Intercultural competence in teaching German

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Abstract

A global citizen is the paradigm to which teachers and students can and must aspire. The modern multicultural society demands that shift in the educational system. That change can occur, a global citizen can be raised and it rests on the development of the student’s intercultural competence. Intercultural competence signifies the ability to understand and be open towards different cultures. In this paper I attempt to present how I implement intercultural competence in teaching German as a foreign language in the primary school. Our goal of learning a foreign language still remains the same: to prepare students for an effective communication in the target language. It is effective however only when the lessons aren’t restricted only to learning grammatically correct sentences and vocabulary, but also include the study of foreign habits and culture. In the short paper I am presenting my experience with students and the implemented methods. I am showing, why it is important to prepare traditional German dishes when studying the food vocabulary and thus why the simulated situations are not a waste of time. Only time devoted to learning by experience can provide that necessary platform where superficial knowledge can be replaced by long-term knowledge, and a positive relationship to the foreign culture can evolve, thus providing the students with a sense of security and respect, as a background of their personal social responsibility.

Keywords: German, foreign languages, intercultural competence, primary school, social responsibility.
znanje nadomestimo z dolgoročnim znanjem, in lahko razvijemo pozitiven odnos do tuje kulture, s čimer študentom zagotovimo občutek varnosti in spoštovanja, kot ozadje njihove osebne družbene odgovornosti.

**Ključne besede:** nemščina, tuji jeziki, medkulturna kompetenca, osnovna šola, družbena odgovornost.
1 Introduction

The development of intercultural competence, i.e. the ability to live in a multicultural society, is a continuous process, that begins with kindergarten and continues in school. Modern teaching methods of teaching foreign languages can hardly exclude multicultural contents. The goal of learning a foreign language is to prepare a student for an effective communication in the target language, which encompasses not only grammatically correct sentences and vocabulary, but extends to an understanding of the foreign habits and culture. Only this ‘holistic’ method will equip students to integrate and communicate in an efficient and confident manner and be even able to live in the selected country.

2 Intercultural competence

2.1 The key competences

The European Commission’s guideline for a lifelong learning is the development of key competences that an individual needs for his or her personal development, active citizenship, social involvement and employment. Each individual should obtain key competences at the beginning of their education, which one later implements, evolves and upgrades through education. The key competences are defined as a combination of knowledge, skill and relationships. They are divided in eight groups: 1. communication in the native language, 2. communication in the foreign language, 3. mathematical competences and basic skills in science and technology, 4. digital competences, 5. learning how to learn, 6. social and civil competences, 7. self-initiative and entrepreneurship, and 8. cultural awareness and expression. The intercultural competence is a part of social and civil competences and signifies the ability of a diverse, intercultural, tolerant, respectful and prejudice-free communication.

2.2 Inter-culturalism in learning languages

Inter-culturalism in Slovenia can be referred to in two different contexts. The first is the situation of children, that are a part of our language environment, where the target language is Slovene and the cultural competences are those linked to our language. The other context is far more frequent: students learning a foreign language, that is taught in Slovenia by mostly Slovenian teachers, with the target country being far away. The two contexts differentiate in the stimuli and the motivation. In this paper the primary focus is the position of Slovenian students learning a foreign language.

With learning a foreign language one acquires, according to Cuq and Gruca, a certain cultural addendum, that is specific and different from the mother tongue, since an individual consciously chose it. The learning of the mother tongue encompasses the acquirement of cultural competences, that form the identity of the individual. While learning a foreign language isn't meant to totally submerge an individual in another group with similar or very different values. It is meant to offer a large enough symbol net, providing the speaker to comprehend the foreign language and express oneself sensibly in that foreign language. (Cuq and Gruca 2002)

The prevailing opinion in Europe today is, that «everyone lives their own culture, but is not limited in one’s expression by only one language and one culture, one can choose different languages and cultures to express oneself». (Abdallah Pretceille, 1999).
Regarding the inter-culturalism, a significant breakthrough has been made on the European level with the Common language framework in 2001. Authors assign intercultural awareness to the students comprehension, while the intercultural skills and operative knowledge is assigned to: the ability to form a relationship between the primary and the foreign culture, cultural sensibility, the ability to identify and use different strategies to form a relationship with people of another culture, the ability to play the part of a cultural mediator between one’s own and a foreign culture, the ability to efficiently mediate cultural misunderstandings and to surmount stereotypical relationships.

2.3 Intercultural competence of a teacher

Obtaining the intercultural competence is a lifelong learning process. Van Eycken and others (2005; cv: Vrečer 2009) claim that the teacher’s knowledge doesn't restrict itself only to the taught subject, but extends to a knowledge of the world. Intercultural competence is comprised of: tolerance to unclear, unexpected situations, flexibility, awareness of one’s own cultural identity, open-mindedness to new experiences, including different opinions, allowing other people's values, ethical behaviour, patience, keenness, interpersonal skills, empathy and a sense of humour. C. Bennett (2011, cv: Vižintin, 2013) stresses the key role of teachers; she believes, that teachers can significantly contribute on a local, national and global scale. According to C. Bennett the intercultural competence is possessed by those teachers, who are able to discuss the diversity of nations within a nation and within the given class. A person with intercultural competence understands that his or her view of the world is based on his or her primary culture; he or she is able to confront with the source of his or her ethnocentrism and reach a level of objectivity when assessing other cultures; he or she is able to provide aid and support to form relationships between cultures, show cultural empathy and understand other people's view.

2.4 Intercultural competence in teaching German

The goal of teaching a foreign language is to help the student attain the ability to freely communicate in the foreign language. Students will attain that level of independence faster, if they speak in a natural environment, being urged to speak by the activity or situation itself. Learning dialogs from books behind the school desk is characteristic for the school system of our grandparents. Today students will learn the topic Food by baking German dishes (Schwarzwald cake, Sacher cake, Kaiserschmarrn) and making their own TV cook show. They will learn new vocabulary very fast; in a relaxed atmosphere they learn indirectly about German culture and cuisine. When learning the topic Professions each student will present or even play the role of a known German celebrity. All these activities occur throughout the year and are then presented by the students at the German evening in the school library. The German evening is known for the German or Austrian food, made by the students themselves, the German music and a short German or Austrian play. Under the title Made in Germany / Austria / Switzerland students thus present also other interesting facts linked to the German language. Each year we also organize a field trip to a German speaking country.

2.5 Social responsibility and intercultural competence

Social responsibility will manifest itself in human relationships, especially when confronted with actual work tasks. Social relationships, friendships and interactions with people from varied backgrounds and cultures can evolve only when there is a willingness for positive actions on our part. A student learning German as a foreign language is confronted when many opportunities to foster his or her willingness in our highly varied social and ethnic profiled...
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school. Perhaps this is the students’ most precious experience, when he or she outgrows the ethnocentrism and accepts diversity. Learning languages or better implementing the learned language in actual situations proved to give an ideal opportunity for students to become more socially responsible. Such instance was provided when students depended on their own ingenuity and cooperation to prepare and bake or cook the food, that was then given to a class of younger students. Students also visited a home for elderly people where they performed German songs, thus establishing a relationship between them and the elderly people and the German language. This somewhat minor step towards real social responsibility and intercultural competence will help form a diversity of new friendships and it may play an important role in the students’ attitude and competencies in this modern multicultural society.

3 Conclusions

Intercultural competence has an important role in teaching foreign languages even in primary schools. Language teachers have a responsibility to foster intercultural competence from the youngest age on. We should guide our students in the acquisition of various skills, contributing to the development of their knowledge and understanding of the target language and culture; we thus help them reflect their own culture as well. Progress and results will however be evident in the future, immediate results can be hardly described, even hard to monitor. Education for peace is a long-term goal, therefore incorporating intercultural competence into curriculum is essential.

References