

10 Developing intercultural competence: building on the year abroad in oral classes

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Abstract

This paper provides an analytical account of a speaking activity, which was designed and delivered by the authors in order to help modern languages finalist students to further develop their intercultural competence. It argues that even finalists coming back from their year abroad might struggle with making sense of cultural differences. The paper presents an activity that builds on their year abroad to facilitate deeper cultural understanding. Through an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates recent recommendations of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) as well as scholarly work on cultural studies and intercultural pedagogy, this paper offers a concrete example of how a language curriculum can be adapted to meet the challenges of today's culturally complex and ever changing world.

Keywords: speaking, intercultural competence, year abroad, employability.

1. Introduction

Opportunities to incorporate intercultural competence among learning objectives are often missed. As language teachers, we may draw attention to some of the cultural differences, for instance in ways of greeting, but rarely dwell on the why and how of these differences.

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This approach to language teaching is at odds with the changes afoot today. Educational aims are increasingly ambitious, and utilitarian purposes are no longer the sole focus of language learning. Since the CEFR was first published in 2001, the Council of Europe has produced several documents promoting a more holistic approach to language teaching (Council of Europe, 2015, 2016, 2018). These documents highlight the need for a plurilingual and intercultural education equipping students with the ability to mediate between cultures as well as languages. In the labour market, candidates with intercultural skills are sought-after as companies seek to meet the challenges of a globalised market. A survey of 367 companies conducted by the British Council in nine countries has revealed that “HR managers associate intercultural skills with significant business benefits”, with the ability “to understand different cultural contexts and viewpoints” and “respect for others” mentioned as key qualities (British Council, 2013, pp. 3, 12).

This paper explores a practical way in which teachers can help students reflecting on and deepening their intercultural competence, building on their year abroad experience. It implies a shift from ‘linguistic’ to ‘linguistic *and* intercultural’ education, achievable with minimal adjustments to the curriculum.

2. Method

2.1. Settings

The activity was delivered to two groups of finalists during a 50-minute oral class at the University of Bristol as part of the Bachelor of Arts in Italian. The final-year language course is structured over three weekly hours, each developing a different skill – speaking, writing, and translating. The hour dedicated to improving speaking skills revolves around activities designed with a blended learning approach whereby the class discussion often follows online homework. In line with the central principles of intercultural pedagogy (Loewen, 2013, p. 33), the activity described below encouraged students to question national stereotypes and reflect critically on the culture in which

they were immersed during their year abroad. According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997), “culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings” (p. 2). In other words, culture is the lens we use to read the world around us. Therefore, students participating in the activity were invited to ‘wear and see through others’ lens’ to make sense of the differences encountered abroad.

2.2. Oral class on cultural differences

The activity was divided into three steps: description, discussion, and analysis. Each step addressed essential aspects of intercultural competence, namely self-awareness, deep knowledge of the other’s culture, and respect for it (Deardorff, 2004; Lustig & Koester, 2010).

2.2.1. Description

As part of their homework, students were required to brainstorm some of the situations experienced during their placement in Italy, where cultural differences had emerged. They were asked to list them on the online platform Padlet, on this occasion utilised as a virtual ‘blackboard’. Some examples were provided by the tutor, such as: ‘at work’, ‘at school’, ‘at home’, and ‘at university’.

2.2.2. Discussion

In class, the students were allowed ten minutes for discussing the content generated at home on Padlet. They were encouraged to reflect on their experience and make hypotheses on the reasons behind the cultural differences occurring in those situations.

2.2.3. Analysis

In the remaining part of the lesson, the tutor gathered the students’ thoughts *in plenum* and guided deeper reflection on the main themes that emerged from the discussions.

3. Results and discussion

Students found it difficult to analyse ‘cultural differences’ at a deeper level. Many tended to articulate these differences as ‘things I don’t like about Italians’. The role of the tutor was crucial to help the students rethink differences from different angles. To this end, strategies deployed by the tutor included a number of methods recommended in CEFR: thought-provoking questions, links to students’ existing cultural knowledge, and the breaking down of complex issues (Council of Europe, 2018). It is noteworthy that when students were given the choice between discussing the examples provided by the tutor on Padlet (‘at home’, ‘at work’, etc.) and providing new situations, most students preferred to use the examples already provided. This indicates that the process that leads to recognising certain behaviours as ‘culturally different’ is other than straightforward.

The most significant example addressed as part of this activity concerned the domestic environment. In the discussion phase, the students claimed that ‘Italians don’t give their children strict rules’. As a result, ‘Italian children are unruly’. Interestingly, when the tutor invited the groups to analyse the reasons why this was the case, the students realised that Italian children do have rules. Only, the students judged them as ‘unimportant’, even ‘stupid’. One group provided the example of Italian children being taught to ‘tidy up their rooms’ but not being told off when it came to ‘more important’ issues. A lack of self-awareness which is a key aspect of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2004) was at play. The tutor guided students towards recognising the non-neutral nature of their own cultural practices by asking rhetorical questions, such as:

- Do you agree with all the rules you had as children?
- Were they all important?

A discussion on what the two cultures deem as ‘important’ followed, allowing students to see the differences no longer as ‘weird things Italians do’ but rather as something relatable and deserving respect, thus demonstrating another key quality of the interculturally competent individual (Lustig & Koester, 2010).

An analysis about social contexts and backgrounds also emerged. Encouraged by the tutor to build on their previous knowledge of British upbringing, students reached the conclusion that there can be similarities and differences that transcend nationalities. For example, students noticed that British and Italian families sharing socio-economic backgrounds may also share similar family rules, irrespective of their nationalities. This debate enabled students to explore interculturality beyond national borders (Partoune, 1999).

4. Conclusions

This case-study shows that even Year 4 students who are expected to have well-informed views about the culture that they study, having spent a year abroad in their target language country, can hold stereotypes attached to nationalities. There is still great need to design activities guiding them through the transition from intercultural awareness, acquired during the year abroad, to intercultural competence.

Two groups are certainly not an exhaustive sample to allow definitive statements about the success of the oral activity herein taken into consideration. Further research to collect additional evidence in this direction is therefore necessary. Nevertheless, this case-study offers insights on the fruitful intertwining between the acquisition of intercultural competence and that of linguistic skills. As they were practising their speaking skill, students in the two groups were developing key aspects of intercultural competence, such as self-awareness, deep intercultural knowledge, and respect of the other. At the same time, the high level of engagement with the debate helped remove some of the anxiety about the language production. This case also shows that linguistic and intercultural learning objectives can be addressed during the same lesson.

At a time when universities try to boost students' employability skills and companies seek interculturally competent graduates, modern languages departments that can adapt to these changes have a real opportunity to lead, not just to witness change, without necessarily revolutionising their courses.

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