



# Intercultural learning in English as foreign language instruction: The importance of teachers' intercultural experience and the usefulness of precise instructional directives

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 14 October 2009

Received in revised form

6 May 2010

Accepted 31 May 2010

### Keywords:

Educational process

Classroom perspective

Teacher competencies

Instructional effectiveness

English – second language

Intercultural education

## ABSTRACT

The development of intercultural competence, especially in foreign language instruction, is considered a key goal of teaching in German schools. The present article sheds light on the teaching of intercultural topics in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL). It presents the results of an analysis of data from a larger study (DESI study – Assessment of Student Achievements in German and English as a Foreign Language) bringing the intercultural experience of teachers and observable aspects of instruction into focus. Videotapes of EFL-classroom instruction of 9th and 10th grade students are analyzed in order to assess characteristic of the implementation of intercultural topics. The study reveals the impact of teachers' intercultural experience on the quality of their intercultural instruction. Furthermore, the results indicate that precise external directives for particular lessons can help teachers put intercultural topics into practice.

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## 1. Introduction

The development of intercultural competence, especially in foreign language instruction, is considered a key goal of teaching in German schools. With respect to the teaching of foreign languages, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has a central position in German secondary schools, one major aspect of which is the development of students' intercultural competence and sensitivity to intercultural issues (see KMK, 1994). EFL curricula emphasize this aim accordingly (Göbel & Hesse, 2004).

The present article intends to shed light on the teaching of intercultural topics in the context of foreign language instruction. The paper brings into focus the intercultural experience of teachers and observable aspects of instruction. The study analyses the promotion of intercultural topics in class by comparing the teaching quality of videotaped lessons of teachers with more vs. less frequent contact to English-speaking countries and the teaching

quality of videotaped lessons with more vs. less precise directives for the particular lesson assigned by researchers.

In the following sections, a review of the literature on the promotion of intercultural sensitivity in the context of foreign language teaching and learning on the one hand, and on instructional quality on the other, will be presented.

### 1.1. Content and topics of intercultural learning in the EFL classroom

In Germany the shift to a communicative approach in applied linguistics was followed in the 1980s by an emphasis on intercultural issues, with the result that these also became increasingly relevant in language education. The literature on foreign language teaching and intercultural competence has, however, worked with different theoretical models. First of all, the strong link between language and culture was stressed in the work of Kramsch (1998); and affective components of cultural contact, like concepts of prejudice, were focused on by Hu (1995) and Zarate (1986). Discussion of these concepts in Germany was dominated by the notion of intercultural empathy and mutual understanding in cultural contact (Bredella, 1992). This involved a third culture model, based on the assumption that a commonly constructed third culture would mediate between two interacting persons of

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different cultural background. Subsequently, however, competence-oriented models, as conceptualized by Byram (1997), were favored. These highlighted the competencies required for positive outcomes in intercultural contact and for intercultural teaching and learning in schools.

Current German EFL curricula provide at least some directives on intercultural language teaching. Within the context of foreign language teaching, knowledge about other cultures, openness and empathy toward other cultures, critical involvement with intercultural topics, the readiness to put one's own convictions into perspective, and the ability to deal with people from different cultures are to be promoted (Göbel & Hesse, 2004). Nevertheless, curricula concentrate primarily on general intercultural learning goals such as overcoming ethnocentrism, developing cultural self-awareness, and encouraging appreciation, interest and respect for cultural diversity. But they fail to indicate how these general goals are to be taught, and thus lack a convincing link between general intercultural learning goals and those concerned with specific cultures.

At a European level, the *Common European Framework* (CEF; Trim, North, Coste, & Sheils, 2001) has become increasingly important for language teaching in Germany. Its definition of intercultural competence is, however, limited to the linguistic treatment of sayings, expressions, different registers and social varieties of language. In contrast, the Educational Standards for foreign language teaching at lower secondary level in Germany provide explicit detail on the subject of intercultural competence (Steinert & Klieme, 2004). Their definition covers the ability to deal with cultural differences, intercultural situations, and the availability of knowledge about sociocultural contexts (Steinert & Klieme, 2004). The central goals of intercultural learning in the EFL classroom can, therefore, be described as cultural awareness, acceptance of cultural differences, and interest in the specific culture of the language being taught, as well as in intercultural topics in general. Looking further afield, Anglo-American literature on intercultural language teaching has developed various teaching concepts for intercultural content. Thus Paige, Jorstadt, Siaya, Klein, and Colby (2003) distinguish between 'culture general' and 'culture-specific' goals encompassing the knowledge, skills and attitudes of students. 'Culture general' goals reflect learning about the self as a cultural being, and about the impact of culture on human communication, behavior and identity, as well as learning about cross-cultural phenomena and cultural adjustment. 'Culture-specific' goals refer to a specific culture and its history, geography, specific cultural values and interaction patterns.

Taken together, therefore, German school curricula, the Common European Framework and the Educational Standards for language learning lack a homogeneous definition of intercultural EFL teaching. They focus on describing goals for intercultural teaching in foreign language learning and teaching, but there is no clearly discernible teaching concept common to all three sets of directives. In recent years, only a few empirical studies have dealt with the implementation of the aims of intercultural teaching in the real world of the EFL classroom (e.g. Göbel, 2007; Göbel & Hesse, 2008; Burwitz-Meltzer, 2003; Byram, 1991). Further and more comprehensive empirical research about the promotion of intercultural learning in language teaching is still needed (Göbel & Hesse, 2008).

### 1.2. Concepts of intercultural teaching in the foreign language classroom

Traditionally the emphasis of cultural learning in the classroom has been on the acquisition of knowledge about another country and culture (Byram, 1997). Nowadays teachers need to

acknowledge the interactive nature of culture and transmit this idea to their students. As the objectives of intercultural learning are quite complex, they are difficult to put into the practice. Nevertheless classroom learning retains the great advantage of presenting a space for the systematic and structured acquisition of knowledge and skills under the guidance of a teacher (Byram, 1997). The classroom can be seen as a protective environment where students can make mistakes without lasting repercussions. Thus, it can be seen not only as a preparation for experience but also as an experience itself.

Current intercultural didactics distinguishes four different approaches to learning about another culture (Müller-Jacquier, 2004). First of all, there is the contact situation approach, in which students have direct contact with the other culture. Next comes the cognitive approach, in which cognitive insights about the other culture (e.g. cultural values, cultural practices) and their behavioral implications are taught in class. Virtual contrast is another classroom approach in which a virtual interaction between own and target culture is presented in order to enable students to evaluate this (and the target culture itself) from different cultural perspectives. Finally, there is the linguistic awareness approach, in which cultural differences are taught by discussing linguistic differences in class.

The advantage of dealing with intercultural topics in the classroom is that learners can acquire skills in eliciting meaning under the guidance of the teacher. Teachers and students can take their time to develop interaction skills within the safety of the classroom situation. In this respect critical reflection of experience is particularly important: this might be a student's reflection on her or his own unguided intercultural experience, on fieldwork, or on other independent learning tasks (Byram, 1997) Sercu (2002) proposes to work on intercultural topics from proper intercultural experience of students, so to reflect upon cultural differences. An exploratory study of Göbel (2007) points at the positive impact of experience orientation in the intercultural EFL classroom for the promotion of students' interest in intercultural topics. The teacher should make use of the potential for tardiness in classroom work. Bearing in mind underlying attitudes and the educational objectives of intercultural learning, teachers should give students the opportunity to reflect critically on cultural meanings (Hallet, 2002). When discussing cultural differences there is always the risk of promoting stereotypical conceptions. To avoid the formation of stereotypes in students' minds, and to enhance cultural self-awareness, it may be helpful to point out similarities and differences between one's own and the target culture (Hendson, 2005). Furthermore, addressing common stereotypes toward a student's own culture (the external view) will facilitate the detection of cultural heterogeneity within that culture (Scheu, 2005), which might assist in developing empathy toward persons from other cultures.

To enhance students' critical reflection, teachers could make use of disorienting dilemmas such as those deployed in transformative education. Like the didactic concept of virtual contrast, disorienting dilemmas can help to bring inadequate attitudes or values closer to reality, and thus promote a transformation of perspective (Glicszinski, 2007). In the field of intercultural training the use of such dilemmas is known as "Critical Incident Technique". In order to sharpen students' awareness of different perspectives, trainers present a selection of case studies that allow different interpretations and solutions in terms of disparate cultural orientations (Bhagat & Prien, 1996).

In general, instruction in open education settings has to be engaging and personally relevant for students, nurturing a deeper understanding of contents (Shermann, 2009). Constructivism supports the use of authentic tasks requiring learnt knowledge. Developing new knowledge through a process of active

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