Specifying languages' contribution to intercultural education

Lessons learned from the CEFR

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From the point of view of the Council of Europe, knowledge of languages is not only beneficial for work, travel or sharing information. The quality of language teaching that we may rightfully expect must have an educational dimension and should not, as such, be judged solely on the basis of the efficacy of teaching methods or their conformity with norms and standards. Teaching unfamiliar languages also has a part to play in personal development. This humanist perspective, the continuation of a long-standing cultural tradition in Europe, has now led to a teaching method we have come to call intercultural education, designed to allow learners to react thoughtfully when they come into contact with the various forms that otherness can take. Although the importance of this aim is generally agreed upon, such that it now features in many teaching programmes, attaining it is often difficult, especially when it comes to designing activities to work towards it in practice. Our aim here is therefore twofold: to put the concept of intercultural education in practical terms and to posit the necessary conditions for specifying those terms, in other words, the criteria that any corresponding benchmark instruments should meet. We will seek to define these criteria by studying an existing benchmark instrument: the CEFR. That does not mean "singling out" parts of the CEFR that may be useful elsewhere, but rather drawing support from its methodology and structure.

1. Designing intercultural education within the context of school subjects

The first thing to note is that the design of any intercultural activity should take into account the specific nature of the school subject in which it is to be proposed. Obviously, intercultural education also takes place outside the education system and real intercultural encounters can be organised within the broader educational context, through school exchange programmes, contact on the internet, and local or international projects, for example. Nevertheless, in the institutional setting, educational outcomes involving the development of intercultural competences must first and foremost fit into the established and unyielding framework of school subjects and, consequently, "language lessons".

This may be more problematic when a school already offers a course of education for citizenship, democratic life or knowledge of religion, which seems to bear sole responsibility for "dealing with values" and for such education and to which the teachers of other subjects readily devolve that responsibility. In any event, intercultural education must be tailored to fit each subject: history classes should teach different points of view on space and time; geography classes (particularly classes on human geography) should teach anthropological and social diversity; classes on the so-called scientific subjects should initiate pupils into the particular cultural universe of the communities that form around areas of research, the acquisition and discussion of knowledge, and the ways in which knowledge is disseminated. No one form of this sort of intercultural education can prepare students for community life and civic responsibility, since each form helps to prepare them in a different way.

The intercultural aims of language teaching, particularly the teaching of foreign languages, must be thought of along these lines, given that:

- Learning foreign languages is a direct and powerful way of experiencing otherness on a physical and emotional level, since it involves sounds and words that are foreign to the learner.

- From another perspective, so to speak, learning foreign languages is an important means of interacting with other contemporary societies, which, on the face of it, is not

generally a great personal challenge for learners, because interaction takes place within the school setting: learning foreign languages is a subject like any other, with its own working methods, notes, and so on. Nonetheless, learning languages requires profound personal commitment in some contexts, for example as regards plans to live abroad, the disparagement, acculturation or affirmation of individuals' own way of life, a desire to fit in, emotional or existential motivation, and wanderlust, etc.

Language teaching represents a space in which each learner is affected by his or her relationship with otherness to a greater or lesser degree. As such, it encourages learners to express their personal convictions and attitudes, which are often deeply rooted in a specific national cultural experience, although interaction with the media can reduce the perceived foreignness of social systems and behaviour that are different from their own. The principal characteristic of language lessons is that they represent an educational space in which attitudes are revealed and can thus be explicitly questioned.

2. The case for a tiered system of specification in intercultural education

In order to "move" from the principles and values that we want to share to the specific classroom activities intended for that purpose, it is common to use tools such as benchmarks, the leading example of which when it comes to teaching and learning languages is the CEFR. Designing a benchmark tool for intercultural education in language learning is no mean feat, above all because it demands great terminological rigour (such as in the CEFR) and an overall structure that encompasses various interlinking levels of specification. This is nothing new, as attested to by the high number of existing specifications, which may or may not be organised according to a coherent typology: in addition to the "existential competence" promoted by the CEFR and the development of an "intercultural personality" (5.1.3 and 6.4.6.3), we may, for example, look to the proposals of Byram, which were the first to be made in this area of study, to Bennet's *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity*, or to the descriptors used in the CARAP-FREPA[1] or which I have proposed.[2] This is not the place for a detailed discussion on the topic, but it should be pointed out that, in general, these benchmark descriptions emphasise the desired outcomes. Benchmark descriptions are also not, however, always satisfactorily classified according to a tiered system of specification that would ensure coherence between the descriptions of the values that we want to be discovered and explained, the development and transmission of which we want to support with the corresponding activities offered to learners.

Let us consider, for example, some commonly used formulations, such as: intercultural education has the purpose of developing open, proactive, thoughtful and critical attitudes in order to learn to positively apprehend and profitably manage contact with otherness in school. It is designed to develop curiosity for discovery and personal, attentive and benevolent management of cultural diversity, because it strives to mitigate ego- and ethnocentric attitudes. It must be based on a plural, dynamic conception of cultural and social identity. It has the task of influencing attitudes and, by extension, beliefs and values in order to encourage various forms of acceptance of otherness on an emotional level (when that acceptance is in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, although not

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[1] http://carap.ecml.at/Portals/11/documents/C4pub2007F_20080228_FINAL.pdf
[2] Beacco, J.C. (2004), "Proposition de référentiel pour les compétences culturelles dans les enseignements de langues" [Proposal for a framework of cultural competences for use in language teaching], in Beacco, J.C. et al. (ed.), *Niveau B2 pour le français. Textes et références*, Didier, Paris, pp. 251-287.

universally accepted, remains the world's most widely agreed upon legal document) while considering contact with otherness as a possible way of contributing to personal development.

The terms used (*openness, reflection, criticism, curiosity, benevolence,* etc.) are already descriptors of the desired educational outcomes and are formulated in terms of attitudes to be instilled in learners. In summary documents, for example, DICE,[3] the following typology of attitudes is used:

- o *Respect for people from other cultures*

- o *Openness to and curiosity about people from other cultures*

- o *Openness to learning about other cultures*

- o *Willingness to question what is usually taken for granted as 'normal' according to one's previously acquired knowledge and experience*

- o *Willingness to empathise with people from other cultural backgrounds*

- o *Willingness to suspend judgment*

- o *Willingness to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty*

- o *Willingness to co-operate with individuals from other cultural backgrounds*

- o *Valuing cultural diversity and pluralism of views and practices*

These specifications do not satisfactorily distinguish between target attitudes (*willingness, openness,* etc.), the implied competences (*learning, questioning,* etc.) and the required knowledge, and the level of activities is not immediately apparent. Below we will set out a hypothetical system of organisation that:

- is based on attitudes, which are the manifestation of the beliefs and convictions associated with individuals' values;

- defines the competences that are necessary to develop a way of openly handling otherness, but which also help to change attitudes in an intercultural sense;

- identifies implied or desired societal knowledge (in relation to those competences), which it is important to distinguish in terms of epistemological status;

- proposes activities that involve using and developing the above competences and knowledge;

- encourages learners to produces texts and verbalisations, the basic material with which it is possible to try to nuance attitudes that tend to be ego- or ethnocentric.

3. Attitudes

To appear credible from a teacher's perspective, the items on any list of attitudes to be addressed and which comprise the aims of intercultural education, should probably be:

- described using epistemological terms: terms such as *openness, respect and value* are borrowed from the general vocabulary, which does not necessarily reflect their psychosocial reality. When these descriptive terms are used in relation to the social sciences (such as psychology), they are hypothetical. Their cultural universality is also questionable;

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[3] Council of Europe (2013), *Developing Intercultural Competence through Education (DICE).*

- described in manner that follows a standard structure (the same semiotic structure, for example);

- chosen from among all possible components of intercultural life skills, because those components are interlinked: can there be openness without a hint of empathy? They are not distinct in the same way that language competences/activities are (individuals may be able to read a foreign language without really knowing how to write it);

- limited in number to avoid redundancy and to make them seem more attainable, given their very large numbers. For example, we could prioritise developing curiosity and the conscious acceptance of otherness.

It should also be pointed out that verbal descriptors of attitudes (and descriptors of competences, in general) always give rise to ambiguity, however precise they may be. Potential differences in interpretation can only be ironed out by a community of practice, as stated by Fleming:

> "Descriptors can be seen not as static claims to certainty but more as forming a framework for communication and negotiation within particular communities of practice. Complex activities need to be 'reduced' and simplified to some degree in order to talk about, teach and assess them. The question is not whether descriptors are reductive but whether they are too reductive for the purpose they are intended to serve.

> A key concept in using descriptors is the idea of 'exemplification', meaning that such statements need to be interpreted and understood in relation to concrete examples of what they mean in practice. The transparency of descriptors is not necessarily achieved by constant refining of the statements themselves, it is rarely possible to achieve total transparency and consistency of interpretation in this way. It is by sharing and negotiating through examples of practice that agreement in judgment is more likely to be reached."

Although establishing frameworks of reference for intercultural competences is useful, we still have to consider how to put them into practice in teaching programmes. Merely providing "lists" of attitudes without considering how to integrate them into teaching methods could make these basic educational requirements seem like a generous concession to some moral code stuck in limbo.

Lastly, we need to propose a realistic vision of the challenges facing intercultural education: it would be counter-productive to underestimate the fact that learners, as active players in society, are not necessarily predisposed to "intercultural encounters" or "respectful" communication. Some even deny that they take place or are worthwhile. Intercultural issues often entail cumbersome educational work, which may not always be successful, so that "persons of good will" may learn to engage in beneficial dialogue.

In any case, we cannot dismiss the idea that mastering a foreign language increases individuals' predisposition to intercultural encounters, even if it in no way guarantees intercultural openness. For that reason, the aims of intercultural education should be specifically addressed in foreign language classes, even though it remains necessary for these activities to be clearly linked to strictly language-focused teaching.

4. Competences

Determining the type of competences to be cultivated comes under the same general range of issues as determining the attitudes which constitute the aims of intercultural communication (see above). A competence is an acquired ability that can be observed (through various forms of know-how) during activities that can be broken down into their constituent parts (phases, steps, etc.). Competences involve the use of materials or pieces of

knowledge on a regular basis to produce appropriate outcomes. Competences, in whatever form, are not directly observable and must be deduced from concrete outcomes that can be considered to derive from them: when it comes to teaching languages, the jury is still out on the nature of what constitutes the competence of communicating through language, which is the basis of all observable language activity (oral interaction, writing, etc.). In that regard, certain choices were made for the CEFR which, as is to be expected, do not reflect the consensus of all experts.

Similarly, a number of proposals have been made as to the constituent parts of overall "intercultural competence". As for the CEFR, a corpus of descriptors of the components of intercultural competence should be drawn up and examined so that common denominators can be identified. Consensus (or, better put, general agreement) cannot, of course, be definitive proof, but it is the common foundation on which communities of practice are built.

Pending that overview and by way of example, we will tentatively break down the general competence of being able to handle otherness into a small number of parts, for the sake of clarity and workability, although it is not, of course, possible to discuss the criteria used for that breakdown in this presentation.

The competences to be focused on initially are those associated with the critical evaluation of information, while the critical evaluation of knowledge should follow later. Individuals' ability to interpret their own social environment and societies that they know less well or not at all is essential. This ability to interpret should above all not be reduced to comparison, through which learners tend to become consumers of the information that is provided to them. Confrontational comparisons can be deceiving. A *tertium comparationis*, in other words a descriptive/analytical framework, is necessary for a more astute analysis of the reality of the societies studied: can we compare, for example, national cuisines in any "simple" way without falling prey to relativistic judgments? Studying food-related practices through an anthropological lens avoids this. Descriptive/analytical frameworks generate social significance that goes beyond a tendency towards folklore. They are used during "activities to create awareness of society"[4] from the angle of sociological and anthropological orientation in order to provide necessary items of knowledge and develop non-naïve interpretative competences. It could therefore be considered that the development of this competence, at the very least, helps to nuance spontaneous and often simplistic reactions to life in society.

Interpretive competence can be underpinned by learners' existing social competence, which is based on "internal" experiences of otherness specific to each leaner's social frame of reference and which we normally call "cultural" (which are, in fact, "*intra-cultural*"). Local forms of otherness exist in this frame of reference, which learners can easily experience and which may have deep historical roots (for example, the difference between a country's north and south) or have developed more recently. Those which have deep historical roots are more readily accepted (because they are less surprising) insofar as they constitute "legitimate" forms of national diversity. It is therefore probably appropriate to start with the ability to interpret one's own society and social, cultural and sociolinguistic frame of reference and move towards an analysis of experiences of a more markedly external/"foreign" otherness, not as a motivational factor (change of scenery, exoticism and folklore), but rather as a decentring strategy.

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[4] These activities are doubtless similar to activities designed to raise awareness of history based on territory and to "heritage classes" (France).

It could be said that these socio-anthropological skills are not intrinsically linked to language. However, they must be developed because they respond to learners' demands: "language lessons" are a social construct and do not coincide with any one discipline or the aims of any one delineated scientific field. In the dominant forms of social representation, language lessons involve learning about "culture/civilisation" (as we used to say not so long ago), because language is taught using support material (examples of grammar in practice, real-life examples, etc.), except in the case of teaching materials that are "decontextualised", often for ideological reasons. This means that we cannot ignore cultural/intercultural expectations (on the grounds that they have nothing to do with language) and must seek to put them at the disposal of intercultural education.

Another competence is the ability to express oneself verbally in a thoughtful manner on the subject of otherness: this could be considered to be the most basic form of intercultural communication, because verbal communication does not guarantee communication on a human level. Verbalising can reveal learners' individual reactions to otherness during independent or semi-independent activities. Verbalisation could also be interactive and conducted in a classroom setting or expressed in the language being learned. However, for verbalisation to be effective, language teachers must also realise that it is worthwhile (for the specific activities concerned) to separate language teaching from "teaching about a culture". For example, at the A1, A2 or even B1 level, learners may think that they are not capable of expressing what they feel or "think" using only their target language. From a more specifically educational perspective, verbalisation (in the form of "debates" held in class) help learners to learn about linguistic acceptance (as opposed to verbal violence), which is a precondition for living together democratically (cf. Byram, Gribkova & Starkey: *Developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching: A practical introduction for teachers*).

It is essential to make learners verbalise, because verbalisations reveal attitudes, yet occur in a context that makes them "manageable" for educational purposes:

- They occur in the school environment, where (more often than not) a code of conduct exists.

- They occur in the presence of a third party who, through the school, has a certain moral authority.

- They are not reactions to direct challenges or personal conflicts, because the encounters with otherness in the classroom are simulated and only challenge identity in a (again, more often than not) limited way, except in multicultural classrooms. In this safe space, which is to some extent protected from the brutality of ordinary social exchanges, personal convictions can be expressed and confronted. Such spaces are not, however, insulated from the society that surrounds them, which can break into them at any moment.

5. Knowledge

The use of competences such as those described above presupposes access to new knowledge. Knowledge of any given society is expansive and diverse in nature. It is therefore necessary to make learners aware of available sources of information so as to widen the scope of their knowledge, which may be confined to stereotypes and hearsay. However, it is just as important to emphasise that information should be evaluated critically, along the lines of the procedure for historical sources, a requirement that has become even more necessary now that access to information has become easy thanks to internet resources. Internal interpretations, for example, that is to say, the way in which members of a given society interpret the societal information available in their own environment, may involve individual

testimony, media analysis or social sciences and the humanities. Accordingly, their status and scope may vary greatly and should be clearly distinguished.

Language teachers and the authors of textbooks in particular should be made aware that providing information about society or other societies can lead to simplification or, when put into practice in the classroom, can end up being limited to information considered to be fun (celebrations and traditions), daily life and generalities, thereby often further simplifying internal differences (*young people do…are…think*, and so on).

Knowledge of other societies is not provided as a substitute to learners' personal reactions to otherness, but rather to demonstrate the complexity of cultures that could be called "simple" only on account of a lack of understanding. The aim is to evoke reactions, which may be emotional, evaluative/appreciative, aesthetic (characteristic of so-called external interpretations) and so on, but which should also take account of multiperspectivity.

6. Activities

The attitudes, skills and knowledge identified must form the basis for determining cultural/intercultural activities carried out in the classroom. In general, these activities should:

- build encounters with otherness, which are opportunities for discovery and inputs of knowledge and information;

- evoke reactions to these encounters, which must be expressed verbally so that attitudes can be studied;

- "manage" learners' reactions to the encounters by means of their verbalisations, which are essential: it is not a matter of making learners talk as a means of giving them another opportunity to practice the language they are learning, but of listening to what they say, in whichever language they use.

"Manage" means making learners move from spontaneous reactions (that are probably based on social representations) to controlled, confident and considered reactions. This entails a "detour" through internal/native interpretations (those of the members of the foreign society in question), which must be made known to, or, even better, reconstructed by the learners (when this is possible) so that, afterwards, they can progress towards the external personal reactions of the attentive foreigner. In other words, the development of interpretational competences (see above) is in fact also an essential tool for managing attitudes.

These activities involve three mutually reinforcing strands: access to new societal knowledge, the development of interpretational competences, and an increase in the complexity of attitudes that may result. All activities should be considered as part of the same, complementary series of cognitive activities and as opportunities to gain social and emotional experience.

There are many topics of study for which such activities can be designed and a choice must be made between them depending on the educational context. However, some topics of study are deeply rooted in language teaching as it is generally understood and make up the cultural dimension of that teaching. Generally speaking, these tend to involve linguistic anthropology (for example, the value of silence, verbal virtuosity and poetics), ethno-linguistics and all varieties of the "contrastive" analysis of discursive forms or languages, which includes studying enunciative operations (representations of quantification, of space and time, etc.), as well as the characteristics of communities of communication, such as the names of their speech acts (for example, the names of feelings), types of discourse (denominations, formats,

characteristics, etc.), forms of verbal politeness, and so on. This is because learning a new language also entails entering into a new discursive universe. One could, in theory without great difficulty, encourage a form of metalinguistic and meta-discursive reflection that, without falling into the trap of essentialism or resorting to "the genius of language", from a neo-Humboldtian perspective, may help to come up with activities designed to aid in the foundation or development of a form of understanding and acceptance of verbal otherness, which all too often is construed as "national" otherness or "mentality".

Lesson plans designed to coax out and manage learners' attitudes and values could follow the order of activities set out below:

- Create a form of simulated contact with an "interesting" aspect of the other society (for example, secularism in France and the ban on wearing religious symbols in schools), without pandering to exoticism. This should be done using material that offers no interpretation (for example, street names, stamps, calendars and lists of public holidays, lists of people's names, Christmas cards, yellow pages telephone book for a small area).

- Ask the students to interpret this (small but qualitative) body of information and to reflect on it from a socio-anthropological perspective, which will require using concepts taken from the social sciences.

- Compare the students' interpretative hypotheses to sociological, historical and anthropological analyses taken from the social sciences (internal interpretations).

- Encourage the learners to verbalise as a form of personal interpretation, in other words as a means of expressing external individual reaction to the phenomena being studied, which had, until then, been viewed from an internal perspective.

- Manage these reactions in a class discussion in which points of view should be explained and justified.

- Question these points of view and thus the underlying attitudes they reflect.

This kind of socio-anthropological method can be adapted to suit activities based on verbal material, from a linguistic-anthropological perspective that is nothing new to language teaching, at least since the work of Hymes.

This set of activities constitutes an experience through which beliefs can be altered, although it should be asked whether mere *reflection* on intercultural experiences can help to change attitudes. In any case, through these activities, learners' verbal reactions are coaxed out in a predefined space in which realistic but imaginary intercultural experience takes place. In an enabling framework of this kind, these are not unrefined spontaneous reactions provoked by serious challenges that could harden personal convictions. The activities carried out here must allow dialogue that is simultaneously intra-cultural and intercultural among the students themselves and between the students and the teacher, moderator, mediator or educator, who embodies the founding social values that school as an institution has a duty to impart to ensure social cohesion and to encourage each student to develop as an individual and as a citizen.

The relationship between values and educational activities can certainly take on forms other than those described here, but what is important, as demonstrated by the CEFR, is to ensure didactic coherence between educational principles in theory and in practice.