

ROLE OF THE ENGLISH CLASS IN PREPARING STUDENTS TO LIVE IN THE EU

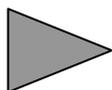
Alexandra Anca CODREANU

This article looks at the ingredients that make communication successful in international contexts. First hand, as well as reported experience seem to point to the need for more than learning the words and the grammar of one or other foreign language in order to make yourself understood or get to the bottom of what your international communication partner is trying to convey to you.

How much of our comprehension of what the interlocutor is saying relies on what we actually hear and how much on our previous knowledge of the language but also of the shared conventions and assumptions on the communication event?

According to Palmer,

“...meaning emerges in discourse itself as participants interpret one another’s speech performances. Meanings are contingent on events rather than entirely fixed in conventional word glosses and grammatical structures. [...] Listeners frame situations and construe meanings in them. If language expresses cognition, it is cognition in interaction and process, not the apparently frozen cognitive structures of taxonomies and componential analyses. Wherever conventional and literal meanings alone are insufficient to encompass events and experiences, we find at work the human cognitive ability to construct meaning in discourse”. (Palmer, 1996: 37)



Needs analysis

To find answers to questions related to **intercultural communication competence (ICC)**, it should be worth looking at the intercultural communication competence of the target audience. Unexpected, odd, unclear reactions or responses in intercultural encounters could be accounted for by appurtenance to different, unknown to each other, cultures. I tried to find such answers in communication events that I was part of or which were reported to me.

The following communication instances seem to have relevance for the matter.

“Romanians are good at starting things!”

“I know.”(1)

This exchange was initiated by me in a discussion with a Japanese high official who had spent some time in Romania. I was speaking from my own experience and was pointing to a positive feature that I knew I shared with my co-nationals. The way he answered, however, possibly the tone of his voice, seemed to me to be pointing to another shared feature that I was not very proud of, related to the lack of determination in pursuing a matter to the end, and I was somewhat surprised that others, obviously culture literate, were aware of it too.

Instructions on how to use toilets given in Romanian (encountered in a large city in the EU). (2)

This information was passed on to me by one of my students. It is definitely a cultural issue. Had the manager who decided to post the instructions wanted to insult Romanians or was it just a measure to solve a problem?

Instructions for fire escape in a hotel in Poiana Braşov, Romania, given only in English.(3)

I saw that with my own eyes in 1995, while participating in a conference organised by the British Council. What was behind the decision of the manager who posted it? Did he think that his co-nationals were bright enough to manage without instructions? Or that they were not worth saving? Or, perhaps, that Romanians would not expect such instructions to be posted so would not look for them in case of a fire. It would have been a waste of time to produce and hang them. Another possible assumption could be that all Romanians likely to be accommodated in that particular hotel read English.

Critical observations on dropping litter in a coach to Bath (4)

I was on my way to Bath on a coach and, on getting off, I did not see a bag with what was left of a snack that I had taken on the bus. A lady drew my attention to it. It seemed to me as if she was expecting such behaviour from me and I felt frustrated that I could not explain to her that I just had not seen the bag and that I felt very strongly against littering myself. Had I been British, I wonder, would I simply not have forgotten or failed to see it?

Rushing up in hope of a better place in a bus in Prague.(5)

It happened to me, and I was so concentrated on what I was doing that I forgot we were four in the group and for a moment found it very strange to hear somebody speak Romanian there. I then felt ashamed of the intensity of my gesture and settled for a standing place but the other Romanians in our party ...

... victoriously occupied seats reserved for senior citizens on the same bus. (6)

They did not do that on purpose, those were the only free seats left, for obvious reasons.

Circumventing queuing at the reception of a hotel in Kaunas. (7)

Another stage in our trip, and a considerable queue. I had no choice but to follow the more orientated of the Romanian group, or else I would have risked being accommodated on a different floor. I could notice, though, that people coming from other cultures, and queuing patiently, did not like our strategy, which made me feel bad about us doing it.

Taking over moderation of a group, by taking advantage of Finnish reluctance to impose. (8)

What happens if you have to do group work in an international group including a Czech, a Lithuanian, two Romanians, an Estonian and two Finns, one of whom is appointed moderator? Well, there is the chance that one of the Romanians is too impatient to wait for the guidance of the Finnish and take over, sharing her experience to an audience less than interested in what she has to say.

“Patriotism is obsolete!”(9)

Believe it or not, a Romanian said that. Denying what you are, erasing the bulk of the cultural iceberg leaves one with what? Being a hollow “European” or “Canadian” being less than anybody else. Romanians need to speak other languages, they need to understand other cultures in order to operate in a multicultural world, but being ready to dismiss one’s own identity will turn such a person into a cultural nobody, deserving from the others even less respect than Romanians now have due to the present bad image we have allowed to be labelled with.

Being critical about other Romanians. (10)

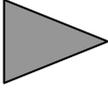
So the other Romanian in the group I was mentioning in (8), is torn between the urge to bring her co-national to order and restore what it seems to her a more adequate way to do things, and the other rule that says Romanians should stick together and that one should never embarrass a co-national in front of other people. I recognize and acknowledge the critical inclination in myself and I know that my criticism is just another way of expressing a wish that Romanians be better. I have my doubts that I am right thinking that, a better approach could be said to be that there is no right or wrong way of doing things.

The evidence above hopefully points to a need to *know how to identify*

- own image/profile
- the image/profile as seen by others
- expectations
- differences in perceptions

and *act on it*.

This conclusion automatically leads to the question: What does ‘acting on it’ consist of? It could be personal development, seeing and doing or learning the hard way. It could also mean training.



Training aims

In view of becoming better fit to operate in a multinational environment such aims as the following could help:

- *Raising awareness of diversity and plurilingualism vs. 'melting pot'*

It is important to understand first that diversity exists and accounts for difficulties in comprehension and communication in general, and then that it is not a threat but an asset worth preserving.

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, gives the following explanations of the two opposed terms:

The melting pot is a metaphor for the way in which heterogenous societies develop, in which the ingredients in the pot (people of different cultures and religions) are combined so as to lose their discrete identities and yield a final product of uniform consistency and flavor, which is quite different from the original inputs. This process is also known as assimilation.

Generically, it is the process that has led to the creation of the American nation. Yet even there the process did not address the people belonging to all "cultures and religions": "white and protestant" was the model, and the non-white were discouraged to blend.

The idea of multiculturalism is often put forward as an alternative to assimilation. This theory, which contrasts to the melting pot theory, is described as the salad bowl theory, or, as it is known in Canada, the cultural mosaic. In the multicultural approach, each "ingredient" retains its integrity and flavor, while contributing to a successful final product. In recent years, this approach is officially promoted in traditional melting-pot societies such as Canada and Britain, with the intent of becoming more tolerant of immigrant diversity. It is difficult to assess the degree to which a government can influence the manner of integration of immigrants and the extent to which it is up to the immigrants themselves.

Comparing the benefits of the great diversity and richness generated by living in a multicultural and multilingual environment, for all the difficulties involved, with the results of "melting pot" policies, it should be clear which is to be preferred. Understanding, accepting, and positively encouraging cultural differences may be a challenge, but it is the path to better and more efficient communication in international contexts.

In the long run, of course, every person is entitled to their own opinion, and individual decisions and actions are only to a certain extent induced by the policy of a larger group. What can be done in class is just to enable students to make an educated choice for themselves.

- *Developing tolerance and concern for the "neighbour"*

Once diversity is no longer perceived as a threat and an individual decision has been made to make real efforts to communicate with the "neighbour", the natural step forward would be developing empathy towards him. If you ask yourself whether you have ever been the object of tolerance and concern from people coming from other cultures, some instances must come up. Understanding them will hopefully generate humility or modesty or a willingness to change.

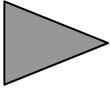
- *Maintaining national identity*

Could maintaining national identity be a problem in current circumstances? Unfortunately there seems to be a high probability that it could. Economic power or the lack of it can affect self esteem. Chances to be successful in another country, especially conditioned by the need not to be different from the new community one is immersed in, can act as strong reasons that determine an individual to willingly try to become somebody else.

Sometimes it is just the wish to become someone else which can trigger such modification to one's values. The dreamland will replace motherland to the extent of denying who one is or has been up to a certain moment.

Teaching a foreign language does mean acquainting students with another culture. Teachers are aware of the need to make the culture attractive to the students in order to make them better understand and learn the language. Sometimes they succeed too well and the students fail to see their own culture's values, taking them for granted.

So it seems important for teachers and students alike to understand that the purpose of learning the language and the culture of a foreign country should not be to turn the subjects into members of another culture. It most often could only produce second rate citizens or, worse, people with no cultural identity at all.



Methods

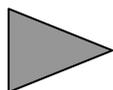
Some methods used to see the aims above materialise include:

- **Case studies**
- **Role plays**
- **Project work**
- **The European Language Portfolio (ELP)**

Case studies and **role plays** enable students to place themselves in situations where cultural competence is necessary in order to solve some practical or professional task.

Participating in **international projects** will bring the contact with other cultures even closer, as it involves communicating with a foreign “partner” in order to solve a task. Also, having partners from cultures other than the ones where English is the mother tongue will make students better understand the role and use of English as lingua franca. The possibility to visit the partners, made possible by mobility projects, will enhance students’ *intercultural communication competence (ICC)* by putting them in the situation where they have to solve real tasks by using all they know about or can make use of in the target culture.

The **European Language Portfolio** can play an important role in achieving ICC aims. It addresses the need “*to promote awareness of a European cultural identity and to develop mutual understanding among people of different cultures*” thus supporting and giving recognition to language learning and intercultural experiences at all levels. It uses the reflective component of learning, as subjects are requested to record all significant events and encounters with the specific language and culture. At the same time, it helps identify personal needs and requirements as regards a target language and culture and establish a strategy for addressing them.



Use of self- evaluation grids

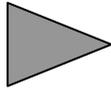
Here is an example of using self evaluation grids to reflect on own skills to know, be and act in communication situations requiring intercultural communication competence. The scales on the left are part of the descriptors used in the self-evaluation grid for Intercultural Issues of the portfolio devised by Inge Koch, Neva Cebbron and Mari Uiibo for the Leonardo da Vinci project entitled *Cross-Cultural Business Correspondence* (CCBC). Intercultural Issues were one of the four main objectives aimed at within the project (www.2cbc.net). As the descriptors were tagged with Common European Framework of Reference levels, I looked at descriptors in the linguistic biography of the ELP, trying to identify which were the linguistic skills closest to the cultural competences envisaged.

Intercultural Issues (CCBC)	European Language Portfolio
I can understand the limitations of national stereotypes (B1)	<i>I can understand the most important information in short, simple, everyday information brochures.</i>
I can spot at least 5 factors that could influence the value system within different cultures (B2)	<i>I can account for and sustain my opinions in discussion by providing relevant explanations, arguments and comments.</i>
I can discuss different cultural values and beliefs with my partners using suitable terminology in English (C1)	<i>I can express my ideas and opinions clearly and precisely, and can present and respond to complex lines of reasoning convincingly</i>

The question is if the two scales can be compared, in view of their addressing different competences and what would be the benefits of comparing them.

The answer to the first part of the question is affirmative, the relation seems to be both-ended inclusiveness: language is a component of culture; to be able to “understand the limitations of national stereotypes” one needs to have used linguistic skills to read or listen about the matter or, in case of direct experience, to put the facts or features observed into words, using the categorising function of language. On the other hand, the skills described in the ELP are of a more general nature, one being able to understand or account about many more topics than cultural differences.

As to the benefits of the analysis, the nature of the competences looked for comes out clearer when contrasted with different kinds of skills. Also, the need is highlighted to look at the cognitive component of languages in the search for a correct “reading” of apparently similar concepts in various cultures. It is only when we are satisfied that we have understood a meaning correctly that we can say we can interpret language correctly and react in a way that we are confident will express clearly our reaction to it.



State of ICC teaching/learning in the Department of Germanic languages and business communication

If we are to look at the state of ICC teaching in our department we shall have to look at

- syllabuses
- course books
- teachers.

I have no intention to establish a hierarchy of importance among the listed components: on the one hand, teachers need to be convinced of the need and use of ICC in order to address the issues with full dedication and competence. There is evidence of this positive attitude first in the titles of the research papers presented at conferences by a considerable number of teachers along the years, cultural issues being a section of most of the department conferences. Thus, since 1994, when I came to the Business English teaching profession, the cultural issues were addressed in every annual Bucharest English Teachers’ Association – BETA – conference I attended. The international and national conferences organised by the Department of Germanic Languages and Business Communication in the Academy of Economic Studies, as well as the annual students’ scientific sessions have had full sections dedicated to intercultural communication. Moreover, Cultural Studies make the object of Master Programmes obtained or currently pursued by many of the teachers in the department, or even of Ph.D. areas of research.

This concern is emphasized and facilitated if ICC is included in the syllabus, and if course books include ICC topics and practice tasks, the teaching/learning process will be even easier.

So we have a task at hand: to enable Romanian students of economics with what it takes to be successful studying, working and living in an international, in particular an EU, context. A prerequisite to adapting is to be able to communicate, understand and change, so as to accept and be accepted and to act correctly. We have looked at

some salient needs like *to know how to identify own image/profile, the image/profile as seen by others, expectations, differences in perceptions, and acting on it*. Then we identified adequate training aims as being *to raise awareness of diversity and plurilingualism, and to develop tolerance and concern for the neighbour while maintaining national identity*. Finally we considered methods for reaching the proposed aims, mentioning *case studies, role plays, project work, the use of the European Language Portfolio*.

I hope it comes out from the above that by making ICC a centre of concern, learning organisation managers, course book writers and teachers can bring a higher quality and efficiency to the English class, as an instrument preparing students to live and work in the multicultural, plurilingual European Union.

References and bibliography

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Palmer, G. B. 1996. *Toward a Theory of Cultural Linguistics*, University of Texas Press.

Leonardo da Vinci project *Cross-Cultural Business Correspondence (CCBC)*:
www.2cbc.net <http://www.2cbc.net/>

Council of Europe: *The European Language Portfolio*: <http://www.coe.int>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melting_pot

The Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research

www.sietarusa.org <<http://www.sietarusa.org/>>

www.sietar-europa.org <http://www.sietar-europa.org/>

www.dialogin.com <<http://www.dialogin.com/>>

The author

Alexandra Anca Codreanu currently teaches Business English and Professional Communication in the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest, and is also a trainer and interpreter-translator for PROSPER-ASE LANGUAGE CENTRE. She is co-author of *English for Legal Purposes*, The British Council & Cavallioti Publishing House, Bucharest, 2002 (published within the British Council EUROACCESS project) and *Learning and Growing*, Cavallioti Publishing House, Bucharest, 2005, designed for first-year students of the Faculty of International Business and Economics. Her main research interests include discourse and genre analysis, legal English, other academic and professional genres, critical discourse analysis, cross-cultural communication.