VIEWS AND WORKSHOPS OF A MASTER'S CLASS IN INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: MILL'S MODEL OF INTERCULTURAL ACTION

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This paper is the result of a participative process in which the students of the Master's Degree "Didactique des Langues" (foreign language didactics) at Université du Maine (Le Mans, France) explored through whole-class activities the field of intercultural dialog and intercultural competence teaching. Our approach to intercultural teaching offers a new point of view: it places intercultural competence in a wider context. We consider it to be beyond encounter and dialog, beyond professional skills, and instead an intercultural action: living, accepting and creating together. As Byram (2008) emphasizes, the development of intercultural competence has to lead to a critical cultural awareness of oneself as a citizen. My thesis is that teachers and students who work with their own cultural biography, who keep the social dimension in their minds, can through intercultural competence cause changes in society. We will try to prove that a culture of a given society does not consist, as Descombes states, *o*f whatever one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members (Descombes, 1995*),* Rather, this acceptable manner takes on a new perspective in language teaching. Culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but through the construction of habits, viewpoints, and beliefs from which people construct strategies of action. Mill (1990) suggests that it is important when different ways of living exist, just as it is useful when different opinions are expressed, that different characters should be allowed enough latitude, provided that they do not harm one another.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is the result of a participative process in which the students of the Master's Degree "Didactique des Langues" (foreign language didactics) at the University of Maine (Le Mans, France) explored through whole-class activities the field of intercultural dialog and intercultural competence teaching. Our approach to intercultural teaching offers a new point of view: it places intercultural competence beyond professional skills, as an intercultural action.

In order to develop Mill's model of cultural identification through diversity, we will present the teaching of intercultural competence as an alternative view for changing action and beliefs. In order to do so, this paper provides a reflection on the

experience and practice of the teacher and the students, focusing on a number of student papers that explore their own cultures, practices and beliefs and develop with freshness and enthusiasm a new approach through an impressive number of cultures. Through their papers, intercultural competence becomes more than a professional skill; it becomes a way of life.

THESIS AND PROCEDURE

As teachers of foreign language didactics we see ourselves utilizing multiple methods in order to instill in our students an inquisitive spirit concerning their cultural values, either conscious or unconscious, rooted in their social context and their native language.

This interest led me to develop an approach to intercultural teaching which offers a new point of view: it places intercultural competence beyond encounter and dialog, beyond professional skills, as an intercultural action: living, accepting and creating together. We experimented with this approach with students in a course at the Master's level, using group workshops in order to promote dialog and intercultural awareness.

My thesis is that, because of "the presence of the social dimension in each individual's mind" (Descombes, 1995), teachers and students who work with their own cultural biography can, through intercultural dialog, become intercultural persons who can bring about change in society. This can happen through an examination of our preconceptions of other cultures and through an exploration of our beliefs which may or may not be different from others' beliefs. As Byram emphasizes, the development of intercultural competence has to lead to a critical cultural awareness (1997, 2008).   "When such change takes hold and becomes incorporated into the person's sense of themselves, a step towards being an intercultural person has been taken" (Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2003, p. 5).

In order to lead the students to take this step, I suggested, as an objective of the course, a meeting with others through the cultural biography of each participant. Five groups were formed in the class with names the students chose. No group contained more than one (or, rarely, two) students from the same cultural background. Each group had to discuss a precise subject and produce a text at the end of the workshop exploring the topic of the day. At the end of the year their texts would be published.

The groups were: "Algréchicais", "Energy mix", "Enfants sauvages", "Indécis" " and "Mosaïque." As an example of the diversity of one group we can see the following composition of one of the groups:

- ➢   Marie-Astrid – France

- ➢   Cathérine - Greece

- ➢   Hasan -Turkey

- ➢   Uthen - Thailand

- ➢   Iuliana - Romania

- ➢   Yan - China

- ➢   Haroun – Algeria

This diversity in the course enabled us to create an atmosphere in which all participants can engage in active, collaborative learning and substantive discussions. Encouraging an atmosphere of tolerance takes practice and preparedness. The choice of groups is the first element to be considered in this approach.

Choice of Groups

This first step, the choice to form groups, needs to be examined. It seems evident to all of us, that we cannot be educated as individuals, but in interaction with others, as we are social actors. Therefore, focusing on the group gives its members "a sense of security which in turn leads individuals to favour insider members of their groups over outsider members of other groups." (Tajfel, 1981, as cited in Alred et. al., 2003, p. 3) Very soon the group has created its own identity, which makes it possible to experience the intercultural exchange together. Students realise that if "I am not with the group, an element is missing because I am a necessary element in the operation of this group" (their words). In the classroom setting, before being French, or Greek, or Chinese, I am one of a group.

In order to lead the students to the intercultural action we would like to explore how they responded to situations that arose in their community classroom. We will first show some examples which demonstrate the process of change that this experience caused, starting with one concerning physical placement in the classroom and followed by others concerning some of the students' statements during the workshops. Then their final works will be presented in order for us to examine the contribution which dialog can make to the educational process of intercultural competence.

Physical Placement in the Course

In many classrooms, as in ours, the largest amount of space is devoted to the arrangement of individual student desks: 30 desks lined in neat rows and facing the teacher's desk. In the beginning of the year students were seated with their cultural

group: Chinese students in the front, Romanian, French and Algerian in the middle and Greek students at the back.

Figure 1. Physical placement of the students in the beginning of the year"
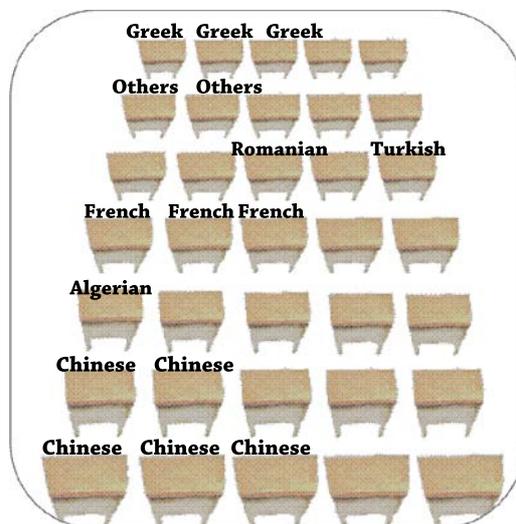
We think that the physical layout, as portrayed in Figure 1, reflects the cultural habits of the students. Placement in the far back of the room is often observed in students who prefer to avoid hard work or interaction with other students or with the teacher. Placement in the front rows indicates hard-working students, such as Chinese students.

Diversity is a fundamental human asset. In a course on intercultural competence diversity necessitates exchange and negotiation over values and actions. In order for students to collaborate in small groups, we organized them around tables or cluster of desks (see Figure 2 below). Working in groups turned our diversity into active inter-group collaboration.

In the concept of Intercultural Dialog, cultural diversity is taken as a given, and also as something positive. It is also understood as a potential that can be developed not only during a course, but all life long. At the end of the year students not only adopted intercultural action as a mode of engagement between members of the groups, but also as a joint action of all members, not limited to one course structure.

We noticed that in another course, where the students did not have to be with their group, their physical placement had changed; they were no longer seated with their cultural group, but they seated themselves with students of other cultures, and all students sat closer to the front of the room.

Figure 2. Physical placement of the students during the intercultural course
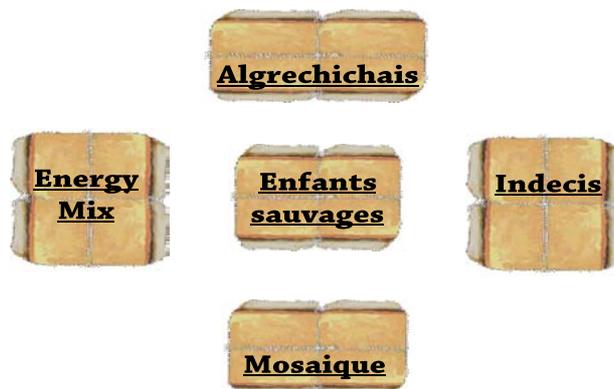
Individuals largely live in and through structures (as in a Master's course). These structures, and the rules by which they function, establish how much they value cultural diversity in society. The experience of our students working in groups expanded their capacity for intercultural dialog in and between all individuals of different cultures not only in the framework of the course but in what we can become together in our every day life.

Figure 3. Physical placement of the students at the end of the year

The new physical placement of students at the end of the year (see Figure 3 above) illustrates that even beyond the limits of our course; students developed the desire to continue the exchange which constitutes the basis of intercultural competence. They developed intercultural competence which "involves change not just in behaviour but also in cognitive and affective levels" (Alred et. al., 2003, p.8).

Within the framework of this course, clarification of the differences between the groups was not clearly solicited. Instead we focused on the identification process of our students, the critical process towards their cultural environment, as well as their development of a global-centric world view and a growing sense of responsibility for a project that they wanted to see published.

Workshops of the Students: From One Reality to Another

During group activities students had to explore different situations. The objective was to allow these future language teachers of languages to develop the type of intercultural competence that opens individuals from a given culture to individuals from another culture. This competence involves certain aptitudes for the students concerned, in particular:

♦   The aptitude to view their own behaviour as determined by the cultural group to which they belong, and to be conscious of the relativity of the perception of reality.

♦   The aptitude to analyze, at the moment of intercultural contact, the difficulties which may happen in interaction in terms of cultural differences and stereotypes.

♦   The aptitude to use behaviour strategies which enable them to adapt to cultural differences.

We present some of the group workshops where we can first notice their aptitude to use new strategies of actions after interaction with others, as well as changes in their perceptions after workshops:

> Before I believed that Americans were ignorant and that they did not care about others, but they respected cultural differences; and also that they ate badly (not their table manners, but the quality of their food). Now I know that Americans care for people, that they respect diversity and that they eat really badly. (*Avant je croyais que les Etats-uniens étaient ignorants et qu'ils s'en fichent des autres, mais qu'ils respectaient les différences culturelles ; et aussi qu'ils mangeaient mal (pas au niveau des manières à table, mais de la qualité de la nourriture). Maintenant je sais que les Etats-uniens ne se fichent pas d'autres, qu'ils respectent bien la diversité et qu'ils mangent vraiment mal.) Les enfants sauvages*

Change of perception cannot be radical. In order to assure continuity the individual's views change progressively, because the fundamental role of views is to secure one's development without procuring violent ruptures in one's identity. Negative attitudes can progressively turn into a positive perception of difference:

> Before coming to France I thought that the French were dirty,
> chauvinists, hypocrites, individualists, liars, as well as irrational, but
> that they had confidence in others, and liked to laugh and enjoy life.
> Now I see that the French are not all like that, but that they like to stand
> out from the crowd and enjoy life; this is true for the French in general.
> (*Avant de venir en France je pensais que les Français étaient sales,
> chauvins, hypocrites, individualistes, menteurs, irrationnels, mais qu'ils
> accordaient facilement leur confiance, aimaient rire et se faire plaisir.
> Maintenant je vois que les Français ne sont pas tous comme cela,
> mais ils préfèrent être remarqués individuellement; pour ce qui est de
> se faire plaisir et de jouir de la vie, cela est vrai pour les Français en
> général.) Energy Mix*

Negative attitudes are easily adopted before meeting the other. Students admit having different views "Before" and "Now'. These views will continue changing as far as individuals admit and communicate their ideas and feelings for the others:

> Before coming to France, I thought that Arabs wore only traditional
> costumes, but I've realized that they are completely westernized.
> (*Avant de venir en France, je pensais que les arabes ne portaient que
> des costumes traditionnels, mais je me suis rendue compte qu'ils sont
> tout à fait occidentalisés.) Energy Mix*

Sharing these proposals, it appears obvious to us that the way to achieve intercultural competence is through the awareness of our stereotypical ideas. The next step is to be able to adopt new views and to proceed to respect for diversity of behaviour and diversity of opinions.

> The richness of the cultural diversity of our group (seven different
> nationalities) enables us to have different ideas as well as common
> points in our cultural references: (*La richesse de la diversité culturelle
> de notre groupe (sept différentes nationalités) nous permet d'avoir des
> idées différentes et des points communs au niveau de références
> culturelles.) Les enfants sauvages*

Furthermore, students began to orient towards a questioning and analytic attitude to what seemed normal to them:

> While going around the table, we realized that the values dear to each
> one of us seem to be obvious, even innate, so much so that it is often
> difficult to explain the reasons for them. (*Lors de notre tour de la table,
> nous nous sommes aperçus que les valeurs chères a chacun de nous
> sont évidentes, voire innées à tel point qu'il est souvent difficile d'en
> expliquer les raisons.) Algréchisais*

And they began to understand that the way to begin to respect diversity of behaviour is to respect diversity of opinion.

> Since we come from different countries, we do not have the same principles and, therefore, the same examples to which all this [referring to values] can be applied. (*Vu qu'on vient de pays différents on n'a pas les mêmes principes et c'est pour cela qu'on n'a pas les mêmes exemples où on applique tout cela.*) Mosaique

Instead of limiting themselves to the topic of the workshop, students began to make conscious choices about ways to extend their participation and to understand that respect for diverse lifestyles would make it possible "to let each man live as he sees fit rather than force him to live as others see fit" (Mill, 1990, p. 79).

> We can conclude by saying that our answers rest on two principles, morality and ethics. Therefore our actions are related to the situation we face each time. Furthermore, they depend on the mentality and the values of each person. *(On peut conclure en disant que nos réponses sont en fonction de deux principes du conséquentialisme et du déontologisme. Alors nos actions sont liées à la situation qu'on affronte chaque fois. En plus ça dépend de la mentalité et des valeurs de chaque personne.) Indécis*

The statements of the workshops the students presented confirm their aptitude to use behaviour strategies which enable them to adapt to cultural differences. The students are enactors of intercultural competence because of the choices they take - in class and outside it - and the influence they have on each other.

Action is considered to be the behaviour resulting from an intention which influences the status and form of human relations. It is in this way that we can describe students' behaviour as a constituent of intercultural action. There is a correlation between the individual's action – including both choice and implementation – and their beliefs, their values and their goals. When these beliefs change, the behaviour of individuals changes also. They learn to respect diversity and become aware of the enrichment that cultural differences offer to our society and to our personal development.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: MILL'S MODEL

Mill sugests that "just as it is useful that there be differeing opinions, it is good for there to be different lifestyles and that every allowance be made for diverse characters provided they do not harm one another" (Mill, 1990, p. 49)

Through data, informal discussions with the students and personal observations, we present how the development of intercultural awareness can be seen through Mill's model, which suggests:

♦ A positive perception of difference: As long as we have a negative perception of difference, as a state of tension between different beliefs and not as a source of enrichment for us all, we will not be able to achieve the democratic goal of respect for diversity of cultures and people. Out of a fear of being different, we sometimes seek homogeneity in our personal beliefs, which guarantees legitimacy and helps us avoid vulnerability. However, this fervent attempt to avoid vulnerability weighs down on us in our daily lives, because we are trying to hide our uniqueness and end up restricting the free development of our personalities.

Identification through diversity: The culture of a given society consists of "all that one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members" (Goodenough, 1964, p. 36), but this "acceptable" manner takes on a new perspective in intercultural teaching. What is acceptable in our home society is not acceptable in another context, (as the French society where our foreign students live and study). Our students were not afraid to expose themselves or explore their own cultures as well as different practices and beliefs in order to develop, with a fresh eye and enthusiasm, a new intercultural group identity. Through their papers, intercultural competence becomes more than a professional skill; it becomes a way of life.

Results of Intercultural Competence: The Final Papers of the Students

At the end of a year of implementing this didactic approach in the intercultural competence course, we evaluate the results of intercultural competence of the students: how did they work in pairs? What did they really think about intercultural situations? We did a qualitative study, centred on two aspects of their papers: the way they treat their subject (which they chose freely) and the analysis of the conclusions they arrived at.

We present the results of the final papers, written by pairs of students and dealing with different realities: marriage, traditions, dance, food, family, and religion, in the different social environments explored: the USA, Turkey, Greece, Thailand, China, France, Algeria and Romania.

We will first present an extract of a paper presenting the feminine condition in France and China, by Achard de Leluardière Sybil and Zhang Jingmin:

> We can comment on the impressions of each person, but the goal here is not to make generalizations, nor to accept the prejudices and

stereotypes associated with Chinese and French cultures as established facts. It is, however, interesting to see what impressions people have of foreign cultures and of their own culture. And to try to understand why they think as they do. Is their mind "formed" or "formatted" by an oppressive and invasive society, or are they free, able to think for themselves and thus to form their own opinions? *(Nous pouvons faire des commentaires sur les représentations de chacun(e), mais le but ici n'est pas de faire des généralisations bien sûr, ni de prendre les préjugés et stéréotypes associés aux cultures chinoises et françaises comme établis. Il est cependant intéressant de voir quelles sont les représentations que les gens ont par rapport aux cultures étrangères, mais aussi par rapport à leur propre culture. Et essayer de comprendre pourquoi ils pensent ainsi : leur esprit est-il « formé », voire « formaté » par une société trop pressante, trop envahissante, ou sont-ils libres au contraire, capables de penser par eux-mêmes et donc de se faire leurs propres opinions ?)*

Very interesting question indeed! The conclusion of this paper, we believe, will be an answer to this question, which reflects our thesis about intercultural action. In fact we can state that the reflections of the students represent the values that an intercultural person holds: intercultural attitudes of curiosity and openness are able to be seen through the questions that students asked.

We continue with a work concerning religion. "Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity: Which future?" by Lina Lia and Morvan Marie Astrid:

We French, Christian or not, have the impression that the Chinese are very religious, but this study showed us another reality: we may be two countries at opposite ends of the world, with different cultures, but the young people are similar. Young people today no longer practice religion, but seek an identity and grapple with numerous existential questions.(*Nous Français, chrétiens ou non, avons une représentation de la population chinoise comme étant très portée sur la religion, mais cette enquête nous a montré une autre réalité, nous sommes peut-être deux pays aux deux extrémités du monde, avec des cultures différentes, mais les jeunes sont pareils que chez nous, une jeunesse qui ne pratique plus, qui cherche ses repères et que est en proie de multiples questionnements sur son existence.*)

Discovering by themselves other realities is the goal of intercultural competence. The students demonstrated that they are able to acquire new knowledge as a result of communication and interaction with others. One could say that intercultural competence, "among other things, involves everyone developing a position to

accommodate the other person's 'otherness' and to adopt a constructive and knowledgeable attitude towards it" (Byram, 2008, p.55).

Another paper explores leisure time in China and in France: an intercultural bond, presented by Braun Celine and Cheng Jin:

> Whether in daily life or on vacation, the individualization of leisure activities actually reveals the [socio-economic] divide within a nation. Not everyone benefits from the same conditions and the same opportunities. It does not matter which country is considered, these inequalities are unfortunately real everywhere. *Que ce soit aussi bien au quotidien ou en vacances, l'individualisation des pratiques des loisirs ne fait que révéler les fractures au sein d'une nation. Tout le monde ne profite pas des mêmes conditions et des mêmes opportunités. Peu importe le pays considéré, ces inégalités sont malheureusement réelles partout.*)

Differences can exist not only among cultures but in the same culture. Our purpose was not to change students' values but to try to make them think explicitly about the differences in their own cultures, in order to develop knowledge of a particular culture or country, or of different cultures within their own country.

We continue by exploring The American and Turkish family, a paper written by Levent Guner and Sewall Aaron for their final work of our course.

> We noticed the growing importance of divorce, which is, or is becoming, a real social problem in the two countries, and the status of school and teachers, which enjoy a similar unsavoury reputation - although in essence they are not the same. Thus our initial assumption of opposition between the two cultures must be tempered because although there are great differences, there are also similarities. *(Nous avons remarqué l'importance grandissante du divorce, qui est ou devient un véritable problème de société dans les deux pays, et enfin le statut de l'école et des enseignants, qui jouissent d'une notoriété similaire – bien que dans le fond ce ne soit pas la même chose. Ainsi notre hypothèse initiale, celle d'opposition entre les deux cultures, est-elle à tempérer, car bien qu'il y ait de grandes différences, il y a aussi des similitudes.)*

It was possible for this pair of students to analyse the situation of two different cultures and consider that their assumption of opposition between cultures should be tempered. As intercultural persons they were able to see the misunderstanding that comes out of comparing. As Byram emphasises "the skills of comparison, of interpreting and relating are crucial" (Byram, 2008, p.64).

Finally, we will present one more paper of our students, concerning dance in Greece and Turkey by Papastamatiou Androniki and Hasan Sahin:

> The intercultural element in the dance of these two countries is certainly present. It is an element which indicates a relation and consideration of the interactions between the groups and the individuals. The intercultural approach does not aim to identify others by shutting them within a network of meaning. Intercultural competence is not a competence which makes it possible to dialog with a foreigner, but with others. The objective is thus to learn about that encounter and not to learn the culture of the other. *(L'élément interculturel dans la danse de ces deux pays est bien présent. C'est un élément qui indique une mise en relation et une prise en considération des interactions entre les groupes, les individus…L'approche interculturelle n'a pas pour objectif d'identifier autrui en l'enfermant dans un réseau de significations. La compétence interculturelle n'est pas une compétence qui permet de dialoguer avec un étranger, mais avec autrui. L'objectif est donc d'apprendre la rencontre et non d'apprendre la culture de l'autre.)*

In fact, we can state that the students' final papers generate a reflection which can contribute to a better knowledge of what being an intercultural person means.

CONCLUSION

This research showed that intercultural competence is an element of individual development. It examined a Master's course as a social subsystem, dependent on other subsystems and the whole social system. It proved that there is a relationship between individual actions and beliefs and used for that purpose the description of factors which have an impact on individual action, such as relationships in class. The results that issued from this research allow a presentation of intercultural competence that situate it in an enlarged conceptual network grasped through the use, appropriation and transmission of languages and cultures and as an alternative view about changing action and beliefs. Relying on discourse analysis and more specifically on Mill's model, this study presents the means that students use to bring forward their beliefs in their discourse, as well as the way these beliefs can change in a course on intercultural competence. It also demonstrated the influence of intercultural socialization when working in multicultural groups.

Now that the intercultural competence course is completed it has become obvious that for the students it was quite an extraordinary learning path. Success means for them, and us, their continuing to question themselves and continuing to develop intercultural competence. They are currently teaching all over the world but they are

in contact with one another and continue talking about how they feel, and what they do.

They have confirmed that culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but through the construction of habits, viewpoints, and beliefs from which people construct strategies of action. These strategies can be changed when you become an intercultural person.

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