

CULTURE, IDENTITY AND INTERCULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE EARLY TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES: SOME DEVELOPMENTS AND REFLECTIONS ON THE “OXYMORON” PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

Language use as a, perhaps ‘the’, social marker in daily life has long been recognised as a key ingredient in the formation of individual and social identities. The cultural processes by which we ask and answer the questions “Who I am?”, “Who are we?” and “Who are they?”, etc, are often settled with reference to the use of language and of languages. Language use is often a rallying point in political struggles, often an object of pride or shame in belonging, or otherwise in the formation of a sense of local, regional and national identity. It may be a guarantee of safety or a trigger for danger. Increasingly we are aware that identity is not singular. At the individual and collective levels identity is multi-layered, multi-dimensional and variable as both a strategic construction of active self-presentation and as well as being constituted in variable sets of labels and designations which may be projected and imposed upon others.

The current wave of interest in ‘European’ identity, encouraging a sense of being European, provides the background against which the above issues are being explored in part of a project funded by Lingua/Socrates programme¹

¹ European Cooperation Project No. 94-01/1437/11-B.

The primary focus is on early modern languages teaching and learning for the purposes of generating cultural awareness and supporting interculturality for both social and educational purposes. We the participants, after some deliberation, have adopted the label 'Oxymoron' for our project. It seems to us the most suitably dynamic title, signalling both ambiguities and ambivalences, under which we are developing our own individual and collective identities as a group of professionals with a variety of interests in the early teaching and learning of foreign languages.

THE OXYMORON PROJECT

The project, has been running for about fifteen months now (as of January 1996) and has partners from Spain, Italy, Greece and England. It comprises a collaborative effort between teachers, teacher educators, and academic researchers interested in two aspects of early modern languages teaching and learning. Firstly, the work has a strong professional development aspect and is aimed at connecting people involved in primary level foreign languages teaching in order to exchange ideas about 'good practice' in aspects of curriculum and pedagogy for classroom teaching and teacher education. It includes all dimensions of planning, materials development and interschool co-operation and communications, for instance through mail, fax, e-mail, video exchange and letter writing etc.

Secondly, we are attempting to assess the possibilities of early modern languages teaching and learning for the specifically social purposes of combating racism and xenophobia. The coordination of this effort within the group is my main responsibility and this account of the Oxymoron Project will reflect that dimension and perspective on our work. In this respect our endeavours are set against a broader background of my own interest in the social policy and planning features of educational provision for addressing social aims.

A major source of energy for our interest in these social questions stems from the concerns of our lead partner, the Italians. They are located in one of the most prosperous parts of northern Italy and have become aware of the presence of racism in the communities they serve. Their concerns are part of a wider agenda of issues emerging across Europe as politics and policy have turned to the social and economic questions of European identity. These arise as questions of European

boundaries are widely addressed. They are being strengthened to regulate the flow of economic migrants and refugees from eastern Europe and other parts of the world, and especially north Africa. Also within these boundaries racist and fascist elements have made their presence felt once more. At stake are the constitution, scalability and penetrability of the walls of 'fortress Europe' and the forging of the new intercultural 'European' identity across many dimensions of social, cultural, economic and political life.

Clearly our aspirations are modest, to say the least in the face of these broader concerns. However, it is perhaps indicative of the way we are working that we have decided to adopt what we call the 'sceptical hypothesis' regarding the potential of early modern languages teaching and learning to contribute positively to a cultural politics of reducing xenophobia, and, even more problematically, of early foreign languages education playing a significant role in anti-racist struggles. Thus while we are aware of a deep reservoir of hope along these lines in liberal progressive aspirations, we are subjecting these assumptions to scrutiny. Some of us will not be surprised to find that the work of teachers and the systems of education in which they work may make very little difference, despite the very good intentions of the professionals involved.

The first year of the work has been exploratory and descriptive, consisting of an effort to acquaint each other with the contexts of national policy and practices for early modern languages teaching and teacher education. This has been achieved through an examination of national policy documents and research. To explore perspectives of the most significant participants we have conducted a survey of teachers and students views about teaching and learning foreign languages, as well as of their senses of the wider cultural, and by implication, political connotations of this work. In addition we have other indications of practices at the school and classroom levels through the use of teacher diaries and other learning activities planning documents. Care and caution is being exercised in the interpretation of the materials we have collected and what is recorded here must be regarded as a report of work-in-progress². Nevertheless some things are becoming clear and provide food for thought about the main problems. Before developing that discussion it is useful to review a couple of general conceptual issues which inform our work. They are centred on languages teaching and interculturality.

² I am indebted to the members of the Oxymoron Project who have been involved in collecting and partial analysis of information and particularly to my colleague Sissy Gika for critical comments and many valuable suggestions. The account provided here is my own reading of the situation and so errors and misjudgments are, of course, my own responsibility.

FOREIGN LANGUAGES TEACHING AND INTERCULTURALITY

Not surprisingly perhaps, our work is inspired by the long established and thoroughly social approach to language teaching and learning deriving from anthropologically based investigations, for instance, perhaps best exemplified recently in Britain by Michael Byram and his colleagues (Byram 1989; 1993). While this has been most fully developed for application in secondary and higher education its general principles arguably apply at the primary level also.

The highest and most ambitious objective of this approach to foreign languages work is to move the students to a condition of autonomous working 'experience' of the target foreign culture through the medium of the acquired fluent use of the foreign language. The cardinal ingredients in this educational process are the promotion of 'language learning', accompanied by the raising of both 'language awareness' and 'cultural awareness'. The educational model involves an interconnected spiral of aims and mechanisms designed to support the long term development of appreciation of and the possibility of participation in, the 'way of life' of the target community.

Fully realised, the 'experience' of another culture would involve complex and multi-faceted appreciation of not so much the singularity of 'culture' but of 'culture-s', within any particular national community, in our case those of Greece, Spain, Italy, England, replicated also at the regional and local levels. This would involve participation in a series of ever receding horizons of processes of interpretations, novelty and debates in which neutrality and certainty were ever problematic. A tall order for primary education, perhaps, despite the high aspirations of early modern foreign languages educators (Johnstone, 1994; Satchwell and de Silva, 1995).

It is in this context that we have taken an interest in conceptual discussions around the themes of culture, 'crossculturality' and 'interculturality'. Thus Kramsch (1993:205) indicates that:

Traditional thought in foreign language education has limited the teaching of culture to the transmission of information about the people of the target country, and about their general attitudes and world views. The perspective has been largely that of an objective native culture (C1) or target culture (C2). It has usually ignored the fact that a large part of what we call culture is a social construct, the product of self and other perceptions.

We read this 'ignoring' as reflecting what we might call a 'crosscultural' perspective and assumptions in the social and educational processes. In this the sense of awareness of the learner's own cultural assumptions is quite low and reinforces an unconscious attitude of objectivity about one's own cultural identity. This may well articulate with a perspective in which crosscultural activities at the points where people from different cultures meet will allow for and possibly encourage a lack of respect for the other culture, even to the point of social, political and economic domination and exploitation.

At the centre of our approach to the question of the potential role of languages learning is the concern to promote the very opposite. We are involved in increasing intercultural tolerance, positive curiosity and willingness to learn about the 'other' in non-exploitative ways. In this context the constitution and role of 'reflexivity' is being investigated as necessary for intercultural dialogue. To this end cultural exploration and appreciation, not only of the 'other' but of the 'self' is vital. Thus the 'inter-' aspect of interculturality is focused upon that space at the interface between cultures where they meet, where 'inter-' refers to a dynamic and potentially creative region for both the self and the other. In this respect we are very sympathetic to Kramsch again, where she discusses 'interculturality' as about more than transferring information. It is conscientiously concerned with reflection both on the 'new' culture (C2) and upon the 'mother' culture (C1).

This intercultural region is the site of cultural reflexivity and is pivotal in the process of developing social and cultural identity by deepening and transforming both the learner's, and no doubt the teacher's sense of self as well. In our most recent working definition of intercultural teaching 'intercultural awareness' is defined as:

A heightened sensitivity to cultural similarities and differences in which judgmental and normative considerations are kept open at the point of contact and during which there is the possibility of the interactors discovering something new and meaningful about the 'other' and about themselves and of generating something new for themselves. Thus intercultural creativity is on the agenda. It is essentially reflexive, potentially innovative and, in full form, extends interpersonal awareness into the spaces 'between' cultures in which the meaningful boundaries of identity and reality are openly to be negotiated (Green 1995).

So, the way we are approaching the educational aspects of interculturality

associated with early learning of foreign languages involves embedding practices through which cultural awareness and self-awareness is to develop. Youngsters should be developing a sense that human life is patterned into meaningful activities associated with distinctive institutions, practices and artifacts. Crosscultural awareness involves the appreciation that such patterns of meaningful activities vary, differing from each other both within the 'other' culture and from their 'own', which itself is characterised by variety, differences and possibilities for change. This applies in such a way as to make any appreciation of the relations between cultural forms and contents continual objects of curiosity and potential curriculum items. What we have in mind is that the 'same' thing may be said or done in different ways and some things may be 'unsayable' and not 'do-able' in our own or the other culture. The bottom line is that human practices are meaningful in their 'own terms', and that an effort may be required to understand and appreciate the 'other'. In doing so learning about and creating the self, both individually and collectively is an inevitable possibility. This would constitute positive interculturality. It is important to keep in mind however that there is also the possibility of pernicious reinforcement of negativities in construction of the self and other, the negative aspects of crossculturality indicated above.

FINDINGS: MAIN THEMES SO FAR

Clearly it is asking a lot to expect to find fully formed and effective teaching for interculturality as defined above in the context of early modern languages work in schools. What is clear though is a very strong sense of commitment on the teachers' part in each of the partner countries, an abundance of good will and professed appreciation of the potential for foreign languages teaching for raising cultural awareness, intercultural tolerance and positive curiosity about the 'other'. This is reportedly strongly supported by parental interests as well. There is though, much less professional confidence about the specifically reflexive dimension of raising cultural self-awareness. So far as the possibility of connecting early foreign languages teaching to anti-xenophobia and anti-racist work in schools are concerned, teachers are mixed about this. Some are distinctly sceptical, others express a more complex sense of reality in this regard.

It is clear that nowhere in the educational systems of our partner members are the teachers systematically encouraged to work on the cultural contextualisation of languages learning as a specified and integrated aspect of the educational task.

Each set of national guidelines and statutory regulations and aims indicates that languages learning is important for raising cultural awareness but these form little more than lip-service and superficial encouragement, the primary concern being to raise levels of linguistic competence. This is, for instance, perhaps especially so in Greece where the initiative to develop primary level foreign languages teaching has been implemented through encouraging secondary teachers with degrees in foreign languages to transfer to primary teaching. Thus the focus upon linguistic competence is central compared say, with Italy where there is more emphasis upon retraining non-specialist primary teachers to be able to work foreign language teaching into the curriculum. One of the things that interests us is to see if the primary trained Italian teachers are more likely to be able to work cultural awareness into their language teaching through experience and application of child centred pedagogy than their secondary trained Greek colleagues who have stronger foreign languages credentials.

The teachers we are working with report that they believe that pupils are positively interested in and curious about other cultures and their ways of life, and find it easy to grasp most things presented to them, particularly about immediate and familiar experiences like school life, games, sporting activities, TV programmes, food and drinks, etc. And that while the children may well have somewhat stereotyped images of the 'other' culture, often reinforced through the materials teachers use, this may be both unavoidable and a part of the teaching and learning process itself. Thus simplified images are inevitably more accessible for initiates to another culture than elaborate constructions. Nevertheless, such less complex information may be used for quite complex learning processes, so far as cultural reflexivity is concerned. We are interested in exploring to what extent and how this is done.

It is with respect to a pedagogy for cultural reflexivity however, that the teachers tend to rely upon their own 'good sense' and intuition and there is little indication that systematic procedures might be applied. Thus drawing comparisons between cultures, mentioned spontaneously by many teachers as the basic method, is approached in a generally opportunistic fashion. There is very little indication in planning, at the national level or in the schools' documentation or represented in information from the teachers' diaries. What might be termed a 'curriculum for intercultural awareness' hardly exists. Whether too ambitious or whatever, this does not form part of the planned educational agenda. Thus with respect to both raising cultural awareness and generating reflexive intercultural awareness there is a distinct lack of confidence on the teachers' parts, compounded in many instances, by

uncertainty about their own linguistic competence. In the English case things are not helped by the recent history, during the 1970's and '80's, with a lack of official recognition for primary level foreign languages activities as having any real educational importance. Following the wider European initiatives the British are moving, perhaps rather hesitantly, forwards with early foreign languages teaching and learning (CILT 1995; DES 1990; Dore & Blackburne 1994). This may open up another avenue for intercultural reflexivity.

On the specific questions of the role of early foreign languages teaching for combating xenophobia and racism, the teachers express a wide range of opinions from enthusiastic projection of liberal views about widening cultural awareness leading inevitably to intercultural tolerance and curiosity, to those who are either positive about the need, but sceptical about the realistic outcomes, or those who see no specific role for languages work in this respect, regarding these social issues as part of the wider moral and ethical education the schools should be providing. The few indications of racial and ethnic intolerance reportedly to be found amongst the majority population that teachers are willing to cite from their own experience, involve children from poor or difficult home backgrounds and these are regarded as exceptional.

Most teachers present what the British would recognise as a distinctly 'multiculturalist' image of life in primary education, so far as the treatment of minority cultures is concerned. In this the main aim is to teach the pupils about the other culture through presenting facts which tend to focus on that which is different and often superficially exotic. Issues of race and ethnicity in schools take on a generally benign appearance. They come onto the teachers' agendas represented most often in the form of encouraging anecdotes about the positive treatment of ethnic minority children, who it is reported tend to be treated well. On foreign languages learning, some teachers indicate that ethnic minority youngsters may be especially talented and well placed compared to their majority culture peers because they have experience and practice at learning more than one language, developing both linguistic and cultural awareness to a degree not so far required of the majority youngsters. This may provide the the minority pupils with the opportunity to shine. No mention is made of the particular languages which are taken to be the appropriate 'modern' foreign languages taught at the primary level. The fact that English is dominant, the embodiment of 'modernity' in this context and in some places squeezing out the other European possibilities is rarely regarded as a significant issue, let alone any

consideration of some of the 'new' non-European minority languages as candidates for inclusion in the curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE POLITICS OF IDENTITIES

As indicated above, our work is in the preliminary stages and we can be only tentative at best in our conclusions. The main issues have been set out but there are some things to highlight in the context of the cultural politics of identity formation in contemporary Europe, plus an aspect not yet raised which is central to the work. The latter concerns a key feature of the primary focus in the project.

One could be forgiven for interpreting the focus of our work as being primarily centred upon the 'cognitive' aspects of language learning, cultural knowledge, self-knowledge and identity building to the exclusion of the 'affective' dimensions. In any aspect of the educational process, not least in issues to do with positive curiosity and intercultural tolerance and self-awareness, it is not just a matter of what is to be understood but also what and how it 'feels' like to experience exposure to the 'other' as part of education in and for the self.

It is clear, for instance, that the pedagogy in place in each of our partner contexts is well-established as primary level teaching procedures are aimed at generating involvement, positive affective engagement on the youngsters' part. Thus a great deal of emphasis is placed upon 'play', 'fun', 'novelty' and dispersing possible self-consciousness by paying much more attention to the spoken than the written word, to communication rather than grammar, through combining 'games', many of which involve repetitive routine with set piece use of the target language. No doubt the teachers are doing a good job so far as affective engagement with foreign language is concerned. What is less certain is whether this also applies to specific consideration of the cultures of the target language, and to taking the opportunities to raise perhaps challenging issues of cultural self-awareness with the youngsters. At stake then is more generally, whether this contributes to positive appreciation of cultural differences within their 'own' and the 'other' cultures.

Many questions are opened up for us by this work. While the general model-in-use is 'teach them young' for language acquisition and

awareness, does this apply to self-other identification opportunities arising in the process? Is this a matter for consideration at a more mature age and so a question in the context of primary/secondary transfer? Are we observing a process of conscientious raising of awareness and self-awareness or is it rather indeterminate and accompanied perhaps by complaisant attitudes. There is plenty of historical and contemporary evidence to suggest that the best practised liberal educational policies of mutuality building, making for trust and tolerance, can be instantly negated by an apparently random happening of confrontation and violence, where history and social structure conspire to pernicious effect. Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia are tragic cases in point. For our teachers the phenomenon of attitudes to and treatment of Gypsies is the most pertinent in our work. They are not shy in citing problems of embedded prejudices in this context.

The interconnections between the affective and the cognitive aspects of education are vital and it is this which partly fuels the scepticism about the possibilities for progressive work in the schools. This is in line with the orientation of the most recent literature review of the 'contact and tolerance' research I am aware of, in the context of language awareness education. It indicates that there is 'no simple relation' between social contact and tolerance (Leets & Giles 1993). Nevertheless the prevailing educational ideology seems to be well established that to start the process young through the vicarious cultural contact of early foreign languages learning will inevitably be advantageous. It is clear that the issues are not simply cognitive and about providing appropriate knowledge. It is the affective processes which are the least well understood and most difficult to practice and plan for at the level of educational policy formation and school level activities. There is still a great deal of work to do in exploring the possibilities of early modern languages work making a positive contribution to the alleviation of racism and xenophobia through reflexive intercultural activities. Whether it will be possible to confidently reject the 'sceptical hypothesis' has yet to be decided.

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