Teaching Communicative and Intercultural Competence

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Prologue: Two classrooms:

A group of 13-year-old English children studying French have received from a partner group in France some materials, produced in English, showing them attitudes to 'law and order' in France. They too have prepared and sent materials, in French, for their French partners including: a video of a sketch portraying a series of traffic offences; an audio-taped sketch relating tales of bullying and flouting of school rules; a picture-documentary of police uniforms and equipment (both English and American); an audio-tape of a series of sketches demonstrating different roles of the police; a photo-documentary of the English school demonstrating all the different rules operating there (school rules, rules for the school bus, the role of prefects, school uniform etc). In class they read and discussed – in both French and English – what they had received. Because they had themselves discussed how to make their French peers understand the attitudes of English people, they could compare and contrast but also see how their partners had had to decentre in order to decide what they should send.

In an upper secondary group of English 17-year-olds, a similar process of analysing materials – but this time not directly acquired from a peer group – includes listening to an interview with a pupil about a strike in a French lycée, scrutinising diagrams of the organisational structure, the 'organigramme', of their own school and that of a specific school in France, studying statistics from a website about the numbers of young people studying in different types of school throughout France, watching a video of the day the baccalauréat results are posted. In this project, the teachers had collected materials from a school they had visited: carrying out the interview themselves; sending the English organigrammes to a colleague in France and asking them to get a group of students to do something similar for their own school; recording the video.

Both projects, developed in English schools some years ago, illustrate some of the principles of teaching intercultural competence: juxtaposition and comparison to gain insight into how 'we' as well as 'they' think and act in an aspect of daily life; focusing on specific people and places not 'the French' or 'the British'; collecting and analysing data as social scientists do; drawing conclusions from different sources of data; learning as much about 'us' as about 'them'; reflecting critically on what 'we' do and take for granted as 'natural' when in fact it is 'cultural'.

All of this could also be done with a focus on another school in Britain or a school in another English-speaking country. In that case communicative competence in a foreign language would not be needed, only intercultural competence, which could be taught in for example a citizenship education lesson. In the cases described the learners were simultaneously

developing language competence – using some of the principles of CLIL but in the foreign language classroom – and intercultural competence. The link between language and culture, and between communicative competence and intercultural competence was through the acquisition of new concepts, new vocabulary, where they began to realise that 'école' and many other related words such as 'professeur' do not have the same meanings and connotations as 'school' and 'teacher'. They were becoming aware of language and of culture at the same time (see also: Byram 2012)

As a teacher of French myself, I often heard the question from my pupils "please sir, why do we have to learn French -- I'm never going to go to France", and that was when I was teaching in the south of England. So one of the things I used to organise was day trips to France, since even the poorest pupils could afford those. Later, as a trainer of foreign-language teachers, I often heard those who came to interview for the training course say that they wanted to teach languages despite their unpopularity in British schools, because they "wanted to broaden children's horizons". Language was not the only or even the prime concern, especially if they agreed with the learners just quoted that actual use of the foreign language was unlikely to be sufficient to justify their and their learners' hard work over several years. For learning a language is very hard work and intellectually demanding. It is like "gardening in a gale" (Hawkins, 1987), since a few hours of foreign language scattered through the weeks and months, sometimes years, do not amount to more than the equivalent of a few weeks of immersion in another country to learn a language. As teachers and learners we know that this is certainly not enough to acquire language to a high level of speaking ability or even writing ability if that is the focus and the promise that it might be useful in the future – even if it is English, the new 'world language' – is not enough to justify the effort. There has to be an education purpose beyond this.

Communicative competence and (Inter)cultural competence – some principles

Knowledge and skill

In a story about helping US American and Mexican car dealers come to an agreement about buying and selling cars with 'rebuilt' engines, Agar (1994) demonstrates that the problem was not one of 'communicative competence' as foreign language teachers might understand it. It was a matter of understanding the keyword, 'rebuilt', in all its complexity. In another place he refers to the way in which such words and 'rich points' cannot be lifted out of their context without long strands of attachment – like putty or maybe sticky toffee – coming with them. 'Rebuilt' has different connotations in the two languages – negative in Mexican (and other) Spanish – and positive in American English – and the concept was intertwined with expectations about how to behave when negotiating a business deal which are quite different in the two countries. As an anthropologist, Agar showed that a full understanding of the word is complex – which is not surprising for us linguists – but also that even with good semantic insight, successful communication was not guaranteed until it was combined with knowledge

of how other people 'think and act' about (in this case) business and of the way those people think about our way of 'thinking and acting' about (in this case) business.

This kind of understanding of communication is well-established in the business world and can be traced back to the work of anthropologists working in the 1950s and captured in a seminal book by Hall (1959) *The Silent Language*. It can be traced forward to a well-established tradition of cross-cultural training for business people of all kinds. What is surprising to linguists is that most business training pays little or no attention to linguistic or communicative competence. Cross-cultural business trainers and language teachers could well learn things from each other.

In the world more familiar to foreign language teachers there is also a long history which Risager (2007) has analysed in detail. One of the most well developed strands of that history was in Germany, where the key word was 'Landeskunde', meaning 'knowledge about a country'. In much foreign language teaching, it was indeed 'knowledge about' which was the focus of any attempts to teach knowledge beyond knowledge of grammar. Even when the focus moved from grammatical knowledge to communicative skill, the cultural dimension remained – and in many cases still remains – a pre-occupation with teaching 'knowledge about'. One of the consequences of this is that many teachers believe that they are not well enough qualified because they do not have enough knowledge or experience of a target language country.

The change which is now taking place in intercultural competence is similar to that which took place in language competence i.e. from an emphasis on knowledge to an emphasis on skills. 'Knowledge about' is still a part of intercultural competence but skills which include 'discovering knowledge' are just as important if not more so.

Cultural and intercultural competence

Before going further, it is important to notice the distinction between cultural competence and intercultural competence. The first is a matter of focus on one or more countries in which the target language is spoken and upon the ways in which people live and work and think in that country, i.e. 'we' observe and analyse 'them', in a one-way relationship. The second is a matter of constant awareness of the mutual relationship between people of another language and country and ourselves as speakers of our language and inhabitants of our country i.e. how 'we' observe 'them' and how 'they' observe 'us' – and vice versa. That relationship of comparison and contrast – or rather of juxtaposition – promotes firstly a better basis for communication since each side is attempting to be aware of the other and how each is seen by the other. Secondly, an ability to "see ourselves as others see us" allows us another perspective on our own world which we don't otherwise have available, and allows us to think carefully and critically about what we take for granted. This is what makes language teaching in schools different from cross-cultural business training, for the latter has different aims and purposes: to be successful in business, rather than to be reflective, thoughtful and critical, about society.

It is also important to be aware of the notion of "essentialism", i.e. the risk of making general statements about people in another country – "the Italians/English (or British[1]) think..., the Italians/English say...., the Italians/English do...." – statements which are inevitably stereotypes over-generalising and therefore mis-representing the complexity of life in another country, the complexity of the social groups within it, and the constant changes which are happening in any society. Of course, as in all pedagogy, there is a need for simplification as a starting point, whether we are talking about "the English language" or "the English people". One simple way to avoid the risk of *over*-simplification is always to provide at least two contrasting examples of whatever is being presented about how "the French people" think and act, and always to remind our learners that they would be offended if they were stereotyped in the same way. As we saw in the two examples at the beginning, the beginners tend to focus on simplified generalisations about their country whereas the advanced learners were studying one case in depth. This is comparable to the simplifications we make when teaching language competence and which are refined as learners become more advanced.

Planning the teaching of ICC

One reaction from language teachers to what I have said so far is to say that, whether it was called *Landeskunde* or *civilisation or area studies*, this dimension of foreign language teaching is always present and was always done. Our research (Byram et al., 1991) did indeed show this, and revealed that teachers of French in England were concerned to "broaden children's horizons". The problem was that this was not done systematically. As a consequence children's understanding of France and French society and people, and their attitudes towards "others" could not be shown to be influenced by foreign language teaching. There was no evidence that teachers' good intentions were having the effect they hoped for. The reason seemed to be that teachers planned systematically the ways in which they developed children's language competence, but did not do the same for the cultural dimension – not least because they had no proper training in how to do this. There was a need to provide a means of planning lessons: deciding on what the content should be, and deciding the learning objectives or outcomes.

More recently a survey of language teaching in Europe (LACE 2006: 8) summarised what teachers said as follows:

> The difficulty in developing intercultural competence in the language classroom mentioned most frequently by teachers is lack of time. Two aspects are involved: time within the timetable to incorporate the development of intercultural skills, and time outside the classroom to plan such teaching and to organise international contacts, projects and so on.

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[1] One of the peculiarities of the United Kingdom is that, from outside, people often refer to 'the British' – and the British often do the same when they are abroad – but from inside the distinctions between English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish are becoming ever stronger and statements about 'the British' are even less accurate than statements about 'the English or the Welsh etc

The second main difficulty that teachers identify is shortage of suitable resources. Some teachers complain that the textbooks are inadequate. Shortage of computers and Internet access is a problem for some teachers in some countries.

92.5% of all respondents in our study (and 91.9% of ISCED 1 teachers) report that they feel there should be more specific guidance for teachers with regard to the development of intercultural competence.

All this indicates that little has changed, not least in teacher training.

Help is however available and there are many starting points[2], including those which can be found in cross-cultural training. The format is to provide a model of intercultural competence where the different elements are defined, for example various kinds of attitude, various skills in understanding other people's behaviour, various accounts of what is considered to be necessary knowledge about another country. The latter is the most well-developed in foreign language teaching and the most discussed. It is also the easiest to teach, and can be found in sections in textbooks about aspects of life in a target language country for example. It is also the easiest to assess: the knowledge which has been taught is to be learnt and can be tested. However, in the models from cross-cultural training, where cultural competence shall be applicable and usable in more than one country for more than one business deal, the emphasis is much more upon attitudes and skills, and assessment is usually in terms of psychological tests of readiness for interaction with other people.

For foreign language teaching, one model has been widely cited in research and used the practice of curriculum planning, in Germany and New Zealand and perhaps elsewhere, as part of the latest attempts to create a national curriculum where intercultural competence is taken seriously. This is the model of "intercultural communicative competence" (Byram, 1997). Its purpose is to describe five components of intercultural competence and define it as objectives which teachers can use to plan curricula and lessons. There are also three other (linguistic) components of communicative competence but since these are already familiar and well discussed, there is no attempt in the model to repeat the definition of the objectives which encapsulate these components.

The model has strengths and weaknesses. Its strengths seem to be that it is accessible to foreign language teachers and does not demand some of the difficult components which can be developed only in cross-cultural training. Its weaknesses include the fact that there is no explicit connection between the linguistic components which form communicative competence, and the other components which form intercultural competence, although more recently that connection has been specified and developed.

An example

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[2] For a brief and practical introduction download Byram, Gribkova and Starkey
http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Guide_dimintercult_EN.pdf

Here is a brief description of an experimental project which took place in a Bulgarian school during English lessons, where the starting point was the model in question. The year was 1998, a few years after the change from a communist regime in Eastern Europe including Bulgaria. The teacher decided to take the well known topic of 'Christmas' but not to tell learners – aged about 17 – facts about Christmas in an English-speaking country, in the *Landeskunde* or *area studies* mode, but rather to use this topic as a means of developing awareness of one's own country and culture and of teaching some of the skills of the social scientist who wishes to work things out by collecting data. These ideas were expressed as her aims for this series of 8-9 lessons:

- to show whether Bulgarian Christmas tradition has changed – after 1990
- to compare with British[3] tradition and introduce other cultural issues
- to teach students to do 'research': analysing data, forming concepts, drawing conclusions.

Before the project started in the classroom the teacher gave learners a task. Each student was to go to a shop and buy one Christmas card they would like to post for Christmas. While in the shop, they should observe: who else was buying cards – and note their age, sex, nationality - how many cards they buy - which cards sell more and which less?

Then the lessons in school began. In groups, students exhibited their cards to other students and explained why they had bought a particular card. They also had to describe the card in terms of price, size or colour or images and messages in the card or the text on the back. The teacher had given them a series of questions to guide the discussion

- Who buys Christmas cards?
    1. What age, sex, occupation are they?
    2. Are they local people or tourists?
    3. How many cards do they buy?
- What Christmas cards?
    1. What size and format are they?
    2. What images are included?
    3. Who printed them?
        etc
- Why buy Christmas cards?
    1. What do Christmas cards mean to Bulgarians?
    2. Why do they buy them?
    3. Who do they send them to?
    4. What do they write on them?

The first two groups of questions were descriptive and therefore conceptually and linguistically easy, but the final questions were more difficult since they invited the learners to think about their own experience and analyse why they do the things they do and have always done, perhaps without reflecting on why. Each group had to report to the whole class and the teacher summarised and compared.

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[3] In this case the reference to British rather than English was I think justified since Christmas traditions are very similar throughout the United Kingdom. New Year traditions are however very different in Scotland to other parts of the UK.

The second task for groups was to classify their cards into types, according to the images and messages they found. After each group had worked on their cards, reported to the whole class and the teacher had summarised, all of which took of course much discussion, the following groups emerged: Traditional Bulgarian Christmas cards - illustrating the traditional Christmas table; Religious Christmas cards with Biblical images; Children-theme cards - e.g. children making snowmen, playing with snowballs; Winter-landscape cards - snowy woods or fields; Christmas-tree decorations - typical Bulgarian cards - traditional decorations.

In the third stage, there was more discussion of the implications of what they had found; for example, that traditional Bulgarian Christmas cards had not changed; that there were recently introduced innovations, e.g. UNICEF cards with 'Merry Christmas' in English.

The next stage involved the teacher giving groups some British cards and asking them to analyse as before, and report and discuss in the whole class. The outcome this time was a different classification and this could then be compared with the classification of Bulgarian cards. There were four types of British card: Religious cards; Winter-season cards; Children-theme cards; Christmas decorations. In the course of doing this comparative analysis the class noticed many things, including the different kinds of information on the back of cards. The British cards often referred to charities which benefit from the buying of the card – only a recent and infrequent innovation in Bulgaria – and also to the fact that they were made of recycled paper. This latter point seemed strange since the learners assumed initially that this meant they were cheap cards and did not understand that 'recycled paper' has positive connotations and is not cheaper than other paper. In the course of this process of analysing and comparing, the cards had stopped being simply 'Christmas cards' and had become 'data' of the kind social scientists – for example ethnographers like Agar – collect as they try to understand another society.

As the teacher describes what she did, she also comments upon what was happening and upon how the students reacted:

> The whole idea of charities was new in the area at the time – there had been no charities and no need for charities in communist times, when everybody had a job and nobody was poor, even if nobody was rich.

So the teacher had to give some information about Britain, British charities and the concept of 'charity', in the 'background studies' mode. Although 'background studies' and the learning of 'facts' is insufficient, it is still appropriate to provide information to support learners' investigative skills. The knowledge acquired needs to be used to stimulate curiosity and surprise and critical reflection, and they went on to a discussion of the political changes in their own society since 1990.

The lessons went further (Topuzova, 2001) but what has been happening so far in these lessons is that students have been acquiring a number of skills and competences based on the objectives set out in the model.

First of all the students acquired some ***knowledge***, not only about England but also about Bulgaria.

- Knowledge about: Christmas cards in England and Bulgaria; recycling; recent history in Bulgaria; the role of charity in capitalist welfare states (and more)

Second they acquired some ***skills in comparing and contrasting***, first of all in very concrete matters – comparing and contrasting Christmas cards – and then comparing and contrasting abstract ideas and concepts of charity.

- Relating/comparing: English and Bulgarian symbols of Christmas; English and Bulgarian concepts of charity

Third they acquired some of the skills and competencies of the social scientist, the ***skills of investigating***, of collecting data, of categorising data, and of drawing conclusions.

- Discovering social practices in Bulgaria (and England) connected with Christmas by investigating/observing/collecting data, categorising data, i.e. being scientists

Fourth, they were stimulated to ***be curious***. This is not necessarily the same thing as being tolerant, and I think curiosity is more important than tolerance:

- Becoming curious about Britain AND the recent history of Bulgaria, thinking about the future; realising that Bulgarian society has not been always 'like this'.

Fifthly, and most importantly, students began to learn how to evaluate and assess what is happening in society, and above all in their own society; they were acquiring ***critical cultural awareness***. They were learning to think, and to be conscious of the background to their thinking, to be conscious of the criteria by which they make their evaluations and react to new phenomena in society.

- Evaluating the change in Bulgarian society since the end of communism – the advantages and disadvantages.

The question of the relationship between communicative and intercultural competence is addressed in two ways. First, the students were doing all this in a foreign language – for most of the time at least the language demands were not high – and in that sense they were fulfilling the best conditions for language learning, since we know that languages are best acquired when they are used for tasks which are engaging and stimulating for the mind, rather than just practising language skills. This is the principle of *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL) and some of the techniques from CLIL are evident here and could be developed further.

Second, the students were essentially learning one key word, one rich point, as Agar would call it, and its corresponding word in their own language – and how the two have different connotations. The word is quite banal: "Christmas" / "коледа", but it is a fundamental idea and once students learn that everyday words can have very different connotations, they begin to be aware of this in all their communication.

By presenting this example, I do not intend to say that all lessons should be of this kind. This teacher and other teachers also have lessons with a more traditional focus on language skills and knowledge. Secondly I do not intend to say that all lessons should have a strong political focus, and indeed this teacher did not expect this to happen. Her original intention was simply to stimulate interest in the ways in which Christmas is celebrated in Britain and Bulgaria, and to begin to develop students' scientific skills of investigating, collecting and analysing data, whereas in fact their 'critical cultural awareness' became very significant. However this example illustrates very well all the different competences which make up intercultural competence, and that is why I use it.

Furthermore, as a consequence of accident rather than design, this lesson began to introduce an element of *education for citizenship*, because the pupils began to think about their own society, a purpose foreign language teaching shares with education for citizenship whilst giving it a different angle. However, this is not the place to develop further the relationship of foreign language teaching and education for citizenship (see Byram, 2008).

Conclusion

On the basis of my own experience as a teacher, of my working with pre-service and in-service teachers and as a consequence of empirical and theoretical research, it is clear to me that language teachers whatever the language they teach and wherever they teach it, are highly committed to the educational value of "broadening children's horizons". My own attempts to do this as a French teacher were a bit like fumbling in the dark and I have learnt a lot from other teachers as they have tried to become more systematic in their curriculum and lesson planning.

There are still problems. One problem is to find a way to address more systematically the teaching of intercultural competence to young learners, although here too there are many recent developments. Another one is more intractable in practice, for although in theory and in the world of cross-cultural training, it is easy to devise ways of assessing intercultural competence, these are not easily adaptable to education systems and to examinations. Given the emphasis upon examination results not only in Britain but in many other countries, the cultural dimension of language teaching will perhaps remain a second priority – although Germany and New Zealand may indicate the contrary – until we can find a way of assessing intercultural competence and making it part of the ways in which not only learners but also teachers and schools are assessed.

To end however on a positive note, I have often been encouraged by those teachers who put their beliefs in educational values on a par with if not above the demands of assessment. Perhaps what is needed is more systematic pedagogy which will convince that assessment is not everything.

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