**Assuring quality for the teaching of intercultural communication in Europe: perspectives and challenges**

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This paper reports on the work of the intercultural communication group, one of the subprojects undertaken as part of the LanQua project. It has three overall aims: to identify current conceptualizations of intercultural communication (IC) and existing quality measures as revealed through a mapping exercise on the teaching of IC in the partner institutions involved; to present examples of case studies that represent a form of best practice; and to present learning outcomes defined by the project members on the basis of a shared conceptualisation of IC and with quality issues in mind. With these perspectives as background, challenges for the teaching and quality assurance of IC will be discussed.

1. Conceptualisations of Intercultural Communication

Two main issues arise in conceptualisations of IC: is it a matter of theory or practice and is it independent of, or integrated into, language learning? The extent to which IC is seen as theoretical knowledge about matters relevant to IC, e.g. concepts of culture or communication, or as a practical competence can vary. In many institutions of higher education, a more theoretical approach dominates, e.g. in Denmark and Austria, but more skills-oriented approaches are found, e.g. in Ireland. Similarly, the relationship of IC to language learning is ambivalent. Autonomous courses on IC (often as part of business, media, communication, anthropology degrees) are found across Europe (e.g. in Portugal, Spain, Denmark, Lithuania), but they are generally not related to language learning. Indeed, it would seem that IC is often not an explicit feature of traditional foreign language degree programmes; it may be integrated into language learning, particularly in relation to translation courses, but this does not seem to be done systematically.

It was necessary for the intercultural communication group to agree on a common understanding of IC, that is to define a LanQua perspective on the concept. Given the focus of the overall LanQua project on languages, it was clear that IC could only be understood as an integral part of foreign language teaching, i.e. as part of language degrees or degrees with a language component. It was furthermore conceived as multidimensional, combining knowledge, skills and attitude (following Byram 1997[[1]](#footnote-1)).

2. Existing Quality Assurance Mechanisms

Over-ordinate, top-down quality assurance exists to some degree in all partner countries at national level and increasingly universities are establishing internal quality assurance procedures. The situation among most partners was that formal quality assurance tends to focus on general questions relating to degree programmes rather than the details of specific courses or disciplines. At this more micro level, quality assurance is generally the responsibility of teachers. Bottom-up, teacher-driven quality assurance is typically not formalised, although at Waterford Institute of Technology quality assurance is achieved through critical appraisal at course design stage, and an annual internal critical appraisal of the success of courses in meeting the stated aims and objectives.

3. Case Studies

The following gives an overview of case studies of approaches to integration of intercultural competence in language courses in 5 of the partner Institutions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

3.1 Cross-cultural project. Lancaster University, Department of European Languages and Cultures

The aim of this project is to prepare second year students of modern European languages for periods of study and work abroad by requiring them to conduct a pilot ‘ethnographic’ or ‘cross-cultural’ project.

The project invites students to reflect on the differences between the UK and other cultures through their researching the attitudes of non-British students towards the UK and British culture. By promoting the capacity of students to identify with another person’s position, the project aims to teach students about 'culture shock' and how to cope with it, how to gather 'cultural' information and write about it.

Second year modern languages students are required to talk to foreign students on campus and explore cultural differences by means of questionnaire and interview. Students then summarize and evaluate the responses of the informants in one of the languages studied by the students. This is presented in a report which includes questionnaires and notes of interviews.

3.2 Intercultural communication through thematic vocabulary development.

Vilnius Pedagogical University, Department of English Didactics

This example of practice focuses on developing political vocabulary by exposing undergraduate students of English to a contrastive study of political systems and society in the UK, USA and Lithuania. Intercultural communication features in this example of practice not as knowledge of theories or a specific skill but rather as competence integrated into the course content. Since the knowledge and understanding of the mechanism of political systems and social life in the three countries in a contrastive perspective involve (inter)cultural issues, by studying topic-specific vocabulary students gradually become aware of their own and others’ beliefs and values, develop sensitivity towards cultural stereotypes and are able to reflect on the cultural factors influencing their own behaviour and that of others.

3.3 Waterford Institute of Technology, Department of Humanities.

Tandem Language Learning for Intercultural Competence (TaLLICo).

The overall aim is to stimulate intercultural dialogue between students of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As part of a module in intercultural communication for language learners, students participate in face-to-face tandem language learning with native speaker partners. They are required to meet a minimum of five times at a time and place agreed by both parties, to negotiate the format and content of discussion, and to present a written reflective report at the end of the module. This report should include details of location, time and duration of meetings, an account of the discussion (topic, time spent on each language, new language learned), a reflection on the process, their perceptions of self and other.

Through this activity the specific objectives of the project were to improve linguistic and intercultural skills, encourage awareness of ‘self’ and ‘other’ through reflection and to develop the students’ sense of autonomy and reciprocity.

Student reports show evidence of increased motivation to use the language they are learning, progression in linguistic and intercultural competence, positive attitudes towards intercultural dialogue, a deeper and more diverse experience of ‘otherness’, and a reduction in anxiety of Irish students before placement abroad.

3.4 University of Southern Denmark, Department of Business and Foreign Languages

Intercultural communication: adding cognitive and experiential dimensions

This example of practice is situated in the multicultural classroom and emphasises issues of didactic method and means of assessment. Through the use of more varied didactic methods, it was hoped to include the dimensions of attitude and skills to help students understand that encountering the other unavoidably entails encountering the self.

The didactic methods that were used were aimed at questioning the three main pillars of intercultural communication theories: the ‘other’, communication and culture. In relation to the ‘other’, students were assigned into multicultural groups that were changed throughout the course; they were given interactional data from a multicultural workplace and were asked to first analyse the data in terms of ascription of identity and otherness, and then reflect on how identities are ascribed onto them in their daily lives. In relation to communication, well-known communication models in intercultural communication (such as the transmission model, meaning negotiation models) were questioned in respect of their assumptions about intersubjective meaning, understanding and conflict. In relation to culture, students were asked to perform simulations that elicited stereotypes of same and other cultural groups, the aim being to raise awareness about how ethnocentricism functions in their own daily perceptions. Students reported in feedback about the course that they had acquired a more critical understanding of the complexities of intercultural communication, including increased awareness of themselves and others.

3.5 Universidad Europea de Madrid (UEM), Faculty of Communication and Humanities. Professional Intercultural Communication.

The subject is taught to future translators and intercultural communicators, in their first year of studies. It will be taught alternatively in Spanish and English and aims to raise consciousness of cultural differences and how these can affect verbal and non-verbal communication. Students will be encouraged to reflect on intercultural issues, culture shock and communication between cultures. Oral and written production skills will be practised with special attention to cultural differences between text types, styles and format.

The course aims to help students acquire intercultural communication skills through raising consciousness and knowledge of different cultures and understanding models of intercultural communication. Students participate in case studies, critical incidents, problem solution and self-evaluation.

4. Learning Outcomes

Adopting the LanQua perspective on IC, 10 key learning outcomes for IC were defined. These learning outcomes recognise not only the need for coherence between outcome, implementation and assessment, but also the importance of being formulated in more general terms to allow for widespread applicability within and across national contexts. Two examples of learning outcomes will be given here, one relating to the dimension of knowledge and the other to attitude. All learning outcomes are available on the LanQua project website.

In respect of knowledge, it was agreed that students on language degrees should have knowledge of the cultures, institutions, histories and ways of life of different communities. Moreover, they should be able to recognise the impact of the above on behavioural norms in given fields of communication. This learning outcome assumes that communication and the situations in which it occurs are influenced by historical, cultural and institutional factors. Consequently, language learners need to be equipped with such knowledge to help them communicate effectively in the situations they are likely to encounter. The strategies for implementing this outcome could involve text books, diverse contemporary media based materials (textual and audio-visual) that provide information relevant to the contexts toward which the learning is directed. Assessment could be in the form of essay, cross-cultural study project, portfolio, learner diary, reflective commentary, oral examination, simulation and presentation.

With regard to attitude, students on language degrees should be able to reflect on the cultural factors influencing their own attitudes and behaviour and that of others. The aim is to raise consciousness of cultural similarities and differences and how these can affect verbal and non-verbal communication. What is encouraged is reflection on the self and others in relation to intercultural issues, culture shock and communication between cultures. Strategies for implementing this outcome could include the practice of oral and written production skills with special attention to cultural similarities and differences, face-to-face or on-line tandem language learning, ethnographic studies, simulation tasks, group presentations, discussions, video clips without sound for guessing the meaning of body language, portfolio, or writing a journal. Assessment could be in the form of reflective reports on experience of tandem language learning or ethnographic studies, simulation tasks, commentaries on video clips, a learner journal, portfolio, or essays.

5. Challenges

The teaching of intercultural communication as conceptualised in the LanQua project is not without its difficulties. Three issues in particular are worth noting. The first is that of assessment in relation to certain aspects of IC, for instance sensitivity and awareness. Such characteristics are difficult to assess and, indeed, it could be open to debate as to whether they should be assessed at all. However, if they are to be assessed, it is clear that non-traditional methods will be required. In some national contexts, for instance in Great Britain and Ireland, more recent modes of assessment are already in use (simulations, learner journals, reflective reports etc.), but such methods may not necessarily be part of assessment practices in all European countries. If they are to be introduced, they will need to be integrated into existing classroom and assessment culture.

A second problematic issue is that of success indicators for the learning outcomes. It is difficult to establish clear quantifiable criteria for measuring the success of the learning outcomes, in particular those relating to behaviour and attitude. Learning outcomes relating to knowledge of the target culture can be assessed in traditional ways, as has always been the case for the cultural component of language courses. However, the skills required for successful intercultural communication and the affective components will require a variety of assessment methods, a possible combination of those listed above. An evaluation of the aims, objectives and learning outcomes could possibly be based on the percentage of students successfully completing assessment, the degree of positive student, teacher or employer feedback, evidence of improved intercultural contact or increased student mobility.

A third challenging issue for the teaching of IC is globalisation. “National” cultures are becoming more multicultural and this diversity will need to be incorporated into classroom practices. Moreover, an interesting challenge is presented by the increasing status of English as a Lingua Franca since this calls into question any necessary link between language and culture and may help promote intercultural communication as a language independent subject.

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that the LanQua project is an exercise in bottom-up quality assurance and, as such, the aim is to encourage ongoing discussion of IC in relation to language learning. The objective is to initiate and maintain a dynamic process rather than to dictate a final product.

1. Byram, M. (1997). Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For further information and contact details, please consult the details of Case Studies on the project website [www.lanqua.eu](http://www.lanqua.eu) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)