

The Development of Intercultural Communicative Competence as an Aim of International Student Exchanges

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1. The Role of "ICC" in Foreign Language Teaching

During the last years the importance of "Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)" as an aim of school education has become widely acknowledged. Especially in foreign language teaching it has become an integral part of the curriculum. Today's students will increasingly need ICC for their working and private life. Under the heading of "Globalization" they will be asked to communicate with colleagues and clients from different countries inside their own culture as well as abroad. They might even find themselves in the situation of having to cross borders to work in another part of the world, where they have to communicate in a foreign environment on a day-to-day basis. Even if they will not work for a multinational firm or in a different country, people from around the world today have more and more opportunities to meet. People are travelling more and farther. Many students will pass a period abroad as part of their education. Visitors to another country are always seen as representatives of their native culture. Therefore it is necessary for them to be able to meet people from other cultures on a positive basis so that both sides will gain knowledge, experience, and understanding from the contact. ICC has thus become a key competence in our society.

ICC can be understood as a basic social skill that should be developed in any school subject and also in everyday life. In an educational context, the foreign language classroom (FLC) is however the most suitable subject to practice this kind of intercultural understanding. In the FLC cultural and intercultural questions are raised and talked about in a language that belongs to a different culture. In this environment students can develop sensitivity for the other culture that will enable them to understand a foreign conversation-partner and a kind of self-consciousness that will help them to express their own point of view in a transparent way with the aim of mutual understanding and respect. The possibilities of the classroom are however limited. The classroom context lacks the unpredictability of real-life situations and limits the students to talk only to their classmates, whose opinions and experiences are well-known and mostly not so far away from their own. Contact with peers from other parts of the world is therefore necessary. In a real-life situation students can try out their intercultural competence and use their language-skills as a medium for communication. This will open new insights for them; they will find out that there might be differences and similarities between themselves and their partners. To try out their language-skills in a situation like this might even increase the students' motivation to learn the other language.

This kind of contact between students from different cultures can be achieved in different ways. This paper focuses on the possibilities of an international student exchange for the development of ICC. In a first part an understanding of ICC based on the model of the "Intercultural Speaker" by Michael Byram (Byram, 1997) will be defined. An exemplary student exchange between Parkside School in England and Gymnasium Stolzenau in Germany will then be evaluated with a focus on Byram's model. Three individual students are introduced and reflected upon. This analysis will reveal that all three of the students find different ways to approach the other culture and come back with different kinds of impressions. But there are also similarities in the development of the students. According to their individual level in Byram's five *savoirs* (Byram, 1997) they gain more or less from the exchange. There are however other factors that also contribute to the individual success of the students. These will be discussed as well as general benefits and drawbacks of the exchange. In a final part there will be some suggestions how one could react to problems students might encounter during an exchange.

2. A Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence

When planning a student exchange with the aim of furthering the level of ICC in the students and also in oneself one needs to have a clear idea of what this means and what exactly one seeks to obtain. There are different theories about which characteristics the visitor to a foreign country needs to communicate successfully with people from the host culture. The two main approaches suggest either assimilation with the other culture or the creation of a new common level, a "Third Room" (Kramersch, 1993). Supporters of the first position argue that visitors are more accepted if they adapt to the beliefs and customs of their hosts. A foreign culture could be understood better from inside. This position takes the native speaker as a benchmark by which learners are to be measured. Others, like Claire Kramersch (Kramersch, 1993) and Michael Byram (Byram, 1997) argue that while it may be possible to reach this model in terms of linguistic competence – a level that most learners will not be able to obtain – it is virtually impossible to reach this aim in respect to an understanding of the other culture (Byram, 1997: 11-12). One reason for this is that there cannot be one single concept of *the* native speaker. Everybody takes on many different social roles during their lives, which not only include that of being "German" or "English", but also that of being a "nurse" or "pupil", being "middle-class", and being "black". As it is impossible to separate all these facets of a personality, trying to assimilate to another culture would therefore only be possible by copying one chosen role model. Every person brings their own identity into a conversation. Asking people to take on another cultural identity would imply that they have to give up their

own cultural identity instead, which "[...] suggests separation from one's own culture and the acquisition of a native sociocultural competence, and a new sociocultural identity" (Byram, 1997: 12). In terms of intercultural understanding this can hardly be desired. Michael Byram suggests that "the more desirable outcome is a learner with the ability to see and manage relationships between themselves and their own cultural beliefs, behaviours and meanings, as expressed in a foreign language, and those of their interlocutors, expressed in the same language." (Byram, 1997: 12).

Michael Byram proposes the model of the "Intercultural Speaker", who possesses certain skills or "savoirs" that enable them to mediate between different cultures and take on a perspective of critical cultural awareness, that leads to new insights into their own as well as the other culture. The components of this model of ICC "[...] are knowledge, skills and attitudes, complemented by the values one holds because of one's belonging to a number of social groups, values which are part of one's belonging to a given society." (Byram, Online). In an exchange the main aim will probably be to find out more about the other culture in a real-life context, to be able to convey something about one's own culture, to confirm or reject one's prior knowledge and beliefs about one another and to make new friends. The prerequisite for a successful exchange will therefore be a positive attitude towards it and towards the other culture. Students need to be curious and open for new impressions, willing and able to decentre from their own culture and to take on a new perspective.

"This means a willingness to relativise one's own values, beliefs and behaviours, not to assume that they are the only possible and naturally correct ones, and to be able to see how they might look from the perspective of an outsider who has a different set of values, beliefs, and behaviours." (Byram, Online)

Since knowledge is something that can be acquired by learning, the foundations for this part of ICC can be laid during a preparatory phase in the FLC. Michael Byram presupposes that ICC should be acquired to be used in any kind of intercultural contact. In many cases it cannot be anticipated with whom the "Intercultural Speaker" will interact, so this savoir comprises not only factual knowledge about a specific culture, but also general knowledge of "how social groups and social identities function"(Byram, Online). In an exchange there is often a long preparatory phase in which it is already known from which culture the partners originate. It will be useful for the students to acquire some specific knowledge about this other culture, as it will not only make it easier for them to relate to their

partners, but also help them to build up a horizon of anticipatory expectation against which they can then measure new impressions.

The educationally most important opportunity for the students during an exchange is the development of the "skills involved in the 'discovery' of a new environment" (Byram et al., 2003: 14). Students will encounter situations and ideas that they are not prepared for and which might not fit into their scheme of the other culture. To deal with such situations and thus built up on their existing knowledge they need "skills of discovery and interaction" (Byram, Online). This means that they have to develop some skills of how to find out things by asking. If they do not understand, they need to be able to use strategies to negotiate meaning. There may also be misunderstandings that occur due to cultural distinctiveness. The "Intercultural Speaker" should be able to

"[...] see how these misunderstandings can arise, and how they might be able to resolve them.[...] By putting ideas, events, documents side by side and seeing how each might look from the other perspective, intercultural speakers/mediators can see how people might misunderstand what is said or written or done by someone with a different social identity." (Byram, Online)

During an exchange students will gain new insights into the other culture, make new experiences and broaden their knowledge. They have the opportunity of talking to people from another culture and to understand their perspective. They will need time to reflect on these new impressions and be able to evaluate them. On the basis of this new insight they might be able to change perspective to have a more "critical cultural awareness" upon other cultures as well as their own and take on the role of the "Intercultural Speaker".

Byram distinguishes linguistic skills and intercultural competence (Byram, Online). As one may meet people from a different culture who speak the same language, e.g. people from England and the US, purely linguistic competence is hardly needed. There will, however, be cultural differences, and intercultural competence is needed. Even cultural differences within one society can be imagined, as for example between "Goths" and "Hip-Hop Fans", two subgenres within youth culture. On the other hand there might be encounters between people from different cultures who speak two different languages and use a third one as lingua franca. In this case language is clearly not part of any of the two cultures and can therefore not be taken into account as culturally specific of any of the speech partners. Here both interlocutors need (foreign) linguistic skills and intercultural competence.

It will be seen in the example that language skills and the confidence to use them still have a very big impact on the performance of the students during the exchange. If communication breaks down or does not take place because of the lack of a common code, it becomes difficult for the students to find out much about their partners and their culture and they also fail to apply intercultural competence.

3. Evaluation of the Exchange between Parkside School and Gymnasium Stolzenau

The exchange between Parkside School in England and Gymnasium Stolzenau in Germany took place between 29th February and 6th March 2004 in the framework of the European Comenius Programme. The available documentation was created between 19th February and 8th March 2004. All available documentation was made by the German students and teachers, either as filmed interviews with the individual German students, filmed group discussions between the German students, or in form of learners' diaries in which the German students reflected upon their experience in England.

Before the trip the participating students were interviewed individually and asked about their hopes and expectations for the exchange as well as about prior experience with communication in a foreign language. Two more individual interviews were recorded during the trip. The first one was taken after the first day in England and the students talked about their first experiences in school and with the English students. The second interview was taken at Heathrow Airport before the flight back to Germany. Here the students summarized their experience during the week and the contact with their English partners. Finally the students were asked to give a One-Minute-Speech to their classmates in Germany, to report what had impressed them most during their stay.

The official programme for the week in England concentrated on establishing contact between the German students and their English partners. On the first, second and fourth day of the six-day stay, the German students went to school and participated in the classes. Everyone was assigned to an English partner and accompanied them through school, to their classes and lunch-time activities. On the third day there was a trip of all students together, during which they visited famous landmarks in the region. On the last day the German students visited York and stayed there for one day on the way back to the airport. The evenings were used by the German students to reflect on their experiences in group discussions and by writing their diaries. All students also participated in free-time activities with their English partners and went bowling and to an Indian restaurant.

4. Three Individual Students: Tim, Tina and Sandra

The analysis of the data focuses on the experience of three students, Tim, Tina and Sandra. The documentation only covers their personal experiences, impressions and evaluations, as conveyed in the interviews and learners' diaries. The analysis focuses on four main aspects of the students' experiences. Firstly their expectations for the week, concerning gains from the exchange and their own performance, as well as hopes and fears are examined. Secondly it will be looked at how the students approach the other culture, what they find remarkable, what surprises them, how they find out things and how they reflect their experiences. The third aspect concerns problems that the students encounter during their stay and how they deal with these problems. Finally there will be an evaluation of the students' gain from the exchange especially in respect to Byram's theory.

Tim

Tim looks forward to going to England and plans to have fun there. He expects to meet English people, and is quite curious about this. He hopes to be able to connect with the English students and wants to do sports with them or have a party. This is something he also does in his free time in Germany, so he is sure that there will be parallels between him and the English students. Although the exchange will be his first time in another country where he has to speak English he is confident that he will manage to communicate and be able to improve his language skills.

As Tim knows what he expects from the English students, he rapidly establishes productive contact with his partner. He and his partner quickly discover a shared interest in football. On the basis of this common ground he finds it very easy to converse with the English students. Apart from this he does not seem to find anything very impressive or special about England. As he had expected, he has fun with the English students and does things with them, that he would also do at home. This might give him the opportunity to compare this aspect of the two cultures with his partner and find out about cultural specificities, similarities and the perspective a person from another culture has upon these. Since his contact to his partner seems to be good, it might even be that he does so. However in the interviews and learner diary he does not reflect upon this experience. Concerning the classes he visits in school, he adopts a rather self-centred perspective. In a maths-class he compares the performance of the English students with what he has already learned in school, declaring that the English students' performance seems to be rather poor, without relating this to the different school system.

Tim does not encounter any problems during the stay that he finds worth mentioning in his diary or interviews.

During his stay in England Tim makes good contact with the students from England. He probably has a couple of interesting conversations, but unfortunately he does not mediate his results to a third party, for example to his classmates in the one-minute-speech. It can be suspected that he is not very conscious of his findings and therefore fails to see them as specific aspects of a specific culture. He has probably learned something about the experiences, values and opinions of his exchange partner, but he does not decentre and try to see things from another perspective.

Tina

During her stay in England, Tina hopes to meet English people and wants to talk to them. She is not quite certain what she wants to talk about, but says that she would like to have fun with them. She perceives her English as not very good and accordingly hopes it might improve during the stay. She has already been to other countries where she had to communicate in English but she still feels a bit nervous about it.

Tina approaches the other culture without an apparent idea of what she wants to find there. On the one hand this opens her up for all kinds of impressions; on the other hand she seems not to find anything that she really wants to examine. Another problem for her appears to be communication in English. On the one hand her spoken English is not very good, but she also gives the impression of being very shy and intimidated by her lack of vocabulary. Instead of finding other strategies to bring her meaning across, she seems to withdraw from conversation into a role of a passive observer. The only time she manages to establish productive contact is while group-working on a task in school together with English and German students. While after the first day she still resolves to talk more, her diary later contains long descriptions of a variety of impressions which she only treats on a superficial level. She seems to see a lot of things that she finds interesting, but then fails to reflect and interpret, which might derive from not talking about them.

As mentioned before Tina's main problem is to overcome her shyness and communicate with the English students. From her interviews and learner's diary it cannot be said how she deals with this problem, as there is not much information about conversations with her partner or information that she has acquired by asking.

At the end of the exchange Tina can list a lot of new impressions. There are many things that have attracted her interest. But she is not able to give an interpretation of her observations or to say why she found these interesting. She has made the positive experience that the English students are not so difficult to understand and that she is actually able to converse in a foreign language. In respect to Byram's model it can be said that her skills of discovery have improved during the stay and that she has started to find aspects of the other culture that she finds worth knowing about. She however needs to go one step further and start to find out more by challenging her observations and by asking other people to find out more. Due to her fear to converse with the English students she does not manage to relate aspects from both cultures to one another or to see them from the other perspective.

Sandra

Sandra looks forward to seeing England and wants to learn something about what it is like there. She also wants to make new friends in England. It's not only the first time in England for her, but also the first time that she has to speak English to communicate with people from a different culture. Her level of English is quite good and she generally seems rather self-confident, so she appears to be certain that she will not have a problem with that.

Sandra seems to be mainly interested in her English peers and establishes contact with them on the first day. She talks with them about their life, what school is like, what they do in their free time and about their families. She is also questioned by the English students with whom she then compares both perspectives. In that way she observes that there are many particularities about going to Parkside School and generally life in England. She mentions her partner's dialect, differences in the school-systems, particularities in the P.E. class, the size and equipment of the other school and other differences between herself and her partner. In her impression the English are as curious about her life as she is about theirs and that they are very open and approachable. There seems to be a very good exchange between her and the students from Parkside School. Sandra not only makes a lot of observations, she also reflects them, mainly in the interviews, but also in her learner's diary. She is able to not only collect facts, but also to interpret differences and relate them to peculiarities of the other culture. She tries to explain the lower level of the maths-class with the English course system. In another class she had observed that there are courses for different levels within one age group, so she assumes that this is also the case in maths.

The problems Sandra encounters are mainly concerned with words she does not know or does not understand due to her partner's dialect. She describes these situations as arbitrary as she and her partner manage to negotiate meaning by using sign language, explanations, or by writing down difficult words.

Sandra is probably the most efficient "Intercultural Speaker" of the three students that are introduced here. She approaches the other culture very openly and knows what she finds interesting. When the other students turn out to be as interested as she is, she is positively surprised and goes into fruitful exchange with them. Her success in these conversations is probably not only due to her good skills of discovery, interaction and interpretation, but also to her high level of English and her confidence to use it. During the stay there seems to be no increase in these skills, as she uses the time to find out more about the other culture. She probably comes back from the exchange with an increase in knowledge and with the positive experience of an interesting exchange with her peers from abroad.

5. Conclusion

As can be seen from the presented example, with the right preparation such an exchange can be a productive experience for all participants. Even if not everybody has managed to enter into effective communication, all students have perceived the time in England as enrichment and will in future probably approach other cultures more openly and curiously.

There are some factors that contribute to successful communication and the productive execution of an exchange. As Michael Byram describes, prior knowledge about the target culture and a positive attitude are factors that help students to approach their peers and to establish constructive communication with them. Another factor that helps to do so is a common basis on which the students can communicate. In Tim's case this is the shared interest in football, Tina finds it easiest to communicate to her partners about a task they work on together. Claire Kramsch described this as a "Third Room" that needs to be established by the conversation-partners to come together on equal terms (1993). This shows that it might be helpful especially for shy students if they come together on the basis of something they share. This might be a grouping together because of common hobbies and interests, or a task that has to be solved together during the exchange.

To profit from an experience in terms of experience and increase in knowledge it is necessary to use "skills of discovery and interaction". This includes not only being a good

observer, but also the ability to find out things by asking and by leading other people to reveal things. As there are things that will not be understood only by hearing or seeing, there also needs to be some questioning and negotiation of meaning. "Skills of interpreting and relating" lead to new insights and a decentring from one's own perspective. Students, who do not challenge their experiences on their own, might be pushed in the right direction by guiding questions.

As there is much conversation involved in this process, good linguistic skills and the confidence to use these are obviously competences that contribute to the success of an exchange. Students whose linguistic skills or social skills are not so well developed need to be supported in finding ways to overcome their inhibition to converse. This might be done in exercises in a preparatory phase if the syllabus allows so. Students with poor linguistic skills might feel less intimidated, if their conversation partners are no native speakers. As the improvement of linguistic skills is not the main target of such an exchange, it can be imagined to conduct an exchange with partners from a culture where the target language would serve as a lingua franca.

Another important factor for the positive outcome of an exchange week is the programme. It is probably a good idea to give the exchange partners as much time together as possible. If all participants agree with this, accommodation in host-families is the best alternative. There students have to spend a lot of time in a foreign environment, see the everyday-life of their hosts and are forced to communicate in another language. Concerning the excursions made during an exchange-week, it might happen that the students feel asked too much by the many different impressions that are offered or they might not be interested and feel they are losing time. A good solution might be to let the students participate in the planning of the programme. This way they can find out something about their destination ahead of time and also influence the programme with what they find interesting.

To advance the ICC of students has today become an important aim of foreign language teaching. Europe's borders are resolving and there are more and more possibilities to meet people from other cultures. People need to be prepared for these encounters and be able to profit from them in a sense of life-long learning. It is also important that they become conscious of their own role as representatives of a culture and represent this culture in positive way. As it is difficult to teach this experience in the artificial context of the classroom, students need to have opportunities to practice their ICC in a real-life situation. A well-planned international student exchange can be a good way to promote intercultural

competence. Students from different cultures can come together in an informal environment, and there is still the possibility for the teacher to guide them in their process of experience.

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