



Intercultural Learning: Know-How Enhancing Intercultural Competences and Cultural Awareness of Teachers

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An American professor, Jim Witherspoon, writes in his book, "English Comes Alive!":

"When I began teaching [in the 1960's], I worked for a wise, much loved and respected chairperson—Dr. Harwell Sturdivant. I once asked him, "What is the most important of all qualities in great teachers?" I thought he would say "preparedness," for he insisted on high standards for students and teachers alike. Instead, he said "love." To be good teachers, he felt that we must love and understand our students"[1].

This love and understanding of Drs. Witherspoon and Sturdivant have surely had an impact on Lithuania, as I will subsequently relate. But what about other attributes? What kind of personal qualities and intercultural competences and awareness should a great teacher have today and in the future? How can we enhance and support the development of these qualities and competences in our teachers? Our university keeps these and related issues on our daily work agenda: the development of teacher competences, the improvement of the teaching and learning process and the measurement of teacher quality.

The problem in Lithuania as in many countries is the lack of enough qualified foreign language teachers, especially teachers of English, because the number of people learning this language is increasing. Thus the Professional Competence Development Institute at our university is mainly concerned with building competence in our foreign language teachers. Cooperating with the Ministry of Education, foreign embassies and the British Council in Lithuania, it organizes teacher training seminars and conferences, designs and conducts "train the trainers" programmes, and is responsible for the requalification of teachers. It also offers a wide range of different foreign language courses for the public.

The challenge we have not yet resolved is that of training teachers in multiple languages. The need for this is caused by the decrease in the number of pupils in our schools and by a much wider use of the English language in all spheres of life. Thus fewer people study languages other than English, giving teachers of German, French and other languages less than a full workload. There is also a need for teachers of another subject in a foreign language: CLIL. Content and Language Integrated Learning has proven its efficiency and it has been successfully implemented in many schools in Lithuania. An early language immersion programme has been implemented in primary schools and kindergartens. Teachers working with these groups have to undergo special in-service training at our institute.

After Lithuania regained its independence 21 years ago and after integration in the European Union 8 years ago, there were great changes and new opportunities for cooperation with foreign universities, opportunities for transferring know-how from foreign educational institutions, for enhancing intercultural competences of teachers, for intercultural learning and for greater intercultural awareness of students and teachers. We perceive intercultural learning as the process of becoming more aware of and having a better understanding of one's own culture and other cultures around the world. In other words, our aim is to increase international and cross-cultural tolerance and understanding.

As Chris Rose of the British Council in Italy points out:

"Language itself is defined by a culture. We cannot be competent in the language if we do not also understand the culture that has shaped and informed it. We cannot learn a second language if we do not have an awareness of that culture, and how that culture relates to our own first language. It is not only therefore essential to have cultural awareness, but also intercultural awareness"[2].

One of the major ways in which culture manifests itself is through language. Material culture is constantly mediated, interpreted and recorded through language. It is because of that mediatory role of language that culture becomes the concern of the language teacher.

Professor Claire Kramsch says further:

"If...language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed as enabling language proficiency...Culture in language teaching is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing"[3] We conclude, therefore, that intercultural awareness is a kind of a competence, which comprises skills and attitudes enabling a person to become aware of his own culture and to observe, compare, identify, recognize, accept differences, negotiate, tolerate, interpret and understand other cultures.

Intercultural learning requires the teacher to become an educator, a kind of a coach. Such a teacher should help students become more aware of the world around them and better interact with that world. This teacher should show the students the pathways to different cultures and assist them in strengthening cultural and intercultural awareness. Additionally, this teacher should have highly developed intercultural competences and be able to transfer knowledge and know-how to his or her students. Our Language Teaching Centre now has such teacher-educator-coaches who show our students and teachers the ways to intercultural learning and who help them develop intercultural awareness.



Nineteen years ago, being the head of the Language Teaching Centre at our university, I met Dr. Jim Witherspoon from Grand Canyon University, USA. In response to our visit, he and other volunteers, usually three to six teachers yearly, began teaching summer English courses for our students. They came every year. What a tremendous experience this has been—19 years of transatlantic intercultural learning and teaching, friendship and cooperation. Through this transatlantic contact our students soon became more fluent in English and more interculturally aware.

These courses give us a superb example of intercultural learning and cultural awareness: they are informal, they are joyful and alive and they make it possible for both parties to learn about the life, culture, habits, and history of the other party. The American teachers incorporate cultural material into their lessons and teach even more of it through informal contacts with our students and teachers. Looking back on this long-lasting, cooperative, intercultural programme, Dr. Witherspoon recently wrote:

“Language and an understanding of culture, I think, are best learned informally whether inside or outside the classroom. Most students are intimidated by the old-time formality of highly structured classrooms. So they hesitate to speak. To correct this, our teachers combine fun with challenge in ways that put students at ease. We and our students sing, tell stories, give improvised speeches on unusual topics, role play, discuss cultural similarities and differences, and do other fast-paced activities that encourage participation. Outside the classroom, we have picnics, play games, and take walks about town. These let us converse in a natural way, so the students quickly lose their fear of Americans and the English language. Informal get-togethers promote speaking, and speaking promotes friendship and cultural awareness.

Likewise, Irena, you and your friends travelled with us through the years to Trakai, Kaunas, Kernave, Klaipeda, Nida, Palanga, Elektrėnai, and elsewhere. We spoke practically nonstop on all these trips, learning a great deal about each other, becoming like brothers and sisters”[4].

The Americans brought their know-how to our students and later to our secondary teachers of English in Lithuania, know-how that enhanced intercultural awareness and enriched our teacher training curricula and teaching programmes. Dr. Witherspoon’s books, starting with “English Abroad” and continuing with “Dramatic, Brain-Building Ways to Teach English” and “English Comes Alive!” were valuable presents bringing professional methodological tools to our English language teachers and students. More than 700 students during 19 years had a wonderful opportunity to improve English supervised by these teachers from Arizona.

Regarding our “train the trainers” programme for English teachers of primary and secondary schools, Dr. Witherspoon wrote:

“I enjoy and learn from every student, every family, every class, but I especially enjoy teaching ESL methods to English teachers. Because they already know English, we move quickly and have more time to interact and share. I dream of someday traveling from school to school, class to class, throughout Europe to show how our teachers in China, Hungary, and Lithuania teach English. But for now, I will simply offer this teaching through amazon.co.uk in the book, English Comes Alive!”[4]

Another extremely valuable source for developing intercultural awareness of students and teachers is close cooperation with the embassies of foreign countries residing in Lithuania and Culture Institutes. The Italian Culture Institute in Lithuania brought three native teachers to our Language Teaching Centre to train students willing to become Italian language teachers in secondary schools; the embassy of Spain brought a native teacher here for four years to conduct the programme “The Spanish Language and Culture”; the Japanese embassy donated teaching materials and brought a native teacher to our Language Teaching Centre. Every year together with the embassy of Spain we organize Cultural Week events. Embassies and foreign businesses help our university equip lecture rooms: at present we have lecture rooms named after Leonardo da Vinci, J. W. von Goethe, J.P Sartre, E. Hemingway and other outstanding writers.

In 2008 the Turkish Language and Culture Centre was established at our university. It provides annually a possibility for over one hundred students to learn the Turkish language and get familiar with the Turkish culture. Two years ago together with the Baltic Turkish Culture Academy we organized the first international conference on Islamic culture. During the conference “Culture Dialogue—Dialogue Culture” participants could listen to many famous academicians, such as Jill Carroll, author of the bestseller, “A Dialogue of Civilisations,” Prof. Dr. Ian Williams from Great Britain, and Dr. Ihsan Yilmaz from Turkey. The core issue of the conference was resonance between the Islamic and western cultures, including discussions on cultural and intercultural awareness, values and honour, and freedom of thought, education, and responsibility related to creation of the worldwide society.

The conference embraced discussions on the Islamic philosopher Fethullah Gülen’s thoughts and ideas stating that different religions of the world have far more common contact points than incompatible differences. Academician Algirdas Gaižutis, Rector of our Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, pointed out that Gülen’s works are a key to the world of Islamic culture. The rector’s presentation stressed the philosophical outlook in different cultures regarding analytical thinking and cultural awareness.

Teachers of our university actively participate in international projects that, without doubt, have a tremendous influence on intercultural learning and intercultural awareness. This year, for example, the Spanish company “Interacting” invited us to join a team of six European countries (Great Britain, Spain, Germany, Cyprus, Italy, Romania) in a project called “At the Hearth.” The project aims to celebrate traditional methods of learning through stories, songs, wisdom, recipes and crafts which were once handed down from generation to generation at the fireside. The stories we share and other cultural “offerings” connect us to our environment: they reveal who we are, where we come from, how we should behave and how we can navigate through life.



The sharing of common experiences with other kinds of people—when cultural, linguistic, and generational differences exist—invites the creation of understanding, tolerance and respect and the development of cultural awareness.

These examples of intercultural learning and teaching prove that effective communication and the interaction of language and culture are vital in fostering understanding and tolerance among people throughout the world and that such communication and interaction highly enhances the development of intercultural competences and intercultural awareness of teachers. We need even more of this intercultural camaraderie.

References

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- [3] Claire Kramsch "Context and Culture in Language Teaching," 1993
- [4] Jim Witherspoon e-mail to Irena Navickienė, 20 March 2012. You may contact Dr. Witherspoon through Jim@englishcomesalive.com.
- [5] Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania, Country report, Vilnius, 2004