

Development of the Intercultural Competence in the Initial Foreign Language Teacher Education

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Received November 29, 2022; Revised January 20, 2023; Accepted February 6, 2023

Cite This Paper in the Following Citation Styles

(a): [1] Sandra Mardešić, "Development of the Intercultural Competence in the Initial Foreign Language Teacher Education," *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 32 - 39, 2023. DOI: 10.13189/ujer.2023.110202.

(b): Sandra Mardešić (2023). *Development of the Intercultural Competence in the Initial Foreign Language Teacher Education*. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 11(2), 32 - 39. DOI: 10.13189/ujer.2023.110202.

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Abstract The contemporary research in initial teacher education is oriented towards development of student-teachers' teaching competences through the reflective approach and experiential learning. In Croatia, in the context of changes in teacher education at the university level within the 'Bologna reform process', a new competence-development curriculum was introduced in initial foreign language teacher education. The development of foreign language teacher competences and their components within the new university curriculum were examined through the application of the reflective approach and a new instrument, the European portfolio for foreign language teachers. The participants in this study were 66 student-teachers of English, French, and Italian from three Croatian universities. Research was conducted during the practical part of their education in Croatian schools. A mixed research method was applied. It included a quantitative analysis of students' self-evaluations of gained competences according to the descriptors in the portfolio and a qualitative analysis of a semi-structured interview with the participants about their experiences in working with a portfolio. The results of this research show that new foreign language teacher education programs do not sufficiently develop certain components of teacher competences such as the intercultural competence. Even though this component is stressed in the ministerial programs for foreign language teaching in public schools and it is formally included in the university curriculums, the students seem to fail to recognize the connection between language and culture and are more oriented towards teaching methodology of reading, listening, speaking and writing.

Keywords Reflective Approach, Foreign Language Teaching, Portfolio, Initial Teacher Education

1. Introduction

The contemporary research in initial teacher education is oriented towards development of the student's or future teacher's teaching competences through the reflective approach and experiential learning [1, 2, 3, 4]. Since the so-called "Bologna reform" was implemented in all European universities, Croatian universities involved in initial foreign language teacher education have introduced a new foreign language (FL) teaching competence development curriculum. However, the process of formative or summative evaluation of the development of these competences has not yet been successfully examined, neither at the state, nor at the university level.

Contemporary research indicates that the process of self-evaluation, through compiling teaching portfolios and reflective essays, has potential benefits in raising students' awareness of the complexity of the "learning to teach" process, and at the same time, can give teacher educators valuable feedback on necessary changes in their syllabi [5, 6].

By testing the application of a reflective instrument for such a formative form of evaluation, the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Foreign Language [7], the aim of the research was to determine self-perceived strong and weak points in the development of the categories of teaching competences proposed by the said

instrument (2.2.).

The idea that language and culture we belong to frame our way of thinking and perceiving the world dates from the 19th century [8], and Sapir-Wolf's [9], hypothesis of linguistic relativity. In other words, our native language and culture define strongly our *forma mentis* and the ways we perceive other languages and cultures. For that reason, the contemporary approaches in FL teaching strongly emphasize the component of intercultural competence within the construct of communicative competences as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [10]. The intercultural competence in the said Framework is theoretically largely based on the previously published Byram's [11] model of intercultural competence.

This mayor European document of reference for FL teaching and learning states two types of intercultural knowledge:

- “academic knowledge”, such as main monuments, personalities, literature, cinema, etc., also commonly called “culture capital C”, and
- “experiential knowledge” which includes main values, beliefs of a certain cultures, norms of behavior, public and informal communication, etc.
- Within that construct CEFR [10] distinguishes 4 components of intercultural competence:
- socio-cultural knowledge [10:105] – knowledge of one's own culture and other cultures and their interaction, also called the “academic knowledge”.
- intercultural awareness [10:107] – the ability to interpret, connect, and compare events of one's own culture and other cultures
- heuristic skills [10:111] - the skill of discovering and intercultural acting in intercultural situations
- ability of critical evaluation, i.e. critical cultural awareness of one's own cultural values and the values of other cultures [10:107]

According to Balboni e Caon [12:107] all of the above mentioned components are necessary for a user of FL to be able to interact effectively in the intercultural communicative situations.

Recent changes in the Croatian curricula for teaching foreign languages in public compulsory schools, both primary and secondary, introduced in 2019, also address this component of FL teaching. For example, the curricula for Italian languages give the following definition of intercultural competence [13:107]:

“Intercultural competence includes the ability to understand and communicate with users of speakers of Italian, with different cultural backgrounds [...] which helps the pupil to discard the prejudice and enforces them to prevent discrimination and to help in non-violent resolution of conflicts, and furthermore, it enables the pupil to broaden their view of the world and to participate actively in both narrow and broader communities, and it helps their chances for mobility and employment.”

In conclusion, this particular component over the years has gained much more importance than before, because it includes important educational issues such as tolerance, empathy towards someone different, mutual understanding and intercultural mediation when needed in international/intercultural communication situations.

However, the research results of the intercultural component in FL teaching of the approved textbooks show clearly that in the Croatian educational system still prevails the traditional conceptualization of teaching only the “academic knowledge” in teaching foreign languages in public schools [14,15].

Furthermore, research about student-teachers' attitudes towards the importance of teaching culture and developing intercultural component of students – future teachers of English of the Croatian university of Zadar, conducted before the “Bologna reform” of university curricula showed clearly that the participants evaluated teaching reading, writing, listening and speaking as highly important, giving far less importance to the knowledge of the culture/s of the English language [16]. They clearly stated that the most important thing for future FL teacher is a high level of linguistic competence in respective language, knowing grammar and vocabulary.

Similar results were obtained also with teacher practitioners in Croatia. Breka [17], examining the role of teaching materials for public schools, showed that teachers of English expressed a high level of uncertainty of how to teach the intercultural component. Drandic's research [18] showed no differences in intercultural sensitivity between Croatian teachers in primary and secondary schools, and regardless of the years of teaching, i.e. no differences were obtained between the novice and long-term practitioners.

The reasons for such results should be considered from different perspectives. The first one is the “old” transmission” model of teaching, which sees the teacher as the only source of “academic” knowledge [19] about culture and civilization of a FL. The second perspective refers to general insecurity of student-teachers and novice teachers mostly oriented towards themselves and less to their pupils' needs during the so-called “survival period”, i.e. when they are still beginner teachers [20, 21]. The third reason considers widely spread attitude in FL teaching according to which the most important issue for a FL teacher is to have excellent knowledge of the foreign language itself, above all other components of communicative competences [22]. And the final reason concerns the period of “apprenticeship by observation” [23] as one of the strongest factors in future teaching practices, regardless of the duration and form of the initial teacher education as confirmed by many research results [24, 25].

The above presented results show a lack of research on the importance and level of intercultural component in initial teacher education for Neo-Latin languages, such as Italian and French. All previous research was conducted at only one Croatian university using different methodology and instruments. So, it was necessary to examine the

development of the intercultural component in initial teacher education on three different universities whose curricula are similar but not the same. A group of students, future teachers of English, was also included in order to compare them with the results of previous research.

Another reason for choosing Italian and French is the fact that their cultures are more nation-centered, when compared with English as FL, now considered a global language. In the case of English, the cultural component could potentially be problematic in the perspective of a question that students might have: “Which culture do I teach, British, America etc?”

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Type

In this study we have applied a mixed method research designed to compare the quantitative data, obtained by the numerical self-evaluations on scales described below in 2.2. with qualitative data obtained by a semi-structured interview with participants.

2.2. Instruments and Procedure

The main instrument used was the adapted Croatian version of the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Foreign Language developed by the ECML [7]. The portfolio distinctly separates seven main categories and several subcategories of FL teachers' competences listed below:

- Context (Curriculum, Aims and Needs, The Role of the Language Teacher)
- Methodology (Speaking, Writing, Listening, Reading, Grammar, Vocabulary, Culture)
- Resources
- Lesson Planning (Identification of Learning Objectives, Lesson content, Organization)
- Conducting a Lesson (Using lesson Plans, Content, Interaction with Learners, Classroom Management, Classroom Language)
- Independent Learning (Learner Autonomy)
- Assessment (Designing Assessment Tools, Evaluation, Language Performance, Error Analyses)

Each category and subcategory is described by a several descriptors (“can do statements”; 100 in total). The self-evaluation process was operationalized with scales from 1 to 5 (1-*I can do that at beginner level*; 5-*I always do that; have no difficulties with it*) for each descriptor.

Research lasted two semesters and was conducted during the practical part of initial teacher education in

Croatian public schools. The number of lessons that participants observed and performed varied from 15 to 80 school hours.

In order to track their personal growth, the participants were told to self-evaluate their competences on 3 different occasions: at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of their practical teaching period. Only the last self-evaluation value was used as a measure of the gained competence.

Second instrument was a semi-structured interview about experience of working with the portfolio, conducted with all the participants after their teaching period in schools. All the answers were recorded and transcribed.

2.3. Participants

The participants in this study were 66 students - future teachers of a master level study program of English (N=21), French (N=12), and Italian (N=31) from three Croatian universities, Zagreb, Pula and Split. The choice of the participating universities depended on comparability of their syllabi. All the participants had theoretical university based courses in Second language acquisition, Foreign language teaching methodology, History of FL teaching methods, and a practical school based part, of observation and teaching in public primary and secondary schools.

2.4. Analyses

All the qualitative data was analyzed using the methods of descriptive statistics and variance analyses. The results of variance analyses showed no statistically significant differences, ($p > 0,05$) between the groups of participants by their mayor, i.e. their language group, so they were considered as a homogenous group in further analyses.

The Cronbach α of reliability was calculated for all the scales and it was satisfactory for further analyses $\alpha = 0,97$.

The results of qualitative data were obtained by the content analyses of all the answers of the interviews. In order to reduce the bias of the researcher, content analyses were conducted by other independent experts, and the categories of data were discussed and adjusted.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Data Analyses

The overall analyses of the quantitative data show that participants estimated that they gained most competences in the categories of Context, Conducting a Lesson, using various Resources and Lesson Planning (Table 1).

Table 1. Self-evaluations of levels of competence in 7 main categories of teaching competences (N=66, scale 1-5)

CATEGORY OF COMPETENCE	LEVEL OF COMPETENCE (M, SD)
CONTEXT	3.50 (SD=1.062)
CONDUCTING A LESSON	3.38 (SD=0.916)
RESOURCES	3.28 (SD=1.242)
LESSON PLANNING	3.11 (SD=1.067)
METHODOLOGY	2.94 (SD=1.085)
INDEPENDENT LEARNING	1.99 (SD=1.403)
ASSESSMENT	1.94 (SD=1.319)

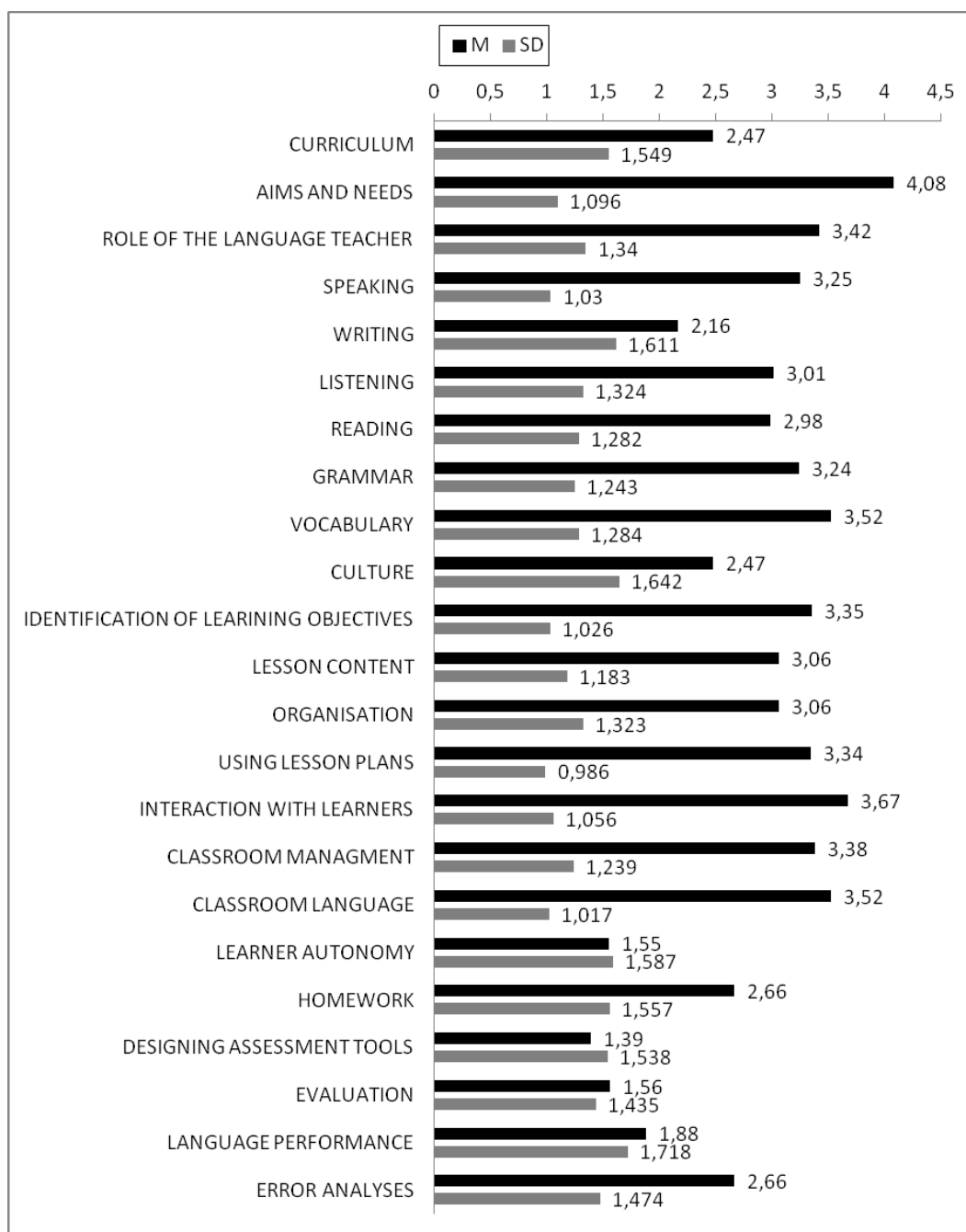


Figure 1. Results of the self-evaluations of the subcategories of teaching competences (N=66, scale 1-5).

Figure 1. shows the level of self-evaluated teaching competences in all of the subcategories. Subcategory of culture is rather low in comparison to others. So, in the following table the results of descriptive statistics are shown for each of the descriptors describing the intercultural component (Table 2).

Table 2. Self-evaluations of levels of competence for the subcategory of culture (N=66, scale 1-5)

DESCRIPTOR	LEVEL OF COMPETENCE (M, SD)
1 - I can evaluate and select a variety of texts, source materials and activities that awaken learners' interest and help them develop their knowledge and understanding of their own and the other language culture (cultural facts, events, attitudes and identity, etc.).	M= 2.98; SD=1.868
2 - I can evaluate and select a variety of texts, source materials and activities that make learners aware of similarities and differences in socio-cultural 'norms of behavior'.	M=2.48; SD=1.930
3 - I can evaluate and select activities (role plays, simulated situations etc.) that help learners to develop their socio-cultural competence.	M=2.43; SD=1.890
4 - I can evaluate and select a variety of texts, source material and activities that help learners to reflect on the concept of 'otherness' and understand different value systems.	M=2.21; SD=1.893
5 - I can evaluate and select texts, source materials and activities to make the learners aware of stereotyped views and challenge these.	M=2.24; SD=1.953

However, it should be noted that the descriptors in Table 4 are described in detail in the main European documents for foreign language teaching: Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) [10] and European Portfolio for Languages (EPL)¹, so here we present results for those descriptors in the Table 3.

Table 3. Self-evaluations of levels of competence for the subcategory of curriculum (N=66, scale 1-5)

DESCRIPTOR	LEVEL OF COMPETENCE (M, SD)
I can understand the principles formulated in relevant European documents (e.g. Common European Framework of Reference, European Language Portfolio).	M= 2.87; SD=1.696
I can understand and integrate content of European documents (e.g. Common European framework of reference, European language portfolio) as appropriate in my teaching.	M=2.06; SD=1.672

¹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/language-policy/european-language-portfolio>, 2/6/2021

3.2. Qualitative Data Analyses

The content analyses of interviews showed that most of the participants evaluated process of applying reflexive approach in their initial teacher education, i.e. self-evaluation through portfolio positively because *“it made them reflect on the quality of their teaching practice in a structured way”*. Furthermore, many (40 out of 66) reported that it stimulated them to consider some new aspects of teaching foreign languages and helped them determine goals for the future.

However, the qualitative data gave some valuable explanations for low results in the category of intercultural competence. When asked which category of the portfolio was superfluous in their opinion, several students² stated: *“The culture part. You can’t actually do that in elementary school”* Some claimed that they did not fully understand culture related descriptors while others reported that they had to little hours of teaching practice and were still in the “survival period”. Namely that they still struggle with lesson planning, classroom management and selection of materials, rather than planning their teaching according to national and European policies of brother goals of FL teaching.

4. Discussion

The results presented above indicate that Croatian students, future teachers of foreign languages, are rather “pragmatically oriented” in their initial education. Gathered data implies that they give a lot more attention to teaching methodology of four skills (reading, speaking, listening, writing), interaction with students, and the use of the FL in the classroom than to other components. The results are similar to the ones obtained in 2006 [16], conducted on “pre Bologna” students, and other research conducted outside of the Croatian educational context [21].

Some of the low levels of self-evaluated competences could be explained by the administrative constraints of the Croatian educational system. This specifically concerns the evaluation category, which, by legal regulation, can only be performed by practicing teachers, so students actually do not have the possibility to interrogate or grade pupils’ tests or written assignments.

However, the results for the intercultural competence have to be discussed considering other university syllabus features and the impact of students’ own language learning experience. Even though European documents (Common European Framework for Languages and European Portfolio for Languages) are part of the mandatory literature for university courses and are examined during FL teaching methodology lessons, their practical application in the actual teaching process seems to be scarce (Table 3, Table 2).

In fact, the collected data imply that students fail to recognize the connection between language and culture, and they consider the term culture predominately as “culture with a capital C” (monuments, historic figures, literature, etc.) as shown in the previously conducted research [14, 15].

This means that future teachers of foreign languages are ignoring the culture-related existential competences [10: 12] as described by the Common European Framework of Reference, [10], and also specific parts of linguistic competences (socio-linguistic and pragmatic competences; e.g. rules of politeness, linguistic codification of certain fundamental rituals, use of speech acts, etc. [10: 12]. For illustration, in the author’s own lessons, and university lessons of university teachers whose students participated in this study, students - future teachers did not recognize typical forms of foreign language greetings as a form of “teaching culture” of the target language. They mostly declared that part of teaching as teaching a simple linguistic act.

The Croatian educational system is defining the main objectives of learning FLs as development of oral and written communicative competence, but it also strongly stresses the development of socio-cultural and intercultural competence, as well as the ability of intercultural acting [13].

In this perspective it seems that the only somewhat positive results concern the value of learning foreign languages in the process of understanding your own culture through comparison with a foreign one (Table 2). The concepts of “otherness”, stereotypes, and their examination in the FL classroom as well of the socio-cultural competence in a broader sense, do not seem to be recognized as important or are not yet recognized by the students. The value for descriptor 1 in table 2 is higher than the values for descriptors 4 and 5 (Table 2) that consider teaching about the “otherness” and stereotypes.

Furthermore, in explaining the results of this study, the influence of students’ implicit teaching theories, developed by their own experience as FL learners, should also be taken into consideration. The results of this study confirm the findings of previous studies that showed that one of the most crucial factors in future teaching practices, regardless of the duration and form of the initial teacher education, [24,25] is one’s own FL learning experience during primary and secondary schools.

5. Conclusions

The results of this research show that the current master level syllabi applied by Croatian universities point to a weakness in the area of development of the intercultural competence of students - future FL teachers, although its limitation is a low number of participants. This category of competence seems to remain at a rather “theoretical” level, and thus it needs to be discussed more profoundly in

² The aim was to gain as much data as possible so the number of answers in this part was not quantified.

foreign language methodology courses. Otherwise, it could be hypothesized that such an important category of teaching competences would be developed only later, through practical work and training courses for practicing teachers as a life-long learning.

Since the portfolio used in this study confirmed its reflective and awareness raising purpose, its future application could help students and teacher educators to determine such weak points of university programs and set the lines of adjustment collaboratively. In order to obtain clear guidelines for development of not sufficiently addressed categories of teaching competences in the initial teacher education, such as the role of the culture in teaching foreign languages, further research needs to be conducted also with practicing teachers and students from other Croatian and foreign universities with different syllabi and on larger numbers of participants. One of the clear practical implications of this study is the necessity of raising awareness of students, future-teachers, in recognizing cultural and intercultural components, in teaching materials and other types of material used in FL classrooms, as an opportunity to teach FL culture and develop intercultural competence in their pupils. Other conclusion is that mere inclusion of the intercultural component in official national, international, and university documents can be implemented practically by more work on students' *forma mentis*, and by raising their awareness through discussions and reflective tasks during their initial FL teacher education.

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