the sentence level. In order to effectively communicate complex ideas, second language speakers need to understand others and need to be understood. Brown and Nation (1997:12) pointed out that: "language learners should also be exposed to and given opportunity to practice and use meaning focused communication, in which they must both produce and listen to meaningful oral communication."

While this also mandates a necessary degree of basic speaking and listening dexterity, most important is the cohesion of the message and what should logically come next based on the situation. Concerning international tourism and intercultural

service communication, people using English should be familiar enough with the potential discourse they would logically encounter.

For international tourism, polite language is a key element of grammatical and discourse competence. The more complex forms of polite language stimulate more effective and better communicative interaction. From a service point of view, a formal expression will lose effectiveness if the interlocutor fails to speak with correct grammar. Failing to speak correctly will result in a loss of professionalism or could create misunderstanding. Savignon, in an interview with Harris, explained:

“I think it’s (grammar) at the very center of communicative ability; without grammar, you can’t communicate. But ‘grammar’ here means a system that is mutually intelligible, and accepted by all participants. Here again it doesn’t mean that you have to use it just like the native speaker does. So if grammar really means ‘rule,’ in that sense you can have not only grammatical but social rules as well”. (Harris, 1998:29).

Accepting and adopting this paradigm, proper choice of polite and suitable vocabulary is one way grammatical suitability and social appropriateness will be ensured within tourism situations. Polite language is necessary for both workers and tourists as it will foster better and deeper cross-cultural appreciation. Making efforts to speak politely in English while travelling abroad will project a higher image of one-self as an internationally knowledgeable and sensitive individual. Ultimately, the use of polite language within international tourism and service situations will lead to greater levels of mutual cooperation and respect.

Strategic competence is the third component of communicative competence. Learning how to handle breakdowns in communication, learning how to properly and effectively clarify meaning, and learning how to ensure and maintain understanding are the key goals of strategic competence. Within an international tourism setting, strategic competence is vital for exchanging information, desires, and opinions. People need to be prepared to deal with breakdowns in communication. This may occur between native speakers, a native speaker and a non-native speaker, or between two non-native speakers. Paribakht (1985) maintained how both native and non-native speakers use various strategies to express themselves and ensure understanding. Language users need to develop strategies and systems of clarifying, simplifying, and checking

meaning. In this way, the people involved in discourse should negotiate communication collaboratively. Methods of clarification and appropriate techniques to ensure understanding need to be understood from an international and intercultural point of view. People who work with others in the international tourism or service industry and people who travel abroad to other countries need to have a heightened sense of awareness toward other cultures while speaking English. Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982:14) explained that:

“Many of the meanings and understandings, at the level of ongoing processes of interpretation of speaker’s intent, depend upon culturally specific conventions, so that much of the meaning in any encounter is indirect and implicit. The ability to expose enough of the implicit meaning to make for a satisfactory encounter between strangers or culturally different speakers requires communicative flexibility.”

Understanding the culture of the people you are trying to negotiate meaning with or clarify communication with will foster better exchange and deepen international respect and appreciation. Considering this, the cultural appropriateness of a response needs to be established. In addition, various intercultural communication styles should be understood. This leads into the final tenet of communicative competence —that of sociolinguistic competence.

Sociolinguistic competence details notions of appropriateness. Various cultures have various ideas about what is and what is not appropriate to say. While it is the moral responsibility of people who choose to visit another culture as a tourist to develop an understanding and appreciation of that culture, it is the professional requirement that host culture service workers be especially forgiving and understanding of any lapses of sensitivity or cultural rule breaking which may occur. Goodenough’s definition (1957:167) is particularly insightful:

“. . . a society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves.”

As more and more people choose to travel abroad as tourists, it is necessary for them to become more aware of sociolinguistic competence. They should appreciate and be sensitive toward the host culture of the country they are visiting. Learners need to increase intercultural sensitivity and develop sociolinguistic grace.

The socio-cultural dimension must constitute an integral part of the curriculum — type of directive framework (Lifszye and Schammah, 1998) which includes the lexical-morphological-syntactical contents— and not be relegated to a second place in the process of teaching/learning. This re-evaluation of the joint importance of the context and of the linguistic and authentic cultural stimulus is already demonstrated in the new protagonism conferred to the cultural in the materials and methods elaborated recently. We would emphasise the relevance that inter-cultural competence acquires; we refer to the necessity that the learner of another language has of knowing the culture of its speakers.

As Yule (1998) states, languages reflect cultures. This observation in no way implies that the aspects related to linguistic competence are not taken into account. Cassany et al. (1998) define language as the key to the culture, since it allows us to transmit information within our own country and beyond and organise our thinking. The need that a student of English specifically, in our case of the Tourism Diploma, has to learn, with the greatest depth and profundity possible, the culture of the countries, territories and people to which this language belongs, is easily identifiable.

Language forms a complex and indissoluble psychic mesh with the individual and, in greater measure, with the society, since its use is emphasised in the communication which supports it. From these connotations language appears and evolves linked to history and individual and collective experiences. In the atmosphere of a language the molecules of the entire historical generation of the collective that has lived with it are present, in such a way that by its analysis we can discover enormous features of that history, but, moreover, and not less importantly, the morphology of the language is related to the psychology of the individual and collective way of life of the “proprietors” of a language, language that, as we say, is the product of these individuals but, at the same time is influencing their way of life.

Therefore, undoubtedly, a future holder of the Diploma in Tourism, student of a language, to obtain a precise mastery, let us say even “real”, rich, profound, substantiated, versatile... and, definitively, as an aspirant to being a professional of that

language, probably has to dedicate the same intensity as to the study of the language itself to the discovery and learning of the corresponding culture, both the historical legacy and the present living culture, ambits in which it has been and is being forged and which it serves and, in turn, conditions. We consider the role of the socio-cultural element of great importance within the learning of second languages.

In the work *Mediating Language and Cultures: Towards an Intercultural Theory of Foreign Language Education* (1991) Meyer makes reference to intercultural competence, as part of a broad competence of the speaker of a foreign language, and identifies the ability of a person to act in an adequate manner when faced with attitudes of people of other cultures. Adequacy involves possessing knowledge of the cultural differences between the foreign culture and one's own and also being able to solve inter-cultural problems consequent to these differences. From this perspective, intercultural competence involves the creation of an awareness and the development of intercultural skills and capacities; the capacity of orientation in a different culture from one's own, based on the system of cultural reference, employing strategies of inter-cultural communication; establishing contrast between one's own mental representations and cultural values and the representations and values of the object culture.

Celce-Murcia and Olhstain in their work *Discourse and Context in Language Teaching. A guide for Language Teachers* (2000) underline the importance of the context and socio-culture in the construction of communicative competence. Furthermore, the cited authors comment that the acquisition of communicative skills in the first language is a process that extends throughout life, which does not occur with the basic skills acquired at a very early age. To learn another language it is necessary to broaden, change and re-adjust those innate strategies, since it is from them that one tackles the new language and culture.

Thus, another of the advantages of holding the teaching of languages in a greater esteem and in a focus that, as well as situating the discourse and the context, —another of the key notions of the model of Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000)— focuses attention on the development and integration of the communicative skills and strategies, referring to the importance of combining the objective of knowledge of the language with skills and strategies which permit us to make effective and appropriate use of the language in different social and cultural contexts.



The lines of work adopted by Byram and Zarate for the description of socio-cultural competence —presented in the document *The Sociocultural and Intercultural Dimension of Language Learning and Teaching* (1997)— commence from the postulate that the people who learn tackle the discovery of a foreign culture with attitudes and knowledge that have been empirically constructed through their own culture. Therefore, the academic context constitutes only one of the spaces where such attitudes and knowledge must be submitted to a critical analysis. In broad strokes, the authors indicate that a student in possession of a socio-cultural competence will be capable of interpreting and establishing relationships between different cultural systems, of recognising distinctive social labels in a foreign cultural system, of managing conflict, understood as the disorders and resistances which can be concomitant with intercultural communication.

Given the variety of professional environments that can be found in the tourist industry and the condition of English as the international language within it, it is very important to take the cultural factor into account. A basic knowledge of the differences between cultures helps the tourism professional to ask appropriate questions in each case and to adapt to the specific necessities of each client (Dale and Oliver, 2000). Some authors who deal with languages for tourism have emphasised the crucial role that the knowledge of the cultural aspects that affect each language plays (Suárez and Moss, 2000).

Calvi (2001) describes four components that shape intercultural competence that every tourism professional must have: The first component refers to the identification and overcoming of stereotypes relative to the foreign culture. The second component: intercultural awareness, understood as the capacity to recognise the characteristics of a foreign culture, comparing it with one's own and with other known ones. The third component: communicative and pragmatic competence, which is to say, the knowledge of social behaviour and capacity to act in diverse interactive situations. The fourth component: knowledge of diverse disciplines such as art, gastronomy or geography and the capacity to relate them to the pertinent linguistic elements.

It is interesting to pay special attention to the knowledge of customs, geography or heritage of other countries and relate it to language teaching. That is incorporating historical, social, cultural and artistic aspects surrounding the outstanding regions and cities of each country. Consequently, the student of English for tourism, like that of any

foreign language for tourism, must acquire linguistic competence based “not only on the technical knowledge of speciality, but also on the cultural specificity of the principal tourist destinations at which the language in question is spoken” (Calvi, 2001: 300).

Krahnke’s (1987) task-based approach, with a firm foundation in content knowledge, actively benefits learners who use English while travelling abroad and people who work in the international tourism industry. Examining, discussing, and considering topics from both the perspective of a worker and a traveller will further increase cultural appreciation and knowledge.

The English language, it seems to us, is established as the language “almost obligatory in practice”, since in this phenomenon of communication and world globalisation, applied relevantly to our tourism theme, English is a common denominator, or universal language of reference. A good example of this and of the reinforcement of English as the international language is given by the widening of the European Union with the incorporation, since the first of May 2004, of ten new members coming, in the greater part, from Eastern Europe: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and the islands of Malta and the Greek zone of Cyprus; and in 2007 Bulgaria and Rumania. Evidently, in the forums of exchange of the community institutions English achieves more protagonism or presence, as, if before a Spaniard could communicate colloquially with an Italian in either of their own languages, or in both at the same time, if a Belgian with an English person could use French or English and with a German even this third language, it seems evident that when a Pole, a Czech, a Slovak or a Lithuanian joins these conversations, the common language of understanding becomes preferentially English, without saying exclusively. It seems, therefore, reasonable to ensure that the people working in the world of tourism are equipped with the adequate knowledge of English for work. Nowadays tourism is a phenomenon of extraordinary economic relevance, but also cultural and social, in all ambits. As a growing and massive activity it generates a dynamic of wide and diverse human and material applied media: administration, communication, transport, catering, health, leisure, culture, sport, education, etc.; it is determinant in base sectors of activity, such as construction —hotels, holiday centres, residential complexes, theme parks, museums, etc.—; and comes to influence the determinations of great infrastructures of public works and services: water and energy supplies, roads, railways, ports and airports, etc.

Tourism is, in the already globalised culture, an activity of generalised appetite and consumption and more and more places are converted into tourist destinations, as citizens of all origins accede to it. This, in international terms, is where the phenomenon of foreign languages and English in particular plays a role which has occupied our special attention. Developing a deep cultural awareness and sensitivity is an essential aspect of providing the best possible service or conducting oneself appropriately abroad in an international tourism setting. Service workers who understand the various needs and expectations of people from different cultures will be able to satisfy those specific needs more effectively and more efficiently. Educators need to address not only linguistic and semantic needs, but also intercultural content.

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