Authentic materials
in developing intercultural communicative competences

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Abstract

Authentic materials are believed to be the best types of materials for developing intercultural communicative competences of foreign language learners. Authentic materials bridge the gap between the classroom and the outside world and they bring reality to the classroom. Authentic materials are those which were not created or edited for language learners, consequently most everyday objects in the target language qualify as authentic materials. Exposure to the authentic materials allows language learners to make contact with the real-life language, customs and way of life of the target culture. Using authentic materials in teaching culture is a great motivational factor and it helps learners to recognize that there is a community of users who live their lives in this other language. Authentic materials include audio, visual and printed materials. This paper discusses and gives examples of activities how to use authentic materials in developing socio-cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic competences, pragmatic competences and non-verbal communication.

Keywords

Intercultural communicative competences, authentic materials, English language

Development of intercultural communicative competences (ICC) is with no doubt one of the main priorities of foreign language teaching. Research studies (Europublic, 2007; Kostková, 2012; Zerzová, 2012; Reid, 2012) in the subject of analyzing curricular documents have declared, that despite the national and school curricula emphasize the importance of ICC, they only generally describe the subject and do not specify how to achieve the goal. The CEFR (2001), which serves as the base document for developing national curricula, also emphasizes development of ICC. However, the CEFR does not elaborate on the development of ICC for each level of proficiency. The CEFR only describes the competences in general, and the aspects of ICC are only included in individual competences and therefore the connection with ICC is not immediately obvious. Consequently, foreign language teachers are often confused and do not know which aspects of culture to teach, what materials to use and what teaching techniques to use with the aim of developing intercultural communicative competences of their learners.

Based on CEFR, general and communicative competences connected to culture have been excerpted and summarized and put into clear diagrams, which can serve as a basis for cultural teaching (Reid, 2012). In the component of socio-cultural knowledge the empirical knowledge relating to day-to-day living, shared values, beliefs, history and taboos of social groups is considered to be essential to intercultural communication. Existential competence is considered to be culture-related as it includes the sum of personal characteristics, personality traits, attitudes, self-image and one's view of others. Skills of cultural awareness, to see contrast between own and target culture and ability to overcome stereotypes are important components of ICC. Sociolinguistic competences refer to linguistic markers of social conventions (use and choice of greetings, address forms, turn taking, rules of politeness, register differences, etc.). Pragmatic competences are concerned with the functional use of the language. The cultural component is very important here, as it includes suggestions, requests, introductions, invitations, correct use of please and thank you, etc. "Non-verbal communication" is an important part of intercultural communication. Paralinguistic features, such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, body contact, proxemics; extra-linguistic speech sounds for expressing silence, happiness, disgust, approval, disapproval etc.; and prosodic features such as loudness, pitch of the voice are very delicate features in intercultural communication. They vary from culture to culture and can cause great misunderstandings if perceived or performed inappropriately.

There are a lot of materials that could be used in teaching culture. Several English language textbooks offer materials developing ICC in separate parts called "cultural pages". However, it is often difficult to convince English teachers that the teaching of culture is not a secondary goal. Culture is an inseparable part of foreign language teaching (Byram, 1998, 1997; Dunnett, Dubin, Lezberg, 1986; Kramsch, 1993, 1998; Brooks, 2001; Cullen, 2000; Straub, 1999; Robinson, 1988; Huhn, 1978), because language without culture is a set of symbols which can be misinterpreted, if they are not understood in the right cultural context. Nowadays, authors of English language textbooks are aware of the necessity to develop ICC of learners and are trying to make more effort to create culturally relevant texts, recordings and activities. However, materials in English language textbooks are adapted materials, which have great advantages, but also disadvantages. One of the greatest advantages is that they are designed according to the pedagogical and psychological characteristics of the learners. They are created for a particular age group, language proficiency and suitable topic, and they are easier to use for foreign language teachers. The greatest

disadvantage of adapted materials is that information can be quickly out of date, e.g. when teaching popular arts, which are popular and motivational topics for young learners. According to Daskalos and Jellum Ling (2005) textbooks often use fabricated texts (e.g. travel stories or visits by families to foreign countries) and these have a tendency to feel forced and irrelevant. Another disadvantage is that adapted materials do not always use real every-day language, nor portray real picture of foreign cultures. Adapted materials are limited to texts, pictures, audio and video recordings (authentic materials offer more resources).

Authentic materials are with no doubt the best materials for teaching cultural aspects, as they bridge the gap between the classroom and the outside world and they bring reality to the classroom. Daskalos and Jellum Ling (ibid.) claim that authentic materials focus mainly on contents and meaning and not on linguistic forms and structures. Authentic materials do not replace textbooks, but could be very beneficial additional materials or a substitution for certain texts that might not be well suited for the specific classroom. Most everyday objects in the target language qualify as authentic materials. According to Nunan and Miller (1995) authentic materials are those which were not created or edited for language learners. Exposure to the authentic materials allows language learners to make contact with the real-life language, which can be a great motivational factor and it helps them to recognize that there is a community of users who live their lives in this other language. Authentic materials include audio, visual and printed materials.

Audio materials include TV programmes, commercials, news, weather reports, films, cartoons, phone messages, podcasts, radio programmes, music, internet audio materials, audio-recorded stories, announcements at the stations and airports, shops, etc. *Visual materials* include photographs, paintings, drawings, wordless street signs, images, pictures from magazines, newspapers, postcards, stamps, coins, wordless picture books, toys, food and any items. *Printed materials* include newspapers, magazines, books, TV guides, catalogues, lyrics to songs, restaurant menus, product labels, street signs, tourist information brochures, maps, letters, greeting cards, junk mail, school notices, billboards, public transport schedules, traffic tickets, application forms, information on the internet, packing slips, packaging from various items, food labels, etc.

There is a great choice of authentic materials, which could be used in teaching culture in foreign language lessons, but teachers need to pay a lot of attention in choosing appropriate materials. Teachers should set up criteria for selecting materials, which would suit the specific groups of learners. The materials should fulfill the requirements of the curriculum topics, interest of learners, usefulness,

language level, age and background knowledge of learners. The authentic materials need to be culturally appropriate, but at the same time comprehensible for learners of English as a foreign language. It needs to be kept in mind, that authentic materials are based on native speakers' culture, which might appear alien or inappropriate to language learners.

Ianiro (2007) recommends several steps in using authentic materials in teaching English. The first step is to identify learners' needs and goals for learning target language and culture. Learners should be invited to participate in the process of choosing authentic materials, for example they are asked to bring recipes, newspapers, labels and other non-school materials to the classroom. Learners might consider these materials inappropriate for school, based on their earlier academic experiences. Teachers should discuss with learners the aim and rationale for using authentic and their connection with target culture. Teachers and learners could become partners in collecting materials. Authentic materials are easily and inexpensively obtainable. Especially the internet is a rich source of all kinds of materials. Nuttall (1996) recommends that the authentic materials should be suitable in content (interesting and relevant), exploitability (the way authentic materials could be used) and comprehensibility (appropriate level of language).

Benefits of authentic materials in developing intercultural communicative competences are immense. They remind learners that there is a real world community that functions exclusively through the use of the target language. Authentic materials help learners to use language in "real life like" situations. Learners are exposed to the real use of language and they are immersed into the real world of the target culture while they are in the classroom. Authentic materials, especially texts, videos, songs need to be actual, as they are culturally sensitive and can become quickly out of date. They can be used for all language levels, from basic to advanced, but need to be carefully chosen. Finally, they have a positive effect on learner motivation as they provide real cultural information and exposure to real language (Richard, 2001). For example, it is more beneficial to use a current newspaper to search for relevant and up to date weather forecast, than to use an out dated text for searching nouns or verbs (which is a typical school-based approach).

Authentic materials are exciting to use, but it is inevitable that we might face some problems. Certainly, there are disadvantages with authentic materials. First of all they are very difficult and time consuming to choose culturally appropriate, up to date and comprehensible materials. Real-life language is often difficult to understand, as it uses dialect words, idioms, complex language structures.

Language can be culturally biased for certain groups of people and learners might have problems decoding the language. Unsympathetically used can cause frustration with the language learners. Listening to authentic language can also cause problems, as there are many different dialects and accents (Martinez, 2002).

Although, there are some disadvantages with using authentic materials, but there are still many more advantages, especially with developing intercultural communicative competences of learners. In fact, it is hardly possible to develop ICC without using authentic materials, particularly the sociolinguistic, pragmatic and non verbal competences.

To be more practical and specific, several activities using authentic materials with the aim of developing intercultural communicative competences are listed here.

Teaching about customs, for example the Slovak All Saints´ Day and American Halloween is an example of developing *socio-cultural knowledge.* First of all, the teacher and learners discuss the habits of the All Saint´s celebration in Slovakia. The teacher tries to find out from learners what they know about Halloween, trick and treat custom, costumes, parties, pumpkins, etc. Learners are encouraged to name films and describe the Halloween customs. The topic can be supported by authentic photographs of both cultural habits. There are many youtube videos showing cultural habits, which learners could watch and by the technique of noticing, learners pick and write down the peculiarities of the shown habits (e.g. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtnWYMmTUR8). This activity is especially suitable for young learners, but a modified version could be used with older learners too.

The following activity develops *sociolinguistic competences* and it practices greetings, address forms, turn taking, politeness and register. For example, authentic menus could be used, which can be downloaded from the internet. First of all, learners need to understand the types of food in the menu. The best way of working with menus is to practice ordering food in role plays using the correct sociolinguistic phrases (useful phrases can be found: http://www.speakenglish.co.uk/phrases/at_a_restaurant). This type of activity would be useful with older or adult learners, right from the beginner´s level of language proficiency. For younger learners, role plays practicing a similar type of phrases, for example buying toys in a toy shop, could be used.

The correct use of "please and thank you" belong to *pragmatic competences.* The following youtube videos could be used with young learners. The first video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-64adnmlqY) is showing a cartoon story,

where a Crawford the Cat encounters many different animals and uses please and thank you in various situations. Pupils can watch the story and count how many times the words please and thank you were used. Pupils should notice the types of situations, where these words were used. Role plays can be used practicing the correct way of saying please and thank you. Polite phrases, requests and offers are presented in the song available on youtube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vaZ26-noUEc). With the technique of noticing, pupils should remember phrases, which they can practice in role plays.

When teaching *non verbal communication*, e.g. greeting gestures, which are different in various cultures, authentic photographs (visual) and youtube videos (audio-visual) can be used. The lesson should be started with eliciting background knowledge of learners about the greeting gestures they know (to name typical greeting gestures for home culture and for some other cultures). There are a lot of videos available showing various greeting gestures, which could be shown to the learners (e.g. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzblFWCf3ck). The teacher gives a list of greetings with the name of countries where they are used and photographs representing the greetings (e.g. hand shake, hand kiss, fist shake, bow, kiss, cheek kiss, wave, nod, hug, nose kissing, shoulder tapping, high five, kowtow, etc.). Learners try to match greetings with the photographs. A guessing game can follow, where pupils act out gesture greetings and other pupils guess the culture where these greetings are used. The teacher should also warn learners about certain gestures being inappropriate in different cultures. For example the hand gesture in American, British, but also Slovak culture for excellence, or OK means "zero" or something worthless in French culture. There are many available videos showing gestures, which should be avoided in various cultures (e.g. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWFPHW7BCCI). This type of activity could be used in all levels of language proficiency and age levels.

To conclude this paper, there is no doubt that authentic materials provide a rich source of cultural material. Teachers should not be afraid to use authentic materials, as they are great fun, very motivational and educational. Certainly, the authentic materials should be carefully chosen and prepared, but they are worth it. Finally, the chosen cultural materials should be freely discussed by learners and compared to their own culture in the relaxing atmosphere of the language classroom. If learners are regularly exposed to authentic materials, they could become more familiar with them and in the future be able to partially avoid a cultural shock when visiting the culture in question.

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