LANGUAGE AND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION FOR MOBILITY: INSIGHT FROM THE IEREST PROJECT

Ana Beaven & Lucia Livatino
Università di Bologna, Italy

Abstract

The increase in the number of students taking part in study abroad programmes worldwide has highlighted the need to offer intercultural preparation for this specific group of students. The IEREST European project (Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers) has produced a set of teaching resources to help students benefit from their sojourn in terms of personal growth and intercultural learning.

The theoretical approach underlying such resources is linked to a concept of interculturality that promotes the idea of multiple identities, and to the notion that identities are co-constructed in interaction (Holiday, 2011, 2013). Furthermore, the learners are taught to recognize the subjectivity and instability of worldviews. In this sense, the activities are culture-general, and can be taught to students regardless of their specific destination.

This paper presents the activity "*Meeting people abroad*". Although originally not designed for the language classroom, it was adapted for use in an Englishlanguage course for a group of future Erasmus students. Central to the activity is the learners' engagement with other mobile students through the task of carrying out an interview from potentially non-essentialist perspectives. The target language is thus seen not as an aim in itself, but as the means to develop the learners' intercultural communication skills and understanding.

In their new format for the foreign language classroom, the activity was tested at the University of Bologna in September 2014. Feedback was collected through focus groups at the end of the course, and was used to evaluate the materials and reflect on ways of introducing the intercultural in foreign language education (Byram, 2008), in particular in the context of student mobility.

1. Introduction

Since its creation in 1987, the Erasmus programme has enabled over three million students to study abroad for a period between three and twelve months as part of their university studies. Nevertheless, often the only preparation they receiveis in terms of language courses to enable them to study in the target language or learn the basics of the local language, when English is the medium of instruction.

Nevertheless, it has become increasingly clear that studying abroad doesnot provide only an academic experience, but also – and perhaps primarily – an intercultural one. It is also evident from the literature that contact with people from different cultures does not in itself ensure the reduction of stereotypical perceptions nor the development of intercultural skills (Byram & Zarate, 1995; Coleman, 1998; Alred et al, 2003;Shaules, 2007) and scholars have called for preparation and support actions which can be help students from this point of view(Abdallah-Pretceille, 2008).

It was therefore as an answer to this call that the IEREST (Intercultural Education Resources for Erasmus Students and their Teachers) European project[1] was developed, aiming at a producing a set of teaching resources to help students benefit as much as possible from their study abroad experience in terms of their personal and intercultural development. The IEREST resources, however, were not developed for foreign language teaching. Nevertheless, we believe that they can fruitfully be adapted to the language classroom, in order to offer mobile students effective preparation from an intercultural as well as linguistic point of view.

In the next sections of this paper, we will offer a brief outline of the theoretical underpinnings of the IEREST resources, followed by an overview of intercultural language teaching. We will then describe how one of the pre-departure activities was adapted to the English language classroom, and discuss the feedback provided by the students during the focus-group that followed the course. Finally, we will consider the implications of our pilot study.

2. The IEREST educational resources

As mentioned above, the resources produced within the IEREST project, called 'intercultural paths', are designed to be taught before, during and after the sojourn abroad. They are 'culture general' in that they prepare mobile students for their intercultural experience rather than to travel to a specific destination. The materials, written in English, are published as Open Educational Resources and can therefore be adapted and translated into other languages. However, they have not been designed as language learning materials.

The theoretical approach underlying such resources is linked to a critical approach to interculturality, and in particular to culture, identity and power.

2.1 Culture

Culture is often conceptualised from an essentialist perspective, whereby people are identified according to the 'essence' of their national culture (or "large culture"). This is often a stereotypical and reified concept of culture, which constrains individuals and reduces them to less than what they are. However, culture can also be conceptualised – and this is the IEREST approach – from a non-essentialist perspective. Cultures are therefore seen not as something solid and external to the individuals that 'belong' to it, but rather, from a social-constructivist viewpoint, as something that is co-created, agreed upon or transformed by individuals in interaction. Thus, the concept of "small culture" (Holliday, 1999) signifying any cohesive grouping (e.g., a neighbourhood, a work group, an Erasmus community) can be a useful notion to attempt to understand social behaviour.

2.2 Multiple identities

Here, identity (like culture) is not seen as something solid and unchangeable, but rather as something that is constructed in context and that changes with context. People constantly (re)negotiate and (re)construct who they are in interaction with others (Holiday, 2011, 2013). Age, gender, social class, language or ethnic background, among others, all contribute to the creation of impressions of oneself and of others. People therefore construct a multiplicity of identities, where some of these aspects may be more relevant than others in different contexts, and can change.

2.3 Power in language

Finally, an underlying idea of the project is that certain discourses limit the opportunity that some people have to enjoy multiplicity and to construct their identities in their own terms. Therefore, a critical approach is needed to deconstruct dominant discourses about otherness (Andreotti& de Souza, 2008; Guilherme, 2002).

3. Intercultural language teaching

Before describing how the activities were adapted to the foreign language classroom for this specific study, a brief excursus into intercultural language teaching is necessary.

Foreign language teaching, particularly since the advent of the communicative approach in the 1970's, has been seen primarily in its instrumental role of enabling people to communicate

across languages in a socially appropriate way. In this context, culture has been seen as corollary to the teaching of effective communication with people from a specific cultural background, usually meaning specific countries where the target language is spoken. Thus, culture has been – and still is in much foreign language teaching – seen as equivalent to knowledge about specific countries, their high culture (mainly literature), history, landmarks and norms. In this perspective, study abroad has been seen as the ideal opportunity to learn a language and its 'culture', used in the singular.

The move to an intercultural approach to language education (Byram 1989, 1997) has attempted to shift the emphasis from learning *about* a target culture to acquiring, through and in the foreign language, the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to *be* an interculturally competent person. More recently, Risager's transnational paradigm (2007) questioned the one-to-one correspondence between a language and its (national) culture. Finally, some scholars have emphasised the need to place identity at the core of intercultural language teaching (Guilherme, 2002; Block, 2007; Norton and Toohey, 2011). It is within this framework that the IEREST materials – with the necessary adaptation – are considered highly suitable to the foreign language classroom.

4. The study

This paper describes the adaptation and implementation of one of the pre-departure activities entitled "Meeting people abroad", whose objectives are:

- to enable students to critically respond to situations where they experience a need tomeet – or on the contrary avoid – "local" people, other international students, or other co-nationals;
- to enable students tointeract with people from other cultural backgrounds from potentially non-essentialist perspectives.

The activity was taught as part of a pilot Englishlanguagecourse in the autumn of 2014 at the University of Bologna, to a group of seven future Erasmus students. The students' level in English was intermediate (B1-B1+ of the Common European Framework of Reference). The course lasted three lessons of three hours each for a total of nine hours.

4.1 The tasks

The activity includes three tasks. In the first, the students are asked to analyse the brochures and/or websites of their destination country or university, including photographs or descriptions of the local people. Through this, they become aware of ways of stereotyping or idealising others. In the second task, the students analyse a video of an Erasmus student in Portugal interviewing her fellow students. By concentrating on aspects of culture that the interviewer (or the interviewees)

choose to highlight or ignore, the students become aware of how people provide their listeners with a subjective view of themselves or of others. The students then carry out and video-record an interview to an incoming student from their destination country before they come to class. In class, they analyse the video-recordings in groups, paying attention to how successful they were to avoid an essentialist interviewing style, to whether the interviewee used stereotypes, and to how stereotyping can happen as a result of leading questions asked by the interviewers.

During the course described here, the original intercultural objectives were supplemented with linguistic objectives as follows:

	Intercultural objectives	Linguistic objectives
Task 1	Understanding ways of stereotyping and idealising others	Practising **comprehension skills** on authentic materials for authentic purposes **Oral production/interaction** during class discussion **Pragmatics**: hedging and mitigation of claims though the use of modals, adverbial phrases and indirect speech.
Task 2	Interpreting what people say about their culture as evidence of what they wish others to see about themselves, and which may not be applicable to others from that culture or group	Practising written **comprehension skills** (English subtitles) and oral **(inter)comprehension** (Portuguese and French) **Note-taking** on completing a grid and during mini-lecture **Oral production/interaction** during group discussion
Task 3	Interacting with othersby adopting a non-essentialist style. Noticing how stereotyping can be the result of a leading question. Reflect on ways in which stereotyping can be deconstructed.	**Pragmatics:** Expressing politeness (interview preparation) **Morphosyntax:** Question formation (interview preparation) **Language/communication awareness**: Interacting through English as Lingua Franca (interview preparation) **Oral interaction** during the interviews

		Oral production/interaction during class discussion

Table 1 – Intercultural and language objectives.

4.2 Data collection

Following the 9-hour course, the students were asked to take part in a focus group to collect their feedback. The students were asked about their perceived learning resulting from the interviewing task, their intercultural and language learning, and their overall satisfaction with the course.

4.3 Feedback on the interview task

All the students stated they had enjoyed carrying out an interview in English to an incoming student from their destination country. Specifically, one student (Elena) – who had interviewed two Belgian students at the same time – commented on her ability to notice contradictions between the students, and to think critically about this:

'So she underlined the positive aspects, but when the other guy came, she said "No, for me it's not the same"… there were differences and they came up […]Before doing this course, I wouldn't have noticed these aspects, so I would hear their explanations without being critical to what she was saying to me.'

Another student (Andrea) had noticed how his leading question had been the cause of his interviewee's generalisation about 'the English':

'I tried not to ask something that generalised. I think only the first question: "What's the relationship between the English people and Erasmus people", maybe she tried to answer me in a contextual way, in a … "well, we aren't very… we live separately, but if you want to live the English life, we're open to other people, to other cultures".'

Michel reported becoming aware of how making questions more specific can help one's interlocutor provide answers which avoid generalisations:

'I noticed when she said for three times "it depends", in three different questions. I wouldn't have noticed that before, and so when she said "it depends" I was trying to be

more specific with the questions, like "it depends on what?" Before I wouldn't have focused on this.'

Finally, Francesca commented on how she was able to interpret what her interlocutor said in the light of the theoretical concepts discussed in class:

'In my experience this aspect came when we talked about the traditional customs in Portugal, and she told me that some people like and some people don't like the traditional customs. So she [wanted me to understand] that each experience is personal [...] She wants [me] to understand that I [shouldn't] listen to one part of the [general] context, I must hear one side and then another side.'

4.4. Language Learning

In terms of language learning, and despite the brevity of the course, the students appreciated the possibility to practice aspects of language related to communicating in real contexts, and get a taste of what they would have to do once abroad:

'Trying to speak with other international students, because usually we can't do this at university, because usually I attend with other Italian students, so this is an opportunity to contact, to speak with international students.' (Matteo)

'Also learning about starting a conversation. Because answering a question is easier than starting a new conversation. So starting it, and keeping it going, yeah… (Michel)

'... And find a way to structure the phrases, so if I don't remember a word, I try another way. Now I feel more confident with English.' (Francesca)

'Maybe also more brave to speak with others.' (Elena)

'Being able to speak in class, and speak about topics we don't usually discuss in language lessons.' (Andrea)

4.5 Intercultural learning

The intercultural objectives had been a novelty to all of the participants, who felt that this facet of the course was particularly useful for their preparation to go abroad. They mentioned having developed their awareness of the dangers of generalisations (both positive and negative) as well as being more open to listening to what their interlocutors said rather than jumping to conclusions.

More than a specific preparation, what I got out of this is a forma mentis, *about the idea of arriving in a different country, different from mine, and in particular relating to others and trying not to generalise… "We, Italians, we do things this way". Maybe being more open, but also more critical, more careful about what others tell us, but also what we tell others… maybe we'll notice that others generalise "oh, yes, we're like this…", but having done this course, we'll try not to do that. (Elena)*

I underline the fact that now we're much more careful about what we hear, but also what we say and how we say it… It was useful to interview an Erasmus student, because during the interview I paid a lot of attention to when she generalised, but also to when I had to reformulate a sentence in order to avoid generalising. (Michel)

5. Conclusion

The present study has shown how intercultural language education should not imply prioritising the language over the intercultural objectives by, for example, adding 'token' intercultural aims to a pre-existing language syllabus. Acknowledging the importance of intercultural development as a way to access other worldviews is crucial when preparing students to study abroad, but not only. After all, the foreign language classroom is the ideal place to explore and put into practice intercultural communication. As Liddicoat and Scarino put it, "learners are from the beginning of their learning users of language, in fact users of languages, through which they present themselves and construct and explore their worlds. Language is not a thing to be studied but a way of seeing, understanding, and communicating about the world" (Liddicoat & Scarino 2013).

References

Abdallah-Pretceille, M. (2008) Mobilité sans conscience…! In F. Dervin and M. Byram (Eds.) *Echangesetmobilitésacadémiques – Quelbilan?*(pp. 215-231) Paris: L'Harmattan.

Alred, G., M. Byram, and M. Fleming (Eds.)(2003). *Intercultural Experience and Education*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Andreotti, V. & de Souza, L.M.T.M. (2008). Translating theory into practice and walking minefields: lessons from the project 'Through Other Eyes'. *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning. 1*(1), 23-36.

Block, D. (2007). *Second language identities*. London: Continuum.

Byram, M. (1989). Intercultural education and foreign language teaching.*World Studies Journal,7*(2), 4-7.

Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Byram, M. and Zarate, G (1995) *Young people facing difference – Some proposals for teachers*. Council of Europe Publishing.

Coleman, J.A. (1998) Language learning and study abroad: the European perspective. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 4*, 1-21.

Guilherme, M. (2002). *Critical citizens for an intercultural world. Foreign language education as cultural politics.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Holliday, A. R. (1999). Small cultures. *Applied Linguistics, 20*(2), 237-64.

Holliday, A. R. (2011). *Intercultural communication & ideology*. London: Sage.

Holliday, A. R. (2013). *Understanding intercultural communication: negotiating a grammar of culture*. London: Routledge.

Liddicoat, A.J. and A. Sacrino (2013) *Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning*. New York: Wiley and Sons.

Norton, B., &Toohey, K. (2011). Identity, language learning, and social change. *Language Teaching, 44*(4), 412–446.

Risager, K., 2007. *Language and Culture Pedagogy: From a National to a Transnational Paradigm*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Shaules, J. (2007) *Deep Culture. The Hidden Challenges of Global Living*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

---

[1]www.ierest-project.eu