

TEACHING TRANSCULTURAL COMPETENCE: FROM LANGUAGE LEARNING TO EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

Hannu Takkula, Jukka Kangaslahti & Joseph Banks

Introduction

Our experiences at the European Parliament have made it very clear that one of the primary sources of misunderstanding, conflict and dispute between individuals, cultural/political groups and nations is a lack of competence in constructive communication skills. Therefore, it is most satisfying to see both the European Commission and Parliament recently conclude that in order to achieve one of the European Union's (EU) key strategic goals of raising the quality and standard of student learning across the EU, additional emphasis and resources must be directed toward teaching in general and teacher training in particular. It is also reported that governments, municipalities, schools and teacher training institutions in every corner of Europe recognise the value of language skills and are putting foreign language education recommendations into practice. As Jàn Figel (2006:3), Commissioner responsible for Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism, states: 'Multilingualism is at the heart of European identity, since languages are a fundamental aspect of the cultural identity of every European'.

This article considers the need for transcultural competence in an increasingly globalised and multicultural society that places increasing demands on our communication skills. It also suggests that development education can support transcultural communications through its support of experiential learning of key concepts and issues. The article goes on to consider the outcomes of longitudinal research studies conducted by three major international youth exchange organisations, which examined the effectiveness of their programmes and their impact on participants.

Transcultural communicative competence

We should always be aware of the fact that all people are products of their native culture and mother tongue. From the moment of birth, an individual is engaged in the process of learning his or her native cultural and communicative skills. People from other cultural or language backgrounds do the same. Naturally, the diverse learning experiences utilise different

‘cultural lenses’. For this reason alone, everyone participating in any systematically organised EU cooperative activity finds themselves dealing across communicative competences and challenged to learn new skills and abilities beyond those normally applied ‘at home’. These skills can be called ‘cross-cultural communicative competence’ or ‘intercultural communicative competence’. Within the EU we could also use the term ‘Pan-European communicative competence’; however, thinking more constructively and globally, perhaps we ought to use the term ‘transcultural communicative competence’. Whichever term one prefers, it does not change the fact that this is a vital challenge in helping people today develop these competences and also acquire a wide and complex range of knowledge and skills required as citizens and workers in an ever more globalised world.

Politicians often cite the vital role that teachers play in mediating between a rapidly changing world and the individuals who are required to cope with these changes. Teachers are expected to deliver effective learning in classes that may have students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They are also required to be sensitive to culture and gender issues, promote tolerance and social cohesion, and encourage the use of new technologies. However, we can not expect teachers to resolve all of the communication issues arising in a globalising world. Therefore, we will briefly review a few actions taken by EU officials that are supporting teachers should in enhancing communications in a profession becoming ever more complex, strategic and important.

In March 2000, the European Council meeting held in Lisbon stressed that people are Europe’s most important asset and that ‘investing in people...will be crucial both to Europe’s place in the knowledge economy and to ensure that the emergence of this new economy does not compound existing problems’. In March 2002 the Council meeting in Barcelona adopted concrete objectives for improving EU member states’ education and training systems, such as the Work Programme for 2010, which aims to make educative and training systems in Europe a world quality resource by 2010. In November 2006, the Council stated:

“The motivation, skills and competences of teachers, trainers, other teaching staff and guidance and welfare services, as well as the quality of school leadership, are key factors in achieving high quality learning outcomes...[and]...the effort of teaching staff should be supported by continuous professional development and by good cooperation with parents, pupil welfare services and the wider community” (2006).

Teacher education policy is very closely connected with other key European policy areas. For instance, the Commission's *New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism* (COM, 2005) promotes the value of language learning and identifies the quality of language teaching and better training of language teachers as important challenges. Research also has an important role in improving and supporting the teaching of languages by monitoring and assessing language learning and making recommendations that will strengthen future practice.

The European Commission has sponsored several quality reports on language teaching such as *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) at School in Europe* (2006). The introduction to that document states that:

“Schools in which the teaching of certain subjects in the curriculum may be offered in a foreign, regional or minority language have existed in Europe for several decades. Before the 1970s, this type of provision was mainly available in regions that were linguistically distinctive (because they were close to national borders or used two languages, etc.) or in the largest cities. This initiative concerned very limited numbers of pupils who were growing up in a somewhat unusual linguistic or social context. The aim was to turn them into bilingual children by enabling them to acquire proficiency in languages comparable of that to native speakers” (CLIL, 2006:7).

Whilst there is some accuracy in this statement we should recall from European history that the teaching of *all* subjects in a foreign language has been practiced for centuries. Finland is an example of this with both Swedish and Finnish remaining obligatory subjects in the schools' curriculum. Finnish cultural memory tells us that multilingualism is a good tool in international business but it also illustrates that one's mother tongue communicates unique lessons and cultural heritage for future generations. This is one of the reasons why in Finland serious efforts are taken to further the use of the Sami language in the province of Lapland, north of the Arctic Circle. If we lose the Sami language, we would lose many rich expressions regarding in the arctic environment that not only describe certain aspects of nature, but also support the Sami people who master the language in surviving the cold and hard practical context of their daily lives.

Experiential education

Teaching young generations about peace and sustainable global development,

language learning and communicative competence are important learning goals. However, the ability to apply these concepts constructively during social activities at home and in intercultural settings anywhere in the world is a much more difficult challenge. Development education can move beyond the successful use of experiential education in teaching foreign languages, toward a focus on important concepts such as human rights, social responsibility, gender equality, and a sense of belonging to one world (*The European Consensus on Development: The contribution of development education & awareness raising*, 2007) and therefore should be fully supported. Addressing this educational challenge requires us to supplement our traditional teaching methods with student-centred approaches to youth development that apply holistic strategies to the complex set of child and youth requirements worldwide:

“This approach recognises that we need to ensure young people develop the skills, values, and attitudes they need to succeed today, not just tomorrow. It also recognises that young people are not problems to be solved, but problem solvers themselves. This paradigm emphasises that youth are assets to the community, and active agents of change who can contribute their energy, idealism, and insights to a community’s growth and progress. They are not merely passive recipients of programs and support” (Little, 2003:4).

Youth engagement - whether defined as active learning, the assumption of meaningful responsibilities, opportunities for choice and voice, or actions that have real impacts - is central to, and an important product of, education reform. Research demonstrates that young people learn best when they are given an opportunity to take on active roles, have opportunities to make meaningful choices, and become contributors and change makers (Tolman et al, 2003:79).

There are thousands of international youth and school/university exchanges each year within the EU and youth exchange organisations contribute valuable experience that can be adapted within classrooms and local youth organisations across EU communities. At the heart of their educational programmes, many cross-cultural youth exchange organisations support the development of essential skills including: cross-cultural awareness; the development of positive attitudes regarding citizenship in multicultural communities; language acquisition and communication skills; and cooperative and leadership skills.

Longitudinal research studies conducted by three major international youth exchange organisations, which examined programme effectiveness

and the impact of their programmes on participants over a period of 40 to 50 years, have identified several important points for policy consideration. The three organisations are AFS Intercultural Programs, CISV International and Youth for Understanding (YFU) all of which have significant experience of delivering EU participation and leadership programmes over a period exceeding 50 years involving over 200,000 international participants per organisation. Each of the research studies analysed the methods used to achieve their educational goals and the impact of exchanges on the participants in rigorous efforts to determine programme effectiveness.

When asked if participation in the exchange programmes had influenced their awareness or changed their attitudes toward people and cultures in other countries, about 90 per cent of respondents in all of the studies gave a very positive answer. Interestingly, even though all CISV programmes are 'short term', and 80 per cent of the participants aged between 11 and 15 years, about one third of CISV respondents had subsequently taken additional courses in foreign language study, demonstrating a continuing interest in communicating with others. Similarly, a high proportion of CISV participants (nearly 20 per cent) had studied or lived abroad with the overwhelming majority of CISV participants also completing formal education well beyond the official secondary school 'leaving age'.

In addition to reviewing the positive intra-personal effects of exchange participation and the development of favourable attitudes towards world peace, Bachner and Zeuschel (1994) also considered the impact of YFU returnees on their 'home' school peers. This classroom 'multiplier effect' extended the influence of the exchange beyond its original goals. They suggest that this is one way in which the influence of intercultural living/exchange can be extended to those who are not able to participate in international exchanges directly. Moreover, we now have the extended facilities of the internet and classroom to classroom electronic communication to extend the exchange experience to greatly increased numbers of students.

In their work with AFS participants both Hansel (1985) and Hammer (2005) note a difference in the impact of intercultural exchange between those who had previously travelled abroad or experienced an exchange programme and those for whom this was the first such experience. Both of these studies found that the impact of an exchange programme was much greater for those for whom it was their first experience. These findings support CISV founder and child psychologist Doris Allen's belief that it is the *first* intercultural experience (especially those beginning at 11 years) which is the most significant in developing intercultural competence. Exchange opportunities should be spread as widely as possible and begin earlier (before puberty) rather than having fewer people engaging in repeated

programme participation.

Authorities and budgets must consider the entire spectrum of opportunities to better prepare and train teachers for more engaging and effective classroom and experiential educational experiences, in order to actively involve young people in the complex and vital goals of achieving effective communicative competence for social/community and economic life within the European Union. With increased mobility and rapidly changing means of communication, it is vital to both preserve our cultural heritage and develop the means to live harmoniously and compete economically within the Union and globally. The Parliament, the Commission and the youth of our countries/cultures demand that we accelerate the process and borrow from every source that helps us achieve our goal.

Potential challenges

As we work cooperatively to improve educational achievement for EU youth and guide young people to become more independent as they take up the challenges of a rapidly changing society, we must be mindful that more teachers, trainers and adult volunteers will be required in this vital enterprise. There has been a concern expressed, at least in some countries, that these efforts may be jeopardised by the fear of some adults that their well-intended association with young people may in some way be misinterpreted or misunderstood.

Civitas (a United Kingdom think tank) has issued a report titled *Licensed to Hug* (Furedi & Bristow, 2008), that claims child protection regulations may have ‘succeeded in poisoning the relationship between generations’. It said that adult volunteers (in sports, education and cultural activities) ‘once regarded as pillars of the community have been transformed in the regulatory and public imagination into potential child abusers’. Instead of relying on discretion, professional judgment and common sense, new laws in Britain will require the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) to approve every adult over age 16 having more than three hours contact per week with a child. The Minister for Children, Schools and Families said it will be ‘a criminal offence for a parent to let a child stay at their home on a foreign exchange visit without having a CRB check’.

While schools, exchange officials, and the development education consensus process must not succumb to excessive ‘risk management and political correctness gone mad’, we must remember the important ethical obligations we all have for the youth in our care. Nor should we become paranoid about volunteer exchange hosts being subject to the same security checks as teachers. The long-term social effect of making children

irrationally afraid of adults/strangers and delaying their independence is a trend potentially full of danger. We must seriously review every aspect of teaching transcultural competence to provide balance and safety.

Conclusion

Providing effective transcultural competence to future generations is too important a task to leave to teachers and traditional classroom methods alone. Proven experiential education methods outside the school have significant potential to also engage youth in this vital task. Gaining transcultural competence is vital if we are ever to achieve a more peaceful world based upon sustainable development and more appropriately educated citizens. Development education can play an important role in supporting teachers that are central to the delivery of transcultural training and experiential learning in the classroom to supplement their teaching with key concepts central to human rights, social justice and equality. The research discussed in this article suggests that positive inter-cultural experiences through exchange programmes and positive classroom experiences can have an enduring and positive impact on young people. Development education, as articulated in 'The European Consensus on Development', should be supported in enhancing constructive communication and learning across the European Union.

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Hannu Takkula is a Member of the European Parliament and Vice-Chairman of the European Union Committee on Culture and Education. He has a Masters of Education from the University of Lapland.

Jukka Kangaslahti, PhD, is Special Advisor to MEP Takkula.

Joseph Banks, JD, is a Risk Management Specialist and the Former Secretary General of CISV International.