

Doktori (Ph.D.) értekezés tézisei

**DEVELOPING ENGLISH MAJORS'
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE
IN THE CLASSROOM:**

*“We have learnt [...] how much more we need
to learn about Intercultural Communication”*

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Topic and research aims

The imperative for intercultural learning is not particularly new. It was recognised some decades ago in relation to the worldwide changes encapsulated in the word *globalisation*. Many came to realise that due to a combination of economic, political, social and technological factors, the boundaries of the world as they knew it had changed, which prompted researchers and theorists from various disciplines to engage in the study of cultural difference and the processes of appropriate and effective intercultural interaction in a variety of contexts. However, in the current climate of global interconnectedness and rapidly shifting populations, in an era when the issue of immigration has become highly politicised across the globe, the need for a critical understanding of interculturality seems more pressing than ever before.

Current trends in Applied Linguistics and Foreign Language Teaching reflect a recognition of this need. There is now an understanding that in the global era the negotiation of meaning can be an extremely complex process: foreign language learners are likely to encounter not only people with a set of beliefs, values, ideologies and behaviours very different from their own, but also multilingual-multicultural individuals, who may hold a variety of beliefs, values and ideologies (Kramsch, 2006). In such situations, being merely communicatively competent in the foreign language, that is knowing how to get one's message across accurately and appropriately, would mean being ill-equipped for fruitful cooperation. It is also necessary to possess the means of analysing a range of social and cultural processes and to have a critical understanding of our own, as well as other cultures and societies (Byram, 1997), hence the concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

Yet what exactly is ICC? How can it be developed and assessed in the classroom? These questions have intrigued a number of scholars, as evidenced by the wide range of ICC conceptual frameworks (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009), accounts of development approaches and programmes (Feng, Byram & Fleming, 2009) as well as assessment tools (Fantini, 2009)

available in the literature. Although the field is characterised by inconsistent terminology and conceptual confusion, there seems to be some agreement that ICC includes a cognitive, a behavioural and an affective dimension (Arasaratnam, 2009; Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2007; Gudykunst, 2004; INCA Project, 2004; Ting-Toomey, 1999), and that ICC development and assessment processes are greatly dependent on the educational context (Feng, Byram, & Fleming, 2009). At the same time, a review of the literature also reveals the need for further research into the ways in which ICC may be developed by means of formal instruction.

The studies presented in my doctoral thesis aim to fill this gap by exploring various aspects of English majors' ICC development while providing a rich description of classroom processes. They were carried out for several reasons and with a number of aims. Firstly, in the 2010/2011 academic year I was granted the opportunity to teach a seminar entitled *Introduction to Intercultural Communication* at the Institute of English Studies, University of Pécs. Before I set out to do so I conducted an exploratory study involving (1) other teachers holding this seminar and the related lecture at the institute, as well as (2) students who had participated in these courses. The aim of this exploratory study was to gain insight into classroom practices and teachers' and students' opinions about the courses. The findings proved very useful and informed the planning phase for the seminars I would later offer, but also revealed an institutional need to determine an approach to teaching intercultural communication which would be most beneficial for students. Consequently, in my own seminars I resolved (1) to take a social constructivist approach to developing English majors' ICC, and (2) to investigate this development. Two classroom studies were therefore carried out with the aim of gaining a better understanding of students' intercultural learning in the social constructivist classroom.

The structure of the doctoral thesis

The thesis is divided into two parts, which include three chapters each (see Table 1 on the next page). In Part 1 I aim to provide a critical review of the literature. In Chapter 1, I explore two concepts integrated in ICC: intercultural communication and competence. I first survey various views of what culture and intercultural communication entails, and point to their different theoretical underpinnings and inherent assumptions. I then examine approaches to the concept of competence, starting out from Chomsky's (1965) notions and eventually leading up to its use in current educational discourse.

All of this lays the groundwork for the topic of Chapter 2: the construct of ICC. Here I discuss how the construct is conceptualised by scholars from different scientific fields, and compare and contrast eight influential frameworks. I take a closer look at Byram's (1997) model of ICC, since this was devised from a foreign language education perspective, and was an especially important source for the purposes of the empirical studies.

Chapter 3 then offers insight into the ways in which this competence can be developed and assessed, supported by a range of studies. I survey three approaches to ICC development: the facts-oriented approach, the ethnographic approach, and the critical approach, and provide examples of how they have been applied in practice by individual development programmes. It is here that I elaborate on the concept of the social constructivist classroom (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010), and consider its relevance to intercultural learning and teaching. Finally, I review a number of indirect, direct and blended assessment tools. Above all, the first three chapters of the thesis represent the interdisciplinary nature of the field, including insights from a number of different disciplines, but with a more pronounced focus on Applied Linguistics and Foreign Language Teaching perspectives.

Table 1

The structure of the doctoral thesis

Introduction

- Research aims
 - Phases of the research
 - The structure of the thesis
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PART 1

Chapter 1: Key concepts: Intercultural communication and competence

- Surveying three approaches to the study of intercultural communication
- Examining the concept of competence from different perspectives

Chapter 2: Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

- Comparing and contrasting ICC conceptual frameworks
- Byram's model and the intercultural speaker

Chapter 3: ICC development and assessment

- Reviewing studies on intercultural learning and teaching in different educational contexts
 - Surveying three approaches to ICC development; discussing the relevance of the social constructivist approach
 - Surveying ICC assessment tools
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PART 2

Chapter 4: Background to the three empirical studies

- Setting and participants
- Purpose of the research and research questions
- Methods of data collection and analysis
- Issues of trustworthiness, role of the researcher and ethical considerations

Chapter 5: Exploring three intercultural communication courses

- Research questions and method of the Exploratory Study
- Discussion of the findings

Chapter 6: Two classroom studies on developing students' ICC

- Research questions, method and course design of Classroom Study 1
 - Discussion of the findings of Classroom Study 1
 - Research questions, method and course design of Classroom Study 2
 - Discussion of the findings of Classroom Study 2
 - Three case studies of students' ICC development
-

Final conclusions, limitations and future directions

- Summarising the main findings
 - Outlining some limitations to the research and the pedagogical implications
-

Part 2 begins with an overview of the three phases of the empirical research (see Table 2 on page 6) in Chapter 4. Here I give information about the setting and participants, outline the research questions and methods, and dwell on the measures taken to ensure that quality criteria were met in the studies. In a separate, introspective section I also reflect on the roles, background knowledge, beliefs and biases I have as a researcher which are relevant in the context of the research, thereby aiming to contribute to its trustworthiness (Creswell, 2003).

The three phases are then discussed in greater depth in Chapters 5 and 6, in which the findings are also provided and reflected on. Those presented in Chapter 5, related to the exploratory study, reveal a number of important points about teachers' and students' attitudes to the intercultural communication courses. At the same time, they point to the abovementioned institutional need.

Chapter 6 differs from other chapters in that it is much lengthier: the findings, including the participants' emic perspectives, are reported in rich detail for the sake of thick description. It provides insight into the classroom processes of my own seminars, reveals the ways in which the social constructivist approach was found appropriate, elaborates on several aspects in connection with the students' intercultural learning, and summarises the challenges that were experienced in teaching the seminar and researching the participants' ICC development.

Table 2
Phases of the research

	Research questions	Data sources	Methods of analysis
PHASE 1 Exploratory study (2010/2011) 16 student participants 3 teacher participants	(RQ1) How is IC taught in the BA in English Studies programme at this Hungarian university? (What topics, materials, activities and forms of assessment are used?)	Semi-structured one-to-one interviews with the three teachers	Qualitative content analysis
	(RQ2) What is the teachers' attitude like toward the IC courses? What benefits and difficulties do they perceive in relation to the courses?		
	(RQ3) What is the students' attitude like toward the IC courses? What benefits and difficulties do they perceive in relation to the courses?	Questionnaire filled in by the students	Qualitative content analysis, Descriptive statistics
	(RQ4) Which topics and activities do the students enjoy the most and the least?		
	(RQ5) In what ways have the courses proved useful for the students?		
PHASE 2 Classroom study 1 (2011/2012) 16 student participants Myself as the teacher-researcher	(RQ6) In what ways is a social constructivist approach to developing students' ICC appropriate in the context of the BA in English Studies programme at this Hungarian university?	1. The teacher's notes and reflections 2. Questionnaire on the students' views about the seminar and their own development 3. Follow-up focus group interview with four students	Qualitative content analysis, Descriptive statistics
	(RQ7) In what ways did the students' ICC develop during the semester-long IC seminar?	1. Background questionnaire 2. The teacher's notes and reflections 3. Questionnaire on the students' views about the seminar and their own development 4. Follow-up focus group interview with four students	Qualitative content analysis
PHASE 3 Classroom study 2 (2013/2014) 12 student participants Myself as the teacher-researcher	(RQ6) In what ways is a social constructivist approach to developing students' ICC appropriate in the context of the BA in English Studies programme at this Hungarian university?	1. The students' end-of-lesson reflections 2. The teacher's notes and reflections 3. Questionnaire on the students' views about the seminar and their own development	Qualitative content analysis, Descriptive statistics
	(RQ7) In what ways did the students' ICC develop during the semester-long IC seminar?	1. Background questionnaire 2. Self-evaluation sheet on the students' ICC 3. The students' end-of-lesson reflections 4. The teacher's notes and reflections 5. The students' written assignments and in-class work 6. The students' portfolio 7. Questionnaire on the students' views about the seminar and their own development	Qualitative content analysis, Descriptive statistics

The findings of the three studies

The exploratory study, which was carried out before I planned my own course, was driven by five research questions and involved three teachers and sixteen students. The findings gained from the questionnaire study revealed that the students were keen on their intercultural communication courses and found them useful. They especially appreciated films and authentic examples of intercultural interaction from the teachers' and their classmates' experience, as well as tasks that required them to do their own research. They enjoyed participating in discussions and conducting interviews. Nevertheless, some difficulties also surfaced, such as ones related to assessment, as well as the students' lack of willingness to communicate in the lessons – despite their claim that they liked discussions. In addition, in the interviews two teachers elaborated on other challenges of intercultural teaching: they referred to difficulties in deciding about the appropriate aims and methods of IC courses.

What many of these findings and the literature on ICC development have in common is their indication that the social constructivist approach may be an appropriate choice. The social constructivist classroom is characterised by less direct instruction, and more investigative tasks, as well as ones that encourage collaboration, dialogue, learning from peers, and critical thinking. It is imperative that tasks are set in meaningful contexts, and learner autonomy is of key importance. I decided to follow this approach and enquire into the ways in which it was appropriate in my own course.

In Phase 2 of the research I conducted a classroom study in Seminar 1. In an attempt to answer the two research questions (RQ6 and RQ7), I relied on two questionnaires, my own notes and reflections and a follow-up focus-group interview. The findings showed that most elements of the social constructivist classroom were greatly appreciated and were seen as unusual by the participants. They explained that Seminar 1 was very different from their other courses. Interestingly, their lack of willingness to communicate was not a problem, which is

possibly due to the fact that (1) they found the topics relevant to their own lives and future, and (2) international and Hungarian students alike were enrolled. The majority enjoyed collaborative tasks and learning from others, and were fond of most assignments, which they claimed made them think and motivated them. They deemed the seminar interesting and useful, and referred to several ways in which their ICC had developed. Set against the thirteen course objectives adapted from Byram (1997), these comments indicate development in attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating/critical cultural awareness and skills of discovery and interaction, although evidence of no improvement in this latter dimension was also found. Importantly, some mentioned greater awareness of how much more needs to be learnt. At the same time, a few students reported that cooperating with peers caused difficulties for them, others argued they preferred “*the teacher teaching, and not all the time the students talking*”, and still others found it challenging to adjust to an approach that looked on them as autonomous learners. In addition, conclusions could be drawn about how activities and assignments could be rethought for Seminar 2, and also about the ways in which the design could be changed to allow for a more systematic documentation of the students’ ICC development trajectories.

These conclusions were carefully considered in Phase 3, in which I carried out the second classroom study in Seminar 2. This seminar differed from the previous one in many respects – most noticeably in that only Hungarian students were enrolled, which resulted in a fairly different classroom environment and possibly different intercultural learning. The research questions remained the same, but the range of data collection methods was broadened: apart from the questionnaires and my notes and reflections, I also drew on the students’ end-of-lesson reflections, self-evaluation sheets, written assignments and in-class work, and portfolios. This provided me with an abundance of data at the end of the term, which were to be analysed qualitatively. I coded and re-coded the data numerous times, and set up profiles for the student participants in order to get a better grasp of their individual ICC development paths, and identify

interesting cases. As for RQ6, the findings confirmed most of those in the first classroom study. Once more it was revealed that the students were not used to such an educational approach, but had very positive attitudes to it. However, their answers in the questionnaire also show that they were not thrilled about having to complete tasks that required critical thinking and self-reflection. This finding is closely connected to those pertaining to RQ7.

It was found that these English majors' 'initial' ICC profiles were rather varied. The majority rated their attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating and critical cultural awareness high, and their knowledge and skills of discovery and interaction low. Yet the numerical data were seen to offer an incomplete picture about the students' competence. For instance, one participant who had a wide range of experiences in intercultural interaction rated his skills of interaction lower than others who had considerably fewer experiences, indicating differences in the students' awareness about the complexities of intercultural communication. Also, the answers to the open-ended question in the self-evaluation sheet yielded inferences about dissimilarities in individual dimensions. For example, many claimed they were very interested in finding out more about people's experiences of daily life in other cultures, whereas others' attitudes were rather different, as seen in a comment made by one of the participants: "*I don't really think that I'm interested in the most of them*".

The self-evaluation sheets, like most other sources of data, pointed to the relevance of numerous individual difference variables to the students' ICC and intercultural learning. These were their (1) experience of intercultural contact, (2) age, (3) motivation, (4) attitudes to the course and to intercultural learning, (5) anxiety, (6) perceived foreign language competence, (7) learner autonomy and (8) ability to think and self-reflect critically. Furthermore, the possibility that various other variables influenced learning and behaviour in the classroom was considered. What was found interesting about these individual differences and the students' ICC was that they were possibly connected in intricate ways as well as dynamically changing

(Dörnyei, 2014, Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). ICC development, if any, was therefore probably non-linear. This, however, was one of the reasons why development paths were very difficult to track. Other reasons included the following:

- (1) Most of the data were collected on a self-report basis. The students misunderstood some tasks, had difficulties with critically reflecting on their learning, and when describing their development, they may have written what they thought was expected of them. Also, in some cases it was difficult to identify which ICC dimensions the students' reflections about development were related to.
- (2) An incredible amount of data was at my disposal. However, those that were not collected on a self-report basis, and yielded direct assessment – like some of the students' assignments and in-class work – contained insufficient evidence of change. This might have been anticipated, since the course only lasted one semester, with 16.5 contact hours in total.

Just like the participants of Seminar 1, all the students in Seminar 2 referred to various forms of intercultural learning, and, as supported by a few examples, it is possible that some learnt a great deal. It is also possible that others may apply what was done and covered in the lessons years later. At the same time, it was found that what was learnt was not in the zone of proximal development of most of these English majors, and that this was in large part connected with their ability to think and self-reflect critically. If contextual factors are considered, this is not surprising: a number of students pointed out that they liked, but were not used to the constructivist approach, and this may mean that during their studies they were normally not required to act as critical thinkers and autonomous learners. In some cases their claims of development were refuted by their actual work during the semester, whereas in others support for these claims were found. In most other cases, however, change could not be identified for

the abovementioned reasons. This showed me that despite all my efforts and expectations, inducing change in such a short time and documenting this change was an incredible challenge.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to the research discussed in the thesis. Firstly, all three studies involved small numbers of participants, which means that the findings cannot be generalised to the larger populations of Hungarian English majors and instructors. Nevertheless, following Dörnyei's (2007) view that "even if the particulars of a study do not generalize, the main ideas and the process observed might" (p. 59), I took measures to ensure that readers would be able to determine the extent of transferability. For instance, I provided thick description, made sure multiple voices were heard, and referred to patterns characterising the classes in general in addition to those reflecting individual attitudes, beliefs and ways of learning. I identified interesting cases and presented the findings in connection with them in rich detail.

Secondly, the data collection instruments, such as the students' self-evaluation sheets, assignments and in-class written tasks were not validated. Many of these were reviewed by other researchers in order to maximise their effectiveness (Mackey and Gass, 2005, p. 96). However, this was not done in the case of the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (Council of Europe, 2009), which therefore resulted in difficulties and confusion.

Furthermore, I had a dual role in the two classroom studies in that I was both the teacher and the researcher. I attempted to account for this limitation to some extent by clarifying in Chapter 4 the advantages and drawbacks of this form of participant research, and by outlining how my background knowledge, perspectives and biases may have affected the research. Nevertheless, in future studies investigating intercultural learning and teaching in the classroom

the separation of these roles may prove immensely helpful. For example, an outside observer's findings about what goes on in an intercultural communication seminar may provide new and different insight into the connections between classroom processes and students' learning.

Conclusions and pedagogical implications

In their overview of perspectives and studies concerning teaching for intercultural competence, Byram and Feng (2005, p. 925) stress the need for "research that investigates the relationship between teaching styles, materials, methods, and the ability to take new perspectives, to be critical, to understand, and act according to the principles of democratic citizenship". The three empirical studies discussed in the thesis explore this relationship and thereby contribute to a situated understanding of ICC development and the suitability of the social constructivist approach.

At the same time the findings yield countless pedagogical implications related to the micro level of the IC classroom, the meso level of the institution, and the macro level of the larger educational context. Firstly, with reference to implications for micro level practices, it is clear that all activities in an intercultural communication classroom need to be contextualised for the students to find them meaningful and relevant. This means that ample authentic examples should be provided when introducing models and theories, as well as in tasks that require the students to reflect on their own experiences. Secondly, as underlined by the findings of the exploratory study, discussion between teachers on the one hand and teachers and students on the other may prove immensely beneficial for pinpointing appropriate aims and methods for IC courses. Thirdly, for valuable intercultural learning to take place, the development of English majors' critical thinking skills is indispensable. However, one course and one term is simply

not sufficient for such an endeavour. If it is agreed that one of the most important responsibilities of higher education is to develop students' ability to think and self-reflect critically (Barnett, 1997), which I believe it is, then all courses should systematically incorporate critical thinking and self-reflective activities in their syllabi for real change to come about.

Finally, the social constructivist approach evidently has a lot to offer in intercultural learning and teaching. At the same time, it seems that its application goes against usual educational forms characterising the larger context. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1 of the thesis, broadly speaking, learner-centred approaches that emphasise cooperation, autonomy and critical thinking exist more at the level of the curriculum than in actual foreign language classrooms (Medgyes & Nikolov, 2010; Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009). As seen in the comments made by the participants of the two classroom studies, on the other hand, this is true of not only public education, but also higher education in the context where I conducted my research, which means that the approach I chose to follow is looked upon as novel and unusual in this context.

In describing models for change and innovation as situated in social and cultural contexts, Kennedy (2013) outlines how “mismatches between an innovation and the socio-cultural and educational context in which it is to be introduced” (p. 13) can occur. For instance, in an educational system mostly characterised by (1) structural approaches, (2) teacher control and (3) aims for ‘knowing that’, a transformative endeavour of (1) task-based approaches, (2) collaborative learning and (3) aims for ‘knowing why’ produces a mismatch. This mismatch may affect the students' learning in negative ways. What is clear is that the development of ICC, this complex ability construct, necessitates such an approach, but not only at the micro level of the individual classroom, but also at the meso and macro levels.

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