Intercultural Communication Skills among Prospective Turkish Teachers of German in the Context of the Comparative Country Knowledge Course

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Abstract

This study develops and provides a sample implementation of a seminar for the 'Comparative Country Knowledge' course taught in the German Language Teaching departments of Turkish universities. The study was conducted with the participation of forty-seven 1st year students attending a German Language Teaching department. As part of the study, Cultural Values Model consisting of four dimensions was used to develop intercultural communication skills. Students' views on learning attitudes and problems in the two cultures were examined on the basis of this model. At the end of the seminar, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire to evaluate the seminar*. The results of the study showed that prospective teachers acquired different cultural perspectives in the Comparative Country Knowledge course. The model seems to have made a significant contribution to students' intercultural communication skills.

Key Words

Interculturality, Intercultural Learning, Comparative Regional Studies, Intercultural Communication Competence, Teacher Education, German Language Teaching.

This study aimed to contribute to the development of intercultural communication skills among prospective teachers as part of the Comparative Country Knowledge course taught in the German Language Teaching departments of Turkish universities.

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*   The data gathered for the study were examined using descriptive analysis. Presentation of the results reached on the basis of qualitative and quantitative research methods focuses on participants' responses.

Renges (2005, p. 4) argues that intercultural learning has three indispensable elements:

1. Acquiring information about the other culture

2. Understanding the alien culture

3. Intercultural communication skills as part of intercultural action

Intercultural communication skills, considered to be the final stage of intercultural learning, are defined by another author as follows:

"The concept of Intercultural Communication Skills is defined as the ability of the individual to understand cultural conditions and other factors affecting his/her own perceptions, judgments, feelings and actions, as well as those of other people, to respect and to value them, and to develop common ways of working to create a productive synergy…" (Thomas, 2003 as cited in von Queis, 2004, p. 4)

The concept of country knowledge is defined by Buttjes as "issues related to the society of the language that is being learnt in the foreign language course. These issues arise when the contexts in which the foreign language is used are introduced." (Buttjes, 1989, p. 140). In another source, "country knowledge" is defined as "context knowledge" with reference to this definition, and the importance of avoiding a singular focus on the "elite culture" is emphasized as country knowledge refers to all forms of expression in a society (Schmidt 1973 cited in Pauldrach, 1990, p. 5).

Beyond the definition of the concept of country knowledge, there are three approaches to the country knowledge course. These are the cognitive, communicative and intercultural approaches (see. Padrós & Biechele, 2003).

Bachmann (1995; 1996) stresses the fact that "finally in intercultural situations, intercultural competence is a skill to be appropriated." Grau and Würffel (2003, pp. 312-314) also refer to a form of exercise that is based on Bach's methodology.

There are a number of different instruction methods designed to develop intercultural communication skills. The most prominent among these are the *case study, imitation, discovery*, and *project* methods (Flechsig, 1999).

Mendez (2005) details the *imitation method* used in a city plan game as part of an English language course. Bosse (2010, pp. 109-133) proposes a program designed to develop intercultural communication skills among university students. The author takes the diversity of students from different cultural backgrounds in universities as a starting point, and proposes a three-day study program that will allow university students from different backgrounds to mix with one another. The program, which is based on the premise of cultural diversity, consists of three stages: in the first stage, individual diversity is taken up, the second stage focuses on institutional and social diversity, and subject of the third stage is communicative diversity. In the words of the author, the program aims to identify the *learning needs* of the students in the first stage, and in the following two stages, to develop *different perceptions and intercultural communicative behaviors in daily university life* (Bosse, 2010, p 110f.).

In another study that uses project-based work, comparative country knowledge issues specific to Turkey and Germany are examined. In this study, the project proposed is examined with reference to the three dimensions of process, product and student achievements (Ünver & Genç, 2009, p. 189). The authors also argue that the Comparative Country Knowledge course should enable students to see the "*bottom of the iceberg*", that is to say, the reasons underlying cultural differences:

"The project run in the "Comparative Country Knowledge" course focused mainly on the visible aspects of the countries and cultures under consideration. If we were to use the iceberg metaphor, we dealt with the tip of the iceberg only. The invisible bottom of the iceberg consists of cultural dimensions that affect the quality and continuity of communication and interaction. The project should be developed in such a way as to allow students to notice the bottom of the iceberg. Thus, studies that examine cultural dimensions such as individualism vs. collectivism, societal and organizational power distance, uncertainty, and masculinity vs. femininity." (Hall, 1983; Hall, 1990; Hall & Hall, 1984; Hofstede, 1986; Hofstede, 1991; Thomas, 1993) would complement the findings of this study (cited in Ünver & Genç, 2009, p. 196).

To show these differences, cultural dimensions offered by Hofstede (1997), such as individualism vs. collectivism, social-organizational power distance, uncertainty vs. certainty, and masculinity vs. femininity can be used (Ünver & Genç, 2009. p. 196).

Perceiving the need for a focus on cultural dimensions, a draft seminar was developed as part of this study that takes up *learning attitudes*[1] among university students and *critical cases*[2] encountered during university education. In the analysis of the learning attitudes and critical cases in question, Geert Hofstede's (1997) four dimensional model of Cultural Values was used. These cultural values are defined with respect to the dimensions of *low vs. high power distance, collectivism vs. individualism, masculinity vs. femininity*, and *certainty vs. uncertainty*.

A total of forty-seven 1st year students attending the German Language Teaching Department of Marmara University participated in the seminar. During the seminar, first, the dimensions of culture (Appendix 1) were defined, and then the learning attitudes (Appendix 2) among university students were examined with reference to these dimensions of culture. In the last stage, *critical cases* (Appen-

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1   Learning attitudes identified by the study group on Intercultural Communication Skills in German Language Teaching were used (Bosse, 2007).
2   The critical incidents used in this study, which are about the experiences of German students and students with other nationalities, were developed in Hamburg as part of a project on "Intercultural Communication Skills" (see Bosse & Harms, 2004, s. 318-329).

dix 3) were examined using the concepts associated with the dimensions of culture, and students were asked to evaluate the 90-minute seminar by filling out a *questionnaire*.

It was observed that prospective teachers held contrasting learning attitudes. For example, a large number of the participants agreed with both "*student-centered learning*", an indicator of low power distance, and "*showing respect to faculty members even outside the classroom*", an indicator of high power distance. This shows that both learning attitudes specific to the German culture and learning attitudes specific to the Turkish culture were selected. These contrasts were observed in all four dimensions of culture.

In their interpretations of the four critical cases that described cultural conflicts, prospective teachers used concepts associated with Geert Hofstede's (1997) cultural dimensions in different ways. For example, comments on critical case A made use of different concepts, whereas all comments except one on critical case B used the same pair of concepts (individualism vs. collectivism).

At the end of the seminar, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire to evaluate the seminar. Prospective teachers evaluated the seminar designed for the Comparative Country Knowledge course using the five items below:

A large majority of the participants (61.7% / 27.7%) agreed that Intercultural Communication Skills has an important place in the profession of German language teaching. A total of 34% / 49% of the participants agreed that the cultural values model is helpful in interpreting different cultural behavior patterns, and 42.6% / 53.2% agreed that the objectives and teacher activities in the seminar were clear and easy

to understand. A total of 29.8% / 61.7% of the students agreed with the statement that Comparative Country Knowledge course should include seminars designed to develop intercultural communication skills. Lastly, 38.4% of the students partially agreed that the seminar contributed to the development of intercultural communication skills, which indicates that there is a long way to go in this field.

In conclusion, the findings of this study show that activities designed to develop intercultural communication skills have to be an integral part of the Comparative Country Knowledge course. However, when designing the curricula in faculties of education, researchers have to constantly ask which issues have priority over others in the country knowledge course. Thus, the course should aim to provide content that both contains substantial information and requires reasoning.

Conclusions and comments

This study proposed a seminar to be offered as part of the Comparative Country Knowledge course taught in the 1st year of the German Language Teaching departments of Turkish universities, a seminar designed to develop the intercultural communication skills of prospective teachers. The proposal used Geert Hofstede's (1997) cultural values model to identify the cultural differences in learning and in daily life.

Having a high level of foreign language knowledge does not automatically mean having a high level of knowledge about the cultural values of the society of the learned language. Thus, it would be safe to argue that having competencies such as Intercultural Communication Skills are required to be able to interpret cultural values. In our globalizing world,

Table 1.
Student Views on the Intercultural Communication Skills Seminar (n=47)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Partially agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean	Standard deviation
	%	%	%	%	%		
Intercultural Communication Skills have an important place in the profession of German language teaching.	61.7	27.7	10.6	-	-	1.49	.688
The cultural values model is helpful in interpreting different cultural behavior patterns.	34	49	17	-	-	1.83	.702
This seminar contributed to the development of intercultural communication skills.	25.5	34	38.4	2.1	-	2.19	.900
The objectives and teacher activities of the Intercultural Communication Skills seminar were clear and easy to understand.	42.6	53.2	4.2	-	-	1.66	5.62
The Comparative Country Knowledge course should include seminars designed to develop intercultural communication skills.	29.8	61.7	6.4	-	2.1	1.83	7.32

different societies and cultures are interacting with each another more and more, and for various reasons, people from different cultural backgrounds are meeting more frequently. Thus, it is imperative that intercultural communication skills also be taught in foreign language education.

The teachers' role in intercultural learning is increasing. Intercultural Education and multicultural environments are considered to be important building blocks of foreign language training and professional development.

"*The concept of multiculturalism refers to a series of different cultural perspectives and attitudes located next to one another. The concept of "interculturalism", on the other hand, refers to a dynamic exchange of ideas between different cultural perspectives. This exchange of ideas takes place both in the home countries of the prospective teachers and abroad.*" (Kelly, Grenfell, Allan, Kriza, & McEvoy, 2004, p. 33f.).

According to another view, intercultural communication needs to be systematically developed at all stages of teacher training from university education to internship to in-service training, and should be considered as a principle of life-long learning (Zydatiss, 1998, p. 171).

This seminar planned and implemented to develop Intercultural Communication Skills can make important contributions to the personal and professional development of our students. It would be an important achievement for German language teachers of the future to be able to interpret cultural differences and similarities. In addition to the seminar proposed in the present study, different models need to be developed so that different and effective curricula can be offered in the training of teachers of foreign languages.

Appendixes

Appendix 1.

Dimensions of Culture

Assignment: Please read the text below, and take notes on Hofstede's dimensions.

Low power distance (geringe Machtdistanz)	High power distance (große Machtdistanz)
Collectivism (Kollektivismus)	Individualism (Individualismus)
Masculinity (Maskulinität)	Femininity (Feminität)
Low uncertainty avoidance (niedrige Unsicherheitsvermeidung)	High uncertainty avoidance (hohe Unsicherheitsvermeidung)

'Cultural Differences: Hofstede's Four-Dimensional Model of Values'

Geert Hofstede was chief of staff at IBM-Europe. In the 1970s, he conducted research on job satisfaction and business values at IBM organizations worldwide. The huge database that emerged from this research allowed him to conduct a comparative study of cultures, the main finding of which was as follows: employees with similar cultural backgrounds gave similar answers to the same questions, whereas employees with different cultural backgrounds gave different answers. Hofstede examined the data using theoretical approaches and statistical methods, and found that the cultures under study could be described using the following four dimensions:

High Power Distance – Low Power Distance: This dimension refers to the distribution of power, in its various forms, in a culture. In societies with high power distance, social strata are hierarchically structured. In societies with low power distance, on the other hand, power is distributed more equally between the social strata.

Individualism – Collectivism: This dimension evaluates societies on the basis of whether individuals work for themselves and for their close relatives only, or for a larger family.

Masculinity – Femininity: This dimension measures whether masculine characteristics such as making an effort for success, efficiency and issue focus are more important in a society, or femi-

nine characteristics such as compassion and caring about relationships.

Uncertainty – Certainty: This dimension is a measure of the degree to which individuals in a society feel themselves threatened by uncertainty.

In cultures where uncertainty is more dominant, uncertainty is treated as "normal". In societies where certainty is more dominant, on the other hand, there is more of an effort to control uncertainty and risks via plans, rules and regulations (Hofstede, 1997).

source: Hofstede, G. (1997). *Lokales Denken, globales Handeln*. München.

Appendix 2.

Learning Attitudes

Assignment: Differences in teaching and learning attitudes are reflected as cultural differences, different behavior patterns and thought patterns in university education, among others.

Please read the statements in the table, identify the values that are "normal" for you and evaluate your experiences at the university.

Compare your evaluations with those of your partner and give examples from your own university life. Identify the typical German and Turkish learning attitudes by generalizing and describing your experiences.

Appendix 3.

Critical Incidents

Assignment: Please read the short reports below on *intercultural encounters* during university education. Which cultural dimensions of Hofstede best explain the "critical incidents" described?

Situation A

Student X from country X is studying in country Y for one year. The student feels uncomfortable in the classes he/she attends, and is perplexed by the behaviors of his/her fellow students. For example, he/she thinks that it is inappropriate for some of the students to be late to the class all the time and not apologize. In addition, he/she thinks that students disrespect the faculty member by interrupting him/her and raising questions. Student X sometimes has doubts about the competency of the faculty members as well, because faculty members do not give clear instructions and seem to avoid expressing their own opinions. Students from country Y think student X is excessively timid and shy, because he/she never participates in the discussions held in the seminars, and speaks only when he/she is asked a question. Other students are also surprised that he/she writes down every word the faculty member utters, and never raises any questions.

Dimension:_____

Low power distance	High Power Distance
◆ Student-centered teaching: questions, criticisms, discussions and active participation of the students in class activities are normal. ◆ Students speak without waiting for the faculty member to ask a question. ◆ Students and faculty members should be equal outside the classroom.	◆ Faculty member-centered teaching: Class activities are shaped by the faculty member's comments and guidance. ◆ Students speak only in response to the questions raised by the faculty member. ◆ Faculty members should be shown respect even outside the classroom.
Collectivism	**Individualism**
◆ Students should follow the course contents provided by the faculty member. ◆ Students expect course contents and solutions to be provided by the faculty member. ◆ Students take the opinions of their parents and faculty members into consideration when making a choice of profession.	◆ Students should pursue individual studies and make an effort to decide what to learn and why, using which methods. ◆ Faculty members expect students to provide ideas and to propose solutions. ◆ Students take their personal interests into consideration when making a choice of profession.
Masculinity	**Femininity**
◆ It is important for students to have good grades. ◆ Students compete with one another for better grades. ◆ Students appreciate the expertise of the faculty members in their relevant fields.	◆ It is sufficient to have average grades on exams. ◆ Students support one another to succeed in exams. ◆ Students value faculty members' kindness and social interests.
Uncertainty	**Certainty**
◆ It is normal for class hours to be flexible. ◆ Learning objectives are hidden within the subject and become visible from time to time. ◆ Decisions concerning the class are made verbally by the faculty member and the students, and are subject to change in line with the flow of the events.	◆ It is normal for faculty members to be punctual. ◆ Learning objectives and semester plans should be prepared by the faculty member and announced in the beginning of the semester. ◆ Decisions concerning the class are made by the faculty member and the students in writing, they are binding, and their implementation is monitored.

Situation B

Female student X from the country X has been in country Y for a while. The kitchen in the dorm where she stays is shared by many students. She is surprised to see that each student cooks for herself and eats alone. One evening, she invites student Y to cook and eat together. However, student Y thanks her and rejects the invitation. Y states that she has shopped for herself and wants to spend the night in front of the television. Female student X takes offense and feels rejected, and thinks that student Y does not like her.

Female student Y is surprised at this, because she is used to cooking for herself at the dorm, and making arrangements in advance when she is to eat with other students. She thinks that student X did not really mean it when she made her invitation, and asked to eat together only as a courtesy. Student Y needs some alone time and she wants to watch television while eating.

Dimension:_____

Situation C

Student X from country X has been studying at a university in country Y. He joins a study group that is supposed to make a presentation in a couple of weeks. A time table is prepared upon the initiative of student X, and everyone is assigned a task to be carried out before the next meeting. However, in the next meeting, it becomes clear that no one is following the time table except student X. In addition, students from country Y are late to the meetings, and spend the whole time making discussions on subjects that have nothing to do with the presentation.

Student X invites other members of the study group to follow the decisions taken, to no avail. As the presentation date nears, student X gets even more frustrated and views the others as undisciplined and lazy people. Students from country Y, on the other hand, cannot understand why student X keeps talking about the study plan instead of participating in the interesting discussions. They think student X is pressuring them, and that he is excessively anxious and serious.

Dimension:_____

Situation D

Student X is from country X and is going to study in country Y for one year. He observes that there is an achievement-oriented study environment from the beginning of the semester onwards. He reaches the conclusion that the study approach is aimed at achievement and a strong willingness to study along these lines. As a result, student X feels nervous and uncomfortable.

Student X and student Y from country Y decide to make a joint presentation. During the preparations, student Y engages in excessive repeats, explanations that upset his partner, and ambitious behavior, all of which frustrate student X. In addition, student X takes offense at student Y's lack of concern for him and his language problems. Student Y is not happy with the joint study either. He regrets that he did not choose to do the presentation by himself. He thinks that they will get a lower grade because of X's language problems and lack of ambition.

Dimension:_____

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