The Challenge of Intercultural Communicative Competence for Polish Learners

Christopher Brighton
Krosno State College, Poland.
cwbrighton@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract: Intercultural Communicative Competence is a well established field of study with a well documented and constructed theoretical model which also provides clear skills and goals attainable for ICC learners. The skills, goals and attitudes can be evaluated by the use of Self-Awareness Inventories with an ICC training programme utilising SAI data. The question is what are the challenges of developing an intercultural ability which faced by largely homogeneous cultural societies, such as Poland. Much of current Polish research into ICC is limited and focused on investigating Polish intercultural business experiences or examining Hofstede's dimensions in relation to specific cultural groups and regions. Little work has been undertaken on the issues that Polish people face in developing ICC.
This paper will present findings of research conducted regarding challenges that Polish learners of ICC face in the developing the necessary skills and goals. The paper is based on an SAI which was developed by the author specifically to evaluate socio-cultural background factors and their relationship to the development of ICC skills. The results of the survey provide indicators to certain areas which may hamper or effect intercultural communicative competence.

The challenge of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is something which we all face in the current era of globalisation. ICC is an ever present in the interconnected spheres of education, media, business and our own social networks. The issue is not how we deal with 'the other' but how we approach and how we understand the concept of being an Intercultural Communicator. In modern society we can transcend borders virtually and really with little difficulty. No longer are nations as closed to foreign travellers as they once were and great distances across time zones can be made insignificant with messenger programmes. As a result, people are arguably more connected today than at any time in the past and this connectedness creates the real challenge of intercultural communicative competence. The challenge is created by our home nation's approach to the issue, the purpose and the reasons of being an intercultural communicator. Most importantly, the challenge is individual and connected to our understanding of the intercultural concept. This paper will examine the challenges and approaches to being an intercultural communicator in Poland.

1.1. Evaluating Intercultural Communicative Competence

The development of the notion of intercultural is largely credited to Edward Hall (The Silent Language, 1959). Since this time, the rise of the field has seen a plethora of work and studies conducted into what is understood as being intercultural (for example: Ting-Toomey, 1999; Geert Hofstede; Gert Jan Hofstede, 2005) as well as how to evaluate and measure intercultural communicative competence (Chris Brown; Kasey Knight, 1999). The field has become multidisciplinary and been taken into health care and drama studies, which is far removed from the initial diplomatic and business approach. This in turn has advanced the concept and definition of ICC which can be argued, makes it more difficult to locate and accurately specify (Castle Sinicrope et.al 2007; Rathje, 2007).

Moreover, the number of ICC evaluation tools at the disposal of the researcher is ever growing (Pusch, 2004). Each of these tools approaches the concept of ICC in a different manner from a pen and paper test as used by Self-Awareness Inventories (SAI) to observations, evaluations and continuous assessment as used by the Portfolio approach. Which approach the researcher uses can provide a definition and structure of what is intercultural.

However, the problem can be alleviated by cross-checking the areas, attitudes and aspects of behaviour the various tools evaluate and the primary definitions of being an intercultural communicator. When this is undertaken several themes emerge which suggest a baseline for evaluation. These are:

1. The work environment
2. The area in which we live
3. The ability to empathise with others
4. Our curiosity
5. Our ability to adapt to new situations
6. Home and Family life

These themes operate both at an intracultural and intercultural level. Within our home society, we build over time the abilities to deal with the situations we face in each category on a daily basis providing an intracultural ability. This ability is rarely challenged or changed until we face an intercultural situation where the realities of the situation differ from those we are used to. The purpose of evaluating intercultural competence is to identify and acknowledge the areas we may have difficulties with.

For the current study, English language students of Krosno and Tarnow State College were evaluated to determine their intercultural ability as well as understand the background factors that may influence intercultural competence. In order to achieve this goal, a survey entitled "The Socio-Cultural Background Survey" was created which was part Self-Awareness Inventory and part personal questionnaire. The SAI was developed and utilizes many of the techniques and styles of questions that can be found in major inventories and portfolios. (see: Tucker, 1999; Kelley & Meyers, 2003; Janet M. Bennett; Milton J. Bennett, 2004; Michael Byram et.al 2005).

The questions in the SAI were categorized in three areas of Politics, Education and Family, which covered the themes mentioned above. Questions which related to the first two themes of work and our areas of living were assigned as being Politics as they are influenced by the rules, laws and social notions of the society in which we live. The second two themes of empathy and curiosity were assigned to Education as the system and structure of schooling teaches these skills. The final area of Family was given to questions that asked about our ability to adapt and our home life.

Accompanying the inventory was a personal questionnaire that evaluated background factors that may influence intercultural competence. The aspects questioned include: time spent abroad either for work or holiday; access to social networks such as Facebook and Twitter; as well as the area the respondent lives in – city, town or village. The data from the inventories has been calculated and correlated to answers provided by the respondents in the inventory creating these three clear categories for evaluation.

The corpus of the study was 119 students from Krosno and Tarnow State College, who represent a specific sector of Polish Higher Education. The State College, or PWSZ sector in Polish, was established in 1999 to represent students from non-university cities and provides education to the first degree (Bachelor or Licentiate) level. Current 2008 figures indicate there are over 93,000 students in the State College sector with most students coming from rural or less affluent backgrounds as indicated by scholarships and allowances for almost 20,000 students (2009, pp. 49, 248). This is further supported by the data provided by the corpus as only 24 students declared they lived in a city against 48 who stated town and 47 who stated village.

The cities where State Colleges are located are less well known and less popular for tourism than the university cities in Poland. Tarnow has a population of 115,000 and Krosno a population of 50,000 so they can be said to be representative of medium and small city Poland. More importantly, as has been stated, the students of the State College institutions are not necessarily city dwellers, but reflect a more rural background. As such the respondents represent a large portion of the Polish population which are outside the remit of most intercultural studies done so far, which have heavily focussed on business aspects of ICC (Silwa, 2007) or have been conducted in a university setting (Bandura, 2007).

1.2. Challenges Intercultural Competence

The research conducted on the corpus of 119 students produced the following mean results for the categories of Politics, Education and Family:

Politics	Education	Family
42.93	44.15	40.73

In order to create a clearer understanding of the challenges and the concept of being an intercultural communicator the data was further analysed based on responses in the background questionnaire. The following information presents the findings and evaluates the data in the areas of: City, Town and Village; Work and Holidays Abroad; and Access to Social Networking sites.

1.2.1. City, Town and Village

Where you live can be one of the most influential aspects to developing intercultural competence. In larger cities there is greater diversity as well as greater chances of encountering larger groups of tourists, business visitors and migrants. Other factors may include the location of the city – whether it is on a main transit route or tourist trail – and festivals, celebrations and cross-border links. The size of the city is not directly relevant, although a larger city should be able to support a large base of diversity as well as a larger business community. In Poland the large cities are university cities – Warsaw, Krakow, Lodz, Wroclaw, Poznan, Gdansk, Katowice etc. – with large tourist attractions, business communities and cultural diversity.

Krosno and Tarnow, although smaller, are located on principal trade routes and close to the Slovakian border as well as having tourist attractions in the city architecture. This is supported by the scoring for 24 city dwellers from the corpus. In the mean scores of Politics, Education and Family the results were:

	Politics	Education	Family
Corpus of 119	42.93	44.15	40.73
City Dwellers Corpus of 24	42.92	43.58	40.71
Town Dwellers Corpus of 48	44.00	44.23	39.90
Village Dwellers Corpus of 47	43.81	42.21	41.34

In terms of difference to the overall corpus there is little difference between the mean scores of Politics and Family. However, village respondents have a much lower score in Education which is 1.94 points lower than the overall average. Moreover, town dwellers have a higher score for Politics which is 1.07 higher than the overall average.

These slight differences in scores from the overall average for city, town and village dwellers indicates that intercultural competence is not hindered or advanced by the location in which you live. This may be said to go against conventional wisdom or common sense which would consider the location as an important factor in the development of intercultural competence. However, the findings indicate that this is not the case which is a positive comment as if location was an important influencing factor then the lottery of location would be essential for intercultural competence. Therefore, location cannot be said to be a challenge of developing intercultural competence for Polish learners.

1.2.2. Work and Holidays Abroad

Due to the increasingly globalised nature of employment it is more common today for people to migrate in search of employment. In the Polish case this has been a long part of history with waves of emigration over the past several centuries. The recent past, since 1989, has seen Western Europe as the major destination with an estimated two million Polish people migrating to the UK since Poland became a full member of the EU on 1st May 2004. Over the following years many of these migrants have returned to Poland, but the UK, Ireland, Sweden and, from 1st May 2011, Germany are the most popular legal destinations. For students, especially learning a foreign language, the attraction of spending a summer or longer abroad is twofold: on the one hand they can improve their language skills and on the other they can earn money.

Those who seek work abroad experience culture shock as well as undergoing an unsettling experience as they relocate. Clearly, the difficulties of moving from your home to a foreign country are great and as such not everyone is persuaded to or willing to make such a move. From the student respondents only 37 had spent time working abroad whereas 60 had spent time abroad on holiday. Only 22 students replied that they had never been abroad for a holiday or for work. The mean scores for Politics, Education and Family were:

	Politics	Education	Family
Corpus of 119	42.93	44.15	40.73
Work Abroad Corpus of 37	43.81	45.24	42.49
Holiday Abroad Corpus of 60	43.77	44.13	39.80
Never been Abroad Corpus of 22	41.86	42.05	39.77

As can be seen from the presented data, the students who had spent time working abroad score higher in each category than those who have only been on holiday, never been abroad and the overall average from the corpus of 119. This is a significant finding and indicates the benefits of long-term stay in a foreign country as well as the interaction with others in a normal environment.

All of the students who had worked abroad had spent between one month and one year employed abroad. The social setting of their work, no matter what sector of the economy, enabled them to experience and to have contact with members of the foreign culture in a normal non-tourist related environment. Furthermore, the nature of living and working creates the need for greater interaction with different parts of the foreign culture from transportation, shopping, renting accommodation and social settings. All of these factors increase and clearly have an influence on intercultural competence as the six factors mentioned earlier all come in to play.

In the case of the students who had been only on holiday the slight rise in the mean score for Politics and the slight decrease in the mean score for Family are not significant. The holiday experience does not provide access to the real foreign culture as tourist centres are often more liberal and accepting of differences among tourists as well as promoting culture in a tourist manner. The tourist centre purpose is to facilitate and provide a service to the guests, providing for their expectations, desires and demands.

The results are clearly significant when compared with those students who have never been abroad. In all categories those who had never been abroad scored lower than the average of the corpus of 119. Specifically, in relation to those who had worked abroad, the differences for those who had never been abroad were: -2.21 in Politics; -3.20 in Education; and -2.72 in Family. These differences are significant and indicate the importance of experience which is gained from being abroad. Even in contrast to those students who had been only on holiday, those who had never been abroad scored lower.

Therefore, in terms of developing intercultural competence spending time abroad is essential. For Polish learners this is a challenge, especially in light of the economic circumstances for many of the State College students who rely upon scholarships and assistance grants.

1.2.3. Access to Social Networks

The final area for comparison is students' access to social networks and their range of friends and contacts on the sites. Over the past few years the growth of social networking sites has mirrored or been partly responsible for the greater globalisation of society. No longer can we only speak of business and companies being global, but now ideas, trends and gossip is global with what happens in one part of the world becoming a topic for the whole world. The rise of Facebook and Twitter only illustrate the interconnected nature of people in today's world. In Poland, Nasza Klasa, which is a similar portal to Facebook and was originally designed to reunite classmates, has a dominant position in the market. However, even the Polish social network community is becoming influenced by Facebook with its global reach.

Out of the 119 students surveyed, 76 have a social network page with 51 having contact with foreigners and 25 having contact only with other Polish people. Forty-three people responded that they had no social network site access. The mean results in Politics, Education and Family were:

	Politics	Education	Family
Corpus of 119	42.93	44.15	40.73
Social Network with foreign contacts	43.88	44.45	41.76

Corpus of 51			
Social Network with no foreign contacts Corpus of 25	43.08	43.80	40.24
No Social Network Corpus of 43	43.09	43.84	39.51

In comparison, those students who had foreign contacts on their social network site had a higher mean score than those who did not and those who had no social network. The differences between the scores are not very significant, but indicate that contact with foreigners does provide broader horizons and greater intercultural competence. This is an important piece of information and shows how even limited foreign contacts can influence understanding of other cultures. Moreover, all 37 people who had worked abroad had foreign contacts on their social network site, again indicating that even after their period of working abroad was over they kept in contact with those who they had met.

Creating cross-cultural networks is an essential part of developing intercultural competence as it provides access to information about other cultures as well as encouraging communication and the exchange of ideas, thoughts and experiences. The challenge is for those Polish learners who do not have access to social network sites to do so at the earliest opportunity.

1.3. Conclusions

The learners of English at the State Colleges in Krosno and Tarnow illustrate many of the challenges that are faced by Polish learners. Firstly, the students come from a variety of locations which present specific challenges to overcome. Most importantly, as can be seen from the statistics quoted with regards to scholarships and assistance grants, many of the students who attend the State College sector come from lower income backgrounds which affect their access to modern technology and foreign visits due to the financial costs. However, the location itself does not impair the development of intercultural competence given the right framework and opportunities to develop.

The presented data illustrates that greater communication with foreign cultures does increase intercultural competence. In terms of experience of being abroad, work and holiday provide clearer understanding of the rules, laws and social notions of society not only of where we live but also of where we are. This is shown by both groups of respondents scoring higher Politics averages than those who have never been abroad. Furthermore, access to a social network, especially with foreign contacts, creates better intercultural competence. This is because of the global nature of today's social society with Facebook campaigns, groups and associations which are open to everyone.

Providing access to greater foreign exchange programmes, for example via the Erasmus scheme in Higher Education, and encouraging the development of social network communication, either formally between institutions or informally, will clearly be of benefit to the development of intercultural communicative competence.

References

Bandura, E. (2007). *Nauczyciel Jako Mediator Kulturowy.* Krakow: Tertium.

Castle Sinicrope; John Norris; Yukiko Watanabe. (2007, Fall). Understanding and Assessing Intercultural Competence: A summary of Theory, Research and Practice (Technical Report for the Foreign Language Program Evaluation Project). *Second Language Studies , 26* (1), pp. 1-58.

Chris Brown; Kasey Knight. (1999). Introduction to Self-Awareness Inventories. In S. M. Fowler, *Intercultural Sourcebook: Cross-Cultural Training Methods* (pp. 19-30). Boston, MA: Intercultural Press.

(2009). *Concise Statistical Yearbook of Poland.* Warsaw: Central Statistics Office GUS.

Geert Hofstede; Gert Jan Hofstede. (2005). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind.* New York: McGraw Hill.

Hall, E. T. (1959). *The Silent Language.* New York: Random House.

IDI_Sample. (2006, 05 04). Retrieved 03 02, 2010, from The OFFICIAL Site of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI): http://www.idiinventory.com/pdf/idi_sample.pdf

Janet M. Bennett; Milton J. Bennett. (2004). Developing Intercultural Sensitivity: An Integrative Approach to Global and Domestic Diversity. In D. Landis, J. M. Bennett, & M. J. Bennett, *Handbook of Intercultural Training* (pp. 147-165). Thousand Oakes: Sage Publications.

Kelley, C., & Meyers, J. (2003). *CCAI Sample Report.* Chicago: Vangent Inc.

Michael Byram; Torsten Kühlmann; Bernd Müller-Jacquier; Gerhard Budin. (2005, 01 21). *INCA The Theory.* Retrieved 02 13, 2010, from Inca project:
 http://www.incaproject.org/en_downloads/24_INCA_THE_THEORY_eng_final.pdf

Paige, R. M. (2004). Instrumentation in Intercultural Training. In D. Landis, J. M. Bennett, & M. J. Bennett, *Handbook of Intercultural Training: Third Edition* (pp. 85-128). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Portfolio of Intercultural Competence. (2004, 12 17). Retrieved 02 13, 2010, from INCA project: http://www.incaproject.org/en_downloads/24_INCA_THE_THEORY_eng_final.pdf

Pusch, M. D. (2004). Intercultural Training in Historical Perspective. In J. M. Dan Landis, *Handbook of Intercultural Training* (3rd Edition ed., pp. 13-36). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Rathje, S. (2007). Intercultural Competence: The Status and Future of a Controversial Concept. *Langauge and Intercultural Communication , 7* (4), pp. 254-266.

Silwa, A. (2007, June 03). *Overview of Polish Publications about Intercultural Communication in Business.* Retrieved January 20, 2010, from http://www.sjo.ae.wroc.pl/Raport%20o%20badanich.pdf

Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating Across Cultures.* New York: Guilford.

Tucker, M. F. (1999). Self-Awareness and Development Using the Overseas Assignment Inventory. In S. Fowler (Ed.), *Intercultural Sourcebook: Cross-Cultural Training Methods* (pp. 45-52). Boston MA: Intercultural Press.