DO YOU SPEAK EUROPEAN? (REVISITING THE REALM OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EU STUDIES EDUCATION AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL)

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Why revisit the realm of intercultural communicative competence?

A lot has been said about the need to prepare students for the challenges of the globalising world and one of the answers to the question how to do this effectively is related to the purposeful implementation of foreign language learning based on the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), the latter referring not only to school language education but also to learning languages at university level. Regardless of age, gender, ethnic, social or educational background, contemporary young people are increasingly part of an intensifying communication across borders and continents. These processes are often related to study and labour mobility although they are not restricted to experiences of having to function in another country only. Far from the view that it is possible to teach students a strictly defined ICC, we rather accept Zarate's view that it is often more appropriate to talk about ICC's - in the plural - due to the unstable development of ICC and to the fact that a high level of language proficiency does not automatically mean a high level of intercultural competences (Zarate 2003)[1]. As stated by Byram, Gribkova and Starkey, „the

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[1] Zarate, G. (2003), Identities and plurilingualism: preconditions for the recognition of intercultural competences. In: Byram, M. (ed). Intercultural competence. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

acquisition of intercultural competence is never complete and perfect" because the complex nature of ICC which is tied in with acquisition of knowledge but also skills and most of all attitudes.

On a EU level, there is a special policy, that of multilingualism, which is aimed at „striving to protect Europe's rich linguistic diversity" (currently, there are altogether 24 official languages and more than 60 regional or minority languages) and „promoting language learning"[2]. On the whole, EU citizens' attitudes to language learning is highly positive. According to the special Eurobarometer „Europeans and their languages"[3], revealed in 2012, 88% think that knowing languages other than their mother tongue is very useful and 98% are convinced that this benefits their children. It is interesting to note that the majority of the respondents relate language learning mostly to working abroad (61%), finding a better job in their own country (45%) and study in another country (43%). Just under two fifths (38%) believe learning a new language would help with understanding people from other culture, which is not an insignificant figure testifying to the general awareness of the EU population of the relationship between language learning and ICC acquisition.

On the other hand, a number of important European documents discussing the priorities of modern language education, including the New Framework for Multilingualism[4] and the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue „Living together as equals in dignity" (2008)[5], emphasize on the necessity of adequate language education coupled with the development of intercultural competence as important factors in achieving enhanced quality of education and social cohesion.

Language education which is aimed at establishing connections between all the languages and cultures one studies or acquires informally is seen as enhancing individuals' personal development as well as improving society as a whole.

One of the basic documents of the European Commission which embodies the above values is the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)[6], which serves as the foundation for converging language policies of member-states, for developing new language learning syllabi, teaching materials, assessment strategies and tools, and which provides transparency and comparability of language qualifications in all modern foreign languages.

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[2] Official site of the European Union: EU by topic - Multilingualism (http://europa.eu/pol/mult/index_en.htm).

[3] European Commission (2012), Special Eurobarometer 386: Europeans and their Languages.(http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_386_en.pdf).

[4] A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism (COM (2005) 596 final (available at http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/archive/doc/com596_en.pdf)

[5] Council of Europe (2008), White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue 'Living together as equals in dignity', Council of Europe F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex, 2008 (available at http://www.coe.int/dialogue).

[6] Council of Europe: Modern Languages division (2001), Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, Strassbourg & CUP.

The Framework has that language and culture learning as one whole and the languages and cultures a person learns or acquires form a complex whole, the constituent elements of which influence one another. „…The learner of a second or foreign language and culture does not cease to be competent in his or her mother tongue and the associated culture. Nor is the new competence kept entirely separate from the old. The learner does not simply acquire two distinct, unrelated ways of acting and communicating… The language learner becomes plurilingual and develops interculturality. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how. They enable the individual to develop an enriched, more complex personality and an enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences."[7]

As a member of the Council of Europe, Republic of Bulgaria is obliged to adhere to European educational policies as a whole, including to language education policies. According to the CEFR, language learners are to „construct their linguistic and cultural identity through integrating into a diversified experience of otherness" and to develop their ability to learn through this same diversified experience of relating to several languages and cultures[8]. The document specifically focuses on intercultural competence which is discussed in relation to a learner's general competences as well as his/her background knowledge, skills and attitudes (connected to learning their mother tongue, or another foreign language, knowledge of the surrounding world in general, etc.)[9]. Knowledge about the society and culture is one of the aspects of knowledge about the world (e.g. places, institutions, faces, facts, events and so on). These deserve special attention because they may be left out of the scope of the knowledge acquired by a learner or they may be distorted by stereotypes[10].

Thus defined, the model of ICC proposed by the Framework correlates to a great extent to the knowledge, skills and attitudes included by Michael Byram in his intercultural communicative competence (ICC) model which has at its heart the image of the intercultural speaker who is regarded as a mediator between cultures. The latter's ICC is a complex entity of intercultural relations (*savoir κtre*), knowledge of social groups and practices in both the target and home cultures (*savoirs*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre)*, skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*), which comprises abilities to evaluate perspectives, practices and products of both home and target cultures[11]. However, the foundation of intercultural competence is in the attitudes of the intercultural speaker and mediator[12]

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[7] CEFR: p. 43.

[8] CEFR: p. 134.

[9] CEFR: p. 126-135.

[10] CEFR: p. 128.

[11] Byram, 1997.

[12] Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2000: p. 10.

In spite of the above outlined potential for tying in language learning with development of ICC it seems that there is a lot to do at the level of language instruction in the field of higher education. According to Dervin „Despite impulsion from the work carried out by the Council of Europe, physical and virtual hypermobilities and the internationalisation of higher education; regardless of the multiple research projects and publications on the topic, interculturality does not seem to have been entirely integrated into language teaching and learning in this precise context"[13].

Towards developing ICC at secondary level

In the period of 2008 - 2012 a learning module aimed at developing ICC within the regular intensive teaching of English at the 8th grade in the specialised schools and parallel classes in Bulgaria was designed and trialled out at several different schools in the capital and other cities in the country. The module provided learning content adding to, enriching or making up for what the course books approved by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education offer in relation to developing ICC.

One of the main areas they had been established to be lacking in was the area of developing skills and mostly attitudes while providing many more opportunities to gain knowledge necessary for developing ICC (Tsvetkova 2012)[14]. Since intercultural learning is experimental and dialogic in nature and it is supposed to lead to changing not simply the acquired knowledge but the attitudes to oneself and to the „other" it is important to select teaching methods and techniques which will ensure maximum learner autonomy and minimum teacher control as well as maximum equality between them. To achieve this interactive methods have been found to be most useful including interactive methods typical of language education such as information-gap activities, jig-saw activities, sharing of values, ideas and beliefs or methods considered typical of intercultural learning such as solving a case or role play which puts the learners in a situation of intercultural communication.

The said learning module is based on the following principles[15]:

- *Intercultural learning:* meaning that students compare and consciously relate their own culture to the culture of the first, second, etc. languages they learn. In addition, their cultural awareness is enriched together with the understanding of how they acquire the target culture.

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[13] Dervin, F. (2010), 'Assessing intercultural competence in Language Learning and Teaching: a critical review of current efforts'. In: Dervin, F. & E. Suomela-Salmi (eds.). New Approaches to Assessment in Higher Education. (157-173). Bern: Peter Lang.

[14] Tsvetkova, N. (2012), People, Places and Ways: A Learning module for developing intercultural communicative competence with Bulgrian 8th-grade students of English. В: Езикът и културата в съвременния свят, ИК „Знак'94", Велико Търново, с. 522-527.

[15] Цветкова, Н. (2013), „Развиване на междукултурна комуникативна компетентност в процеса на интензивно обучение по английски в VIII клас" [Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in the Process of Intensive English Language Teaching in the 8th Grade]. В: сп. Чуждоезиково обучение, бр. 3 (pp. 311-320).

- *Orientation towards the learning content*: this principle is implemented through a careful selection of topics which are relevant to students' age, interests and life experience coupled with using authentic materials which are relevant to their level of proficiency in the target language.

- Priority development of intercultural skills and attitudes of openness to and tolerance for the other: applying this principle ensures that the learning content facilitates the development of skills to draw and collect culturally relevant information, critical thinking and critical reading skills, skills to work with authentic texts and artefacts, to compare and contrast phenomena from their own and the target culture, so that they foster the development of ICC.

- *Distancing from one's own culture*: adhering to this principle allows students to become aware of their own reactions another culture representative in the light of its being culturally determined.

The above principles and suggested teaching methods and techniques are relevant not only to a secondary school context but also to a tertiary education and they can be applied when determining the learning content suitable to use in language learning at university.

The potential of the PICT curriculum framework

In 2011-2013, the PICT project team worked on developing a curriculum framework focusing on developing future translators' ICC which is based on the notion of the intercultural mediator (similar to Byram's intercultural speaker) and is meant to be implemented in the context of tertiary education. The intercultural mediator is seen as displaying knowledge, skills/abilities or attitudes in the following spheres: theoretical, textual and interpersonal, each of which is further specified in a grid where descriptors are also provided to guide teachers along measuring the level of attainment of MA translation students' intercultural knowledge, skills/abilities or attitudes. Thus the framework can also be used as a guide towards assessment of intercultural competence for translators[16]. Although it may look a bit away from the context of EU studies education, this framework provides useful guidelines which, coupled with the model of the intercultural speaker proposed by Byram, help plan, deliver and assess the results of developing EU Studies students' intercultural competence as part of their language education. As Karaasenova and Tsvetkova[17] note, it helps to establish some of the key concepts students have to be aware of so that they can reflect on their

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[16] Catalan, Z., Stoicheva, M. and N. Tsvetkova (2013), Translating and Mediating between Cultures: The Bulgarian Experience within the PICT Project. In: Language Identity and Culture in language education. Edited volume of the 20th ICC Annual Conference 2013.

[17] Tsvetkova, N. and Karaasenova, D. Developing Intercultural Skills. The Case of teaching English as a first and second foreign language to students of European Studies at Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski". Европейският съюз на кръстопът. Сборник с доклади от международната конференция на катедра „Европеистика", СУ „Св. Климент Охридски", 14-15 май, 2014 г.

personal experiences in intercultural communication or on other people's instances of such. The idea of one who speaks the language interculturally and at the same time is able to mediate between cultures is pertinent to what undergraduates are going to encounter in their future professional lives – on occasions when mere knowledge of languages will not be enough.

The authors report on encouraging findings from the process of piloting the PICT teaching and assessment materials with second-year EU Studies students learning English as a first and as a second foreign language which prove that teaching languages towards developing an intercultural communicative competence in such circumstances is possible to plan and implement and that it leads to satisfying results.

EU studies students as intercultural speakers

Given the difficult times the EU has been undergoing for several years now, it is not surprising that Euro-sceptics are becoming more and more active questioning the notion of an „ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe", which is inserted into the preamble of the Treaty of the Functioning of the EU. The current challenges make it obligatory to prepare the future specialists in EU Studies to be able to communicate, act, take decisions, etc. on an arena which is far bigger than the national one or even the EU one for that matter. It is a must for the language education they undergo to turn into a foreign language education for 'intercultural citizenship'. According to Byram this implies learning more about one's own country by comparison, learning more about 'otherness' in one's own country (especially linguistic/ethnic minorities), becoming involved in activity outside the educational institution, making links to compare and act on a topic in two or more countries[18]. In the context of EU Studies at Sofia University students master at least two foreign languages up to a point which allows them to fully understand and interpret EU documents, EU law, EU media messages, participate in international negotiations, create, promote and implement EU policies, etc.

The majority of these students come from a secondary school context which is connected to afore-mentioned intensive language learning and both at school and during their studies at the BA level, students have been exposed to interaction with students from other EU countries. All this allows us to contend that there is a clearly defined need to reconsider the purposes of language education in a EU studies context and utilise its potential for fostering intercultural citizenship. Further research into the use of specially developed tools aimed at fostering learners' ICC such as the European Language Portfolio[19] and the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters[20] in a tertiary context will facilitate

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[18] Byram, 2008.

[19] European Language Portfolio (available at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp).

[20] Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (2009), Council of Europe, (available at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/autobiography/default_EN.asp).

such a process. Finally, all the above are expected to guarantee EU Studies students are not simply proficient speakers of foreign languages but also intercultural speakers able to mediate between their own and other cultures and between cultures in a broader context.

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