



Education Project as a Means for Developing Teachers' Intercultural Communicative Competence

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Abstract

The internationalisation process in the EHEA harmonising the national systems of education, institutions of higher education and the study programmes points out the necessity of educating teachers being able to work and communicate with people of other cultures. The presentation reviews the researchers' attitudes towards the opportunities of educating university graduates to be "interculturally competent" [1] and highlights several tendencies. First, the issue of readiness of HE institutions for participation in the process of internationalisation is discussed [2, 3], and the importance of training intercultural mentors responsible for international affairs of the institution pointed out [1]. Second, the scientists state that the features of internationalisation can be traced out in the new or renewed study programmes aiming at developing students' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) [4]. The component of experience is recommended to be integrated into the teacher training study programmes [5, 6, 7] that would enable teachers to assess their attitudes towards other cultures and develop a higher level of ICC. Transformation in the teachers' worldview is considered to be of great importance while preparing them to work with students representing different cultures, therefore, methods of reflection are emphasized in teacher training [7]. Third, it has been unanimously acknowledged, that the best way to assess the level of one's ICC is to experience the natural encounters with the other culture [8]. The scientists stress the responsibility of practitioners-educators who have to ensure that students derive as much benefit as possible from time abroad [9]. The second part of the paper is based on the empirical study carried out to explore the opportunities to develop teachers' ICC within the context of eight European Teacher Training institutions – Cá Foscari University, Pedagogical University of Tirol, University of Cyprus, School of Education of Aarhus University, University of Nantes, E. Loránd University in Budapest, Jagiellonian University in Krakow and Vilnius University. Firstly, the data of the diagnostic survey that revealed the respondents' (teacher trainers' and student teachers') attitudes towards the importance of integrating Intercultural education into the curriculum of a mobility term is presented. Secondly, the possibilities of developing teachers' ICC within the framework of a designed education project and carried out in the socio-cultural context of Lithuania is described.

1. Introduction to EMETT and MEITT

Considering teachers to be the main driving force for developing knowledge-based society members' competences the paper explores an education project as a means of enhancing teachers' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) [10]. The implementation of the education project is related to LLP Erasmus projects encompassing eight European teacher training institutions - Cá Foscari University, Pedagogical University of Tirol, the University of Cyprus, the School of Education of Aarhus University, the University of Nantes, E. Loránd University, Jagiellonian University, Vilnius University whose teacher trainers and administrators, having explored the scientific literature, legal acts on contemporary teacher education and the data of the diagnostic survey designed a joint Master study programme. It was carried out within the framework of LLP Erasmus project "EMETT – European Master for European Teacher Training", No. 134348-LLP-1-IT-ERASMUS-ECDSP. The programme aimed at teacher training that would develop knowledge, abilities, and professional awareness indispensable for teachers practicing in the European context, therefore, it comprised a mobility term as the most effective way to master student teachers' ICC.

The curriculum of a mobility term was piloted in the format of the *Erasmus* IP "MEITT - Modernisation of Europe by Innovating Teacher Training" (No. LLP-ERA-IP-2009-LT-0261-LSS-12400-1133) when student teachers from the above mentioned institutions gathered in Vilnius. The Institute of Foreign Languages, Vilnius University, took the role of a coordinating institution.



1.2 Theoretical and empirical background of the education project

Mobility is recognized as a strengthening factor of the academic and cultural internationalization of the EU universities, contributing to personal development and employability, fostering respect to diversity, capacity to deal with other cultures, encouraging linguistic pluralism [11]. Despite some painful facts of mobility discovered in teacher education and reported in international assessments within the last two decades [12] there still is “a strong consensus that the international mobility of education students and teacher educators is highly beneficial” [12]. Revision of the scholars’ insights into the benefits of mobility emphasizes the necessity of the following aspects:

- responsibility of a higher education institution and its educators for creating the environment “that students derive as much benefit as possible from time abroad” [1], [2], [3], [4], [6].
- envisaged learning outcomes of the curriculum focusing on developing students’ ICC throughout the component of experience [4], [7], [9].
- the level of students’ immersion into the new context and their ability to reflect upon it [5], [8].

In order to collect evidence on the importance of mobility from the point of view of its participants a diagnostic survey was conducted. It encompassed teacher trainers (**n=229**) and student teachers (**n=587**) representing the already mentioned eight European teacher training institutions. The methodological background of the survey comprised the following methods:

- *empirical*: two structured questionnaires were rendered for teacher trainers and student teachers to highlight their attitudes towards the importance of mobility as the key educational factor for teachers’ ICC to develop;
- *statistical*: the data obtained were processed with SPSS 17.00 software. A *descriptive analysis* (percentage rank) was employed to reveal the respondents’ attitudes towards mobility.

Having divided the joint sample group according to the participants’ countries, it became evident that the majority of the respondents from Italy (77%), Lithuania (73.3%), Poland (72.7%), Austria (70%) and Denmark (66.6%) expressed their positive attitudes towards mobility during the study years. The respondents from Cyprus proved to be moderate (54.9%), while fewer than half of the respondents from Hungary (44.6%) and France (44.3) supported the importance of mobility.

While comparing the teacher trainers’ and students teachers’ attitudes towards the importance of mobility it could be inferred that student teachers support mobility in somewhat stronger terms (64.2%) than teacher trainers (60.6%) from the same institutions.

The results of the empirical study put forward an idea to implement an education project to master student teachers’ ICC during a term abroad.

2.1 The Syllabus of the Education Project

Taking into consideration all the three theoretical aspects related to mobility as well as the empirical evidence, the curriculum of a mobility term of the joint MA teacher training study programme was designed. Its piloting encompassed an education project aiming at student teachers’ immersion into the context of the hosting country for their ICC to master. The target competence was defined as *the integrity of attitudes, knowledge and skills enabling representatives of different cultures to communicate in an effective and appropriate way*. A complex syllabus of the education project provided its participants with an opportunity to combine *knowledge* with *experience* as it comprised:

seminars on culture and its models; on the *Self* as a creature of culture and the types of identity;

lessons of the Lithuanian language;

lectures on the history of the hosting country and its culture;

exploring hosting institution and its history;

exposure to the festive cultural events;

excursions to the Open Air Museum of Lithuania and the coastline of the Baltic sea;

national evenings of the participants’ countries;

ethnographic survey into the socio-cultural context of Lithuania.

The outlined segments of the syllabus aimed at broadening the student teachers’ knowledge and perception of the hosting country, developing their ICC skills.



2.2 The Method and participants of the qualitative research

While applying the *ethnographic method* the aim was to help student teachers develop enough of ethnographic imagination to describe, interpret, explain and construct the socio-cultural reality of the hosting country [13]. *Diary* was chosen to be a data collection instrument to identify the student teachers' worldview and cultural capital possessed, which was the background for discovering the socio-cultural context of a new country for them. The student teachers' ICC manifestation tendencies were traced out through their reflection which allowed us to see the events from their points of view and observe shifts occurring in their attitudes.

Bearing in mind the fact that the participants of the project were exposed to a new and unfamiliar cultural environment, we attempted at providing them with the favourable conditions to discover Lithuania. We also aimed at giving preference to **attitudes**, an ICC component that determines further manifestation of cognitive and behavioural elements in the person's competence. Due to the **knowledge** gained on the cultural background, culture in general and culture specific, and the **skills** of listening, observing, analysing, interpreting, relating and evaluating developed, evident shifts in a person's attitudes occurred. This allowed a person to assess how **effectively** he, an outsider to the hosting culture was able to achieve his own goals (etic perspective) and **appropriately** behave in line with the norms of conduct of the local people (emic perspective) [14].

The sample size of the qualitative research accounted for 33 student teachers. The analysis of the data obtained was based on *qualitative content analysis*, J. W. Neuliep's *Intercultural Communication Contextual Model* comprising a country's cultural, micro-cultural, environmental, socio-relational and perceptual contexts [15] was chosen as the methodological background for data interpretation.

2.3 Interpretation of the Results

Taking into consideration the participants' different motivation levels and cultural backgrounds we aimed at identifying just general tendencies in their ICC manifestation, i.e. what was (in)effectively and (in)appropriately achieved by them in each context of the hosting country. We also targeted at eliciting to-be-improved mobility issues that hinder the progress of internationalization process.

While analysing the data on each context separately, it became evident that the student teachers were able to analyse **the environmental context of Lithuania** most effectively and appropriately. Owing to their ICC skills the student teachers succeeded in revealing: 1) Vilnius citizens' relationship with the architecture of the City, 2) the influence of nature on the society members' character peculiarities, 3) the prevailing synthesis of nature-mythology-history. The student teachers also demonstrated special creativity in strategies to discover the environmental context of Lithuania.

The collected data on **the context of social relations** provided evidence about: 1) the appearance of the inhabitants of Lithuania, 2) their character traits, 3) verbal and nonverbal communication, 4) foreign language proficiency, 5) type of relationship among society members and foreigners, 6) close link to history, 7) values cherished by the society members, 8) activities preferred by the youth. In contrast to the environmental context, the data obtained on the context of social relations disclosed quite limited abilities to interpret the social relationships, pointed out teachers' ethnocentric points of view highly dependent on preconceptions and unwillingness to be open and tolerant.

The student teachers' reflection on **the context of perception** mainly focused on the culinary heritage of the country and the society members' perception of time. These two factors were identified as the most effective ICC developing factors that revealed shifts in the student teachers' attitudes when the encounter with the new and unknown was interpreted as a challenge, as a positive or a negative experience.

Finally, the data of the empirical survey proved that the student teachers were competent enough to interpret **the cultural context** of Lithuania within the framework of theoretical culture models presented to them.

Conclusions and Future perspectives

Mobility is an effective educational factor to enhance teachers' ICC in case the hosting institution and its staff create favourable environment for the participants' encounters with a new culture and provide conditions to act effectively and appropriately in the unfamiliar context. Taking into consideration this particular case of internationalisation it also could be added that success of mobility is highly dependent on the participants' attitudes towards the importance of mobility and its possible benefits.



Both teachers' and students' different levels of English proficiency can become an obstacle in communication preventing from achieving excellent academic results. Still existing hostility between the representatives from the East and the West of Europe appears to be a painful issue to be tackled in the future.

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