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BUILDING ESP TEACHER AWARENESS THROUGH INTERCULTURAL TANDEMS – POST-PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Learning teaching for specific purposes in collaboration has become well-established in the current teacher education framework, due to a growing need to encourage international cooperation between ESP teacher trainees. The aim of the present paper is to deliver a preliminary report on the study into fostering intercultural teacher identities through computer-mediated tandem learning. To accomplish this aim, two groups of student teachers were put into tandem groups to share and comment upon teaching observations, videos and activities.

Keywords: ESP teacher education, tandem learning, intercultural competence

1. Introduction - the rationale for intercultural FLT

The contemporary world is saturated with multicultural communities where different cultures regularly interact. Even relatively monocultural and monolingual countries, e.g. Poland, are now hosts to a variety of ethnic groups, and the European Union has culturally diversified so much that it is inhabited by representatives of roughly three hundred minorities (Aleksandrowicz-Pędich 2005).

"Globalization, modernization, and the new technologies of communication have combined to produce many situations where the rules for identifying members and Strangers have become blurred. Urbanization and immigration in particular have produced societies where members are strangers to one another" (Riley 2007: 172-173). Consequently, today effective communication requires intercultural (communicative) competence (Lázár 2007), which equips people to negotiate socio-cultural differences.

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Intercultural language teaching is supposed to help learners avoid communication breakdowns (Shandar 2005), sensitise them towards otherness, develop empathy, as well as teach them how to objectively explore other cultures (Aleksandrowicz-Pędich 2005).

Intercultural language teaching encourages learners to work autonomously, perform, and reflect on experience, without concentrating exclusively on declarative knowledge (Bandura 2000).

Byram and Planet (1999) indicate that intercultural communication involves a complex network of interactions between people's perspectives, beliefs, values, and practices, beyond mere information exchange. Thus, Byram (1997; 2008) sets out the goals of intercultural language teaching under the umbrella concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence, which embraces: linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence, as well as intercultural knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness.

2. Background

2.1. The intercultural ESP teacher

Intercultural teaching ascribes the role of an intercultural mediator to the ESP teacher (Byram 1997; Damen 1987; Aleksandrowicz-Pędich 2005), which necessitates a revision of the basic components of a foreign language teacher's professional competence on interpersonal, intercultural and language levels.

On interpersonal level, Kaikkonen (after Zawadzka 2004) postulates that the teacher is to mediate between the learners' native culture and the target culture, thus he needs to display: a relaxed attitude towards the behaviour of others, which facilitates interpersonal interaction; readiness to negotiate and cooperate; empathy, which helps the teacher understand other people's feelings and perspectives; and the ability to act in new situations.

The intercultural competences of a foreign language teacher are listed out by Edelhoff (Zawadzka 2004; Bandura 2007) within the main three categories of Byram's (1997; 2008) intercultural competence: (i) knowledge, (ii) skills and (iii) attitudes.

(i) The teacher's knowledge is supposed to cover: societies and cultures, including his own; an awareness of the perspectives of others on his own culture; culture-determined learning modes; interpretation of behaviour, and ways of avoiding conflict.

(ii) The intercultural teacher is to possess: skills of negotiation; skills of text/media interpretation; teaching skills which would enable him to facilitate learner autonomy; skills of materials management; and language skills useful for the negotiation of meaning.

(iii) The teacher's attitudes are to comprise: readiness to use the target language in order to negotiate interpersonal understanding, reflection, critical cultural awareness, critical evaluation, openness, tolerance and acceptance of otherness.

Gautheron-Boutschatsky et al. (2004) explain that the intercultural teacher needs to bring out to learners the symbolic meanings represented in the language and behaviour of others. He also has to destereotype the picture of the other by analysing cultural prejudices. In addition, the teacher is to demonstrate and deconstruct what is relative in culture, so that learners are aware of its implicit and relative nature.

The linguistic dimension of the intercultural teacher is tackled by the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CUP 2001), which describes a mediator as someone who assists speakers of two different languages in resolving communication problems. In effect, CEFR highlights the following competences of a mediator: interpretation, translation, text summary and text reformulation.

In plurilingual contexts, the intercultural ESP teacher, who may play an important pedagogical and social role of "an agent for social cohesion" (Zarate et al. 2004: 230) needs to work with learners not only on samples of the target language and culture but also the learners' own culture. Thus, the teacher and his learners ought to occupy a central position between these three entities.

Apart from new interpersonal, intercultural and language competences, the role of an intercultural mediator requires a shift in the teacher's role in the classroom and his relation to the learner (Zawadzka 2004; Aleksandrowicz-Pędich 2005; Bandura 2007).

Firstly, since intercultural communicative competence is not a fully prescribed entity, the ESP teacher can no longer act as a *knower* who transmits to the learners a

body of declarative knowledge. Secondly, since it is impossible to collect a complete/perfect intercultural knowledge (Byram 2008), the teacher's task is to engage, along with learners, in controlled intercultural mediation. Hence, the ESP practitioner needs to activate learners (Komorowska 2006b) in order to ensure that they are truly involved in learning. In computer-assisted teaching a blend of responsibilities on the linguistic, didactic, technical, managerial and social spheres needs to be reached (Krajka, 2012). Finally, the intercultural teacher must be ready to face situations in which he will be unable to answer his learners' questions. While assisting learners systematically, he might also need help *from* their learners. While it is a realisation that teachers are not universally ready to accept, it is perfectly illustrative of a transfer in the intercultural teacher's role from that of an authority to that of a partner.

2.2. ICT-mediated intercultural LSP

As Bélisle (2007) succinctly summarises, ICT ameliorates intercultural teaching through learning modes characterised by: a combination of intellectual understanding and empathy; learner activation; a learning shift from memorisation to transformation; the fostering of interpersonal relations; and immersion in the foreign cultural context.

Multimedia create an enriched learning environment in which ESP learners experience phenomena and events more directly. Audio-video clues enable learners to live the experience of others, thus it enables them to empathise. The immediacy of the learning context is conducive to constructivist learning, where learners interact with the knowledge they develop. A media-enhanced, enriched sociocultural context permits learners to make more relevant inferences (Bélisle 2007).

ICT also promotes interactive learning, where the learner actively participates in experiences, and increases his intercultural understanding through problem solving. As Bélisle (2007) stresses, ICT-based learning is also interactive in that it allows real interaction between human beings, where actions evoke responses and meanings can be negotiated.

Perhaps, the strongest argument for using ICT for intercultural language teaching is cultural immersion allowed by computer media. In Bélisle's (2007) opinion, this kind of learning fosters the development of the basic components of Byram's

intercultural competence: knowledge, skills, appropriate attitudes as well as critical cultural awareness.

However, one must not lose sight of the fact that ICT is only a teaching aid which may potentially facilitate intercultural teaching – a means that has to be handled appropriately in order to produce an expected impact on learning.

2.3. Computer-enhanced techniques in IC teaching

Online techniques in intercultural ESP teaching involve synchronous communication, e.g. telecollaboration projects and the use of online forums, as well as synchronous, e.g. chat and videoconferencing.

Telecollaboration projects, being a form of interpersonal exchange online activity format (Krajka, 2007), involve students in genuine communicative exchanges with partners in a distant location. Telecollaboration is particularly useful for intercultural learning as electronic exchanges increase learners' confidence and encourage participation (Warschauer 1997). Telecollaboration may entail student cooperation within or between institutions; a recent example is the *English for Specific Purposes Methodology* project, currently being run by Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin.

One-to-one telecollaboration may be realized through *e-mail tandems*, which are "(…) a form of open learning, whereby two people with different native languages work together in pairs in order

- to learn more about one another's character and culture
- to help one another improve their language skills

to exchange additional knowledge – for example, about their professional life" (Osborne 2000: 61). E-mail tandems are concluded by a summary of the project work, e.g. in the form of essays, posters, or multimedia presentations.

As Penz (2001) observes, an inherent advantage of asynchronous intercultural e-mail communication is the fact that learners can delay responses, thanks to which they have time to ponder over experience. As a result, they feel safer and more confident than when interacting with partners in person. In addition, tandems help the participants

perceive each other's perspectives and engage in intercultural negotiation and interpretation (Penz 2001).

Levy (2007) discusses intercultural teaching through *authentic internet forums*, originally intended for native speakers. He states that as learning environments, they are by definition less safe psychologically, as they lack the sheltering which email tandems provide. Yet, he emphasises that the authenticity of online forums stems from the fact that they reveal the cultural norms and behavioural patterns of their native speaker users.

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Learners might join authentic forums in order to examine the gate keeping practices of "digital cultures" (Levy 2007: 109) as well as test out their intercultural knowledge, attitudes and skills by performing in a real context.

However, Levy (2007) warns that despite the intensive preparation that such participation requires, it ought to be considered an option for advanced learners.

Internet chat is a technique in intercultural teaching which involves synchronous communication, i.e. text-based exchange in real time. Toyoda and Harrison (2002) maintain that live communication online creates a context in which intercultural skills can be tested in practice; however, this work mode requires extensive practice.

Levy (2007) notes that while learners engaged in chat conversations decipher meaning they inevitably have to rely on their culture-bound conventions and norms. He also observes that what is determined by culture in intercultural chat-mediated communication is not only how learners interpret meanings, but also how they interact and what roles they adopt.

As he concludes, interpreting contextual meaning successfully is a challenge in chat conversations because native speakers frequently produce incomplete or abbreviated sentences, which leads to semantic misinterpretations. What is more, chat obliterates nonverbal clues, which normally facilitate face-to-face communication; it also causes problems relating to turn-taking (Levy 2007).

However, it must be stated that if chat conversations are handled as principle-guided intercultural activities, they may yield a multitude of cultural information which will facilitate learners' intercultural competence. Modern chat software, e.g. *Skype*, allows users to save conversations as text files, which gives learners an opportunity to

analyse asynchronously, thus in privacy, culturally-determined discourse patterns and interpretations of meanings. In such a case, chatting becomes an evidence-gathering activity as well as a ground for practice or assessment of one's intercultural skills.

One more technique in synchronous telecollaboration is *videoconferencing* (Osborne (2000). Examples of software which could be used for that purpose are cited by Gajek (2009): *Skype*, *zoho*, or *ooVoo*. Żylińska (2007) demonstrates that videoconferencing complements text-based communication through audio-visual contact, which implies that a combination of various telecollaboration formats, e.g. on virtual learning platforms such as *Moodle*, may add to the repertoire of ICT techniques in intercultural teaching.

3. The study

3.1. The aim of the research

The major aim of the present study was to verify the relationship between increased intercultural teacher awareness and the use of e-learning tandems across cultures. The applicability of the idea of tandem learning (Little and Brammerts 1996; Kotter 2003), defined in the present paper as project groups made up of teacher trainees from two partner institutions collaborating online in synchronous and asynchronous modes, was to be verified throughout the action research process. Teacher awareness was tapped into by the use of electronic learning diaries as well as informal face-to-face interviews.

The other major sphere of interest in the present study was the exploration of collaborative environments, specifically Moodle Learning Management System, in extending practical training beyond the confines of the classroom. Teacher development as a collaborative experience is a new and promising direction in foreign language teacher preparation, and computer technology might provide suitable learning environments to enable this mode of training. It was interesting to investigate whether post-practicum reflection of teacher trainees gets added value through the use of intercultural teacher tandems.

3.2. The participants and the setting

The study encompassed two groups of ESP teacher trainees, 13 and 19 students respectively, from Division of Applied Linguistics, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland, and Department of Foreign Language Education, Bogazici University, Istanbul, Turkey. Both groups were parallel in terms of teacher proficiency, in their final year of the B.A. studies, having completed most of the language teacher training programme and having just served their English language practicum. Both groups were heading towards an exam in foreign language methodology, which was to take place at the end of the tandem project.

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The project was an online supplement to regular face-to-face foreign language methodology classes run by the instructors according to the syllabuses below.

Table 1. Class syllabi of partner groups.

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland **LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES METHODOLOGY**	Bogazici University, Istanbul, Turkey **FLED 416: SEMINAR ON PRACTICE TEACHING**
1. Teaching grammar. 2. Teaching vocabulary. 3. Teaching pronunciation. 4. Planning lessons and curricula. 5. Teaching receptive skills. 6. Teaching productive skills. 7. Testing and assessment. 8. Teaching aids and resources in the classroom. 9. Classroom interaction and management. 10. Culture and content in ESP language instruction.	1. Introduction and orientation. 2. Teachers' beliefs and reflective teaching. 3. Technology in TEFL. 4. Lesson planning. 5. Nature of language learning activities. 6. Native and non-native English speaking teachers. 7. Job interviews and novice teachers. 8. Interaction and classroom language. 9. Plagiarism and academic writing. 10. European Language Portfolio (ELP) and IB Programs. 11. Intercultural communicative competence for language teachers and ELT in Turkey.

Even though the two groups followed slightly different syllabi, it was possible to match the topics they dealt with during their practicum. Thus, the major areas of lesson planning and management, classroom interaction, teaching aids and resources, grammar and vocabulary teaching, as well as error correction and assessment were isolated for teacher tandem work.

The selection of tandem partners started with personal acquaintance of the researchers. However, after that, a careful matching system was applied to make sure that the groups differed in as few respects as possible. The major factor was a similar point student teachers from both groups were at in the process of teacher development. Another important qualifying issue was similar level of computer literacy, as both groups were relatively skilled at tools used for e-learning and Web-based learning (videoblogs, Learning Management System, discussion forums, electronic learning diaries, Video Sharing Sites, social networking portals, social bookmarking tools).

The study took place in two virtual spaces: the dedicated Moodle course "Languages for Specific Purposes Methodology" situated at the Virtual Campus of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (http://lingwistyka.kampus.umcs.lublin.pl) created especially for the experimental programme. The Moodle coursepace contained the following resource types:

- sample YouTube-based videos as input for group work analysis,
- discussion forums to enable reflection on viewing materials,
- self-study quizzes consolidating factual methodology knowledge,
- private learning diaries encouraging individual reflection,
- collaborative topic-related glossaries.

3.3. Materials and procedure

The study aimed at investigating opportunities for the development of teacher awareness through computer-mediated intercultural teacher tandems. Out of the whole array of collaborative environments, two solutions, namely videoblogs and Learning Management Systems, had been selected to design asynchronous group tasks. The rationale behind the selection of the tools was that these were familiar to students in the receptive mode, as they had been used by instructors to post classroom materials prior to the project.

The present study was executed within the framework of action research (Wallace 2002), a systematic collection and analysis of data relating to the improvements of some aspects of professional practice. Since this particular research

method is generally perceived as a way in which teachers can solve professional problems and improve their practice through reflection-on-action (suggested as the best way of professional self-development), it seemed appropriate for the language teacher development.

The research procedure started with diagnosing student teachers' needs from multifold perspectives, taking into account target language wants, lacks and necessities (Hutchinson and Waters 1989). On the one hand, careful scrutiny of the class syllabi and practicum requirements was executed, in order to get the awareness of the approximated topics and shared knowledge of participants.

The project started with introducing students at both sides to the setup of the study, explaining in detail the interaction modalities and contribution procedures. This tutorial session took place in the Internet lab of the Faculty of Humanities, which was equipped with 18 state-of-the-art workstations, a networked printer and a teacher computer connected to the LCD projector.

Turkish students were set up dedicated email accounts, which were connected with the Moodle accounts, and they were provided with Moodle access URL, login and password, together with partner names and emails, in order to save classroom time and prevent possible disorientation caused by lack of familiarity with the program interface or language. A similar procedure was performed with videoblogs, where Polish students were assigned blog links, passwords, as well as their email addresses were added as viewers by their Turkish counterparts. Following these technical issues, partner students on both sides sent welcome letters to each other, explaining contribution procedures and encouraging responses. During the six-week period of the project, instructors-researchers on both sides monitored videoblogs and Moodle spaces, if necessary, prompting students to more active contribution.

Upon conclusion of the study, individual learning diaries, post-experience student questionnaires and group interviews were used as data collection instruments to corroborate the hypothesis adopted.

3.4. Presentation and discussion of results

This is an analysis of the online activity of the participants of an e-learning course entitled *Languages for Specific Purposes Methodology (LSPM)*, which was designed at MCSU University, Lublin and delivered on the *Moodle* platform. The course spanned over four months and lasted from February to May, 2011. The course content and resources were arranged in topics format, and the participants were 34 international postgraduate students of Polish and Turkish nationality.

The course resources, course participation and learner activity were examined through an analysis of the *Moodle* platform's course report functionalities with regard to the following research questions:

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1. What resources were offered within the *LSPM* e-learning course?
2. How were the resources utilised by the participants?
3. How many students used particular resources?
4. How many times were the resources used, including cases of viewing as well as contribution?
5. What was the nature of the course forum posts with regard to number, length and character?

Resources. The course featured 10 different resources: handouts, reading tasks, worksheets, video viewing materials, audio clips, hyperlinks to external ELT resources, text files, thematic glossaries, forums and learner journals.

The course handouts were available as downloadable *pdf* files which the participants could store and use electronically or in printed format. They constituted overviews of the course topics in run-on text format, appended with tabular and listed summaries of the major issues in question.

The reading activities were based on texts devoted to various aspects of language development, e.g. vocabulary acquisition, originally published by the *Modern Language Teacher* journal, and delivered on the *ELT Forum* website as part of a pack of materials for teacher development. The activities were complete with pre-reading, elicitation and post-reading tasks, where the latter served the purpose of reflection and summary.

The worksheets were a set of lesson observation sheets which were supposed to be downloaded, printed out and used by the course participants.

The video viewing materials were made available to the course participants through hyperlinks to educational video clips produced and published by the British Council on *YouTube*, the file sharing service. The videos were aimed to facilitate teacher education and featured in-class scenes with educational commentary and practical advice from professional teacher trainers.

The audio clips were files which featured resources such as recorded programmes from the BBC and British Council's *TeachingEnglish* lesson archive. The programmes focused on selected aspects of language teaching and learning relevant to the LSPM course content.

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The hyperlinks offered within the course led to external websites which contained ELT resources e.g. the above-mentioned *TeachingEnglish* lesson archive or other resources, such as online surveys designed and delivered through the *SurveyMonkey* internet service.

The text files which the course participants could download were largely excerpts of professional literature featuring content relevant to the LSPM course while the remainder of the files comprised lists of vocabulary items to be used during the course.

The thematic glossaries contained lists of terms denoting selected concepts in second language teaching methodology, e.g. *Error correction and assessment*, *Materials and resources in teaching language*, *culture and content* or *Lesson planning and management*.

In addition, the course website featured a number of online forums, which were devoted to course news and announcements as well as issues relating to particular course topics. The forums functioned primarily as platforms of communication for the participants involved in project-based group work assignments. They also permitted the course students to exchange knowledge and experience pertaining to particular problems in ESP.

Finally, the LSPM course website offered learner journals, which provided an opportunity for the students to reflect on the intercultural teacher training experience during the course. The reflections were elicited through a number of guiding questions, e.g. *How do you perceive your cooperation with the foreign partner-teacher-trainees?*

or *Did your foreign partners' view of teaching differ from yours? What exactly did you observe?*, and the students could share their posts with the other participants.

Resource utilisation. The course resources were utilised in a number of ways, depending on the format and functionalities. For instance, the handouts, reading tasks and lesson observation worksheets were simply viewed by the participants. The *Moodle* reports did not allow an examination of any forms of use beyond the platform per se, however, as on downloading the materials the students were offered the option of saving them, it may be stated that at least some of them may also have downloaded the resources for printing, reference and other forms of use.

In a similar vein, the video viewing materials which the e-learning course made accessible were viewed by the participants, but they may equally have been downloaded to the course participants' computers, as such an alternative was offered when the students attempted to open the video files.

The course forums, which were supposed to facilitate group work assignments or foster the discussion of particular topics, were used in a number of ways. The students either limited themselves to viewing the entire forum or individual posts as well as contributed to the discussions by sending their own messages. Occasionally, they updated their posts, presumably in order to correct the language mistakes which they had found or to alter the content.

The learning diaries, which were aimed at stimulating reflection on selected aspects of the e-learning course, e.g. the students' teaching experience or intercultural experiences, and the course glossaries were utilised in largely the same way as the discussion forums. In both cases the participants also viewed the posts/entries sent in by their colleagues or added, updated and deleted entries themselves.

The number of resource users. The number of students who used particular resources differed substantially from one course feature to another. The resources were accessed by 1 (e.g. *Learning diary: reflecting on the intercultural experience*) to 27 students (*Project Group 1 Forum*). None of the resources was used by all the course participants, and on average the resources were utilised by 7 students each. The resources which were used by more than 7 students were mostly the discussion forums (10-27 users) while those used by a noticeably smaller number of students were the

learning diaries (1-11 users), course handouts (2-5 users) and reading tasks (2-7 users). At the same time, one must be aware of the fact that the data are not necessarily a good indicator of course participation, as only a few students might have directly accessed the resources and subsequently, they might have shared them with colleagues outside the *Moodle* platform. The number of the students who used the video viewing materials ranged from 3 to 12 students, with few video files having been viewed by over 7 participants.

The frequency of resource use. Particular resources were used at the frequency ranging from 1 to 175 times. The course handouts were accessed from 5 to 31 times, i.e. 11 times each on average. The reading tasks were used from 4 to 8 times, which amounted to four times on average. In the case of the video viewing materials, the average number of viewing attempts was 14 times, whereas the learning diaries were used 20 times each. The highest level of online activity was generated by the discussion forums, which – on average – were accessed 229 times each while the second most frequently utilised type of resource were the glossaries, which were visited 128 times each on average.

Forum post length. The length of the forum posts was analysed on all the 15 forums set up within the LSPM course in terms of the number of lines occupied by the text entered by individual participants. The message length ranged from 1 to 37 lines. The shortest posts were entered on the *Developing speaking skills* forum (1-8 lines), whereas the longest contributions were made on the *Most effective ways of presenting grammar and vocabulary* forum (between 34-37 lines). It might be inferred that such a disparity in the length of posts might have stemmed from the difference in the level of interest generated by the topics which the course participants were supposed to discuss or the amount of the students' teaching experience with reference to a specific issue.

All in all, on average the course forum posts spanned between 2-16 lines, with an average single post containing 10 lines of text.

The nature of course forum posts. As it was observed, a limited number of the course participants sent in single posts, which would be isolated from the remainder of the messages within a particular discussion. Even if single posts were occasionally entered, they usually referred to specific previous messages and constituted a

contribution to the discussion being held, despite the fact that they were not formally embedded as replies to any particular posts. The lack of embedding might have been caused by minor technical issues in that some students may simply have not selected the *Reply* option when posting their message, as a result of which the *Moodle* platform interpreted the posts as the initiation of a new discussion thread.

Most of the participants attempted to express their opinions on the issues discussed, although only a limited number of students (3-4 participants) were more actively involved in the discussion of all the thematic threads on a given forum and sent a single reply to each. Occasionally, longer exchanges occurred, which generated more engagement, with individual participants posting more than one entry.

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4. Conclusion

As evidenced by the present study, intercultural LSP teacher development in online tandems is a teaching framework that has a great potential to be explored. Together with a multitude of easy-to-use collaboration environments such as *Moodle* LMS, videoblogs, online word processors like *GoogleDocs*, audio-graphic conferencing systems such as *WiZiQ*, ESP trainers may find appropriate contexts for collaborative work between partner classes, be it in synchronous or asynchronous mode. With each exchange training materials are going to accumulate, which will make instruction of further groups of ESP trainees even more relevant and lifelike.

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