

15 The dichotomy of language and content in US and UK higher education – Implications for the development of intercultural competence and perspectives towards the target language

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Abstract

The complex relationship between language and culture has been widely problematised in applied linguistics and education (see Byram, 1997; Byrnes, 2002; Kramsch, 1993; Risager, 2006). While this issue has been extensively explored from a theoretical perspective, few studies have examined the complexity of this relationship from the curricular/structural approach towards Modern Language degrees. The American Modern Language Association (MLA, 2007) report, as well as reports issued in the UK such as the Worton (2009) report, similarly refer to a division in the content and language elements of the degree and advocate for a curricular reform in which a more integrative approach is adopted for languages in higher education. The paper reports on some of the initial findings from a Ph.D. study exploring the implications of dualistic approaches towards language and content on the student experience and more specifically on the place of the target language and the development of intercultural competence. The results reported are drawn from student questionnaires and follow-up interviews from two American and two English universities.

Keywords: language degrees, content, higher education, target language, culture, intercultural competence.

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1. Introduction

The study explores the complex relationship of the separation between language and content and its implications for the student experience in higher education. It is situated in a context of uncertainty for the future of language degrees. While the decline in uptake at secondary level remains a concern at secondary level (Worton, 2009), as Gallagher-Brett and Broady (2012) argue, “the sense of crisis appears to be particularly marked in higher education” (p. 263).

In light of the concerning status of Modern Languages as a discipline in the UK, some studies (see Busse & Walter, 2013; Gieve & Cunico, 2012) have problematised the traditional separation between language and content still very much present in many Russell Group and older universities, which now teach the majority of Modern Language degree students in the country (Kelly, 2013).

Among other issues, the curricular separation brings into question the place of the target language and its relationship with the target culture. It also raises questions with regards to establishing relevant links between the two elements of the curriculum. As Brumfit et al. (2005) argue, “consideration of the exact nature of the interaction between language and content is often neglected” (p. 158). While in the USA Modern Language curricula differ considerably, the literature identifies a similar problematic relationship between language and content.

It refers to a ‘bifurcation’ between lower-level language courses on one end and upper-level literature and culture courses on the other (Paesani & Allen, 2012), often resulting in a difficult transition for students from lower to upper level (Maxim, 2006). In this regard, the MLA (2007) report argues that “a two-tiered structure impedes the development of a unified curriculum” (pp. 2-3), and suggests that “a curriculum should consist of a series of complementary or linked courses that holistically incorporate content and cross-cultural reflection at every level” (p. 5). The document also places emphasis on the objectives

of a ML degree and argues that “the language major should be structured to produce a specific outcome: educated speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence” (MLA, 2007, p. 3). This is similarly voiced in the Worton (2009) report, which argues that “universities should take a more active leadership role [...] by emphasising the importance of intercultural competence and multi-lingual skills” (p. 35).

The paper hence examines student perspectives, in both contexts, on being taught in the target language and perceived opportunities to develop intercultural competence.

The study adopts Byram’s (1997) model for intercultural competence and places particular emphasis on his fifth savoir, critical cultural awareness², which, as he argues is “the crucial educational dimension of intercultural competence” (Byram, 2009, p. 326).

2. Method

2.1. Settings and participants

The research reported in this paper is drawn from an ongoing Ph.D. project. The study employed a mixed-methods approach comprising of questionnaire surveys and follow-up interviews. Data was collected from students enrolled on a German degree programme in four universities. The institutions taking part were assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality of the responses. University A and University B are both located in northern England. University A follows a traditional curriculum, where language is taught alongside content. All content teaching takes place in English. The curriculum at University B, on the other hand, demonstrates an evident effort to increase relevance through content taught for the most part in German and a more text-based approach towards the teaching of language. With regards to

2. “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, p. 53).

the US institutions, University C is a very well established university located on the East Coast. Its German department has been specifically redesigned to adopt a genre-based content-oriented curriculum throughout the degree programme and hence provides an example of an alternative to what has been identified in the literature as a two-tiered structure. University D, located on the West Coast, to an extent reflects a two-tiered structure, although a number of courses fall into a middle area between a lower-level language course and upper-level content course.

2.2. Data collection

The data collection took place over the period of 10 weeks; it commenced with the questionnaire survey (using a 6 point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree) and was followed by semi-structured interviews with students willing to take part.

The paper reviews some of these results in light of the issues raised in the literature and proposes some pedagogical recommendations based on the findings.

3. Discussion and conclusions

Results from the questionnaire illustrate the different student attitudes towards being taught content in the TL and students' perception of their programme as more or less integrated. The results (see [Figure 1](#)) show that students in programmes where the main medium of instruction for content modules was not German (University A - UK), or where some content was taught in German and some in English (University D - USA), felt that language and content should be better integrated.

There was a negative correlation between the two variables (see [Table 1](#)) indicating that the more content is taught in the TL, the less students feel that language and content should be better integrated in their programme. The data seem to indicate that, from a student perspective, a higher proportion of TL

used across the curriculum can be regarded as one of the characteristics of more integrated programmes.

Figure 1. Students' perceptions on integration of language and content

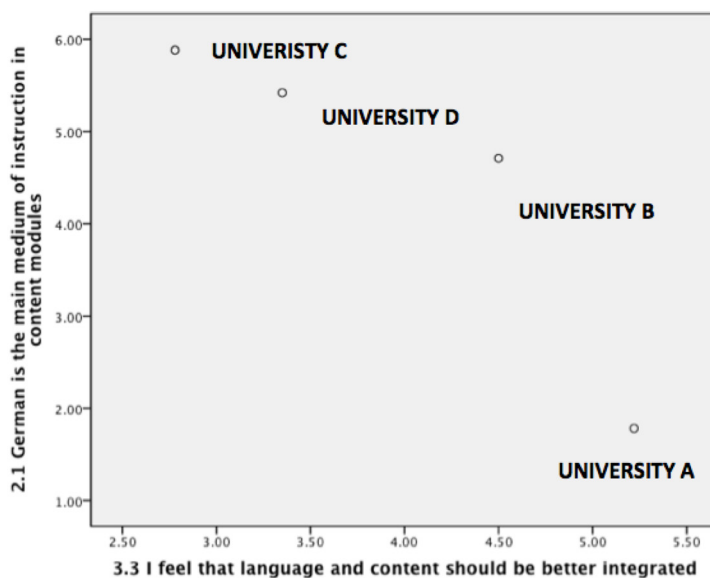


Table 1. Correlation test

		2.1 German is the main medium of instruction in content modules	3.3 I feel that language and content should be better integrated
2.1 German is the main medium of instruction in content modules	Pearson Correlation	1	-.903*
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.048
3.3 I feel that language and content should be better integrated	Pearson Correlation	-.903*	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.048	
		N	N
		4	4

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

With regards to the implications of the different curricula on the development of intercultural competence, the more insightful findings were drawn from the qualitative analysis of student interviews. The questionnaire results, however, did highlight a difference in overall mean scores obtained from the multi-item scale for the fifth savoir: critical cultural awareness (see Table 2).

Table 2. Mean values for critical cultural awareness

University A	University B	University C	University D
4.78	4.92	5.09	5.04

University C, with the highest rating, was also the institution with greatest integration between language and content.

Furthermore, there was a significant difference between mean scores for critical cultural awareness and similarity in feedback and relevance between language and content ($p < 0.04$), suggesting a possible relationship between certain curricular approaches and students' perceived opportunities to develop critical cultural awareness.

While scores for intercultural competence were slightly lower in the two UK universities, evidence of how this was developed through the learning experience was voiced in interviews. Zak from University A, for instance, referred to the unique contribution of content modules,

“The modern women writers module made me think about social conditioning and how history... how religion plays a part in bringing somebody up into the world and the views they form. You've got to look at this from a Russian person's point of view”.

In this statement the student demonstrated a clear understanding of what Byram (1997) defines as critical cultural awareness as he was able to identify how elements which influence the establishment of cultural beliefs, such as history and religion, shape views and perspectives on other cultures and

countries. While at University A students referred to specific content modules, at University C, the reference extended to the overall learning experience. One of the students interviewed was particularly articulate in describing how the university experience had transformed his world views and enabled him to make comparisons between his home culture and the target culture.

“East Germany has a lot of the same problems [...] that we do, you think about both sides and how you fit in where. And what happens when you place yourself in that society, what would I be like if I were East German, what would life be like? [...] And I think... in doing that you come to the conclusion about how you fit in”.

The results of the study would appear to indicate that programmes which strive to integrate the language and content elements of the degree are better able to extend opportunities for a critical engagement with culture beyond specific content modules. In institutions where language was taught separately from content, students generally referred to the critical dimension most often in reference to their content modules, in line with [Mitchell et al. \(2004\)](#) who found that in “interviews both tutors and students talk most about critical thinking and engaging with the world when discussing content rather than language classes” (cited in [Brumfit et al., 2005](#), p. 159).

Three recommendations for higher education are made based on the initial findings: firstly, to recognise the invaluable contribution of content modules for the development of the critical dimension, secondly to consider how the language modules may similarly contribute to this development and thirdly to reflect upon the role of the target language in bridging the language and content curricula in order to achieve a more holistic curriculum.

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