



Instructional methods and languages in class: A comparison of two teaching approaches and two teaching languages in the field of intercultural learning



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ABSTRACT

The article presents the results of a quasi-experimental intervention study with a 2×2 factorial design. We implemented a problem-based intercultural learning unit in four secondary schools (grades 9 to 12) and varied the teaching approach (analytical/affective-experiential) and the language of instruction (German/English). The learning unit covered six 45-min lessons and was conducted in nine school courses ($n = 143$). Five additional school courses ($n = 66$) served as a control group. In all experimental groups, students engaged with critical incidents. These were either analysed (analytical focus) or acted out as role plays (affective-experiential focus). In addition, students analysed film clips (analytical focus) or participated in a simulation game (affective-experiential focus). The experimental groups outperformed the control group in the post-test, which required the analysis of critical incidents. Both teaching approaches were equally effective; however, students evaluated affective-experiential learning more positively. Using a foreign language for teaching did not impair performance.

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1. Introduction

Promoting intercultural education and fostering intercultural dialogue are key objectives in our increasingly globalised world and essential for the development of social cohesion. Students should therefore be enabled to communicate successfully with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and so-called intercultural competence should be fostered in all educational settings according to the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (Council of Europe, 2008). This objective is particularly important against the backdrop of the current increase in immigration in Europe. As schools become more culturally diverse, promoting intercultural education becomes more imperative. Although the need for intercultural competence is, therefore, generally recognised, it is difficult to reach agreement on what is meant by the term, and the capacity, scope and structure of the concept of intercultural competence have been controversially debated in a variety of research areas and disciplines (for a discussion, see Byram, Nichols, & Stevens, 2001; Leung, Ang, & Tan, 2014; Rathje,

2007). Many scholars would nevertheless agree that the traditional emphasis in intercultural learning on cultural practices and specific facts (e.g. geographical, historical, societal, linguistic) is important, but not sufficient in this respect (e.g., Bennett, 2009; Pusch, 2004).

A first approximation towards an operational concept is to relate intercultural competence to general social competence; one may highlight in particular the ability for perspective taking and empathy (e.g., Bennett, 1979, 1993; Deardorff, 2006; Perry & Southwell, 2011; Stephan & Finlay, 1999). However, while it is easy to see why intercultural competence is similar to social competence, it has long been recognised that in intercultural situations specific intercultural competencies are beneficial (Gardner, 1962) as interaction between people with different cultural backgrounds can pose particular challenges to interlocutors (e.g., Bennett, 1993; Rathje, 2007), which require the ability to question one's own notions of normality and to actively engage with different conventions and communication patterns.

As a conceptual basis, the study draws on the work by Deardorff (2006). By exploring different understandings of the term, Deardorff defines intercultural competence as “the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (p. 247). *Knowledge* here also refers to *cultural awareness*, which is an awareness of how

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cultural norms influence an individual's values, beliefs and behaviour. Cultural awareness is relevant for the acquisition of important skills, e.g. the ability to change perspective in intercultural encounters, to reflect on and relativise one's own frame of reference and ideas about normality, and for the adjustment to and flexibility in using different communication styles and behaviour.

Given the importance of such competencies in today's world, the stimulation of intercultural competence has now become a major educational goal in Germany. There is, however, evidence to suggest that more systematic stimulation and practice is needed. For instance, in a large scale assessment of school students' achievement in German and English, over 30% of German students did not take the cultural dimension into account when interpreting critical situations in intercultural encounters, about 8% showed negative attitudes and another 25% downplayed cultural differences (Hesse, Göbel, & Jude, 2008). However, stimulating intercultural competence is not easy. Research on university students shows that even visits abroad do not necessarily lead to enhanced cultural awareness and that reflection and other accompanying learning activities are needed (for a review, see Paige & Vande Berg, 2012). Although there is a scarcity of school-based intervention studies, a review of empirical research on intercultural training programmes for expatriates further revealed that trainings are often successful in transmitting relevant cultural knowledge, but appear to be less effective in changing relevant attitudes and behaviour (Mendenhall et al., 2004). An experimental study on younger children similarly found that reading and analysing texts that portray different traditions and cultural conventions is not enough for stimulating cultural awareness (Jankowska, Gajda, & Karwowski, 2014), and data from an ethnographic study illustrate well how difficult it is to reach all students, especially those with adverse attitudes (O'Dowd, 2003).

The present study investigates ways of promoting intercultural competence across different school subjects including foreign language education and other humanities subjects. The intercultural learning unit designed for these purposes draws on research in the wider area of psychology that shows the usefulness of training programmes specifically aimed at promoting empathy and perspective taking in order to improve intergroup attitudes in children and adolescent students (see the meta-analysis by Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014). The learning unit is grounded on a problem-based learning approach (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980; Norman & Schmidt, 1992), where students work on authentic complex problems and deal with multiple perspectives. Problem-based learning may not be as effective for rapid acquisition of declarative knowledge as more traditional instructional methods (Vernon & Blake, 1993), but it can be beneficial for retention and application of knowledge, intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning (Dochy, Segers, Van den Bossche, & Gijbels, 2003; Gijbels, Dochy, Van den Bossche, & Segers, 2005). Much of the research on problem-based learning has focused on higher education and adult learners. One may suppose that self-directed learning activities such as problem-based learning are more difficult for younger than more mature learners (Hmelo-Silver, 2004), and there is evidence to suggest that students with little prior knowledge may not benefit as much from problem-based learning as students who are more familiar with the topic (Dochy, Segers, & Buehl, 1999). It is therefore likely that within the school context, age and prior knowledge will moderate the effectiveness of the problem-based approach.

In the present study, students dealt with authentic problems in the form of critical incidents. Critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954) display misunderstandings or conflicts that arise as a result of cultural differences. They have a long tradition as a learning and assessment tool (Fowler & Blohm, 2004; Göbel, 2007; Wight, 1995) and are often employed in the context of language teaching (e.g.,

Snow, 2015). The aim of critical incidents is for students to become aware of how ideas of normality (influenced by the cultural background) influence the perception of a given situation and to reflect on behavioural strategies to deal with the situations depicted. By comparing and analysing different perceptions and interpretations of the same situation, students can, for instance, become aware how the interpretation process is influenced by different communicative conventions. They can also become aware that their own perception is subject to individual interpretations, which can lead to misunderstandings or communicative problems. However, there are also many pitfalls associated with critical incidents; for example, students might draw undesirable generalisations (e.g., Lebedko, 2013), which can actually reinforce stereotypes or foster cultural reductionist views (for a discussion, see Guest, 2002). Care was therefore taken to use incidents which allow for different interpretations and depict people in ways that do not reinforce stereotypes.

Findings from a previous quasi-experimental intervention study (Busse & Krause, 2015) indicated that a problem-based learning unit based on critical incidents stimulated intercultural learning. However, students' performance on pre- and post-test fell short of the expectation horizon: Students' *conceptual knowledge*, i.e. their understanding of the term intercultural competence, was not sufficiently developed, and students had difficulties with *applicable knowledge* tasks, i.e. tasks that assessed their ability to apply the knowledge gained through the learning unit to critical incidents that were different from those presented in class. Many students showed low levels of cultural awareness when analysing the critical incidents and therefore had difficulties developing appropriate communicative strategies for the situations depicted.

Based on these findings, the learning unit was developed further and implemented either with a focus on affective involvement and experience or with a focus on analysis. The hypothesis here was that a more affective-experiential focus could be especially effective for inducing intercultural learning processes. It is also known that personally relevant experiences, e.g. feelings and reactions in challenging situations, and their subsequent reflection, can play an important role for promoting deep thinking processes and modifying existing mental frames (Kolb, 1984). Stimulating students' reflection on their own intercultural experience and using affective-experiential methods such as role plays and simulation games is therefore promising in intercultural learning (e.g., Barrett, Byram, Lázár, Mompoint-Gaillard, & Philippou, 2014; Kohonen, 2014). In addition, role plays are often employed for fostering empathy (e.g., Hoffman, 2000) and emotional participation, and simulation games are commonly implemented in intercultural trainings as part of professional development exercises with adults to promote cognitive, affective and behavioural competencies needed to engage in intercultural dialogue (Fowler, 1994; Fowler & Blohm, 2004; Fowler & Pusch, 2010; Hofstede & Pedersen, 1999). However, despite considerable effort by the European Union to stimulate the use of affective-experiential methods such as role-plays and simulation games for intercultural learning (Barrett et al., 2014; Council of Europe, 2000), empirical studies exploring their effect in the classroom environment are rare. Little is known about whether they are more effective or less effective than analytical approaches traditionally employed in language and literature classes, whether they are as suitable for younger learners as for older learners, and whether both experienced and inexperienced learners benefit from them. Much research has shown that there are differential effects of many teaching approaches for learners with different prerequisites (see, for instance, the expertise reversal effect Kalyuga, Ayres, Chandler, & Sweller, 2003).

In the present study, students worked on critical incidents, which they either acted out as role plays (affective-experiential

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