

The Development of the Intercultural Dimension through the Use of Websites in Foreign Language Teaching

Ma. Olsa Pema

Department of Foreign Languages
Faculty of Education & Philology
“Fan S. Noli” University, Korça, Albania
olsa.pema@yahoo.com

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Abstract. Are virtual environments conducive to the development of intercultural competences among students of foreign languages? The present study seeks to give a substantiated answer to this question by presenting and analysing the results of a project carried out as part of a course in Communication and American Civilization with the first year students of English language in the University of Korca, Albania. The study makes an assessment of the role played by websites in promoting the intercultural dimension while practising foreign language skills. Our assesment is based on a careful examination of the students’ language biograpy records - a major component of the European Language Portfolio - and a comparison between the results of their self-assessment with regards to the different cultural components before the beginning of the project and after its completion. The conclusion which follows from our analysis is that websites, employed as tools in the teaching of foreign languages, serve as catalysts in promoting the students intercultural competences – the students’ sense of curiosity about other cultures is aroused, their uderstanding of other cultural identities becomes deeper and more comprehensive and, sometimes, sensibilities are even translated into actions which evince a highly developed intercultural awareness. As the comparison of results shows, the students have progressed remarkably from a relatively poor command of intercultural competences at the beginning of the project to significantly improved skills, a richer fund of intercultural knowledge and a better uderstanding of intercultural values by the project’s end.

1. Introduction

In the context of a multicultural Europe, where the winds of globalization are affecting people from different cultural backgrounds and civilizations, the need for mutual understanding has become very pressing. The role to be played by visionary teachers, who make use of the latest pedagogical tools in order to help their students meet the challenges of the contemporary world, is a crucial one. As the experience of teachers around the world has amply demonstrated the development of the students’ intercultural competence – one of the chief aims that guides the SLT – is greatly enhanced when the teaching/learning process is conducted along new paths made possible by the employment of digital technology. It is our firm belief that such an experience should be more widely known and practiced by foreign language teachers in their day-to-day exertions with students.

2. Case study. Participants and demographical context

There have been few empirical studies of the intercultural dimension in Second Language Teaching (SLT), while the relationship between virtual teaching environments and the enhanced acquisition of intercultural competences has received little direct investigation. As for the Albanian context, the present situation could be described as one of increasing (if somewhat spontaneous) practical interest in the new ICT-based technologies among foreign language students and teachers. Our project, which involved the creation of a website called “English for the Net Generation”, was conceived as a means of understanding these novel methodological trends by providing a multitude of facts on which to base our conclusions. The participants, 12 in all, were chosen among the first-year students of English at “Fan Noli” University, Korça, Albania, while the project itself lasted for six months.

3. Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to assess the development of the students’ intercultural competences in the context of an online project on teaching English through websites. The assessment is based on an examination of several aspects of the students’ progress with regards to the acquisition and improvement of intercultural competences and on a comparison of the results of their self-assessment before embarking on the project and after its completion.

4. Methodology and tools

Examining the results of the students’ self –assessment is a practice which follows the framework of the European Language Portfolio on language biography.

Why did we choose the method of self-assessment? Other methods like assigning and examining special tests or other relevant tasks can be employed in order to assess the level of the students’ knowledge acquisition with the advantage that the results of such procedures can be easily presented in quantitative terms. However, the case with assessing intercultural competences is somewhat different, since factual knowledge and intercultural information as such make up only a fragment of a many-faceted interrelated whole. There is an inevitable difficulty attending the assessment of such intangible shifts and inward changes as the ability to change one’s perspective on things or to act on one’s newly acquired viewpoints. Finding out whether the students show an increased tolerance and understanding towards what is different involves dealing with aspects of one’s moral and affective development which cannot be reduced to a simplistic quantitative representation. The practice of self-assessment comes to the rescue of the researcher in this methodological predicament by providing him with an invaluable passageway to the inner feelings and attitudes of his targets. Such a procedure cannot compete for accuracy and exactness with some elusive objective approach which discards any evidence based on introspection, though, by following the standards specified by the European Council in the European Language Portfolio, it can attain a degree of academic rigour that guarantees results which are sufficiently trustworthy as a basis for well-substantiated conclusions.

More concretely, our conclusions are based on an analysis of the students’ notes on their intercultural experience as recorded in their language biography and on a comparison of the results of their self-assessment on intercultural competences before and after the project.

5. Results and discussions

5.1 Analysis of the students’ records on their intercultural development

The following is an analysis of the records of the 12 participants in the project as presented in formulary 1 of their language biography, where they provide information about the intercultural knowledge they have gained during the course of the project, their attitudes and sensibilities

towards issues of intercultural significance and those actions that they regard as having an intercultural impact.

Firstly, the students were asked to give a description of their feelings and sensibilities during the course of the project. More concretely, the variables that were discussed were the students' sense of curiosity as manifested in their handling of the various assigned tasks, the culture-related difficulties which they encountered during the course of their work and the corresponding level of comfort and ease with which they accomplished their tasks. All the participants in the project agree in their remarks that the progressive development of their sense of interest and curiosity as the various tasks and activities followed one-another in time is largely attributable to the fact that the materials that were used for teaching purposes were up-to-date and clearly relevant to their sensibilities as responsible citizens of a global society. By way of explanation, they also emphasize the fact that the website provides them with a wide context for comparisons between their native culture and that of the English-speaking countries. Some of the materials which the students highlight as very stimulating from an intercultural perspective are the documentary on autistic children, the reports on the protests in Turkey, the coverage of the public debate on the abortion law in Ireland, the sensational news about Angelina Jolie's prophylactic breast surgery (almost a taboo topic for Albanians till recently), the discussions about the historical advancement of women in political careers in Western countries (much remains to be done about this in Albania). The students attribute particular interest to their project in American Civilization, which followed a comparative approach in examining the American and Albanian culture with regards to religion, education, gender issues, minorities, etc.

The students admit of having met various culture-based difficulties during the course of their work. Two students write of fundamental religious and ethical values which make it impossible for them to accept the idea of a woman's right to abortion. 35% of the students say they regard the public confession of Angelina Jolie on her breast surgery as a bold act, which discards an old taboo. Whereas the students explain most of these difficulties as due to a discrepancy between their own values and perspectives and the views presented in the materials, they are sometimes attributed to their lack of relevant knowledge on the issues discussed in the listening materials. Thus, 35% of the students expressed deep concern and even some amount of shock, as they watched the BBC documentary on autistic children in Britain, and then reflected on the insufficient amount of social care, which such people receive in Albania. A small group of students – 17% of the participants in the project – make no mention of difficulties whatsoever.

As regards their feelings of comfort (culturally at home), 60% of the students say they felt more at ease during the reflection stage of the lessons, when they made use of the opportunity to discuss and debate on the forum or to leave a comment below the given text. As is to be expected, the students felt progressively more comfortable and confident about their work, as the project followed its course and their intercultural awareness received a boost which they could not fail to notice. In their comments the students highlight particular scenes and sequences from the online materials as especially evocative of an attitude of acceptance and mutual understanding – the example of the open and unprejudiced communication between a father and his daughter, who is going on her first date is the one which is cited most frequently by the students.

Secondly, the students were asked to report on the various aspects of the cultural knowledge which they acquired in the course of their online practice. They were all unanimous in asserting that their work on the website helped them to widen the range and diversify the contents of their intercultural knowledge. This conclusion also follows when we examine the amount and variety of students' notes on controversial aspects of family life, education, health and the environment in English-speaking countries. The students' comments on the values which are embodied in the words and actions of the many people whom they come to know through the intercultural window opened by

the website, testify to the dimension of depth, which their intercultural knowledge possesses, especially since they are guided by a comparative approach that seeks to throw light on the similarities and differences between native and target cultures.

Thirdly, a very important and original aspect of the students' intercultural experience as it evolves during the course of the online project is the translation of attitudes and sensibilities into practical acts of a marked intercultural impact. Such acts as the organised visit to the center for children with developmental disabilities (inspired by the documentary on autistic children in Britain), the frequent posting of links on social networks with the aim of reaching out and influencing the sensibilities of a broad audience (33% of the students have used Facebook for this purpose) or the direct sharing of ideas with families and friends (40% of the students) demonstrate the degree to which the students have been affected in their thoughts and deeds by the intercultural dimension of the online teaching project. No culture-related incidents occurred in any stage of the six-month-long project.

5.2 Analytical comparison of the results of the students' self-assessment regarding their intercultural in the beginning and at the end of the project

Besides the examination of the students' records, another track was followed with the aim of reaching a well-founded conclusion on the relationship between the use of websites in foreign language classes and the promotion of the intercultural dimension of SLT. Our second line of analysis involved a comparison between the results of the students' self-assessment, conducted according to the criteria established by the European Language Portfolio, both before the commencement of the project and after the completion of all the assigned tasks. On both occasions the students were asked to order their descriptions of the degree to which they felt in command of the various intercultural competences according to a four-level Likert scale (1 – poor, 2 – below average, 3 – above average, 4 – very good) and to back up their scores by explanatory remarks.

More concretely, the students' scores on the first intercultural component – parameter A, or, *how interested they are in other people's way of life* – show that prior to their engagement with the tasks of the project they were rather indifferent about the idea of getting an insight into the life of other cultures. The same lukewarm attitude is also revealed by the lack of concrete examples which the students could have used to illustrate their answers. Meanwhile, the significantly higher scores in the final self-assessment (in the language of numbers the mean score of the students has gone up from $k_1 = 1.9$ in the first self-assessment form to $k_2 = 3.3$ in the second) and the rich variety of examples from the online materials which the students bring to accompany their answers unmistakably point to the effect of the six-month long project in boosting the students' awareness about other ways of living and stimulating their curiosity about the unknown.

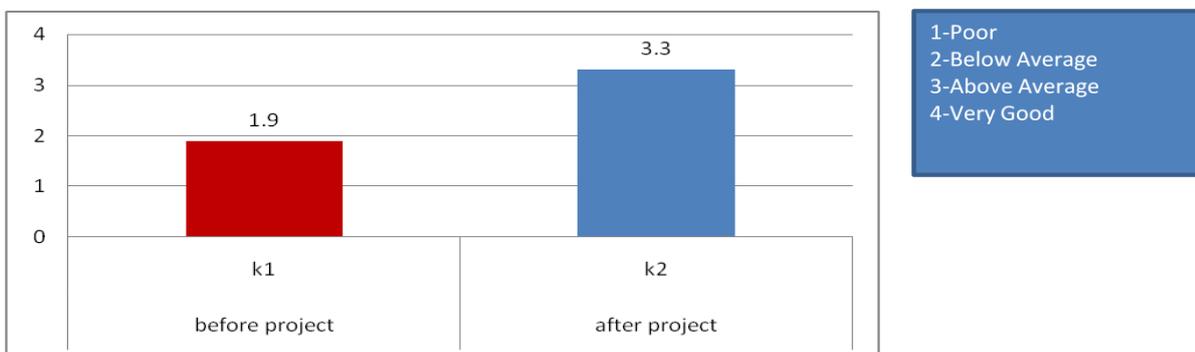


Fig.1 [A] Students' interest about other people's way of life

As regards parameter B – *the ability to change one’s perspective* – the students’ mean scores show an even more remarkable increase from $k_1 = 1.4$ before the project to $k_2 = 3.5$ by its end.

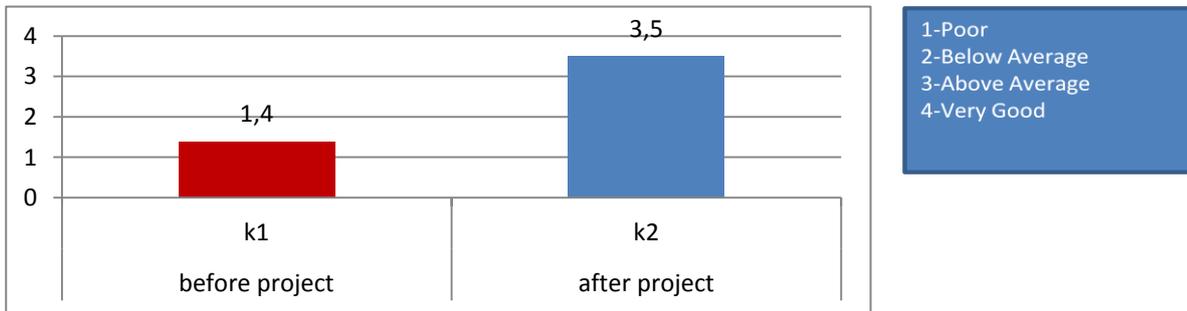


Fig.2 [B] Ability to change one’s perspective

As for parameter C – *the ability to cope with living in a different culture* – the increase in the students’ mean scores is understandably rather small – from $k_1 = 2$ before the project to $k_2 = 2.8$ after its completion.

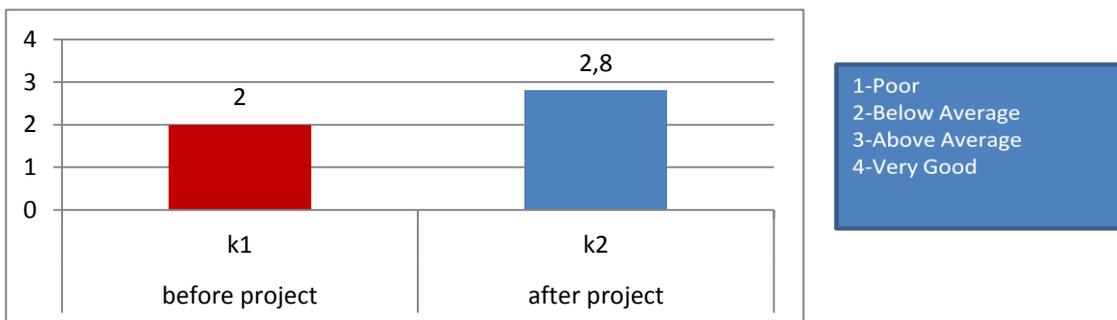


Fig.3 [C] Ability to cope with living in a different culture

For parameter D – *knowledge about other countries and cultures* – the students’ mean scores were doubled as a result of the project (from $k_1 = 1.9$ to $k_2 = 3.8$), which is a clear indicator of the effectiveness of websites in expanding the students’ sphere of knowledge on other cultures.

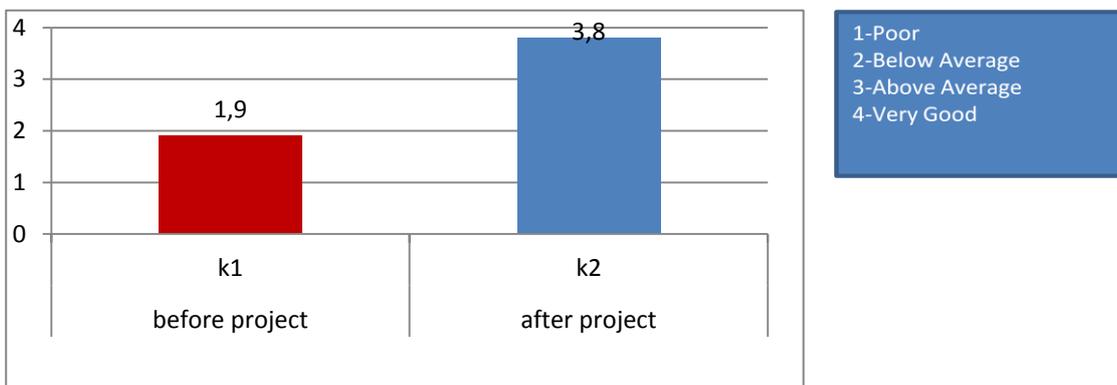


Fig. 4 [D] Knowledge about other countries and cultures

The same conclusion with regard to the efficacy of websites in promoting the students' intercultural competences follows from a comparison of their mean scores on parameter E – *knowledge about intercultural communication* – especially as the amount of increase in this case is the greatest, from $k_1 = 1.2$ before the project to $k_2 = 3.1$ at the end.

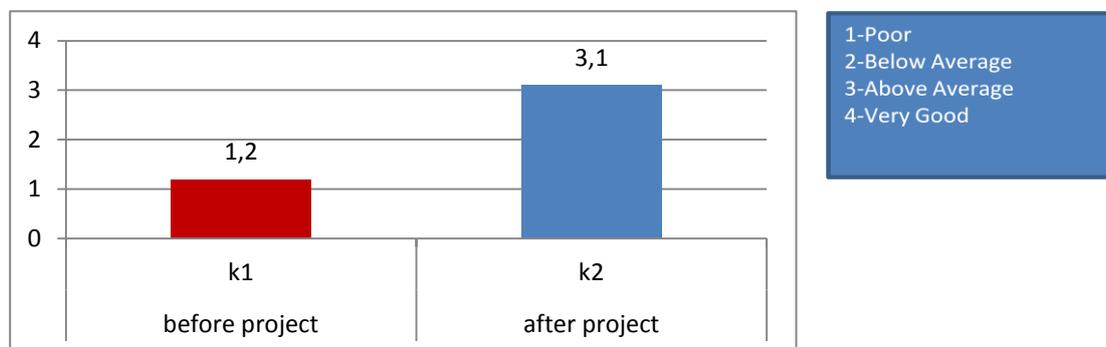


Fig. 5 [E] Knowledge about intercultural communication

How can we make sense of all these differences in the students' mean scores with respect to their command of the different intercultural competences before and after the online project?

Firstly, if we try to take a more general perspective on the results of the students' self-assessment before the project, it becomes immediately apparent that, although they have been studying English as a foreign language for a good many years, the level of their intercultural attainments is far from satisfactory. For four of the five intercultural components their mean scores do not even reach the level of *below average*, with the scores on knowledge about intercultural communication ($k_1 = 1.2$) representing a strikingly insufficient result given the amount of time the students have spent in studying foreign languages. From such uniformly poor results, it inevitably follows that the traditional approach to teaching adopted in foreign language classes does not provide a solid basis for the promotion of the intercultural dimension of the teaching of foreign languages. The very fact that some of the students needed explanations from the teacher in order to make out the meaning of such essential intercultural concepts and ideas as "the ability to change one's perspective", "intercultural communication" or "empathy" was attributed to the insufficient attention which the intercultural dimension receives in a foreign language class (according to the students such classes are commonly reduced to a purely linguistic element which is treated in isolation from the broader cultural context).

Secondly, the students' scores in the self-assessment form handed in after the completion of the project indicate a marked improvement in all the components which make up the intercultural dimension of foreign language teaching and learning. More concretely, the increase in the students' scores was biggest for parameter B (the difference between k_2 and k_1 amounts to a remarkable 2.1 units) followed by the same increase of 1.9 units for parameters D and E. Such figures are a clear indicator of the effectiveness of the online teaching environment in promoting the intercultural competences described by the respective parameters. On the other hand, the relatively small increase for parameter C ($k_2 - k_1 = 0.8$) is explained by the complex nature of the changes involved in improving one's ability to cope with living in a different culture (this depends on a variety of factors that go far beyond the confines of the foreign language classroom). Nonetheless, this small increase is pragmatically very important, as the issue at stake is the students' self-confidence in meeting the practical challenges of a global society with no borders or other artificial barriers to impede the free movement of people and ideas.

6. Summary

This study was conceived as an investigation of the relationship between the adoption of web-based

methodologies in the teaching of foreign languages and the promotion of the intercultural dimension of such teaching. In order to give a fact-based answer to this open question we followed an experimental approach by planning and carrying out a project on teaching English through websites. The participants' records on their intercultural experience, as lived out along the course of the six-month long project, and the results of their self-assessment with regard to the command of the various intercultural competences before the beginning and after the completion of the project, provided us with a broad empirical groundwork on which our generalizations are founded.

The sensibilities, knowledge and actions that the students have recorded in their notes demonstrate a progressive development of the intercultural dimension of their experience as it evolves through the course of the project. The students themselves assert, and our analysis confirms that their enhanced curiosity on intercultural topics is largely derived from the relevancy and attractiveness of the online materials and from the dynamic framework which the website provides as a context for the understanding of intercultural issues. Such difficulties as the students encountered, when in the initial stages of the project they were confronted with completely new ways of seeing and interpreting phenomena, were gradually reduced as they got used to the shifting of perspectives, which is a hallmark of intercultural education. Most striking of all, their heightened sensibility on intercultural issues was channeled into practical acts of marked intercultural significance and more than merely symbolic importance (among many such acts the example that best shows the spirit which the students put into the project is that of their organized visit to the center for children with developmental disabilities).

The comparative analysis of the results of the students' self-assessment with regard to their command of the intercultural competences before the beginning of the project and after the accomplishment of its tasks, revealed how defective their intercultural education had hitherto been and the new level of development which all the major intercultural competences attained after receiving the boost of a web-based methodology employed experimentally in the teaching of English as a foreign language. Such a marked progressive development, which is especially pronounced with regards to the ability to change one's perspective or the knowledge about intercultural communication, other countries and cultures, points to the conclusion that websites provide a very effective means for the enhancement of the intercultural dimension of foreign language teaching.

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