Developing intercultural communicative competence through task-based language teaching

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Abstract

 Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is a vital set of skills for any participant in intercultural communication, which naturally includes foreign-language teachers, translators and interpreters. In university programs training such professionals, ICC development can be incorporated into practical language courses (among others). This paper proposes using Skehan’s “weak” form of task-based language teaching (TBLT) to develop learners’ ICC while maintaining a focus on idiomatic target-language production. As an example of this approach, the author presents a roleplay activity where students practice a challenging intercultural communication task: helping an international student to navigate a situation fraught with potential cultural differences and misunderstandings.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, task-based language teaching, roleplay, empathy, hedging

**1 Developing intercultural communicative competence in the foreign-language classroom**

For foreign-language teachers, translators and interpreters to do their jobs properly, they must be sufficiently acquainted with the cultures associated with the languages they work with (Byram’s “minimum content”; see Byram, 1993, p. 31). In Slovakia, as in many other countries, this is widely understood by higher-education institutions, demonstrated by the inclusion of cultural studies (called *reálie* in Slovak) in university programs that train teachers, translators and interpreters of foreign languages. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize the importance of **inter**cultural communicative competence (ICC) (Byram, 2020, p. 27), i.e. those skills **apart from** specific cultural knowledge and language proficiency that allow one to engage in successful intercultural communication.

Students at UMB have a variety of opportunities to develop their ICC through hands-on, practical experience with intercultural communication, including the Erasmus Student Network’s (ESN) Buddy System, where local students take incoming Erasmus+ students under their wing, helping to acquaint them with the institutional and cultural specifics of their new setting. The benefits of such a program for all involved are clear. The classroom, however, can also be a venue for improving such competencies, helping students to prepare for or reflect on their practical experiences with intercultural communication.

My colleagues from the Department of Professional Communication in Business at UMB’s Economics Faculty, such as Anna Zelenková and Dana Benčiková, have devoted a great deal of scholarly work to ICC development specifically for the needs of business students and professionals, while also recognizing the necessity of developing such skills among students of other fields (Zelenková, 2010, p. 10).

Various means of teaching ICC have been proposed, many of which are appropriate for practical foreign-language courses. These means include literature, a particularly effective tool according to Michael D. Palmer, as “the effect of identification that occurs as a reader becomes absorbed in a story permits a kind of cross-cultural empathy not easily achieved by other means.” Empathy, a key component of ICC (Byram, 2020, p. 44, p. 129), can also be cultivated through roleplays, a variety of which are presented by Slovak scholar Eva Reid (Reid, 2015, pp. 942–943), as well as the “simulation method” recommended by Zelenková (Zelenková, 2010, pp. 79–90). Incorporating such activities into a larger series of interconnected activities, such as reading, listening, and brainstorming, can serve to further enhance students’ sense of empathy by creating an interactive, long-form narrative with recurring characters.

In this paper, I present a roleplay activity as an example of a way to cultivate students’ ICC while fulfilling the more traditional didactic aim of developing their foreign-language proficiency and their ability to accomplish specific communicative tasks in a foreign language.

**2 Task-based language learning and intercultural communicative competence**

 The concept of task-based language teaching (TBLT) is nothing new, having been proposed by N. S. Prabhu in 1987, but like many teaching methods, its integration into practice has been slow and inconsistent. In their 2010 study, John L. Plews and Kangxian Zhao note language teachers’ reluctance to use TBLT, as well as its flawed implementation among those who do use it. They conclude that “The challenge for TBLT is not teachers or even the complexity of the approach, but rather **its dissemination**.” (Plews & Zhao, 2010, p. 56, my emphasis). Furthermore, Peter Skehan warns that TBLT may reinforce unidiomatic usage by encouraging learners to focus purely on accomplishing the task rather than on the language they use (Skehan, 1996, p. 41). For future foreign-language teachers, translators and interpreters, acquiring idiomatic target-language usage is a major priority, which leads me to prefer what Skehan terms the “weak” form of TBLT, a more conservative version which balances a focus on task fulfillment with an emphasis on specific target language (ibid., p. 39).

**3** **A task-based activity for developing intercultural communicative competence**

 As an example of the approach described above, I here present a task-based activity of my own devising for the development of ICC. Using the terms and approach recommended by Eva Homolová (2018), I have defined the following aims for the activity:

Linguistic aim: Active use of hedging expressions, e.g. modal verbs.

Communicative aim: Offering sensitive constructive criticism.

Formative aim: Development of intercultural communicative competence, specifically empathy.

***3.1 Shevek’s semester abroad***

At the start of the activity, the teacher gives a dramatic reading of the text below. Meanwhile, students are instructed to note down every faux pas (a term previously introduced to them) they hear.

*Shevek, a student from Antarctica, has come via Erasmus+ to study at your university for one semester. He speaks English fluently, but it’s his first time outside Antarctica. You have volunteered to be his “buddy”.*

*In the two weeks since his arrival, Shevek has shown himself to be a kind, outgoing fellow, taking great interest in your culture and quickly making friends with you and several of your classmates. He’s trying his best to adapt to local customs, but he’s still learning.*

*Yesterday, however, Shevek attended your classmate Andrea’s birthday party and made several “faux pas”. First of all, he arrived one hour early, dressed in nothing but a pair of penguin-skin shorts. Upon seeing Andrea, he said, “Please accept my condolences, Andrea. You’re one year older and closer to death.” Then Shevek turned to her boyfriend, bowed deeply, said “****Ruky bozkávam!****” and kissed both of his hands.*

*Over the next hour, before the other guests arrived, Shevek proceeded to give himself a tour of Andrea’s home, paying particular attention to the bathroom medicine cabinet. “Quite an impressive collection!” he noted.*

*After the other guests arrived and it was time for Andrea’s birthday cake, he saw the lit candles and immediately poured Kofola on them, yelling, “Fire!” The guests were speechless. Then he started opening Andrea’s presents, one by one. The first was a bottle of French perfume, which he promptly poured into little glasses. He said, “****Na zdravie!****” drank up his glass, and looked confused when no one else did. “But it’s excellent cognac!” he said.*

*It’s now the day after the party, and you’ve decided to sit down with Shevek for a chat. Can you help him? What should and shouldn’t he do at a birthday party in your country?*

After listening and taking notes, the printed-out text is distributed to the students, and in pairs, they check to see if they identified all the faux pas, underlining them in the text.

***3.2 Pre-task: Offering culturally sensitive constructive criticism***

The students watch LeeAnn Renninger’s “The Secret to Giving Great Feedback”[[1]](#footnote-1), which contains helpful tips on both giving feedback (for Shevek’s buddy) and receiving/eliciting feedback (for Shevek himself).

The teacher then presents insensitive, judgmental expressions and elicits more sensitive alternatives with a focus on both effectiveness and idiomaticity:

* Instead of saying “You should have…”, focus on future improvement, e.g.

*Next time/In the future try (not) to…
Next time, it might be a good idea to…
You may want to consider…
One thing you might want to try is…*

* Instead of asking “Why did(n’t) you*…*?”, assume Shevek’s best intentions and explain his mistake, e.g. *I know you meant well, but…*
* Instead of saying “What were you thinking?”, express curiosity about Shevek’s culture, e.g. *How do people [e.g. dress for a party] in your country?*
* Instead of saying “That was really insensitive!”, explain the way his actions might be received, e.g. *People might misinterpret that as…*

Students practice making specific suggestions, e.g. instead of “You should have worn a shirt,” use “Next time, make sure to wear shoes, trousers **and** a shirt to a gathering.” In addition to the specific target language, the teacher encourages students to avoid premature judgements and give Shevek the benefit of the doubt.

***3.3 The roleplay***

The teacher assigns each student one of two roles: 1. Shevek’s buddy or 2. Shevek. Using the presented target language, the buddies (Role 1) then plan what they will say to Shevek. Meanwhile, the Sheveks (Role 2) should brainstorm aspects of (imaginary) Antarctic culture that could have led to the misunderstandings in the story and plan their responses accordingly. Alternatively, the teacher can give prompts to the Sheveks or, in smaller groups, take the role of Shevek themselves, allowing all the students to focus on the target task and language.

Once the students are prepared, they act out the roleplay in their assigned roles, either in pairs or as a group with the teacher in the role of Shevek. This is followed by a reflection phase: “Shevek: How did your buddy’s feedback make you feel? Buddies: How would you improve your communication next time?” The roleplay can then be repeated, potentially with roles reversed, allowing students to further practice the target language and communication skills.

***3.4 Post-task discussion***

The teacher presents students with the following question, allowing them time to prepare and discuss their answers: “Based on Shevek’s responses, what can you infer about Antarctic culture and values?” If students are familiar with cultural taxonomies, this can be an opportunity to apply and review those concepts as well: “What differences are there between your culture and Antarctic culture in terms of categories like formality/informality, punctuality, directness/indirectness, privacy, views of aging/death, taboos, gender-dependent behavior etc.?”

This discussion is key to encouraging students to, as Byram puts it, “use [their] skills of empathy and [their] linguistic competence in order to understand the structure and coherence of another variety of values and behaviours” (Byram, 2020, p. 127)[[2]](#footnote-2).

**4 Activity commentary**

Like every teaching tool, this activity should be adapted by the teacher for the specific context and their students’ needs. The following commentary describes specific aspects that teachers should consider adapting.

***4.1 Culturally specific phenomena***

Culturally specific items are printed **in bold** in the story; by replacing these (and others) with phenomena from students’ native culture(s), the teacher can offer their students opportunities to use their own knowledge, as cultural insiders, to help Shevek.

In one of Benčiková’s activities exploring stereotypes and generalizations, she uses imaginary countries (*Xanadia* and *Ynlandia*) as neutral examples (Benčiková, 2007, p. 73). Aiming for a similar neutrality and broad applicability, I have opted for Antarctica as Shevek’s place of origin. Teachers can assume that students have a general knowledge of the real yet uninhabited continent, and this basic familiarity creates a convenient basis for them to envision and elaborate an imaginary home culture for their version of Shevek.

***4.2 The name “Shevek”***

The name “Shevek” is a reference to the protagonist of Ursula LeGuin’s 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*, the story of a man visiting a foreign planet and his struggle to come to terms with its very different values, societal organization and culture. Michael D. Palmer highlights the suitability of this particular novel, as well as other works by LeGuin, as a “tool for cross-cultural thinking and teaching” (Palmer, 1989, p. 31). Naturally I don’t expect all students to pick up on this reference, but on the other hand, it suggests the rich possibilities of combining literature and roleplays to cultivate ICC. Students could, for example, read a literary work about an intercultural encounter and then roleplay as one or more of the characters.

***4.3 Hedging***

Most of my suggestions for sensitive language employ hedging (e.g. the modal verbs *may* and *might*) to mitigate the potential discomfort caused by negative feedback. Hedging is an important pragmatic aspect of language for learners to acquire (Fraser, 2010, p. 33), but they should also be aware that it comes at the cost of a certain vagueness (ibid., p. 25) which could cause misunderstandings, especially in lingua-franca situations such as this one. Foreign-language teacher, translator and interpreter trainees should be encouraged to consciously consider what level of hedging vs. directness is appropriate for their interlocutors/audience.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have presented a practical example of an activity that uses the “weak” form of task-based language teaching to develop intercultural communicative competence. I hope it will serve as an inspiration, or at least a jumping-off point, for other educators.

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Resumé

 Interkultúrna komunikačná kompetencia (ICC) predstavuje súbor zručností, ktoré sú nevyhnutné pre akéhokoľvek účastníka interkultúrnej komunikácie, vrátane budúcich učiteľov cudzích jazykov ako aj prekladateľov a tlmočníkov. V rámci študijných programov, ktoré pripravujú takýchto odborníkov, existuje možnosť zakomponovať vývoj ICC aj do predmetov praktického jazyka. Tento príspevok navrhuje použitie „slabej“ formy (podľa P. Skehana) vyučovania cudzieho jazyka zameraného na riešenie úloh (TBLT) s cieľom rozvíjať ICC takým spôsobom, aby sa zachoval dôraz na vývoj aktívneho použitia štandardných jazykových prostriedkov. Ako príklad tohto prístupu autor uvádza aktivitu, kde študenti hrajú roly vyžadujúce citlivú komunikáciu: poradiť cudziemu študentovi, ako sa správať v situácii nabitej potenciálnymi kultúrnymi rozdielmi a komunikačnými nedorozumeniami.

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1. https://www.ted.com/talks/leeann\_renninger\_the\_secret\_to\_giving\_great\_feedback [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note that Byram is careful to distinguish this endeavor from moral relativizing (Byram, 2020, pp. 124–130). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)