

9 Developing criticality and critical cultural awareness in modern languages

Elinor Parks¹

Abstract

The chapter reports on a doctoral study exploring the complexity behind the separation of language and content within modern language degree programmes, placing particular focus on implications for students' development of criticality (Barnett, 1997) and intercultural competence (Byram, 1997). The study investigated implications of the division as experienced by German studies staff and students in two American and two British universities. The findings suggest that students who are prompted to critically reflect upon both the target language and the target culture have greater opportunities to develop into 'good' interculturalists in line with the view that students require an 'intercultural education' in order to maximise the benefits (Holmes, Bavieri, & Ganassin, 2015).

Keywords: language degrees, higher education, criticality, intercultural competence, critical cultural awareness.

1. Introduction

In the UK, modern languages in Higher Education (HE) have experienced a sharp decline in degree applicants over the years, resulting in department closures and a fall in the number of universities offering language degrees

1. University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom; elinor.parks@manchester.ac.uk; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6226-6256>

How to cite this chapter: Parks, E. (2020). Developing criticality and critical cultural awareness in modern languages. In A. Plutino, K. Borthwick & E. Corradini (Eds), *Innovative language teaching and learning at university: treasuring languages* (pp. 53-59). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.40.1066>

(Polisca, Wright, Álvarez, & Montoro, 2019). According to the recent University Council of Modern Languages report (see Polisca et al., 2019), the number of universities offering language degrees in the UK fell from 69 to 64 in the course of the 2018-19 academic year. While it has been suggested that the global spread of English could in part be associated with a reduced interest in foreign languages (Lanvers, Doughty, & Thompson, 2018), others have argued that the current curriculum needs to be revisited in order to make it more relevant to 21st century students (Worton, 2009). While the decline in language degree applicants may be more pronounced in the UK, the MLA (2007) report highlights some similar concerns with reference to the US context. The report, for instance, stresses the importance of a curriculum which holistically encompasses both language and content. Reports issued in both countries furthermore stress the importance of developing language graduates who are interculturality/transculturality competent (MLA, 2007; QAA, 2019; Worton, 2009).

One of the barriers to developing a holistic curriculum lies within the very structure of the curriculum. While in the UK the separation of language and content is manifested through the parallel teaching of language modules alongside content, in the US the separation of the two strands can be recognised in what is known as a ‘two-tiered structure’. This means that lower-level language courses (generally taken by first and second year students), which focus on language practice, are “disconnected from upper-level courses in literature, culture and linguistics that focus on *content* rather than language” (Brown & Thompson, 2018, p. 7). This structure is strongly criticised in the MLA (2007) report, which suggests that it “impedes the development of a unified curriculum” (p. 4). With regards to the UK context, Gieve and Cunico (2012) found that students’ studying a modern languages degree in the UK had a “weak appreciation of connections between language form, language use [...] and intercultural communication, [...] which appeared to be associated with a curriculum that does not promote integrating and content and language” (p. 273). The aim of the study was hence to explore the implications of the separation of content and language, as manifested in four very diverse German departments, two based in the UK and two in the US, for students’ development of criticality and intercultural competence.

2. Criticality and critical cultural awareness

While the term ‘criticality’ is increasingly used in HE, particularly in the context of academic writing, here the term is understood according to Barnett’s (1997) conceptualisation of criticality. This model was also the basis for the Southampton criticality project (Johnston, Mitchell, Myles, & Ford, 2011), which highlights the relevance of Barnett’s (1997) work to foreign language education. Barnett’s (1997) conceptualisation of criticality consists of four ascending levels of criticality: (1) critical skills, (2) reflexivity, (3) refashioning of traditions, and (4) transformatory critique (the highest level). Barnett (1997) argues that criticality is developed across three domains – (1) knowledge, (2) self, and (3) world (see Figure in Barnett, 1997, p. 103) – and suggests that “a curriculum for critical being [...] has to be one that exposes students to criticality in the three domains and at the highest level in each” (p. 102).

Similarly, the concept of intercultural competence is understood here in Byram’s (1997) terms. Byram’s (1997) intercultural communicative competence model consists of five *savoirs* (skills), however particular emphasis is placed on the fifth *savoir*, described as *savoir s’engager* (critical cultural awareness). This refers to one’s “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. 63). Byram (2012) argued that critical cultural awareness “embodies the educational dimension of language teaching” (p. 9) and stressed the importance of the ‘notion of criticality’.

3. Methodology

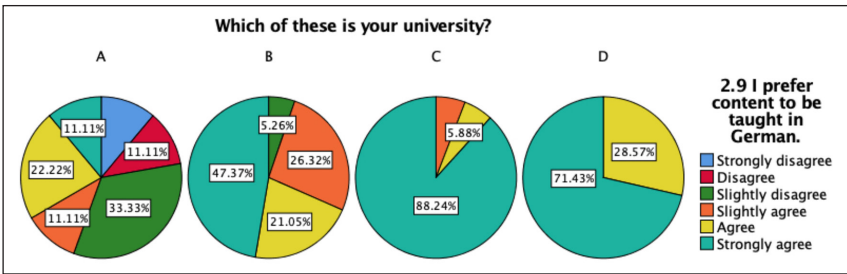
The investigation adopted a mixed-methods design consisting of a student questionnaire with follow-up interviews and separate interviews with faculty members. Fifty-six students responded to the questionnaire and 21 took part in the follow-up interview. The participants were all finalist students of German (or joint-honours), in the UK (Universities A and B), and students taking upper-level courses in the US (Universities C and D). Seven faculty members took part in

the interview, which helped inform my understanding of the curriculum as well as generate rich qualitative data.

4. Key findings

There were observable differences in the ways language and content was more or less integrated across the four universities. University A represented the least integrated model, since all content was taught in English. At University B, some content modules were taught in German, allowing relevant links to be established between the two. University C represented the most integrated model, as the German curriculum had been entirely reshaped to adopt a genre-oriented content-based teaching approach across the degree. At University D, the department had introduced content-based upper-level language modules, which provided a good example of integrating the two areas at modular level. Students who studied in programmes where there was greater use of the target language across the curriculum generally expressed a stronger preference for being taught in German (see Figure 1).

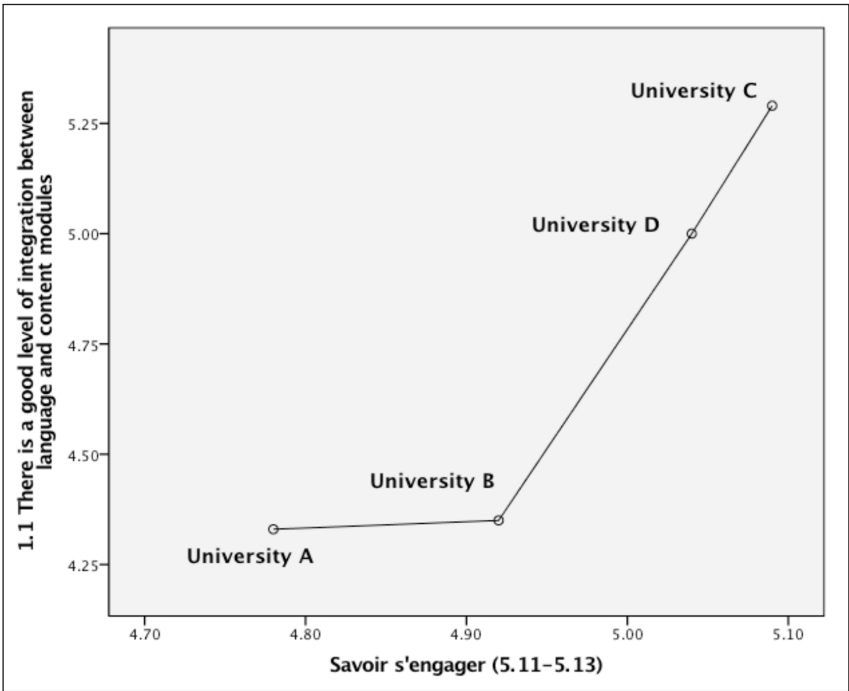
Figure 1. Preference for being taught content in the target language



Across all four universities, there was evidence that students had developed aspects of intercultural competence and criticality, yet a minority of students illustrated examples in interviews that could be coded as ‘transformatory critique’, the highest level of criticality. Similarly, fewer students illustrated examples of *critical cultural awareness*. Both staff and student interviews

suggested that upper-level content-based language modules (US) and content modules (UK and US) played a key role in fostering students' development of these competencies. The year abroad assessment task (UK universities, in particular University B) also emerged as effectively fostering students' criticality. Scores for savoir s'engager obtained from the two US universities were slightly higher than those obtained from the UK universities. These also correlated with the level of integration (see Figure 2). The relationship between degree of integration and scores for savoir s'engager was statistically significant at $r=.250$ with a p value of $p=.041$.

Figure 2. Integration and savoir s'engager



The language coordinator at University B made specific reference to the importance of prompting students to move beyond observation of culture and develop a more critical perspective on the differences they observed while on

their year abroad. The Head of German at University B also made reference to the explicit coaching, arguing that criticality development is more something that happens in the modules, rather than developing independently. Student interviews similarly suggested that the constant challenge of justifying arguments and researching information themselves helped them develop a more critical perspective on beliefs and practices established both in their own culture(s) and in the one(s) studied.

5. Conclusion

In interviews, students most often made reference to content or upper-level content-based language modules when describing how lecturers helped prompt them to develop a more critical perspective on the cultural products they were studying, and the different viewpoints portrayed in texts.

The findings also highlight an association between the use of the target language across the curriculum and a greater degree of integration. Students studying in more integrated programmes generally had stronger preferences for being taught in the target language and slightly higher scores for *critical cultural awareness*, suggesting that greater collaboration across the department and ability to establish links between the curriculum could result in greater opportunities for students to be ‘coached’ to develop more critical perspectives towards both the foreign culture(s) and their own. Language coordinators and heads of department should thus work collaboratively to develop a curriculum which effectively develops students’ criticality and critical cultural awareness across all strands of the degree: language, content, and the year abroad.

6. Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the continuous support received by the University of Hull as well as all the participating institutions, who welcomed me and strongly supported my research project.

References

- Barnett, R. (1997). *Higher education: a critical business*. SRHE and Open University Press.
- Brown, A.V., & Thompson, G. L. (2018). *The changing landscape of Spanish language curricula: designing higher education programs for diverse students*. Georgetown University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvvngv2>
- Byram, M. (1997). Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence. *Multilingual Matters*.
- Byram, M. (2012). Language awareness and (critical) cultural awareness – relationships, comparisons and contrasts. *Language Awareness*, 21(1–2), 5-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2011.639887>
- Gieve, S., & Cunico, S. (2012). Language and content in the modern foreign languages degree: a students' perspective. *The Language Learning Journal*, 40(3), 273-291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2011.639459>
- Holmes, P., Bavieri, L., & Ganassin, S. (2015). Developing intercultural understanding for study abroad: students' and teachers' perspectives on pre-departure intercultural learning. *Intercultural Education*, 26(1), 16-30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2015.993250>
- Johnston, B., Mitchell, R., Myles, F., & Ford, P. (2011). *Developing student criticality in higher education. Undergraduate learning in the arts and social sciences*. Continuum Studies in Educational Research.
- Lanvers, U., Doughty, H., & Thompson, A. S. (2018). Brexit as linguistic symptom of Britain retreating into its shell? Brexit induced politicization of language learning. *Modern Language Journal*, 102(4), 775-796. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12515>
- MLA. (2007). *Foreign languages and higher education: new structures for a changed world*. <http://www.mla.org/flreport>
- Polisca, E., Wright, V., Álvarez, I., & Montoro, C. (2019). *Language provision in UK MFL Departments 2019 Survey. Report no. 2, December*. University Council of Modern Languages (UCML).
- QAA. (2019). *Subject benchmark statement: languages, cultures and societies*. Quality Assurance Agency. <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/subject-benchmark-statements/subject-benchmark-statement-languages-cultures-and-societies.pdf>
- Worton, M. (2009). *Review of modern foreign languages provision in higher education in England*. HEFCE Issues Paper 2009/41. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/329251/2/herereview-worton.pdf>



Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

© 2020 by Editors (collective work)
© 2020 by Authors (individual work)

Innovative language teaching and learning at university: treasuring languages
Edited by Alessia Plutino, Kate Borthwick, Erika Corradini

Publication date: 2020/04/20

Rights: the whole volume is published under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives International (CC BY-NC-ND) licence; **individual articles may have a different licence.** Under the CC BY-NC-ND licence, the volume is freely available online (<https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.40.9782490057603>) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book is believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover layout by © 2020 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-60-3 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-61-0 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-59-7 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)

Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: avril 2020.

