

# Learning a culture and a foreign language at school – aspects of intercultural learning

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## INTRODUCTION

This article is based on the project 'Culture and Foreign Language Learning' consisting of a two years' teaching experiment with Finnish upper secondary school pupils and the action research on the experiment. The research was hermeneutic, its purpose being to understand what occurred in the teaching experiment and how the pupils understood the substance and the learning of it. In accordance with the principles of action research the teachers and researchers were the same persons. It was therefore possible to get closer to understanding qualitatively what may have happened in the minds of the learners.

The research had the following main targets:

1. to understand better the concept of culture and some other relating concepts, such as intercultural learning, intercultural understanding, intercultural communication and intercultural encountering;
2. to plan a teaching experiment in foreign language teaching focusing on intercultural learning;
3. to describe a teaching experiment with accuracy;
4. to report how the individual learners' conceptions of culture have changed during the two years' period;
5. to discuss the teaching methodology appropriate to guiding young people towards intercultural learning of a foreign language at school.

The qualitative research methodology made it possible to explore the learners' understanding of their thinking and intercultural learning process more deeply. The research material was collected in the following ways:

1. The documents of the most important learner outcomes were collected in the two years period. The researchers received various kinds of written materials and video-recordings of classroom work.

2. The teachers kept personal journals of their work and their pupils' work.
3. The pupils kept personal journals of their actions in certain periods and reflected on what they did and learnt alone and in small groups.
4. All pupils were interviewed about their learning process and experiences on intercultural learning three times during the teaching experiment. The interviews were carried out by both the teachers and the researchers.

The conclusions and results presented in this paper are based on the analysis and interpretation of the above mentioned material all of which was at the disposal of the researchers.

## BACKGROUND TO INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

Educational institutions in most European countries, including Finland, have tried to guide their school children to understand 'foreignness' and dissimilarity in societies. People long ago realised the importance of education to peace and international understanding in all levels of education and in all school subjects. It is in this context that new concepts like 'intercultural learning', 'intercultural understanding' and 'interculturalism' were adopted. The reason was that more and more frequently people meet representatives of other cultures and they stay in a culturally different environment for longer periods of time or even permanently. In many countries intercultural learning is related to situations where people speaking different languages, with different looks, customs and values, live side by side. This is true especially in countries which have problems with immigrants and refugees. In those societies interculturalism is commonplace and concrete in one's own life. The situation in Finland with a rather monolithic culture, has been different during the past decades. For this reason Finns tend to see interculturalism from another perspective be-

**"The pupils kept personal journals"**

cause they haven't been exposed to great 'foreignness'.

## FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

The school in Finland has also tried to respond in many ways to the objectives of interculturalism by emphasising internationalisation and tolerance. After the lower level of the comprehensive school, studying is based on different subjects, and therefore teaching interculturalism is linked with the objectives of the subject in question and the knowledge and background of the teacher concerned. As regards foreign languages, 'foreignness' has been part of the subject matter.

Languages differ by their nature in many respects. However, paying attention solely to the differences between languages has been approached as a system; vocabulary has been studied by labelling the words of the foreign language with the meanings of the mother tongue; pupils have listened to the foreign language in order to pick up information and so on. In this situation learning has not gone beyond formal learning. Intercultural learning means, however, that the individual should learn to understand the intentions and expectations of the representative of a foreign culture. The learner should realise that linguistic communication is only part of global communication and that in every language there are elements which belong to the automatic, ritual and routine component of a native speaker's behaviour. It is these elements the learner should learn and know how to analyse. In addition to this, he should gradually know how to express his own aspirations and intentions in a foreign language. It makes no sense to limit foreign language learning just to studying, for example, a language system because we are dealing with a very complex learning process associated with social and communicative dimensions. In our research 'Culture and Foreign Language Learning' we have tried to

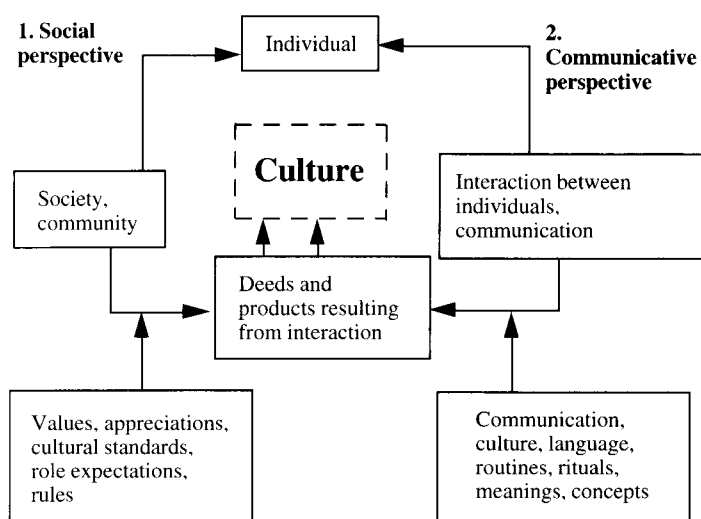
find out whether and how deep this type of learning process can be achieved at school and what the methods would be like.

## CULTURE – A BASIC CONCEPT IN INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

Culture being perhaps the most crucial concept in our research, it is necessary to define it the way we have understood it. We have tried to see culture both from the point of view of different disciplines and from the point of view of the learner's everyday life. As a consequence we have come to a wide description of culture which combines both social and communicative aspects and the theory of learning. Culture as a concept derives its strength from the situation where there is communication and interaction between individuals on the one hand, and from the communities resulting from this activity on the other. Communities organised in the form of a state are called societies. In this view we can describe culture as in Figure 1, which shows the behaviour patterns resulting from interaction and communication as well as the meanings which result from common acceptance within a community. The concept of culture should be approached from two angles. First, there is the perspective of the theory of society which seeks explanation for cultural phenomena in the social order of society. Durkheim, Weber, Parsons, Habermas and Münch among others represent this view. Second, we should always study culture from the perspective of action and communication theories. Culture guides the individual's action through the interactive process and offers him orientation in the shape of background expectations and cognitive models. Phenomenology, ethnomethodology and cognitive anthropology represent this viewpoint. Concepts, meanings and communication are not just linguistic activity but they result from wider semiotisation in which there are many more components than just a verbal communication system (Loenhoff 1992). In this way we can see the role of norms, rules, expectations, routines, ritualised behaviour, i.e. the cultural standards of commonly accepted good behaviour within a community including both verbal and nonverbal communication. In addition, one's own and alien view of culture and thereby prejudice, stereotypes and clichés play a role in the reality of society.

Culture is learned in and through communication, in interaction with other people. Similarly, the individual also learns the fundamentals of culture such as language, cultural standards, behaviour routines and communication rituals in interaction with others within a community. It is the question of communication strategies and behaviour norms the members of a community have agreed upon, and which become automatic in their use. Because people act as members of society, culture too has its manifestations in action and language in accor-

Figure 1 The role of culture, community and communication



dance with the agreement of society. It is obvious that the relationship between individual, society, interaction, language and culture is so complex that it is difficult to divide it in small parts.

The individual is always a member of a community, society and its subcommunity. In this community he has a need to interact and communicate with other members. All this goes to make up the kind of activity that we are here calling 'culture'. It is defined by the two factors: community and the need for interaction. The situation gives birth to the use of language (everyday communication, literature, arts as a form of visual communication) as well as to cultural institutions, such as home, family, school, church etc. There would be no culture without the individual, his communication and community. The definition of culture would then be according to Nicklas (1991) and Kaikkonen (1991) as follows:

'Culture is a common agreement between the members of a community on the values, norms, rules, role expectations and meanings which guide the behaviour and communication of the members. Furthermore, it includes the deeds and products which result from the interaction between the members'.

This is how culture can be defined from the individual and community point of view.

## PROCESSES OF INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

It is as a member of a community that the individual learns his culture. But even within a community, individuals experience the surrounding world differently. Their interpretation of surrounding reality is different, even though they represent the same community. That is why their learning, i.e. the process of making sense of and possessing the world, takes different forms and meanings. Therefore our starting point in the research is the learner's previous knowledge, experience, beliefs and ideas. Part of the whole picture is the fact that the learners are Finns and their mother tongue is Finnish. Their picture of the world is influenced by Finnish society, its cultural standards and the Finnish language. We were conscious, when starting the project, of the fact that their experiences of 'foreignness', foreign countries and people were not similar. In the process of intercultural learning the learner constantly compares new experiences with those of his mother tongue, and new information with old information etc. In other words, intercultural learning is a process where the learner's picture of culture grows wider, with the help of new information about foreign culture and language, increasing at the same time the consciousness of the special features of one's own culture and language.

According to the basic idea of our research, teaching should form an entity where the learner's picture of the world labelled by his own culture develops into a multicultural picture of the world. Of course we understand that, from the learner's point of view, none of the stages are in unbroken succession but analysing them separately clarifies the process. We have tried to create learning situations where all the stages were present. There are four stages which are to be taken into consideration in interculturally oriented language learning (Figure 3):

1. The learner should be sensitised to those phenomena we are interested in, especially foreign phenomena.
2. The learner should be instructed to observe foreign culture and its phenomena, and made to compare the observed foreign phenomena with those of his own culture.
3. The learner gets information about the foreign language and foreign cultural standards and compares them with the functioning of his own language and his own cultural standards.
4. This is the process where new meanings get a shape, building on the basis of the first three stages, and this eventually leads to a successful communication and interaction with the representatives of a foreign culture.

A further important process in our study is the making of observations. We understand that the learner, when making observations, anchors them

**" their experiences of 'foreignness', foreign countries and people were not similar"**

Figure 2 Widening of the learner's picture of culture and its components

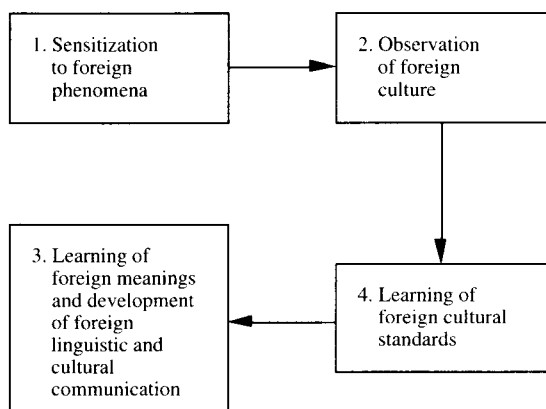
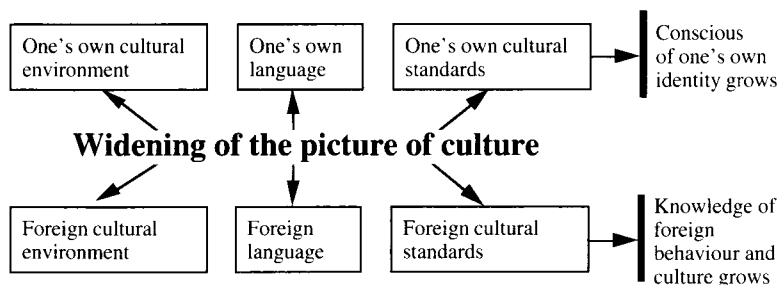


Figure 3 Different stages of intercultural learning



in his earlier observations, meanings and concepts. To this end the pupils were instructed to make observations consciously with the help of special observation assignments. The observations were based on a text, pictorial material or tapes and were part of a project. Then they reflected on their observations and made hypotheses about foreign phenomena. Later, the hypotheses were verified – or falsified – by means of a discussion or information obtained in another way. For this purpose the pupils met face to face with a native speaker. The most significant phase was the study visit to the foreign country and the visit of the foreign student group to Finland. We wanted to make the verification and falsification processes really conscious to the pupils, though we understand that the processes also take place subconsciously. The entries in the reflective journals the pupils made during their stay in the foreign country show that they really did reflect on their observations and experiences.

## ON THE TEACHING EXPERIMENT AND ITS RESULTS

The teaching experiment consisted of five courses, 38 lessons each, of French and German in the upper secondary or high schools level. Thirty pupils took part in it and they had studied some 160 lessons of the language in question. Each course contained certain culturally connected themes which gave the framework for the study of language and culture. During the third course, the study visit both to France and Germany took place. During the stay, each pupil lived alone with her/his host family and carried out daily observational and linguistic assignments. They kept a reflective journal and reflected either individually or in a group on their experiences. The pupils were given a relatively free hand as regards how they spent their free time with their young friends in the foreign country.

During all the five courses, we considered the role of the teaching material very carefully and used the publisher's materials only when it was relevant. We used quite a lot of video-recordings as illustrative material and the pupils got an extra folder in which to keep the material they had prepared. The pupils kept their reflective journal only during certain periods of time. Entering their experiences into the journal was difficult for the pupils in many respects, partly because this approach was new to them. The pupils' view of learning didn't correspond to the view they were being directed towards, involving a move towards learner autonomy and the idea that learning is not only a cognitive process. The view that learning is directed from outside and based on getting information seems to be so deeply rooted that changes in the desired direction are bound to be slow. Intercultural learning, meeting and understanding foreignness together with acting in foreign situations, demand another kind of approach and acting as a whole person.

An important part of the teaching experiment was the pupils' projects during the courses. They were linked to a certain theme, such as living, eating, living in town or countryside, etc. The pupils worked in small groups, sought information, evaluated it, simulated foreign situation and presented their own projects to the others. The projects also involved visits by a Frenchman and a German to the classroom. Within the framework of their project, the pupils designed a questionnaire for the pupils of the twin school and got back extensive written material about the young people's ideas on friendship, dating and falling in love. The Finnish pupils considered this material more valuable and authentic, according to our interviews, than the ready-made material. This is only natural because the writers were their friends of the same age who they really knew.

Most students saw that it was during their project work that they had learned significantly. They felt that was important to deal with a theme over a longer period of time and this made the activities novel and closer to them. However, especially in the second year of high school, the pressure of the following year's national matriculation examination was apparent. The pupils criticised the lack of traditional language teaching. Some pupils were worried about whether they learned enough grammar and the 'right' vocabulary from the point of view of the national matriculation examination. They were clearly firm in their belief that the examination is based on publishers' materials.

The action research 'Culture and Foreign Language Learning' has demonstrated the fact that a foreign language has to be studied with its cultural background. Moreover it has become clear that the foreign language learning as a traditional school subject can only to some extent help pupils to grow towards intercultural understanding and intercultural learning. It is obvious that in all school subjects pupils have been guided to consider other people, be pluralistic, and think globally. According to this approach, however, in order to achieve intercultural learning, the curriculum of all school subjects should be developed in the direction which includes all the basic fundamentals of intercultural learning: (a) an individual's own culture, his own cultural behaviour, and his own language on the one hand, and (b) foreign cultures, strange behaviour, and foreign languages on the other. So familiarity and 'foreignness' are the experiences the pupils should be exposed to constantly at school.

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