

Review of *Developing Intercultural Language Materials*, written by Freda Mishan and Tamas Kiss (2024). Routledge, 254 pp. ISBN 9781032651385.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, intercultural competence has gained recognition and prominence worldwide. A great deal of research has highlighted the value of integrating culture in language teaching (e.g. Holliday, 2018; Kramsch, 1998; Reid, 2012). It challenges educators to rethink curricula, approaches and activities in a way that prepares students for communication in diverse cultural contexts. What makes *Developing Intercultural Language Materials* worthwhile is that it comes right on cue to fill a lacuna in the field, addressing the urgent need for materials that combine both language proficiency and intercultural competence.

2. Delving into the book

From the vantage point of a teacher mentor, I felt a keen sense of curiosity to explore the book, not only because it ascribes a pivotal role to research in devising intercultural language materials, but also because the book dovetails theory and practice in a way that makes it comprehensive, and user-friendly.

The book is structured around four parts entitled respectively: (1) *From Research to Implications*, (2) *From Implications to Application*, (3) *From Application to Implementation*, and (4) *From Implementation to Research*. The editors highlight the valuable contribution of the book and how the suggested activities, which they consider “the centerpiece” of the volume, encourage insights into one’s own culture and nurture openness to other cultures.

Each of the four parts has an introduction and a set of subdivisions. Part I puts forth a practical conceptualization of intercultural competence (the understanding and acceptance of different cultural norms of different communities) and highlights the value of intercultural learning as a vital skill in today’s multicultural contexts. The underpinnings of this definition are drawn from the multicultural aspects of communication between people and across countries, and set within the framework of complex dynamic systems (CDS). Transferred to the classroom context, intercultural competence emerges as a proxy metric that builds trust and weaves relationships between the learner’s source culture and other cultures. Part I also warns against a number of factors that may, if not taken into consideration, stand as hindrances to implementing intercultural competence materials in curricula. Among the factors mentioned by the book authors is the fact that some course books in use present culture in a simplistic and superficial way. Another point is that some intercultural books are not neutral, and are imbued with prejudice and stigmatization. Teachers should therefore be alert and use checklists to evaluate materials, and as prerequisites for developing learners’ intercultural competence.

Part II entitled *From Implications to Application* introduces the reader to an array of 34 activities that are essential to developing learners’ intercultural competence. The activities, structured into

four sets, advance from general themes to “progressively more personalized and challenging ones,” (p. 164). The four sets of activities are entitled respectively *Materials Evaluation Tasks for Practitioners*, *Learner Activities for Fostering (Critical) Cultural Awareness*, *Materials Development Activities* and *Adapting Materials to Fit Cultural Contexts*. For each cluster of activities, there is an introduction, a set of objectives and a detailed procedure that provides practitioners with insight and guidance. Part II also highlights a number of conditions that are conducive to good practice and that should be put in the forefront when adapting the materials for cultural and contextual purposes. These conditions include focusing on intercultural awareness-raising, repurposing coursebook illustrations, working with non-linearity, etc.

Two activities appealed to me as a former teacher and a mentor: *Greetings* and the *Johari Window of culture*. Should these two activities be cascaded to teachers and implemented in the classroom, they would hopefully nurture the students’ motivation and encourage the teachers to endeavour treading new teaching paths. *Greetings*, for instance, could easily be implemented in contexts where intercultural awareness is given scant attention. The activity may allow students to get acquainted with a variety of ways people greet one another, and thus recognize the value of culture as a launch pad for awareness-raising. In contexts where teachers are in thirst for such engaging activities, as I have experienced in the Tunisian context, *Greetings* could foster students’ critical thinking and allow making connections between micro and macro-cultures. The second activity, the *Johari Window of culture*, may allow students, through filling in the four quadrants with information about each other, to map out what they know and what they do not know about one another, hence to recognize the universality of culture and adopt an open-minded attitude towards differences.

Part III examines how intercultural skills are being implemented in different curricula pertaining to different contexts. This part moves from general assumptions to specific recommendations, to the grassroots, suggesting ways of integrating intercultural competence activities in language curricula. A survey was conducted in 16 countries in order to collate data on how integration is being conducted on the ground. Participants “were asked about any supplementary intercultural teaching materials they developed and used and how these succeeded in the classroom” (p. 163). The authors then catalogued a set of 14 principles that should underpin the integration of intercultural skills in the curriculum. Among them addressing both the affective and the cognitive aspects of learning, devising open-ended tasks, understanding the context wherein the intercultural activities would be implemented, and putting the students at the core of the learning process.

Part IV highlights the uncontested value of academic and practitioner research in devising intercultural materials. Starting with research, (Part I) and closing with research (Part IV), the book proposes a cyclical progression strategy where teacher initiative is in the epicentre, and which highlights the prominent value of intercultural competence, being a burgeoning field of research that still requires further investigation. The authors insist that teachers should engage in “small-scale research projects,” evolving around topics that emerge from the teachers’ contexts, and allowing reflection and adjustment. Part IV is oriented to practitioners, highlighting the importance of their contribution to the field of intercultural competence. Akin to these considerations, Action Research springs to mind as a winning pathway whereby classroom practice would be moulded and refined.

On the personal level, the book resonates with my own conviction that without the study of culture, language learning is incomplete. This conviction stems from a record of visits I had to classrooms where English is taught as a foreign language. I noticed that whenever cultural awareness-raising activities are not envisaged in lesson objectives, students’ perceptions regarding their culture and other classmates’ cultures do not evolve into an open-minded attitude towards people and communities. The volume therefore comes at an auspicious moment to reinforce my own beliefs as a teacher mentor that developing students’ critical thinking and open-mindedness should be a crucial part of language lessons. Cogent arguments and well-devised processes are presented in the volume in order to make this shift to culture-integrated curricula easy and efficacious.

3. A critical view of the book

Being immersed in classroom context, the book makes accessing culture in a language learning environment a pleasant and motivating endeavour. The activities inherent to this process are insightful and undeniably interesting as they offer well-sequenced guidance to stakeholders and practitioners alike. They are seconded by a clear, simply-worded conceptualization of all ideas evolving around culture and intercultural competence. As such, the book constitutes the start of a new shift towards intercultural-focused curricula and practice.

Yet some minor remarks are worth mentioning. To begin with, for practitioners who still lack knowledge about intercultural competence, too much theorizing about the activities inherent to cultural competence may seem dampening, or even stand as a hurdle to transforming practice. For instance, in the context where I work, a large section of the teaching community I am mentoring is made up of novice teachers who undoubtedly feel eager to acquire in-depth knowledge about the intercultural competence concept, but at the same time, may be inclined to find so much information splashed all at a time, and an excessively-detailed guidance, discouraging or even daunting. Likewise, introducing readers, who may miss the true meaning and the added value of culture in learning, to so many related activities may not necessarily yield a keen interest among them in embracing the process of integration. As such, and in order to nurture the teachers' motivation to venture beyond their teaching methods, the definitions of some key concepts could have been extracted from the description of the activities and included in a glossary. Concepts such as (inter)cultural awareness, small cultures, intercultural learning, semiotic analysis, third space, etc. would be better assimilated and explored, I think, were they included in a *Glossary* section. This way, the activities would be more user-friendly, easier to implement, and would not encroach on the teachers' class time.

4. Conclusion

Developing Intercultural Language Materials is a breakthrough as it suggests guidance towards the implementation of such materials in the classroom. Its value lies in its overall appeal to changing the way intercultural competence is being taught and counted for in curricula and course books. Through four well-rounded units, oscillating between theory and practice, the book furnishes the educational systems around the world with teaching strategies and training schemes that are grounded in the classroom context. Because “[c]ulture emerges from the actions and thoughts of members of a community,” (p. 50) the cover page of the volume purposefully highlights faces of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, an applaudable effort to prove that culture per se is universal. This said, I believe the book will provide researchers around the world with useful assistance on how to conceive culture-integration programs, and will supply practitioners with sufficient knowledge and self-confidence to put their agency and that of their students into play.

References

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About the author

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