DESIGNING AN INTERCULTURAL PROGRAM TO PREPARE STUDENTS TO STUDY ABROAD

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This article focuses on how to teach intercultural communicative competence to learners of English as a foreign language enrolled in a university exchange program in Europe, and help them become 'intercultural speakers.'   The intercultural speaker can be defined as an intermediary between his or her own culture and the other's culture. Intercultural competence is a skill to be acquired. Significant elements of this process were identified during a three-year action-research project with students learning English as part of their business degree at Mulhouse University (France). The outcomes of this project were in turn used to design a specific course to prepare Erasmus students for a stay in a European university where they complete a master's degree in disciplines other than English. The purpose of this course is to improve both the linguistic and cultural adaptation of these students, help them reach greater intercultural awareness and thus become real 'intercultural speakers.' In this article, I first discuss the theoretical background of the course. Next, I examine the learning context for which this course was designed and detail the implementation process of the course. Finally, I report on the outcomes of the course

INTRODUCTION

The research presented in this article centers around the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence which according to Byram (1997) includes linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and intercultural competence, and focuses on how learners of English can be helped to improve both their linguistic competence as well as their ability to manage the encounter with otherness - in other words how to become an 'intercultural speaker' (Byram, 1997). This research is based on a previous action-research study (Zumbihl, 2004) which uncovered specific elements of necessary preparation for a stay abroad in order to acquire competence in intercultural mediation. The course described in this article, which takes place at Nancy 2 University (France) for students in literature and social sciences, prepares students for the Erasmus program of a European university exchange. The design of this course was based on theoretical research defining intercultural

communicative competence, objectives and assessment. A first cohort has already attended this course. The results obtained by these students for the evaluation as well as their impressions of the preparation they received, including a questionnaire about their level of satisfaction concerning the course, will be presented in this article. Since the design of this program is the subject of an action-research project, the hope is that it will evolve in the future, based on the findings presented here, in order to meet better the students' needs for effective preparation for their stay abroad.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Intercultural Communicative Competence

From a more theoretical point of view, one issue was how to integrate language learning and developing intercultural skills, as discussed by Byram (1994) and Coperias Aguilar (2008) into the course to enable the students to acquire intercultural communicative competence.

As for communicative competence Van Ek (1986) suggested that foreign language teaching should not be concerned merely with training in communication skills but should also involve the personal and social development of the learner as an individual. In other words it should enhance the individual's self-reflection and self-awareness and his or her ability to interact in an intercultural context. Van Ek presented a framework for comprehensive foreign language objectives which included aspects such as social competence, the promotion of autonomy and the development of social responsibility.

According to Byram (1997), when persons from different languages and from different countries interact socially they bring to the situation their knowledge about their own country and that of the others. The success of such interactions depends on establishing and maintaining human relationships, something which depends on attitudinal factors. It also depends on the skills of interpretation and making connections between aspects of the two cultures and the skills of discovery and interaction. Byram (1997) presents these factors as *savoirs* (knowledge) to be acquired or developed by the learner, the future 'intercultural speaker': *savoir être* (attitudes), *savoir comprendre* (skills of interpreting and relating), *savoir apprendre/faire* (skills of discovery and interaction), *savoir s'engager* (skills of cultural critical awareness).

Research about communication and interaction between groups is also one of the main concerns of this theoretical background even if, as Byram (1997) points out, the perspective taken by Gudykunst (1994) concerning cross-cultural communication and interaction has a minimal concern for language. However, Byram agrees that the kind of model for cross-cultural communication developed by Gudykunst (1994) reminds foreign

language teachers of the importance of seeing linguistic competence in a wider context, and of taking new psychological factors into account to prepare for face-to-face interaction with people from other linguistic groups.

Abdallah-Pretceilles (1999) also asserts that linguistic competence alone, even if it is necessary, is not sufficient from a communicative perspective. Consequently intercultural communicative competence means learning how to consider strangeness, language and cultural otherness which goes through the development of specific competences. For Abdallah-Pretceilles (1996), the contact is not between cultures but between individuals in an intercultural encounter. The second aspect to consider is the encounter with otherness and education developed by Abdallah-Pretceilles (1996), who argues that otherness cannot be understood though not directly expressed and explained to learners in a real learning process.

It was also essential to compare our project with other experiences of students' preparation which have already been carried out in other foreign universities and which have been compiled by Anquetil (2006), who shows the difficulty for language teachers in combining both intercultural competence and linguistic competence. In the curricula preparing for study abroad and which were studied by Anquetil (2006), these two competences are very often separated.

The different learning activities offered to the students during the course at Nancy 2 were primarily inspired by Derek Utley's '*Intercultural Resource Pack'* (2004) which reflects the current thinking and practice on intercultural competence and forms a set of materials which are easily accessible to and usable by teachers. Derek Utley makes a distinction between two different kinds of intercultural development: intercultural awareness or sensitisation and cultural briefing. The assumption is also made that intercultural competence consists of two main elements: cultural knowledge by understanding cultural differences, both factual and affective; and cultural skills, that is to say, the ability to react in a variety of cultures. These skills include attitudes of openness and tolerance and the ability to cope with ambiguity. The different activities may lead the students through a process of guided discovery. Utley's pack is mainly based on the work of Hall (1997) and Gudykunst and Kim (2002).

For the design of this specific program one of the main concerns was research on the assessment of intercultural communicative competence. The organization of evaluation was based principally on Byram's (1997) and Corbett's work (2003) and will be developed in the following paragraph.

Assessment of Intercultural Communicative Competence

It is recognized today that assessing intercultural communicative competence is a main issue, and thus designing this course also meant examining the research in this area. As previously mentioned the organization of the evaluation was based on the theories developed by Byram (1997) and Corbett (2003).

Kramsch (1993) cautions against too narrow an assessment of the cultural element of a language course, arguing that its benefit might not be realized until long after the course has ended. As far as cultural education is concerned, Byram (1997) uses the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle for the process of learning.

In literature on assessment and testing, a test is considered 'valid' if it assesses what it is meant to test, and not something else (Hughes, 1989, p. 22-28). Indeed Corbett (2003) points out that "the explicit incorporation of a cultural element into a language course raises obvious questions about the means of assessment used in the course: for instance, should they test language or culture, simultaneously or separately?" (p.191). Some scholars raise the question of whether culture can even be tested explicitly.

Assessment typically has an institutional and individual use, namely the university system demands assessment to measure the performance of curricula and individuals who attend them. As Corbett (2003) points out "teachers and learners also demand assessment as a means of measuring their progress, charting future needs, and diagnosing problems" (p. 192).

As for the evaluation of the course at Nancy 2, we decided that the main principles for the design of the course -- understanding, critical reflection and mediation (Bryam, 1997) – should also be the guidelines for the evaluation. Based on Corbett (2003), we decided to use subjective tests such as reflexive essay tasks, role-play-simulations and projects and portfolios. The reflexive essay "may also be a vehicle upon the state of the candidate's intercultural awareness, and so constitute valuable evidence of the learning progress" (Corbett, 2003, p.196). These types of subjective tests seemed to correspond to the objectives of this course as the students were required to have reflexive reasoning through the writing of a journal. Whereas most of the test formats involve the use of writing, Corbett (2003) also agrees that some skills and techniques can only be properly tested orally, most probably by role-play or simulation. The skills which were evaluated in this program include: using everyday conversation to construct and maintain individual identity within a group; using formal and informal interviews to elicit cultural knowledge. Corbett (2003: 200) also recommends the writing of portfolios which should contain an element of critical reflection, for example, in the form of a learner journal. He agrees finally that the choice and implementation of test formats depends on many factors, such as the length of the course, its aims, the number and language level of the students, and

not least the time that the teacher is willing and able to devote to assessing students' work. Thus, until general examinations in intercultural proficiency become widely available, it must be the responsibility of local curriculum planners and teachers to flesh out the details of the most appropriate goals, formats and grading criteria for the assessment of the intercultural content of their language courses (Corbett, 2003).

CONTEXT OF EXPERIMENT

As Alred, Byram and Fleming (2003) indicate, the learning context is fundamental in developing a course and, as pointed out above, this course was designed to promote intercultural communicative competence at the university level to prepare ERASMUS students to study abroad. Kelly, Elliott and Fant (2001) assert that:

> for the promotion of intercultural awareness and intercultural communication, higher education has a key role to play in more than one respect. . . . Higher education is where those professionals are trained who may become the most important intercultural mediators: translators, interpreters and, above all, language teachers for all levels of education. (p. 2)

Three main contextual aspects were taken into account for the design of the course: a) results obtained from a previous action-research project integrating a 6 month-stay abroad; b) the nature of the Erasmus program; c) the existing infrastructure in our own University.

Results of a Previous Action-Research Project

A previous action-research project (Zumbihl, 2004) was carried out to study the acquisition of intercultural mediation competence with students at a university business school in Mulhouse. The course included a six-month internship in a company in an English-speaking country. Questionnaires and interviews before, during and after the work placement focused on several fundamental aspects of preparation for the stay-abroad that would help with the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence. It showed that before the stay students need to think about the encounter with otherness, rather than specific behaviors, and develop the linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge to face everyday situations as well as cultural knowledge and work on intercultural competence to limit 'culture shock' and anxiety. The results of this study also made it very clear that regular help during the stay abroad is essential and that post-stay debriefing interviews are needed in order to provide students with an opportunity to reflect on their individual experience.

The Erasmus Program

The *European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students* (ERASMUS) established in 1987 as a framework for European student Exchange was established in 1987, forms a major part of the European Union's Life Long Learning Program 2007-2013, and is the operational framework for the European Commission's initiatives in higher education. ERASMUS has a number of specific objectives, the main one being to encourage and support academic mobility of higher education students and teachers within the European Union. More specifically it aims to:

- improve the quality and to increase the volume of student and teaching staff mobility throughout Europe;

- improve the quality and increase the amount of multilateral cooperation between higher education institutions in Europe;

- improve and increase cooperation between higher education institutions and business;

- spread innovation and new pedagogic practice and support between universities in Europe.

The Existing Infrastructure at Nancy 2 University

The International Relations Department is charged with welcoming foreign students as well as managing the various programs for student and teacher exchanges with universities abroad and training programs in foreign companies. A large number of agreements with European or non-European countries provide a framework for these exchanges. A special office has just opened on the campus to help foreign students organize their studies and their lives in France as well as to help French students to prepare for their stay in a foreign university. Each academic department has a faculty member in charge of the organization of Erasmus exchanges, however, until this year there was no specific course to help students on a more linguistic and intercultural level. It must be added that these exchanges are open to all students and that most of them have taken English courses but are not majoring in the language.

It is important to point out that this first step in creating a new course in English to prepare students for studying abroad should be extended to other languages in the future.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COURSE

Objectives of the Course

Byram's (1997) recommendation that curricula for the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence focus on linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and intercultural competence provided the guiding principle for the curriculum of this course. Since it is essential to choose an intercultural communication model to design a curriculum for the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence, Lorenz's model (2001), which includes global attitude towards otherness, constitution of the self, cultural and communicative practice as well as ethical and political considerations, was chosen.

The course combines two different approaches. It integrates observation and a real understanding of otherness on the one hand and on the other hand reflexive thought about identity and ethnocentrism (Anquetil, 2006). In doing so, it aims to create a 'third space', which Kramsch (1993) describes as a space for encounter and communication. The aim of this course is to promote the acculturation process which is, according to Byram (1994): "learning to function within a new culture while maintaining your own identity" (p. 7).

Organization of the Course

The ten-week course includes twenty one-hour sessions. The enrollment in this course is limited to twenty to allow for greater oral participation. These twenty students are divided into two groups. Each group meets with a native English-speaking teacher or a French teacher of English every week. The native English-speaking teacher is responsible for the linguistic component. Different aspects of everyday life (e.g.: finding lodgings, understanding public transportation, traveling or engaging in small talk), which are pre-departure concerns for students, are addressed. The native English-speaking teachers usually stay only one year at Nancy 2 University. On the one hand, this can be an impediment to building a curriculum; on the other hand, it can be an advantage as it gives students an opportunity to be exposed to different nationalities and different backgrounds, thus allowing for a richer curriculum content. In 2009-2010, a British teacher was in charge of the linguistic component of the course. Her experience with studying abroad in Mexico and Russia helped her relate to students' worries about their future stay and detect where problems might occur. The intercultural competence part of the course, which is meant to prepare students for their stay abroad and derive maximum benefit from it, was led by the French teacher of English. While there are two parts of the course, it should be remembered that they are closely intertwined, since "teaching for linguistic competence cannot be separated from teaching for intercultural competence" (Byram, 1997, p. 22).

The intercultural part of the course is organized around five main topics, which are discussed in English during the five sessions each group has with the French speaker. The link between language and culture is central in each topic discussed in class. These five main topics are:

a) what culture means to you

b) the different skills or '*savoirs*' defined by Byram (1997)

c) the different areas in intercultural communication where problems may occur such as dos and don'ts, behaviors, body language

d) 'culture shock'

e)   'individual specificities' and 'learning and teaching styles.'

The last two topics are essential for students' preparation. Indeed 'culture shock' is inevitable (Furnham & Bochner, 1986) and the learner has to accept it and find solutions to deal with it. With respect to individual specificities, we are all individuals first, and in encountering another culture we are first encountering other individuals (Abdallah-Pretceilles, 1996). Stereotypes and generalizations can be tackled at this point of the course. These individuals will have to be mediators between their own culture and the other's culture to create a 'third space' (Kramsch, 1993).

Differences in learning styles are also important as students plan to study abroad and they will sometimes have to adapt to very different types of teaching styles which are in fact part of the cultural environment.

All these topics are studied through discussion between the students and the teacher based on documents and reflection exercises. An important point is for the students to realize that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer, the objective is to share ideas to help them progress individually. Students are required to write their personal impressions in a journal after each session, which enables them to keep notes about the course and to integrate them into a personal reflection. They can also add their personal research about 'cultural briefing' as well as the different steps in the construction of their own plans abroad. This journal is also a means to help them prepare for the final interview of the evaluation described later.

This organization of the course is very surprising – even unsettling - for French students, as they are used to listening to a teacher and taking notes. After their initial astonishment, they become much more relaxed and ready to speak, which helps in the development of their linguistic competence.

Adaptation of Assessment to Objectives

For Corbett (2003): "if tests are […] matched to curricular goals, then the tests should be valid" (p.194). For Spiro (1991, p.16), the question 'what is a good test' is a question of ideology because a 'good test' depends on clear identification of target competence, and target competence is a composite of goals and ideals. The point is how to determine learners' progress. To ensure test validity, it is necessary to specify the kinds of knowledge and skills which are to be assessed.

The first concern was therefore to adapt the evaluation to the objectives of the curriculum, concentrating on oral expression, as well as communicative and intercultural competence, with an oral examination being the obvious choice.

The reflective journal entries students write help them prepare for the final interview. The format of the journal entries changed as the semester went by. Students went from writing down their impressions about each class to detailing the necessary steps they had taken to make their project evolve, as well as their own research or 'cultural briefing' about the country where they would stay and which they would have to present during the interview. Although keeping a journal was a course requirement, it was not graded.

For this course, a final oral examination seemed an obvious choice as the objective of the course was to develop both oral communication skills and intercultural reflection.

The Format of the Evaluation

The format of the evaluation– keeping a journal and the oral examination at the end of the semester -- partly derived from the objectives described above.

The evaluation focused on: language, personal reflection on the intercultural encounter, evolution of the student's plans to study abroad, as well as the student's research on 'cultural briefing.'

Consequently the final form of the evaluation is an interview starting with a short role-play with the British teacher about an everyday situation to assess speaking skills followed by a presentation by the student. This presentation should include intercultural aspects discussed in class and integrated into a personal reflection, 'cultural briefing' about the country of the stay and the evolution of the organization of the stay abroad. Thus the evaluation integrates the criteria to be assessed in the curriculum. On the whole what has to be evaluated is the students' personal development concerning their project abroad as well as their efforts to improve the ability of communicating in everyday situations and in a more general way their motivation to prepare for their stay abroad. We must take into account that the students' personal evolution is not finished, that it is a life-long process and that the stay will also be a part of this evolution.

ANALYSIS OF THE CURRICULUM AFTER THE FIRST SESSION

Students' Results for the First Session

For this first session 15 students applied for the course, 13 attended the program including one Mexican, one German, one from Luxemburg and two students from Vietnam. Some of them were planning a stay outside Europe in countries such as the USA, Canada or Japan. It was decided to accept these students in the group even if their plans did not really correspond to the Erasmus program. The intercultural constitution of the group naturally favored the exchange of intercultural views. 15 students took the examination. Out of these 14 students, 13 passed the examination; the two students who failed did not attend the course regularly and had no precise objectives to study abroad.

The other 13 students who passed the exam exhibit similar attitudes and evolutions. Broadly speaking all improved their linguistic knowledge, especially in terms of self-confidence. They were all able to participate in an interaction with the native teacher on specific situations of everyday life, and the use of specific vocabulary seen in class was significant.

We could observe during the students' presentations that their personal plans were much more precise. Every student who passed the examination is now in the process of applying for a place abroad. It is obvious for all these students that they will spend some months abroad next year and none of them have apparently abandoned these plans. Moreover they were all able to present a satisfying personal research on their destinations.

As far as intercultural competence is concerned, they were all able to give facts about culture and especially 'culture shock,' which seem to be the most important point for them to remember. For some of them, the difficulty of expressing their intercultural reflection was more a linguistic problem than a lack of personal reflection, even if for a few of them this reflection was based mainly on learning facts rather than on real personal experience. As we pointed out before, understanding the intercultural encounter is also based on experience and maturity (Byram, 1997). It would be interesting to follow these students and conduct the same interview after the experience abroad, which could be another step in our action-research project.

Moreover it was noticeable that sometimes the students' journals contained more personal reflection on intercultural aspects of the curriculum than their presentations during the evaluation. Indeed, as the journal was written in the students' mother tongue, it seemed easier for the students, especially at the lower level, to express their personal reflections.

Students' Level of Satisfaction for the First Session

At the end of the semester, the students were asked to fill in a questionnaire anonymously to provide feedback on their level of satisfaction, to say whether the organization of this curriculum corresponded to their needs, and where it could be improved in the future. The questionnaire contained 25 yes/no questions, with space for additional comments. For the clarity of our discussion we will focus on the questions in Table 1.

Eleven students out of the 13 who attended the course filled in the questionnaire, providing results in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of the questionnaire

Questions	Yes	No
satisfied by the course	11	0
the course met their expectations	11	0
satisfied by the language component	11	0
satisfied by the intercultural component	11	0
fewer worries about the stay	6	5
additional courses by the 2 teachers	10	1
usefulness of the log-book	9	2
progress in the language	11	0
progress in intercultural communication	10	1
personal development	8	3
more precise plans	9	2
a change in the plans	6	5

It was very satisfying to see that the students gave unanimously positive answers to the first four questions concerning their global impressions about the program.

As for the students' worries about the stay, in fact out of the 5 students who answered "no," 3 students added in their comments that they had no particular worry, they were only impatient to leave. One of them said: "we know what to expect now."

Ten students appreciated the additional courses given by the two teachers, the exception being one who could not see the link between the two parts of the course. Otherwise in their comments they were highly interested to have discovered two different ways of working with two different approaches and personalities, which is at the basis of the intercultural perspective. According to one student, "it was a combination of theory and practice." Moreover in their comments they expressed satisfaction that they had had the opportunity to speak the target language.

The students found it generally difficult to write their impressions in their journal but most recognized that it was a useful exercise. Two students gave a negative answer: one of them gave no further comment, and the other underlined that it was difficult to have a personal analysis without having precise plans, which is an interesting comment in itself as some students did not know exactly what their plans were at the beginning of the course. These results show that there is still a need for further explanation of the usefulness of the journal at the beginning of the course for both the students' self-reflection and their preparation for the final interview.

It is noticeable on the whole that students felt they had made progress in intercultural communication. The only student who answered negatively added that he could not distinguish his progress between the two different competences - linguistic competence and intercultural competence. It could be worthwhile analyzing this answer in more detail.

Three of the students declared they had not developed personally; it is however interesting to notice that none of these three students added any comments to their negative answers. This suggests that perhaps a global discussion should be organized at the end of the course to help them understand how they have evolved personally thanks to this preparation. All the comments concerned the positive answers. On the whole they emphasized the fact that they really have the impression of knowing themselves better and that they are much more determined to pursue their plans to study abroad. These comments were very close to the ideas expressed by the students during the evaluation interview.

It is also noticeable that nine students had a much more precise objective after the course, which was also an important achievement noticed during the evaluation interviews; 6 students even added new plans to the initial ones concerning either their possible destinations or the number of stays they wanted to organize. Indeed some

students primarily planning to apply for an internship abroad also considered the possibility of studying in a foreign university.

DISCUSSION

As the implementation of this curriculum is the subject of an action-research project, we will follow the principles of action-research as they are defined by Nunan (1992), who points out that the research is initiated by the practitioner and is derived from a real problem in the classroom which needs to be confronted and therefore takes the form of an ongoing cycle. Riley (1996: 263) also declares: "Instead of starting with a "research question" based on previous research and theory, the action researcher starts with a problem with which he or she is faced." The intention is for the course to evolve with future intake in the light of our analysis of the different results during: a) observation, b) evaluation, c) feedback. We can already draw conclusions from the evaluation, the questionnaire and also practice in class with the first cohort. A few changes have already been planned.

At the beginning of the implementation we intended to organize this course during one semester once a year. We rapidly discovered that this did not correspond to the students' demand for preparation or the fact that some students wanted to study abroad during the second semester, others during the first semester, and that some wanted to spend the whole university year abroad. As it is essential to provide this preparation as close as possible to the departure date, it was decided to organize two sessions during the year, one in each semester.

The objective of the curriculum has also changed slightly. It was initially aimed at students who had very precise plans for studying abroad. As students who attended this course had not applied to an exchange program yet, it was sometimes difficult to speak about their precise destination in class. Consequently, an additional objective has been added: to help students prepare their application on a personal but not administrative level and to construct their project to study abroad more widely as a whole project in their career as students. Since this curriculum has a theoretical humanistic basis it was not conceivable to reject students who wanted to attend this course on the basis that their project was not precise enough.

Feedback was also received from the International Relations Department, which reported on the students' high levels of satisfaction and the fact that the course had also helped their department with the preparation of the students and their personal plans. Indeed an important part of the students' personal reflection had already been carried out during the course and did not therefore need to be done at the stage of their application for the Erasmus program.

CONCLUSION

The first objective - to combine a linguistic and an intercultural preparation for the stay abroad - seems to have been achieved. It is possible to assert through the different results that this course enabled both an intercultural and personal reflection from the students as well as language practice about everyday situations. The opportunity of working in small groups favored oral expression, and enabled the creation of a free space for expression. As students are not evaluated on their opinions or on the acquisition of precise points of the program, they felt able to speak much more freely, an aspect they greatly appreciated. It also helped them progress in language and communication competences. The evaluation focused on their capacity to integrate a personal and intercultural reflection in their project connected with communicative competence in English. This aim also seems to have been achieved. The first results obtained with this cohort tend to show that students improved in both linguistic and intercultural competences as well as self-awareness. They generally feel much more prepared for the experience of studying abroad. These results will have to be confirmed with the next cohorts. It will also be interesting to analyze students' feedback on their return after this "independent experience" (Byram, 1997: 65).

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