ON LIQUID INTERCULTURALITY; FINNISH AND LATVIAN STUDENT TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Over the last decade, the promotion, development and assessment of “interculturality” have been key interests in language teaching and learning. In this paper, we presuppose that speakers of a foreign language are “interculturally” competent when they are able/willing to communicate effectively with others, accept their position as “strangers” when meeting others, and realize that all individuals, including themselves, are multicultural and complex (sex, age, religion, status in society etc.). In other words, they are adequately prepared to function in the present unstable, flexible times described by sociologist Z. Bauman as *Liquid Modernity*. Comparing data from Latvian and Finnish trainees who have just started initial language teacher training, our contribution looks at how they predict the intercultural competence put forward by their future language learners.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, modern foreign language student teachers, liquid interculturality
1 INTRODUCTION

In order to communicate effectively in the rapidly changing and culturally complex societies of the 21st century (Morin 2001), foreign language students need creativity, as well as an ability to work in multicultural groups and participate actively and responsibly in social processes. According to Byram (2003) and Tinsley (2003), one of the main goals of Language Teaching and Learning (hereafter LTL) is to promote intercultural communication and intercultural competence (IC). Additionally, documents and publications of UNESCO and the Council of Europe, two of the most influential educational institutions worldwide, have stressed the necessity of incorporating intercultural communicative competence in LTL. To become intercultural mediators (Zarate, Gohard-Radenkovic, Lussier & Penz 2003) and facilitators of the development of IC in language classrooms, language teachers need to understand intercultural communication and the processes involved in intercultural learning.

Approaches to intercultural communication – or interculturality in this paper – are numerous and varied in LTL (cf. Dervin 2005: 7). In the following, we will explain what we propose to be a necessary move from solid interculturality to liquid interculturality and operate a much needed paradigm shift in LTL didactics. After a review of the main trends in characterizing interculturality in LTL, our paper sets out to present our understanding of language learners’ intercultural competence through the paradigm of liquid interculturality. Having collected questionnaires filled out by 18 student teachers (9 Finns / 9 Latvians) at the beginning of their training in autumn 2005, our small scale research compares our findings on solid and liquid interculturality with how student teachers of foreign languages predict the intercultural competence of their future language learners.
2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 A CALL FOR PARADIGM SHIFT IN LTL: FROM SOLID TO LIQUID INTERCULTURALITY

On societal – but also educational – levels and also when referring to encounters between representatives of different nationalities, culture is usually understood as “the shared habits, beliefs, values of a national group” (Kotter 1996: 188). LTL has had a long tradition of teaching culture by introducing the national culture of native speakers of a language being taught/learnt. This is reflected in course books and curricula in LTL where different aspects of national cultures such as traditional food, leisure, festivals, clothes and music are portrayed. According to Gilroy (1990: 60), this approach leads to the idea that two national cultures communicate with each other, not actual people. This is what we believe to be solid interculturality: descriptions of national features imposed on all of the representatives of a country by others – or even themselves. Yet, some researchers in LTL didactics assert that, teaching unrelated solid cultural topics in LTL often leads to over-generalizations and stereotyping (cf. Abdallah-Pretceille 2001; Byram 1997; Byram & Fleming 1998; Dervin 2004a, b, 2005; Dirba 2003, 2004a, b).

Contemporary theories of cultural identity characterize the concepts of “culture” and “identity” as being socially constructed, always in the process of “becoming” as well as “being” (Hall 1992). The British sociologist Zygmund Bauman (2000) perceives the zeitgeist of our times as “liquid” in his latest series of publications. In other words, Bauman states that the old social bonds of nations, community, and society are being replaced, on the one hand, by concepts of identity and culture that are by their nature fluid and flexible, and on the other hand, by an excess and lack of personal identity and culture. In a similar vein, researchers in linguistics and social interaction have found evidence that people change identities – or images of themselves – and adapt their speech and opinions to context and interlocutors (Johansson 2000). As a
consequence, in this game of identities, “culture” is always created when individuals encounter one another, intra- or interculturally, and cannot be reduced to solid descriptions that supposedly help people to communicate. Therefore, to us, the next key in building up a link between educational goals in LTL and the realities of society is liquid interculturality, or considering any encounter to be based on liquid individuals rather than solid representatives of cultures.

2.2 OUR UNDERSTANDING OF LANGUAGE USERS’ INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

In order to face liquid interculturality, language learners need to be guided towards the development (rather than the acquisition, cf. the “game of identities” supra) of intercultural competence. As an immediate result of this, the roles of teachers and learners have to change. According to Guilherme (2000: 300), “Teachers need to discard their role as ambassadors of a foreign culture and the concept of a static, self-contained and strange culture. Instead, they must acknowledge the interactive nature and the social, political, and ethical implications of learning/ teaching about culture”. We could add to that by saying that teachers should be aware of their own liquidity, both that of foreign cultures and of her/his own culture. In our opinion, language teachers should help students to become intercultural intermediaries, or speakers – not copies of an ideal and imaginary native speaker (Byram & Zarate 1996). In other words, students should become confident, effective and liquid “border crossers” (Giroux 1992) and develop IC. As a final point, the authors of this paper agree with Kohonen (2005), who suggests that the term language users is more empowering and encouraging than the term language learners.

As a starting point, we used Byram’s basic definition: “Intercultural competence (IC) is the ability to interact effectively with people from cultures that we recognize as being different from
our own” (2000: 297). In order to add to it, the authors of this paper consider that students are *interculturally competent* when:

- They are willing/able to communicate effectively with *individuals* in a foreign language or a *lingua franca* (by means of strategies and in order to get their message across and understood);
- They try to decentre from their own culture. In other words, appreciate “[h]ow (…) individuals use culture – theirs and that of their interlocutors – or, more precisely, how do they use fragments of these cultures in order to communicate?” (Abdallah-Pretceille 2001: 137);
- They become aware that national culture can be a *Deus ex-Machina* in intercultural encounters (i.e., it can help to explain misunderstandings and national differences and mislead interlocutors);
- They realize that all individuals, including themselves, are multicultural (sex, age, religion, status in society, etc.) and liquid, and wear “masks” with different interlocutors and in different contexts.

To summarise our definition, we wish to turn to Byram’s model for intercultural competence (1997: 57–64):

1. Attitudes (relativising self, valuing other);
2. Knowledge (of self and other, of interaction: individual and societal);
3. Skills (interpret, relate, discover, and/or interact).

For the sake of clarity, Byram’s three-partite classification will serve as the basis for the analysis in the rest of this paper.

### 3 CASE STUDIES: LATVIAN AND FINNISH STUDENT TEACHERS

#### 3.1 QUESTIONS, HYPOTHESIS AND METHODOLOGY

Having now paved the way for the paradigm shift, we wish to confront the idea of liquid interculturality and the adjoined definition of IC to how trainee teachers of English and French in Latvia and Finland see it at the beginning of their training. It seemed interesting and important for us to ask them about interculturality
since the trainees will start their teaching career after a year, and will have the responsibility to implement it in their own classrooms. The research questions addressed in the study were as follows:

a) How do student teachers of foreign languages define the intercultural competence of their future language users at the beginning of their training period?

b) An indirect question, linked to what we presented supra, was: are there any signs of “liquid interculturality” in their discourse?

We hypothesize that similar elements are to be found in most student teachers’ definitions, that the answers are imprecise because they are not used to reflecting on their own intercultural competence. Secondly, their definitions are based on “solid” interculturality and will present the competence mostly through solid categories of knowledge.

In early autumn 2005, some student teachers from the University of Turku, Finland and the University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia were asked to write down in English their understanding of language users’ intercultural competence. This took place at the very beginning of the study year; thus, we presume that the students were not influenced by the authors’ interpretations of intercultural competence because they had not been taught by them at this point. In addition, none of the students had attended general courses on intercultural communication.

**TABLE 1. Details about the Finnish and Latvian trainees.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Finnish trainees</th>
<th>Latvian trainees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
<td>9 female students</td>
<td>9 female students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>labelled S1 &gt; S9</td>
<td>labelled St1 &gt; St9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher training</td>
<td>First month of teacher training (French)</td>
<td>First month of teacher training (English)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Data for this research were collected through questionnaires, from which we took into account those parts of the definitions that clearly expressed their understanding of intercultural competence. In fact, many of their statements did not really supply any characterization of IC. For example, in the Finnish corpus, five out of nine respondents described how to acquire intercultural competence (by means of visits abroad, etymology, knowledge of cultures…). In order to find some answer to our research questions, we focused on sentences that contained modals and semi-modals as well as some verbs and verb phrases used as modals because modality can help reveal opinions and attitudes (Palmer 1990: 25). Sentences with epistemic can / could / be able to, should / shall, may / might, must / have to, among others, were selected from our corpus. We have classified the students’ answers according to the category to which they belonged: attitudes, knowledge and skills. On top of the modals and semi-modals that were used as clues, we also paid attention to the verbs that were modified by them, among other things. Hence, our criteria underlying the three-partite classification are as follows:

- attitudes: sentences containing feel at ease, accept, avoid, etc.
- knowledge: sentences containing know and understand in one case.
- skills: sentences containing understand, distinguish, compare, etc.

Tables 2 and 3 below summarize the contents of the sentences produced by the students in order to define intercultural competence. The modals and semi-modals as well as verbs and verb phrases used as modals have been omitted from the tables for the sake of clarity.

### 3.2 FINDINGS: TOWARDS LIQUIDITY?

#### 3.2.1 Elements for definition in the Finnish corpus

From table 2, it appears to us that skills and attitudes are more essential than knowledge when defining IC. The first aspect from the answers given by the Finnish students is the presence-absence
of the targeted “other” (i.e. an individual, individuals) when the students define intercultural competence. S/he is mostly accessible through or reduced to her/his culture:

- “Language learners are very open towards other cultures” (S1)
- “It is useful for the student to know typical characteristics of the culture s/he studies” (S5)
- “One should know how to adapt to other cultures, and try to manage possible misunderstandings” (S7)

Secondly, the analysis of the definitions given by the Finnish student teachers reveals that their discourse is highly modalised: i.e. they use “should” and “can/be able to” frequently. In a way, it is understandable when one is asked to talk about “competence”; on the other hand, it could also be an indication of the uncertainty, generalisation and use of pedagogical discourse in understanding, and thus defining the competence. S7 (sic) established that:

It should be useful for the student to know typical characteristics of the culture s/he studies. Sometimes, there can be many differences between one’s culture and the foreign culture for example traditional customs, food… Language learners must be able to compare different culture. (S7)

It is interesting that none of the respondents questioned the relevance of intercultural competence in LTL. It seemed “natural” for them to talk about it. Besides, no student reflected on general educational goals related to intercultural competence, educational contexts and users’ individual objectives when it came to developing intercultural competence in Foreign LTL. Language users are “identified” just in one case. S1 wrote (sic):

As for students in primary school, language learners are very open towards other cultures. At the beginning, they don’t see how representatives of other cultures are different except if the representatives speak a foreign language and live in a different country. Besides, intercultural communication can happen without any problems, for example through games. (S1)
Contexts of teaching and learning as well as types of potential intercultural encounters for the language users were defined at no time. Finally, the importance of good skills in foreign languages stands out in their definitions, which is worthy of note. For example, S9 wrote (sic):

Intercultural competence, in my opinion, means for ex. Learners’ abilities to be able to express themselves in the target language in a way which is adapted to the language. It means, for example, using vous in French. It could also be knowing customs, which can affect communication. (S9)

TABLE 2. Finnish student teachers’ definitions of intercultural competence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Attitudes</th>
<th>Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Know typical characteristics of the culture s/he studies (S4, S3)</td>
<td>Openness towards other cultures (S1, S2 &amp; S9)</td>
<td>Adapt to to other cultures (S7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand that people see the world through their culture (S1)</td>
<td>Accept differences between cultures (S5) but also resemblances (S1)</td>
<td>Compare different cultures (S2 &amp; S5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know customs that can affect communication (S5, S6)</td>
<td>Treat people as individuals not as representatives of national cultures (S1)</td>
<td>Speak the target language in a way which is adapted to the language (S9, S5, S6, S8 &amp; S7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accept norms in other languages (S2 &amp; S6)</td>
<td>Communicate in one’s mother tongue or in a foreign language (S7 &amp; S6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feel at ease among foreigners (S1)</td>
<td>Distinguish different language registers (S3 &amp; S7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognize (S3) and avoid (S4) stereotypes and prejudices</td>
<td>Compare other languages to one’s own (S5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2.2 Elements for definition in the Latvian corpus

Let us begin by saying that many Latvian students admitted that they did not know anything about intercultural competence and refrained from defining or explaining it. We were surprised to find out that only “body language” – not “language” as such – was mentioned in the Latvian corpus (see table 3). This might be explained by the students’ pedagogical background; some of them had had an experience in schools as full-time teachers before the teacher training and had, consequently, acquired didactic skills based mostly on the communicative approach. Moreover, unlike the Finnish students, nothing referring to the concept of knowledge was pointed out by the Latvian respondents. This might also be explained by the pedagogical background of the students, who are used to focusing more on a pragmatic approach. The humanistic “touch” of the elements in defining attitudes is also noteworthy (cf. the use of words such as tolerant attitude, diversity, etc.).

Furthermore, when attempting to explain what intercultural competence is, some students used examples from their personal experiences of learning in multicultural classrooms and “multicultural” Latvia (Dirba 2003). For instance, st 3 wrote (sic):

There are certain rules you have to obey in multicultural society. Nobody is to be offended in any way, everybody should be treated equally. I have a personal experience in learning into a multicultural class for a half year. To tell you the truth it was hard, because there were people from Africa, Madagascar, Brazil, Mexico. Each was with his own ethnical, cultural background. The colleague from Madagascar was with mythological thinking, he could not distinguish mystical creatures from real. (st 3)

Let us conclude by noting that a few students even suggested possible ways for assessing language users’ intercultural competence within a classroom context. This was not the case in the Finnish corpus.
TABLE 3. Latvian student teachers’ definitions of intercultural competence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Attitudes</th>
<th>Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Not offending anybody (st1);</td>
<td>Understand body language (st2, st3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tolerant attitude (st1),</td>
<td>Ability to see cross-cultural differences (st4),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoid discrimination (st2),</td>
<td>Ability to use social skills in order to communicate (not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communicate with tolerance and understanding</td>
<td>only verbally, but also non-verbally (st4),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(st6)</td>
<td>The ability of a person to see some differences between</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Appreciate diversity in the classroom for</td>
<td>cultures (st7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>learning from each other (st 3)</td>
<td>The abilities to communicate successfully with people who</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>are different form them (st8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Awareness that each individual has his or her own</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>background and should be respected and appreciated (st5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As a qualitative case study with only 18 participants (9 Finns and 9 Latvians), the findings are not generalizable due to the size but may carefully be considered for further research. Also, the fact that the student teachers all responded in English should be taken into account. Yet, they all spoke relatively good English (all the Latvian students were to be qualified as teachers of English and the Finns had studied a minimum of six years of English at secondary and high school), so we assumed that their answers would have not really differed in their mother tongues. And finally, let us emphasise that the definitions given by the students are mere statements and
that, in practice (i.e. in a classroom or societal context), they might emphasize divergent aspects when it comes to “implementing” interculturality (D’Iribarne 2004).

All in all, it seems that the answers given by the Finnish students were more theoretical. No examples from personal experiences were provided to explain or clarify their thoughts. For example, S2 wrote (note the use of the generic “scientific” one in what follows):

To have an intercultural competence means to have an open attitude towards the other culture. Nothing should look obvious. One should be careful with stereotypes and avoid prejudices. In intercultural contexts, one should position oneself on the same level as the other. One should not overestimate or underestimate the other. Individuality should be taken into account as well as each person’s identities. National identity should just be one minuscule part of personality.

The answers given by the Latvian students were more practical, based on their own life and classroom experiences. The difference might be explained by the fact that all the Finnish students had studied “linguistics” (French studies) before starting their teacher training and as a result they strongly emphasised language when defining intercultural skills (registers, norms, metacognition…). On the other hand, the Latvian students had studied General Education or practised at schools and had put an emphasis on pedagogy and humanism (“human rights”, tolerance, understanding…) in their definitions.

The general impression that was conveyed by the definitions of intercultural competence confirms that the student teachers in question still see cultures as fixed and “usable” in communication, i.e. if one knows the culture, one is linguistically and interculturally competent and vice-versa. So, they seem to be approaching interculturality through its solid version. The stress on cultural difference(s) is established by the corpus of definitions since e.g. “different”/ “difference(s)” appear in both corpora while “same”/
“similarity” are missing in the vocabulary used by the students. One remarkable element to underline here is that out of the 18 answers that we collected in total, only a few definitions contained similar “ingredients” (the balance between skills, attitudes, and knowledge differed in every definition). On the whole, we can conclude that the definitions given by both groups of students are unique and personal and do not correspond to a clear-cut “agreed on” notion.

Finally, did we find any clear signs of (an awareness of) liquid interculturality? There could actually be one example in both corpora: “Language learners treat everybody as individuals not just representatives of a different culture (sic).” (S1 had spent a year abroad and was a bit older than the other respondents). But, in most cases, when the students talked about the “other”, s/he was presented as being a representative of a fixed national culture. However, this apparent stability or solidity of culture in the students’ discourse is, in fact, evidence of the counter-effects of liquid modernity (Bauman Ibid.). Faced with the complexity of the world and otherness, with cultures and identities defined as fluid, flexible and “open” (cf. Dervin 2005) and with one’s need for “imagined communities” (Anderson 1996) since the beginning of Modern times, one tends to reduce reality and individuals to merely stereotypes.

The results of our study call for more extensive work on the issue of liquid interculturality in LTL in general and in teacher training (in literature used in entrance examinations for example). With the current world events, where the “other” is almost always seen through the lens of determinist and hyper-solid snapshots, solid interculturality can no longer be the right answer for the liquid language users of today. As Sen puts it: “the robbing of our plural identities not only reduces us, but also impoverishes the world” (2002: 63).
REFERENCES


