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Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence

Michael Byram

Contents

Preface

Although I am the sole author of this monograph and take responsibility for what it says, it owes much to its origins in a particular project and to the people involved. I am above all grateful to Geneviève Zarate, with whom I have enjoyed the privilege of co-operation and joint authorship for several years. She may not agree with all that I say but her ideas have profoundly influenced this text.

In 1989 in *Cultural Studies in Foreign Language Education,* I wrote that one of the areas crucially in need of further research was the assessment of the cultural dimension in language learning. I was therefore very pleased to be invited to participate in the Council of Europe's project to develop a 'Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning and Teaching'. The Framework was to be based on definitions of levels of proficiency in the use of languages, and Geneviève Zarate and I were invited to write a paper to clarify the issues involved in determining levels of 'socio-cultural competence'.

The paper, 'Definitions, objectives and assessment of socio-cultural competence' was written to a tight schedule. This had the advantage of obliging us to formulate our thinking quickly and clearly, and the disadvantage of allowing little time for reflection, revision or elaboration. It also meant that the formulation was related to a particular model of language learning and to other position papers in the project.

It is possible that without the stimulus of the Council of Europe project, we would not have put pen to paper or hand to computer, being too wary of the complexities of the issues. For me, it served as a significant first step, whose direction was determined by writing together with Geneviève Zarate. Research Fellowships in Durham and Washington DC, provided the second stimulus and the intellectual and physical space in which to pursue the ideas of our original paper. This time the purpose and the readership is different. My hope is that this monograph will be accessible to anyone interested in foreign language teaching and learning, whatever the context in which they live and work. I realise that I am setting myself a difficult task because language teaching and learning are social phenomena differing according to time and place. Assessment in particular is linked to societal demands, to

ensure quality of education, to plan for national needs,

to facilitate mobility, and so on. To say anything useful for every context is difficult but important, partly for reasons internal to the field, and partly because national concerns are now being complemented by international ones.

I referred above to the different origins and contexts in which this monograph has been produced. At the Council of Europe, I am particularly grateful to Antonietta de Vigili, Joe Shiels and John Trim.

At the National Foreign Language Center, I was very fortunate in being in residence with Ross Steele and Myriam Met, who were generous with their time in reading my long-hand script, and stimulating in discussion of my ill-formed first drafts. It was also a novel and rewarding experience, on my first visit to the United States, to be coping with new cultural practices, a whole range of cultures, and attempting to communicate in a language in which I was a proficient foreigner, whilst at the same time retiring to the haven of my office to write about the 'intercultural speaker'. Theory and practice were one.

I am grateful to the University of Durham for the award of a Sir Derman Christophersen Research Fellowship, and to the National Foreign Language Center at the Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC for the award of an Andrew Mellon Fellowship. It was a pleasure to be a colleague of David Maxwell, his staff and other visiting Fellowsparticularly my neighbours Mats Oscarrson and Stephen Straightfor three months.

I would also like to acknowledge the helpful comments on a draft of the manuscript by an anonymous reviewer who provided encouragement and detailed suggestions for improvements.

I am grateful to Susan Metcalfe who patiently and efficiently typed my first draft, written still with paper and pencil, I have to confess.

As always, my wife, Marie Thérèse, allowed me the luxury of quiet essential for writing, and put up with my absences, whilst my attention was elsewhere. My best, and best-loved examples of 'intercultural speakers' are our children Alice and Ian, who are an inspiration.

MICHAEL BYRAM
DURHAM, JANUARY 1997

Introduction

The Tourist and the Sojourner

The purpose of this monograph is to explore the issues which arise if we wish to evaluate and/or assess a person's ability to relate to and communicate with people who speak a different language and live in a different cultural context. The need to do this is not a new one. Relationships between different cultural and linguistic groups are at the heart of diplomacy and the need to choose appropriate ambassadors of one group to another is as old as civilised societies. What is new, however, is the condition of the world which allows and encourages all the people in a cultural and linguistic group, not just its diplomats and professional travellers, to take up contact with people in other groups. This happens in two quite different ways, making for the people involved two quite different roles: that of the tourist and that of the sojourner.

The role of the touristand the word itselfis far more familiar than the word and characteristics of the sojourner, for the latter has touched fewer people hitherto, at least in Western societies. In the West, it has been the fate only of small numbers of the social elite but of much larger groups of people of low social status, especially migrant labourers, from non-Western countries. The tourist, on the other hand, is a role taken by very large numbers of all social classes in Western countries, and has been so for almost fifty yearsanticipated by the enforced 'tourism' affecting many people in the 1939-1945 war who would otherwise never have left their region, let alone their country. However, although tourism has had major economic consequences, it is the sojourner who produces effects on a society which challenge its unquestioned and unconscious beliefs, behaviours and meanings, and whose own beliefs, behaviours and meanings are in turn challenged and expected to change. The tourist hopes for quite the opposite effect, first that what they have travelled to see will not change, for otherwise the journey would lose its purpose, and second that their own way of living will be enriched but not fundamentally changed by the experience of seeing others.

The experience of the sojourner is one of comparisons, of what is the same or different but compatible, but also of conflicts and incompatible

contrasts. The experience of the sojourner is potentially more valuable than that of the tourist, both for societies and for individuals, since the state of the world is such that societies and individuals have no alternative but proximity, interaction and relationship as the conditions of existence. Societies benefit from more harmonious co-existence, and individuals gain an understanding of others and of themselves which makes them more conscious of their humanity and more able to reflect upon and question the social conditions in which they live. Where the tourist remains essentially unchanged, the sojourner has the opportunity to learn and be educated, acquiring the capacity to critique and improve their own and others' conditions.

Teaching and Assessment

Yet why evaluate and assess the qualities of a sojourner? Is it not enough to let these qualities emerge and to create the conditions propitious for societal harmony and individual education? The answer lies at one level in the institutions in which the qualities are developed, but also in the underlying characteristics of social groups and societies.

Social groups informally, and societies through their formal institutions, have as a first priority their own longevity and they ensure that their members acquire loyalty and group identity from an early age. Their institutions support this through processes of socialisation, particularly in educational institutions, but at the same time, schools and other educational institutions are also increasingly expected to prepare those entrusted to them for the inter-lingual and inter-cultural experiences of the contemporary world. For the qualities of the sojourner, which run counter to the many influences creating a sense of loyalty and group identity, are seldom acquired without help, are seldom learnt without teaching. Educational institutions therefore have a responsibility, and a need to demonstrate their ability to fulfil it, to show they are accountable. Evaluation of their general efficacy, and assessment of the individuals in their charge are part of that accountability, and also serve the individuals in providing them with certification of their capacities, a certification which enables them to gain acceptance as sojourners in another society.

Evaluation and assessment cannot and should not be separate from the teaching and general institutional arrangements, and it is therefore inevitable that this monograph should deal with teaching as well as assessment of

13

individuals. On the other hand it will not deal with evaluation of general arrangements, of the efficacy of the realisation of plans and principles for teaching and assessment. It will focus on the

principles, on the ways in which they can inform planning and on the relationship between teaching and assessment.

Intercultural Communicative Competence.

The qualities required of the sojourner are what I shall label 'intercultural communicative competence' (ICC). The phrase deliberately maintains a link with recent traditions in foreign language teaching, but expands the concept of 'communicative competence' in significant ways. The link makes it explicit that our focus will be on the contribution of foreign language teaching (FLT) to the development of the qualities required of a sojourner, although there are other areas within schools and other educational institutions which can also contribute. FLT should not and does not need to claim sole responsibility for the teaching and assessment of ICC. Other subject areas such as geography or the teaching of literature can introduce learners to other worlds and the experience of otherness. History can confront learners with otherness in the dimension of time. FLT however has the experience of otherness at the centre of its concern, as it requires learners to engage with both familiar and unfamiliar experience through the medium of another language. Furthermore, FLT has a central aim of enabling learners to use that language to interact with people for whom it is their preferred and 'natural' medium of experience, those we call 'native speakers', as well as in lingua franca situations where it is an estranging and sometimes disturbing means of coping with the world for all concerned.

FLT is therefore concerned with communication but this has to be understood as more than the exchange of information and sending of messages, which has dominated 'communicative language teaching' in recent years. Even the exchange of information is dependent upon understanding how what one says or writes will be perceived and interpreted in another cultural context; it depends on the ability to decentre and take up the perspective of the listener or reader. But successful 'communication' is not judged solely in terms of the efficiency of information exchange. It is focused on establishing and maintaining relationships. In this sense, the efficacy of communication depends upon using language to demonstrate one's willingness to relate, which often involves the indirectness of politeness rather than the direct and 'efficient' choice of language full of information. That ways of being polite vary from one language and culture to another is widely known, but this is often reduced to the acquisition of particular formulae. Politeness is however

15

only the visible symptom of a more complex phenomenon: the differences in beliefs, behaviours and meanings through which people interact with each other,

differences which may be incompatible and contain the seeds of conflict unless relationships are maintained through politeness.

The introduction of the language of politeness into syllabi for communicative language teaching, for example in the revised version of the Council of Europe's *'Threshold Level'* (van Ek & Trim, 1991) is a sign of change. Communication is being presented as interaction among people of complex cultural and social identities. FLT needs to be based on such syllabi but also to go beyond linguistic realisations of politeness to take account of the ways of living out of which others speak and write. Only then can FLT claim to prepare learners to communicate and interact with foreigners who are 'other' and accepted as such, rather than being reduced to people assumed to be (almost) 'like us'.

Teaching and Assessing ICC: A Framework

It follows from the view of communication and interaction presented here that it is specific combinations of individuals with specific cultural identities which are the outcome of FLT. There can be no generalisable syllabus, neither linguistic nor cultural. A French learner of English needs a different syllabus and methods to a Greek, and different again from a Japanese, and within each of these national groups there are different needs arising from age, purpose, institution and so on. Similarly the assessment of their success as learners needs to take account of specific learners' origins as well as the languages and cultures they are learning. It is therefore inevitable that non-specific discussion can provide only a framework, a discussion of principles, illustrated with specific examples, but no more.

The framework offered in this monograph is an attempt to clarify principles which give adequate recognition to the view of FLT presented briefly above. It is written above all from the FLT perspective and has a strong link to the teaching of foreign languages in general education. It is thus written particularly for FLT professionals, be they teachers or policy makers or language planners. I considered writing the text in such a way that it would also include Second Language Teaching, i.e. the teaching of a language which is routinely spoken outside the classroom in the society in which the learner lives. There are clearly significant similarities between FLT and SLT, and the distinction is not a dichotomous one, but rather a question of degree. However it is precisely this complexity which decided me against trying to take the

17

variety of factors into consideration throughout the text. It would have otherwise been full of digressions and qualifications to cover a range of cases. The intention is to write at a level of abstraction which can be related to FLT or SLT in a wide range of situations, although it is necessary to use specific examples and terminol-

ogy. Thus I shall refer to foreign countries and societies where I might also have referred to communities with a second language within a learner's own country. It would be tedious to try to formulate the text in such a way that it refers to all possibilities, and I hope readers who consider themselves to be involved in SLT will make their own amendments and qualifications and still find the text useful.

A text of this kind, which attempts to discuss general principles, is difficult to make accessible to all the readers one would wish. It has to be positioned at a high level of abstraction if it is to be valid in its claims, yet this tends to create difficulties in following the argument. Constantly to offer examples, however, can cause clutter and even lead readers to reject the argument because a particular example does not hold in their situation. I have tried to compromise by offering some examples but not exemplifying every point. The monograph will perhaps function best when used in teacher education, where readers can discuss the argument with respect to their own concrete situation, rather than hypothetical illustrations which I might provide. I would nonetheless wish to assure readers that the text arises out of my own experience of concrete situations over many years of teaching and teacher education.

Chapter 1 sets the scene by discussing the nature of intercultural competence and communication, and makes the point that FLT is an enterprise which always takes place in specific circumstances, is inevitably influenced by those circumstances and should be planned to suit the environment in which it takes place. In Chapter 2, I offer a descriptive model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). This is a description of the components which contribute to the ability to understand and relate to people from other countries, and is intended to be a comprehensive and rich description of what is required in the most complex and also the most favourable circumstances of intercultural communication. It is not a blueprint for all FLT. Since FLT has to be responsive to its environment, it is frequently the case that FLT quite properly does not attempt to develop in learners the most complex competence possible.

Chapters 3 and 4 take the discussion closer to the immediate concerns of FLT professionals. In Chapter 3, I formulate the description of ICC in terms of objectives. These provide a means of determining what the teacher and learner wish to achieve by suggesting what knowledge, behaviour, skill or attitude might 'count as' a part of ICC. Chapter 4 considers how these

objectives might also be used to plan a curriculum, and is therefore intended to be particularly useful in setting the parameters within which FLT takes place on a routine basis.

Chapter 5 is intended for those who are involved in the assessment of