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Intercultural Communicative Competence in the Eyes of Student Teachers of English

Abstract: For many decades different language teaching methods aimed not only at developing language competence but also acquainting language learners with the knowledge of history, literature, art and everyday life routines of the target language community. Rapid socio-economic changes such as the growing interest in academic and professional mobility as well as the development of tourism and international trade proved this approach to teaching culture ineffective. Nowadays L2 is used as a means of communication with native speakers of this language and, even more frequently, with speakers coming from backgrounds different from those associated with target language countries. Successful communication, therefore, depends on the ability to deal with linguistic and cultural diversity in a variety of social contexts. In order to help language learners become competent intercultural speakers, teachers need to adopt an intercultural approach, offering a dual focus on both linguistic and intercultural elements. This article aims to present a small-scale research study conducted among undergraduate student teachers of English who were requested to express their opinions about the role of culture and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in language education. The results of the research indicate that although in most cases the subjects were able to provide an accurate definition of ICC, their perception of the role culture should play in a language classroom in some instances appeared to be based on the traditional approaches.

1. Introduction

Language teaching and learning aiming solely at developing linguistic competence do not seem to suffice in the era of mobility and distant communication involving interlocutors coming from diverse cultural backgrounds: proficient knowledge of grammar or lexis, native-like fluency and correct pronunciation do not guarantee success in communicative situations. Similarly, theoretical knowledge of historical or cultural data does not necessarily translate into the learners' ability to socialize, negotiate meaning and employ correct politeness strategies in different cultural contexts. As Bennett (1997: 16) accurately suggests, "to avoid becoming a fluent fool, we need to understand more completely the cultural dimension of language."

Byram (1997) underlines that apart from linguistic, discourse and sociolinguistic aspects, intercultural communicative competence requires also a set of attitudes, knowledge and skills. If a language learner is to become a competent intercultural speaker, the development of these three elements needs to constitute an integral part of language education. It can be observed that in spite of the implications of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages — CEFR* (Council of Europe 2001) as well as the national curriculum for language teaching, intercultural competence is heavily neglected in a language classroom. This situation can result from the fact that due to a limited amount of time devoted to initial teacher training, the role of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is downplayed in favour of other, usually language-oriented, aspects of language teaching.

Implementation of the intercultural approach to language teaching to a large extent depends on the teachers' understanding of the real nature of ICC and their familiarization with different techniques used to develop students' intercultural sensitivity. As Sercu (2005: 7) indicates, "the body of research ... suggests that it is very difficult to influence the conceptions of the practices of either experienced or beginning teachers." For this reason, it seems important to treat intercultural training aiming at developing student teachers' theoretical background and practical skills as an integral part of teacher training courses.

The theoretical sections of this article focus on providing a definition of intercultural communicative competence and outlining its role in a language classroom. The empirical part is devoted to the presentation of a small-scale research study based on a questionnaire in which the participants, undergraduate students of English Philology, were asked about their perception of the notion of ICC and its role in language teaching. The collected data helped to put forward several practical recommendations that could be used to adjust the existing teacher training programme to the actual needs of student teachers of English.

2. Definition of intercultural communicative competence

As the role of culture as a necessary component of successful communication has been underlined for a few decades, it is not surprising that intercultural communicative competence is inherently linked with the notion of communicative competence. The importance of the cultural dimension of language competence was observed by an American sociolinguist and anthropologist Dell Hymes (1972), who underlined that communication is based on utterances which are not only linguistically correct but also appropriate in a given social context. This idea was further developed by Canale and Swain (1980) who proposed a model in which communicative competence consisted of three elements: grammatical, strategic and sociolinguistic. The last type of competence referred to the functional aspects of communication in which language users must be aware of the social context, the

role of participants as well as the norms and purposes of interaction. The sociolinguistic, functional and pragmatic dimensions of communicative competence were further developed in other models (for example Van Ek 1986; Bachman 1990). The role of culture is also given a lot of attention in the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001), which suggests that an individual's communicative language competence is to a large extent dependent on a set of general competences referring to declarative knowledge, existential competence, skills and know-how as well as the ability to learn. In the light of this division of general competences as well as the models proposed by Byram (1997) and Lussier (2003), Lázár et al. (2007: 25) present ICC as a concept consisting of three dimensions:

— knowledge/*savoirs* refers to our awareness of history, culture and other sociocultural aspects of the community. This type of knowledge enables language users to observe differences between the country of origin and the target language community as well as disparities in social relations and their impact on the shape of interpersonal communication.

— know-how/*savoir-faire* can be described as “skills of comparison, of interpreting and relating” (Byram et al. 2002: 12). *Savoir-faire* involves the ability to use the *savoirs* to compare one's own and the interlocutor's cultures to predict the roots of potential misunderstandings and find possible solutions before a culture clash occurs. It also refers to the ability to implement the knowledge of cross-cultural differences, social norms and conventional requirements in successful communication. Being aware of such differences, an interculturally-oriented speaker should be able to act as a mediator between L1 and L2 cultures.

— being/*savoir-être* underlines the role of attitudes towards other cultures in successful communication. A truly intercultural speaker has a well-developed sense of curiosity and openness towards other cultures, is willing to suspend judgmental evaluations of other people and readily accepts the fact that cultures are different and governed by diverse norms. The development of such positive attitudes depends on the ability to evaluate critically one's own cultural background and see its culture in relation to that of the other cultural groups. The awareness of such cross-cultural differences should ideally evoke a feeling of empathy and positive attitudes towards other cultures, which, ultimately, may enable an individual to integrate with other communities.

Taking into account different aspects of this notion, intercultural communicative competence can be defined as “the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts” (Bennett and Bennett 2004: 149). This definition underlines all types of communicative incidents involving not only native speakers of the target language, but also interlocutors coming from diverse cultural backgrounds. As Risager (2005) underlines, cultural competence refers to the knowledge, skills and attitudes associated with the target language countries, whereas intercultural competence requires a broader definition which would embrace the knowledge, skills and attitudes that

would facilitate successful communication within several cultural backgrounds (including L1 and L2 cultures).

3. The role of ICC in language teaching

The evolution of culture teaching can be best observed in foreign language teaching methods, which, in an attempt to find the optimal way of language teaching, over the decades have adopted approaches embracing “big C” and “little c” culture (as defined by Halverson 1985). The former, also referred to as civilisation culture, represents a given nations’ great achievements in such areas as literature, social institutions and political systems, while the latter refers to the aspects of culture involving customs, traditions, social conventions and routine everyday activities. The Grammar-Translation Method adopted the “big C” culture as it emphasised the role of literary language and formal culture consisting of literature, fine arts and factual data concerning the geography and history of the target country. In the Direct Method, on the other hand, a change of perspective in teaching culture was observed — apart from the history and geography, the culture additionally embraced the “little c” elements such as information about routines, habits and everyday life of the target language community (Larsen-Freeman 2000). The “little c” approach to teaching culture was further employed in the Audio-Lingual Method, which viewed culture as consisting of behaviours and practices carried out every day by native speakers of the target language. The Communicative Approach also highlighted the importance of everyday culture, but placed more emphasis on non-verbal behaviour or pragmatics, that is aspects determining the effectiveness of communication with native speakers. Still, as noted by Corbett (2003), at the early stages the Communicative Approach aimed at developing usually unattainable native-like proficiency and the primary goal of language learning was successful communication with native speakers of the target language; therefore, the entire teaching process emphasised the language and culture of the target language communities only. For this reason, it can be said it was based on the cultural, as opposed to the intercultural, approach (see section 2). Truly intercultural communication does not exclusively involve native speakers of L2 but appears in a variety of cross-cultural situations requiring not only the knowledge of the target language “big C” and “little c” cultures, but also certain skills and attitudes referring to a wide range of communicative situations.

Consequently, a more consistent intercultural approach to teaching was necessary, an approach that would focus not on developing native-like proficiency but rather intercultural communicative competence in the three dimensions presented in section 2. To enable language learners to engage in interactions with people of other cultures and identities, the objectives of language teaching curricula should include developing culture-bound knowledge, attitudes based on mutual respect

and acceptance as well as the ability to implement these two elements in authentic communicative situations. One of the aims of language education should be to help a language learner become an intercultural speaker who “has knowledge of one, or, preferably, more cultures and social identities and has the capacity to discover and relate to new people from other contexts for which they have not been prepared directly” (Byram and Fleming 1998: 9).

It must be noted, however, that the intercultural approach does not reject the linguistic aspects of language teaching or the recommendations of the Communicative Approach but aims to emphasise the role of ICC in language learning and teaching. As Lázár et al. (2007) indicate, teaching language and culture should not be treated as two separate phenomena in a language classroom. The authors suggest that the best approach to developing ICC is to teach culture through language in an integrated manner as such a dual focus allows for treating both language and culture as central objectives of the teaching and learning processes.

All teachers are responsible for equipping their students with appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes that would enable them to communicate in cross-cultural situations. However, as “foreign language education is, by definition, intercultural” (Sercu, 1) and learning a foreign language is inherently linked with acquiring a new identity, language teachers in particular should treat ICC as an integral part of their teaching process. If language teachers are to teach culture and language in an integrated manner, they should understand the intricate nature of ICC and be able to perceive a direct link between culture and language. The level of their own ICC to a large extent depends on the type and frequency of contact with the culture in question — teachers should seek opportunities of developing their ICC by means of face-to-face (also referred to as physical) mobility or other types of contact while staying at home (for instance through the media, information and communication technology — ICT).

It is therefore important to incorporate the intercultural dimension into initial teacher training that would aim not only at discussing the theoretical aspects of ICC, but also developing appropriate skills and attitudes. To be able to pass on intercultural values to the future pupils, student teachers themselves should become competent intercultural speakers, that is speakers possessing thorough cultural knowledge of the language they are going to teach, aware of their own cultural and linguistic identity, sensitive to cross-cultural differences and willing to seek contact with L2 and L2 culture in an autonomous way.

4. Research design

4.1. Research aims

As student teachers’ personal theories of good teaching and previous experiences of their own learning often shape their future teaching practices, the author of this

research aims to observe their understanding of ICC (in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes) and its role in a language classroom. The research also focuses on student teachers' self-assessment of their own knowledge regarding the culture of English-speaking countries, and the measures they undertake to maintain contact with L2 and its culture. In order to address these issues, the following research questions are investigated:

1. How do the student teachers understand the notion of ICC?
2. How do the student teachers perceive the importance of linguistic and cultural elements in a language classroom?
3. What aspects of ICC (in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes) do the student teachers consider as important in language teaching?
4. How familiar do the student teachers consider themselves with the culture associated with the language they are going to teach in the future?
5. By what means do the student teachers seek contact with the L2 culture?

In the academic year of 2012/2013, the study programme of the Department of English Studies at the University of Wrocław, that is the institution in which the research was conducted, was subjected to extensive modifications necessitated by the process of implementing the National Qualifications Framework as well as the ministerial regulations stipulating new standards of teacher training. Consequently, the syllabi of subjects in the teacher training course had to be revised in order to meet the new standards as well as the ongoing needs of student teachers. By lending insight into the level of student teachers' awareness about the role of ICC in language education, the research was hoped to indicate a number of training needs that should be addressed in the new teacher training programme.

4.2. Participants

The research took place in June 2012. This focus description study is based on a questionnaire distributed among 20 undergraduate students of English Philology at the University of Wrocław. Although the sample is relatively small, it embraced all third-year students who had completed the teacher training programme as well as teacher training practice, and thus obtained qualifications to teach in primary and lower secondary schools. The selection of this particular group of students allowed the researcher to determine whether the existing initial teacher training programme provided the respondents with sufficient theoretical knowledge of ICC and its practical application in a language classroom.

4.3. The research instrument

The questionnaire used in the research is based on a research instrument developed by Lies Sercu (2005) and applied in an extensive research study on the cultural

dimension of language teaching in Europe. As the study also investigated Polish FL teachers, in the case of some questions it will be possible to draw comparison between the teachers' and student teachers' responses. In the original study the instrument was addressed to language teachers; therefore, some modifications were necessary to adjust a few questionnaire items to the context of pre-service teacher training in Poland. The questions referring directly to the teaching practice and teacher mobility (e.g. school exchanges or study visits) were replaced or supplemented with items more relevant to the student teachers' immediate situation; thus, the respondents were asked about their beliefs concerning their future teaching, participation in student mobility, and the role of ICT in developing their linguistic and cultural competence. Some questions included in the questionnaire for FL teachers had to be removed as they were not applicable to the Polish system of education (for instance questions about language assistants). Additionally, three elements were added by the author of this research. The participants were presented a Polish version of the questionnaire which consisted of both open- and closed-ended questions.

In the open-ended questions the respondents were asked to formulate their own definition of intercultural communicative competence. Next, they were to choose the optimal proportion between the time devoted to language teaching and culture teaching in a language classroom, and then rank different aspects of language teaching in order of importance. In the subsequent task, the student teachers had to grade different aspects of ICC referring to knowledge, skills and attitudes according to their perceived importance in the language teaching process. It is worth mentioning that the sections devoted to knowledge embrace both "little c" culture (e.g. developing knowledge about L2 values, beliefs, lifestyle and habits) and "big C" culture (e.g. raising pupils' awareness of literature, music, arts, etc.).

Then the respondents attempted to self-assess their knowledge of the selected aspects of L2 culture. Finally, the last task aimed to elicit the type and the length of physical mobility the respondents have been involved in as well as the frequency of contact with L2 and L2 culture student teachers have while staying at home.

5. Presentation and interpretation of the results

Presentation and interpretation of the results in the next section will follow the order of the research questions. When asked to define intercultural communicative competence, over a half of the participants indicate that it refers to the ability to communicate with speakers coming from different cultural backgrounds. They also point out that successful communication is essentially free of linguistic and cultural misunderstandings. Three persons define ICC as the knowledge of

culture, without clear indication of what the word “culture” refers to, while in other answers ICC is likened to sociolinguistic competence. It must be highlighted here that only two respondents view ICC as the ability to communicate with native speakers; in the remaining definitions the subjects emphasise that communication takes place between individuals coming from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Although the meaning of ICC is frequently limited (also by experienced language teachers, see e.g. Sercu 2005) to the knowledge of factual data referring to the L2 literature, arts and history, most of the investigated student teachers are able to provide a definition of ICC that complies to a large extent with definitions available in literature on ICC [see Bennett and Bennett’s (2004) definition in section 2].

The next section of the questionnaire is devoted to the optimal proportions between the linguistic and cultural components in language teaching. The overwhelming majority of respondents share the opinion that linguistic and cultural components should be treated as separate units in the classroom. As many as 15 subjects believe that 80% of time in the classroom should be devoted to teaching language and only 20% to culture. Only two students opt for an integrated approach in which the teaching of culture and language are seen as inseparable entities. In Castro and Sercu’s study (2005), the majority of Polish teachers also indicated the “80% of language teaching and 20% or culture teaching” option, while the integrated approach was totally neglected. In the meantime, effective communication depends on the interplay between language and culture. Insufficient awareness of culture-bound vocabulary, sociolinguistic rules of politeness and norms governing relations between people of different generations, sexes or social groups may lead to communication breakdowns. Therefore, an integrated approach to culture and language teaching is advocated as it might help L2 speakers avoid culture shock resulting from linguistic inaccuracies.

When it comes to the perceived importance of different aspects of language teaching, it appears that speaking is viewed as the most important (median = 1; SD = 1.08) and vocabulary (median = 2.5; SD = 1.69) as the second most prominent element of language teaching. With the median oscillating between 3.5 and 4, grammar, reading and listening are placed in the middle of the scale. According to the respondents, writing and pronunciation (median values equalling 6 and 7 respectively) should be paid lesser attention to in the classroom. The answers reveal that the respondents view teaching cultural components as the least important aspect of language teaching. Moreover, the standard deviation SD = 0.93 suggests that the subjects are rather unanimous in this claim. The respondents were also invited to indicate other aspects of language teaching that might appear important; however, no additional options were put forward. These findings confirm the general tendency observed among Polish teachers who also value linguistic objectives of language education higher than the cultural ones (Castro and Sercu 2005).

Table 1. The perceived importance of culture-related aspects in language teaching

Rank	Aspects of ICC	Mean	Mode	Median	SD
1.	Developing the ability to communicate with individuals from different cultures	2.33	1	1	2.03
2.	Developing the sense of understanding and empathy towards individuals from different cultural backgrounds	3.44	2	2.5	2.55
3.	Informing about target language lifestyle and habits	3.89	3	3	2.42
4.	Developing the learners' tolerance and openness towards other nationalities and cultures	4.22	3	3.5	2.60
5.	Encouraging the learners to reflect on cultural differences	4.94	5	5	2.62
6.	Informing the learners about the values and attitudes of target language speakers	5.17	7	5	2.73
7.	Informing the learners about geography, history and political situation in the target country	5.22	6	6	2.49
8.	Informing the learners about literature, music and art of the target country	5.78	5	6	2.18
9.	Encouraging learners to reflect on their own culture	6.06	9	7.5	3.40

Table 1 illustrates how the respondents rank different aspects of intercultural communicative competence according to their importance in language teaching. The order proposed by the student teachers indicates that the ability to communicate with interlocutors coming from other cultures and developing the sense of understanding and empathy towards others are seen as much more important elements of teaching than raising the learners' awareness of the factual knowledge concerning the geography, history, political system and arts of the target language community. Although the subjects are not unanimous in their answers, the need to encourage language learners to reflect on their own culture is regarded as the least essential element of developing ICC in a language classroom. As can be observed, student teachers tend to value the aspects of ICC referring to skills and attitudes higher than those connected with knowledge of the L2 culture. These findings stand in opposition to the results of the Castro and Sercu's study (2005) in which Polish FL teachers emphasise the importance of the knowledge-based aspects of ICC. It is worrying, however, that student teachers and Polish teachers alike do not recognise the importance of the ability to reflect on and understand one's own country. Many authors (e.g. Byram 1997; Council of Europe 2001; Sercu 2005) underline that to be a truly intercultural speaker, one needs to be aware of his/her own cultural identity and be able to relate this culture to foreign cultures.

In the next section the respondents were requested to self-assess their knowledge of different elements of L2 culture. The perceived competence appears to be the highest in the case of literature and other art forms such as music, theatre and youth culture art. Knowledge of different social and ethnic groups as well as history, geography and a political situation are graded rather low. The lowest level of competence

is concerned with the subjects' awareness of political, social and cultural bilateral contacts between their homeland and the target country. While the high level of competence in terms of literature and arts could have been predicted, as these aspects of culture are extensively discussed during academic classes at university, low self-assessment of students' knowledge of history, geography and political system of L2 countries can be surprising as these topics are also included in the syllabus. Similarly to the student teachers, Polish teachers graded their knowledge of international relations and ethnic groups as low; still, they appeared to have extensive knowledge of L2 daily life routines, literature, history, geography and political system, that is topics most frequently included in FL course books (Ryan and Sercu 2005).

The question referring to student teachers' visits to English-speaking countries reveals that as many as 7 respondents have never been to a country in which the language they are going to teach is spoken. The remaining answers indicate that 11 students have visited English-speaking countries rather rarely during short, lasting only a few days, trips and only 3 students have been to L2 countries on more than one occasion. Despite the possibility of participating in diverse mobility programmes (e.g. Comenius, Erasmus and a wide range of scholarships), it turns out that only 3 students have spent more than 1 month abroad (two students have spent respectively 6 months and 1 year in the UK, and one person reported a two-month stay in France). Interestingly, 2 out of 3 participants who reported a mobility stay longer than 2 months indicated in the second question of the questionnaire that cultural components should be given a higher rank in the language teaching process (5th or 6th rank). It suggests that longer mobility experiences might affect students' approach to the role of culture in the teaching process; still, the number of student teachers involved in mobility is too small to draw any definite conclusions.

The subjects were also asked about the frequency of contact with the target language culture. The answers indicate that the majority of respondents (65%) access mass media (press, television and radio) in English. The same number of students sometimes communicate with native speakers of English or international students. It is difficult to determine, however, whether this communication is voluntary or whether it results from being taught by native speakers or somehow unavoidable contact with Erasmus students at university. Nine respondents seek opportunities for communication with L2 speakers by means of online tools such as Skype or Facebook. Still, a small number of students report that they never use L2 media (3 subjects) and do not have any contact with native speakers (2) or international students (5).

6. Conclusions

The research presented in this article offers a number of positive observations concerning the student teachers' perception of intercultural communicative competence. It appears that student teachers are able to provide an accurate

definition of ICC and understand this notion in reference to its three core elements: knowledge, skills and attitudes. Moreover, the respondents do not hold a traditional view of culture teaching as passing on factual data to language learners: developing positive attitudes, empathy and tolerance towards other cultures as well as raising FL learners' awareness of different lifestyles and habits are recognised as more important than teaching about L2 literature, history or geography.

The respondents, however, are inconsistent in their perception of the role of ICC in a language classroom: they claim that it helps in successful communication but, at the same time, consider it the least important aspect of language teaching. Moreover, they do not realise that in order to become an intercultural speaker, competent in mediating between cultures, one needs to possess a profound understanding of their own culture. Finally, teaching culture and language are perceived as two distinctive phenomena. Such misconceptions might result from the traditional approach to teaching culture that student teachers might have experienced as language learners or inadequate treatment of ICC in the teacher training course they had completed.

Future teachers need to know how to equip their future learners with appropriate knowledge and skills that would enable them to communicate effectively in a variety of cross-cultural situations. Therefore, there is an urgent need to supplement teacher training programmes with elements of intercultural training embracing all three areas of ICC: knowledge, attitudes and skills. There is a wide array of practical materials that could be used to promote the development of ICC among student teachers, for instance Egli Cuenat et al. 2011; Lázár et al. 2007, EPOSTL (European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages). To develop student teachers' ICC, it is also advisable that all subjects in the study programme consistently include learning outcomes aiming at developing students' open-mindedness, tolerance and awareness of their own as well as other cultures.

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