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Developing ICC within the Activity Theory

ABSTRACT. The major goal of the article is to introduce the Activity Theory as a framework for developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of prospective foreign language teachers with the example of students from the Faculty of English (FE) at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. I will refer to the concept of ICC resulting from the evolution of the concept of language competence in which social and cultural components have become more prominent, and for which the reference to the mythical native speaker's competence in the context of foreign language teaching has been questioned.

KEYWORDS: activity theory; intercultural communicative competence; teacher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many applied linguists agree that language and culture are two inseparable components (e.g., Bennett 1993a, Moran 2001, Liddicoat et al. 2003), and non-native speakers of a language need to be aware of the possible pitfalls of intercultural communication. Yet, research in many countries has shown that not all foreign language teachers (FLTs) are able, or willing, to integrate culture teaching into their language class and teach their learners to become intercultural mediators (see e.g., Lázár 2007, Białek 2009, Szczepaniak-Kozak 2010, Canh 2015). Young and Sachdev's (2011) research into the beliefs and practices of English teachers in France, UK and the USA relating to the application of the ICC reveals that teachers highlight the importance of ICC for language development, however they also report that ICC was given little emphasis in their teaching. They also identified the lack of support in textbooks and no emphasis on culture learning in tests and institutional syllabi. It is a signal to FLTs' trainers that ICC needs more emphasis in

the course of teacher education, because it is specified as a target for foreign language instruction in Europe in the *Common European framework of reference for languages* (CEFR, 2007) – the document which informs course-book and syllabus designers – and thus, it should also become a target for foreign language teachers.

Having an experience in running ICC seminars for FE students in their Master Degree programme, I want to share my observations and reflections. After emphasising the need to develop ICC, which is the result of an evolution of the concept of language competence, I will discuss the socio-constructivist approach to teaching in which the Activity Theory (AT) is grounded. I apply AT to assist my students' ICC development, as well as to show them ways of applying ICC tasks in their language classroom. I also find AT a useful scheme for educational research (Siek-Piskozub 2013, 2014, 2015).

2. ICC AS A RESULT OF THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

Since the times that Chomsky introduced the concept of language competence, meaning internalized rules of the native language (Chomsky 1965), our understanding of the concept of competence for the context of learning and teaching foreign languages has been evolving due to new concepts and research reported in related disciplines. As an analysis of the evolution of the concept in question reveals, the importance of the social factor has grown steadily (see e.g., Celce-Murcia 2007).

Hymes (1972) urged for the inclusion of sociolinguistic components claiming that it is not a mere ability of performing (as posited by Chomsky) but the competence to use language. He introduced the concept of communicative competence (CC) to understand first language acquisition. The researcher emphasised that it is necessary to take into account not only grammatical competence but also the ability to use language appropriately, thus placing an emphasis on sociolinguistic competence among native speakers (Hymes 1972). Kramsch (1993: 8) notes that if language is perceived as "social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching" and refers to cultural awareness as "enabling language proficiency and as the outcome of reflection on language proficiency". Hymes' concept of CC was taken up by other researchers, for example, by Canale and Swain (1980) in North America and Van Ek (1986) in Europe, who applied it to describe the competence of a foreign language learner and formed the basis of a teaching approach known as communicative language teaching (CLT). The aim of CLT

was to acquire the necessary skills to communicate in socially and culturally appropriate ways.

Canale and Swain (1980) proposed that communicative competence is composed of grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic competences, the latter encapsulating an ability to cope in a situation when one lacks knowledge or skills. Some time later research in pragmatics led to the inclusion of discourse competence (Canale 1983) into the concept. Van Ek (1986), who for many years was involved in a project to define a language syllabus for a European unit/credit system for modern language learning by adults (Van Ek 1975/1976), suggested that foreign language (FL) teaching should not be concerned merely with training in communication skills but should also involve the personal and social development of the learner as an individual. The FL objectives he presented (which he called competences) build up the ability to communicate. These include: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, sociocultural and social competences (Van Ek 1986: 33-65, quoted by Byram 1997: 9). They all relate to complex phenomena which overlap and which are mutually dependent. The concept of language competence (or ability) is no longer so clear-cut and although it may be considered to be confusing for researchers, yet it is of importance for the context of foreign language teaching.

However, recently the concept of language competence has undergone a further evolution, and emphasis has been put on intercultural communication. Research in FL learning in an educational environment devoid of contacts with the target language speakers, resulting from CLT in which CC was the target, has revealed numerous weaknesses. Due to the fact that potential interlocutors communicating in a cross-cultural context use diverse patterns of communicating and thinking rooted in their own systems of culture, various problems are bound to occur, as confirmed, for example, by Róg's (2013) study of experiences of exchange students taking their semester abroad. Furthermore, evaluation of FL teaching materials reveals weaknesses in the adopted approach to culture; text-book authors focus on characteristic places, famous people, symbols (Krawiec 2010) and common cultural practices of target language cultures (Nguyen 2011: 87), often the same regardless of levels of language competence (Spychała 2007), implying that culture is static rather than dynamic, and learning it stands for getting acquainted with such facts. Such an approach is often referred to as 4F culture, which comes from the first letters of the common components of the content in English teaching materials (food, festivals, fashion, and folklore) (Karpińska-Musiał 2015: 126). Although activities are targeted at developing communication skills (Kaszyński 2009), yet, as noted by Nazari (2007: 202), they are usually based on "an idealized speaker-hearer's socioculturally neutral ability to communicate". What is more, learners may be unwilling to

communicate in a FL on the assigned tasks in the classroom context (Yashima 2002, Mystkowska-Wiertelak, Pietrzykowska 2011, Siek-Piskozub, Nowacka 2012). Devoid of intercultural knowledge, such a limited communicative competence may not be enough for intercultural encounters. As Alred, Byram and Fleming (2003: 3) point out:

> People born and socialised into specific groups tend to assume that the conventions and values by which they live within their groups are inevitable and 'natural'. It is when they have some kind of experience which leads them to question these given conventions and values – but not necessarily to reject them – that they begin to become 'intercultural'….

Many models of interculturality and communication in the intercultural context have been offered by researchers in cross-cultural studies. For example, Hofstede (1991) concentrated on selected characteristic features of 50 countries and 3 regions to show how they differ and in what ways they can become a potential source of misunderstanding. His concepts can be applied to compare them using an online application offered by the Hofstede's Centre (http://geert-hofstede.com/national-culture.html). Yet, critiques of his model (e.g., Venaile, Brewer 2013) claim that while the correlations may be significant when aggregated at the national level, they do not need to be significant at the individual level. Bennett (1993b) emphasizes a developmental nature of intercultural competence, which changes when one has a prolonged contact with another culture going potentially through six stages from the ethnocentric attitude to an ethno-relativistic one. The observed stages are: denial, defence or reversal, minimisation, acceptance, adaptation and integration with possible recurrences of the previous stages. Weaver (1993), referring to the iceberg model of culture, anticipates where the potential points of miscomprehension may appear. Although the differences between the cultural tips of the bergs formed of features easily recognisable by the senses are noticed, it is what is hidden underneath (believes, thought patterns, myths) that collides as first leading to miscomprehension, often even without the awareness of interlocutors. For, as Hall (1959: 39) notes, culture hides as much as it reveals and it hides the most for its native user. In other words, we are often not aware of our cultural uniqueness and may not understand how others see us.

Yet, the model which is the most popular in the educational context is the one proposed by Byram (1997) known as intercultural communicative competence (ICC). It is the one referred to in CEFR (2001: 101-130) and it is also the one which has guided me in planning the ICC seminar. Apart from the components of the earlier concept of communicative competence, i.e., linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and discourse compe-

tence, Byram added an additional component of intercultural competence. However, the first three components do not refer to the native speaker's competence, but to a non-native speaker's one, which is particularly right in the context of English as a *lingua franca.* The intercultural component includes political education and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager),* knowledge of self and other and knowledge of interaction on individual and societal levels (*savoirs*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), skills of discovering and interacting (*savoir apprendre/faire*) and all these supported by the attitudes which help to relativize self and value other (*savoir être*) (Byram 1997: 34 ff, CEFR 2001: 101–108). This model calls for an approach to culture referred to as 5Cs in the American standards for world-languages, i.e., communication, cultures, connections, comparisons and communities (www.globalteachinglearning.com/standards/5Cs.html).

Byram (1997) also explains in what contexts ICC can be developed. It can be the outcome of a direct instruction by a teacher. It can develop because of fieldwork (Róg 2013) and can be optionally preceded by instruction; for example, before sending students for an exchange programme, they can be acquainted with the culture of 'Other', they may have a preparatory language and culture course. The last approach mentioned by Byram is an independent study of culture. As one can easily notice, the approaches are not mutually exclusive, but assuming that ICC is of a developmental nature, they can complement one another.

3. SOCIO-CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO ICC DEVELOPMENT

The recent approach to ICC development recommended in the context of FL education is based on the socio-constructivist paradigm (Siek-Piskozub 2006). It enriches more traditional approaches to FL teaching with learning by doing such activities as simulations, role-plays, language and cultural portfolios, intercultural projects, case studies etc. (see e.g., CEFR 2001: 131-156, Bandura 2007). Such activities enable skill development and thanks to reflection can bring about awareness of one's attitudes. The approach allows also for adopting the 5Cs approach to culture. I have applied the activity theory (AT) (Engeström 1987), which is a meta-theory rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) constructivism, for the planning and analysis of my ICC seminars.

Vygotsky [1896-1934] introduced a triangular model of "a complex, mediated act" expressed by 'subject', 'object' and 'mediating artefact'. Unlike Piaget (1960), who looked at the cognitive development of an individual devoid of any social context, Vygotsky introduced the concept of cultural means without which the individual could not be understood. His model

suggests that humans interact with their environment with tools and cultural artefacts that mediate efforts to achieve certain goals. The mediating artefacts are tools and signs used in the process of mediations. For example, as signs one can treat a language or any other symbolic system (Vygotsky 1978: 40). Vygotsky also introduced the concept of a zone of proximal development (ZPD) by which he meant what a child/learner can do assisted by a more knowledgeable other and which he/she would be incapable of doing by him/herself (Vygotsky 1978: 86). He emphasised that "an essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (Vygotsky 1978: 90).

Vygotsky's ideas were further developed in the works of his collaborators and followers and are included in Engeström's model (1987). Engeström incorporated some of the factors discussed by Vygotsky's colleagues into a complex triangular model. Drawing on Ilyenkov's (1977) concept of internal contradictions, as the driving force of development and change in activity systems, Engeström envisaged four types of contradictions, which mark the inherent imbalances and tensions in human activity and constitute a critical aspect of the activity theory. Identifying contradictions in an activity system allows for the consideration of potential opportunities for growth and transformation within the activity system. The primary contradictions may appear within each constituent component of the system, the secondary contradictions may appear between the corners of its triangles (its components), the tertiary contradictions concern introducing the object and motive of a culturally more advanced form of the central activity into the dominant form of the central activity, and the quaternary contradictions require that we take into consideration the essential neighbour activities, i.e., the ones which produce the key instruments for the central activity (e.g., language, rule-producing activities) (Engeström 1987).
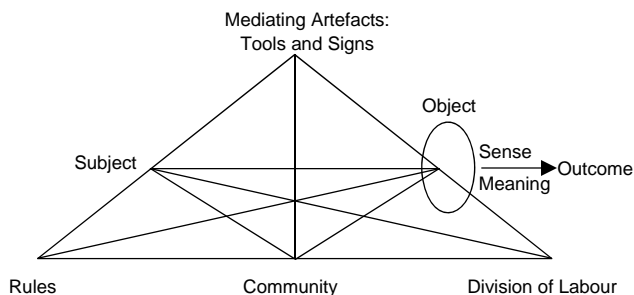

Figure 1. Engeström's model of activity (1987: 78)

As we can see from the model (see Figure 1), all the factors are interconnected forming a big triangle including smaller triangles at the intersections. Thus, apart from Vygotsky's three components, which form the tip of Engeström's triangle, there are 'rules', 'community' and 'division of labour'. Additionally the 'object' factor has been elaborated upon, as the final 'outcome' results from the meaning attached by the objectives targeted by different activities/experiences, which as a result form an expanding circle.

4. AT APPLIED IN PRE-SERVICE EFL TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

4.1. Components of the system

To have an insight into the educational context, I will first describe each of the components of Engeström's model as applied by me.

The subject component comprises me as the teacher and my students as individuals:
- *academic teacher*: 43 years' experience in EFL teaching and educating EFL teachers, active member in an international association, experience in applied linguistics research,
- *students*: BA graduates in English as a foreign Language (EFL), specialising in EFL teaching, graduates from FL teachers colleges, higher vocational schools or universities enrolled on an elective ICC course and/or ERASMUS exchange students from different countries.

Mediating tools component includes:
- English as the language of communication in class,
- students' potential prior intercultural experience (e.g., participating in exchange programmes, studying abroad),
- two educational packages: *All different all equal: education pack* (Brander et al. 1995), *Intercultural learning kit (*Martinet, Taylor 2000),
- traditional and online resources on language competence, models of intercultural competence, and approaches to teaching culture in the EFL context (referring to e.g., Chomsky 1965, Hymes 1972, Canale, Swain 1980, Hofstede 1991, Bennett 1993a and b, Weaver 1993, Byram 1997 and Bandura 2007).

Regulations that guided the seminar come from:
- The syllabus of the seminar which students got acquainted with before the course enrolment. This specified the roles that each student would have to assume during the course; namely of an active participant in interactive tasks run in class, of an EFL teacher implementing ICC

activities in a class of EFL learners (workshop/microteaching), and a member of a team-project on a selected topic. They were also expected to meet deadlines for presentations of the team-projects and for running workshops.

- Roles imposed by the tasks (e.g., in a simulation of an intercultural conflict assuming an assigned role in the conflict).
- Social rules which, with Erasmus students from other cultures, sometimes needed negotiation.

The *community* is made up of:

- the academic teacher and her students in the seminar,
- other teaching staff,
- Polish society in general,
- other ethnic groups, if students come from abroad.

The *division of labour* component deals with responsibilities shared among all the participants of the seminar, which are as follows:

- the teacher planned the syllabus and located the key resources (teaching materials), monitored students' performance, facilitated (if needed) activities, participated in the discussions, evaluated students' performance (i.e., introducing and running the task, giving a presentation on the theoretical issues), evaluated the ICC development of individuals at the beginning and at the end of the course,
- each student participated in a team project on a selected topic, prepared and ran a workshop targeting prospective EFL teachers' ICC development, participated in the activities run by other student-teachers, self-evaluated his/her ICC development (mind-maps and questionnaires),
- teams worked in- and off-class on the selected topic for a presentation, prepared a report on their teamwork, and evaluated the presentations of their colleagues' team projects.

Object(s) are the teaching/learning objectives specified by the tasks and related to the components of Byram's ICC model. They refer to:

- knowledge gained from preparing a presentation and listening to the presentations by other teams. The topics of the presentations included: i. Evolution of the concepts of language competence, ii. Models of (inter)cultural competence; iii. Approaches to teaching culture,
- skills developed because of participating in the workshops run by the student teachers on ICC issues (e.g., coping with culturally challenging situations, sharing opinions, showing interest in the opinions of others, identifying stereotypes, recognising prejudice and discrimination, negotiating solutions to problems),

- attitude resulting from the reflection upon the activity (e.g., openness to other ideas and cultures, responsibility for mutual understanding).

The final o*utcome* of the seminar concerned the overall students' ICC development observed by me as their teacher and also assessed with two tools, i.e., entry and final mind maps of the term ICC designed by the students, and a questionnaire self-evaluating the student's ICC filled in before the course and reanalysed by them at its end. What was noted referred to:

- higher level of ICC knowledge as seen on the mind-maps designed before and after the course,
- higher awareness of one's own achievements and limitations at ICC level resulting from the reflection based on the comparison of the questionnaire filled in before and after the course,
- skills of designing, running and evaluating ICC activities in the EFL class observed by the teacher;
- further development of teaching skills (autonomy, team work, creativity) observed by the teacher,
- developing a more open attitude to cultural differences observed by the teacher and reported in the questionnaires.

4.2. Contradictions

One of the possibilities for ICC research within the AT model is to observe contradictions. Out of the four types envisaged by Engeström, I will concentrate only on some primary and secondary contradictions.

Referring to the *primary contradictions*, i.e., the ones concerning variety and conflicts within the components, several observations were made by me. What could be noticed at the very beginning of the seminar was that individual students had different levels of awareness concerning their understanding of the concept of ICC as revealed by the entry mind-maps of associations with the term (the lowest number of associations was 0 the highest 23). Also the entry questionnaires in which they were to self-evaluate their ICC skills revealed diversity (cf., Siek-Piskozub 2015). The creativity of individual students in designing tasks for their workshops, as observed by me as their teacher, was varied too. Some students strictly relied on the suggestions from the education packs' tasks, others were adjusting the tasks to the local context by, for example, adding the role of an additional member to emphasise family influences on an individual in the decision making process, or designing props, which made the activity attractive to their colleagues. Their teaching skills were also on different levels. While some felt

confident in running their workshops and in reflecting upon its content, others had to be stimulated by me through questions that I asked them or suggestions of alternative conclusions that could be drawn from the experience. When we had students from the Erasmus exchange programme in a class, an even bigger diversity could be observed. The foreign students expressed their opinions, which were rooted in their culture, provided justification by introducing some facts concerning their country, and they also showed interest in Polish culture. As a result, in groups where there were foreign students (Community) there were more heated discussions after the tasks but also the students were becoming more aware of cultural diversity. The willingness to communicate in English was also of different levels when considering individual students, particularly at the beginning of the course. Some students had to be nominated to express their opinions, while others had no reservations about revealing sometimes really very private facts.

Referring to the *outcome* component, the greatest impact of participating in the seminar could be observed in those students whose awareness and skills were the lowest. They enriched their ICC mind-maps with new concepts and also indicated the interdependence of some factors. For example, while initially they separated components of the language competence (aspects of the system, skills) and the target culture knowledge, at the end, they showed connections and a more holistic view of culture and cultural differences. Furthermore, they became more critical of their ICC level which could be noticed in the self-re-evaluation ICC questionnaires. Towards the end of the seminar, the student teachers were becoming more autonomous, and all the students participating in the tasks showed more willingness to communicate their opinions, observations and/or prior experiences. They were also more careful of expressing opinions on challenging issues avoiding radical evaluations.

Taking *secondary contradictions* into consideration, i.e., the ones which may appear between the corners of its triangles (its components), it struck me how the attitudes of students to 'other' changed in the course of the seminar as a result of participating in simulations offered by the education packages (Student – Mediating tools – Outcomes). It concerned the language skills and attitudes in coping with 'otherness' as targeted by the teaching objectives of the seminar and the roles imposed by the task described in the education pack. I could observe that, for example, in groups in which the activity called "Guess who's coming to dinner?" (Brander et al. 1995: 87-9) was introduced at the beginning of the programme, the students assuming the role of an authoritarian and xenophobic parent who was against their daughter's decision to marry a black/Muslim boy-friend of whom the family had not heard of before, had no difficulty in expressing their ideas using

words that one could hear from people who used to be xenophobic. However, when the activity was introduced closer to the end of the course, during the reflection phase, the role-players confessed that it had been difficult for them to express ideas and opinions, which they did not share themselves (Subjects – Rules imposed by the Mediating tools – Rules of a desirable Outcome).

5. CONCLUSIONS

I can conclude from my experience that foreign language teachers may and should be prepared to act as cultural mediators during their pre-service education programmes. This confirms Romanowski's (2011) experience with training students studying English philology in one of the State Higher Schools of Vocational Education in Poland. However, what I find important is to start with identifying their real level of ICC competence at the beginning of the course to adjust the programme to the needs of the participants (to establish the zone of proximal development) and also to use their prior knowledge in the activities. Such a course should aim not only at developing cultural knowledge, which in foreign language education typically refers to learning about the target culture, but of equal, if not even bigger, importance are the skills which assist in communicating with interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds and an open attitude towards difference. To develop intercultural skills, one needs direct experience of a cross-cultural nature. Such experience can be simulated even in countries like Poland with a dominant Polish culture. Education packages designed for that purpose may be initially of help but they also stimulate the educators' creativity leading to implementing their own ideas.

A course for prospective teachers should also aim at showing them how ICC can be developed in their future language classrooms and at providing them with an opportunity to do so in microteaching. If culturally challenging situations are simulated in a friendly environment of the classroom and then analysed with the help of the real teacher, students (prospective FL teachers) may not be afraid of introducing such activities in their own context in the future. They also become more aware of the problem and may anticipate potential situations endangered by miscommunication.

The AT theory described above is a helpful framework for planning and also for assessing ICC programmes. One can anticipate contradictions more easily and take them into account while running it.

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