

USING AUTHENTIC AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS TO SUPPORT INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Abstract

The paper presents a study carried out in 2015-2016 within the national scheme of research - VEGA 1/0106/15 based on theoretical research and empirical verification of the concept of intercultural communicative competence. Our research has revealed how the concept of intercultural communicative competence had been perceived by secondary-school teachers of English in Slovakia before they were intensively trained. Intensive workshops were based on the use of both authentic and instructional materials with the goal to support interculturally oriented language teaching aimed at challenging thinking. The former concept that supported the development of the students' linguistic knowledge and the use of a target language to obtain information about the culture of the country whose language learners were learning was expanded by the meaning-making framework which views language as a typical means by which culture is mediated. The goal of the workshop was to influence English teachers to better understand the concept of intercultural communicative competence, combining theory and practice optimally. The results of the study will be presented and analysed, providing particular recommendations for language teachers from which English learners should benefit in their future studies or professional careers.

Key words: culture, intercultural communication, intercultural communicative competence

1. INTRODUCTION

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment (2001) supports the idea of intercultural communication as Europeans no longer have a choice about whether to live and communicate with people of other cultures as the European Union is a multicultural society and its inhabitants should choose only how well they want to communicate together. Despite the fact that the CEFR is mostly considered a framework for languages, it promotes culture. There is a heightened emphasis on culture as Europeans come from different cultural backgrounds and intercultural encounters occur across national borders, in face-to-face interactions, in business, tourism, politics, etc. The internationalisation of European companies exposes people to cultural differences that can affect their intercultural communication. What is more, modern information communication technologies facilitate human interactions across the globe and allow people to participate in events around the world. Intercultural competence seems to be very important as human interaction is dominated by culture, cultural differences and people need to be able to understand and interact within multiple cultural frameworks.

An educational system in any country should focus on understanding and appreciating cultural differences with the aim to translate this understanding into competent communication. Communication is a process in which those who communicate with each other share symbological systems, working together to create and sustain the meanings that develop. All communication takes place within a certain context. According to Lustig and Koester (2013), the context includes the physical, social, and interpersonal settings within which messages are exchanged. In intercultural communication, the messages should be structured and coded so that they are culturally and interculturally appropriate and effective.

Being aware of different cultures enables language users to become competent intercultural communicators. The analogy of culture as an iceberg supports the idea of a visible portion of culture (architecture, music, food, behaviour, etc.) that is smaller than an invisible part of culture, although it is more important for understanding the aspects of culture and intercultural communication. This hidden part comprises a culture's deeply held beliefs, values and norms about the right ways of

behaving and interpreting the world. As Lustig and Koester (2013) state that visible elements of a culture cannot make sense without an understanding of the deeper components that remain hidden from view. Despite the fact that in the teaching context, the majority of language teachers focus on the visible features of culture as they are presented in their course books, those who have experience from living abroad or use other forms of becoming aware of the hidden qualities that drive those observable ones try to share and encourage either their colleagues or students to increase their intercultural competence.

2. RESEARCH

In 2015-2016 within the national scheme of research - VEGA 1/0106/15 based on theoretical research and empirical verification of the concept of intercultural communicative competence – a team of five language teachers (of English, German, French, Italian and Spanish started to focus more on the concept of intercultural communicative competence, stated in the national education programme. This programme is divided into several chapters and foreign language instruction is included into the chapter Language and Communication, alongside the mother tongues and Slovak as a second language. The target language curriculum is based on the CEFR and its philosophy behind it, emphasising communicative approaches and an action-oriented approach.

2.1 Analyses of the curriculum and its implication in English class

The national curriculum deals with all the competences presented in the CEFR. Apart from fundamental goals of language learning related to students' abilities to solve everyday life situations in a target country or helping foreign language users to make themselves understood in the home country, sharing information and ideas in a target language, the third goal refers to better understanding of the ways of living and thinking of different nations and their cultural heritage. General competences concern critical, creative and pro-social thinking. Along with other descriptors, general competences (ŠVP, 2005, p. 3) include the ones we decided to focus on the ones as follows:

- to be open to cultural and ethnical diversity
- to be aware of basic norms of behaviour and of common social conventions of the countries, in which the target language is spoken
- to identify basic cultural aspects of the selected countries of a target language and recognise the differences among them and similar cultural aspects of home country.

Apart from general competences that concern learning to learn, developing learning strategies, using target languages actively, accepting feedback, preparing for real life and becoming aware of the necessity to learning other languages, the previous version of the national curriculum for a B level of the CEFR included the descriptor - to identify basic facts about target communities, and to recognise the difference between those facts and similar ones about their home country – that was later replaced by the one presented above, focusing on basic cultural aspects rather than facts or life and institutions.

The national curriculum focuses on specific competences that are comprised of linguistic competences, sociolinguistic competences and pragmatic competences. Listed below are the descriptors that refer sociolinguistic competences:

- to respond accurately in various common social communicative situations
- to be aware of common phraseological units, sayings and proverbs
- to be aware of the differences between formal and informal discourse
- to use a wide range of language functions while responding, using the commonest expressions of neutral style
- to be aware of fundamental norms of politeness and behave accordingly

- to be aware of the most important differences in ritual everyday speech, attitudes, values and beliefs that are dominant in the target community and typical for their language use.

A close study of the descriptors in the document has revealed that the descriptors are too general and do not provide enough information for language teachers, when they are not properly trained how to imply the content of the descriptors into practice. Discussing the descriptors concerning cultural aspects with students in pre-service teacher training and teachers of foreign languages in in-service teacher training supported our assumption that language teachers focus on cultural facts of the target language communities rather than developing learners' abilities to respond and act appropriately in encounters with the target language culture.

On the other hand, this approach of teachers is supported by the topics that are introduced in language course books. Analysing the English course books (Project 5 by Tom Hutchinson), most culture pages included topics such as Education in the U.S.A., Regions of England, the English Language that were based on texts full of facts. The teachers we discussed the descriptors with admitted that due to an old descriptor (to learn basic facts about target communities) they focus on reading the text and asking the learners to memorise the data presented in the texts. While reading, the students are expected to compare the target culture with their home culture. The descriptor related to being aware of basic norms of behaviour and of common social conventions of the countries, in which the target language is spoken, is considered problematic as teachers complain that they do not have enough experience with present-day conventions and norms of behaviour because it needs a continuous contact with the target community. Other descriptors are usually omitted due to a rich content of the syllabus. Observation of the lessons in selected schools supported that the above-described approach of teachers is a commonplace.

Other aspects that are presented in the national curriculum are language and intercultural dimensions that broaden the concept of recognising norms of behaviours and social conventions in target countries as the descriptors provided in the documents deal with the aspects such as being aware of differences in formal and informal communication, maintaining basic rules and attitudes while shopping, being able to express agreement and disagreement in discussion in a polite way, etc. The teachers that participated in the project pointed out that these expressions are usually presented in the course books and they teach them naturally in the context provided, not emphasising the similarities and differences between the norms of behaviour and conventions in the home country and the target country.

2.2 Teacher training

While preparing the seminars for the language teachers, it was necessary to take into account that the level of awareness of intercultural communicative competence differs as an older generation of the teachers were provided mostly with historical, geographical and political facts about the countries the language of which they studied at university. During the academic courses of general English they dealt with the topic related to everyday life in the countries that speak that particular language. A younger generation of language teachers have studied academic courses such as intercultural communicative competence, apart from the particular historical and geographical insight into the target country during their bachelor-degree studies and cultural studies in their master-degree programmes.

In December 2016, teachers of English were invited to take part in the workshop during which they were provided with up-dated information about Britain and British culture to understand the attitude and beliefs that shape Britain's character and a set of materials usable by teachers in teaching English. Most activities were taken from the *Intercultural Resource Pack* (Utlely, 2009) and *Britain for Learners of English* (O'Driscoll, 2009) and website (www.oup.com/elt/britain). The topics were related to observing conventions, communicative styles, techniques that help prevent speakers from being confused and conversation from being broken down, different styles of learning in different cultures, levels of politeness, importance of punctuality and body language. These materials were based on authentic use of language, necessary for real life communication.

In the beginning of the workshop, most teachers complained about their overload, which resulted from many lessons per week, marking papers a lot and time-consuming preparing for lessons as they teach

students of different years of schooling and much varied levels of proficiency. They admitted that they use mostly course books and the materials devoted to culture in them. If the texts are supplemented by tasks, these are usually brought to a whole-class discussion or are completed in pairs and/or groups.

The training materials seemed to be useful as they initiated a lot of discussion during which the teachers shared their own experience, providing exact examples of activities that they evaluated as good practice. An issue raised quite often was the tendency to misuse cultural texts for lexical and grammatical analyses. This issue was placed into the category of bad practice. Translation of authentic texts was posed as well as it produces a different original (in a different language). The teachers came to conclusions that re-writing of a text by students in the classroom, be it in the form of a summary or a role-play, seems to be more useful as they can produce a different original, by emphasising different issues from the original text.

2.3 Comparison of the teachers' attitudes before and after the workshops

Before the workshop, we decided to send a questionnaire to the teachers teaching at secondary schools to get a picture of the processes in English classes. The questionnaire topics and questions were based on the questionnaire used in the project concerning an international investigation regarding the intercultural competence of foreign language teachers (Sercu et al., 2005, pp. 191-207).

The questionnaire used in our study consisted of 24 items comprising both close-ended and open-ended questions. The whole questionnaire comprised 12 pages and was returned by 25 English teachers from different secondary schools, as the expected level of proficiency of learners studying at any secondary school in Slovakia is either B1 or B2 of the CEFR. The curricula concerning both levels have the same distractors for general competences as well as for sociolinguistic competence.

The majority of respondents highly evaluated their familiarity with the country, culture and people primarily associated with English. More experienced teachers indicated that they introduce culture teaching activities quite frequently, and ask their students to think about what it would be like to live in the target country. Less experienced teachers admitted that they never invited foreigners to his/her English class nor asked their students to describe an aspect of their own culture in English. Both groups of teachers agreed upon the fact that they prepare their own materials as they are not satisfied with coverage of topics in the course books. Some teachers reported that they are not fully aware of the content of the national curriculum and were not able to say which descriptors concern intercultural competence. Some teachers stated that they regularly add new and current information related to target communities. The most variable answers were given to the question concerning the distribution of teaching time over language teaching and culture teaching. The question was close-ended and teachers were offered six options: 1) 100% language teaching – 0% culture teaching, 2) 80% language teaching – 20% culture teaching, 3) 60% language teaching – 40% culture teaching, 4) 40% language teaching – 60% culture teaching, 5) 20% language teaching – 80% culture teaching and 6) 100% integration of language-and-culture teaching. The following table shows that there was not consistency with any variable, either the number of years of teaching practice or kind of education a respondent's school offers (Bérešová, 2016).

Teachers/ Schools	Years of teaching	100% LT - 0% CT	80% LT – 20% CT	60% LT – 40% CT	40% LT – 60% CT	20% LT – 80% CT	0% LT- 100%CT
Secondary	0 – 5	-	6	2	-	-	-
Secondary	6 – 16	-	5	2	-	-	-
Secondary	17 – 30	-	6	2	2	-	-

Table 1. Distribution of teaching time over language teaching and culture teaching before the workshop

After the workshop, the same questionnaire was distributed to the same teachers and the results need commenting. Being provided materials, less experienced teachers felt motivated and admitted that they have changed their approach to culture materials in course books and stopped using them for lexical and grammatical analyses of the language. Another important shift was visible in introducing home culture. The majority of the workshop participants started to introduce a new cultural topic with focusing on home culture and then presenting new culture. Two young teachers invited foreigners to their English classes and let students discuss the pros and cons of living abroad.

Teachers/ Schools	Years of teaching	100% LT – 0% CT	80% LT – 20% CT	60% LT – 40% CT	40% LT – 60% CT	20% LT – 80% CT	0% LT- 100% CT
Secondary	0 – 5	-	4	3	1	-	-
Secondary	6 – 16	-	3	4	-	-	-
Secondary	17 – 30	-	5	3	2	-	-

Table 2. Distribution of teaching time over language teaching and culture teaching after the workshop

As Table 2 shows that most changes in attitudes occur in the group of young teachers. In the first group (0-5) one teacher decided to focus more on culture teaching than language teaching. In his report he emphasized the fact that only after the training he started to use the national curriculum more deliberately, using the descriptors from language and intercultural dimension more intensively as he now sees the concept of cultural awareness more clearly. The least significant change is recognisable in the group of the most experienced teachers (17-30) who explained their stability by the facts that their ways of teaching cultural aspects work, they are satisfied with their learners' achievements as their students actively introduce current issues from English-speaking countries as a topic for classroom discussion. These discussions comprise any real life topic, taken from English authentic sources, introduced by a student or a group of students who usually present challenging information, highlighting significant issues, and invite their peers to express their own opinions, taking their turn when appropriate and respecting each other. Cultural issues are usually dissected into similarities and differences between home culture and target language culture.

3. CONCLUSION

Developing intercultural communicative competence seems to be a natural process, parallel with acquiring a target language. A number of studies deal with explanatory analyses of intercultural communication and explore the relationship between language and culture. From the communicative perspective, cultural awareness is viewed both as an enabling language proficiency and as being the outcome of reflection on language proficiency (Kramsch, 1993). The descriptors based on the CEFR and used in the national curriculum supports an idea that intercultural communicative competence should be developed systematically while learning a target language as it affects language communication between representatives of different cultures and unexpected misunderstandings might be influenced by lack of being aware of culture of target communities.

Within the national scheme of research - VEGA 1/0106/15 - Theoretical Research and Empirical Verification of the Concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence as Part of the Current Conceptual Framework Related to Target Language Teaching Compatible with the Common European Framework of Reference: Learning, teaching, assessment, the analysis of the course books supported our assumption that instructional materials for English language teaching are quite often based on introducing facts, the daily life and institutions of the target country. However, the number of texts introducing cultural differences is increasing, for example, in the set of course books, called face2face by Redston and Cunningham (2010). The section dedicated to language development such as starting conversation, ending conversation, agreeing, disagreeing, etc. are very useful for developing intercultural communicative competence.

In both questionnaires (either before the workshop or after it) none of the teachers focus on just language teaching. While in both questionnaires, most teachers distribute their teaching time predominantly over language teaching (80%), the difference was 20% (68% in the pre-workshop questionnaire and 48% in post-workshop questionnaire). In answering open-ended item E, several teachers (32%) expressed their wish to devote more time to culture teaching, but complained about a lack of time as they are expected to treat a lot of new language and practise communicative language skills – both receptive and productive (Béřešová, 2016). A significant difference occurred in the 60% of language teaching and 40% of culture teaching category, as 24% achieved in this category in pre-workshop responses was almost doubled (40%) in the post-workshop responses. The 40% language teaching and 60% culture teaching category increased from 8% to 12%. In the pre-workshop questionnaire, some teachers (29%) specified that the course books they use to meet the standards of the national curriculum contain quite a lot of articles presenting culture, life, traditions, beliefs and values, however they admitted that many times they use them for developing students' communicative language skills (Béřešová, 2016). In the post-workshop questionnaire, 52% of the respondents stated that they use culturally-induced texts only for developing cultural awareness and started to use language-based texts for intercultural communicative competence.

Learning target languages is supported by the European Union as their members use several languages. Developing cultural awareness plays an important role in language education. The Council of Europe is concerned to improve quality of communication among Europeans of different cultural backgrounds, speaking various languages. Language provides a cue about whether language speakers share each other's cultural background. To use languages effectively, it is necessary to be communicatively competent. Communicative competences include different competences such as linguistic, socio-linguistic, pragmatic, strategic, existential and intercultural. Intercultural communicative competence enables members of different cultural groups to understand each other better and to interact effectively.

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