

General background information on the PICTURE project¹

Introduction

PICTURE, a Socrates project, makes use of the communication possibilities of two groups of people – native and non-native speakers of a European language – in its language teaching module on intercultural communication. This module should be usable, albeit in different versions, in any type of foreign/second language course in the EU, at any level, from 16+ education, to vocational training, to university. The core item is a series of personal interviews, centered on intercultural aspects, with speakers of the target language, which means that students doing the interviews have to put into practice the language they are studying. Hence the project title, an acronym of ‘Portfolio Intercultural Communication: Towards Using Real Experiences’ <<http://www.worldenough.net/picture/>>.

The intention is not to convey information on ‘realia’, such as transport systems (from rickshaws to red double-decker buses), Christmas traditions (such as how and when gifts are given), or food preferences in a specific country. Nor is PICTURE about great men and women, mass media or the major cities associated with one or more particular cultures. Rather, the emphasis is on two aspects: (1) the socio-cultural knowledge speakers are presumed to have, and (2) fundamental differences between cultures, described in terms that, unlike most stereotypes, do not imply an evaluation, i.e. dimensions such as power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, or the way the environment is experienced. However, the possible risk which has been foreseen in this approach, is that, instead of making young people more tolerant towards people from other cultural backgrounds, it might strengthen the formation of stereotypes, thus defeating the purpose of the project.

Realia

The use of realia is common in the foreign language classroom, especially among the proponents of Communicative Language Teaching, who put emphasis on ‘authentic’ or ‘from-life’ materials (Richards and Rogers 2002:170). Realia, as authentic objects from the target culture, are intended to provide students with “a dose of reality” (Lund 1992), and in this way increase the comprehensibility of linguistic and cultural input. They help students relate classroom teaching to the real world through facilitating “the simulation of experience in the target culture” (Berwald 1987). To relate, for example, a lesson on banking vocabulary to real-world foreign banks, language teachers may bring into the classroom authentic bank statements, different types of forms, cheque books, foreign coins and bank notes, or articles published in the Financial Times. Similarly, a lesson on food can be enriched with food commercials, recipes, magazines which contain pictures of food, articles on healthy diets, menus or restaurant bills. If properly incorporated, such items may indeed be helpful in bringing the learners to relate the foreign language to the foreign culture. However, this is still a far cry from becoming “interculturally competent” (Byram 1997).

Savoirs

Developing intercultural communicative competence requires moving beyond the simulation of experience “Towards Using Real Experiences” (from the name of the PICTURE project). In Byram’s (1997) terms, it involves developing *savoirs*, i.e. the attitudes, knowledge and skills connected with intercultural communication. *Savoir être* refers to curiosity, openness and readiness to discover different perspectives on familiar and unfamiliar phenomena. *Savoir comprendre* stands for the ability to interpret phenomena from another culture and relate them to one’s own culture. *Savoir apprendre* describes the ability to acquire knowledge of a culture and use it in real-life interaction. *Savoir s’engager*, which will be the main focus point of the project, refers to “an ability to evaluate critically and *on the basis of explicit criteria* perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” (Byram 1997:53; emphasis ours). Hence, the focus will be on those aspects that may function as criteria for making critical evaluations of real experiences concerning one’s own and other cultures, such as the socio-cultural knowledge that speakers are supposed to have, and cultural differences described in terms of dimensions.

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Socio-cultural knowledge

The awareness of differences between cultures in the way they perceive time and space, and differences in non-verbal communication – eye contact, gestures, touching, emotionality (showing, or not showing emotions in public), and even body ornamentation (piercing, make-up) or hair growth – is no doubt important. But ‘understanding’ these differences, in the sense of being aware that there are differences in what is considered ‘normal’ in various cultures, is only the first step towards tolerance and the acceptance of diversity. And even this step is quite difficult. It is not so difficult to ‘understand’ that some people, in some cultures, find touching conversation partners more normal than other people in other cultures, but if one happens to belong to a culture where touching is considered overly familiar, it is quite difficult not to mind if one is touched constantly by the person one talks to, even if one knows about the difference.

In order to be successful intercultural communicators, FL learners will have to develop the ability to adjust their own behaviour to match their conversation partner’s so-called ‘comfort zone’ and adapt their own comfort zone as well. They need to be taught strategies of intercultural communication. Although dealing only with the cognitive aspects of intercultural competence is not enough, knowledge of at least some of the aspects that affect understanding in intercultural situations is absolutely necessary. We give a very brief survey of the most relevant research findings below.

Cultural dimensions

Developing a critical cultural awareness, or *savoir s’engager*, requires acquiring the ability to identify, interpret and analyse explicit and implicit values in phenomena from one’s own and other cultures (Byram 1997:63). This objective can be achieved with the help of cultural dimensions, i.e. classifications of fundamental cultural differences, such as those identified by Hofstede (2001) and Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (2001). Such taxonomies can function as a useful reference point, or as an explanatory and interpretative scaffolding for students involved in intercultural interaction. However, to avoid stereotyping, it is crucial to remember that these classifications are intended to reflect tendencies in societies and that, in reality, individuals may differ in substantial ways from what is ‘normal’ or ‘average’ in their society.

Hofstede (2001) claims that cultures differ because people are equipped with different “mental programs” that contain an element of national culture and reflect dominant value systems. He argues that one can describe national cultures in terms of the following dimensions:

- power distance
- uncertainty avoidance
- individualism versus collectivism
- masculinity versus femininity
- long-term versus short-term orientation.

Power distance is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 2001:98). The concept is reflected in the belief that inequalities in society should be minimized (low power distance), or desired and protected (high power distance).

Uncertainty avoidance is “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations” (Hofstede, 2001:161). High uncertainty avoidance implies a need for clarity, structure, conservatism, law and order, whereas low uncertainty avoidance stands for readiness to change as well as tolerance of ambiguity, relativity and chaos.

Individualism and collectivism indicate the degree of cohesion among society members. The former pertains to “a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: Everyone is expected to look after him/herself and her/his immediate family only”, whereas the latter describes “a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Hofstede, 2001:225). Thus individualism is associated with ‘I’ consciousness, emotional independence from institutions of the individual and emphasis on individual achievement, while collectivism is related to ‘we’ consciousness, emotional dependence on institutions of individuals and emphasis on belonging.

Masculinity and femininity are sometimes referred to as career success and quality of life respectively (Adler, 1991). In a masculine society “social gender roles are clearly distinct”, as opposed to a feminine society in which “social gender roles overlap” (Hofstede, 2001:297). In the first case “[m]en are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focus on material success; women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and

concerned with the quality of life”. In the second case “Both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life”.

The last dimension, *long-term* and *short-term orientation*, is often referred to as Confucian work dynamism to signal its connection with the teachings of Confucius. According to Hofstede, long-term orientation is “the fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular, perseverance and thrift”, unlike its opposite, short-term orientation, i.e. “the fostering of virtues related to the past and present, in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of ‘face’ and fulfilling social obligations” (Hofstede, 2001:359).

Another classification of cultural differences is offered by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2001). They claim that cultures differ primarily in the way that they solve universal problems relating to: (1) human relationships, (2) the passage of time, and (3) the environment. Bearing these issues in mind, the authors identify seven dimensions of culture, the first five of which concern human relationships:

- universalism versus particularism
- individualism versus communitarianism
- neutral versus emotional
- specific versus diffuse
- achievement versus ascription
- attitude to time
- attitude to the environment.

These taxonomies are important in that they allow us to talk about cultures without passing judgement on whether certain aspects are ‘good’, or not. As Beneke (2000a) mentions, talking about “the social and cultural meaning of certain phenomena like values or action-governing orientations” requires a language which enables the description and explanation of differences in a non-judgemental fashion. The dimensions listed here provide this kind of language, which makes them a fairly powerful tool for developing students’ *savoir s’engager*. In the terms of Beneke, who distinguishes between two kinds of culture-related knowledge, strategic competence and encyclopaedic knowledge, such dimensions have the potential to help students with acquiring strategic competence. This type of competence includes the ability to find and explain action-governing principles in one’s own and other cultures. The same type of potential is not inherent in culture-related encyclopaedic knowledge, which includes the type of factual, realia-oriented input which tends to prevail in foreign-language textbooks.

Culture in language course books

Since the 1960s the importance of culture in foreign-language teaching (FLT) has become widely accepted. Furthermore, in recent years, a great deal of research has been carried out on intercultural communication. Nonetheless, actual FLT practice does not seem to reflect the results of all this research. The intercultural content of language course books is still, in fact, at a surprisingly ‘concrete’ level, and the question of how to include culture in textbook material for the purpose of developing intercultural competence has still not been answered.

FL textbooks do contain information on various topics, such as education, the environment, fashion, food and drinks, ceremonies, institutions, pop culture and shopping, but the selection of topics is rather arbitrary and seems to be based on what textbook authors expect young people will be interested in. Topics like (1) body language, (2) cultural norms and values, (3) culture shock, (4) culture comparison, (5) intercultural contacts, and (6) stereotypes are almost completely missing from FL textbooks, even though students might be quite interested in these aspects, too.

In order to evaluate the degree of realism of a language course book in portraying a foreign culture, Risager (1991) developed a four-dimensional framework. One of these four dimensions is the author’s point of view, indicating the attitude the author expresses towards the country and the people (positive, negative, critical). The other three refer to the level of the cultural information, i.e. at the micro, the macro or the international level. The micro level refers to real people with real feelings, attitudes and values, represented in real situations. At the macro level she situates the broad socio-political problems of contemporary society, sometimes represented in their historical context. At the international level situations of conflict and co-operation are described, including stereotypes. The distribution of cultural information at the micro, macro and international levels in different course books varies roughly from about 40% to 70% for the micro level; from 20% to 45% for the macro level; and from 5% to 15% for the international level.

Disappointingly, even when language course books give information on cultural aspects, they provide very little practice in dealing with them. They focus on the cognitive aspect of intercultural competence,

mainly offering reading tasks on cultural issues with subsequent discussions. There are some role-play activities in some textbooks, but they are usually ‘neutral’, i.e. without any cultural context, with attention being paid specifically to the proper use of grammar and vocabulary and to developing communicative skills. Additional activities should be used if we want to develop not only the cognitive, but also the affective, behavioural and strategic aspects of the intercultural competence of our students.

The most popular activities proposed for this purpose nowadays are simulation games, which are used in many intercultural training courses for business. Through playing these games students learn to understand better why other people behave the way they do, and consequently learn not to take offence as easily as they would previously have done. These simulation games are closely related to activities based on ‘critical incidents’. Usually, students are given one or more critical incidents in written form. Working in small groups they analyse a potentially problematic situation and develop a way of dealing with it. An example of such a critical incident is given by Beneke (2000b:290):

Representatives of German and Norwegian energy companies and government officials had been negotiating the conditions for the construction of a new gas pipeline. The language of negotiation was German. The talks had reached a critical phase. Tensions were increasing, not the least because of the extensive press coverage and public attention in Germany. For environmental concerns the pipeline was highly controversial. It was agreed that the two parties were to host the negotiations alternately. This time, it was the Norwegian company that was playing the host.

Mr. Hansen, the head of the Norwegian delegation, extended his welcome to the German guests. For the high-ranking German delegation, headed by Herr Geschke, it was their first business visit to Norway. In view of the outstanding importance of the meeting and because the press was present, all the Germans, naturally, were wearing business suits. To their great surprise, all the Norwegians, including the head of the delegation, were wearing their traditional Norwegian sweaters and jeans. Some of them were actually wearing sneakers! Herr Geschke felt really annoyed at this. He thought it was bad form, even a sign of disrespect to wear what he felt to be unsuitable clothes. [...]

Incorporating critical incidents in FLT programmes probably works best when students bring their own experiences to the classroom, such as the case of a Russian girl who had been to Spain for the first time and who reported on her experiences in her Spanish class:

Spanish people are not very polite. They always interrupted me when I started talking. Maybe they didn’t like it that my Spanish is still very slow. But if they don’t let me say what I want, I will never learn to express my thoughts.

Students may then conclude that Spanish people are much quicker than Russians at taking turns during a conversation. They will, hopefully, learn to be more patient with Spanish conversation partners, and try to adapt to their way of conversing.

Learners’ diaries and intercultural portfolios seem to be a very good tool for the assessment of personal development. The European Language Portfolio <<http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio>> also contains intercultural aspects:

- The European language passport gives an opportunity to report on intercultural experiences.
- The language biography gives room for a discussion of intercultural issues.
- The checklists invite students to describe their intercultural experiences.

A very practical approach is to provide students with a list of intercultural questions. Not only do they provide a good starting point for discussion, but they may especially be a very effective tool for developing intercultural competence through comparing other cultures with one’s own. An example is a list of 22 questions for Swedish students <http://www.fba.uu.se/portfolio/portfolio_en/pf7.htm> with questions such as:

- How do people address someone they don’t know? What sort of politeness phrases do people use when talking to casual acquaintances or strangers?
- What is the attitude to private cars? Positive / negative? Do cars tend to be small / large / new / old / well-cared for / wrecks?
- Are there issues which people feel strongly about – e.g. hospitals and health-care, the environment, animal rights etc?

The fact that the above-mentioned activities can be used as effective pedagogical tools for developing intercultural awareness among FL learners led us to the idea of developing our own module on intercultural communication that can be used for any FL students of 16 years of age or older.

PICTURE objectives

The objectives of the PICTURE project are threefold:

(1) to develop a course module with materials on aspects of intercultural communication which can be used in addition to the course book that is normally used, at various educational levels, for students from the age of 16 onwards. The module is made available in five languages (French, German, English, Italian and Spanish).

(2) to develop, and include as part of this module, a questionnaire which can be used by students in personal interviews with foreign-language speakers (usually tourists, but also visiting business people, people one meets on a camping site, students on exchange schemes and trainees on work placements in offices, hotels, factories or restaurants). These interviewees need not necessarily be native speakers; thus a Polish student may interview a Swedish person in English, as well as interviewing a native speaker of English from, say, the UK. These questions and answers would be part of the teaching module, with each student being required to write a report on how the interviews went. The report would then go into the student's portfolio.

The personal interviews with target language speakers are thus a central part of the teaching module. Each questionnaire as used by students will probably consist of only about 10 questions, although we have made suggestions for some 100 questions. The complete list of possible questions can be found **here**. . Some questions consist of a request to indicate how the interviewee would react in a given intercultural contact situation, or what the respondent's experiences or expectations are in such a contact situation. Others consist of questions such as how the respondent would continue a particular start to a conversation, how they would respond to a compliment or say 'no' to a request. Some questions elicit opinions about a comparison of aspects of the cultures of the countries from which the respondent and the interviewer originate.

Students would approach their 'targets' in teams of two or three, preferably making use of a tape recorder. One student would carry out the interview, one would be responsible for recording it and one would be responsible for observing the body language interaction from a distance. The students then meet to listen to the tape, extract the data (much more accurate than on the spot notation, plus an excellent 'real life' listening comprehension exercise) and integrate the verbal information with the non-verbal cues observed by the second / third party. If the student observer has a video camera, that could also be used.

(3) The (coded) answers to the questions can be sent to a central location (details **here**) and put into a database. The database will allow students and researchers to make an analysis of a variety of aspects related to intercultural communication in present-day Europe.

Pedagogical concepts

Two pedagogical concepts are involved in PICTURE. The first one concerns the importance of authentic foreign-language use in actual intercultural contact situations. Only real-life interaction makes 'communicative' language learning truly communicative. In Byram's (1997) terms, we aim mainly at *savoir s'engager*. It is clear that in order to make progress in acquiring the *savoirs*, interculturally-competent people will not only have gained a certain insight into the target culture, but will also have developed a sense of their own cultural identity, have developed concepts about the construction of culture, and will have come to understand that there is more than one way of 'being' in the world. This holds for both language learners and language teachers. Hence, we believe, as one of our project partners wrote, "that the foreign language teacher should understand how cultural background and attitudes towards foreign cultures may affect language learning. Awareness of these differences is a prerequisite for the development of materials and strategies completely tuned in to and taking into account the needs of specific groups." (De Wachter and Decavele, 2004:157).

The second pedagogical concept is the 'Language Experience Route', developed by Horizon College in the Netherlands, one of the project partners, which concerns the importance of strengthening the relation between 'school' and 'the outside world' through carrying out assignments outside school and preparing them in school with life-like assignments via video-taped contact situations as they occur in 'the real world'.

It will be possible to use the course module at various levels, from intermediate to advanced (in terms of the Common European Framework of Reference: B1, B2, C1), because it contains a variety of situations, tasks and assignments. Typically, when used in school, teachers will make a selection from the material, of both the videos and the assignments (most can be done autonomously) corresponding to the level and the interests of their students. Of course, we will suggest an 'optimum' selection for a variety of educational situations and levels.

The innovative aspect is the possibility of authentic foreign-language use, in a large variety of actual contact situations within Europe. We expect that it will be quite motivating for students to be able to contribute to 'a better understanding between Europeans'.

Stereotypes

A risk which is recognized, however, in this approach is that it might increase a 'stereotypical attitude' towards foreign cultures. People have stereotypical views of people with other (sub-)cultural backgrounds. These stereotypes are sometimes surprisingly universal, and, it must be said, very resistant to change, even in the face of contradictory evidence. Thus Germans are regarded as hard-working, punctual, arrogant, and not blessed with a sense of humour, by a large number of people from many nationalities. Similarly, Americans are regarded by many nationalities as career-conscious, hard-working, friendly but superficial etc.

It is customary among intellectuals to frown upon stereotypes and to state that they are very often wrong, which is true to a certain extent. However, it has been pointed out that stereotypes are not necessarily misleading (Beneke, 2000b:122):

Insofar as they suggest that once you have seen and understood one specimen of a certain category (e.g. Frenchmen or Germans) you have a good chance to understand all other specimens ("the" French or "the" Germans etc.), they mislead people [...]. [However], although they may be glaringly misleading and deceptive, stereotypes answer a very important communicative need; i.e. the reduction of complexity and the increase of predictability.

In this sense, stereotypes have a useful function: they may provide some help in dealing with people from other countries who one has not met before. As has been said (Koster 1999:60) it may be quite useful to know that 'the Germans' are more formal during business meetings than 'the Dutch', or that they attach more importance to shoes being polished. Similarly, it may help people to deal with the rather characteristic bluntness which some Dutch people tend to exhibit during meetings (which they themselves regard as 'being direct' or even as 'being honest'), or the different importance they attach to 'being on time' as compared to, for instance, 'the Portuguese'. At the same time it should, of course, be clear that some Dutchmen, or even quite a few, find polished shoes or courteous behaviour quite important, and that some Portuguese tend to show up at meetings at the exact time agreed upon, only to find that the Dutch participant is late.

Also, it should be pointed out that 'knowing' is not the same as 'understanding' or 'appreciating'. Knowing that Russians have an entirely different way of planning their days than Dutchmen often does not diminish the irritation felt by the Dutch in dealing with what they regard as the chaotic way in which Russians plan things. And the fact that many Polish people know that 'westerners', who have taken over their companies and banks, mean well and almost certainly have a greater expertise in dealing with a market-driven economy, does not mean that Poles agree with the philosophy that lies behind the westerners' approach in regarding quarter-year financial results as much more important than human relations.

One last example: sharing information. In many western societies, including the Netherlands, the UK and the USA, information is there to be shared. One shares information with one's colleagues. One prepares a 'dossier' when somebody else in the company takes over, so that the successor is well-informed, and knows the state of play. The internet is one of the prime examples of the urge to share information, to put information at other people's disposal. This 'normal' sharing of information, however, is not nearly as normal in formerly communist countries such as Hungary and Bulgaria, not to mention Russia. In many of these countries, information is power. Those who have certain information (such as, in economically leaner times, where to buy commodities, or who to turn to in order to get something done) obviously have a larger chance of 'survival' than those who do not have this information.

A 'westerner' may 'know' this; s/he may know that information is often not passed on (to other departments or to colleagues). S/he may also know that in some cultures people don't like saying "no" to anybody, and would rather give incorrect information than say that they don't have the information required. Yet, there appears to be a large difference between knowing and accepting (or appreciating) that the information one gets in Central European (ex-communist) countries is very often unreliable.

In conclusion

The great challenge for PICTURE and for the module it develops is not to contribute to or strengthen stereotypical thinking. We believe that personal contact between students and foreigners can help in preventing this, especially if both parties have to think hard about not only the differences but also the

similarities between their cultures. Most importantly of all, we believe that a great part of such a module will have to be devoted to an analysis of one's own culture, which is a *sine qua non* for understanding people from different cultures.

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