LINGUODIDACTIC BASES OF PREPARING STUDENTS FOR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Annotation: *It has been widely recognised in the language teaching profession that learners need not just knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways. This was the major innovation of 'communicative language teaching'. At the same time, the 'communicative approach' introduced changes in methods of teaching, the materials used, the description of what is to be learnt and assessment of learning. The Council of Europe's 'Common European Framework of Reference' embodies these innovations and also emphasises the importance of 'intercultural awareness', 'intercultural skills', and 'existential competence'. The 'Common European Framework', like other recent publications, thus introduces the 'Intercultural Dimension' into the aims of language teaching.*
Key words: *Intercultural Dimension, classrooms, examinations and certification, idea, intercultural speakers, mediators, native speaker, linguistic competence.*

The purpose of this book is to make this new Intercultural Dimension easily accessible in practical ways to those teachers who want to know what it could mean in practice for them and their learners in their classrooms. It does not ignore the need to explain the ideas and the theory, but it ensures that the reader can see from the beginning what is involved in the Intercultural Dimension, and what they can do about it.

It is for this reason that we have written the text in the form of 'Frequently Asked Questions', the questions and problems which we have met when working with other teachers ourselves. Secondly we have provided information about further sources of practical use, and examples of what other teachers have done to introduce an Intercultural Dimension into their work.

Above all, we want to demonstrate that an Intercultural Dimension does not mean yet another new method of language teaching but rather a natural extension

of what most teachers recognise as important without reading lots of theory. What we offer here is simply a systematic overview and some practical advice.

How do I assess intercultural competence? There are many kinds of assessment of which testing is just one. Tests too are of many kinds and serve many functions - diagnosis, placement on courses, achievement, proficiency for example - but are often associated with examinations and certification.

Examinations and certification are highly sensitive issues to which politicians, parents and learners pay much attention. As a consequence, the examination of learners' competence has to be very careful and as 'objective' - meaning valid and reliable – as possible.

It seems not difficult to assess learners' acquisition of information. There can be simple tests of facts, but the difficulty comes in deciding which facts are important. Shall they, for example, learn 'facts' about social etiquette and politeness in a particular country? But then whose social etiquette, that of the dominant social class, or that of the social class or ethnic group or gender group to which they belong? Shall they learn historical 'facts', but whose version of history?

It is also possible to assess learners' knowledge and understanding. In the teaching of history for example, rather than testing recall of historical 'facts', historical understanding and sensitivity is assessed in essays where learners discuss events. A similar approach is familiar to many language teachers who have also been learners or teachers of literature, where the testing of recall of literary history or plots of novels has largely given way to assessment of critical understanding of and sensitivity towards literary texts.

The problem lies however in the fact that knowledge and understanding are only part of intercultural competence (savoirs and savoir comprendre). Assessing knowledge is thus only a small part of what is involved. What we need is to assess ability to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange (savoir être), to step outside their taken for granted perspectives, and to act on a the basis of new perspectives (savoir s'engager).

Most difficult of all is to assess whether learners have changed their attitudes, becomemore tolerant of difference and the unfamiliar. This is affective and moral developmentand it can be argued that even if we can test it, we should not be trying to quantify tolerance. But quantification is only one kind of assessment. If however, assessment is not in terms of tests and traditional examinations, but

rather in terms of producing a record of learners' competences, then a portfolio approach is possible and in fact desirable.

Teachers are not just professionals but also human beings with their own experiences and histories through which they may have acquired prejudices and stereotypes about other cultures and peoples just like any other human being. We are not always conscious of these feelings and how we express them, but a brief remark in the classroom is often remembered by learners for many years afterwards.

These remarks may be negative or positive. Some teachers are positively prejudiced about the countries where their target language is spoken and wish to pass this enthusiasm on to their learners. This might seen to be the role of the teacher but it is debatable whether teachers should try to influence attitudes or not. So this is one of the first issues teachers need to think about. The response to this problem may be different in different countries according to their education traditions. In some countries teachers believe that they should not attempt to influence attitudes towards other countries and in fact should be careful only to deal with the cognitive dimension of learning. Teachers in other countries may feel that it is part of their pedagogical responsibility to influence attitudes. Neither of these positions excludes the development of savoir être because this is not a question of developing particular positive (or indeed negative) attitudes towards a country or people but rather of creating curiosity and a sense of openness.

When two people talk to each other, they do not just speak to the other to exchange information, they also see the other as an individual and as someone who belongs to a specific social group, for example a 'worker' and an 'employer' or a 'teacher' and a 'pupil'. This has an influence on what they say, how they say it, what response they expect and how they interpret the response. When two people in conversation are from different countries speaking in a language which is a foreign/second language for one of them, or when they are both speaking a language which is foreign to both of them, a lingua franca they may be acutely aware of their national identities. They are aware that at least one of them is speaking a foreign language and the other is hearing their own language being spoken by a foreigner. Often this influences what they say and how they say it because they see the other person as a representative of a country or nation. Yet this focus on national identity, and the accompanying risk of relying on

stereotypes, reduces the individual from a complex human being to someone who is seen as representative of a country or 'culture'.

Furthermore, this simplification is reinforced if it is assumed that learning a language involves becoming like a person from another country. Often in language teaching the implicit aim has been to imitate a native speaker both in linguistic competence, in knowledge of what is 'appropriate' language, and in knowledge about a country and its 'culture'. The concept of 'culture' has changed over time from emphasis on literature, the arts and philosophy to culture as a shared way of life, but the idea of imitating the native speaker has not changed and consequently native speakers are considered to be experts and the models, and teachers who are native speakers are considered to be better than non-native speakers.

In contrast the 'intercultural dimension' in language teaching aims to develop learners as intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity. It is based on perceiving the interlocutor as an individual whose qualities are to be discovered, rather than as a representative of an externally ascribed identity. Intercultural communication is communication on the basis of respect for individuals and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction.

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