A Performance-oriented Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence

Paolo E. Balboni & Fabio Caon

Ca' Foscari University, Venice

Abstract

The article proposes a model of intercultural communicative competence. The need for further reflection on this topic derives from two facts: existing models are not built on Dell Hymes' model of communicative competence (cc), although they use Hymes' term 'cc' is used; our discussion in this essay starts from a definition of cc in Hymes' tradition and studies what changes are needed to make it fit to describe intercultural cc; most models are, in fact, not 'models'. According to the theory of models, models aim at being universal, based on formal logic rather than empirical evidence, and this is extremely important in ICC studies where empirical research is always partial. The result is a new instrument to analyse, describe and teach ICC.

Keywords: *Communicative competence, Intercultural communication, Models of intercultural interaction*

Introduction

Most of the research on intercultural communication (hereinafter referred to as IC) produced in the 1970s and 1980s was *descriptive*, which was only natural in the pioneer phase of such studies. Towards the mid-1990s the perspective started to change, and it focused mainly on the notion of intercultural communication competence (or as they say in Europe: intercultural *communicative* competence – or simply ICC). This shift brought about two consequences:

a. forty years ago Dell Hymes moved away from Chomsky's notion of *linguistic* competence and suggested *communicative* competence. He was in fact moving from knowing *about* the grammars of a language to knowing *how to use* these grammars within communicative events ('communicative event' being another important contribution by Dell Hymes to language and communication science). In this essay we aim to repeat the same process, i.e. to integrate a model which describes ICC, its structure, its components and its nature (Balboni's contribution to IC research dating back to the 1990s), by including the abilities and skills which enable a speaker to act and interact appropriately in intercultural communicative situations (Caon's contribution to this essay);

b. Hymes named his essay "Models of Interaction", and many studies picked up the term 'model' as a definition of their outcome. Yet, 'model' was used to describe different objects: from good training practices to lists or diagrams of the components of ICC, from developmental processes to mere descriptions – the latter being, in fact, what most of proposed 'models' are. The first part of this essay deals with the notion of 'model', as our essay aims to provide a 'model' and not just a simple description.

In our opinion a clear shift from *description* models to *performance* models is needed if we aim to design a process of *competence building*, i.e. courses teaching ICC. In fact, descriptions cannot be taught or they are useless if they are, whereas models can be taught, and competences based on models can be developed.

The first thing to do in this process is to give a definition of the term 'model'.

The epistemological framework of this study: the notion of 'model'

'Model' is a concept often used as a synonym for 'theory' (Chomsky's syntactic *model*) or to indicate an analogy (a set of billiards balls in casual movement can be employed as a *model* for gas molecule movement). In other cases, 'model' defines an exemplary paradigm to be followed (Leonardo's Vitruvian man offers a *model* of the proportions of the human body), or rejected (the development *model* in the North of China is deleterious to the environment). In each of these cases, 'model' is used to offer a formal structure as a reference point. Although this is an intuitively clear idea, it is certainly far from rigorous. In fact, there are more rigorous meanings for 'model', and they are described in the following paragraphs (we have discussed modeling in Balboni 2010; see also Balboni 2006 in English and 2007 in Italian discussing models of intercultural communication).

The Theory of Models

A 'theory of models' was proposed in the 1930s by the Polish philosopher Albert Tarsky, who dealt with the parameters of sentence veracity and semantic logic in scientific definitions: under this theory, a model is a true, therefore perpetually valid, interpretation of a linguistic or of a mathematical formulation. His collaboration with Robert Vaugh in the 1950's led Tarsky to focus his attention on mathematics and pure logic studies, largely abandoning his interest in linguistics. Therefore, the theory of models, originally logical-semantic, became an aspect of mathematical research.

In the 1960s, the concept of 'model' entered cognitive sciences, as in Neisser's cognitive psychologyor Arnold's cognitive model of emotions: they proposed schemes that were valid on a purely logical basis, independent from empirical measurability.

On the basis of this tradition we define a model as a structure that includes *all* and *only* the relevant factors of an idea, an action, an object, a phenomenon, so that secondary or unpredictable information does not overload the model and therefore increases the risks of its falsification. (A model must be *falsifiable*, of course, in order to be scientifically acceptable – yet, should *falsification* occur the model would be abandoned).

Our definition is expressed in four declarations (in the cognitive science sense of that term, see declaration 3, below):

a. *A **model** is a structure that includes all the possible realizations of the described phenomenon*: if we propose a *model* of competence (be it linguistic, communicative, or intercultural) it must work in describing such competences in any time, in all countries, across all cultures;

b. ***Complex models** are hierarchical and are layered in depth:* the Pythagorean theorem describes the relationship among the dimensions of the three sides of any right-angle triangle. It does not require further explanatory models: it is a *simple* model. Yet, complex models also exist, that is to say, hierarchic structures that include 'inferior' levels – where 'inferior' simply refers to a position and involves no judgment whatsoever about value. For instance, 'phonological competence' is a primary model when it describes the phonemes of a language, whereas it is a secondary model when it is inserted in the 'linguistic competence' model, and in turn, the latter model becomes secondary when it is inserted in the 'communicative competence' model: complex models are built according to a matryoshka logic;

c. Models are based on ***declarations*** and ***procedures***. *Declarations* are sentences usually composed of two parts linked by a verb such as: to be, to have, to be made of, to be equal to, to include, etc. For instance, "all languages in the world have at least three functions: subject, verb, object" is a declaration. By interacting with other models, declarations produce *procedures* based on the relation "if… then…". For instance, "*if* in every language there is svo, *then* the six possible sequences of these functions are svo, sov, osv, ovs, vso, vos";

d. *In **theoretical sciences**, models produce declaratory knowledge (which is self-referential), in **operational sciences** they produce procedural knowledge (which governs behavior).* Theoretical sciences, such as semiotics and communication sciences, aim to describe the nature and structure of ICC, and such knowledge has its final purpose in itself, i.e. the knowledge of how the nature of IC. Practical sciences, such as language education research (including education in IC), aim to govern a process (building ICC) in order to generate a behavior, performanceto use Chomsky's words.

The role of diagrams in the interpretation of models

We saw that the intrinsic ambiguity of language was the main reason why Tarsky, the creator of the Theory of Models, slowly abandoned the verbal model approach in favor of a mathematical one. In order to reduce linguistic ambiguity a useful aid can be found in a collection of essays edited by Allwein, Barwise (1996), *Logical Reasoning with Diagrams*. They argue that by using the mechanism called 'relais' – a term used by Roland Barthes in his *Le dit et le vu* – the iconic element acquires meaning only if it is interpreted through language, and the latter becomes non-ambiguous through iconic interpretation. Diagrams, moreover, activate three different forms of intelligence, three different ways of seeing, interpreting, and psychologically representing the world: the logical-formal, the linguistic, and the spatial intelligences, in Gardner's sense of these terms – and this once more reduces the possibility of ambiguity and misinterpretation.

Therefore, in our perspective, the use of diagrams is not only an instrument to clarify and reduce the possibilities of logical 'catastrophes' (to use René Thom's term) due to ambiguity, but it is also a way to think differently from the merely linguistic approach.
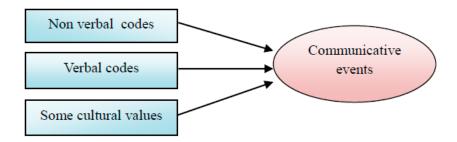
Two qualities of models

In order to work, a model needs to be *economic* in structure and *reliable* in contents:

Economy

A model must be economic, i.e. easy to remember and to use. Simplicity is necessary at the surface level of a model: complexity can be added by working in depth, as in a website homepage. We mention here the model of IC critical points, which we shall discuss later, in order to show what 'economic', 'simple', and 'in depth construction' mean.

The declaration is: critical points in IC belong to one of these areas:

This model is

- *economic*: there are only four elements, three of which are homomorphic and are connected to the only heteromorphic element. This structure makes it easy to memorize the model; as far as using it is concerned, the assumption is that each intercultural difference ever can be stored into one of these boxes;

- *simple*: square elements are data bases of areas where intercultural problems may arise. The 'boxes' contain theoretical knowledge, they are a sort of 'grammar books', and they are each is *homogeneous* in nature. The arrows show that rules come into action when a communicative event takes place. The shape of the box containing communicative events is different because it is *heterogeneous*, in includes the rules drawn from the boxes on the left, and the cultural rules governing the different types of events, such as dinners, group works, lectures, and so on;

- *in depth construction*: in a hypertext we click on an icon and it opens up; here, if we click on a box it opens up as well, and it shows a series of headings: a table of contents of IC critical points. The rainbow model of intercultural competence (Kupka, Everett2007) may be a good model, but it has no in depth construction and consequently it becomes very difficult to analyse and impossible to memorize and use efficiently;

Reliability

For a model to be *reliable*, the information it contains must be true. This statement may sound tautological, but we should not forget that senses sometimes lead to the construction of unreliable models: scientists were killed or imprisoned because they challenged the Ptolemaic model of cosmology, based on the fact that we do see the sun going from East to West while the earth stays motionless.

In some cases, theoretical models anticipated empirical demonstration, e.g. when Einstein imagined that time slowed down as speed increased. This is why empirically validated models are no longer the only models to be considered reliable, as validation or falsification of a model's reliability can be logical prior to be empirically possible..

In conclusion, we can say that although an economic and reliable *description* of IC is impossible (IC is continuously changing, there are billions of possible combinations among cultures, the list of events is enormous, etc.), yet it is possible to propose a *model to observe* IC and to classify all possible critical points at any time and in any place.

A model of Intercultural Communicative Competence

As we have already seen, a model must be simple and include all and only the relevant features of an idea, an action, or an object, so that it is not blurred or loaded with irrelevant secondary information. We shall proceed to outline three steps in order to construct an IC *competence* model, starting from a *communicative* competence model, and going through an IC *observation* model.

The starting point: a model of communicative competence

A model of communicative competence must respond to this brief question: *what is the meaning of "being able to communicate in a language"?*

Different answers were give to the question above as posed by Hymes in 1972, and different models of communicative competence have been produced (the main ones being Canale, Swain, 1980, later expanded by Canale1983, and Sauvignon 1883; in the 1990s Bachman1990, expanded the original models by stressing on the pragmatic aspects of communication, and Celce-Murcia *et al*.1995, produced a 'pedagogically motivated model'; the most widely used model of communicative competence today is the one underlying the *Common European Framework* of 1991).
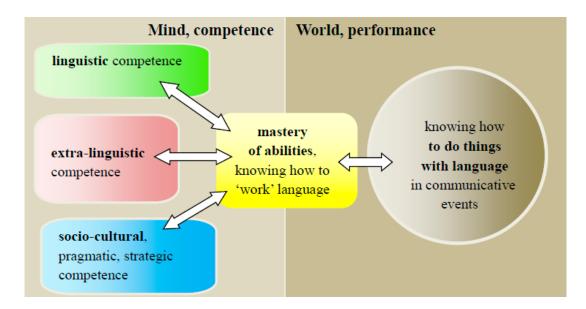
In order to use the model of *communicative* competence as the basis for a model of *intercultural communicative* competence we need to reconsider the tradition above focusing primarily on two of the communicative codes at the disposal of human semiotics: verbal and non verbal ones.

Codes are mental constructions which include sets of items and the rules that govern their combination ('grammar').

A model of communicative competence includes first of all 'linguistic competence' and then 'extra-linguistic competence'. These are *competences*, that is, mental representations and unrelated to real utterances or texts: the ability to judge the grammaticality of a sentence exists in a person even if no sentence is spoken *hic et nunc*.

In Hymes' model of interaction the term *competence* has a broader meaning. It indicates both the mental models, and their implementation in a *social context*, which is governed by the 'grammars' of *socio-cultural competence*. Hymes' model needs *mastery*, a series of processes and skills translating mental reality into social action.

These 5 elements constitute 'communicative competence' and can be graphically represented as follows:

Some of these factors of communicative competence include intercultural critical points. For instance:

a. *linguistic competence* is composed of two main fields, semantics and form, and both of them pose intercultural problems.

In some cases a speaker may easily master these problems: one may control the tone of voice, avoid taboo words, abstain from the use of the future

tense or mask its force in adding "it is God's will", avoid yes/no questions in cultures where a foreigner is supposed to receive a 'yes' answer just because he or she is a foreigner and respectable and rich. Other aspects are more difficult to cope with, e.g., textual interculturality, which depends on a person's *forma mentis*. For example, the way that texts are constructed mirrors the way they are thought, and as a consequence they can differ significantly between cultures; a semantic example can be provided by pointing out that such words as 'democracy' or 'university', which can be found in many languages, sound similar but often refer to quite different concepts of democracy and university;

b. *extra-linguistic competence* includes kinesics, proxemics, objectemics, and is a particularly precarious field in IC, because we are generally unaware of our use of gestures and of interpersonal distance and we tend to consider them 'natural' and therefore universal, whereas they are 'cultural' and therefore local;

c. *socio-cultural competence* includes three elements:
   - the *sociolinguistic* grammar, particularly where register and respect are concerned,
   - the *pragmalinguistic* grammar which governs the 'force' of utterances (e.g., the use of the imperative mode vs. the use of softeners such as *should* or *could*),
   - the *cultural* grammar which provides paradigms and parameters to evaluate values and behaviors;

d. the central box is the heart of the model. The competences on the left of the diagram exist only in a person's mind: he or she can think sentences and texts and conversations and arguments but they do not exist as communication, only as internal language. In order to become communication they must (a) become real texts – oral, written, audiovisual, monologic, dialogic, and so on – and (b) be shared with a receiver who comprehends (sees, listens to, interacts with) them.

e. In the *mastery* 'box' thought is transformed into:
   - *communicative moves*, such as (dis)agreeing, attacking/responding, apologizing, interrupting, joking, accusing/justifying, and so on. Moves are the *strategic* element in communication, and each culture considers them in a different light; communicative moves are an open set, there is no fixed list of moves, their identification depends on the parameters and on the goals of the analysis,
   - *communicative acts* (or functions as they are often called, sometimes generating confusion with high-rank functions such as Jakobson's or Halliday's), i.e. the *tactical* elements of communication. For example: greeting, taking leave, offering, asking/telling one's age, nationality, job, and so on. Most acts, which are an open set, are implemented according to rules that vary from culture to culture;

f. the circle represents the open set of possible events in which communication takes place: lessons, group work, seminars, negotiations, dinners, exams, chats, telephone conversations and so on.

Communicative events are governed by *universal rules* (for example: written correspondence in any culture will include an address, salutations, a sender and a date) and by *cultural rules* (an American letter has different rules than an Italian or a Chinese letter): and here the critical aspects of intercultural communication and of paramount importance.

This *model* of communicative competence *is thought to be valid* in all languages and in all communicative occurrences, on any occasion and in any location.

Moreover, all the factors intervening in a communicative act can be included in one of the 'boxes' of the diagram: in other words, the model *is thought to be exhaustive*.
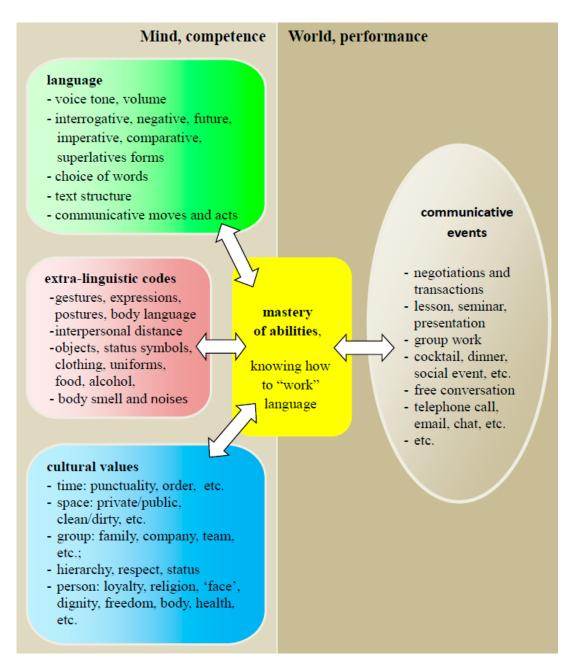
Finally, the model is *economical:* it has only 5 factors and this means it is easy to learn and apply, and is *simple* to use, being constructed in depth, with a limited system of sub-headings within each 'box'.

A model of intercultural communication description

As a consequence of the principles of economy and simplicity the model of the critical points in IC includes only three components, which we can describe by using Hofstede's (1991) metaphor of software:

a. the *software of the mind*, i.e, those cultural factors which affect communication. This software works like the system files inside a computer: the user is unaware of them until a warning about a problem appears on the screen. Similarly, we are unaware of the existence of many *cultural* values, which we consider *natural* and therefore shared by all potential interlocutors;

b. the *communication software*, the codes in use, both verbal and non verbal. The main problem is that attention is directed towards verbal language, especially if a non-native language is used, while no attention is paid to non-verbal body language such as gestures, expressions, proximity to speakers, smells, and bodily noises, thought to be universal, and little attention is paid to the communicative function of clothes, jewels, status symbols and other objects;

c. the *context software*, the socio-pragmatic software which governs the beginning, the direction, and the conclusion of a communicative event (whether monocultural or intercultural).

The diagram is as follows:

Mind, competence

language
- voice tone, volume
- interrogative, negative, future, imperative, comparative, superlatives forms
- choice of words
- text structure
- communicative moves and acts

extra-linguistic codes
- gestures, expressions, postures, body language
- interpersonal distance
- objects, status symbols, clothing, uniforms, food, alcohol,
- body smell and noises

cultural values
- time: punctuality, order, etc.
- space: private/public, clean/dirty, etc.
- group: family, company, team, etc.;
- hierarchy, respect, status
- person: loyalty, religion, 'face', dignity, freedom, body, health, etc.

mastery of abilities,

knowing how to "work" language

World, performance

communicative events

- negotiations and transactions
- lesson, seminar, presentation
- group work
- cocktail, dinner, social event, etc.
- free conversation
- telephone call, email, chat, etc.
- etc.

The diagram should be interpreted as follows:

Intercultural communication is governed by competence groups, respectively verbal, non-verbal and cultural, and is realised in the context of communicative events governed by grammars which contain both universal elements and local cultural elements.

Each of these areas may include IC critical points, to be highlighted in a description of IC among people from culture 'x' and from culture 'y'.

(This model was designed by Balboni in 1999 and later used in all his works on intercultural communication).

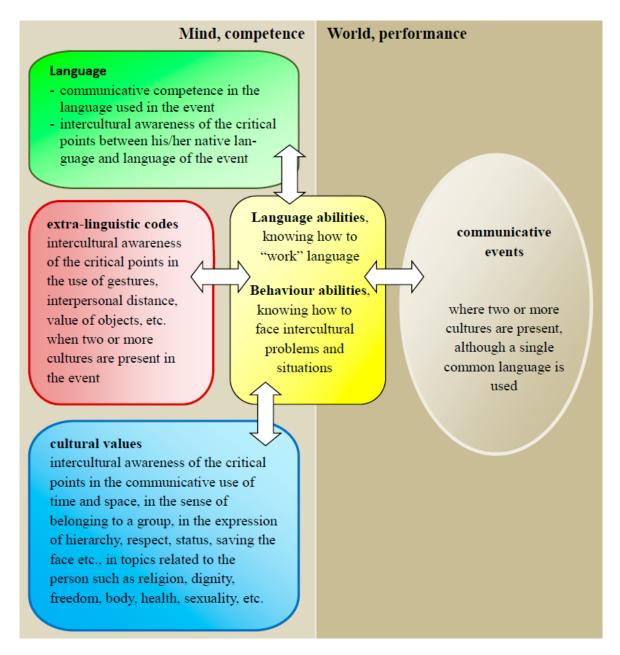## A model of intercultural communication competence

We are fully aware that there have been many attempts to define ICC, yet many of them *describe* the rewarding effects of competent intercultural communication but do not *define* its elements, its constituents – i.e., they do not provide a *model*.

Moreover, most studies are not aimed at an epistemological definition of intercultural communicative competence but at designing ways to assess it, for academic or commercial purposes.

In the Nineties, the scene was mostly occupied by Kelley and Meyers' Cross Cultural Adaptability Inventory (1993), by Byram's founding manual (1997) and by Hammer and Bennett's Intercultural Development Inventory (Bennett 1998); Fantini developed the yoga assessment for Brattleboro students (Fantini 2000). In the first decade of the 21:st century more person-centred instruments and methods of assessment were proposed, such as Oudenhoven and Van der Zee's Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (2002). An analysis of the discrepancies in the many attempts of assessing the development of intercultural communicative competence is in Garrett-Rucks (2012) and a general survey of assessment methods can be found in Deardorff (2006:72ff provides a clear synthesis; 2011 completes the survey) and Dervin (2010), the latter focusing on the intercultural element in language teaching but rich in general perspective and subtle observations.

We are aware of the value of these works, and of many others we cannot quote here, yet we think that a model such as the one we are suggesting below is not only more consistent as concerns epistemological paradigms, but can prove a more efficient framework to design intercultural communication curricula and courses.

The following diagram shows IC competence, seen as an integration of the model of communicative competence in a language and the model of critical points in IC. In other words: if a person living in Oxford uses English to communicate with other Oxonians he or she only needs communicative competence in English as shown in the model, as Oxford is culturally homogeneous. But if that person interacts with other English-speaking natives (neighbours such as Welsh, Scottish, Irish, or 'foreigners' such as Californians or Indians) or with non-native English speakers from the rest of the world, he or she needs both communicative competence in English *and* IC competence as shown below.

The most relevant element in this diagram is the central box, where there are not only language abilities (cognitive processes) and skills (the implementation of abilities in a given language on a given text), but also the abilities and skills of appropriate behaviour in IC, which were proposed by Fabio Caon as a qualifying aspect of ICC (Balboni, Caon 2010).

Intercultural behavior abilities

In order to interact in intercultural communicative events, intra- and inter-personal strategic skills must be built.

This process follows the two phases known in Latin as *pars destruens* and *pars construens*, that is, 'first delete, then construct'.

The main elements a person should be able to delete in order to develop intercultural behavior abilities are:

a. intrapersonal filters such as *prejudicial mistrust and diffidence, or enthusiasm and a-critical openness* towards people belonging to a specific culture. The problem is two-sided: first, despite being aware of general stereotypes ('Greeks speak with forked tongues', 'all Italians are friendly') we are seldom aware of our own personal stereotypes, based on experience or irrational feelings. Second, once awareness has

been built, psychological effort is needed to overcome prejudicial diffidence/enthusiasm. This can be difficult to perform when most of the communicative effort focuses on the use of a non-native language, on the topic being dealt with, and on the pragmatic ends of the communicative event;

b. the *primacy effect*, that is to say, the fact that first impressions are of paramount importance in the development of a communicative event. If a group of people are asked to look at an individual and state in two or three seconds what that person's profession, his/her favourite sport, etc., most of them will give their opinion, and this shows that we form wholly non-grounded opinions which become unconscious behavioral guidelines in communicative events.

Pars construens concerns the development of some skills which create a system of checks and balances between cultural detachment or shock, on the one hand, and willingness and openness on the other:

c. *decentralization*, being able to distance oneself, to move away from one's usual roles and behaviors, from those ideas which generally guide the appraisal of other people's behavior. In other words, it means that when faced with unusual actions, statements, behaviors, etc, a decentralized person will observe them from a 'third party' position: neither his or her own nor the other person's;

d. *emotional distance* from the situation: while decentralization is a sort of *rational* third party attitude, this skill concerns the *emotional* component of input appraisal before it arouses some type of reaction ('appraisal' and 'arousal' are used in the sense of the cognitive theory emotions). Cultural mistakes often concern emotion rather than reason: the latter is slower in reacting and can be controlled, whereas an emotional reaction is often immediate, in the etymological sense of the word: 'without the mediation' of reason. Emotional distance thus requires control over reactions to emotional appreciation of other people's behavior.

In order to allow the formation of psychological habits of rational decentralization and emotional distance, two attitudes must be constructed:

e. *exotopicattitude* implies the fact that a person thinks of him/herself as different from others and that others are different from him/herself. Each of them is fully within their right to be distinctive, although one's diversity must be controlled in order not to overstep the other person's right to be different. To paraphrase one of the basic principles of democracy, usually stated with reference to freedom, 'my right to difference ends where your right to difference begins';

f. the *empathic attitude* is the natural consequence of the exotopic one: a person develops the ability to put him or herself in the other person's shoes and consequently, puts off any judgment.

Developing the ability to postpone communicative reaction, both negative and enthusiastic, as long as we analyze exotopically and empathically the other person's behavior, is the core of intercultural communication skills.

The word 'communication' derives from 'putting in common', i.e., sharing. The last of the skills to be developed is

g. *providing feedback* in order to avoid the risk of misunderstandings and of consequent (over)reactions: "You made this gesture: in my culture it means … Was that what you actually meant?", "I've noticed your tone of voice is high, which in my culture is considered rude: did you intend it to be so?", and so on. Of course feedback has a far wider role in human interaction, but we must limit ourselves to this brief reference to it, just to balance the treatment of point 'g' with the one of previous items.

The process described above is circular: it starts with what in counseling procedures is called 'active listening', that is, listening with a decentralized third-party attitude, and proceeds through the exotopic and empathic appraisal of the input, ending with feedback in order to check whether one's interpretation of the other's words or actions is right.

Teaching intercultural communication

Kramsch (1993) hinted at the intercultural dimension in her classic book about culture in language teaching, and many methodologists of the 1990s picked up the idea; yet Beamer1992, Brislin, Yoshida 1994, Landis, Bhagat1996 and other leading studies of the same years separated IC teaching apart from language education, both in schools and universities, and in lifelong learning contexts, and this trend prevailed (a critique of intercultural communication training in these years can be found in Cargile, Giles 1996); only in Attard 1996, Byram 1997, Balboni 1999, Byram *et al*. 2001; Humprey 2002, IC teaching was seen under an educational perspective.

The basic assumption of the studies above (and many others we cannot quote here) is that IC *can* be taught. We think this is not exact. In fact, the dynamic and ever changing nature of intercultural communication implies that ICC must be seen as dynamic and ever changing as well, which implies lifelong and lifewide learning. In other words, no IC course can claim to be a 'complete' course.

Our opinion is that ICC cannot be taught as such because it changes continuously, but a model for *lifelong observation of ic* is fully teachable. The student attending a course of IC studies is an adult, a fully autonomous person, who needs a scaffolding (our model) to be filled up and completed through lifelong and lifewide observation.

As far as the behavioral component of ICC, exotopy, empathy, suspension of judgment, decentralization and so on can be presented to the student, can be described and discussed, but attitudes cannot be taught.

This perspective implies that *teaching IC* means making students aware of the nature of IC and of ICC, providing them with an instrument – the observation model – to record what they observe, lifelong, lifewide. The model thus provides the table of contents of a personal manual of IC manual.

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About the Authors

Paolo E. Balboni: Docente di Glottodidattica a Ca' Foscari, Dip. Studi Linguistici e Culturali Comparati, DD1075, 30125 Venezia. Presidente del Centro Linguistico di Ateneo e Delegato del Rettore per la formazione linguistica. Presidente della Società Italiana di Didattica delle Lingue e Linguistica Educativa, DILLE. Direttore del Centro di Ricerca sulla Didattica delle Lingue (CRDL) e della sua rivista Educazione Linguistica - Language Education.Vicepresidente della World Federation of Language Teacher Associations (FIPLV)

Fabio Caon: Dr Caon teaches Intercultural Communication, Language Teaching Research and Literature Teaching Research at Venice University and is the founder and director of the Laboratory for Intercultural Communication of the Centre for Research on Language Education. He has authored and edited several monographs and essays about multilingual and multicultural classes and above alternative ways of dealing with the problem of migrant students language education and social integration, carrying out experiments about the use of sport, of songs and other multisemiotic activities. He is one of the editors of *Educazione Linguistica – Language Education*, the journal of the Centre mentioned above.

P.E.Balboni is the author of the section from the beginning to "A model of intercultural communication description", F. Caon from "A model of intercultural communication competence" to the end.

Authors' Address

Centro di Ricerca sulla didattica delle lingue
Dpt di Studi Linguistici e Culturali Comparati
DD 1705 Ca' Bembo
Università Ca' Foscari
30122 Venezia (Italia)