Inter-Cultural Meetings – how intercultural learning supports the communicative competencies of language learners

Petra McLay

Principal Teacher of Modern Languages, Fife

Abstract: This article reports on findings from a study carried out in 2012 in a large comprehensive secondary school in Scotland. 54 pupils took part in the event. 30 Scottish learners and 24 pupils from Germany were involved in a project within the framework of a case study. In two meetings the teenagers (aged 14-16) worked collaboratively on a bilingual task that helped learners improve linguistically and develop personally. The activity allowed pupils to discuss similarities and differences of Scottish and German popular cultures and to show curiosity, interest and enthusiasm to learn more about the youth culture in Scotland and Germany while improving their communicative competences in writing and orally.

Keywords: Intercultural learning; communicative competence

Introduction

Intercultural learning is an educational principle rather than a method. It is a holistic approach which can permeate the foreign language teaching as a whole. Intercultural communication requires empathy, cooperation, metacognitive and communication skills to solve problems relating to cultural and linguistic misunderstandings or conflicts (Luchtenberg, 1999). Intercultural learning and teaching prepares language learners for a life in the foreign country (Byram and Feng, 2005) and migrant literature can be used to support linguistic competencies (Luchtenberg, 1999). According to Holzbrecher (2004) four aspects of intercultural education should be targeted:

- Understanding the "other", the foreigner and what is foreign.

- Accepting the "other" and his identity.

- Non-judgmental interaction with the different culture.

- Cross-borderline understanding in global responsibility.

The project in this study incorporates these issues by challenging pupils throughout to discuss their thoughts, image and opinions of the "other" and to learn from each other. The project outline was chosen to stimulate creativity and thought. It must be noted that intercultural learning as it is understood here removes itself from a school of thought that describes the "other" and the differences between cultures and their languages as a problem that needs to be solved. Instead it celebrates differences and how they can enhance one's own culture (Barkowski, 2008).

Participants

The empirical data which are presented here stem from an intercultural project conducted in a secondary school in Scotland. They involved 54 pupils aged 14 to 16 years. An S4 German class consisting of 30 Scottish pupils and 24 pupils from Germany made up the participant group.

Method

The case study

An intercultural project was developed and planned at the secondary school for the visit of 24 pupils from Germany to the local further education college. The young people from Germany were selected to take part in a six-week programme in Scotland to improve their language skills and to increase their chances when applying for training and apprenticeships on their return to Germany.

The project had two main aims:

- improve pupils' communicative competence, and

- develop pupils' understanding of the other culture and specifically its youth culture

The first meeting was organised in sections of an ice-breaker in pairs and group work in mixed groups of German and Scottish participants. The ice-breaker consisted of a questionnaire where the German learners had to ask their Scottish partners a number of simple questions in English and note their answers in English. Equally, the Scottish learners had to ask their German partners various questions in German and write down the answers in German too. This activity was carried out after general introductions were made. As the teacher in charge and a German national I was able to explain both to the German visitors in German and to my own S4 class in English what was expected of them. The fact that I identified myself as a fellow German seemed to put the German pupils and their accompanying teacher from Germany at ease and led to increased confidence that I would be able to support German and Scottish learners equally – if difficulties were to arise.

The main task required the groups to work collaboratively on an extended project. Each group was given a theme (film and TV; fashion; hobbies and free time; sport; Germany and Scotland – similarities and differences; celebrities; social network sites and their use). The themes tied in loosely with the curriculum for German and the Standard Grade course that the Scottish pupils were studying towards. This ensured full support from the school's leadership team and parents who could have otherwise voiced concerns over the time spent on this project rather than with traditional course work in class.

Groups had to mind-map ideas for a bilingual article for the newsletter that was to be published in the Scottish school and the schools in Germany where the participants came from. Only through intense communication and clarity on the content of the

article in both languages were the groups able to complete this task. The texts that groups put forward were to be the exact translation of the text in German and English. This method encouraged the young people to collaborate very closely. Groups were seen to actively discuss semantics and grammar in the two languages while putting together their pieces of writing.

During the second visit the same groups finalised their articles. They also prepared a presentation that conveyed the main ideas of their texts. The groups were issued project booklets to take notes at the beginning of the task. These were used in analysing the extent of the groups' collaboration and the communicative competences they displayed along with the observations of the teachers that helped supervise and support the work of the young learners. A post-project survey underpinned the triangulation of the data collection consisting of the written evidence of pupils' work, teachers' notes and observations and feedback from the teachers from Germany and the survey results from participants.

The literature review at the beginning of this article informed the framework of the case study and within that the structure and type of activity that the young learners were asked to complete.

Findings

Pupils' attitudes and views

German and Scottish pupils admitted to feeling very nervous and filled with anticipation prior to their first meeting. They situated the roots of their anxieties in the unfamiliar nature of the project. Most of the German pupils were looking forward to their visit to the Scottish secondary school. The Scottish pupils were slightly more apprehensive and worried about their German language skills.

When asked about their first encounter all pupils gave positive comments and described their enjoyment of the ice-breaker task and how their anticipation and shyness slowly faded and was replaced with curiosity as they finally met young people who spoke the language they have studied in school for a number of years. Two thirds of participants declared in the questionnaire that the completion of the first task in pairs helped them overcome their initial concerns that they would not be able to communicate with their partners.

The collaboration phase

All pupils agreed that they were clear about the task and what was required at every visit. This was important as it is planned to repeat the project annually and therefore feedback from the participants was encouraged. Almost all Germans and Scots stated that they worked very well with their partner group. Effective collaboration could only be achieved when the German pupils communicated in English and the Scottish pupils spoke German with their partners.

The second visit was described as being even more enjoyable than the first. According to pupils' statements this was due to the fact that they knew the type of activity they were going to do and they felt that they already got to know each other. Several statements commented on the use of Facebook in between visits to stay in touch. This was deemed a fantastic opportunity and some of the German pupils met a few Scots privately in the area before the second scheduled visit took place at the school.

Most learners were content with their success of completing the task of the bilingual presentation and article. Analysing the data from the survey indicated the raised confidence of participants as they continued to work together and completed the tasks in their groups.

Ninety percent of participants felt that the groups worked well in their mixture of Scots and Germans and that they benefited from each other's language skills in their completion of the project. This is deemed a success for the overall aims of the project.

Intercultural Learning

More than three quarters of the participants stressed the fact that they learned a great deal about the youth culture of the "others" throughout the project. Teachers observed an improvement of communicative competence and confidence in talking in the foreign language. The intercultural aspect of the project brought the two groups closer together and enhanced understanding, respect and tolerance among these young Europeans.

Apart from one participant all learners agreed in the survey that their language skills have improved as a direct result of the meetings. According to statements from pupils this has happened in different ways: some commented on feeling more confident; some learners specifically mentioned their increase of vocabulary in German and English; others talked about the development of their oral communicative competence.

The project

Pupils were asked to comment on their overall impression and rating of the project regarding the intercultural and the linguistic aspects. Participants commented positively on the structure and aims of the project. Some commented negatively on the fact that there were only two meetings. All surveyed learners agreed that the project should be repeated to support another two groups of Germans and Scots. Most learners stated that what they liked best was the opportunity to meet and communicate with young people from the other culture and to find out about the similarities and differences in lifestyles, preferences and traditions.

When asked to recommend improvements participants mentioned the organisational issues that were encountered in trying to arrange meetings and allow pupils to spend more time together. Some learners suggested different activities, e.g. cooking together and meeting outside of the school environment. These recommendations will be taken into account when planning a repetition of the event.

Learning and teaching

Pupils' written and spoken communicative competences showed improvement throughout the course of the project work: Learners learned to overcome their fears of making mistakes and aimed for general comprehension and being able to make themselves understood. They supported each other when linguistic obstacles occurred and increased their active vocabulary with the aid of dictionaries and their peers' language skills.

Emerging trends support the adaptation of the principles of intercultural education in the modern foreign language classroom. The use of intercultural meetings is providing pupils with access and insight into the lives of their European peers.

Intercultural competency should be a named target of foreign language learning and teaching. Grimm (2010) states the importance of intercultural competency in learners' ability to interact with others: demonstrating respect and resolving conflict. It also encourages reflection on one's own image and the image of others. This was certainly achieved during this project where German and Scottish learners expressed a natural positivity and curiosity when meeting each other. They were polite and considerate, forgiving and supportive. They praised each other's communication skills and displayed heightened motivation and interest in the language and culture of their new acquaintances.

Final thoughts

Communicative and overall linguistic competencies have been improved in the duration of two three-hour-visits for 30 Scots and 24 German language learners. Opportunities like this meeting of cultures may not always present themselves; however, where they arise it is highly recommended to exploit them for the benefit of our young Europeans. Teachers also gained new knowledge and skills regarding the organisation of such a project. A very pleasant side-effect was to meet colleagues who are equally keen to continue such a fruitful collaboration virtually and in reality in the future.

Acknowledgement

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