

Teaching intercultural communication: pedagogical approaches and practical applications [1]

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A conference organised by the Scientific Committee on Intercultural Communication of the Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages took place at the Université du Littoral Côte d'Opale, Boulogne sur Mer, France, on 14th-15th May 1999. The conference focused on making recommendations on the teaching of intercultural communication to students specialising in modern languages, to students of other disciplines and to trainee teachers in higher education in Europe.

In view of the fact that intercultural communication is not a clearly defined academic discipline in many European countries and that this subject nevertheless is relevant to all Higher Education programmes, the Scientific Committee had already spent considerable time on trying to reach agreement on a definition of the subject and on the approach to be adopted. At previous workshops many different aspects of the question of intercultural communication had been dealt with. It was decided that in Boulogne the issue of teacher training needed to be addressed in some detail and as in all previous workshops, a number of concrete examples of attempts to improve intercultural communication were outlined. A number of outside experts were invited to join members of the Scientific Committee to give presentations and to assist the committee in formulating recommendations.

Intercultural communication and teacher training

Professor Martine Abdallah-Preteuille, Université Paris III and Centre International d'Etudes Pédagogiques, the author of several books on intercultural communication (2), examined the issues involved in designing an intercultural communication curriculum for the training of primary school teachers. In her lecture entitled: "Intercultural communication: elements for a curricular approach", she insisted on the necessity of fixing the aims and objectives of a curriculum in intercultural communication before deciding on the content. In her view, the status of languages as well as the conditions in which they are taught and learnt are largely dependent on the historic, economic, social and political context. Consequently, language and culture teaching must be addressed in relation to two fundamental evolutions of the social fabric: globalization and complexification. The educational act lies at the crossroads of at least two worlds, that of the teacher and that of the taught. One current issue concerns the appropriateness of the educational act for pupils who are perceived and designated as culturally different. Educating to be tolerant, the fight against racism, cultural knowledge and recognition were already a priority at the end of the Second World War. It was a time of renewal of ideals based on international openness, "cultural dialogue", valuing exchange and mutual understanding, a "culture for peace" etc. It was also at that time that studies on stereotypes were carried out. Henceforth these elements must be taken into account where language learning is concerned. Learning a foreign language is above all else a means of learning *otherness* - a key concept in intercultural communication. A humanities approach and more especially an anthropological approach to identity construction is thus essential in teacher training.

Professor Lars Fant, a specialist of intercultural communication at the University of Stockholm, (3) took up the previous speaker's emphasis on identity construction in his talk on "Identity work in interaction as a resource for language training". In his view, the purpose of identity work is to establish which communicative features should be acknowledged by the group or audience as constitutive of its collective identity (however transitory or unstable the group as such may be), and which should be socially acknowledged as tokens of individuality. Three processes are seen as essential for the negotiation of social identities: sharing codes, sharing topics, and sharing assumptions. In a series of recordings involving native and non-native speakers of Spanish in two different activity types, including discussions and interviews, the identity work which takes place

between the interactants has been studied from various angles. A programme for the application of the analyses to language training has been elaborated at the Department of Spanish and Portuguese in Stockholm University. A basic assumption of the programme is that the intercultural skills of language students can be successfully improved, if the students become aware of the various mechanisms of identity work with regard to how codes are shared, and which kind of topics and assumptions tend to be preferred, both in the home and the foreign language/culture community. Such awareness should be accomplished not only by means of data analysis but also through role play.

Marie-José Barbot, Université du Littoral Côte Opale (ULCO), and Shirley Lawes, Canterbury Christ Church University College (CCCUC), explained the intercultural problems involved in setting up and implementing their current experiment in a joint teacher training programme. This programme enables students to obtain two professional qualifications in one year: the Maîtrise de Français Langue Etrangère (FLE) and the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). Their aim is to provide students with a complementary programme which brings together theory and practice in an intercultural context. They identified a number of issues which illustrate how cultural concerns are of essential importance to the success of the joint programme. The paper focussed on four main issues: student experiences and expectations, preparation for professional life, professional practice in the United Kingdom and terminology. The identification of cultural differences is clearly only the first step. The extent to which differences and difficulties can be resolved at an institutional level is open to question. However, they concluded that heightened cultural awareness will better prepare students to adapt to new situations and contexts, that is, to become autonomous.

Attempts to improve intercultural communication

Next colleagues from Boulogne and Canterbury presented their experiment in a joint module for first year undergraduate students in the two institutions in two parts. First Marie-France Noel (CCCUC) and Isabelle Roblin (ULCO) presented the joint research project between French and British first year undergraduates. They explained the history, rationale and objectives of the project, enumerated the factors determining its format and presented samples of students' work and comments. They noted that this joint module had a number of positive outcomes in terms of students' personal development, intercultural relations, transferable skills and academic progress. Difficulties were mainly of an administrative and financial nature. They concluded that this type of module requires a committed team of lecturers willing to give up a lot of time which may not get the recognition it deserves for career purposes.

Marie-José Barbot and Alain Payeur (ULCO) analysed this new approach in institutional terms. In the context of higher education in Europe facing innovation, they wondered whether or not intercultural communication was welcome. As a relatively new and unexplored field in higher education, intercultural communication has difficulty coexisting with established formal knowledge. The introduction of existential competence ("savoir-être") and of skills and know-how ("savoir-apprendre") linked to this field can seem perturbing in a field dominated by classical knowledge ("savoirs classiques"). As the subject is not yet fully accepted, it is necessary to specify what is on offer in order to legitimize it. As a result, reflection on the shifts brought about by this kind of teaching is necessary. By modifying the rules of the game, intercultural teaching is likely to bring about changes in the functioning of higher education institutions.

Hassan Zaoual, an economist in ULCO, (4) gave a presentation on the South – North Network "Cultures and Development", which adopts a transdisciplinary approach to relations between academic researchers and development workers within Non-Governmental organisations. Referring to the possible alliances between economics and intercultural communication, he stressed that economics cannot respond to the expectations of the populations of the North and South without considering their symbolic representation of the world. In this sense, intercultural communication is essential. Despite the outward appearance of globalization – a single way of thinking and a single model: the hegemony of technology, science and economics – this necessity can no longer be ignored, in any aspect of society and above all in economics. It is for these reasons that his theory of symbolic sites is built on a combination of principles – links between beliefs and practices, the ethics of the site and the primacy of meaning, the principle of the uniqueness of each site, the principle of diversity, the

principle of prudence and tolerance. All this presupposes integrating the contributions of communication theories in so far as the implicit meaning of the local practices of any human group presents a specific and evolving code that must be approached carefully for fear of misinterpreting communication. Besides, this can only be achieved by releasing the humanities from the disciplinary compartmentalisations which have distorted our views of man. It is time to reconstitute knowledge in order to interpret social practices in the best possible manner. Cross-fertilisation is being carried out, secretly, as well as being each time – in space and time – unique for each individual and group of individuals. It is this uniqueness of people, societies and cultures that signals the end of the sciences (for instance, economics) which are supposed to be instrumental, objective and generalizing in their models - general models are not transferable.

The last speaker of the day, Angela Chambers, University of Limerick/Université de Lille III, gave a presentation entitled: "Improving intercultural communication: the role of virtual mobility". Defining virtual mobility as not only the replacement, but also the enhancement of real mobility, she examined the potential of virtual mobility as a means of improving intercultural competence during a period of real mobility. The paper revealed that in the language learning context, virtual does not necessarily mean "not real", as real communication between learners and between learners and teachers can be computer-mediated. Thus during a period of mobility web-based environments can provide, in addition to practical information on accommodation, registration etc., the means by which students can develop their intercultural competence. It emerged that, in the context of the development of intercultural competence, the roles of virtual and real mobility are not distinct, but closely intertwined, as the intercultural activity, namely the learner's reflection on the other culture under the guidance of the home institution, is essentially a computer-mediated activity. She cited the British RAPPORT (5) project as an example of good practice and noted that major developments in this area are dependant on recognition of its importance and the allocation of appropriate funds.

Recommendations

The last part of Friday 14th and all day Saturday 15th May, chaired by Professor Michael Kelly, University of Southampton (UK), were spent on final discussions to produce recommendations on the teaching of intercultural communication in higher education in Europe. A summary of the main recommendations is provided below. They can be grouped around the following themes:

- 1) The provision of courses in language and culture
- 2) mobility
- 3) teacher training
- 4) proposals for specific initiatives

1) The provision of courses in language and culture

- a) language courses for students of other disciplines

Language courses should be provided for all students of other disciplines and they should receive academic recognition as integral parts of degree programmes.

- b) language and culture diversity awareness

Where one second language (in practice usually English) is an obligatory and thoroughly studied subject in secondary education, the next step must be to promote substantial studies for as many individuals as possible. The cultural aspects of second foreign language studies should always be underscored. In English-speaking countries, stronger efforts should be made to promote the study of foreign languages.

The EU Commission target of two foreign languages should be adopted in secondary education, and significant competence in at least one foreign language should be made a prerequisite for entry into higher education. Foreign language studies should be followed up in higher education. This should allow as many individuals as possible to increase their knowledge and command of the foreign

language they started learning in secondary education, and/or to allow for higher education students to take up another foreign language study.

All higher education programmes should include an element of education for language awareness, particularly in relation to the diversity of language use and of culture in Europe. This should especially address the languages which are less widely taught, should encourage an understanding of the richness of the linguistic heritage and culture. In recognizing the cultural capital of linguistic communities in minority positions across Europe, the EU should seek to facilitate access to such cultures through the promotion of autonomous learning, and investment in the development of appropriate new technologies and mobility programmes.

Appropriate and attractive methods and programmes need to be developed.

c) cultural study for students specializing in modern languages

A significant part of the curriculum for both first degree students and for teacher trainees should be dedicated to the study of the cultural realities and literatures of places where the language is spoken and to the linguistics of the language in question. Students need to have a thorough knowledge of the institutions of the target country(ies) as well as a vision of the history of the target country(ies) closely related to present concerns. It is also necessary for them to be aware of cultural variety and difference between their home country and the host country as well as cultural variety and difference within each country.

2) mobility

Access to a period of study of at least one semester in a higher education institution in another European country should be encouraged for all students. As an integral part of their degree, all specialist students should be required and enabled to spend a period of at least one semester working or studying in a country where the target language is spoken.

All students undertaking periods of residence abroad as an integral part of a university programme of study should receive appropriate preparation for the academic and cultural experience to which they are committed. This preparation should include a component which addresses students' attitudes towards the relationship between their view of self (their personal identities) and their national culture of origin. It should also include specific information on the teaching and learning methods of the host country, the examination system and the expectations of staff. Differences and similarities with the home institution should be pointed out.

3) teacher training

The training of language teachers and language assistants should include specific provision for training in intercultural communication, not only in their native language but also in foreign languages. Acquired capacity for intercultural communication in the context of the place in which they are employed should be taken into account in the reemployment or promotion of language

4) proposals for specific initiatives

a) A working group on the enhancement of European citizenship should be set up.

b) University programmes on non-European languages should be established.

c) Future promotion of intercultural research should involve coverage of the conversational, anthropological and sociolinguistic bases of language interaction. Real life interaction should serve as the main basis of observations.

A wide range of perspectives enabled the Scientific Committee (6) to reach complementary conclusions, and the resulting recommendations were greatly enhanced by the interdisciplinary approach adopted. The papers from the Boulogne workshop along with the Scientific Committee's recommendations will be published.

Notes

(1) The author would like to thank colleagues who read and commented on an earlier draft of this paper.

(2) See, for example:

Abdallah-Preteceille, M. (1996) *Vers une pédagogie interculturelle*. Paris: Anthropos.

Abdallah-Preteceille, M. & Porcher, L. (1996) *Education et communication interculturelle*. Paris: PUF.

(3) See, for example:

Fant, L. (1995). "Negotiation discourse and interaction in a cross-cultural perspective: The case of Sweden and Spain." K. Ehlich & J. Wagner (eds.), *The Discourse of International Negotiations*. Berlin/New York: Mouton & Gruyter. 177-201.

Fant, L. (1997). "The stereotypical response of intercultural interactants". Barfoot, C.C. (ed.), *Beyond Pug's Tour. National and Ethnic Stereotyping in Theory and Literary Practice*. Amsterdam/Atlanta GA: Editions Rodopi B.V. 475-494.

(4) Zaoual, H. "The Economy and Symbolic Sites", in: Rahnama, M. et Bawtree, V. (1997) *The Post-Development Reader*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books, pp.30-39.

(5) Kelly, M. (1998) "Language development in the UK", *Bulletin of the European Language Council*, 4, 8-14.

(6) The following are the members of the Scientific Committee on Intercultural Communication of the Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages: Michael Kelly (co-chair, University of Southampton, UK), Vittoria Tessitore (co-chair, University of Rome III, IT), Théophile Ambadiang (University of Madrid, ES), Imelda Bonel-Elliott (Université du Littoral Côte d'Opale, FR), Robert Crawshaw (University of Lancaster, UK) Pol Cuvelier (University of Antwerp, BE), Lars Fant (University of Stockholm, SW), Michel Fournie (INALCO, FR), Hanneke Houtkoop-Steenstra (Université d'Utrecht, NL), Martin Kayman (University of Coimbra, PT), Gitte Rasmussen (Université d'Odense, DK), Geraldine Sheridan (University of Limerick, IE), Maria Sifianou (Université of Athens, GR), Wolfgang Streubel (University of Bremen, DE), Christine van-Baalen (University of Vienna, AT). Michael Kelly co-ordinated the drafting of the recommendations.