

DARKO ŠTRAJN
(EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LJUBLJANA)

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES

In the study LACE (Languages and Cultures in Europe), which was carried out in 2008 for the European Commission's Directorate for Multilingualism, the team started from the perception that education – and especially foreign language teaching – can fulfil at least a part of the expectations, if it focuses concretely on the development of abilities, skills and, above all, intercultural competences of pupils. The project LACE was built on theories of intercultural competences (Chen and Starosta 2005; Byram 1997, 2000, 2001, 2002) with an objective to deliver some evidence to form a basis for devising appropriate policies in the European multilingual space.

KEYWORDS: interculturalism, competence, education, foreign language, curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism seems still to be a “problem” when we find ourselves in the area of “interculturalism”, where many interactions are in play in the sphere of social, historical and cultural diversity. Identities, traditions, customs, symbols, religion, collective memories and, last but really not least, different languages are defining the space of encounters, which is the social space of multiculturalism. Education and training as agencies of linking actors in this space are of course essential, as it is well demonstrated in a series of documents of such international organizations as the Council of Europe, UNESCO and several NGOs. The notion of multiculturalism marks social spaces as we could say with Bourdieu (1997), in which unavoidably intercultural connections happen. Broadly, we can state that a scientific conceptualisation of the notion of interculturalism, as well as many empirical studies of the phenomena in the framework of multiculturalism, progressed a lot from the first “naive” attempts to define the notion. Literature, published in the last few decades is abundant. For example, SAGE Handbook (Joy, Mesha, Gordon 2008) addresses multiculturalism and children by studying traditional agents of socialization as well as contemporary media influences. Contributors to the book try to find out how socialisation practices and media content construct and teach

us about diverse cultures. Another compendium (Zieberts, Kay 2009) puts a stress on religion as an agency of socialisation in the multicultural world, which happens to be observable in Europe. On the other hand, there were also some attempts of repudiating the concept and shed – to put it mildly – different light on the phenomena of multiculturalism itself as a presumably “leftist” or even “Marxist” construction (Schmidt 1997). Without citing further references, one can remember many public activities of NGOs and some intergovernmental organisations, which one way or the other reacted, commented and devised plans of action to address various contexts of multiculturalism as well as interculturalism, which is for better or for worse generated in its framework. Such organisations often devise legal, social and political solutions for many problems, which happen to be perceived as having their roots in an expansion of multiculturalism.

CONCEPTS OF THE HERMENEUTIC THEORY

According to Gadamer, as Roy and Starosta comment, human activities cannot be discerned without taking into account their impacts upon each other. Therefore a research of intercultural communication on the bases of Gadamer’s notion of *praxis* should generate more than just knowledge. It should rely on the moral ground as well (Roy, Starosta 2001: 13). Of course, we know that any theoretical construction of coexistence of cultures and any projections of politics of difference (and diversity) encounter many obstacles, when an answer to a question on how to implement the concepts in a sphere of daily life of a society must be given. As much as there is a lot of evidence on many disappointing effects, there is still no better suited activity for the purpose than formal and informal education.

On a fundamental level (philosophical or other within humanities) the importance of education and/or training can be defined in the framework of the notion of *Bildung*, whose signification Gadamer linked to the notion of *praxis*. “The concept of *self-formation, education or cultivation* (*Bildung*), which became supremely important at the time, was perhaps the greatest idea of the eighteenth century” (Gadamer 1975: 8). This clearly means that in Gadamer’s view one cannot conceive in the realm of *praxis* any correlation of *Bildung* in the social reality without education. Further on, Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory puts forward a view on humanity as being founded on language as the ontological basis. The above cited authors (Roy, Starosta 2001: 9) also claim that for Gadamer language represents much more than just means to attain an aim since the language defines who a person is and what – in a range of many imaginable forms of identity such as ethnic, vocational, etc. – is he or she about to become. What follows from this is the obvious link between the determination of very being of humans, who are decisively constituted by language on one side and the activity of education, which

most certainly positively affects cultural relationships, on the other side. Therefore, this link also represents a constitutive aspect of the educational *praxis* in the field of interculturalism.

I shall try to present contours of an international research project under the title LACE (Languages and Cultures in Europe), which was built on these and some more closely defined theories with an objective to deliver some evidence to form a basis for devising appropriate policies in the European multilingual space. Especially foreign language instruction (of course, presupposing also learning about a mother tongue) is even in a most elementary form unavoidably an education in interculturalism, considering the circumstances of growing intercultural interactions in the framework of globalising contexts and tendencies. Taking into account this fact and building upon it so that elements of interculturalism are interlaced with a curriculum – in its methods as well as in its contents – we are on the way to construct the intercultural education, supported by a degree of reflexivity. Of course, teachers should be properly educated for the task. They should acquire knowledge on multi- and inter-culturalism and they should be informed about the state of the art teaching methods as well as they should have at their disposal an array of didactic means. Such needs and aims are visible in a number of documents of such international organisations as Council of Europe and UNESCO, and one should not forget NGOs in the field of education too.

WHAT WAS LACE ABOUT?

Starting in 2006 and finished in 2008, LACE study provided some insights and some recommendations concerning opportunities for a development of intercultural competence within the first foreign language curriculum. What follows in this section of this paper summarises only some aspects of the study. To enhance readability, these summarisations are given without specific quoting of the *Report* of the LACE study.¹ The primary specific objective of the study was to identify and assess the nature, scope and extent of intercultural competence currently developed in foreign language education at each of the main stages of compulsory education (understood here as ISCED 1 and ISCED 2 as they are determined in UNESCO conventions) in selected countries of the European Union [Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, UK (England)] and the European Economic Area (Norway). To generate the review, a sophisticated analysis tool was developed to assess the provisions and objectives prescribed by

¹ The entire study is available at this internet link: [http://nellip.pixel-online.org/files/publications_PLL/18_Languages%20and%20Cultures%20in%20Europe%20\(LACE\).pdf](http://nellip.pixel-online.org/files/publications_PLL/18_Languages%20and%20Cultures%20in%20Europe%20(LACE).pdf) (accessed 11th December, 2016).

the curricula under review. The analysis tool was applied to the original documents (not translations) by local experts working in the countries investigated. The data collected was evaluated by the Steering Committee led by Peter Franklin from *Hochschule Technik, Wirtschaft und Gestaltung* (HTWG) in Konstanz. A review created a picture across the countries investigated and also allowed a certain degree of careful comparison. The tool analysed the curricular objectives (and didactic and methodological approaches) according to three conceptualisations or models of intercultural competence or, more precisely, models of the sub-competence.

These three conceptualisations comprised theories by Michael Byram, Chen and Starosta as well as the document of Council of Europe COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK concerning foreign language teaching. These three conceptualisations provided slightly different focuses of analysis. For instance, Byram's model differs from the Chen and Starosta model. Both of these models were used to construct the above mentioned so called tools, which were actually quite complex forms or questionnaires meant to be filled-in by country experts. Let me make a note that recently Sylwia Kossakowska-Pisarek in her journal article concerning education of students of law clearly marked the difference between the emphases of both very influential theoretical models. Thus, after a condensed presentation of Byram's concepts of intercultural competence she accurately characterises his model: "It emphasizes the importance of openness and curiosity and the importance of learning about values and practices of other cultures and learners' own one. It highlights the role of the language component as a part of intercultural competence" (Kossakowska-Pisarek 2016: 43). Similarly, the author briefly describes Chen and Starosta's model, but in their case the focus is different due to the inclusion of – among others – behavioural aspects into the model. Therefore, this model allows a somewhat different view upon issues of intercultural competence: "The model puts emphasis on multiple perspectives and identities in the global context" (Ibid.: 43). Nevertheless, the main features of these models or theoretical constructions of intercultural competence are broadly quite similar, or they at least support and complement each other. Definitely they don't contradict each other. Hence, I am giving an outline here of the project's summarization of only Byram's model to illustrate what the country experts had to look for in their national curricula. The analysis tool also collated data referring to didactic and methodological approaches.

BYRAM'S MODEL OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCES

1. Linguistic Competence

- *the ability to apply knowledge of the rules of a standard version of the language to produce and interpret spoken and written language*

2. Sociolinguistic Competence
 - *the ability to give to the language produced by an interlocutor – whether native speaker or not – meanings which are taken for granted by the interlocutor or which are negotiated and made explicit with the interlocutor*
3. Discourse Competence
 - *the ability to use, discover and negotiate strategies for the production and interpretation of monologue or dialogue texts which follow the conventions of the culture of an interlocutor or are negotiated as intercultural texts for particular purposes*
4. Intercultural Competence, comprises:
 - 4.1. Knowledge (Savoirs)
 - *knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general process of societal and individual interaction*
 - 4.2. Discovery & Interaction (Savoir apprendre)
 - *the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction*
 - 4.3. Attitudes (Savoir être)
 - *curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own*
 - 4.4. Interpreting & Relating (Savoir comprendre)
 - *the ability to interpret a document or events from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own*
 - 4.5. Critical Awareness (Savoir s'engager)
 - *the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries*

Analysis of national curricula with the tool basically provided findings, which were then processed by the steering committee of the project.

FINDINGS: RELEVANCE OF CURRENT CURRICULA

The final report of the project takes into account also other research evidence provided by teachers and it presents the particular findings of the project. Again, I am presenting these findings in a condensed form:

- There is some but not complete overlap with the elements of the three models of intercultural competence underlying the curricula reviewed in the study. The curricula demonstrate a tendency to emphasise linguistic competence and communication skills at the expense of intercultural competence.

- The curriculum review undertaken with the analysis tool makes clear that when intercultural competence is a focus of the curricula it tends to concern knowledge and attitudes rather than behaviour.
- It can be said that in many cases the curricula are only partially relevant to the optimum.
- Effectiveness of current curricula: Intercultural competence objectives may be described in the curricula in such general terms that it is difficult for teachers to imagine what they may mean and, more significantly, how these objectives can be put into practice in the language classroom. Greater clarity and detail are necessary in the formulation of objectives in the area of intercultural competence development.

APPROACHES ACTUALLY USED IN THE CLASSROOM

To gain further data an online survey was conducted of 213 foreign language teachers in primary and lower secondary education. As I already mentioned above, quantitative and qualitative data were collected, which were evaluated by the Steering Committee. Experiences of teachers developing intercultural competence in foreign language education were also researched through telephone interviews, which were conducted in English, Danish, Flemish, French, and German with 78 teachers. 34 of them are teaching in primary and 54 of them in lower secondary education.

Final output was achieved by an assessment by the Steering Committee of all the data collected. On the basis of all findings the research team – apart from specific national reports and other information and explanations – also produced Recommendations for two relevant levels of policy making in education systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL

The research team concludes from the study's findings that, as a matter of principle, the teaching of foreign languages can be enhanced by the proper promotion of intercultural competence alongside linguistic skills. To pursue this aim, certain steps can best be taken at the European level. They concern the areas of strategy on the one hand and mobility, professional development and teaching resources on the other. The following summarises the recommendations made by the authors of the study at this level:

- make intercultural competence development alongside foreign language learning a key feature of a new framework strategy for multilingualism;
- support intercultural competence development in language learning as a means of enhancing, also in lower secondary education, practical business-related

skills for relationships both within the EU and with extra-European cultures, in pursuit of the aims of the Lisbon Agenda;

- focus on intercultural competence development alongside linguistic skills as a priority, where appropriate, in the next general call for proposals under the Life Long Learning programme;
- establish and fund an international, multi-disciplinary group of experts to establish a framework of performance indicators which describe attainment levels of intercultural competence and to develop methods of assessing intercultural competence in the language classroom;
- support awareness-raising in the area of intercultural competence for officials, educational policymakers and decision-makers, foreign-language educators and other key multipliers at the European and national level: this would assist in creating an underlying and proper appreciation of the nature of intercultural competence, how it can be developed and how it complements European language policy;
- support research into the nature of intercultural competence and into approaches to developing and assessing it in school settings, specifically foreign language learning;
- increase funding for international teacher mobility, teacher exchanges, school partnerships, school exchanges and visits, and simplified procedures;
- support (1) the development and operation of an EU-wide face-to-face and virtual network of experts and practitioners in the teaching of intercultural competence in the context of foreign language learning, and (2) the development and operation of an EU-wide multilingual, Internet-based intercultural competence development resource bank.

RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Other steps can best be taken at the Member State level. These cover the areas of strategy and administration, initial teacher education, professional development of teachers, curriculum design (including assessment) and teaching and learning resources. The following summarises the recommendations made by the authors of the study:

- fund research into intercultural competence linked to foreign language learning;
- promote understanding among foreign-language educators, curriculum designers and other key multipliers, of the nature of intercultural competence and its development;
- promote and fund teacher and pupil mobility measures;
- improve initial teacher education to give greater emphasis to intercultural competence and its development;

- promote and fund professional development courses and in-service training for foreign language teachers;
- improve the design of foreign language curricula to include clearer and more detailed specification of objectives, descriptions of didactic and methodological approaches and methods of assessment;
- Support the development and provision of teaching and learning resources for language teachers; support and fund professional development for those developing such materials.

CONCLUSION

The following concluding comments are sole responsibility of the author of this paper and not of the whole LACE project team. The findings of LACE project – no matter how relatively modest it was especially in its empirical component due to limited budget – draw attention to a discrepancy between declarations on international level and “real life” on micro levels. As we all know, the educational goals concerning a formation of intercultural competence are more than desirable on the international level. However, in view of what was generally found out about the first foreign language curriculum in the countries involved in the project, some goals are included in the foreign language curriculum, but the situation is bleaker on the level of cross-curricular contents. Of course, a detailed assessment of the results in each particular country shows significant differences between countries, but the main aim of the project was not any ranking of countries. The recommendations, therefore, constitute a ground for comparisons and further reflection on possible improvements. Results of the LACE project, which I presented here in a rather condensed way, point towards attainable impacts in the development of intercultural competence in a practice of foreign language teaching. As for both sets of recommendations I am not in possession of any evidence about an implementation of them in the policies of the respective levels and in teaching practice in the European schools. Maybe an additional research or at least an evaluation should be conducted to reach any conclusion, but I am inclined to say that there isn’t much to research and/or evaluate, regarding the impact of the findings and recommendations.

There cannot be any doubt about it that foreign language teaching represents probably the most important part of a formation of intercultural competence of pupils. Such a view isn’t, needless to say, any original discovery of the LACE project, but it represents also knowledge of those social sciences and humanities, which deal with many different aspects of reproduction of cultures. On the other hand, it wouldn’t be enough to rely only on foreign language teaching in the formal educational framework for the purpose of deepening tolerance and mutual understanding between cultures in already more or less multicultural European societies. Both,

on the European level and on national levels the notion of intercultural competence requires further refining especially in the educational context. As it also follows from answers of teachers on-line and in telephone interviews it is strategically important to include knowledge and understanding of intercultural competence in teacher education colleges as well as in in-service teacher education. An increasing amount of scientifically founded knowledge requires an appropriate translation for the needs of educational discourse and its usage in any educational *praxis*.

It is quite a bit worrying that in most countries one can find very visible traces of ethnocentrism in the curriculum. As, for instance, in the Slovenian case the situation is critical especially in view of cross-curricular contents, since a bulk of other curricula – except to an extent the citizenship education – put a stress on a development of the national identity without even mentioning the intercultural aspect. It goes without saying that intercultural competence (or whatever in that sense) is absent from these curricula. In Slovenia and elsewhere politics and not the majority of educators can be blamed for this. This means that in most countries governments' offices don't pay enough attention to European standards and trends. However, one must admit that the European politics in this field is, hopefully, still a work in progress. Unfortunately, due to some recent movements and currents in the public sphere, amplified by the so called refugee crisis, the developments point much more towards a *work in regress*. At the same time many political parties, both in "new" and "traditional" democracies, which are confronting populism and propagation of fear of foreigners and cultural minorities, for reasons of a political pragmatism do not really feel like promoting any decisions to strengthen interculturalism. However, this is another topic, which requires a strong involvement of social studies and humanities in the public sphere.

As we know, many teachers of citizenship education and related "sensitive" syllabus (like history, geography, etc.) feel explicit and hidden tensions in the classroom due to such political atmosphere. We can only hope that many benefits and advantages, which better developed interculturalism would certainly contribute to the social and economic development, will become increasingly more visible. On the other hand, there is an increasing evidence that intercultural competence enables an individuals' fuller and more creative life in the European multicultural communities as well as in the global world.

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