Journal of Language and Cultural Education, 2022, 10(1)
ISSN 1339-4584

DOI: 10.2478/jolace-2022-0006

Development of Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence via Creating Their Own Cultures

Petra Ivenz[1,2] & Eva Reid[3]
[1] University of Hradec Králové, the Czech Republic
[2] University of Trnava, Slovakia
[3] Comenius University Bratislava, Slovakia
petra.ivenz@uhk.cz, eva.reid@uniba.sk

Abstract
One of the long-term aims of the European Union is to incorporate intercultural education into lessons in foreign languages. However, studies have shown that teachers of foreign languages often do not know what intercultural teaching involves and are themselves not interculturally competent. The aim of an elective course *Intercultural training* in a teacher training study program is to develop students' intercultural communicative competences (ICC) and to teach them various teaching techniques and activities for the development of ICC. An activity for this intervention is called *Aliens*, where students were creating their planets (cultures) with sociocultural and historical foundations and sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of their newly developed cultures. Four lessons focused on intercultural topics such as greetings, addressing, non-verbal communication, small talk, punctuality, diversity, etc. were conducted before the intervention. The main aim of this intervention was to develop intercultural communicative competences (awareness, sociocultural knowledge, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences) and positive attitudes towards difference and respect for other cultures. The intervention was conducted via four-step *action research* and it was evaluated as very successful, as students were able to reflect on their own and other cultures, and showed open-mindedness, curiosity, and acceptance toward foreign cultures.
Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, intercultural communication, culture, language, foreign language teaching, activities

Introduction

The European Union aims to incorporate intercultural education into foreign language education (CEFR, 2001, 2020). Learners need to develop their intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and within this competence, they should focus on deepening their awareness of other cultures and their tolerance of other cultures. They should try to be open-minded, curious, and emphatic towards other cultures. However, according to some recent studies (Chau & Truong, 2019; Köşker & Gülmez, 2018; Özışık, Yeşilyurt & Demiröz, 2019; Safa & Tofighi, 2021; Sándorová, 2017; Zerzová, 2018), learners of foreign languages are not provided with enough knowledge linked to intercultural communication. This is because teachers of foreign languages do not know how to include topics and use various techniques and activities aimed at the development of ICC in their lessons of foreign languages. That is why at universities, the focus should be placed on developing the ICC for future teachers, so they know how to incorporate intercultural education in their future teaching practice.

This article describes an implementation of an activity that focuses on creating new cultures. Their creation is based on previously acquired knowledge of several aspects of ICC, including sociocultural knowledge and awareness, sociolinguistic knowledge, and pragmatic knowledge. The research was conducted in the lessons of a subject called Intercultural Training. This course is an elective course, supplementary to the compulsory course of Intercultural Communication, in a teacher training program at a bachelor's

study program in one of the Slovak universities. The activity aimed to strengthen students' awareness and tolerance towards other cultures. This activity was conducted through the qualitative research method- action research. The action research method is the most efficient when completed on a small scale to improve and change for the better (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

Theoretical background

Before we are able to accept another culture, we must be aware of it (Remland, Jones, Foeman & Arévalo, 2018). This is built on three pillars: learning about other cultures (and at the same time, learning more about one's own culture), increasing respect for other cultures, and creating shared cultures (McDonough, 2005). Ideally, speakers of foreign languages have to move from ethnocentrism to cultural relativism. Ethnocentrism can be described as feeling superior because of a certain way of life, e.g., that a certain way of life (or a culture) is better than the other (Fitzpatrick, 2019). On the other hand, cultural relativism preaches that all ways of life (cultures) are of equal value, and should they be judged, they have to be judged from a neutral point of view (Fitzpatrick, 2019). All students of foreign languages need to be aware of this, they need to show tolerance and be open-minded towards foreign cultures to successfully live in a pluralist society (Reid, 2014).

Edmondson & House (1998) state that in intercultural awareness, language is "embedded in cultural traditions, values, and attitudes" (Edmondson, 2009, p. 172). Furthermore, intercultural awareness may help to avoid misunderstandings between people from different cultural backgrounds. There are some differences between the communicative model and the educational model of intercultural awareness. In the communicative model, awareness concerns the target language culture, cultural awareness addresses communication in the target language, awareness is one of the goals of foreign language teaching (Edmondson, 2009). In the educational model, awareness concerns any and all cultures, it also concerns communication in the first language, not only the target language, and foreign language education contributes to intercultural awareness (Edmondson, 2009). The educational model can be linked to Byram's (1997) understanding of communication with people from different cultures in their first language and their second language. He wants to relate to these people. That is why Byram (1997) created two models: intercultural competence (IC) and intercultural communicative competence (ICC). While intercultural competence can be described as being able to communicate in one's first language (mother tongue) with people from different countries and cultures, intercultural communicative competence is the ability to communicate in the target language with people from different countries and cultures. In the latter, communicative competence and intercultural competence come together and intercultural competence is added to communicative competence (Edmondson, 2009).

Language and sociolinguistics are closely connected (Sankoff, 2008). One of the main characteristics of a sociolinguistic approach to a language is the actual engagement of the speakers in the codifying and regulative operation (Ondrejovič, 1997). Speakers can create their socially and individually distinctive speech, and it can be assumed that different people would talk differently. This proclamation was supported by Trudgill (2000) and Coulmas (2005), who state that different people use a different language within the same language (not dialect). Sociolinguistic competences refer to "rules of behavior and politeness, norms defining relations between generations, sexes, classes and social groups" (Reid, 2014, p. 9). Sociocultural competence is closely related to sociolinguistic competence as much of what is contained in sociolinguistic competence is

a part of sociocultural competence as well (e.g., taboos, personal space, differences between accents and dialects, etc.) (CEFR, 2020).

Pragmatic competence is important for mutual understanding in communication as it includes the knowledge of phrases, idioms, irony, requests, etc. In intercultural settings, pragmatic competencies are more important than linguistic competences because learners of foreign languages may use their own cultural rules in foreign language communication (CEFR, 2001; Reid, 2014). Yule (1996, p. 4) states that pragmatics studies the "relationships between the linguistics forms and the users of these forms", meaning that the discipline needs to examine the decisions which are made by the speakers when speaking in a particular social interaction. Moreover, he proposes one more definition of pragmatics as he states that it is "the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by hearer (or reader)" (Yule, 1996, p. 3). Therefore, it is more concerned with the actual meaning of the words than the choice of the spoken words. People usually do not have problems understanding each other as they belong to the same social groups and follow the expected behavior. However, a problem may arise when these change (for example living in a different country).

Information on how to include intercultural education in the classrooms of foreign languages can be found in documents provided by the Council of Europe (CEFR, 2001, 2020). The documents state that the knowledge of foreign language speakers should consist also of intercultural education, appropriate for students' ages and levels of proficiency. However, in practice, many research studies (Chau & Truong, 2019; Köşker & Gülmez, 2018; Özışık, Yeşilyurt & Demiröz, 2019; Safa & Tofighi, 2021; Sándorová, 2017; Zerzová, 2018) point to several reasons why intercultural education is not included in the lessons of foreign languages. For example, there is a lack of time to include this education, or the teachers simply do not know what to teach. Some of the in-service teachers claim that they did not have enough education during their university studies and therefore, they do not know how to implement intercultural communication into their lessons. This is why it is important to start to prepare future teachers of foreign languages during their university studies. Future teachers need to be equipped with empathy, open-mindedness, respect, and cultural relativism first and then they can learn how to implement intercultural communication into their lessons. This article shows an activity that can do both: strengthen awareness, make students more tolerant of other cultures, and be more open-minded at the same time, it can give a tip for teachers to see what activity can be used to develop intercultural communicative competence of foreign language learners.

Methodology

The action research method was chosen for completing this activity. According to Cohen, et al. (2007, p. 297), action research is a "powerful tool for change and improvement on a local level". Ebbut (1985, p. 297) defined action research as a "systematic study that combines action and reflection with the intention of improving practice". For this research, it is used as a form of a teaching method because the discovery method replaces a traditional method, as well as it also lays a claim to the professional development of teachers (Cohen et al., 2007). The main aim of action research is to "improve practice rather than to produce knowledge" (Elliot, 1991, p. 49). Craig (2009, p. 4) says that the process of action research focuses on "practice in order to improve practice". Costello (2003, p. 5) states that the fundamental aim of action research is to improve educational practice as action is undertaken to "understand, evaluate and

change". Through action research, teachers can conduct a systematic inquiry which leads to improving conditions and solving problems (Craig, 2009).

Action research is usually performed in several phases. Even though several researchers presented many phases (Schmuck, 2006; Sagor, 2011; Rychnavská & Bačová, 2015), this research follows four phases: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Sagor, 2011; Schmuck, 2006). The planning phase deals with the lessons which led to the main activity of creating new cultures. In the acting phase, students created their own cultures and their new planets. In the observing phase, the outcomes of the newly created planets and discussion were observed and described. As for the reflecting phase, reflection was provided by both students and researchers. Throughout the whole activity, participant observation was used by the researchers. Participant observation is a method used in qualitative research as it seeks for understanding a phenomenon in natural settings (DeWalt & Dewalt, 2011). In order to reflect on the activity in the reflecting phase, students were given a questionnaire with open-ended questions. The questions did not aim at this activity only, therefore, students could freely choose their favorite activity and state reasons why.

Participants

The students were chosen by purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative research as it identifies and selects cases that are connected to the main interest. This means that the participants in the study are familiar with regard to the interest of the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). There were twenty-one students that participated in this activity, all of them attending the course of Intercultural Training which is a part of their bachelor's studies at one Slovak University. All students were English language teacher trainees who already passed the first course of Intercultural Communication. Students were randomly put into three even groups in which they conducted the activity.

Ethics approval was gained by written informed consent, which was signed by all participants. They all agreed to be participants in the research undertaken. The names and other specific identifying characteristics are not used in any way which would intentionally publicly identify the participants.

The researchers were the authors of this article and as well the teachers of both Intercultural Communication and Intercultural Training.

Main aim

The main aim of this activity was to develop intercultural communicative competence (intercultural awareness, sociocultural knowledge, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competencies) and deepen respect and tolerance towards other cultures.

Research Questions

1. How did students reflect their sociolinguistic, pragmatic linguistic competencies and intercultural knowledge in creating new cultures?
2. How did students develop their awareness, respect, and tolerance of other cultures?

Results

Planning phase

Before the main activity of creating new cultures was chosen for one of the lessons of the Intercultural Trainings course, students needed to acquire self-awareness, intercultural awareness, sociolinguistic competence, sociocultural knowledge, and pragmatic competence that developed their ICC. Four such lessons were conducted before

the lesson focused on creating new cultures was introduced to students. The alien activity was chosen as a suitable one for an even deeper understanding of other cultures. Even though throughout the course students participated in many discussions, role-plays, and predictions, in this activity, students had to imagine that they were from different cultures with different beliefs, backgrounds, and languages. Many of them had never experienced that feeling, being an alien in an unknown environment and that is why this activity could help them to empathize more with people from other cultures.

The first two lessons aimed at raising self-awareness and awareness of other cultures and tolerance towards them as these two spheres are closely interconnected. Students first talked about their traditions when celebrating some major holidays, for example, they talked about the food they eat and habits they keep, if they do any special activities with their families on their birthdays, whether they celebrate All Saints Day or Halloween, etc. Using the Kahoot quiz, students then had to guess a country where a specific tradition is held. In a fun way, students were competing against one another and exchanging information about traditions from all around the world. The next activity was linked to watching a video about rules in different countries. Students had to remember all the points from the video and then compare them with Slovak culture. In this task, they implemented both self-awareness (Slovak culture) and awareness of other cultures (intercultural awareness). The last task was to read a short article about tolerance and students had to write a reflection on it.

The third lesson focused on developing sociolinguistic competence and sociocultural knowledge. In the lesson, we discussed formal and informal situations, different types of greetings, and addressing (based on whether the situation was formal or informal). Since greetings and addressing are different in the world compared to Slovakia, students also had to focus on highlighting the differences between their own and foreign cultures. At the end of the lesson, to put the theoretical knowledge into practice, students prepared short role-plays where they had to implement the suitable type of greetings and addressing based on whether the situation was formal or informal. For example, one situation was when a Slovak woman went to Japan, and she met with her Japanese host in Tokyo. In this scenario, students needed to first determine whether the situation was formal or informal and then based on their decision prepare a short conversation with the host, highlighting the greeting part.

The fourth lesson focused on pragmatic competence as well as sociocultural knowledge, sociolinguistic competence, and intercultural awareness. Students were presented with English idioms, and they had to find their Slovak idiomatic counterparts and explain the meaning of the idioms. Then punctuality and perception of time in different cultures were introduced by a video. Based on the video, students were given 9 cultures and in small groups, they had to decide on those cultures' perceptions of being punctual. This lesson was also dedicated to small talk, so again, this topic was introduced by a video in which different types of small talkers were introduced to the students. Based on this video, students could characterize to which type of small talkers they belong. They could choose between peaches and coconuts. While peaches were described as easy to communicate with and asking many questions, coconuts were described as more reserved, however, once people get through the hard shell, they will find a spectacular person within. Furthermore, students learned how to talk to other types of people. At the end of this lesson, students formed pairs and they had to prepare short role-plays. They were given some awkward situations and they had to apply small talk in them. For example, in one scene two people who hated each other in high school meet in a

supermarket and they are forced to talk. The task was to keep a small talk conversation going for at least 30 seconds.

After these four lessons, finally, all the topics were discussed, and we could start with the main activity: students had to imagine that they were aliens from other planets and their task was to create cultures on their planets.

Acting phase

At the beginning of the fifth lesson, students were divided into three groups. They were provided with A1 size papers and markers, and in the next forty-five minutes they had to follow these instructions:

- Name your planet, name of your inhabitants.
- Invent your language and basic phrases, names, greetings, how you introduce yourselves, and decide how you non-verbally greet each other.
- Decide on your behavior: punctuality, dress code, traditional food, taboo topics, how you make friends, how you celebrate holidays and birthdays, what you do when you are: happy, sad, angry, in love, relaxed, hungry.
- Decide on historical milestones in an alien culture. You need to explain how these milestones influenced your culture (behavior, traditions, beliefs, language, thinking)
- Are you an alien-friendly planet? What would you do, if you were visited by other aliens? Would you invade other planets?

Students worked for forty-five minutes. After that, all three groups presented their planets with their specific features based on the instructions. Once all the planets were introduced, there was a discussion where aliens from different planets could ask questions to the other aliens.

Observing phase

While working, students talked in English the whole time, they enjoyed the activity, and the atmosphere in groups was very positive. Students thoroughly considered every aspect of their new culture and by doing so they develop their self-awareness. During the presentation of the planets, students from the other groups listened carefully to their classmates and asked questions about different aspects of the cultures of their newly created planets. After the presentation, there was a discussion between students, and the researchers also asked some questions about the newly created planets. Firstly, the researchers were interested in how aliens perceive the other aliens, whether they were curious about their culture or defensive of their own. All three groups were interested in other cultures. They asked follow-up questions, they were curious about different traditions the other aliens practiced, and overall, they just wanted to know more. Furthermore, when asked whether they could imagine visiting other planets, students showed enthusiasm and excitement. At the same time, those planets which were supposed to be visited did not show any hostility, yet they wanted to host their guests. The last question regarded trade, as the researchers wanted to see whether the aliens would participate in trade with other aliens, to see their collaboration. Students said that yes, they could imagine trading with each other, some of them even suggested what could be traded from their planet. The whole discussion had a very positive and open atmosphere.

However, the researchers conducted this activity with other groups as well and their reactions were very different from this group. For example, when students from other groups were asked if they would like to visit other planets, almost all the students got defensive and wanted to go to war with the other aliens. Some of the aliens stated that if

the other aliens would visit them, they would bomb them. When these students were confronted about this, they stated that these were not their real beliefs about other cultures and that they thought that this was just a game.

Reflecting phase

Students were very creative when inventing different types of greetings, addressing, small talk topics, stereotypes, traditional dishes, holidays, etc. One of the groups even proposed the architectural structure of the buildings on their planet. All three groups were able to provide at least three historical milestones that shaped their societies and influenced their language. For example, one planet had the Industrial revolution where new machines for creating leaves were invented. Another group thought of the First Pearl Finding which influenced their currency.

Based on the open-ended questionnaire, which was given to students, seven out of twenty-one students that participated in this activity stated that this was their favorite activity of the whole semester. Several students mentioned that they enjoyed being creative in this activity. One student said that there were not many lessons in which students get to be creative and at the same time, learn something new. Some students stated that this activity was just fun. One student saw this activity as using their knowledge from previous lessons in order to create a culture of their own.

The reactions from students as well as the atmosphere of the lesson where this activity was conducted point to the fact that it was a well-prepared and well-received activity. In future lessons, there could be more groups with fewer students in them and they could have more time to create their planets. Otherwise, the researchers cannot think of other changes.

Discussion and conclusion

The main aim of this activity was to develop intercultural communicative competence (intercultural awareness, sociocultural knowledge, and sociolinguistic and pragmatic competencies) and deepen respect and tolerance towards other cultures. Sociocultural knowledge, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competencies were reflected in the activity when students created stereotypes, taboos, idioms, greetings, addressing, historical milestones, punctuality, dress code, etc. All these were based on the previously gained knowledge from the former lessons and students successfully incorporated their knowledge into their newly created cultures.

Deepening students' self-awareness is reflected in how they implemented historical milestones that they knew of into their own planets. They used wars, the industrial revolution, and first settlings, therefore they were working with the information they already had in themselves, and which was known to their culture. As for intercultural awareness, that was developed as students showed interest in the other planets and open-mindedness towards their traditions and cultural specifics. Students seemed genuinely interested in the newly created planets and they asked further questions. This was crucial, as there were no negative reactions when students presented their planets to their classmates. Respect and tolerance were reflected in students' curiosity about other planets, and their willingness to cooperate, visit each other and establish trade. There was not one student who would consider being hostile toward other cultures. It is difficult to confirm whether this activity reflects students' real thoughts, however, if yes, then this particular group was open-minded, curious, and tolerant.

This article can be used as a basis for teachers of foreign languages who struggle to find activities aimed at developing the ICC of their students. Furthermore, this activity can be

used to further strengthen intercultural awareness, respect, and tolerance of other cultures. This activity is not recommended for learners whose levels of proficiency are lower than B1 (intermediate level). Students completing this activity should be able to understand also theoretical knowledge about intercultural communication. The presented activities (through lessons 1-4) are complementary to the theoretical knowledge and they can be used as examples to strengthen the knowledge of the ICC of students.

References

Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Multilingual Matters.

Chau, T. H. H., & Truong, V. (2019). The Integration of Intercultural Education into Teaching English: What Vietnamese Teachers Do and Say. *International Journal of Instruction*, *12*(1), 441-456.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morisson, K. (2007). *Research Methods in Education*. Routledge.

Costello, P.J.M. (2003). *Action Research.* Bloomsbury Publishing.

Council of Europe (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment.* Cambridge University Press. Council of Europe Portal. Available at: https://www.coe.int/lang-CEFR

Council of Europe (2020), *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume*. Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg. Available at: www.coe.int/lang-cefr

Coulmas, F. 2005. *Sociolinguistics: The Study of Speakers' Choices.* Cambridge University Press.

Craig, D.V. (2009). *Action Research Essentials.* John Wiley & Sons.

DeWalt, K.M. & Dewalt, B.R. (2011). *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers.* Rowman Altamira.

Ebbut, D. (1985). Educational Action Research: Some General Concerns and Specific Quibbles. In: L. Cohen, L. Manion & K. Morisson. (2007). *Research Methods in Education*. Routledge.

Edmondson, W.J. & House, J. (1998). Interkulturelles Lernen- ein überflüsigger Begriff. In K. Knapp, B. Seidlhofer & H. G. Widdowson (2009). *Handbook of Foreign Language Communication and Learning.* Walter de Gruyter

Edmondson, W. (2009). Language Awareness. In K. Knapp, B. Seidlhofer & H. G. Widdowson (2009). *Handbook of Foreign Language Communication and Learning.* Walter de Gruyter

Elliot, J. (1991). *Action Research for Educational Change.* McGraw- Hill Education (UK).

Fitzpatrick, F. (2019). *Understanding Intercultural Interaction: An Analysis of Key Concepts.* Emerald Group Publishing.

Köşker, G., & Gülmez, G. (2018). The role of the teacher in building intercultural communication skills in foreign language teaching: Teachers' views with examples from France and Turkey. *Eğitimde Nitel Araştırmalar Dergisi- Journal of Qualitative Research in Education*, 6(1), 157-171.

McDonough, T. B. (2005). Intercultural Forgiveness: The Conditions for the Possibility of Peace. *Philosophy of Education Yearbook, 1,* 96-98.

Ondrejovič, S. (1997). *Slovenčina na konci 20. storočia, jej normy a perspektívy.* Vydavateľstvo Slovenskej Akadémie Vied.

Özışık, B. Z., Yeşilyurt, S., & Demiröz, H. (2019). Developing intercultural awareness in language teaching: Insights from EFL lecturers in Turkey. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, *15*(4), 1436-1458.

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research. *Administration and policy in mental health*, *42*(5), 533–544.

Reid, E. (2014). *Intercultural Aspects in Teaching English at Primary Schools*. Peter Lang Edition.

Remland, M. S., Jones, T. S., Foeman, A. & Arévalo, D. R. (2014). *Intercultural Communication: A peacebuilding Perspective.* Waveland Press.

Rychnavská, M. & Bačová, D. (2015). *Akčný výskum - cesta skvalitňovania pedagogickej praxe.* Metodicko-pedagogické centrum v Bratislave.

Safa, M., & Tofighi, S. (2021). *Intercultural Communicative Competence Beliefs and Practices of Iranian Pre-service and In-service EFL Teachers*. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17501229.2021.1889562

Sagor, R. (2011). *The Action Research Guidebook: A Four-Stage Process for Educators and School Teams.* Corwin Press.

Sándorová, Z. (2017). Interkultúrne aspekty vo vybranej sade učebníc a na hodinách anglického ako cudzieho jazyka na Slovensku. *XLinguae Journal, 10* (3), 256-272.

Sankoff, G. (2008). *Social Lives in Language- Sociolinguistics and Multilingual Speech Communities: Celebrating the Work of Gillian Sankoff.* John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Schmuck, R. A. (2006). *Practical Action Research for Change.* Corwin Press.

Trudgill, P. (2000). *Sociolinguistics: an introduction to language and society.* Penguin Books.

Yule, G. (2010). *The Study of Language.* Cambridge University Press.

Zerzová, J. (2018). Opportunities to Develop Intercultural Communicative Competence in Czech lower-secondary schools: Findings of IRSE Video Study of German. *Journal of Language and Cultural Education, 6*(3),101-121.

Contacts

Mgr. Petra Ivenz
Univerzita Hradec Králové
Rokitanského 62
500 03 Hradec Králové III
petra.ivenz@uhk.cz

Doc. Eva Reid, PhD.
Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave
Filozofická fakulta
Gondova ulica 2
811 02 Bratislava 1
eva.reid@uniba.sk