Intercultural development through intercultural awareness and cultural briefing

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to show that developing our students and (non-)teaching staff interculturally needs raising intercultural awareness and cultural briefing. The method used is documenting (to clarify the concepts culture, multi-culturality, cross-culturality, inter-culturality, and intercultural awareness, and to develop teaching aids) and testing the intercultural communication competence of both students and teachers after attending specific activities. Expected outcomes of such an approach would be: in students and teachers: challenging viewpoints that perpetuate inequality and discrimination; reflecting on European topics; enhancing intercultural awareness; understanding and responding to social, linguistic, and cultural diversity; identifying common values in spite of cultural differences; improving cultural awareness; integrating within the new socio-cultural environments, respecting cultural diversity and fighting against racism or xenophobia; in organisations: addressing target groups by providing new and improved practices to cater for the needs of disadvantaged groups and to deal with social, linguistic, and cultural diversity.

Keywords: Intercultural development; intercultural awareness; cultural briefing.

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1. Problem Statement

One of the important features of the Erasmus+ Programme (*Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2017*) is "Equity and Inclusion". Equity and inclusion can be promoted by facilitating the access to transnational projects to learners with disadvantaged backgrounds (and, therefore, fewer opportunities compared to their peers). One of the personal difficulties or obstacles that limit or prevent these learners from taking part in transnational projects is cultural differences. Tertiary level students usually fall into this category because they face *linguistic adaptation* and *cultural inclusion* difficulties. If *linguistic adaptation* is an ongoing process due to the language courses undergraduates may or are compelled to attend, cultural inclusion remains an issue.

Moreover, one of the aims of all Key Actions types (1, 2, and 3) is to *improve the teaching and learning of languages* and *promote the EU's broad linguistic diversity and intercultural awareness*. The "Erasmus+ Programme Guide" emphasises, for each of these Key Actions, the following *needs related to the intercultural / European dimension* of the activities: Key Action 1 (Learning Mobility of Individuals): *Linguistic and intercultural preparation* of participants before departure; *Linguistic and intercultural support for the participants before departure*; Key Action 2 (Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices): *Linguistic and intercultural preparation* of participants before departure; *Equipping both educators and youth workers with all competences and skills needed to deliver high quality services and address increasingly diverse needs such as, for instance, the needs posed by multicultural societies*; *Promoting people-to-people contacts, intercultural awareness and understanding*.

Though mentioned tens of time, neither intercultural preparation, nor intercultural support is mentioned among the key terms of the *Glossary* at the end of the "Erasmus+ Programme Guide", not to mention intercultural awareness. This is why we had the idea of initiating the project "Intercultural Development through Intercultural Awareness and Cultural Briefing" whose main intellectual outputs would be a set of 28 activities for the raising of intercultural awareness to be included in English classes in the 1st year of study (tertiary level) or carried out in a separate course for future Erasmus+ mobile students and teachers of other disciplines than English; and a set of 33 cultural briefings on the Programme Countries (28 EU Member States and 5 non-EU Member Countries) to be posted on the University website on the Erasmus+ page for future Erasmus+ mobile students and teachers of other disciplines than English.

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the paper is to present the methodology for the organisation of activities centred on **intercultural development** through the development of **cultural awareness** and **cultural briefing** (Boye, 2016).

2.1.1. Intercultural Development

In **Intercultural Development**, there is a shift from "minimizing [cultural] differences [to] accepting [cultural] differences, which involves the recognition and appreciation of multiple cultural frameworks" (Endicott, Bock & Narvaez, 2003). The authors cited found statistically significant relations *between moral and intercultural development*, *between multicultural experiences and intercultural development*, *between depth of multicultural experiences and intercultural development*, and *between depth of multicultural experiences and moral development*, and suggested that "we might encourage students and teachers to *value quality over quantity*, namely, to choose intensive immersion cultural experiences over whirlwind tours that move quickly through several cultures." (Endicott, Bock & Narvaez, 2003).

2.1.2. Intercultural Awareness

Being **culturally aware** means being aware of the "pattern of knowledge, skills, behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as material artefacts, produced by a human society and transmitted from one generation to another" (Williams, 2014).

If **Cultural Self-Awareness** is "the foundation of communication and it involves the ability of standing back from ourselves and becoming aware of our cultural values, beliefs and perceptions" (Quappe & Cantatore, 2007), **Intercultural Awareness** involves becoming aware of the cultural values, beliefs and perceptions of people from other cultures through a process of comparison in which we see, interpret and evaluate things. Evaluation leads to similarities and differences (both positive and negative) between two different cultures. More recently, **Cultural Awareness** was defined as "a conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices and frames of reference can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in real-time communication" (Baker, 2012).

Cultural differences can be perceived in four different ways (Quappe & Cantatore, 2007): "My way is the only way" (Parochial stage), "I know their way, but my way is better" (Ethnocentric stage), "My Way and Their Way" (Synergistic stage), and "Our Way" (Participatory Third culture stage). If the third stage belongs to what is labelled as **Multicultural Awareness**, the last belongs to **Intercultural Awareness** since it "brings people from different cultural background together for the creation of a culture of shared meanings. People dialogue repeatedly with others, create new meanings, new rules to meet the needs of a particular situation" (Quappe & Cantatore, 2007).

The last 30 years have seen a profusion of manuals for the raising of Cultural Awareness (Kassebaum, 1992; *Arab Children in sport – A fundamental skill development program: A Resource Manual for Sport Leaders*, 2001; *Cultural Awareness: 58 Factsheets*, 2006; *Managing Cultural Diversity: Training Program Resource Manual*, 2010; Williams, 2014; *Cultural Awareness: A Free Manual*, 2016; European Union, 2016). They focus on cultural areas such as Arab (*Arab Cultural Awareness…*, 2006) or African-American (William, 2014), on activities such as law enforcing (Kassebaum, 1992) or sports (*Children in sport…*, 2001), or on the way people express cultural awareness (*Cultural Awareness: A Free Manual*, 2016; European Union, 2016).

Recently, the European Union introduced the concept of **Transcultural Awareness** defined as *awareness of culture as a result of intercultural exchange* (European Union, 2016).

2.1.3. Cultural Briefing

Cultural briefings or, rather, **cross-cultural briefings** (see the series "Culture and Customs of…" published by Greenwood Press; *Cross-cultural briefings*, 2010) are designed for businesses, government departments, or individuals.

2.2. Developing Activities

López-Barrios, Villanueva de Debat and Tavella (2008, in López-Barrios, 2012, 1) conclude that "[…] course-books do not encourage intercultural awareness as they include insufficient instances of the target language in authentic use, give prominence to global topics in detriment to more local issues that may be more meaningful to the learners and give emphasis to aspects of life in the UK and the USA in disregard of other English-speaking communities." and that there are "few attempts to make the course-book relate to the students' experiences". Thus, course-books "mostly make learners 'consume' information about aspects of life in the target language communities and often require the creation of a similar text as a follow-up activity." (*Idem*) Hence, the need for special activities such as *Ice Breakers*, *awareness activities*, *Stereotyping & Unpacking the –isms Activities*, or *Community Implementation Activities*: Candy bar analysis; Chocolate milk and shades of skin colours; Collaborative painting; Complimentary round table; Critical incidents; Cultural scavenger hunt; First impressions; Inclusion/exclusion; Intercultural holiday party; Is that a fact?; Jelly bean personality; Label activity;

Let's say "Hello" in different languages; Lookism; Me and my M&Ms; People with disabilities; Pipe cleaner similarities; Potato activity; Proverbs: similarities and differences; Tell me s story; The chain of diversity; Think about that…; Unequal resources; Walk apart, walk together; What do you know about…?; What have you heard about…? (*Diversity Activities Resource Guide*; Neill, 2004; Ingram, 2004; Ingram, 2008; Currila & Randall, 2011; Leandri & Quincer, 2011; Levesque & Pilling, 2011; Sahr, 2013).

Numerous authors have emphasized the role of online instruction associated with in-class instruction in the raising of cultural awareness in language teaching/learning (Al-Jarf, 2006; Baker, 2012).

2.3. Developing Cultural Briefings

A cultural briefing might cover one or several of the following topics:
- Communication: Are there a range of meanings? First Encounters, How does one use "Yes" and "No"? Non-verbal Communication, Social Courtesies, What are popular topics of conversation?
- Directions of Change: What are the most powerful symbols of modernity?
- Doing Business: Conduct of Commercial Business and Local Work Practices, Means of Communication, Negotiation, What are likely to be the greatest barriers in making contacts?
- Etiquette: Dress Rules and Gift Giving, Hospitality, What kinds of hospitality are likely to be extended?
- General Information: Driving and Transport, Education, Food, Drink and Travel, Geography, Housing and Security, People, Services, Shopping, Time and Leisure
- Public Relations: Economic and Social, Political, What do people think is important in their political system?
- Social Order: Family, Men and Women, Role of Religion, To what extent is the family the basic unit of society?
- Time Horizons: Past, Present and Future, What is the general attitude towards time?

2.4. Testing Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Facciol and Kjartansson (2003) and Kjartansson and Skopinskaja (2003) were among the first to consider methods of assessment in intercultural communication courses in academic institutions for teacher trainees in English as L_2. Young and Sachdev (2011) investigated the beliefs and practices of teachers in the USA, UK and France relating to the application of ICC to English language programmes and identified a lack of support in testing for effective and appropriate approaches to culture learning and interculturality. Baten, Dusar and Van Maele (2011) attempted at testing behavioural flexibility, communicative awareness, cultural bias, empathy, generalizations, knowledge discovery, respect for otherness, or tolerance for ambiguity.

Skopinskaja (2009) claimed that **assessing intercultural communicative competence** means ***assessing intercultural knowledge*** (the understanding of the similarities and differences between the world of origin and the world of the target language community), ***assessing intercultural know-how*** (the ability to function and interact in the target language and to integrate experiences in the L_2 to use efficiently communicative competence as an intercultural speaker) and ***assessing intercultural being*** (cultural awareness – basic understanding of the differences in beliefs, attitudes and values across cultures; critical awareness – critical interpretation of one's cultural identity and acceptance of the fact that other cultures may have different beliefs and attitudes; and transcultural internalization – empathy with other cultural identities).

Zheng (2014) identified cultural knowledge, cultural attitude and cultural behaviour as the three components of intercultural competence and suggested as methods of assessment written tests (summative assessment) and performance evaluation and portfolio assessment (formative assessment). Thus, cultural knowledge should be assessed on the micro level (specific situations),

defining clearly the content of cultural knowledge and including knowledge on host culture; cultural attitude should be assessed using Bogardus' social distance scale, Osgood's semantic differential approach or Grice's statement judgment method (Zheng, 2014); and cultural behaviour should be assessed by both multiple-choice tests, short answer questions, true/false questions, and portfolio ("a purposeful collection of student's work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress and achievements in one or more areas [including] student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit and evidence of student self-reflection" (Zheng, 2014).

3. Methods

The method used is documenting in order:
- to design a methodology for the organisation of activities centred on the culture, multi-culturality, cross-culturality, inter-culturality, and intercultural awareness;
- to develop a set of 28 activities for the raising of intercultural awareness;
- to develop a set of 33 cultural briefings on the Programme Countries;

and testing the intercultural communication competence of both students and teachers after attending the 28 activities for the raising of intercultural awareness and after studying the 33 cultural briefings on the Programme Countries.

4. Findings and Results

We believe, together with Quappe and Cantatore (2007) that cultures can be bridged by:

- Assuming differences, not similarities;
- Evaluating situations based on accurate descriptions only;
- Being empathic;
- Checking our assumptions systematically;
- Becoming comfortable with ambiguity;
- Celebrating diversity.

The **results of such an approach** could be:

- *In students*: challenging viewpoints that perpetuate inequality and discrimination; deeper reflection on European topics; enhanced intercultural awareness; greater understanding and responsiveness to social, linguistic, and cultural diversity; identification of common values in spite of cultural differences; improved cultural awareness; integration within their new socio-cultural environments; respect for cultural diversity and fight against racism or xenophobia;

- *In teachers*: challenging viewpoints that perpetuate inequality and discrimination; deeper reflection on European topics; greater understanding and responsiveness to social, linguistic, and cultural awareness; identification of common values in spite of cultural differences; improved cultural awareness; respect for cultural diversity and fight against racism or xenophobia;

- *In organisations*: an innovative approach to addressing target groups by providing new and improved practices to cater for the needs of disadvantaged groups and to deal with social, **linguistic, and cultural diversity**.

5. Recommendations

The conclusion and recommendation of this paper is that all higher education institutions involved in Erasmus+ projects should develop such teaching aids.

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