

Developing Intercultural Communication Skills

The Case of Teaching English as a first and second foreign language to students of European studies at Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'

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Abstract

The paper discusses the place of intercultural education in the European Studies curriculum. The authors view it both from the perspective of the intensive language education BA students of European Studies undergo since their first year at university and the practical needs of modern-day communication in the context of globalisation. Based on their experience in the PICT project (Promoting Intercultural Competence in Translators)¹ and reflecting on it in view of the realities of teaching English as a first and second foreign language to BA students,

¹ The European Union project PICT 'Promoting Intercultural Competence in Translators' (№ 517871-LLP-1-2011-1-UK-ERASMUS-EMRC) ran from 2011-2013. The core aim of the PICT project was to produce a comprehensive toolkit making it easy for HE institutions within the EU to introduce Intercultural Communication into their postgraduate programmes in Translation. The project was coordinated by the University of Westminster (UK) and the following partners took part: ISIT (France), University of Bologna (Italy), Sofia University (Bulgaria), Jagiellonian University of Krakow (Poland) and ICC - the international language association (Germany).

they argue the need to approach the issue of developing students' intercultural competence systematically.

Key words: intercultural competence, language education, European studies

Background

Culture has gained significant attention over the years spurred on by the processes and demands of globalisation. It has been approached and discussed from various perspectives. Triandis² conceptualises the key elements of culture as values, perceptions, attitudes, stereotypes, beliefs, categorisations, evaluations, expectations, memories, and opinions while cultural competence has been defined as 'a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.'³

The implications of intercultural competences in the workplace have attracted due attention as we have witnessed increased international labour mobility and internationalisation over the past decades. It is acknowledged that effective performance in a multicultural work environment is dependent on intercultural competencies, foreign language proficiency and field-specific abilities.⁴ Among the key competences necessary to ensure social inclusion, personal and professional satisfaction, the European Key Competences for Lifelong Learning reference framework⁵ lists the capacity to communicate in foreign languages and demonstrate intercultural understanding. Emphasis is placed not only on the ability to demonstrate knowledge and professional skills but also on displaying attitudes that are appropriate to the particular work context. A comprehensive survey carried out by the University Council of Modern Languages shows that there is high demand for linguistically and interculturally competent labour. Language proficiency and the ability to

² Triandis, Harry C., (1995), *Individualism and Collectivism* (New Directions in Social Psychology). USA, CO: Westview Press.

³ Cross, T., Bazron, B., Dennis, K., & Isaacs, M. (1989). *Towards A Culturally Competent System of Care*, Volume I. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Child Development Center, CASSP Technical Assistance Center.

⁴ Fantini, Alvino E., (2000), *A Central Concern: Developing Intercultural Competence*. SIT Occasional Papers Series. Brattleboro, VT. <http://www.sit.edu/SITOccasionalPapers/sitops01.pdf>, p.25.

⁵ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning. OJ L 394, 30/12/2006, pp. 1018.

work in an intercultural setting are perceived as 'pan-sector skills' and are held in high esteem.⁶

As integration at European level deepens, we observe ever more intensified cross-cultural interaction. People of various cultural backgrounds communicate on a daily basis either in their professional environment or in the purely personal context. A suggested description of this phenomenon is that 'Intercultural communication occurs whenever a person from one culture sends a message to be processed by a someone from a different culture.'⁷ The interlocutors involved in the intercultural communication process approach one another with certain expectations that stem from their own socialisation, which in itself predisposes them to view the world from a particular vantage point⁸. A prerequisite for successful outcomes of such interactions is therefore the awareness of and the ability to step aside from one's own ethnocentric perspective⁹ and show empathy and appreciation for diverse value systems and norms of behavior.

The afore-mentioned underscores the paramount importance of attainment of intercultural competences and makes the case for integrating the development of such skills in language teaching. The Common European Framework of Reference asserts that it is through learning a foreign language that the '...learner becomes *plurilingual* and develops *interculturality*. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect to 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.'¹⁰

Knowledge, attitudes and skills described in the CEFR in relation to acquiring intercultural competence correlate to a great extent to the knowledge, skills and attitudes included by the prominent theoretician Michael Byram in his intercultural communicative competence (ICC) model. It represents a complex

⁶ Labour Market Intelligence on Languages and Intercultural Skills in Higher Education, http://www.ucml.ac.uk/sites/default/files/shapingthefuture/101/17%20%20Anne%20Marie%20Graham%20emp%20resource%20template_0.pdf

⁷ Samovar, Larry A. , Porter Richard E. & McDaniel, Edwin R. (2009). *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, 12th ed., USA, Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, p.7

⁸ Cushner, Kenneth & Brislin, Richard W. (1996). *Intercultural Interactions: A Practical Guide*, 2nd ed. USA, CA: Thousand Oaks, p.11.

⁹ 'ethnocentric: characterised by or based on the attitude that one's own group is superior' - <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethnocentric>

¹⁰ The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment, p.43.

entity of intercultural relations (*savoir ktre*), 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 cultures¹¹.

Byram confronts the ideal of native-speaker proficiency in foreign language teaching and asserts the idea that it is much more important to learn to speak the language 'interculturally', that is to acquire intercultural communicative competence. These ideas of Byram's re-echo an earlier assertion made by the distinguished researcher Milton Bennett who affirms the cultural dimension of language by referring to so-called 'fluent fool' - 'one who speaks a foreign language well but doesn't understand the social or philosophical content of that language'¹².

Modern foreign language education at the European Studies Department of Sofia University

The theoretical background presented above coupled with the current labour market realities calls for a shift of focus in the foreign language syllabus from achieving linguistic excellence only to enhancing students' sensitivity to the understanding of culturally conditioned actions and reactions. In addition, the authors hold the view that students learn more effectively and retain what they have learned for longer if they have had the opportunity to live through an experience, albeit in a classroom setting, rather than when they acquire knowledge through theory. Experiential learning has been propagated by many eminent researchers.

The educational theorist David Kolb suggests that 'Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.'¹³ and presents a model, the Experiential learning cycle, consisting of four elements: concrete experience; reflective observation (one observes and

¹¹ Byram, Michael (1997), *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

¹² Bennett, Milton J., 'How Not to Be a Fluent Fool: Understanding the Cultural Dimension of Language'. In Fantini, A. E. (vol. ed.) & J. C. Richards (series ed.). *New ways in teaching culture*. TESOL series II: Innovative classroom techniques, 1993, p. 16. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.

¹³ Kolb, David A., (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as The Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, p. 38.

reflects on the concrete experience); abstract conceptualisation (one analyses and conceptualises the experience); active experimentation (one tests the new concepts); repeat of cycle. What is more, the Experiential learning cycle has a direct relation to the above-discussed model of intercultural competence in which knowledge does not play a central role but goes hand in hand with living through and reflecting both the salient and invisible features of the cultures learners come into contact with - both their native and those underlying the languages they are studying. That is why this pedagogical approach has been undertaken in the English language classes (first and second foreign language) at the European Studies Department of Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski' in our endeavor to develop students' abilities of critical reflection and of application of these skills to the situations they encounter.

Statistics of the European Studies Department reveal that the majority of the department graduates hold posts in the EU institutions or related agencies, in the Bulgarian ministries, in nationally or internationally based consultancies. Taking into account the nature and the scope of activity of these organisations, we can assume that their employees are involved in extensive intercultural interaction where it is not only linguistic proficiency and field-related knowledge but also the ability to function in a multi-cultural environment that comes to the fore. Furthermore, outcomes of such interplay favourable or not may not only affect their personal relations, but have a larger implication for the organisation they represent.

Therefore, in view of the European Studies graduates professional orientation, as well as of the Europe 2020 Strategy¹⁴ which emphasises on the need for increasing employability and competitiveness through relevant educational practices so that 'educational improvements help employability and reduce poverty', BA students of European Studies at Sofia University have advantage as they have the opportunity to master further the first foreign language they studied at school as well as to continue developing their proficiency in their second foreign language or even take up studying a third one. It is therefore, possible and desirable that these language disciplines are taught in a way that ensures a synergy of the approaches, teaching teams' efforts and, hopefully, of the end results. The latter hold true for enriching students' knowledge of and skills in using the target languages, for mastering a substantial body of specialised EU terminology and developing their intercultural competences.

¹⁴ COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION. EUROPE 2020. A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Brussels, 3.3.2010. COM(2010) 2020.

Teaching and learning English as a first and as a second foreign language. Focusing on the intercultural dimension.

Now we would like to focus on the opportunities of studying English as a first and second foreign language at the European Studies Department at Sofia University, where inter cultural learning is an intercultural learning an integral part of students' learning experiences from their first semester onwards. 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 cultures¹⁵. 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.)¹⁶. The CEFR asserts that 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 stereotypes¹⁷. Despite the undisputable need of a plurilingual competence today, English is by far the most popular foreign language studied at schools across Europe, as well as in Bulgaria, and this makes the task of developing students' intercultural communicative competence in the process of acquiring the language even more difficult, as English is more and more often used as a lingua franca by speakers of a variety of other languages. Drawing on the above, as well as on the previously discussed model of intercultural communicative competence proposed by Byram, the PICT project developed a conceptual framework for implementing intercultural learning in the process of mastering translator skills at a tertiary level¹⁸. The underlying principle of this framework is the idea of the intercultural mediator¹⁹ as one who possesses theoretical knowledge of cultures and the conceptual tools needed to understand the intercultural aspects of translation, who is capable of interpreting genres and text conventions in an intercultural perspective and is ready to suspend judgement and accept otherness and apply

¹⁵ The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment, p.134.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 126-136.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹⁸ Promoting Intercultural Competence for Translators: Curriculum Framework. <http://www.pictllp.eu/project-outcomes/curriculum-framework/>

¹⁹ Katan, David, (1999), *Translating Cultures: An Introduction for Translators, Interpreters and Mediators*. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing.

social positioning according to the needs of the context.²⁰ Thus the framework dwells on three dimensions - theoretical, textual and interpersonal, each with four subdimensions. Although it may look a bit away from the context of learning English as part of the European 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 students' intercultural competence as part of their language education at tertiary level. It helps to establish some of the key concepts students have to be aware of so that they can reflect on their 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 the language will not be enough.

In view of the above, the following sequence of learning situations was developed and piloted with first and third-year BA students of European Studies at Sofia University. The approach is markedly student-centered throughout and the teacher mostly monitors the students' work and provides prompts if needed.

The initial material revolves around making students aware of some basic intercultural terms, i.e. culture, identity, small and large culture. In terms of classroom procedure, students start by writing definitions of culture, then compare and discuss these definitions in pairs. As a result, they produce revised definitions in the light of the views on culture as the substance, which provides the 'software of human brains' without which most human behaviours would seem 'random', 'unpredictable' or even 'meaningless' to others²¹. The next task introduces Holliday's large-versus-small culture paradigm²². Students brainstorm 'definitions' of nationalities on their own, then compare them in pairs and identify the underlying overgeneralisations and stereotypes. Next, in a whole-group discussion, they disprove them, drawing on personal experience, thus dealing in practice with the essentialist and confining effects of

²⁰ Catalan, Zelma, Stoicheva, Maria and Nikolina Tsvetkova. (2013). Translating and Mediating between Cultures: The Bulgarian Experience within the PICT Project. 'Language, identity and culture in language education', edited volume of the 20th ICC annual conference documentation, Sofia 2013. http://www.icc-languages.eu/media/documents/ICC_AC_edited_volume_2013.pdf

²¹ Seeley, Ned. 'Cultural Goals for Achieving Intercultural Communicative Competence'. In Fantini, A. E. (ed.) *New Ways of Teaching Culture*. Bloomington, Illinois, TESOL, Inc., 1997, pp.22-26.

²² Holliday, Adrian. 'Small Cultures'. In: *Oxford Journals: Applied Linguistics*, 1999, Volume 20, Issue 2, pp. 237-264.

the large culture paradigm. At the end, in groups students 'draw a picture' of the European Studies bachelors they are part of as a small culture and present it in class.

The second material is a logical sequence to the first one. It focuses on working with two texts produced in the EU context - the first one in relation to the implementation of the Digital Agenda for Europe (an address by the responsible commissioner, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-12964_en.htm?locale=en#PR_metaPressRelease_bottom) and an article about the future of young people in the EU by Zygmunt Bauman, published in the Guardian (available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/may/31/downward-mobility-europe-young-people#start-of-comments/>). Working on this material students can relate the acquired theoretical concepts to analysing discourse samples produced in a EU setting. They have to identify the different small cultures represented in these two texts, to draw conclusions about their target readers, the sought-after effects, etc. Finally, students are encouraged to imagine they are members of the DG of Translation at the European Commission and to discuss how far the two texts reflect the official EU policies and ideas, how they would go about each text if they were to translate it in into their own language in order to preserve its cultural implications and if they would do it differently if they were to translate it into a third language.

The third material goes further by drawing on students' knowledge of basic intercultural terms and skills in analysing discourse from an intercultural perspective and draws their attention to the issues of cultural awareness and empathy manifested in a social exchange. The activities place students in a mock negotiation setting with the purpose of accentuating on the „hidden dimension of culture“²³ and enhancing students' sensitivity to implicit messages. Students are encouraged to take a pro-active stance, anticipate possible conflict points in intercultural contacts, identify affects in the communication process and be prepared to resolve any such arising challenges. The underlying intention of the activities is to promote understanding and tolerance for the other.

This sequence of learning materials can serve as an introduction to the issues of intercultural communication and can be used with first-year students

²³ A reference to *The Hidden Dimension*, the second book of the eminent anthropologist Edward Hall in which he focuses on the concepts of time and space, on the way they are construed in different cultures and how they affect intercultural interaction. The text also alludes to the theory representing culture as an iceberg made of a visible and an invisible part. The visible manifestations of culture are just the tip of the iceberg. However, it is the lower, the hidden part of the iceberg, that is the powerful foundation of these visible manifestations.

who study English as a first foreign language during the first semester. They can also be used with students studying English as a second foreign language, preferably during the second semester when the individual differences in terms of language proficiency have been smoothed out to a great extent.

Summary and conclusions

The conclusions below are based on the process of piloting the materials with European Studies BA students at Sofia University in the academic year of 2012-2013. Overall, the level of satisfaction with being familiar with and able to discuss intercultural issues was welcomed by both the 'first-language' and 'second-language' students. They found the materials and tasks engaging and had stimulating discussions about entities, skills and attitudes they would need in real life. In their opinion working on intercultural issues was 'different from what we usually do in a language class' as it gave them greater 'freedom' to express themselves. To put it in one student's words, the tasks 'made me think thoroughly - I highly appreciate the tasks and the answers they lead me to'. However, when asked to formulate the skills they were practicing over the above-outlined sessions, students found it difficult to name the skills in question while it was easier for them to identify the key terms they were introduced to. This is understandable as skills take longer to be developed and attitudes - to be consciously displayed in practice. In addition, we view these results as indicative that future work in this area should be carefully planned and focused more on developing and practising intercultural skills and attitudes. However, the conclusion which is most important to achieving intercultural aims within the language education provided at the European Studies Department at Sofia University is that there is a clear need to approach this matter in a systematic way. For starters, the above examples prove that working on intercultural topics, developing students' so much sought-for intercultural competence can be an important aim of the process of learning their first and second foreign language. Tasks aiming at introducing students to key concepts, at equipping them with relevant analytical tools they can apply to home and target cultures, with skills to act not as fluent fools but as mediators between cultures, being open-minded and being able to suspend judgement, etc. should be made a prominent part of their language classes over the first two years of study before they go on to studying specialised EU terminology and Cultural Studies (according to their first foreign language). The results of our small-scale 'experiment' are indeed encouraging and give us the necessary confidence that we have started working in the right direction.

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