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An investigation of the background, practice and intercultural communicative competence of part-time distance language tutors at the Open University

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Abstract

The Open University employs a large number of part-time teaching staff (Associate Lecturers, - AL) who play a crucial role for student success acting at the interface between institution and students. They are the first and main contact for the students, give tutorials, mark assignments and provide individualized feedback. Despite their importance, relatively little scholarship is undertaken on the background and practice of these ALs which is what this study aimed to address. This scholarship project investigated the cohort of ALs in languages (n=292) to find out more about their backgrounds, tutorial practice, their intercultural experience and how this impacts on their teaching. The study used both quantitative (online survey) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews) approaches for data collection and an established framework for the exploration of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997).

The findings overall reflect the position of part-time staff in languages - the majority of colleagues are female (76%), they have extensive teaching experience (many more than 15 years), have usually worked for other institutions apart from the Open University, and are not born in the UK (63%). One important finding was that the overall majority of the ALs had first-hand experience of living across cultures but that they had very limited opportunities to bring their intercultural experiences into their teaching practice. This resulted in the development of recommendations that the AL role in the languages curriculum should be reconsidered and enhanced. These recommendations will be implemented during the renewal of the curriculum and demonstrate how a scholarship investigation can impact on teaching practice and curriculum development.

Key words: Language learning, distance education, part-time tutors, intercultural communicative competence

Introduction

The article presents the finding of a project with Associate Lecturers (ALs) in the then Department of Languages at the Open University to investigate their identities, values, beliefs and professional practice. It starts with a short section on the background and rationale for the study, explains the methodology and then discusses the findings from this investigation and finishes with the possible implications for tutorial practice.

Background and rationale for the study

One of the learning outcomes for the Open University BA (Honours) Language Studies is the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The category 'knowledge and understanding' states that students should be able to

show intercultural communicative competence, including a reasoned awareness and critical understanding of the cultures and societies associated with each language and the ability to describe, analyse and evaluate the similarities and dissimilarities between cultures and societies' with the students' own.

As a distance education institution, the teaching strategy is embedded in the materials that students use to study their unit of studies (called 'modules'). For this reason and in response to the institution's focus on qualifications rather than modules, colleagues in the then Department of Languages recently devised a new, structured qualification-based approach to the Modern Foreign Languages curriculum with clearly expressed the development of intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes which is underpinned by research and scholarship (see, for example, Aguerre, Alder & Beaven, 2013; Rossade, 2013; Beaven, 2012; Stickler & Emke, 2011). This new structure is being introduced gradually over the coming years.

The increasing emphasis on teaching intercultural communicative competence in language modules created the need to try and bring together a) ICC in our curriculum, b) our knowledge about our students (see for example Álvarez & Kan, 2012; Baumann, 2010, Baumann, 2007) and c) how our tuition is actually delivered by the Associate Lecturers. This project aims to find out more about the third element and investigates current tutoring practice, and the values and beliefs that the ALs hold.

Methodology

The study followed the established conceptual framework of intercultural communicative competence by Mike Byram and his collaborators (Byram, 1997; Byram, 2003; Alred, Byram & Fleming, 2003). Within a European context, Byram’s work has been the benchmark for ICC since the late 1990s, reflected in the adoption of his and his collaborators’ work in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001; Byram, 2003; Byram & Parmentier, 2012).

Intercultural communicative competence, as defined by Byram, consists of: ‘knowledge, skills and attitudes, complemented by the values one holds because of one’s belonging to a number of social groups, values which are part of one’s belonging to a given society’ (Byram, Nichols & Stevens, 2001: 5). The following model summarises the five component parts of ICC which are expressed as ‘*savoirs*’ or ‘ways of knowing’. They form the basis for the tools used in this project.

Figure 1. Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 1997)

	Skills Interpret and relate (<i>savoir comprendre</i>)	
Knowledge Of self and other; Of interaction: individual and societal (<i>savoirs</i>)	Education Political education Critical cultural awareness (<i>savoir s’engager</i>)	Attitudes Relativising self Valuing others (<i>savoir être</i>)
	Skills Discover and/or interact (<i>savoir apprendre/faire</i>)	

The project uses a mixed method research methodology (Creswell, 2009), consisting of the collection of quantitative data through questionnaires and qualitative data through interviews. The online questionnaire was designed for this purpose with 25 questions and administered through SurveyMonkey. ALs were asked in the questionnaire whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Semi-structured interviews (Gilham, 2005) were used to collect interview data. The interview design followed the approach taken in the 'autobiography of intercultural encounters' (Council of Europe, 2009), a resource to be used as a complementary tool 'to encourage students to exercise independent critical faculties including to reflect on their own responses and attitudes to experiences of other cultures' (Council of Europe, 2009: 2). Ethics approval was granted for both parts of the project. The questionnaire was sent electronically to all Associate Lecturers in the then Department of Languages (n=292). 112 ALs returned the questionnaire (response rate: 40%). All ALs were asked whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview to which 37 agreed. All potential interviewees were contacted, 28 ALs were interviewed by eight interviewers. The interviews were conducted via the online conferencing tool Elluminate and recorded. Five recordings failed, 23 recordings were transcribed and verified by project members and then coded using N-Vivo for data analysis, following a content analysis approach. The procedures to anonymise data from the participants followed standard British Education Research Association (BERA) guidelines.

Findings

Background of the tutors

The majority of the ALs were female (76%), born outside the UK (63%) and of those born outside the UK most were born in EU countries (84%). Just under half (47 %) had British nationality and 55% had a nationality other than British (this totals more than 100% as four tutors had dual nationality), 47% had lived in the UK for 20 or more years and a further 35% had lived in the UK for between 11 and 19 years. The interviewed ALs in their overall majority had also lived in the UK for a long time (between 10 and 35 years).

Over 80 per cent had at least ten years of teaching experience whereas only a small percentage (4.5%) was relatively new to teaching (up to five years). About a third of the ALs had worked for more than ten years for the Open University, a third had gained between five and ten years of experience and a further third had taught between one and five years at the OU. Around 70% worked in other institutions as well.

They spoke a variety of different languages apart from English and the language they taught (if not English), including Albanian, Arabic, Breton, Catalan, Chinese, Dutch, French, Galician, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Swedish, Spanish, Turkish and Welsh. The interview sample revealed that the majority of these tutors were quite well travelled around most of the globe (Europe, Asia, the Americas, Australia, Africa and the Middle East) whilst a minority had less travel experience or perceived themselves to have travelled less ('I haven't been travelling much, [...] but I have been to Italy, France, Belgium, Austria, Germany, Sweden and Japan').

Approach to intercultural communicative practice and tutorials

The ALs firmly believed that 'language and culture are inseparable and therefore should always be taught together' and about half agreed with the statement: 'I think the teaching of culture is essential to language teaching'. When asked about intercultural competence in their tutorial practice they considered developing attitudes of openness and tolerance towards other people and cultures most important, promoting reflection on cultural differences and promoting the ability to handle intercultural contact situations successfully. Providing information about shared values and beliefs, daily lives and routines, history, geography and politics also featured.

ALs defined intercultural awareness in a variety of ways, focusing on *the ability to understand the context of the language, an awareness of the social norms and values of other cultures leading to communicative competence*. They also stressed cultural differences: *'be aware of cultural differences AND the understanding that people from different cultures see things and think about things in a different way AND comparing one's own culture with another one*. Awareness of and respect for other cultures' beliefs

and perceptions of the world featured as well as demonstrating empathy (*being able to see difference without fear but with empathy*), flexibility and change.

One tutor said that they tended to concentrate

on the language teaching rather than the intercultural aspects of the language. So much of intercultural understanding can be learnt only by spending time in another country or exchanging information with people from another culture.

Some however had experienced differences of viewpoint and stereotyping:

some students come with misconceptions about French culture and I have to dispel some myths. Usually, I try to develop some cultural awareness by comparing stereotypes about Scotland or England (regional differences between North, South, East or West, today and 50 or 100 years ago) and students realise that cultures are not uniform and static. I also use non-British students' knowledge if I have some in my groups.

The interviewed ALs all had personal experiences of other cultures, as they had lived in other countries or migrated to the United Kingdom. In addition, their replies to the question about their attitudes towards people from other cultures were also shaped by their professional experiences as teachers of English and Modern Languages:

one is very aware [...] and being quite receptive to different views [...] or not to offending anyone or balancing different aspect[s].

At the same time, exposure to another country and culture also impacts on how they regard their own country and culture.

Living in a foreign country or a different country makes your outlook on your own country different, just stepping back a bit and looking at things from a distance makes you perhaps more aware of what's going on in your own country [when living abroad] you change without realising [it] [...] so in a way you are almost hovering above two countries, not quite feeling where now you belong.

The question of identity and belonging was also touched upon by the following comment: *I feel it is ok for me to be different*. The importance of tolerance towards people from other countries and cultures is exemplified by the following extract: *[the experience of living abroad] has made me more empathetic towards people from different cultures*.

The vast majority of ALs (about 85%) considered *developing students* speaking skills as most important in their teaching, followed by *developing students' interactive skills* and *developing students' listening skills*. The emphasis on speaking skills is also reflected in the amount of time they reported developing the students' speaking skills (about 45%) and what they regarded as the most important goal in their tutorial practice: *I want to improve their ability to speak more fluently* (57%). This clearly highlights that the tutorials focus very much on speaking practice.

Benefits of learning languages and about other cultures

Several ALs articulated the benefits of learning a language. Learning a language opens horizons and changes the way other cultures are being experienced.

Learning a foreign language, regardless of what it is will automatically give you so much more than just speaking a language, or so much more, as well, than understanding the local culture, it will [...] equip you with certain tools to deal with the unexpected, to deal with differences, [...] and I don't think this is something that you realise when you learn the language, when you are in the thick of it, it is later that when you, when you, you transfer that.

We are aware that cross cultural communication is never perfect, you know, we are aware that there are some times when, because we are from different cultural backgrounds, we will not understand each other and we know that and accept it. So it makes it possible to avoid, some interpersonal conflict. to be quite sensitive and receptive to other people's cultures and [...] understand that not everyone sees the world through the same logic [...] and also to, well, to be aware of one's own is very important, the language one is using

A sense of interculturality gained through life experiences was reflected in the responses of the participants: *'It's probably just things I have learned from my life experiences because I have moved across country a few years ago to the UK'*. The intercultural experience may have been enhanced by their professional practice as language teachers (*'being a tutor is also being a mediator between two cultures'*). Another AL however reflects on the tension between being seen as an *'ambassador of the country'* and a reference point for the notion of native speaker (*what you do and say etc. represent for the students what a native person is*) and the fact that such notions are rarely applicable to tutors who *tend to be quite multi-cultural*.

Discussion of findings

As has been established in this project, the group of tutors are diverse with a wide variety of experiences. They have in-depth knowledge of the culture(s) in their country of birth and of British culture(s) by having lived amongst British people. The majority of these colleagues have experienced other cultures through, in some cases, extensive travel or residence abroad and many of them have also experienced migration, the vast majority of them are bi- or pluricultural and also plurilingual: in addition to English and the language they teach, most speak at least one other language. They are experienced practitioners and their personal and professional experiences as language teachers have had an impact on how they see the world, their attitudes, values and beliefs. It has changed the outlook on their own country of origin, allowing them to become observers of different cultures and accept differences.

ALs have also articulated clearly an understanding of the concepts of intercultural awareness and competence. As knowledge of oneself and others, of interaction (individual and societal), openness, curiosity and the relativizing of oneself and valuing others are key components of the ICC framework, it can be said that these ALs come equipped with a level of intercultural communicative competence which should enable them to support students in gaining greater intercultural communicative competence in their tutorials.

However, the data also show clearly that their tutorial practice at the OU is not primarily conducive to the development of ICC among the students. The focus in tutorials lies on developing oral and interaction skills, as these skills are a particular challenge in distance language learning. As tutorial and study time is a limited resource, there is clearly a tension between these statements, and the conviction by over 80% of ALs that language and culture should be taught together. These findings are in line with the findings of an international study into the theory and practice of foreign language teachers and the teaching of intercultural competence in seven countries (Sercu, 2005) which found that teachers did not teach the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence for time reasons.

It would be beneficial if the overall focus of tutorials is widened and include activities that foster intercultural (communicative) competence at every level of study, even if some of these activities are not conducted in the target language. The recently developed overall curriculum plan for the Language Studies degree at the Open University offers opportunities to address the overall balance of the different components involved in language learning in tutorials, especially as intercultural communicative competence is systematized in this plan. The study has also revealed areas that merit further work and discussion.

Four out of five ALs maintain that language and culture belong and need to be taught together. In their professional practice, however, when asked about what they teach when they teach culture, they focus on a wide definition of culture, on lived and performed traditions and celebrations, for example major events in the cultural and religious calendar or daily life and routines. Several ALs also mention different conventions for greeting and addressing each other. Thus their focus is to some extent limited to the surface and immediate visibility of culture. Such an approach to culture teaching bears the danger that culture is then reduced to the folkloristic and essentialist without enabling students to gain a deeper and more differentiated understanding of the cultures of the societies in the target languages they study.

The examples of intercultural experiences and encounters the ALs have told us about contain many more hidden cultural practices and conventions which ALs had to learn or adapt to. It is not clear if and how these enter the actual teaching. On the basis of their

responses one can assume that it might be beneficial to establish a more explicit and more differentiated understanding of what is meant by 'culture' whilst acknowledging that this is a difficult, contested and controversial concept. The absence of socio-economic, geographic and demographic factors (class, gender, age, urban vs. local or rural) in defining culture is also noticeable. Most contributions stay at the level of national culture and this needs further reflection and discussion. In order to enhance the student experience it might be beneficial to be more explicit to ALs in how the teaching of ICC is integrated in the new curriculum through some staff development.

The findings of this study suggest that it might be worth exploring further how the rich personal experiences that ALs report in this project could be integrated more systematically into their tutorial delivery and more generally within the teaching strategy so that tutors feel enabled to become mediators between cultures, which is the overarching goal of Byram's concept. This should allow them to work together with their students and their students' experience of other cultures to critically reflect on the students' own and the other cultures. This might necessitate for the Language Studies programme to partially redefine the role of the tutors in respect of their tutorial practice and extend their merit beyond the practising of interactive speaking in the tutorials. The findings indicate that embedding a wider, deeper and more reflective approach to 'culture' might be beneficial.

Overall the project has led to a set of recommendations that are gradually being addressed through the programme's strategy of curriculum renewal, including the development of a new strategy for tutorials which allows for the integration of ICC into tutorial practice, thus demonstrating how a practice-based research project can have an impact on teaching practice.

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