In a recommendation dating from 2005, the Commission of the European Union presented key competences for lifelong learning (Education 2010)\(^1\). One of these competences is interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, civic competence, which is defined as:

These competences cover all forms of behavior that equip individuals to participate in an effective and constructive way in social and working life, and particularly in increasingly diverse societies, and to resolve conflict where necessary...

In many definitions of intercultural competence (cf. e.g. Byram 1997, Dervin 2006, Dervin & Dirba 2006, Deardoff forth.), a very important part is played by items such as knowledge of oneself or awareness of one’s own identities. Plurality of identities and selves, which has been researched by interactionists, psychologists, and anthropologists, amongst others, leads individuals to adapt to varied interlocutors and contexts, i.e. change Selves. Hence the idea that we are all intercultural inside of us and that we have to deal with this plurality on a constant basis and use strategies to be able to adapt to various contexts of intra- and inter-cultural encounters. These arguments are starting to blossom in the didactics of interculturality in language learning and teaching but it will take time before they develop and prevail over the current culturalist paradigm, whereby students are given lists of stereotypes and generic information on people from other nations.

What is dissociation?
"When the accident happened, I didn’t feel like myself."
"There is this other person inside of me who doesn’t want to do it."
"I said to myself: no, you can’t do that!"

Unlike what the reader might be thinking, these excerpts are not taken from narratives of schizophrenic patients but from every day life speech of very “normal” people. They are actually words that, most probably, most of us have uttered on several occasions, and in varied contexts. These
quotations derive from a phenomenon that psychologists describe as disso- 
ciation or “a state of fragmented consciousness involving amnesia, a 
sense of unreality, and feelings of being disconnected from oneself or 
one’s environment” (Steinberg & Schnall 2003: IX). “Dissociation is a 
healthy adaptive defense used most universally by people in response to 
overwhelming stress or life-threatening danger” (ibid.: 5). In other words, 
in the quotations above, the speakers talk about themselves as if they 
were strangers to themselves: the first one goes through an accident and 
doesn’t realize that she is experiencing it; the second speaker explains 
that there is another Self in him; while the third speaker is simulating a 
conversation that she has been having with herself.

In what follows, I would like to suggest working on awareness-raising 
about dissociative states in everyday life. If aware of such ordinary 
phenomena, my hypothesis is that students of foreign languages will 
accept more easily that a foreigner is also plural and dissociates — 
especially in intercultural contexts — and that they will refrain from see-
ing him/her as a mere representative of a culture (cf. the widespread 
thinking that cultures meet — not actual individuals). Please note that 
some students may feel uncomfortable with this method because they 
can touch upon sensitive areas of their personal lives, so it is always 
good to take it slowly and give them many examples before launching 
any work on dissociation.

**How could dissociation enter our classes?**

In order to make the students reflect on these ideas, looking at the fol-
lowing phenomena is the first step to becoming aware of people’s plur-
rality as well as their own. Either the students document them by find-
ing examples of dissociative acts in their own daily lives (e.g. you may 
ask them to do this as a weekly task of auto-ethnography in a learning 
journal) or by looking for examples in films, novels, TV-series, etc. in the 
language that they are studying or in their native language. If they keep 
a learning diary on the dissociative acts that they have found, they can 
first explain what they were about (narrate the episode or copy/trans-
scribe the text) and then analyze them, explaining what each acts tells
us about the plurality of the people involved. Steinberg & Schnall list the following categories of what they call dissociative acts. I will illustrate each category with examples.

**Depersonalization**

This type of dissociation happens when we talk about ourselves as if Self was another person, an Other. In other words, one watches oneself from a distance. In the following example, an English exchange student in Finland dissociates when she talks about something that she used to do with her foreign flat-mates: “When I was in Finland, my friends and I used to get on buses without paying the fares since nobody ever checked... I would never do that in Britain.” There is clearly a change of person between the first series of Is and the last I in the quotation, even though the person who utters these words is the “same.”

**Internal dialogues**

Internal dialogues happen in each and every one of us when we have to make a decision or do some role playing, such as playing back what conversation has been like or will be like. Internal dialogues are obviously not recordable but they can be expressed directly by people in written or oral forms (cf. testaments, confessions, memoirs, etc.). There is, of course, no guarantee of the actual contents of internal dialogues when they are uttered or written (people do not always tell the truth about the sort of reticence or questioning that they have had with themselves). Many times a day, we may be heard saying: “I say to myself...” This is an example of externalized internal dialogue, which tells listeners that we have been talking to ourselves.

**Derealization**

This phenomenon is usually caused by stress, fatigue, extreme surprise or amazement. For instance, one cannot believe or understand what is happening to oneself. For example, before you travel to a country that you have always wanted to visit and once you have reached the country, you have a strange feeling that you are not actually there. Another simple example would be when one listens to music on one’s iPod on the streets and do not even realize that one is walking to the city centre to do some shopping.

**Identity alteration**

This is the most common and normal dissociative act since it happens every minute of our lives. Every time we change partners in a discussion, places, etc., we adapt and change representations on who we are and who the person in front of us is and therefore we alter our discourse and identifiers (or identity signs such as tone of the voice, language registers, things we talk about, clothes, etc.). Sherry Turkle sums up identity alteration under the question “who am we?” which, as paradoxical as it may seem, symbolizes the reality of societal life. Turkle has worked on identity on the internet (cf. Turkle 2005) and showed how people tend to dissociate on Internet Relay Channels or forum by lying about who they are (ex: a man plays the role of a woman, an old lady can pretend to be young, etc.). Steinberg and Schnall also clarify that dissociation happens through:

- referring to yourself by different names/ nicknames (ex: I am either Fred or Tony to some people), talking about yourself using “we,” “you,” or “one” (ex: “one is never happy when this happens..., well I wasn’t happy about it.”);
- acting like a different person, imitating, speaking in different accents, pretending to be happy or satisfied;
- being told by others that you are different (ex: after a stay abroad, your parents tell you that you would never have done something the way you do it now, before) or telling others.

Finally, let’s not forget that it has become quite clear that plurality in our speech is always present. What we call represented speech (sometimes referred to as reported speech — though it can never be reported because the context in which the speech has taken place cannot be fully “reported”) is the archetype of dissociation in each and every one of us. By including Paul’s speech in the following, I take on his mask for the duration of it: “I met Paul the other day and do you know what he told me? He said great to see you! I was just thinking of you.”

**Self-)Solidification**

I am adding this final phenomenon linked to dissociation. While identity alteration occurs voluntarily or not, solidification is always conscious. This category is inspired by the work of the sociologist Z. Bauman. Bauman tells us that we live in liquid times where every one is entitled to various identities. The flip coin to this is solidification or the fact that one “solidifies” who one thinks one is and retains one identity that seems to better define them. In intercultural communication, this happens quite often and leads to auto-/hetero-stereotyping. Stereotyping is normal and cannot really be controlled or “deleted” from encounters. It helps to meet people and to deal with the complexity of our liquid world. This kind of dissociation usually takes place in discourse (ex.: “We Spanish people like to eat food late” where millions of people are suddenly reduced to a same model) or in attitudes (e.g. a French student who was an exchange student in Turku told me that he was so fed up with having to listen to people telling him that, because he was French, he was going to be late, that he decided to be late to please them — and confirm the stereotype). We tend to solidify selves but also others by pretending e.g. to be “experts” on other people’s “culture.”

For example, I read an entry on a Belgian website the other day that said: “Black people have a lot of children because it is part of their culture.” With this entry, every single colored person is dissociated into a generic definition of their “culture.”

**Putting an end to “easy and safe” interculturality**

The didactics of interculturality in language learning and teaching requires pondering over the methods used in class for ethical and intellectual reasons. I have been criticizing the culturalist approach (i.e. students are given information about the people of such or such country) for quite many years now but it seems that it is still extremely popular in most teaching contexts. Why? The culturalist approach is “easy and safe,” in other words, teachers can easily make a list of information (recipes) that students can use if ever they encounter natives of the language they learn. It is safe because it doesn’t involve the students in the sense that the natives are “talked about” and “described” but nothing is said about the students as individuals and/or their countrymen — or if this happens, it is usually solely for comparative purposes (ex: Germans vs. Finns). To me, the culturalist approach is not ethical for it
makes students believe that the recipes it offers will help them to meet very complex and dissociative Others. Besides, it is not based on any intellectual rationale since it concentrates mostly on differences and usually ignores similarities between people. As Abdallah-Pretceille (2003) puts it, it is so much easier to notice differences than spot similarities.

The intercultural approach through the observation and analysis of dissociation is far from being “easy and safe.” The approach offers to concentrate on the complexity and internal plurality of each individual. This means that no recipe, no information about cultural aspects of these individuals can help to encounter them. It also implies that, instead of concentrating on any imaginary other by giving make-believe indications on how this other lives, thinks, sees, etc., the approach makes clear to language students that every single person is before all complex, liquid, different from her/his country fellows, and unfixed. The approach also lends a hand to them to find illustrations of this.

Remains to be seen what students do with the savoir-faire that this approach provides them with. It is clear that they have to be taught to use this outside class and learn to avoid manipulating others by presenting a unified, imaginary self in intercultural communication — which means, before all, an end to self-solidification. Of course, it’s not part of our job to check on that or control the students’ attitudes. That is why, students should reflect on why, how, when, with whom they can dissociate, and e.g. solidify. Finally, they should also find a range of strategies that they can use when others self-solidify and/or solidify them and in/directly manipulate them (e.g. “you’re not Finnish, so you wouldn’t understand. We Finns do it this way”).

**Bibliography**


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