Can proteophilia transform Finnish and Hong Kong students of French engaged in virtual mobility? Transforming versus repressing the self and the other in language learning and teaching

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If one says that all one is interested in is the study of behaviour ‘pure and simple’, then one is not studying persons.


Introduction

This paper is a reflection on the notion of transforming otherness within the field of education, and more specifically in the area of language learning and teaching (LLT hereafter). Focusing on virtual academic mobility involving students of French from Hong Kong University and the University of Turku (Finland), I shall demonstrate how the experiment described in this paper aimed to help these students transform each other’s views on and attitudes towards interculturality during internet chat sessions.

Transforming otherness (i.e. oneself and the ‘other’) in LLT requires reflection on the much-debated notion of intercultural competence. This competence has been defined in multiple ways, but not always in a clear and convincing manner. It would even seem that there is a subconscious agreed-upon definition, for example, in European parlance which reduces intercultural competence to requiring the ‘imitation’ of an imaginary ‘pure’ Other or imposing on this person one’s own ‘cultural characteristics’ in order to communicate with him/her. With regard to the scientific study of this area, the same paradigm seems to dominate, and I have proposed elsewhere a critique of the most frequent models of intercultural competence (Dervin, 2007), especially of their ‘simplistic’ and contradictory objectives. The quotation by Laing that opens this contribution amply expresses the complexity of what transforming otherness represents in intercultural encounters: purity and simplicity cannot be operationalised when dealing
with persons and their ‘transformation’.

My approach is situated within a hermeneutical/intersubjectivist conception of interculturality (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003; Dahl, et al. 2006) and is in line with the concept of proteophilia (Dervin, 2006, 2007, 2008), which I have put forward in my research on intercultural competence in LLT and student mobility. The approach is strongly influenced by linguistic discourse analysis, theories of enunciation and dialogism (Dervin, 2008; Hermans, 1999; Markova, et al., 2007; Marnette, 2005) and rejects culturalism or what I call solid interculturality (in reference to Z. Bauman’s work, cf. Dervin, 2006), i.e. a vision of the Other and the self as reified cultures and identities. The competences which emerge from such an approach in the field of LLT are called proteophilic competences (or the appreciation of diverse diversities - one’s own diversity and that of others”) and represent a call for a move away from pure and simple diversity.

The article is structured as follows. I firstly present criticisms of the most widely used models of intercultural competence and define competences that may help us to avoid their fallacious features in terms of diversity, culture and identity. The context of the study is then presented and three sections are devoted to the analysis of the corpus, which reports on how the students involved in the experiment ‘transformed otherness’ in the internet chat sessions.

1. Models of intercultural competency: fallacious views on transforming otherness?

Many criticisms can be leveled at the models of intercultural competence which have been proposed by researchers within LLT and other fields (e.g. intercultural communication) (Dervin, 2007). Two will be developed here: the reification of culture and the absence of the other. The definitions of intercultural competence that I have analysed tend to consider that cultures/cultural features meet, rather than intersubjective, emotional and somewhat ‘free’ individuals. Is it really possible, however, to meet/engage with a culture (and not individuals)? For the scholars who have provided these definitions, whose approaches can be clearly labeled as culturalist or pseudo-intercultural, culture becomes an alibi and a simple explanation for all, ‘as if culture had taken on a life of its own’ (Wikan 2002, p. 83). In this sense, for the type of approach described above,
transforming otherness would mean that, in intercultural encounters, an individual becomes an other (or vice versa) by learning the Other’s (singular!) culture through recipes or by creating a pseudo-blended version of cultures based on reified visions of the culture in question (e.g. as in her culture is half-Japanese/half-English). These types of transformations appear to be ‘easy’ and unilateral. But are they really possible? If one cannot grasp/touch a culture, as it is constantly being created and negotiated, how can one modify it without limiting transformation and repressing the self and the Other?

Another misunderstanding that I have identified in the ‘canonic’ definitions of intercultural competence is the absence of the interlocutor (usually the Other) in most definitions. In fact, only the «user» of the competences is mentioned while those of the interlocutor – in spite of the primordial role that he/she plays in encounters and thus in transforming otherness – are lacking, as if only the ‘observed user’ was being transformed. In fact, an individual can feel absolutely «interculturally competent» (i.e. s/he communicates without encountering many problems with an Other), yet s/he may be easily troubled by the lack of motivation of the other, her/his negative intentions, her/his language skills… The context of interaction and the obligatory presence of polyphony, dialogism and voices (Hermans, 2004) in each individual’s discourse, attitudes and actions are also usually overlooked, despite their fundamental importance.

For the above reasons, in this paper, transformation will imply that the prefix ‘co-’ be taken into account in all the processes of intercultural encounters and transformations, i.e. the inter-influence of various ‘forces’ on what occurs when people encounter. Tania Ogay’s (2000, p. 53) proposal of using the concept of *intercultural dynamics* rather than *competence* is fully justified in that it allows us to take into account the double responsibility and engagement of the interlocutors.

2. Proteophilic competences: exposing real transformation

The model of Proteophilic competences that I have proposed (Dervin, 2008) involves the development of *Savoir-faires* and *Savoir-agir* (know-how related to how one (re)acts) rather than knowledge about the other, and aims to bring about *real*
transformation, i.e. triggering meetings between individuals which are based on unlimited transformation and unrepressed identification. Moreover, it is fully theorized as a multidimensional process and emphasises the fact that each individual constructs themselves (with more or less freedom) and that « in any act of interaction, it is well known that one never communicates with the person as s/he really is, but with a representation which we have of the groups to which he/she belongs, just as this person brings to the interaction act his/her own representations » (Ogay 2000, p. 166, my translation). It is hoped that these savoir-faire lead individuals to genuinely ‘reject’, in a consistent manner, culturalism and develop their ability to deal with others in terms of the diverse diversities of the self (e.g. avoid manipulating an Other with solid discourses such as ‘you cannot understand because you are not from my culture’). In educational terms, along with the constant development of these components, the user should also be able to contribute to mediating them to others.

Given the above, in this chapter, the concept of transforming otherness will cover the following situations:

- when one manages to move away from a solid vision of the Other and the self, as well as resisting culturalist discourses (and ensuing actions!),
- when one helps the other to put an end to these visions,
- when one negotiates a proteophilic discourse (diverse diversities vs. façade diversity) with one’s interlocutor and transformations of each individual occur.

3. Context of the study: virtual mobility between Finland and Hong Kong

The study is based on a corpus of internet chats which took place in 2008 through virtual mobility between Turku and Hong Kong (HK thereafter). All the participants were university students of French (majors and minors), who used French as a lingua franca to communicate as they were non-native speakers of the language. Virtual mobility took place through a Learning Management System (Moodle) and a synchronous chat system (Skype or MSN Messenger). The choice of the partner university was based both on long-term collegiality and on the wish to allow encounters between individuals from non-francophone space-times, thus preventing, to a certain degree, the emergence of the
model of the ‘native speaker’ of French (the native speaker is often considered as THE representative of a ‘target culture’ and thus imposes a hierarchical imbalance in interaction with learners).

During spring 2008, 15 pairs of students were formed randomly and were required to participate in three chats within a three-week period. The students were asked to exchange and discuss various documents on images and perceptions of France, Hong Kong and Finland, avoiding the ‘characteristics’ or ‘cultures’ of these space-times. The scientific backgrounds of the groups differed greatly; this is why the experiment could potentially allow the observation of rewarding multidimensional processes of transformation: the Turku students had received proteophilic training for 3 months before the experiment, while in Hong Kong, the students had taken some courses on civilization and Francophone culture but had received no formal training in interculturality.

The following analysis is based on the definitions that the partners had to co-produce of intercultural competence. These definitions can easily give indications of their understanding of interculturality, the self and the other. I am also interested in the potential differences between the HK and Turku students.

4. Analysis of the corpus

4.1 Differentialist approaches

Seven of the fifteen teams will be considered in this section. It is firstly interesting to see that the definitions of interculturality that were provided by these teams (and in the contents of their chats in general) corresponded to the canonic definition of cultures encountering and were highly differentialist, i.e. the students only put forward differences between ‘cultures’, with learning these differences seen as a major objective of intercultural competence. The following table presents the definitions given by the students (translated from French) when they discussed intercultural competence in chat 1 and tried to define them:

Table 1 – Students’ definitions of intercultural competence
Let us compare the vocabulary used in these definitions. The verbs and actors included by the students to define intercultural competence are examined below as they provide us with important clues regarding their conceptions of interculturality:

### Table 2 – Verbs and actors used in the definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team number</th>
<th>Finnish students</th>
<th>Hong Kong students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To understand differences between cultures</td>
<td>To understand the other country’s culture</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>To understand that cultures and countries have different</td>
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<td></td>
<td>communication with people from different cultures</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To communicate effectively with foreigners from different cultures</td>
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<td></td>
<td>To be able to communicate with people who come from other cultures</td>
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The choice of verbs used to express what is involved in intercultural competence highlights differences between the conceptions of Finnish and Hong Kong students. We need to bear in mind that, as the turns in table 1 for each team immediately followed each other, the choice of a verb or an actor by the students in their definitions might have been motivated by the need to avoid repeating the same words as the other partner. Overall, while the Turku students mostly used verbs that show processes (understand, communicate and share), the majority of Hong Kong students seem to understand interculturality as a fact or a ‘given’ for which one should ‘be open-minded’, ‘accept’, ‘know’, ‘be aware of’…

Regarding the actors involved, most members of both groups resorted to ‘culturespeak’ (relations between cultures, differences between cultures, cultures should be respected, not judged, learnt…). It also seems that, to a certain degree, most definitions contribute to the idea that ‘cultures are often treated as coterminous with countries’ (Philips 2007, p. 44 – the best instance being one HK student’s statement regarding ‘the other country’s culture’; note however the puzzling but interesting instance of ‘cultures of cities’!) and corresponds largely to culturalist approaches. A minor difference between the Finns and the students from Hong Kong is the fact that more animate figures (people and others) are included in the Finnish definitions – which seems to once again lend a more ‘active’ feel to the conception of interculturality. These conceptions, however, are always accompanied by culturespeak and thus lead to culturalist discourses (cf., for example, the Finnish student in team 12) and the idea that

<table>
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<tr>
<th>‘starting points’</th>
<th>To understand each other better</th>
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<td>To communicate with people from other cultures means and abilities of communicating with others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to communicate with foreign people to communicate efficiently</td>
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<tr>
<td>To share ideas with minimal distortion to respect others to be proud of one’s own culture</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>To be open-minded to accept other cultures not to have presumptions about other cultures to know about cultures of other cities in the world to be aware of relations between cultures to learn differences between cultures</td>
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<tr>
<th>Actors</th>
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<tr>
<td>(Different) cultures nations countries nationalities lifestyle people from other cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreigners from different cultures foreign people cultures other cultures cultures of other cities</td>
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</table>

| Table 1 |
transforming the self and thus otherness takes place through (?) a culture or country. Signs of proteophilia are absent here.

4.2. Attempts at mediating diverse diversities? Failed proteophilia

In this section, we look at excerpts from internet chats in which some of the Turku students seem to be resorting to the competences that they have been developing, albeit in a rather inconsistent manner, within the framework of their studies. In a way, what seems to be taking place in what follows can be labeled as failed proteophilia, i.e. on the one hand, there are signs of appreciation of diverse diversities or transformation of Otherness (for oneself and potentially for the other, i.e. their partners) but on the other hand, contradictory ‘culturespeak’ or proteophilia may be put forward by a student but neither negotiated nor agreed upon by both partners.

TEAM 9:

HK9: the concept means the ability to communicate and interact with people from other countries
HK9: what do you think, XXX?
Fin9: I agree with you
(…)
Fin9: I think that one can improve interculturality by communicating with people from other cultures and by living in their countries
(…)
Fin9: and communicate without presumptions and forget stereotypes
HK9: it means to respect differences.
Fin9: and think that someone is an individual and unique and not just a stereotype
HK9: yes absolutely

In this first excerpt, at the beginning, both the Finnish and Hong Kong students both resort to culturespeak (communicating with people from other cultures, to respect differences, i.e. façade diversity). The extract ends with a proteophilic comment from the Finnish student (communicate without presumptions and forget stereotypes / think that
someone is an individual and unique and not just a stereotype), with which the student from Hong Kong agrees. In other words, even if the end discourse is that of openness towards diversities (individuality and uniqueness), the contents of the basic underlying assumptions remain culturalist and differentialist.

In the following excerpt from team 4, it appears that the Finnish student is trying to mediate his proteophilic skills to the Hong Kong student by suggesting first that there are not that many differences between ‘intra’ and ‘inter’ cultural processes:

TEAM 4

Fin 4: for instance does interculturality mean « internationality » or « interindividuality », is interculturality only between people of different nationalities, you know what I mean?
HK 4: I think that it is between nationalities, you know, if one speaks about a specific country then one has to deal with a country
HK 4: and it is also a culture, you know, we are different otherwise it is not interesting
Fin 4: yes but it is also all about individuals not just cultures that we represent, don’t you agree?
Fin 4: everybody is different, not just cultures are different
HK 4: everyone represents the culture of his/her nationality

One can easily see here how the Finnish student is trying to suggest to the Hong Kong student that people are not simply governed by their cultures but that they are also individuals, i.e. ALL different (‘everybody is different, not just cultures are different’). The Hong Kong student insists on the fact that ‘we are different otherwise it is not interesting’ and provides her partner with culturalist arguments. By ‘we are all different’, she probably means differences ‘between cultures and countries’, rather than within these entities (‘intracultural differences’), which is what the other student is emphasising. We have two clearly opposing ways of conceptualizing interculturality that neither the Finnish student not the Hong Kong student manage to transform and negotiate – i.e. convince the Other of their visions.

Later on in the conversation, the Finnish student continues to try to indirectly convince the Hong Kong student that her conception may not be the best one possible by introducing the idea that one must work on one’s reactions when dealing with an Other:
Fin 4: an important thing included in the (intercultural) competence is being able to react properly
Fin4: I mean we should know how to react when faced with suppositions that others make about us
HK 4: yes when one communicates, we have to give a concrete answer
Fin4: how could we for example tell someone that a stereotype that they are trying to impose on us is not correct?
HK4: I think that there are norms in different cultures, for instance for politeness.

The Finnish student suggests that it is difficult to make someone realize that they are reducing their interlocutor to stereotypes (she uses the word *suppositions* in her discourse), despite, in her opinion, the ability to come to such a realization being a vital component of intercultural competence. At the end, the student from Hong Kong reacts by introducing a culturalist comment which is not comparable to the idea that the Finnish student proposed: different cultures have different codes of politeness. Here again, while the Finnish student attempts to deal with meta-, discursive and psychological aspects of interculturality, the HK student resorts to differentialist/objectivist arguments. For this team, proteophilia was not reached either.

4.3. Negotiated proteophilia? Otherness transformed?

To finish, let us examine team 15, which yielded by far the most interesting data. There is, from the beginning of the internet chats, a clear gap in the ways the students understand and conceptualize interculturality. When they provide their first definitions of intercultural competence (chat 1), the two students propose the following:

**TEAM 15**

HK15: ok, for me *intercultural competence is being able to interact with different cultures* …
Fin15: for me intercultural competence is the ability to separate stereotypes from a person we meet… so to be able to notice the stereotypes about the country of this person, *what we say about his/her people and then consciously avoid using them*
HK15: that we should be tolerant towards people from other countries
Fin15: to know how to communicate with people, individuals, instead of believing that we are meeting an entire nation and to classify him/her according to nationality.

Fin15: and if we mix both definitions...

HK15: yes I think that will be fine

Fin15: so intercultural competence is the ability to communicate with people from different countries and to respect their culture all the time by trying to avoid stereotypes by trying to meet the person as an individual without believing that we know the person because we know his/her culture.

Even though both understandings are very different (the HK student is typically culturalist/differentialist, while the Finnish student’s discourse is proteophilic par excellence, cf. the underlined sentences in the excerpt), Fin15 manages to combine both types of discourses on interculturality (culturalist and proteophilic) at the end to provide a definition that they both agreed on. For example, she cleverly inserts the word countries in the beginning of her definition: ‘to be able to communicate with people from different countries’ while the HK student had said ‘being able to communicate with different cultures’. This results, to a certain degree, in a contradictory definition as it contains culturespeak. It does, however, respect both inputs. In a sense, by respectfully trying to combine both inputs – while maintaining her own views - she demonstrates that she is able to behave in a proteophilic manner.

It becomes obvious during the next chats that the members of team 15 do not really understand each other (though the chats are friendly) and fail to transform each other – both remain within their theoretical framework without really negotiating or giving the impression that they are negotiating. In chat 2, the Finnish student explains that she works with Russians in Finland and sometimes has to fight against stereotypes and generalizations about them. The Hong Kong student answers and shows that she doesn’t fully grasp what the Finnish student means, as she presents her with a wholly culturalist argument about the ‘mentality of a person from a different culture’:

HK15: yes :) I understand of course they have had different professional experiences and so they do not know how to behave differently

(…)
HK15: sometimes, of course it can be difficult to understand the mentality of a person who comes from a different culture.

Clearly, the premises between the two conceptions are different and seem to lead to non-discussion, as if they were floating past each other.

Yet, at the end of the experiment, one gets the impression that the Finnish student manages to transform the discourse of her partner from Hong Kong into a discourse lending itself to openness towards ‘real’ diversities:

Fin15: this is where we may need intercultural competences… not to judge an entire people and to concentrate on the fact that such or such a person is from such or such a country and generalize

HK15: but of course you are right it’s easy to blame a whole culture, people like to generalize but we have to be objective and form an opinion of our own.

Despite what the HK student describes here corresponding precisely to what she has been doing during the chats, the message that her Finnish partner has been putting forward about interculturality being more than cultures meeting seems to have resonated with her. Is this where proteophilic competences and deconstruction may have had an impact on the discourse which was co-created in the chats?

Conclusions and implications

Based on the analysis, it is clear that it is difficult to assess and predict the impacts of proteophilia on the students when interacting with an Other and ‘transforming’ him/her can be unpredictable. Most of the extracts show that proteophilia was not always present, despite the Turku students having been trained to go beyond ‘culturespeak’/culturalist discourses - most of them actually resorted to the latter when interacting with their counterparts from Hong Kong. Moreover, some HK and Finnish students appeared to be ‘proteophilic’ and ‘culturalist’ at the same time, and in a rather unstable fashion, except perhaps for the Finnish student in team 15. A certain number of hypotheses regarding the instability of the use of proteophilic competences in the chats can be put forward: for some students the approach was probably too fresh in their minds,
its rationale hadn’t been fully grasped or they found it difficult to apply proteophilia in interaction (culturalism being the easy way out); they might not have wanted to shock the other by overly contradicting her/him (‘intercultural correctness’), and by developing ideas which are not widely acknowledged societally (and of which they might not have been fully convinced themselves), etc.

The fundamental underlying problem of researching transformation is that we have to work with discourses, which are not / cannot always be consistent with previous/future discourses and actions. This has some important implications for examining real transformation: Can it be really done? Is it authentic or just based on politeness, political correctness or ‘swallowed’ and ‘parroted’ discourses? Who is to judge if it really took place and if it is genuine? How could, for example, an instructor learn to trust such discourses?

Bearing in mind these issues, some meaningful educational opportunities are possible, based on the kind of experiment that was presented in this chapter: students could deconstruct their own chats or those of their peers by checking for consistency and contradiction in the discourses, analyse the voices used to give authority to culturalist or proteophilic statements, examine, for example, reactions to solidification by their interlocutor…

All in all, transforming otherness through appreciating diverse diversities is an unstable, long-term (never-ending?) process, as it involves othernessES (one’s own othernessES and those of others), emotions, contexts… - i.e. elements which cannot always be controlled. Nevertheless, especially in education, this area is worth exploring as it can help us move away from the dangers of culturalist approaches and the current discourses of culture-alibi, while also renewing the students’ visions of selves and othernesses and helping them to prepare for a ‘liquid life’ (Bauman, 2005).

Vääksy, Christmas 2008

References


