

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE THROUGH AUTHENTIC RESOURCES. A PERSPECTIVE ON A PRE-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAM

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Abstract: This paper is intended to reflect on the intricate relationship between culture and foreign language learning. Authentic documents constitute valuable resources in the foreign language classroom because these depict culture in an authentic manner. To be proficient in a foreign language does not reside only in acquiring a sound linguistic competence, but also a sociolinguistic and a pragmatic one. A new language learner model has emerged: the intercultural speaker is someone who is interested in developing an intercultural communicative competence that would favour interaction with different cultural contexts in the globalized world. Therefore, would-be teachers should become aware of the intrinsic connections that exist between culture and foreign language learning. We have conducted a qualitative research in order to further understand the would-be teachers' ability to reflect on integrating authentic documents in a teaching sequence.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, knowledge, attitudes, skills, culture.

This paper is comprised of two parts. The first seeks to detail the intricate relationship between culture and foreign language learning. The teachers' and the students' relationship to culture tends to be more personal in a foreign language classroom. In the first part we intend to provide arguments that sustain the development of the intercultural communicative competence within pre-service teacher training programs. The second part of the paper intends to provide details about the results that have been obtained after conducting a qualitative research.

An intercultural teaching and learning approach

The need for an intercultural approach in foreign language teaching is sustained both by the global realities and the characteristics of the educational context. First of all, the globalization process enables individuals to travel and interact with different cultures. Likewise, language becomes a means of expressing a cultural stand point since "culture is communication and communication is culture" (Hall 1981, 186). Secondly, the educational context has undergone various changes due to global realities and decision making institutions (European Union, The European Commission etc.) have acknowledged the fact that education should take into consideration new coordinates in order to make the teaching and learning process more efficient and in accordance with the needs of the society. A great number of studies (Sercu 2005; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Fantini, 2000; 2006) and recommendations imply that foreign language teaching should incorporate an intercultural teaching perspective and that teachers should be trained in order to be able to interact efficiently in diverse classrooms. The following documents focus explicitly on encouraging acceptance of different cultures and respect for identity

values: The Key Competences for Lifelong Learning-European Reference Framework³⁴, the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue³⁵, The Aims of Language Teaching and Learning³⁶, and The European Profile for Language Teacher Education³⁷.

The European foreign language teacher should be according to Kelly et al. (2004, 6) more reflective of the teaching process and more aware of the importance of teaching and learning about foreign languages and cultures. The recommendations mentioned above favour an intercultural foreign language teaching approach and intend to develop both the teachers' and the students' ability to relate, accept and understand different cultures. Even if these guidelines generate the portrait of a knowledgeable foreign language teacher "there is still uncertainty regarding the concrete preparation and development of intercultural competence" (Emert 2008, 20). This paper intended to cover this gap and suggest that a suitable solution for developing intercultural communicative competence could reside in the use of authentic teaching materials. Authentic resources represent a meaningful exposure to language and culture and often play according to Troncoso (2010, 90) the role of sociocultural mediators in the formal context of the foreign language classroom.

Teacher-student relationship to culture

Lustig and Koester (2010, 290) imply that all participants (teachers, students, school masters etc.) in the educational context bring their cultures, beliefs, values, norms and social practices with them. First of all, we intend to tackle the teachers' relationship to the educational context. The classroom becomes according to Choen, Manion and Morrison (1996, 347) an *emotional space* that is able to reflect the teacher's attitudes and expectations, his/her moral values, control techniques, leadership style and praising strategies. Because language represents a channel for expressing identity and membership, a teacher's attitudes towards the target culture tend to be more visible in the context of foreign language learning as compared to teaching other subject matters. Scrivener (1994, 11 in Skela 2004, 163) identifies three levels of rapport that influence the way in which a teacher makes choices within the foreign language classroom: teacher decisions and actions, teacher attitudes and intentions and teacher beliefs and values. Scrivener has placed in image no. 1 individual beliefs and values at the bottom of the pyramid suggesting likewise that these influence directly a teacher's attitude and the preference for choosing a didactic method or activity.

³⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/publ/pdf/ll-learning/keycomp_en.pdf

³⁵ http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper_final_revised_en.pdf

³⁶ http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/ListDocs_Geneva2010.asp#P58_2278

³⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/languages/documents/profil-broch_en.pdf

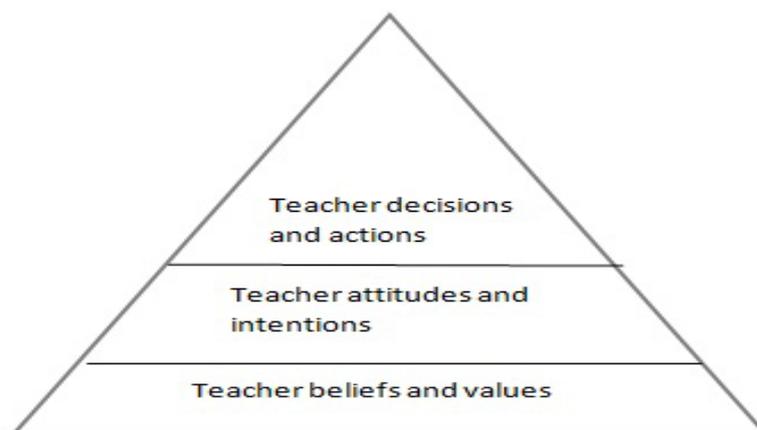


Image no. 1. Teacher Levels in the Decision Making Process
(adapted from Scrivener 1994,11 in Skela 2004, 163)

Secondly, the student's relationship to the educational context provided by the foreign language classroom takes the shape of a two-way process. On the one hand, the student encounters a new culture that is governed by other beliefs and values. On the other hand, the student is making comparisons and is more reflective about his/her mother tongue culture. This two-way process is possible because „the study of language exposes learners to another way of viewing the world as they develop flexibility and independence from a single linguistic and conceptual system through which to view the world” (Byram 1989a; Kramsch 1993a; in Liddicoat, Scarino 2013, 25). In addition, Cortazzi & Jin (2013, 4) argue that intercultural learning provides a context that enables learners to reflect on specific aspects of their own cultural practices and values and their own cultural identities. Learners interact and learn in a secure context in which they can freely express their opinions. Learning a foreign language does not only imply the fulfilment of the intended academic purposes but also a cultural dimension according to Hyland (2006, 42) who suggests that language and learning are closely bound up with cultural dimensions.

The foreign language classroom is in itself a multicultural space even if there is a homogenous group of students who speak the same mother tongue. This is sustained by the fact that sharing the same mother tongue represents only one cultural aspect, which contributes, together with other sub-culture particularities to form the broader idea of culture.

Developing intercultural communicative competence in pre-service teacher training programs

Nowadays, education policies undergo constant changes and pre-service teacher training programs need to reflect this development. Important changes that have taken place in the foreign language teaching field of study. The concept of *communicative competence* was introduced by Hymes in the early 1970s in opposition to the Chomskyan term of *linguistic competence* (Aguilar 2009, 247). Afterwards, Byram (1997) came up in 1997 with a new model of competence: *the intercultural communicative competence* which put a greater emphasis on the context of language acquisition and on the learner. In 1997 Byram and Zarate

(Byram 2008, 57) designed a new learner model in order to replace the native speaker model that no longer reflected global realities: *the intercultural speaker* would be able to understand and value cultural differences and would manage to communicate in different communicative situations. The acknowledgement of the important role played by culture in foreign language learning led to the development of these models. This transition is presented in image no. 2 below:

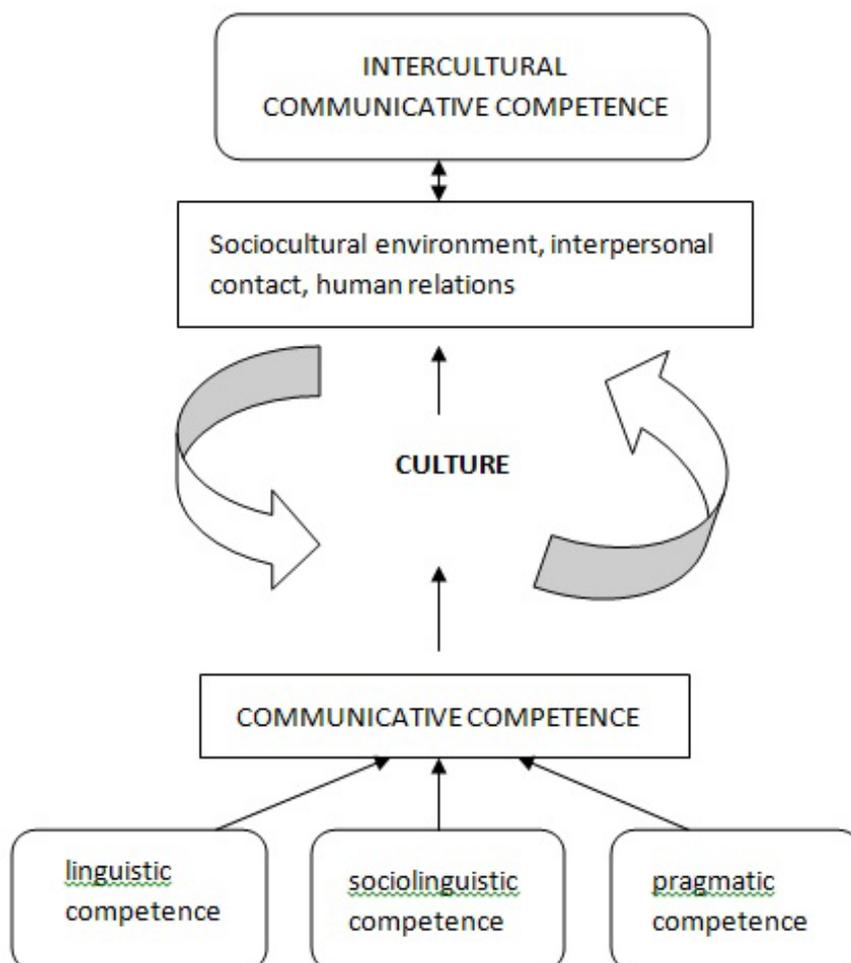


Image no. 2 The Development of the Intercultural Communicative Competence

In order to equip learners to be active participants in a multicultural society, it is the duty of teachers to constantly redefine their roles (Petruş, Bocoş 2013, 156). Therefore, students who register for pre-service teaching practice programs should develop their intercultural communicative competence in order to put in practice after graduation the policies and recommendations suggested both by international and national decision-making institutions.

In this study we favour the Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model proposed by Byram which is comprised of three components: knowledge, skills and attitudes that are complemented by the values one holds because of one's belonging to a number of social groups (Byram, Nichols, Stevens 2001, 5). The ICC model consists of:

- knowledge of social groups and their products in one's own and in the interlocutor's country and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction (Byram, Nichols, Stevens 2001, 6)
- skills that refer to being able to compare, interpret and relate to different cultural resources, to manage to operate in real-time instances of communication and interaction (Byram, Nichols, Stevens 2001, 6)
- attitudes of curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own, willingness to relativize one's own values, beliefs and behaviours (Byram, Nichols, Stevens 2001, 5)

When conducting this study we kept in mind the suggestion made by Lies Sercu (2010, 29) who stated that intercultural learning and by inference also the intercultural communicative competence are *indefinite* i.e. there is no zero starting point and no final destination. It is in fact a life-long and life-wide learning process that can be improved by exposure to different cultural contexts.

The study

The second part of this paper intends to provide detailed information regarding the research that has been conducted.

Data collection

The data for this study was collected in April 2013.

Location

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca.

Participants

The participants were students who registered for the course – *The Didactics of the English Language*. The students were in their second year of study and all of them were majored in English

The aims of the study

The study aimed to develop the students' reflective attitude towards the usefulness of integrating authentic resources in a teaching activity. The details are provided in table no. 1 below:

Activity	Targeted components		Number of students who have completed the assignment
Designing a storytelling activity	Attitude	- reflective attitude towards the usefulness of such an activity	37

Table no.1 Targeted attitude

The students were required to design an activity that intended to celebrate cultural diversity in the foreign language classroom. They had to provide authentic resources (examples of stories) that were part of their students' culture.

Data analysis

Out of a number of 62 students who attended regularly the course just 37 of them completed the assignment.

The reflective attitude

Would-be teachers' reflection in this activity

All the students were confident that the activity would be successful if put in practice. We have selected randomly some verbatim examples: *'I'm proud of how this activity has developed because it has captured my students' attention; I find this activity appropriate for young learners and I believe it would be interesting for them and also amusing; the activity would generate interest and would increase speaking, reading and writing skills; the pupils can use their imagination and try to find the best fairy-tale character from the tales they know in both mother tongue and English'*. Two students did not provide any feedback to this question.

We have identified in the responses that have been provided several keywords that suggest that students have understood that authentic documents represent means of celebrating cultural diversity: *multicultural classroom* (1 time), *cultural diversity* (3 times), *information about other cultures* (3) *L1-L2 relationship* (1 time). Still, a number of seven students considered that this activity would be more suitable for teaching grammar points or enhancing the skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening).

Learner expectation

At this stage of the assignment students had to imagine how their learners would react to such a storytelling activity. The responses provided by the students have allowed us to further understand the students' own point of view related to the reactions they expect to obtain from their future learners.

The components of the responses that have been obtained have been placed in three categories:

Components	Examples	Number
Knowledge	Know other cultures	1
	Understand the moral message	1
	Understand Romanian culture better	1
	Understand beliefs of other people	1
Attitude	Excited	15
	Interested	12
	Open-minded	2
	Confident	2
	Attentive	2
	Active	2
	Cooperative	1
	Relaxed	1
Ability	Improve their enhance their cultural skills/ language skills	2
	Use their creative imagination	2
	Remember the story	1

Table no. 2 ICC Components

Limits for interpreting the attitudes: adjectives such as *enthusiastic* (mentioned by the students for five times), *amused* (mentioned by the students just once), and *thrilled* (mentioned by the students just one) have been placed under the category - *excited* because their meaning is almost the same; adjectives such as *curious* (mentioned by the students twice) and *captivated* (mentioned by the students once) have been placed under the category - *interested* because their meaning is almost the same.

Four students did not indicate any attitudes. Students provided only four references as regards the knowledge dimension and five references as regards the development of abilities. The conclusion we have drawn is that students believe that the use of a story would generate attitudes of excitement and would awaken the students' interest.

Conclusions

The data that have been obtained suggest that students tend to be more concerned and interested in the attitudes that their would-be learners would manifest when working with authentic resources. Even if the attitude component is better exemplified in the data that we have gathered (which only pleases us more), we appreciate that students have provided relevant details both as concerns the knowledge and abilities components. This indicates without a doubt that they have been reflective about the usefulness of integrating authentic resources into their teaching activities.

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