An autobiography of learning Portuguese in Brazil: Illuminating the role of intercultural competency in second language acquisition.

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This paper reveals the role of intercultural competency in second language acquisition (SLA) through the interpretive lens of Byram’s savoirs. It draws upon four months of diary notes and reflections during a study abroad sabbatical learning Portuguese in Brazil.

Fantini (2006) has summarized a host of terms that are used to address intercultural competency – e.g., intercultural communicative competence (ICC), transcultural communication, cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural sensitivity, effective inter-group communication, cultural sensitivity, global competence, and international competence – and defines ICC as “a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself” (p. 12). In other words, ICC explores “the ability to step beyond one’s own culture and function with other individuals from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds” (Sinicrope et al., 2007, p. 1). American ICC research over three decades (1960s to 80s) grew out of an analysis of aptitude and attitudinal research including self-study, diaries, surveys, and open-ended interviews with interest in predicting sojourner success and preventing its failure, developing personnel selection strategies, and designing and preparing sojourner training and preparation methodologies (Ruben, 1989, p. 230). Results include several inventories and models (e.g. IDI by Bennett, 1993 and Deardorff’s study abroad model, 2004). European models of ICC have placed a heavier weight on language proficiency in ICC with interest expanding since the formation and expansion of the EU. One major hindrance to this endeavour is the lack of agreement as to what culture is (Schultz, 2007, p. 10).

This paper draws upon four months of reflective journals, attendance in two lower-level Portuguese classes at a university, work with and observations of instructors of Portuguese from several universities, insights from graduate students in a course on ICC, informal conversations with Brazilian and study abroad learning peers, and discussions with Brazilian research colleagues. Designed as an auto-ethnography, the research questions that guide the analysis are: (1) How can I describe the SLA process of learning Portuguese in an immersion setting? (2) How did external factors such as teaching/teachers and immersion in the language and internal processes such as effort, prior SLA, and learning strategies influence my SLA while abroad? (3) What role did culture/my culture/Brazilian culture play in that process? (4) How did intercultural competency influence the process?

I will use Byram’s savoirs as an interpretive lens and will integrate a broad spectrum of research in SLA and ICC, diary studies (Garrett & Young, 2009; Jorge, 1994; Kirova, 2007; Pearson-Evans, 2006;), and autobiographical works in SLA. Although the latter are few, they capture the in-depth experience of being culturally immersed (Lotherington, 2007; Schumann, 1998; Steinman, 2005;), the mourning, grieving, loss, and recovery of first language in their identity (Hoffman, 1989; Kaplan, 1993; Rodgers, 2012), and the struggles with pronunciation (Fang, 2005; Li, 2005).
References


