

A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL BYRAM BY MANUELA WAGNER

Manuela: You have been working on Intercultural Competence (ICC) for quite a while and in a variety of different contexts (in different countries, “with different hats on”, e.g. as part of your work at the Council of Europe, at different levels of education, etc.). Could you share with us some important similarities and differences among the various contexts? Based on your experiences and on what you learned about GLASPORT what are your recommendations for the development of ICC in our context?

Michael: Well, it is clear to me that there is quite a lot of development in different parts of the world toward some cultural dimension in language teaching which goes beyond the notion of knowledge and information. But I would like to emphasize that knowledge and information which is still a part of ICC. In New Zealand, they have begun to talk about Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching as a formal or official designation in documents to describe what teachers and pupils are expected to do. And I think the element that came out very strongly in Krassimira’s lessons, which I talked about earlier, that language teaching is as much about learning about ourselves as about learning about others is very important. I have a quote from one of my students, a quote from the current Chinese document on language teaching where they say something like “getting in touch with other countries, understanding English speaking countries, helps to deepen understanding of our own country.” So I have seen similar kinds of statements in other countries as well.

On the other hand, the degree of preparedness on the part of teachers from country to country and also within countries, with respect to their knowledge and training in the cultural dimension, varies a lot. In New Zealand, they have been doing a lot of training for teachers. In China, and China is of course very big, but the teachers who were surveyed came from the Xinjiang Province in the North West although the survey said “you shall/we shall do intercultural competence”, the survey showed that nobody had really heard about it very much at all. The degree of preparedness in the sense of knowledge and training is quite varied.

Also, the degree of willingness on the part of teachers varies. Some teachers, and there have been a number of surveys of teachers in different countries, said, “Not my bag, not my business. I am a language teacher and I teach language, that is the grammar, and functions and language. The rest is something for other parts of the curriculum.” And so, one of the aspects that one needs to develop, I think, in teacher training, is to change the identities of teachers from being language teachers to being language/culture teachers.

Michael: You were also asking about Glastonbury, weren’t you?

Manuela: Yes.

Michael: I don’t know the answer to that. I have not been here long enough.

But I think it was excellent what one of the teachers said about Russia. Because it has

that element of looking at ourselves and looking at other people and then taking them to Russia and China and how the others see, “seeing themselves as others see us” is what you develop.

Manuela: Related to this question, we also are talking a lot about articulation. In your opinion, what are the most important aspects of an articulated ICC program (pre school through university)?

Michael: I am going to answer that question in very general terms. I have seen, and we have collected examples of intercultural language teaching, but they are often “one off” examples, like Krassimira doing a project and a whole group of other people doing projects. But the notion of progression has not been addressed and obviously the notion of assessment is connected with that the fact that progression is not being properly addressed. So progression is not easy to handle.

In terms of assessment there is progress in two or three projects - the Intercultural Competence Assessment (INCA) www.incaproject.org and Language Online Portfolio Project (LOLIPOP) <http://lolipop-portfolio.eu/> projects in Europe – which trying to divide

Intercultural Competence into three levels. But the levels are identified by someone just sitting at their desk asking how to describe level 1, 2, 3 more or less. They are not empirically founded. So that’s the issue in terms of assessment and progression in ICC.

It is a similar question in the teaching of

grammar. What is progression in grammar? We always assume that the present tense is easier than the past or than the future. Therefore, we teach present first. But why? There again are certain traditions, common sense traditions. The INCA did also use common sense, professional common sense, to identify three levels. But they are not empirically founded.

Manuela: Here, as we explained earlier, we often have to defend our place in foreign language education. If a politician were to ask you what the main benefits of a well articulated ICC curriculum are, what would be your answer?

Michael: Hofstede was mentioned earlier this morning. Hofstede's book, which is now 20 years old, at least, is still widely used. Sage is now bringing out an encyclopedia of ICC. There is already a Sage handbook of ICC. All this activity demonstrates the importance of ICC. In the world of business there is still a lot of work on preparing managers and other people to interact and sell in other countries. Studies by Hofstede are used despite the fact that the research is fundamentally flawed. So I would say to politicians who want to develop competitiveness of their country – that's generally one of their main concerns – "If the business world is doing this, then we can complement this and maybe even do it better than Hofstede's work." That is the world of work but then there is the social world. I was talking again with Marty Abbott this morning and she was saying that Kansas is becoming a multicultural society. That is the case in Europe as well, of course. I was born in a town, which was a mill town for making wool. I used to spend my holiday as a student working in the local mill to earn some money. I never met a foreigner until I went to France at the age of sixteen, of any kind, white, black, any color. They were all white locals. Today, the very same town is statistically speaking dominated by Islam in fact. So all these societies are becoming multicultural. The sense of interacting with people is what we are really concerned with in intercultural competence.

Of course, when I go back to Dewsbury, the center of the world where I was born, if I speak to somebody whatever their color, whether they are from Pakistan or wherever, they will speak to me in English and in the local accent, and I will drop back into my local dialect. But there are still different ways of thinking and being and so I need my ICC and sometimes I need my language competence to understand the ways in which I have to use my language competence here in the United States of America. I have to learn new words, I have to learn the nuances and the differences in the professional dialogue here even though we are

using the "same language".

And so, I would say to politicians "It's part of the whole social "inclusion" program, which means being together in societies, the dominant term we use in Europe. I am not sure if you use that phrase. It's not that language education has the monopoly on this, of course, but it is a strong part of language teaching.

Manuela: If you had to name a few challenges in the planning, teaching and assessment of ICC, what would make the list of the top three (or five, if you like)?

Michael: I mentioned teacher education already. The degree of preparedness of teachers varies so much, and the degree of willingness of teachers varies as well. So I think it's a big task to develop teacher education, to change the notion of "what I am as a teacher of languages" to "what I am as a teacher of language and culture".

Assessment is clearly an important issue, increasingly important through the international comparisons of PISA etc. There aren't any international comparisons with foreign language or second language that are in the same status as Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) but we are becoming ever more concerned with assessment for competitive reasons but also for its proper role in teaching, the role of assessing progression in teaching and learning the competences. If we define progression, we need to assess whether our students are progressing.

New technologies, again there were wonderful examples of the use of technologies in examples of intercultural language teaching but these technologies need to be used systematically, I think, not just a play thing. Such technologies are novel for teachers but not for students. For students they are not novel at all, it's what they grew up with. And unless we use them systematically, students are going to get bored. The systematic use of such technologies in creating an "international community", to use that phrase, his what I have seen in examples of work from Glastonbury teachers. You're creating a community here. And if you want to go into theory, you are creating a community as a group of people who are sharing and living together.

Manuela: I am going to ask the last question but I am going to include something you said because I think it is such an important part of our conversation. So what would you say to those people who say that ICC can be taught, and should be taught, but also in other areas of the curriculum? And I think I want to include here the importance that you put here on teaching ICC and not something like cross-cultural

knowledge of other cultures exclusively because that's what we find mostly when we go online. "We know the dimensions of national culture and we know how people in China act and we are all set." How can we arrive at a common understanding of what we mean with ICC and how can it be taught in other parts of the curriculum?

Michael: "Cross-cultural training", let us call it, has its reasons and purpose in the business world; it is about behavior, training of how to say hello and how to bow in Japan etc. What Krassimira was doing had nothing to do with behavior. There was no behavior training there. And I think that's a major difference. It might well be that if Krassimira, like students studying Russian in the GLASPORT work were to take her students to another country, then behavior training is necessary. But it does not actually make an awful lot of sense to Krassimira's students if they are not actually going to meet face to face British people. So there is a distinction to be made there. It can be complementary the way in which we focus on ICC in school and maybe K:20 or even P:20.

And as I said earlier in our conversation, it's not a monopoly. It's not that foreign language teachers are the only people who can develop intercultural competence. Historians – it's part of what they do. As my favorite historian, Eric Hobsbawm, says, "The past is another country. They do things differently there." And in that sense historians are developing ICC but not in the sense of cultural behavior training unless you are going in a time machine and go back and meet people!

I think across the curriculum there are opportunities, just as across the curriculum there are opportunities for language development. However, if a science teacher says, "I am a teacher of science," then I think you have to respect that. But if a language teacher says "I am a teacher only of language", then I think we have a problem. So in that respect I think the language teacher has a major role but is not the only one to have a role when we look across the curriculum. Teachers can work together. I can think of examples where teachers of English in the USA might well work together with foreign language teachers in the USA. Mother tongue and foreign language teachers can easily work together. There are ways of doing that and there are also other opportunities for other teachers to work with language teachers.

Manuela: Thank you so much, Mike. I think we can open the floor now to hear questions from our colleagues.