

# Intercultural communicative competence [2]

Lynne Parmenter

(Associate Professor, Waseda University)

## Introduction

The aim of this series of three articles is to explore in greater depth one of the most common rationales given for teaching and learning English in schools: in order to communicate with people of other cultures. In the first article of this series, the concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) was introduced. Recent research on ICC was mentioned, and the first two elements of ICC, namely, 'knowledge' and 'skills' were discussed. In this second article, I would like to introduce the other two competences necessary for the development of ICC, which are 'attitudes' and 'critical cultural awareness'.

## Attitudes

Attitudes are crucial to ICC, as well as playing a very important part in motivation for foreign language learning. In order to be successful intercultural communicators, students need to develop attitudes of openness to otherness and curiosity about other cultures and people. Openness and curiosity are often displayed by beginning foreign language learners, but unfortunately tend to risk being 'lost' in the struggle to memorise vocabulary and grammar structures for entrance exams. In addition, it is necessary that students are willing to question their own cultural assumptions and beliefs and willing to accept other ways of acting and thinking without prejudice or discrimination. Most people would agree with the desirability of such attitudes, but many educators wrongly assume that such attitudes will be developed naturally through the mere process of foreign language education. In actual fact, foreign language education can actually perpetuate students' prejudices and biases about other cultures, particularly if textbooks and teachers emphasise dichotomous differences between the native and foreign culture and use these dichotomies to 'prove' the 'uniqueness' of the native culture. Foreign language teachers thus have a responsibility to make sure that the

content of their classes, and the way that this content is taught and learned, promote positive rather than negative attitudes towards ALL other cultures and people (not only Western culture and American people).

## Critical cultural awareness

'Critical' in the term 'critical cultural awareness' does not have a negative meaning. In this sense, it means the ability to think about things actively and intelligently rather than just accept them passively without question. The development of critical cultural awareness involves the ability to identify and interpret values in another culture, the ability to critically analyse and evaluate cultural practices or documents from another culture, and the ability to interact and mediate in intercultural exchanges, drawing on one's knowledge, skills and attitudes. In other words, it means being able to go beyond surface stereotypes and false images of a culture, e.g. 'All Japanese people wear kimono and eat raw fish', to be able to see the deeper levels of meaning in a society or culture. This critical attitude to one's own and other cultures is a key element of ICC, and it is possible to develop it from the earliest stages of foreign language learning.

## Conclusion

In the first article and this article, therefore, we have looked at the four elements of Intercultural Communicative Competence; which are knowledge, skills, attitudes and critical cultural awareness. In the third and last article, the focus will be on the practicalities, possibilities and problems of implementing aspects of ICC in the foreign language curriculum in Japan.

## References

Byram, M. (1997) *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters