China–Finland–France: virtual mobility, French as a lingua franca and interculturality

Interculturality doesn’t have to mean encounters with native speakers when one is learning a foreign language. Two university classes, one in Turku and one in Hong Kong, participated in a project that aimed to raise the students’ intercultural awareness by using French as a lingua franca.

The widest used lingua franca in our contemporary world is English, while Mandarin, Spanish, and potentially any language can also serve as lingua francas. The use of these languages remains unexplored in the development of a didactics of intercultural communication – which I will call interculturality – within language teaching and learning, even though L2s are a reality in most language classes worldwide. There are over 100 million people who study French worldwide and most of them probably use French as a lingua franca (FLF) with other students and teachers.

This article looks at the use of FLF within two higher education settings by describing and discussing a joint action-research between two university classes: Department of French Studies, University of Turku, and French Department, University of Turku, Finland. My partner in Hong Kong was a teacher at the French Department, Valérie Martinez. The project involved the virtual mobility of students of French through Moodle and Learning Management System (Moodle) and a synchronous chat, and aimed to raise the students’ intercultural awareness. The approach also aimed at helping students to grasp concepts such as intercultural competences, stereotypes, identity, culture, which are often misconceived and can lead to ‘misencountering’ the Other through mere stereotypes or representations (i.e., they are positive or negative). The class from Turku was trained theoretically for dealing with these questions, while the class in Hong Kong wasn’t.

What did we do?

In spring 2008, 13 pairs of first-year students were formed randomly. The students had to contact each other by e-mail and make three appointments for the three chats that were to take place within a three-week period (there was at the time a 6-hour time difference between Turku and Hong Kong, which we thought could be problematic for the students to ‘meet’ but turned out not to be). The students exchanged various documents on images and perceptions of France, Hong Kong and Finland. The tasks included writing, reading, and listening. Synchronous chats are closer to oral productions than writing so reality was also incorporated. Based on the documents produced and collected by the students, they chatted on topics such as the self (same people from their own country, others, cultural identity, representations and stereotypes, intercultural competences and so on. The three chats took place through the use of the chat module in the Learning Management System or through MSN Messenger. During the three-week period, the students had to write a diary on the experiment and comment on what had surprised them, what they had learned, things they hadn’t understood and which had developed their intercultural competence, and so on. The students in Turku had received training in self-reflexivity and critical thinking. The one in Hong Kong, who had skills in peer assessment, the students were asked to comment on the documents that they had sent to each other each week, in terms of linguistic and pragmatic competences. At the beginning of the third week, the students were asked to gather all their productions, documents and images, and present them to the class. The perceptions articles, encyclopedia articles and advertisements. Based on these documents, the students had to discuss potential stereotypes, stereotypes and representations and ask each other questions.

Comparing and discussing

The first chat was devoted to getting to know the partners through a questionnaire that had been sent to partners prior to the first chat, comparing careers and studies. The second part of the first chat consisted in discussing French as a lingua franca (FLF) that each partner had found on the internet about Finland and Hong Kong and that had been commented on and sent to the partner in English. The types of documents chosen by the students were: extracts from personal blogs (foreigners living in these countries and sharing their views and experiences), news and/or articles, encyclopedia articles and advertisements. Based on these documents, the students had to discuss potential stereotypes, stereotypes and representations and ask each other questions. Some interesting points came up during the discussions during which the students had to share their impressions on each other’s countries and societies using their own knowledge, their partners’ answers to the questionnaires and what they had found. For example, some HK students were disappointed at the idea that Finland isn’t that cold a country, that there are summers, and that there are no polar bears on the streets. On the other hand, some Finns were surprised that Hong Kong people don’t see themselves as Chinese but Hong people when they see them. These discussions reflect the fact that both students were introduced in a different manner to issues of interculturality.

Defining competences

As an introduction to the second chat, the students reflected on the concept of intercultural competences and provided an agreed-upon definition at the end of their presentation of different definitions which were provided during the first chat corresponded to the idea that being interculturally competent equals to being able to interact with people from different language families, such as English, French, Spanish, Russian and Mandarin, in different cultural settings. The second chat was centered on what the students had taught their partners about France and the French in the media. The media is a common reference point for the students because it appeared in the first chat. The Turku student added a clearer definition of intercultural competence in French.

HKstu: to believe that intercultural competence means that one can interact with different people, in this case, the partner’s country.

Tkustu: for me intercultural competence is to know how to separate stereotypes and the encounters of an individual, so be able to notice which stereotypes about the interlocutor’s country can influence the communication and to avoid consciously stereotyping him.

HKstu: that one is tolerant towards people from other countries

Tkustu: so that means being able to communicate with individuals instead of believing that one knows an entire people and to classify according to their nationalities

HKstu: so if we mix both definitions: intercultural competence is being able to communicate with different people from different countries and respect their cultures all the time by avoiding concentrating on stereotypes, but by trying to meet the person as an individual without knowing that one knows their culture. (All the excerpts translated from French)

It’s easy to see here the difference in how the HK student defines the competence (‘one can interact with different cultures’) while the Turku student attempts, successfully, at imposing her views (it’s about ‘encountering an individual’, not a culture). The synthesis of both definitions which is offered by the Finnish student at the end of the excerpt contains both aspects but provides a more comprehensive and useful definition as an introduction to the activities to come and allowed to make stereotypes and representations emerge.

Exploring further

The second chat was centered on a further exploration of intercultural competence as the students had to find three scholarly definitions of the concept and explain why they preferred this one. Two documents on France and the French were also found by the students in the Hong Kong media and Finnish media (in English). These documents were accompanied by a commentary on what was identified as stereotypical written by the students and sent to their partners on the first chat. The students were about the stereotypes they identified about France and the French in the foreign media. The idea of combining reflections to the documents chosen by the students and discussing ‘solid’ images of the self and the others derived from the hypothesis that the theories on intercultural competences could support them in analyzing during the discussions (but also later on in life). For the last chat, the students sent their portfolios to their partners and discussed them. An assessment grid was provided that contained language, pragmatic features, and contents. The last part of the second chat was devoted to assessing the experiment and discussing impressions on the fact that it was organized between non-native speakers of French.

What did we learn?

After having read the chats, portfolios (self-assessment forms), video documentation, two students had problems with technology (the chat module was too slow) and schedule (some students took more time than others to confirm their availability). The students qualified the experience as pleasant, surprising, exciting, they asserted that the experience allowed them to meet people, communicate with total strangers, develop their knowledge about other countries, improve their French in ‘face-to-face’ writing, improve their vocabulary, gain confidence and learn to make e-mail appointments.

As far as interculturality is concerned, the students wrote the following feedback:

It’s nice to talk to a stranger and see that you are so unique and say the same things, and say them in the same way, and try to understand them.

I communicated with someone whom I had never met before but yet, we shared our views and understood each other.

When one reads these comments, one is tempted to say that the experience seemed to have worked really well in terms of interculturality. Yet, we need to remember that there is always a gap between words and actions, and there is no guarantee that the students really (will) apply these ‘words’ in real-life situations, being in their home countries, in physical or virtual mobility.

It is hard to really assess the impacts of the experience on the students in both institutions, as its time span was quite short, just before the end of their semester. The students are so unstable as they vary depending on the context of interaction, the people we talk to, our moods and emotions. Trying to transfer the discussions about how the students had developed their competences based on the chats or documents that they had written would lead nowhere. What can be observed is how the students use the theoretical knowledge and savoir-faire that they have acquired when they discuss issues of stereotyping. This is why including a strong theoretical background in such experiments is vital.

Sticking to it

As far as French as a lingua franca is concerned, it is interesting that not a single student expressed the desire to communicate during the experiment – just for the occasional word or phrase – and really ‘sticked’ to French as a lingua franca. Both the students and the instructed used the use of FLF were very positive at the end of the experience. Students felt that it was easier to use FLF than writing to a native speaker, and as they seemed to share the same level, they didn’t feel inferior. Only three students asserted that communicating with French native speakers in their home countries was too difficult, and they wanted to develop their language skills more.

Working through French as a lingua franca on images of France and the French seems to be a good way to avoid any of the students playing the role of the cultural specialist. Through dealing with images on the ‘third country’, FLF users are led to notice and discuss the fact that they share reduced and ‘imagined’ images of the ‘third country’ (‘we don’t see the same things and opinions’). I learnt that I shouldn’t impose stereotypes on people.

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