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Intercultural Communicative Competence: challenges from formative and authentic evaluation.

Competencia Comunicativa Intercultural: desafíos desde la evaluación
formativa y auténtica.

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Resumen

El concepto de evaluación, en el contexto educativo, ha evolucionado a lo largo de la historia y las diferentes generaciones le han otorgado distintas funciones -desde un enfoque positivista hasta un enfoque constructivo y participativo-. Por lo tanto, es importante reflexionar sobre la necesidad de una evaluación que se adapte a los cambios de la sociedad contemporánea y promueva la inclusión, la equidad y el aprendizaje de los estudiantes. En cuanto a la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, la evaluación se ha quedado en la primera generación (la generación de la medida) ya que se hace énfasis en la evaluación de las cuatro habilidades (hablar, escuchar, leer, escribir) como se hace en los exámenes estandarizados. Sin embargo, un cambio en los currículos de enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras que se enfocan en el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa hacia el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa intercultural podría también cambiar la manera como la evaluación ha sido concebida.

Palabras clave: competencia comunicativa intercultural, evaluación formativa, evaluación

Abstract

The concept of evaluation, in the educational context, has evolved throughout history and different generations have given it various functions - from a positivist approach to a constructive and participatory approach-. Therefore, it is important to reflect on the need for an evaluation that adapts to the changes of the contemporary society and promotes inclusivity, equity and students' learning. Regarding foreign language teaching, evaluation has remained in the first generation (*the generation of measurement*) since it has mainly focused on the evaluation of the four skills (speaking, listening reading, writing) as done with standardized tests. However, a shift from communicative competence to intercultural communicative competence in the foreign language curricula might also change the way evaluation has been perceived.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, formative evaluation, authentic evaluation.

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Introduction

In the Colombian context, there are common problems regarding evaluation: the misunderstanding of the terms “to measure- to evaluate- to test”; the lack of formative evaluation and effective feedback; the lack of teachers’ training; and the limitations regarding institutional policies that often permeate the teaching praxis (Ospina Marulanda, 2019). Prieto and Contreras (2008) warn that evaluation practices are mediated by teachers’ beliefs and, based on their pedagogical principles and experiential background, they establish their own evaluation criteria turning it into a subjective process and pairing the term “evaluation” with that of “exam”. In the field of bilingual education, this reality also prevails given the fact that students’ abilities are also “measured” with standardized tests which places students into a given level. In fact, some Colombian policies - as in the case of the statute law 18583 of 2017 which establishes specific characteristics to all B.A programs – and graduate and post-graduate programs at several universities have mandated future graduates to reach certain levels of proficiency according to the Common European Framework (CEFR). These decisions might be due to the emphasis given to the development of communicative competence in the foreign language classroom. However, a shift to the development of intercultural communicative competence in foreign language curricula can lead to a different view of evaluation.

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC thereafter) is a concept created by Byram (1997) and referred primarily to the ability to communicate with people with different cultures, creating an intercultural speaker with given attitudes, knowledge and skills. This construct has also been defined as a lifelong process (Deardorff, 2006) and more recently as “the ability to communicate and manage relationships appropriately and effectively in intercultural contexts” (Dai &Feng, 2024 p. 12). Evaluating ICC has been challenging mainly due to its nature and the varying definitions (Lazarević, 2018); and its complexity towards the ethical and contextual aspects involved (Borgetti 2017; Dervin, 2010). However, various authors (Byram, 1997; Sercu, 2010) see evaluation and assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning, highlighting its importance in providing opportunities for reflection and improvement. Thus, aligned to Byram’s and Sercu’s ideas, we consider evaluation of ICC as an important process that has to be developed through both formative and authentic evaluation. The former because it focuses on providing continuous feedback during the learning process. The latter because it seeks to assess competency in real, meaningful contexts.

Evaluation: history and generations

The term *evaluation* can be defined as a natural process that is evident in each of the activities we carry out in our daily life (Alcaraz, 2015); evaluating can be related to giving an opinion, judging, describing, identifying shortcomings and strengths, building improvement plans, substantiating, verifying, etc. In the educational context, there is not distinctions between the verbs “to assess” and “to evaluate” since, in the Spanish language, “to assess” works as a synonym. Evaluating implies a systematic process that addresses various variables such as educational conditions (from the academic and administrative fields) and the role of teachers whose conceptions influence their way of evaluating (Prieto and Contreras, 2008).

The history of evaluation can be traced back to the second century B.C in the Chinese context, to recruit officials, and in the fifth century in the teaching practices of Socrates and other teachers (Alcaraz, 2015). In the 19th century, in the United States, the use of tests started to evaluate students’ performance and, in Great Britain, evaluation committees were created to evaluate education. After the Second World War, personality and intelligence tests became relevant and between 1920 and 1930, in the educational context, standardized tests were positioned as a way to evaluate the abilities of a large number of students. At this time, as suggested by Alcaraz, evaluation and measurement were set as synonyms, thus placing the first generation of evaluation: *the generation of measurement*.

In 1969, the father of educational evaluation, Ralph Tyler, transcended to criterial evaluation, which “indicates performance of an individual in relation to a standard” (Alcaraz, 2015, p. 19). This second generation is then called *the description generation* and its main goal is to describe the educational process as such. Between 1957 and 1972, a third generation of evaluation called *the judgment generation* was born, this in order to “account” for quality. In this period, the effectiveness of the educational programs that have received financial support for their development is investigated to justify their relevance and quality. Up to this point, a positivist approach is visualized in which measurable, observable and quantifiable results are privileged.

A fourth generation was generated at the end of the 80’s, that of negotiation and participation, that is, the generation of *evaluation as a constructive process*. From this period, evaluation seeks to involve all actors in the process to make decisions and to improve the educational field. This new approach, *the naturalist one*, represents a different way of seeing reality and multiple views and interpretations are valued.

Alcaraz (2015) proposes referring to a fifth generation of evaluation, that of *eclecticism*, in which so many conceptions and functions of evaluation proliferate that the panorama becomes complex and there are not unified criteria towards this construct. Therefore, there is the need of reflecting upon an approach to evaluation that is comprehensive and integrative enough for the educational context.

Types of evaluation

In the Colombian educational context, different types of evaluation are considered: diagnostic, summative, formative and authentic. A diagnostic evaluation is the one done at the very beginning of a process to determine students' previous knowledge and skills (Díaz & Barriga, 2002). Summative evaluation, is the type of evaluation done at the end of a process to verify students' understanding or level achieved (Díaz & Barriga, 2002). Formative assessment focuses on the learning process and aims to provide continuous and constructive feedback (this type of evaluation can be treated as assessment). Anijovich (2000) highlights the importance of feedback, stating that this process allows placing the student at the center of the evaluation and promotes responsibility towards ones' own progress. It also allows us to identify good aspects that need to be improved and favors the development of metacognition. Authentic assessment, on the other hand, is based on the practical application of knowledge and skills in real contexts. Ahumada (2005) describes this type of evaluation as “a new vision of evaluation whose intentionality is manifested in the search for real evidence and experiences of the student in relation to learning the various types of knowledge that the subjects present” (2005, p. 3). It is therefore these two last types of evaluation the ones that gain importance in the field of intercultural communicative since as it is a long-life process, it should both: receive always accurate feedback and be evident in real contexts.

Evaluation and Intercultural Communicative Competence

As aforementioned, evaluation in the field of Intercultural Communicative Competence shows a controversial panorama. There are those who suggest that this competence should not be evaluated; This is the case of Borgetti's ideas, who argues that there are different aspects of ICC that do not allow its evaluation: the variety of methodologies that do not unify criteria, the evaluation of attitudes that leads to considerable ethical analysis, and the context of communication that differs and depends on a specific communicative situation. In the same way, Dervin (2010), highlights that identity, nationality and culture, among other implicit concepts of ICC, should not be evaluated.

However, other authors take a different position regarding the evaluation of ICC. Byram (1997) recognizes that, in the educational context, teaching and evaluation always go hand in hand “evaluation

and assessment cannot and should not be separated from the teaching and general institutional arrangements” (1997, p. 12) and that it is the task of educational institutions to account for the abilities achieved by students “evaluation of their general efficacy, and assessment of the individuals in their charge are part of that accountability, and also serve the individuals in providing them with certification of their capacities, a certification which enables them to gain acceptance as sojourners in another society” (1997, p. 12). Byram recognizes, however, that ICC represents a complex construct and that it is still necessary to continue searching for strategies to evaluate it appropriately.

Along these same lines, Sercu (2010) notes different difficulties in the process of evaluating ICC (mainly due to the nature of the cognitive, affective and procedural dimensions that could differ due to the context or the communicative situation) but she proposes two main reasons why ICC should be evaluated: on the one hand, because students tend to think that what is not evaluated is not important; and on the other hand because teachers would have the task of reflecting on what and how to teach so that it has a positive impact on the evaluation process.

Different instruments have been created to evaluate ICC or some of its components; for instance, the intercultural Effectiveness (IE) questionnaire (Hammer, Gudykunst, Wiseman, 1978); the Behavioral Assessment Scale for intercultural Communication Competence (Koester, Olebe, 1988); cross cultural adaptability inventory (Kelley, Meyers, 1995); the intercultural sensitivity inventory (Bhawuk, Brislin, 1992); the intercultural developmental inventory (Hammer y Bennett, 1998; Hammer, Bennett, Wiseman, 2003; Hammer, 2011); the intercultural sensitivity scale (Chen y Starosta, 2000), among many others. However, as González (2019) stated after a thorough analysis of the existing instruments, many of the instruments to evaluate ICC are not applicable to all languages and all contexts, some others do not have a holistic approach where the common dimensions (affective, cognitive, procedural) are considered.

Reflection

If we refer to the history of evaluation and the different generations that have emerged over time, we might be surprised to realize that, today, in Colombia, many of the evaluation processes evident in the classrooms remained stuck in the first generation, since the concepts of “measurement” and “evaluation” continue to prevail as synonyms in the teaching discourse and even in the educational policies. Likewise, and considering the field of bilingual training programs, the fact that standardized tests are still the ones that evaluate the competencies achieved by students (as is the case of tests such as

the DALF and DELF- for French as a foreign language; and the APTIS, TOFEL, IELTS tests, among others - to evaluate the level of competence achieved in English) still places the evaluation processes in a first and second generation of evaluation. But, what if foreign language curricula incorporates ICC development? Would it give a different perception of evaluation? Perhaps, this new perception can lead to a sixth generation of evaluation, one that considers the changes and advances of today's society that is affected not only by globalization processes but also by post-pandemic times. A sixth generation that transforms assessment practices to be more inclusive, equitable, and promote student learning rather than simply measuring their performance. One that emphasizes the development of being and living together as a primary factor for the development of society. One that transcends from the measurement of levels achieved by speakers towards an evaluation that guides behavior and builds citizenship.

Accordingly, and considering the different typologies of evaluation (diagnostic, summative, formative and authentic), ICC evaluation processes can be developed through formative and authentic evaluation since “different formative assessment tools and performance-based assessments can respond to the complexities of ICC better than traditional assessment” (Izarević 2018, p. 474). Strategies like portfolios (Zhen, 2014) interviews (Markhabat, 2017), self-evaluation and role-plays (Skopinskaja, 2009), intercultural discussions and reflections and tasks (Suet Fong & DeWitt 2019) seem to be an answer to tackle ICC evaluation.

Through formative assessment, teachers can do direct observations due to the fact that “when assessing ICC, the teacher becomes an observer of the process of ICC development” (Skopinskaja, 2009 p. 139). Thus, teachers can design tasks and activities which involve cultural encounters and evaluate students' performance in terms of their ability to understand and respond appropriately to cultural differences. This is the case of the study developed by Carreño Bolívar (2018), who carried out a study in a Colombian higher education institution with six university-level students (2 Colombians, 3 Germans and 1 Haitian). She proposed several lessons towards national cultures and identities with the aim of “promoting meaningful encounters as a way to enhance intercultural competences” (p. 1). The study arrived to the conclusion that evaluation planning is a challenging task and it “requires commitment and persistence from all those involved in the process in order to achieve common goals” (p. 132). She also makes a call for the creation of new strategies to continue improving IC evaluation.

On the other hand, through authentic evaluation, ICC can be evaluated in real and meaningful contexts and the use of authentic materials in foreign language classrooms can lead to a better development of ICC (Bernal Pinzón, 2019). One idea for carrying out this type of assessment is by creating projects or tasks that require students to interact with people from different languages and cultures, as in the case of the study developed by Tutunea, (2021). Her analysis of 55 intercultural projects lead to the conclusion that virtual exchanges is an opportunity to foster “skills of interaction, cooperation, collaboration, and interpretation, necessary for intercultural communication” (p. 59).

Additionally, authentic evaluation can profit from the use of tools such as reflective journals. The study by Chen & Zheng (2019) is one example. They analysed 41 reflective journals of Chinese students to mainly follow any attitudinal change during the process. This study determined positive attitudinal changes related to empathy, objectivity and appreciation of differences. Thus, the authors suggest this type of strategies as way to enhance ICC in the classroom. Also, group discussions can provide an authentic environment to evaluate how individuals interact with people from different cultures and how they manage cultural differences in communication; the “story circles” methodology proposed by UNESCO⁴ represents a very useful tool to reach that end.

Conclusion

As foreign language educators in Colombia and beyond navigate the challenges of evaluation, adopting a formative and authentic approach can contribute to creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. This not only prepares students for effective intercultural communication but also aligns with the evolving needs of contemporary society. The historical evolution of evaluation, from a positivist approach to a more participatory and constructive perspective, highlights the need for a contemporary evaluation paradigm that aligns with the complexities of our society.

The challenges in evaluating intercultural communicative competence are acknowledged, with some scholars arguing against it due to the intricate nature of cultural and psychological dimensions. However, recognizing the importance of assessment in the educational context, especially in promoting reflection and improvement, supports the idea that intercultural communicative competence should be subject to evaluation. The proposed sixth generation of evaluation emphasizes inclusivity, equity, and a focus on

⁴ To find out more about this strategy visit: <https://usdac.us/storycircles>

promoting learning rather than mere measurement. This paradigm shift is crucial in the current globalized and post-pandemic society, where cultural understanding and effective communication across borders are paramount. The formative and authentic evaluation approaches offer dynamic and comprehensive ways to assess intercultural communicative competence, recognizing its evolving nature and the need for continuous growth.

Formative evaluation, with its emphasis on continuous feedback, observation, and student-centered assessment, allows teachers to guide students' progress and encourage reflective practices. Authentic evaluation, on the other hand, places students in real-life situations, providing opportunities to interact with diverse cultures and languages in meaningful contexts.

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