



Intercultural education in language teaching.

Applications of some research at the University of Primorska (Slovenia)¹

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Abstract

The pacific coexistence of the European nations, as well as their economic development, depends upon the mutual understanding and cooperation of the European states, based on the equality of rights and duties. Contact areas, where cultures and languages have interwoven and nations have coexisted for ages, represent the European laboratory for mutual coexistence and understanding, born of political and historical challenges well before the implementation of EU strategies. Communication and information exchange are cornerstones that help to improve an understanding of the economic, social and cultural situations of the nations that have decided to follow a common path. Yet, acquiring a satisfactory level of proficiency in a foreign language for communication is no longer sufficient. Participants in conversations bring into their interpersonal communication individual aspects and cultural elements of the environment in which they live. Content transmission depends not only on the language form in which the content is expressed, for the implicit relationships between the speakers, between the speakers and the content and between the content and the communicative context are all influenced by the cultural features of each participant in the speech act. Linguistic communication is thus faced with the cultural realities of each single language user of a specific language code.

By acquiring relevant language and intercultural competences, individuals as well as social groups will manage to create communication links that are necessary for efficient cooperation. Moreover, intercommunication must foster the conceptual values of the nation or ethnic group, state or nation, and European identification at the same time, because the multicultural nature of modern societies is still based on national identification. Different national groups can coexist peacefully and interact successfully to the benefit of each group only when they are led by reciprocal understanding and empathy. Empathic competence is in fact the cornerstone for efficient intercultural competence. Ethnic and plurilingual groups that live in the same area are expected to be aware of cultural differences and of interlinguistic influences. They use their native language to preserve their national identity and they commit themselves to keep their culture alive in their family context, but at the same time they respect the languages and the cultures of the environment, playing the active role in the process of multiethnic coexistence and multicultural integration.

The Centre for Scientific Research of Primorska University has developed and implemented research technologies and teaching techniques in the field of intercultural language education with the aim of making native and foreign students aware of the features of the bilingual (Italian-Slovenian) area in Istria and, at the same time, of Europe's multilingual and multicultural reality. The results of several

¹ This is a translation by M. Strubell of the original paper, delivered in Italian, which is also available on this website.



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national or European projects (Language as a bridge to intercultural communication and understanding, 2003-2007; Language as cultural cohesion and human capital, 2004-2007; Bilingual education in the ethnically mixed areas of Slovenia: Bilingual models efficiency as a challenge for the Europe of languages and cultures, 2006-2008) shed light on the dynamics of human relationships, knowledge of ethnic peculiarity and richness, intercultural education to European citizenship in second and foreign language teaching. Modules for language teaching using an intercultural perspective have been published in several Italian and English course books (*Il vicino diverso – The close otherness*, by Nives Zuduč Antonič, Metka Malčič and Neva Čebon), while the theoretical underpinnings of the research have been presented in the anthology *Bližina drugosti – The close otherness* (edited by Lucija Čok). The research results are a contribution to applied linguistics, to language teacher education and training, to sociolinguistics and to the psychology of culture and human relationships.

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INTRODUCTION

The pacific coexistence of the European nations, as well as their economic development, depends upon the mutual understanding and cooperation of the European states, based on the equality of rights and duties. Contact areas, where cultures and languages have interwoven and nations have coexisted for ages, represent the European laboratory for mutual coexistence and understanding, born of political and historical challenges well before the implementation of EU strategies. Communication and information exchange are cornerstones that help to improve an understanding of the economic, social and cultural situations of the nations that have decided to follow a common path. Yet acquiring a satisfactory level of proficiency in a foreign language for communication is no longer enough. Participants in conversations bring into their interpersonal communication individual aspects and cultural elements of the environment in which they live. Content transmission depends not only on the language form in which the content is expressed, for the implicit relationships between the speakers, between the speakers and the content and between the content and the communicative context are all influenced by the cultural features of each participant in the speech act. Linguistic communication is thus faced with the cultural realities of each single language user of a specific language code.

By acquiring language skills, intercultural individuals as well as relevant social groups will be able to establish communication links required for efficient cooperation. Intercultural communication must promote conceptual values at the level of country / ethnic group, state / country and European identification at the same time, for the multicultural nature of modern societies is still based on national identification. The different national groups can only coexist in peace and interact to their mutual benefit when they are guided by mutual understanding. Ethnic and multilingual minorities living in the same area are expected to be aware of cultural differences and inter-linguistic influences. To maintain their national identity they use their language of origin and are committed to preserving their culture matrix in family and social domains, but also promote the languages and cultures of the environment, thus forming the multiethnic and multicultural corpus.

The teaching of Italian in Slovenian Istria has a long tradition. The two languages / cultures, Slovenian and Italian, form the civic, social and historical substrate of the land. That is why the two languages are languages of daily use and in the administration, offices and schools. The Istrian intercultural environment has lived through moments of imbalance and political conflicts. This was caused by some hegemonic policies and claims, which is why the facts of memory and tradition are often manipulated. Our unique chance of peacefully surviving in a common European home is to learn a lesson from our history (Schefer 2003)¹.

Cultural realities may be close to each other, but they may also be very different and distant. The only way to accept what our partner, companion, friend, colleague or just our neighbor represent is to empathize - or better, to live with this reality, to get close to them and understand them. It is a matter of a so-called empathic skill, which facilitates the transmission and understanding not only of content but also of the specific environment in which communication takes place. Enhancing with tolerance the skill of comparing one's values with those of others, leaving aside selfishness, broadening identifications, becoming familiar with diversity by accepting differences, are the basic conditions of this process.

Especially at an advanced level of teaching, using "critical dialogue", students need to be confronted with the cultural context in which the language is practiced. An important factor in this respect is the dialectic of comparison and inter-subjectivity. The alternation of interventions and the relationship between language and linguistic context, between the speech act participants, listening to many voices and



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experiences, to learn about different identities, all this leads to a situation of inter-subjectivity, where the multiple dimensions of meaning are to be found. In this pedagogy, learners focus on the perspectives, practices and products that are offered by others, at the same time feeling the need to express their own perspectives. The intersection is thus created between information received and participation given and, consecutively, the apprehension of differences, tolerance of the diversity of voices and the negotiation of meaning. Cultural experience, shaped by the numerous occasions on which the facts acquire their value, is enriched over time. The process evolves in a perpetual dynamic. The individual who wants to save his internalized values, wants to expand them or replace them with similar or different values, commits himself to accommodate or to change the world around him. In the process of cultural development, he uses mental, behavioral, cognitive and emotional functions as the higher order transference that form his cultural memory. The intercultural development of a student, unless it start beforehand, may come true in a language or culture program, didactically structured, defined in the curriculum and introduced by cross-cultural practices.

Researchers at the Science and Research Centre of the University of Primorska (UL CRS) have based their applied research work mainly addressing the following phenomena:

- Multiple identities and citizenship,
- Models of bilingual and multilingual education,
- Social interactions in the areas of linguistic, cultural and national contact
- Cultural awareness and language skills,
- Early literacy in several languages, plurilingual proficiency levels,
- Self-assessment of linguistic and cultural skills, and self-assessment tools (Language Portfolio)
- Methodologies, tools and facilities for innovation, teaching materials for language learning.

The starting points for interculturality are to understand and know the other, in addition to knowing oneself. To drive or be driven to such knowledge, the content of studies in the humanities must highlight the differences between national identity and meta-identity as cultural resolutions of identification and the (re) identification of themselves. This process can be done in the educational environment, where content, relationships and structures allow encounters with difference.

APPLIED RESEARCH AND EMPIRICAL PRACTICE

The multilingual coastal area provides researchers of bilingualism and interculturalism a laboratory full of stimuli and content. With basic research and research undertaken over the last two decades, the UL CRS has introduced innovation in education and has created educational strategies for and language policy reform in the specific multilingual territory with, perhaps as a result, government intervention input at the national level.

Projects (*Language as Social Cohesion and human capital*, targeted research project, 2004-2007), *Language as a bridge to intercultural communication & understanding*, LABICUM, applied Research, 2004-2006, *Efficiency of bilingual education models in the ethnically mixed areas - challenge to the Europe of languages and cultures*, targeted Research, 2006-2008) are evidence of this. The projects were funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology. With the aim of including the



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business world, the LABICUM project was co-funded by the British Council Slovenia, Luka Koper, Banka Koper and Istrabenz Koper.

The last of the projects contributing to the scientific basis of the European project EUNoM is devoted to the research of the economic effects of plurilingualism. The Language and Economy, Basic Research (2008-2011) projected is coordinated by the Institute of Ethnic Studies in Ljubljana and is being undertaken in collaboration with the Science Research Centre of the University of Primorska.

On sound theoretical bases, the projects set out to propose the problem definition, data analysis, experimental research and monitoring of innovative tools, and successful completion of the empirical practices in teaching with innovative materials in various languages.

a) The problem and the research field

Intercultural linguistic communication compares the realities surrounding us. The creative use of language is an interesting aspect, especially when confronted with cultural identity, ethnic studies and civic citizenship. Effective communication in multicultural environments takes for granted linguistic completeness in socially and culturally determined roles of verbal and nonverbal behaviour.

From the anthropological point of view, however, in the complex relationship between speakers of different languages and cultures, intercultural competence is essential for the generation of linguistic content. The fields of research where such skill may be recognized are applied linguistics, psycho- and socio-linguistics, linguistic anthropology, cultural psychology, education for citizenship and language teaching.

b) Objectives of cross-cultural research

The main objectives of our research were: to promote awareness among students of linguistic and cultural diversity and encourage understanding of diversity and multicultural sensitivity through the contents of the university. The most appropriate topics for this strategy stem from sociolinguistics, such as political correctness, the distinction of styles and genres, hidden messages, etc. From a literary perspective differences in speech style, displays of feelings, and the use of symbols and metaphors need to be included, whereas artistic expression is more a part of the cultural traditions and the communicational areas of a given cultural context.

Our research has thus examined forms of linguistic communication in the contact areas, specifically language groups within the European Community. Taking into account the fact that the multiethnic and multilingual European society respects cultural and linguistic diversity and wishes to follow the principles of peaceful co-existence, our project was to integrate forms of intercultural communication as a tool of international behavior in different educational situations. The Italian language and culture as a subject of study and communication tool (official language) in Slovenian Istria was presented to researchers as a research area *par excellence*.

From the quantitative and qualitative analyses of linguistic structures, areas, variety and strategies in the second language, data emerge that can verify the role and importance of scientific research. They are then used to form communication modules, methods of communication and linguistic and cultural strategies to be included in the study of languages and their cultures. The self-assessment of intercultural awareness is also part of the development process of the student in his training as a person aware of the multiple realities of social life.



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c) *Models of good practice*

The identification of cultural behaviour and communicative acts in different language areas was the first phase of our research. Our attention was directed mainly to contact with Slovenian languages (Italian and German) in border areas, in tourism, in diplomacy, in science and in university studies. The same approach was adopted for other European languages, from which we have chosen English and French. We have designed language teaching modules in humanities areas, in cultural studies, in tourism studies, in education and in management. The educational approach to the study of languages was based on recent scientific theories, making sure however that they are consistent with the linguistic and cultural reality of Istria.

The second phase was that of monitoring, in which modules of language and culture teaching (English, Italian, French and Slovenian) were presented to students of the Faculties of Humanities, Management and Tourism. In the training seminars, tutored by Paolo Balboni (Ca 'Foscari University of Venice) and Michael Byram (University of Durham), conducted by researchers Lucija Čok and Nives Zudič Antonič, the content and structure of the modules were analyzed. Data from a questionnaire, designed according to the chosen theory and distributed to eighty University students, provided researchers with the opportunity to reflect on the application of the material. The overall result of the research was presented at the 2005 International Conference on 'Intercultural Communicative Competence: Europe and Beyond' (June 2005).

d) *Methods and tools, teaching approaches in the assessment of intercultural linguistic proficiency*

In documents for assessing levels of language competence, the part devoted to intercultural competence is only vaguely defined. There are, however, advanced methodologies which are in the implementation phase (Beacco 2000, Byram et al 2009) that demonstrate how teaching can introduce some method with which to define or self-assess one's cultural competence.

The national research projects presented above, in which intercultural competence is the core issue, were aimed at the formation of descriptors that were supposed to give, through experimentation, a self-assessment methodology for intercultural competence levels. It is by chance - or perhaps not, given the similarity of the heuristic approaches used - that the procedures of the LABICUM methodology correspond to Bennett's (1993) stages of intercultural development. We formulated three skill levels: that of attitudes toward interculturality, in which according to Bennett the need is to overcome denial of diversity and individual's resistance to interculturality. The next level, the discovery of the world of interculturality, involves the minimization and at the same time the acceptance of Bennett's differences. The third level, in which one's own intercultural experience is transferred to others, is considered by Bennett as the phase of the individual's adaptation and integration in the multicultural world.

The descriptors developed in our research covers three areas: (1) the *cognitive area* refers to the individual's reflections, concepts and evaluations; (2) the *emotional area* includes emotions, passions and values that the individual associates with the peculiarities of his nation / national identity; and (3) the *dynamic-activating area* refers to the aspirations of the individual to actively participate in the dynamism of phenomena that build up his or her intercultural awareness. By completing the European Language Portfolio with descriptors of intercultural competence, we have offered the learner a more elaborated tool, with which he can self-manage his process towards plurilingualism and interculturalism.

In practice, we have introduced empirical descriptors of self-assessment at three levels (Čok 2006):



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1) The first level of intercultural awareness (ICA): *Attitudes and exposure to cultural diversity* cover the cognitive area. This level includes teaching ways of overcoming denial (refusal), and defending Bennett's differences or Byram's "*Savoir faire*" methodological procedures (Byram 1997).

The 'intra-cultural' procedures at Level 1 deepen the knowledge of one's culture, encourage reflection on oneself, inform us about the target culture, help us see differences. Also employed are 'inter-cultural' procedures that, with a heuristic approach, help us to cope with what is different; they help us get outside our own group using cooperative activities which allow us to compare what is different with what is our own.

2) The second level of ICA, *discovering the diversity and modulation of inputs*, covers the affective area. This level integrates Bennett's teaching methods, which works to avoid the minimization of differences and to ensure that the individual will accept them; it also follows the procedures of Byram's "*Savoir faire*" methodology.

The second level works to some degree on awareness, and therefore stimulates our behavior targeted towards interculturalism. The research of the different forces us to compare cultural differences, with which to increase knowledge, sensitizing us to respect, to tolerance and to coexistence. It also encourages us to reflect on our own concepts and to tolerate ambiguity.

3) The third level of ICA, *transferring intercultural awareness to real life*, covers the dynamic area. This level integrates Bennett's teaching methods aimed at adapting and integrating the individual in the inter-cultural context, or the procedures of Byram's "*Savoir être*" methodology.

The third level is that of action. Reacting as a result of anthropological-cultural experience acquired during the exchange of cross-cultural traditions, forces us to expose environmental intra- and inter-cultural references, to shape our beliefs (cultural flexibility), to transfer positive attitudes in coping with the cultural diversity of others.

In developing content for teaching materials, published according to the methodology of our research, we followed specific procedures and techniques.

The piloting of the tool in language teaching courses at the university was made possible thanks to the special teaching material designed by the researchers. Two guide books offer educational content in intercultural education: one for teaching Italian, *Il vicino diverso*, by Nives Zudič Antonic and Metka Malčič, and one for teaching English, *The Close Otherness* by Neva Čebon. The teachers of different languages that have contributed to the success of the LABICUM project continue to develop new modules that will offer students the University the opportunity of learning languages in an intercultural dimension. In this way it is hoped that the way languages are taught at the University of Primorska will contribute to the Council of Europe's language teaching research.

e) *The close otherness, paths of intercultural education in Italian*

In the active book that belongs to a collection of intercultural education, authors Nives Zudič Antonic and Metka Malčič present five modules of language and culture education in the Italian language; this is followed by a didactic discussion by Lucija Čok. The material is used in teaching Italian as a foreign language or a second language to broaden language learning into intercultural education. The tool for the self-assessment of intercultural competence is also included. It is advisable to add it to the European Language Portfolio descriptors of language competence level. Students cope with social interaction in



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which different cultures have touched their emotions and stimulated reflection on the reality that they are experiencing.

The themes of the modules are carefully chosen and lend themselves to dialogue between the content and interpretation. They provide a starting point for the students’ various activities aimed at finding multiple perceptions and involving their earlier experience. It is a matter of stimulating confidence, friendship, cooperation and of providing cultural information, exploring the ways in which different cultural behaviour occurs (art, music, literature, theatre, dance). The more the culture is understood, the better the language is acquired and the easier it is to internalize communicational models. Living a multicultural reality involves interacting to every cultural and ethnic situation with flexibility, adaptability and with an ethical relationship with one’s own values, which are confronted with those of the *other*.

f) Centre for Languages and Innovation in Language Teaching / Cultural Appreciation

The experts of today and tomorrow, graduates in various fields, will need to master, on top of their first language, a high level of linguistic and cultural skill in their second language or the language of the neighbour and also have a satisfactory knowledge of the language most used in their professional field. Languages have different roles in our lives: they are means of social communication, and a cognitive medium that opens the way towards knowledge; they transmit intimate and creative personal expression; they are one of the tools for professional practice or study, and they have even more roles. The so-called functional and analytical methodologies, based on the needs and the many situations in which language functions, are targeted to complete the personal process of linguistic and cultural self-study, and to ensure the learner’s communication self-sufficiency.

Both curricular innovation at the university level and empirical research in the field of language teaching have convinced the University of Primorska that the integration of content, innovative methodology and teaching methods in teaching language and cultures call for new ways of language teaching, and less traditional organizational forms and technological structures. A number of factors have led to the formation of the Centre for Languages and Intercultural Communication at the University: the spread of Community languages in the European Union; plurilingualism and interculturalism as an essential requirement of youths’ education; the need to strengthen the education of bilinguals in the ethnically mixed area of Slovenian Istria; and the possibility of offering the study of national languages within Erasmus mobility. Learning more languages and knowing different cultures become new opportunities for students to become plurilingual speakers and knowledgeable in intercultural contexts in which they will operate in their future professional field.

The Centre for Languages and Intercultural Communication, with university teachers qualified to teach standard language with linguistic registers and dialects, sectorial languages with guided, semi-autonomous and autonomous learning approaches, with individual and group work, with laboratories and computerized classrooms, with practical activities, plenary courses and colloquia, is the ideal place in which to undertake this didactic approach.

The methodology proposed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which defines the descriptors of language assessment with the European Language Portfolio, was accepted unanimously. It is much more difficult, however, to make the descriptors sufficiently apt and transparent to establish the level of intercultural awareness, since they relate to acts and effects of perception and evaluation, to knowledge and recognition in which individual register their own ideas and interests. The



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cultural evenings organized by the students' union, the Erasmus guests and the guest experts in interculturalism, underline to what extent language and culture are linked and inseparable.

CONCLUSION

The Istrian bilingual environment in which the University carries out its mission provides a social laboratory where the intercultural education of young people is a condition of life. Speaking in tongues and knowing the rules of communication between different cultures help the individual overcome barriers to civic and cultural life, to preserve and develop the values that have been handed down, and to acquire the ability to adapt to values which are different but common to the two nations that cohabitate. The moment one has to act in new and different situations, one needs to understand the cultural diversity so as to be able to assert one's intentions and to achieve the objective in hand. The complex process of intercultural communication displays various forms of linguistic and cultural interaction, functional approaches to uses of linguistic structures, the unequal distribution of languages, sectorial linguistic needs, different registers, roles in the exchange of messages, competition in the job market.

In view of the specific uses of language it is important to integrate in the educational offer a diverse range of learning / teaching languages, according to the needs of the speaker. Such an offer requires a specific teaching method and special structures in which teaching takes place. The lingua franca, in our case English, must be integrated into the curriculum as an added value and not replace the second language, as happens in some cases. A recent study (Čok and others, 2008) has shown how this can happen. The loss of motivation for the study of the second language (in our case, Italian) is due to routine teaching, the lack of attention by teachers to current teaching and social developments and to wrong choices being made by educational professionals and politicians.

The motivation for multilingualism and cultural experience, formed by the multiple occasions in which the facts acquire their value, accumulate over time. This process evolves in a perpetual dynamic. The individual who wants to save internalized values, and to expand them or replace them with similar or different values, displays his desire to accommodate or to change the world around him. In the dynamics of such processes, the individual develops his own, varied and unique cultural experience, based on his everyday experience. It is well known that language is the means par excellence of mental functions: it has the form and content in which culture is materialized, passing it on creates value systems and multiple, specific cultural identities. The teaching of languages and intercultural education, therefore, require constant attention and careful handling by the individual and by society.

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NOTE

ⁱ ... /O/r « l'Europe n'est faite que de cas semblables : elle est peut-être une chance pour chaque pays (qui souffre de troubles de mémoire) d'accéder à une identité réelle. Nous vivons tous ensemble depuis la fin de l'empire romain, notre histoire est donc commune, et c'est notre première richesse intellectuelle, politique, artistique, humaine. » (J. L. Schefer, 08.05.2003, author's personal correspondence)