INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON ESP

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Abstract

Given that English is largely used as a language of high-tech environment, the current article is aimed at shedding light on the intercultural exchange which takes place between L1 and L2 within the "savoir" framework. Emphasis is laid upon "the savoir comprendre" category which is tightly related to interculturality. By contrasting data from English, French, German and Romanian, the paper is concerned with the learners' need to develop new perspectives on foreign language learning through comparison. Thus the different conceptualization of the screw-bolt category in English, French, German and Romanian seems to be determined by cultural preferences.

Keywords: intercultural exchange, the *savoir* framework, technical translations, TEIC.

1. Intercultural awareness and content

Various attempts have been made on mapping the cultural dimension in language instruction, making use of an intercultural approach.

In any society which expects its education system to prepare people for living in an internationalized culture and globalised economy, and also for the interaction between people of different cultures within and across national boundaries, the process of tertiary socialization and the acquisition of intercultural competence are clearly desirable (Alfred et al, 2002: 351).

The term "intercultural" will be employed throughout the present paper with the view to comparing two or more cultures within Teaching English for Intercultural Communication paradigms which enable students to become effective intercultural speakers by raising their awareness of their own culture, and thereby facilitating their understanding of other cultures. Numerous definitions of intercultural competence have been formulated by researcher's worldwide (Deardoff 2004, Byram 1997, Sercu 2004, Guilherme 2000). The most complex and influential definition of intercultural competence is that of Michael Byram (1997). Byram (1997: 5053) has defined five *saviors* or components of intercultural

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communicative competence, which are complementary to a language learner's communicative competence. Byram's (1997) model has a significant advantage compared to others: it sets clear-cut objectives.

This aspect is also emphasized by Bryam et al (2002:10) in his study when he defines intercultural competence as "the ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality."

In this vein of thought, consider Bryam's five savoir categories, shown in Figure 1 below which illustrates a set of objectives for intercultural content, widely adopted in intercultural learning, teaching and assessment (Little and Simpson, 2003). The five "savoir" categories encompass a set of objectives that encourages the learner to stop being a passive consumer of culture and "develop instead a more critical insight into both their own and other cultures – the learners is invited to become a critical participant-observer in intercultural exchanges rather than a mere consumer of culture" (Lindner 2010). It is to note that all the categories shown in Figure 1 below are based on the foreign learner's development of skills, attitudes and understanding. In a nutshell, the learner's cognizance of interacting with another culture when acquiring a second language is central to the model under consideration.
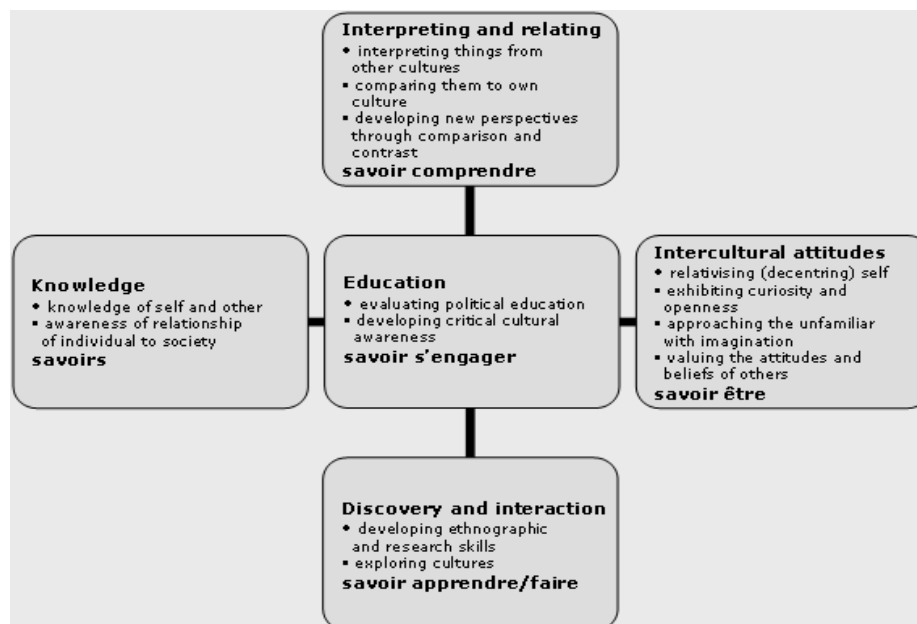

Figure 1 Byram's five "savoir" categories (adapted from Byram, 1997)

Given the "savoir" framework we looked into previously (Bryam's 1997), ESP teachers should not narrow down their mission to providing their ESP students with the linguistic tools required to analyze, understand and evaluate cultural diversity. First and foremost, ESP teachers should sensitize their students to the cultural differences between their native tongue and the target language. Intercultural learning should

give primary place to developing in students the ability to use tools for understanding by means of questioning and analyzing the information supplied in various forms, for example through the media, tourist literature, medical leaflets and literary texts. (Davcheva et al. 1999:64).

As Benabdallah (2012) pointed out, *interpreting* and *integrating* refer to a set of strategies which determine learners to interpret a given discourse from a foreign culture, to decode it and relate it to documents from one's own. In this vein of thought, Byram et al, (2002:13) define it as "… finding out new knowledge and integrating it with what they already have."

It has been widely claimed by educationalists (Byram *et al*, 2002; Neito, 2010) that ESP involves not only imparting learners with knowledge about the target culture but rather providing them with suitable tools to engage with it. In this stratum, the language teacher has to "… rethink and confront their beliefs and biases" (Bodycott et al, 2000:87), focusing, on the other stand point, on the *dynamic view of culture*.

Knowledge, skills and attitudes make up one's social identities. Thus, as formulated in the literature (Byram et al. 2002), intercultural competence lies in the attitudes of the intercultural speaker and mediator. As for what Bryam et al. (2002) call *savoir être*, further comments are needed to clarify this issue. Basically, the authors themselves define *savoir être* as "a willingness to relativize one's own values, beliefs and behaviors, not to assume that they are the only possibly and naturally correct ones, and to be able to see how they might look from an outsider's perspective who has a different set of values, beliefs and behaviors". Another crucial factor which is mentioned in Figure 1 above, is **knowledge**. As a matter of fact, in this context, knowledge should not be oriented towards one single culture, but rather towards social groups and identities. From this point of view, knowledge covers "not only knowledge of social processes, but also knowledge of illustrations of those processes and products; the latter includes knowledge about how other people are likely to perceive you, as well as some knowledge about other people"(Bryam et al. 2002).

Proceeding to skills, we should assume that they are just as important as attitudes and knowledge. "By putting ideas, events, documents from two or more cultures side by side and seeing how each might look from the other perspective, intercultural speakers finally come to understand lingustic and cultural aspects on the part of someone with a different social identity"(Bryam et al. 2002). As a

result, the skills of comparison of interpreting and relating are seminal. It is equally advisable for intercultural speakers to acquire the skills of finding out new knowledge and integrating it with what they already have. First and foremost, they need to know how to ask people from other cultures about their beliefs, values and behaviours. As a result, apart from *skills of discovery and interaction*, intercultural speakers need critical cognizance of themselves and their values, along with those of other people.

To conclude this section, we should safely assume that the intercultural dimension in language teaching is aimed at developing learners as intercultural speakers or mediators who are capable of engaging with a complexity of multiple identities. Stereotyping brought about by perceiving someone through a single identity is thus avoided. "It is based on perceiving the interlocutor as an individual whose qualities are to be discovered, rather than as a representative of an externally ascribed identity." (Byram et al. 2002).

2. Technical Translations and intercultural awareness in ESP

In what follows, we will emphasize major lexical differences and similarities across English, French, German and Romanian. The *screw-bolt* category is a case in point throughout the current study. Along with Kastberg (2002), we will look into technical warnings that differ in English and German due to the traditional patterning of warnings in the two cultures, which are derived from cultural contexts. This section is also aimed at proving that Bryam's (2002) *savoir comprendre* holds when the translator develops new perspectives when trying to find an L2 correspondent. We will embark upon a contrastive approach of the *screw-bolt* category to highlight that English, French, Romanian and German follow distinct patterns of conceptualizing and employing *bolt* and *screw* in idioms and technical warnings.

Once intercultural content was clarified along with intercultural awareness, special attention should be given now to another underlying issue in ESP, that is, to what extent technical genre conventions are also subject to interculturality. Thus, being culturally-driven, genre conventions are not composed in the same way in England and Germany, for instance. Basically technical genres do differ from culture to culture, as illustrated by an instruction in (1) found on the back of identical electrical household appliances in England and Germany:
  (1) *Caution*: *Risk of electrical shock! Do not open!*
        Caution: *To reduce the risk of electric shock, do not remove cover (or back)*
      No user-serviceable parts inside.
      Refer servicing to qualified service personnel. (Göpferich 1995)

Compare the piece of text in (1) to the equivalent text in (2) below which was posted on the same electrical household appliances in Germany. Note that the instruction in (2) stands for the translation of the same instructions given in (1).

(2)   *Before opening, pull the plug!* (Kastberg's translation, 2002:107)

It appears that the German version of the same English warning lacks a lot of the cultural extras of the instruction in (1).

In his paper, Katsberg (2002) identified three such extras:
(3) *(a)   the explicit reference to what it is you should not open;*
(b)   the explicit assurance that there are no user-serviceable parts inside;
(c)   the suggestion that you should leave servicing in the hands of the designated qualified personnel. (Katsberg, 2002: 107)

According to Kastberg (2002), the warning differs in the two languages under scrutiny due to the traditional patterning of warnings in the two cultures, patterns derived from the cultural contexts in which they are supposed to serve their purpose. These cultural contexts themselves are subject to a number of influences and factors. In this case perhaps the foremost factor would be the different perception of liability issue. It seems that Bryam's category of interpreting and relating, labelled as *savoir comprendre* in his model holds in the sense that the warning in English was reinterpreted in German, compared to the existing warnings in German, and finally the translator developed new perspectives through comparison and contrast. Therefore, in an increasingly globalized world, intercultural awareness and content should be emphasized when analyzing translations with an ESP class.

2.1 The screw- bolt category: a contrastive analysis across languages

Words are not used in similar contexts across languages as shown by the *screw/bolt* category section 2.1 is concerned with. Among all the lexical differences existing between English, German, French and Romanian, we will consider those stemming from the *screw-bolt* category. More precisely, we will point out how *screw* and *bolt* pattern, being differently conceptualized across the four languages under consideration. The English category of *screws* and *bolts* seem to pose translation problems with non-native speakers of English. These translation problems, generally speaking, stem from the fact that there are lexical items that may conceptualize differently in various languages, their reference being the same. It seems that the different conceptualization of identical objects is determined by cultural and historic preferences as shown in figure 2.
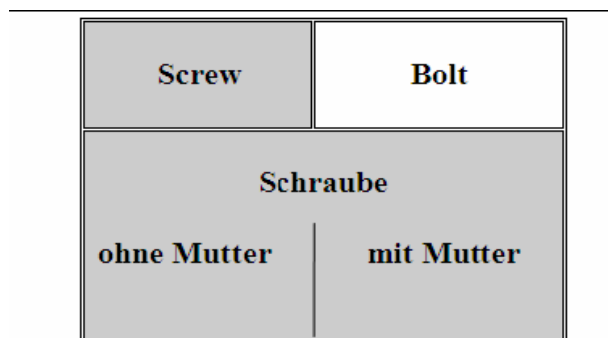
Figure 2: The conceptualization of the English *screw* and *bolt* notions by German technicians (Göpferich, 1995: 23-24)

According to the data in Figure 2, German technicians approach the terminological difference between screw and bolt by resorting to the specification *ohne Mutter*, *mit Mutter*. Instead of creating two separate lexical categories which are kept widely apart, they split one single lexical category to designate two referents by adding additional specifications. By contrast, in Romanian and French, speakers set up two lexical categories for the items under consideration, as illustrated in the examples (4a-d) below.

> (4) Word Gloss
> (a) *şurub* (Romanian) 'screw'
> (b) *piron* (Romanian) 'bolt'
> (c) *vis* (French) 'screw'
> (d) *boulon* (French) 'bolt'

The existence of two distinct terms designating two distinct items show that English, French and Romanian follow the same pattern of conceptualizing and employing *bolt* and *screw*, whereas German is different. In German, in the specification *mit Mutter*, the noun *Mutter* carries a technical meaning. It stands for *thread*: *a helical or spiral ridge on a bolt*. It is interesting to notice that, when *bolt* and *screw* surface in collocations and idioms, in some contexts, the L2 idiom is likely to pattern the one in L1, whereas in other instances, there is no such correspondent.

> (5) (a) *He's sort of strange. I think **he's got a loose screw**. Yes, he has a screw loose somewhere. He wears a jacket in the middle of summer. To have a loose screw (inf) = to be silly or eccentric*
> (b) *Il est un peu étrange. Il **a une vis desserrée**. He is strange. He's got a loose screw.*
> (c) *Este ciudat. Îi lipseşte **o doagă**.*

As shown in (5a) and (5b), English and French follow the same pattern, that is, the idiom *to have a loose screw* equals *avoir une vis desserrée*, whereas in Romanian, the noun *screw* is replaced with *doaga/ stave,* where *stave* means a narrow strip of wood forming part of the sides of a barrel, tub, or similar structure.

Nevertheless, if we consider the examples in (6), we will obviously realize that in this case, there is almost faithful correspondance across English, French and Romanian.

   (6) (a) *They **put the screws on him** until eventually he was forced to resign.* (*informal*)
        (b) ***I-au strâns şurubul** până şi-a dat demisia.*
        (c) ***Ils lui ont serré la vis** jusqu'à ce que finalement il a été contraint à la démission.*

Diachronically, screws or thumbscrews were devices used to hurt people by crushing their thumbs in order to force them to do something. Hence, the idiom *to put the screws on somebody*.

Still, if the bolt idioms are looked into across English, French and Romanian, no similar connections are to be found between the **bolt** use in the three languages under consideration.

   (7) (a) *The news that they had got married was **a bolt from the blue**.*
        (b) *Vestea căsătoriei lor le-a picat ca o lovitură de trăsnet.*
        (c) *Les nouvelles qu'ils s'étaient mariés était un coup de tonnerre.*

The idiom *a bolt from the blue* refers to something that you do not expect to happen and that surprises you very much. As a matter of fact, the noun *bolt* occurs only in the English idiom, whereas noun *bolt* is employed in the French and Romanian versions. The same comments hold in the examples in (8).

   (8) (a) *He seemed to be very happy in his job, so his resignation **came as a bolt out of the blue.***
        (b) *Părea foarte mulţumit de slujba sa, aşa că demisia lui **a picat tam-nisam**.*
        (c) *Il semblait être très heureux de son travail, ainsi que sa démission **est tombée comme un coup de tonnerre.***

Similary, if we analyze the idioms where the Romanian noun *piron* occurs, we can see the semantic discrepancy between the three languages. In (9) the Romanian idiom *a face piroane* equals *to clench one's teeth*, while in (10) below, *a tăia la piroane* meas *to tell lies/ to lie to someone.*

   (9) (a) *Ionel **a făcut piroane** de la atâta stat in staţia de autobuz.*
            Ionel has made bolts for too much waiting at the bus station.
        (b) *John **clenched his teeth** for too much waiting at the bus station.*
        (c) *Jean **a claqué des dents** parce qu'il a attendu le bus trop de temps.*

(10)   (a)   *Ionel **a tăiat la piroane** zilele acestea.*
    (b)   *John has told lies these days.*
    (c)   *Jean a menti ces jours.*

Given the examples in (9) and (10), our claim is that French follows the same pattern as English, while Romanian is different. Basically, in English and French, the verb to clench/ claquer subcategorizes for the direct object *teeth/dents* which substituted the Romanian noun *piroane*.

(11)   (a)   Tu dois **serrer les boulons** pour ne pas avoir des problèmes.
    (b)   *You have **to put the screws on** you so as not to have troubles.*
    (c)   *Trebuie **să strângi şurubul** ca să nu ai probleme.*

Special attention should be given to the examples in (11) where the French plural noun *boulons* can be safely used in those contexts that trigger *screw/ şurub* in Romanian.

3. Conclusions

In the current paper, we adopted Byram's (2002) five *savoir* categories which provide a set of clear-cut objectives to be applied to intercultural learning, teaching and assessment. Within this theoretical framework, the learner is encouraged to become a critical participant-observer in intercultural exchanges rather than a mere consumer of culture. Thus, the Teaching English for Intercultural Communication paradigms enable students to become effective intercultural speakers by raising their awareness of their own culture. Therefore, the ESP teachers' part is to guide learners in the acquisition of *savoir faire* and *savoir analyzer* linguistic and cultural aspects from a second language.

As shown in the examples (1)-(10), technical genre conventions and collocations are also subject to interculturality. Thus, being culturally-driven, genre conventions and idioms are not composed in the same way across languages. We concluded, along with Kastberg (2002), that the warning in (1) differs in English and German due to the traditional patterning of warnings in the two cultures, patterns derived from the cultural contexts in which they are supposed to serve their purpose. These cultural contexts themselves undergo various influences and factors. In this case perhaps the main factor would be the different perception of liability issue. We proved that Bryam's (2002) category of interpreting and relating, labeled as *savoir comprendre* in the model he worked out holds, as the warning in English was reinterpreted in German, compared to the existing warnings in German, and eventually the translator developed new perspectives through comparison and contrast when coming up with the L2 correspondent. A contrastive analysis of the *screw-bolt* category was also carried out to highlight that English, French and Romanian follow the same pattern of conceptualizing and employing *bolt* and *screw*, whereas German is different. Given the examples in (9) and (10), our claim

is that French follows the same pattern as English, whereas Romanian is different. More precisely, as shown, in English and French, the verb to clench/ claquer subcategorizes for the direct object *teeth/dents* which substituted the Romanian noun *piroane*. These data prove that words are not used in similar contexts across languages.

To conclude, the set of examples we provided in the latter section of the present paper come to reinforce the intercultural speakers' communicative competence – based on the five *savoir* categories – when translating target items.

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