Globalisation, the European Higher Education Area and Quality Education

Intercultural Competence: Changing European Classrooms

'Bolognarization', a kind of mini globalisation, will result in the mobility of teachers and students in the European Higher Education Area. Students taking advantage of what Bologna has to offer will find themselves immersed in different educational cultures, and teachers, aiming to provide quality education, will need to be aware of the different forces at play in emerging multi-lingual and multi-cultural classrooms. We will be dealing with students, possibly of many different cultural backgrounds, who might be struggling to make sense of their university courses taught through the medium of English. In order to help them, we will also need to be aware of what our students, who are already active cultural beings, bring from their own cultures into our classrooms.

Currently, in 2005 and in a slightly different although connected forum, the Council of Europe is developing materials which address the issue of how the wheels of intercultural communication, as a means of developing democratic citizenship in Europe, might be oiled. The Council of Europe is referring to a social identity or a sense of identification within a group, in this case, a European identity - one which is additional to our existing identities, not a substitute for those we already possess. According to the Council of Europe, intercultural communication, when producers and receivers of a message belong to different cultures, is central to the development of democratic citizenship.

For this to be achieved, communicators need to have a high degree of intercultural competence. In other words, we will need 'an ability to see ourselves as others see us, and to respond and interact with others in light of that'. We would then be able to reach an acceptance of our differences, and this would pave the way for tolerance, prevent xenophobia and facilitate mutual understanding. Intercultural competence is considered a competence to be developed, in part, in the foreign language classroom, and this reflects the Council of Europe's belief that education is both a moral and political force.

Outside the Bologna classroom, the importance of intercultural competence is also evidenced by its inclusion in multi-national corporate training and business language courses. Success in a global market place depends, to a certain extent, on an ability to deal in an international arena. Nowadays, it is also being included in many university courses, for example, it may be integrated into language and linguistics teaching, or simply included in response to challenges of multi-cultural classrooms.

In this talk I would like to briefly consider, in the context of the European Higher Education Area, changes which might take place in multi-cultural host classrooms in general and foreign language classrooms in particular. I will begin by defining the term 'culture', which frames a description of the term intercultural competence as currently used by the Council of Europe. I will then briefly describe aspects of classroom culture and describe two tools devised by the Council of Europe which will assist teachers looking to incorporate intercultural competence into their courses.

1. What is culture?

Before we can determine the nature of intercultural competence, we need to clarify what we mean by *culture*. A classical definition of culture usually incorporates traditions of art, music, literature etc. of a particular society: culture with a capital 'c', if you will. Alternatively, a broader pragmatic definition might simply be 'the way we do things around here', that is, culture with a small 'c'. It is the second definition of culture I will refer to here. I use the term *culture* to signify a 'shared system of assumptions, values and beliefs of people which result in characteristic behaviour'. This is *culture* that surrounds us, we breathe it and are mostly unaware of it, much like a fish surrounded by

water, and which we have a tendency to take it for granted. We only become fully aware of the nature and importance of culture when we move from one culture to another, as if we are a fish who has been dropped into a new body of water. The water might taste, smell, look and sound 'funny' or strange.

When we change cultures, we might find ourselves in a state of culture shock. Students who move to a new environment often experience this, and it can adversely affect their academic performances. Culture shock has been described as a complex continuum of emotions, affecting our physical and psychological well-being. To move from shock to successful resolution, there are several stages we might experience: euphoria, shock, gradual recovery and full recovery or acculturation. Euphoria is an experience, an emotional high, a kind of 'wow' period when the natives are friendly and accommodating. Short-term tourists might leave this stage, they take pictures, go home, dreaming, remembering their experiences of the visible layer of culture. This 'wow' feeling is just the tip of the cultural ice-berg. It might embrace, for example, historic costumes, crafts, special foods, holiday traditions and maybe a smattering of language. Let us consider three concrete examples of what might constitute immediately accessible areas of cultural differences from the 'wow' period: daily life and traditions, verbal communication and non-verbal communication.

i. Daily life activities and traditions

These are reflected in the type of information often contained in tourist guides. An awareness of social conventions might involve for example, knowing whether 60 the age of wisdom or retirement.

Imagine you are in Thailand – you are sitting with a Thai friend and his 7-year-old child on a crowded bus, when an old man gets on. Would you:

a. do nothing?
b. sk the child to give up his seat to allow the old man to sit?
c. Give up your seat for the old man

(Ans = C)

ii. Verbal communication

This includes greetings conventions (like whether or not to say hello to the cashier in the supermarket), being noisy or quiet, turn taking and interrupting. In Alaska, like Finland, the communicative virtues of speech and silence can be tricky, and for some, they reflect a belief that an 'empty vessels make most noise'. Prudence in speech, especially in public, is highly valued.

Verbal communication also encodes aspects of politeness in culture. You are in Britain, in a crowded lift and a man gets in and steps on your foot. Would you

a. grin and bear it?
b. tell him to 'Get off'?
c. apologise yourself?

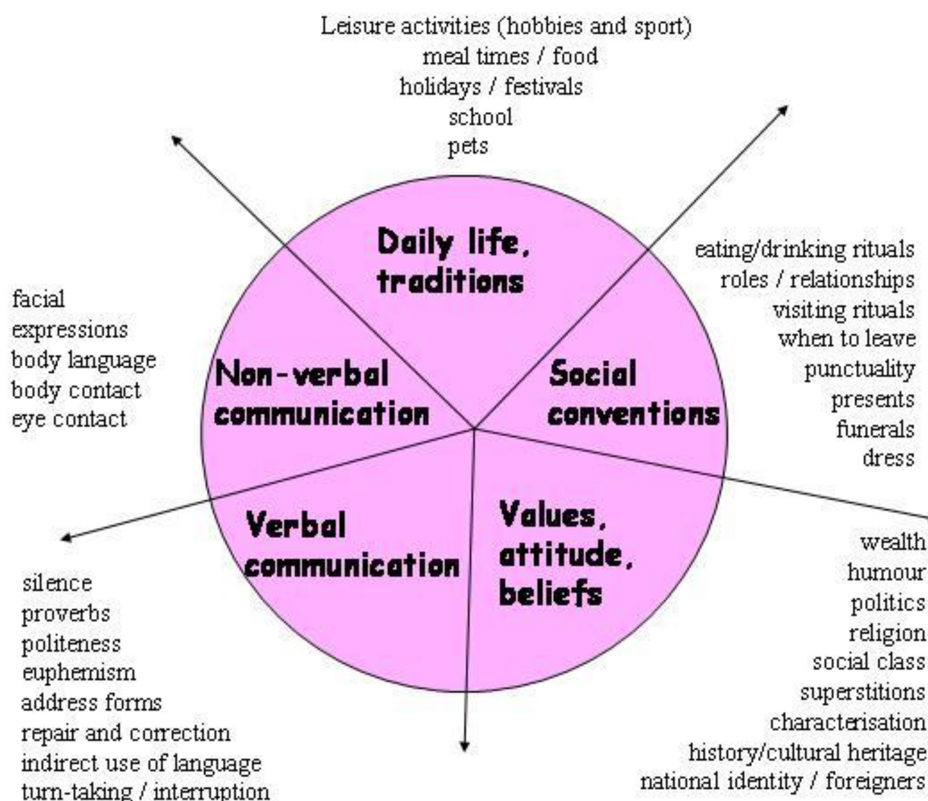
(Ans – a or c – depending on your personality!)

iii Non-verbal communication

At an everyday level, this might involve, say,

- greeting friends of the same and opposite sex
- knowing what to do when you are introduced to somebody – do you shake hand, hug, kiss, rub noses or do something else?

Clearly, we've got to help our learners get beyond the 'wow' stage if they are to function effectively in a new environment. To do so, we will need to consider all elements of 'culture'. Components of intercultural competence are: daily life activities and traditions; social conventions (or normal ways of behaving); values, beliefs and attitudes; verbal and non-verbal communication.



So, what does an individual need to be, do, and have to recover from the shock stage and be able to deal effectively with cultural differences they may encounter in a new cultural learning environment?

2. What is *Intercultural* Competence?

It is a combination of **skills, attitudes, knowledge and awareness** – which enable us to deal with the cultural differences we encounter.

Knowledge concerns daily life activities, but with the added element that an inter-culturally competent person will view these activities positively, rather than as differences which can lead to misunderstanding or rejection. An intercultural **attitude** encompasses an ability to be interested in other people's behaviours, to be curious and to ask questions (in the host language). It also involves a readiness to suspend belief about one's own way of doing thing and a willingness to 'relativise' one's own values, beliefs and behaviours, rather than assume that our way of doing things is the only possible and correct way. We also need the ability to see how we might look from the perspective of an outsider (the ability to de-centre).

An inter-culturally competent person is also able to use the **skills** of interpreting and relating (i.e. knowing how to compare and evaluate other behaviour, beliefs and meanings in contrast to their own), and be able to develop a critical or analytical understanding of their own and other cultures using skills of discovery and interaction. These skills concern the ability to ask questions to find out information from other people, the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate under constraints of real time communication and interaction. Developing such skills might become the concern a foreign language classroom engaged in preparing students to continue quality higher education through the medium of English (or, indeed, another foreign language).

A final component, critical cultural **awareness** (including political education) is the ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, the perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries. For the Council of Europe this includes acknowledging respect for human dignity and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction.

So, a student who has a high level of intercultural competence is someone who is able to see relationships between different cultures and has the ability to mediate, that is, interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or others. This student will also have a critical or analytical understanding of their own and other cultures; they will be conscious of their own perspective, of the way in which their thinking is culturally determined, rather than believing that their own understanding and perspective is the only way of doing things. This form of competence is also crucial for a student immersed in a new and, quite possibly, a culturally different classroom environment

3. Changing Classroom Cultures

Let's imagine the following situation – a student in class hasn't understood something a teacher explained. What do they do? This fairly simple situation raises two very important aspects of multi-cultural classrooms and quality in higher education (or, indeed, education in general). A student's choice of behaviour will probably be governed by the cultural norms of their own education system. Research into the differences between French and British secondary schools demonstrated that classrooms in both countries have different practices. Secondary classrooms in these countries display different types of behaviour, and the roles of the school and teachers within them are different. Examples of differences include degrees of formality between teachers and students, the extent to which pupils have freedom of movement, the degree of autonomy enjoyed by learners, and teachers' role in the classroom. In spite of growing standardization of methodologies in the Higher Education Area, differences in classroom cultures in different countries will still, inevitably, exist.

For students from different cultures, who arrive with a spirit which has its origins in prior educational experiences, identifying the social reality of the new classroom and deciding on a pattern of behaviour in a new and foreign classroom is not easy. Different societies determine appropriate classroom behaviour based on their own values and beliefs, for example, how one should behave towards ones' elders, and teachers. In the same way that society has a system of address forms reflecting honorifics, and power and solidarity, so does classroom. The asymmetrical relationships between perceptions of a teacher's duty, and the rights of the teacher and the taught vary. In one context, an egalitarian relationship between teachers and students is contrary to what the classroom should be, in an other, this might not be the case. As teachers and students, we might be used to (or not) using full titles or first names, and the use of one or another, has its roots in different educational and cultural values.

Returning to the question I asked earlier – what do you do, if, as a student, you don't understand your teacher? In one educational culture it might be respectful to feign understanding, given that

signalling a lack of comprehension might, in some way, challenge authority or indirectly criticise teaching expertise. In another educational culture, to pretend that you have understood when this is not the case would be considered contrary to the very purpose of the educational event. In the US, for example, universities the value of freedom of speech and this is reflected in classroom interaction. However, differences in classroom norms in other cultures may create a problem for a student from a different cultural background, who is adjusting to the norms of classroom interaction in US universities. It might be that loud voices and opinionated speech are not signs of good behaviour in some societies, whereas in some classrooms students are graded on their participation. Silence is a sign of respect in Japanese classrooms, but this behaviour might be interpreted by a teacher as an unwillingness to participate in the communicative language classroom.

Recently, in my own classes, with students from Germany, The Netherlands and Estonia, I enquired, informally, about perceived differences between the home and host culture classes. I also spoke to students who had returned from Erasmus courses in The Netherlands and Belgium. I asked about the following elements of classroom culture:

- Formality/informality (e.g. Do you call teachers by their first names?)
- Student and teacher responsibility (e.g. Are you expected to attend class regularly? Should you tell a teacher if you don't understand? Are you expected to prepare for your next class? Do teachers have times available to help students?)
- General student/teacher interaction (Is it easy to talk to a teacher? Do you need to make an appointment? How do teachers and /student greet?)
- Classroom interaction: (Does the teacher lecture and students listen? Are students expected to play an active role in the lessons as individuals? Are language mistakes important?)

Student responses provided interesting indications of the extent to which classroom cultures differ. Here are two examples, which not only highlight aspects of classroom interaction culture, but also indicate how these are intertwined with language proficiency. Some students commented that there is a tendency in the host classroom to assume that a foreign student has a high language proficiency level, and consequently, is able to follow lectures with ease. However, these students felt that they didn't have a sufficiently high level of English and would prefer teachers to explain or paraphrase what had been said. Others talked about the difficulty of participating in classes, not being able to express one's self as s/he would like to, and feeling challenged when it came to participating in group work. One said: 'I don't tell my teacher if I don't understand because I don't feel like asking in front of the class full of Spanish students'.

Spanish students who had returned from Erasmus programmes had concerns mirroring those of students studying here in Madrid. Generally, they found differences in classroom cultures that they felt unable to deal with. For many students, it had been their first time abroad. Consequently, they were surprised by different cultural norms, both in the classroom and beyond, and many found that they didn't have the language to deal with many intercultural encounters. They expressed an inability to be able to talk about their own cultural norms, both in general, and in the classroom in particular. As teachers, we clearly have to address possible changes we might need to implement in foreign language teaching classrooms so our students are prepared to benefit from their Bologna experiences.

4. General implications of the multi-cultural classroom

For quality education in a higher education space, one in which growing numbers of students will experience mobility, foreign language classrooms will need to put greater emphasis on *language* for academic purposes which will enable students to participate actively in the classroom. Students need to be able to display their ability in various types of thinking, for example, critical thinking

demonstrating that they can assess the worth and validity of something. Language content should aim to include full coverage of questions for clarification (What do you mean by..? Could you give me an example of …?); questions that probe assumptions (Are you assuming..? What could we assume instead..?); questions which probe reason and evidence (How could we find out whether this is true?); questions about viewpoints and perspectives (How would other groups of people respond?), and questions that probe implications and consequences (What effect would that have?). Students will need to be afforded classroom time to practice through high-level thinking activities which involve collaborative group work, problem solving and open-ended activities.

We will also need to give greater consideration to the cultural input in our teaching materials. Most language courses inevitably contain some cultural input, and it is often pre-supposed that this is somehow obvious and will be imbibed by some sort of osmosis. Cultural input on its own does not necessarily lead to intercultural competence. After all, what can be inferred from the learnable fact that London stands on the River Thames? What we need is a shift away from the content-based 'cultural' approaches of the past - in the case of English, the big red buses – which reflect the capital C view of what constitutes culture. Knowledge of particular societies does not of itself provide the skills for coping with and managing unpredictable cultural situations. Helping students understand culture with a small 'c' and similarly encouraging students reflect on their own cultural norms, beliefs and values will stand them in good stead when it comes to moving to different cultures.

We will need to identify and analyse cultural input and check that it qualifies as being cultural in that it produces cultural outcomes. In other words, we need to develop the linguistic skills necessary to mediate intercultural encounters, for example, those which invite reflection on the learner's own culture and comparison with other communities. We also need to make sure we cover linguistic content so that students will be able to resolve issues involved in (mis) communication, in other words, develop skills needed to reduce any loss of meaning. In intercultural encounters, all participants should take away images intended by others so culture reception and culture production skills are of equal value and importance.

A final consequence of multi-cultural classrooms and language teaching in general might be that teachers might wish to help students **assess** their own intercultural competence, especially in light of the position of the Council of Europe. Fortunately, there are two tools which are now available through the Council of Europe which can aid us to fully implement an intercultural competence strand in our syllabus.

5. The ELP and Intercultural Competence

Along with the Common European Framework, the Council of Europe has developed a European Language Portfolio. Students using this can keep a record of their progress in different languages using 6 levels of language proficiency. The levels provide a common scale for the referencing of various official language examinations and can be used to provide transparency in ability for students wanting to study abroad. The European Language Portfolio also includes sections designed to provide a chronological overview of significant intercultural experiences and the following format has been suggested as a framework for students in the Higher Education Sector.

Learners can keep records of

- intercultural experiences with regard to feelings (when the holder felt homesick or uncomfortable and, on the other hand, at home and comfortable) – in both cases including the circumstances which gave rise to the feelings
- 'knowledge' – what the holder learnt about the country, family life, customs and conventions

- particular actions the holder engaged in (for example, incidents or problems resolved, and examples of times when asking questions or working out an understanding of cultural customs and beliefs).

In addition to record-keeping, the Council of Europe is beginning to investigate the extent to which intercultural competence could be assessed. Intercultural competence presents us with many difficulties and challenges – assessment is very problematic. Sadly, it is true to say that if something isn't tested it's not taught, so, how do we assess IC? Assessing knowledge and skills is part of our curricula bread and butter, but how do we assess values or attitudes? Here we have a moral dilemma. There is no such thing as a perfectly inter-culturally competent person, new challenges always exist, rather, an inter-culturally competent person is open and constantly learning – an intercultural person will always learn and be willing to learn, in other words, possess an intercultural attitude. It would be worth following the developments of the Council of Europe in this area.

The European Language Portfolio also provides for the notion of self-assessment and on Council of Europe related web-sites there is a suggested format for self-assessment of the following aspects of intercultural competence:
- interest in other people's way of life
- ability to change perspective
- ability to cope with living in a different culture
- knowledge about another country and culture
- knowledge about intercultural communication (resolving misunderstandings and discover new information)

Conclusions

Students risk being ostracised if they do not – overtly at least – conform to the norms of the classroom. Teachers too, might risk rebellion in various forms if they do not honour the conventions expected by a student from a different culture. Many Bologna students might be able to deal with the academic input but experience failure or frustration when adjusting to the foreign classroom. They might also behave in ways we feel are counter to our expectations and we should be careful not to make academic judgements on behaviour, which might, in part, reflect different cultural expectations of the classroom. As teachers in multi-cultural classrooms we need to be able to deal with a student's perceived reluctance to participate in lessons, we need to listen to our students, and ask questions about their countries and classroom cultures in order to identify possible causes of non-classroom conformity.

We will also need to help students culturally adapt to our classrooms, and deal effectively with differences in a positive manner. For students attending foreign language classes prior to studying in culturally different classrooms, we will need to help them develop and assess their intercultural competence and ensure they have the language abilities to express what is needed in an academic learning environment. For successful *Bolognarization* of the Higher Education Area and quality education, students will need to be inter-culturally competent and it is quite possible, if not natural, that the development of such skills will fall into the domain of foreign language classrooms of the future. With more and more mobility in the Higher Educational Area, teachers need to familiarise themselves with what is meant by intercultural competence, reflect on our syllabus and investigate how we might integrate this into our courses. Documentation currently available and being developed will help us in this endeavour.