

Intercultural Communicative Competence as a Focus of Applied Linguistic Research in Poland

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Abstract: Since Poland joined the European Union in 2004, developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become an important goal of foreign language education. The role of school instruction is not only to equip foreign language (FL) learners with appropriate language competence, but also to prepare them to understand FL cultures and successfully communicate with their representatives. Intercultural communicative competence has become a focus of a number of studies conducted within the area of foreign-language acquisition, those theoretically oriented and those aiming to approach this subject area in a more practical manner. The paper looks at a selection of recent studies that explore issues related to ICC conducted by Polish researchers and published in academic publications. The overview examines how the concept of ICC is understood and investigated in FL studies and what intercultural topics are most up-to-date in a Polish research context. The analysis highlights the areas that need more academic attention. It also describes Polish educators' endeavors to implement the principles of the intercultural approach in a foreign language classroom. This discussion should be of interest to researchers exploring foreign language issues as well as practitioners responsible for education.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, intercultural training, intercultural skills, intercultural approach

Since Poland joined the European Union in 2004, developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become an important goal of foreign language (FL) education. The role of school instruction is not only to equip FL learners with appropriate language skills, but also to prepare them to understand FL cultures and successfully communicate with their representatives. Clear aims concerning this aspect of education are explained in formal documents, such as the *Core Curriculum* recommended by the Ministry of Polish Education,¹ based on the internationally acknowledged guidelines stated in *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*,² as well as in teaching syllabi and course-books used in Polish primary and secondary schools.

Intercultural communicative competence has become a focus of a number of studies conducted within the area of second-language acquisition, those theoretically oriented and those aiming to approach this subject area in a more practical manner. The paper looks at a selection of recent studies exploring issues related to ICC, conducted by Polish researchers and published in academic publications. The aim of this overview is to demonstrate how the concept of ICC is understood and investigated in FL acquisition studies and what intercultural topics are most up-to-date in a Polish research context. The analysis also highlights the areas that, in the opinion of the present author, need more academic attention. It is hoped that this discussion will interest researchers exploring second-language issues as well as practitioners responsible for education.

The principles of the overview

The overview is based on a selection of studies conducted by Polish applied linguists, published in academic journals, post-conference publications, and monographs. Diploma theses written by MA students

- 1 Ministry of National Education (2012), Decree of the Minister 27.08. 2012 r. concerning the Core Curriculum for General Education in different types of schools <<https://men.gov.pl/pl/zycie-szkoly/ksztalcenie-ogolne/podstawa-programowa>> accessed July 2017.
- 2 Council of Europe, *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* <<http://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>> accessed July 2017.

under the supervision of the present author of the present paper were also taken into account. Most of the research papers analysed have been selected from two journals: *Neofilolog* – the journal of Modern Language Association of Poland (Pol. Polskie Towarzystwo Neofilologiczne PTN) and *Lingwistyka Stosowana/ Applied Linguistics/ Angewandte Linguistik* – the journal of Applied Linguistics Association of Poland (Pol. Polskie Towarzystwo Lingwistyki Stosowanej PTLs). Only the journal issues released in 2016–17 were overviewed. The other studies were selected from several post-conference publications and monographs published in 2007–17 and diploma theses produced in 2015–17. The purpose of the overview is not statistical; therefore the exact number of studies analysed is not given. Since the main aim of the analysis is to single out topics which are the foci of intercultural research and to look at how these topics are explored, only studies viewed by the author as representatives of particular groups of studies are referred to and discussed. As a result of the analysis, a wide range of topics have been identified and are discussed below under the following headings: theoretical principles of ICC, developing ICC in a FL classroom, ICC in FL course-books, and a new role of a FL teacher.

Theoretical principles of ICC

Most of the studies overviewed refer in a very explicit way to Byram's³ model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). This theory of developing intercultural communicative competence is also presented in *The Common European Framework*⁴ as a basis for defining the competencies of FL learners. In the afore-mentioned model, ICC is defined as a combination of five elements that should be developed in FL teaching: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery, and interaction as well as critical cultural awareness. Attitudes embrace curiosity, openness, and willingness to communicate. Knowledge refers to learning about one's own and other cultures, their products and policies, such as daily life, history, art, institutions, and

3 M. Byram, *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence* (Clevedon, 1997).

4 Council of Europe.

non-verbal behaviour. Studying gestures, facial expressions, dress codes, attitudes to nudity, use of public space, proxemics, eye contact is considered to be key issues in intercultural training. Developing skills of interpreting and relating involves equipping students with the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture as well as practising how to explain and relate to documents or events from one's own culture. There is one more set of skills that according to the model should be developed by FL students: skills of discovery and interaction, which involve establishing an understanding of a new environment and interaction with the representatives of foreign cultures. A crucial component of the model is critical cultural awareness – the ability to evaluate critically, to justify opinions about and think critically of one's own culture and the foreign one. Critical cultural awareness revolves around viewing other cultures in a more objective way and being aware of potential areas of conflict.

The studies overviewed refer to the afore-mentioned model of ICC for a number of practical reasons. The model serves as a point of reference in the process of designing curricula and writing course-books, as well as designing classroom activities. In all the cases it helps educators to elucidate the principles of the intercultural approach and discuss activities that can enhance FL learners' intercultural competence. The way Byram's theory has inspired FL educators is explained in the further sections of the paper along with the discussion of the particular studies. The findings of the analysis show that theoretical principles of ICC are not a frequent subject of applied linguistic research. A study worth emphasizing is Owczarek's⁵ discussion of philosophical foundations for developing ICC. The author suggests Critical Theory and Gadamer's⁶ hermeneutics as philosophies that stand behind ICC. She also underlines the importance of Bakhtin's⁷ idea of dialogue. She refers to Guilherme's⁸ book *Critical Citizens for an Intercultural World* as a useful source to understand the idea of critical cultural

5 D. Owczarek, 'The philosophical foundations for developing Intercultural Communicative Competence: the role of dialogue', in *Dialogue in Foreign Language Education*, ed. M. Kusiak (Kraków, 2009), 39–45.

6 H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London, 1970).

7 M.M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin, 2004).

8 M. Guilherme, *Critical Citizens for an Intercultural World: Foreign Language Education as Cultural Politics* (Clevedon, 2002).

awareness as the basis of Critical Theory which elucidates the concept of understanding and the way it is achieved. In Owczarek's opinion, Gadamer's concept of Building (i.e. a self-forming process) is of high value in understanding the nature of developing ICC. Owczarek explains that when going through the process of Bildung, we develop sensitivity, character, and an ability to understand and evaluate our own culture, which in turn would enable us to develop a skill of analysing and appreciating other cultures. Owczarek considers the focus on critical cultural awareness as the main objective of developing ICC in the process of becoming critical citizens of an intercultural world. The researcher emphasizes 'the role of dialogue as the main prerequisite of intercultural relations'.⁹ She explains that '[o]nly true dialogic relations allow people to become responsible and worthy citizens who can speak their own voice and recognize the voices of the other'.¹⁰ Therefore, she suggests that language education along with dialogic pedagogy promote the concept of cultural dialogue.

Developing ICC in a FL classroom: Principles and techniques

A substantial number of studies focus on very practical questions: how teachers can incorporate the intercultural component in their teaching, what materials and what techniques can be effective.

A popular way of enhancing ICC is a microethnographic approach (Siek-Piskozub),¹¹ which involves studying text or watching video materials and discussing their intercultural content. A technique that can sensitize FL learners to differences between cultures is an analysis of critical incidents in a given situation, i.e. situations that are examples of intercultural conflicts. A useful technique can be asking learners to keep a personal diary during their journey (Bandura).¹² The process of writing about one's experiences can be a valuable opportunity to reflect on foreign cultures and to observe the changes in one's opinions and values.

9 Owczarek, 43.

10 Ibid.

11 T. Siek-Piskozub, 'Kompetencja międzykulturowa – koncepcje i wyzwania', *Neofilolog*, 46/2 (2016), 137–52.

12 E. Bandura, *Nauczyciel jako mediator interkulturowy* (Kraków, 2007).

A similar technique that can enable students to challenge their attitudes to foreign cultures is accultural training suggested by Jankowska and Bodzioch.¹³ The training is based on simulations that resemble real-life situations and provide students with an opportunity to act out and understand the rules that function in different cultures. Learners are given a task which illustrates a situation that may lead to an intercultural problem. They play their roles and suggest a solution. For example, learners play representatives of two different cultures: monochronic (demanding punctuality from others) and polychronic (not respecting rules concerning time). Students experience problems that the two cultures may encounter and are encouraged to talk about their understanding of the situation.

As emphasized earlier, a crucial element of building intercultural competence is developing the awareness of one's own culture. Aleksandrowicz-Pędich¹⁴ suggests intercultural activities that can stimulate learners to gain insights into their own culture. She recommends a number of activities that aim to make learners think about and discuss their daily routines, social practices, and non-verbal behaviour. Good examples of intracultural activities are class discussions about social rules concerning eating habits, visiting someone's home, kissing in public, and taking off shoes. Aleksandrowicz-Pędich¹⁵ believes, referring to Kapuściński,¹⁶ that: 'to understand yourself better, you have to learn about the Others, because they are the mirror in which we see ourselves. Through looking at the Other we may better understand our own culture, behaviour and emotions, and only then can we try to explain ourselves to the Other.'

Stereotypes constitute a vital element of all cultures and it is crucial that intercultural training encourages learners to understand their role in intercultural communication. Piotrowska-Paprocka¹⁷ suggests that FL learners watch TV commercials or newspaper advertisements based on

13 I. Jankowska, M. Bodzioch, 'Trening akulturacyjny a rozwijanie interkulturowej kompetencji komunikacyjnej', *Neofilolog*, 46/2 (2016), 221–34.

14 L. Aleksandrowicz-Pędich, 'Intracultural dialogue during intercultural activities', in *Dialogue in Foreign Language Education*, ed. M. Kusiak (Kraków, 2009), 23–33.

15 *Ibid.*, 33.

16 R. Kapuściński, *Ten Inny* (Kraków, 2006).

17 U. Piotrowska-Paprocka, 'Stereotyp w dialogu interkulturowym – wprowadzenie do warsztatu', in *Dydaktyka języków obcych na początku XXI wieku*, M. Jodłowiec, A. Niżegorodcew, eds. (Kraków, 2007), 287–92.

stereotypes preferably connected with their own culture and exchange opinions about how stereotypical ideas function in the given texts and in a particular culture. Such discussions are likely to raise students' awareness about the quality of their own knowledge of other cultures and facilitate their understanding of possible sources of intercultural conflicts.

Media are also a crucial component of the approach suggested by Wilczyńska.¹⁸ Following *The recommendation of the European Parliament on key competences for lifelong learning*,¹⁹ the researcher suggests an integrated approach in which learners develop media communication skills along with intercultural competence. Using as an example a selection of texts published in the online version of *New York Times*, Wilczyńska²⁰ explains that 'IC competence implies personal development, openness, and critical thinking, all of these contributing to the improvement of cross-cultural communication in our global village'.

Intercultural training should not focus only on analysing social behaviours functioning in specific foreign cultures. Learners should be provided with opportunities that will help them to reflect on the connection between language and culture. Kramsch²¹ claims that, in analysing culture, one needs to look at abstract concepts (such as democracy or pluralism) that function in a given culture. Following this idea, Strugielska²² suggests activities based on cognitive linguistics that can enhance learners' intercultural awareness – viewed by the researcher as the ability to comprehend and (re)interpret the meaning of terms that correspond to concepts. Her seminar 'Metaphors across Europe: Language, culture. and the mind' prepared for an international group of Erasmus Plus students is an example of how both cognitive linguistics

- 18 W. Wilczyńska, 'Integrating Intercultural (IC) and Media Competence: the DSK affair from a cross-cultural perspective', in *Exploring the Microcosm and Macrococosm of Language Teaching and Learning*, eds. E. Mańczak-Wohlfeld, M. Jodłowiec (Kraków, 2013), 181–96.
- 19 Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on Key Competences of 18 December 2006 for Lifelong Learning, <http://enil.ceris.cnr.it/Basilii/EnIL/gateway/europe/\\EUkeycompetences.htm> (accessed 20 July 2017)
- 20 Wilczyńska, 182.
- 21 C. Kramsch, 'Language and culture', in *Routledge Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, ed. J. Simpson (New York, 2010), 305–17.
- 22 A. Strugielska, 'Językoznawstwo kognitywne a rozumienie kompetencji międzykulturowej w kontekście umiędzynarodowienia szkolnictwa wyższego w Polsce', *Neofilolog*, 47/1 (2016), 93-107.

and intercultural communication theories can be successfully integrated in intercultural training.

A linguistic perspective as a theoretical foundation for developing ICC is also suggested by Dryjańska.²³ Drawing on Wierzbicka's²⁴ cross-cultural linguistics, she advocates a reflective approach to one's native language and a foreign language. The author assumes that intercultural training should sensitize FL learners to the meaning of FL words which Dryjańska views as the key elements of the language and culture relation. For example, students can be asked to reflect on the meaning of value words, i.e. vocabulary items that express certain values. An activity can involve comparing two similar words, e.g. *friend* (Eng.) and *przyjaciel* (Polish) or *freedom* (Eng.) and *свобода* (Russian). The author believes that this semantic analysis can serve two purposes: FL learners practise the skills of discovering the real meaning of words within their cultural background and develop ethical attitudes towards foreign cultures as well as their own culture.

A common technique of developing ICC in school learners is organizing intercultural meetings, which is the subject of Kic-Drgas's²⁵ study. The most popular forms of intercultural meetings are exchanges of school learners from different countries, e-Twinning projects, projects conducted by universities from different countries, international festivals, and exhibitions. Kic-Drgas conducted the survey among Polish and German teachers responsible for organizing international exchanges of their school students. The respondents emphasized the benefits of this form of international meetings. The exchanges resulted in the students' increased sensitivity and awareness of different cultures and enhanced openness to foreigners. They also provided the learners with a valuable opportunity to challenge stereotypes they had held about foreigners and their country.

Another type of intercultural meetings are international projects conducted by educational institutions. An example is a joint project of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland and the National University in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine, entitled 'Developing

23 A. Dryjańska, 'Słowa-wartości: interkulturowość ukryta w językach', *Neofilolog*, 47/1 (2016), 37–52.

24 A. Wierzbicka, *Słowa Klucze. Różne Języki – Różne Kultury* (Warszawa, 2013).

25 J. Kic-Drgas, 'Spotkania międzykulturowe z perspektywy organizatora – cienie i blaski', *Neofilolog*, 47/1 (2016), 109–22.

intercultural competence through English'. The outcome of the project is a collection of essays edited by Niżegorodcew, Bystrov, Kleban,²⁶ in which Polish and Ukrainian writers, both scholars and university students, discuss issues about their culture that can be of interest to foreigners. Aleksandrowicz-Pędich,²⁷ the reviewer of the book, observed an interesting difference between the participants of the project: Ukrainians focused on the characteristic and attractive aspects of their own culture, e.g. Ukrainian customs and traditions; whereas Polish authors wrote about problematic and difficult issues, such as Polish people's attitudes to religion. Another example of an international project is CEReS (*Cross-cultural Curricula for European Regions and their Students*) Project²⁸ conducted by Icelandic, British, Polish, Bulgarian, and Swedish scholars, whose goal was to design an intercultural curriculum for business students. The main material was obtained from the interviews with businessmen in the five countries.

All the studies described above concern teaching techniques and materials that can be useful in the process of fostering FL learners' ICC. Not many studies overviewed for the purpose of this paper discuss the issue of evaluating ICC, the aspect of teaching that seems important especially in formal education. The study worth discussing here is the one by Owczarek,²⁹ in which the author explains the advantages of the application of dynamic assessment (DA) to ICC evaluation based on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. The DA model can help educators to assess a development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to students' ICC. A novelty of the model lies in viewing all these intercultural elements as being in a constant dialogue. Thus assessment would aim 'more at stating whether the process of training heads towards the required direction rather than positioning students' competence at a definite point of the assessment scale'.³⁰

- 26 A. Niżegorodcew, Y. Bystrov, M. Kleban (eds.), *Developing Intercultural Competence Through English: Focus on Ukrainian and Polish Cultures* (Kraków, 2011).
- 27 L. Aleksandrowicz-Pędich, in *Developing Intercultural ...*, eds. A. Niżegorodcew, Y. Bystrov, M. Kleban, fourth cover.
- 28 L. Aleksandrowicz-Pędich, *Rozwijanie Kompetencji Interkulturowej na Studiach Biznesowych, Propozycje Programowe* (Białystok, 2006).
- 29 D. Owczarek, 'ICC assessment – experiences and perspectives', *Glottodidactica. An International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, XLIII/2 (2016), 213–22.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 218.

ICC in FL course-books

It seems undeniable that course-books are still the main materials used in formal instruction. The quality of intercultural material they provide has been a common focus of recent studies. The results of course-book evaluation studies (e.g. Spychała,³¹Wajdzik³²) indicate that although contemporary course-books offer a rich choice of content to teach factual knowledge of foreign cultures, they lack materials that could enable learners to develop intercultural skills and attitudes. Culture of foreign countries is presented in a superficial manner, without sensitizing learners to core values of the culture presented (Piwowarczyk).³³

A new role of a FL teacher

The role of the teacher in the process of fostering ICC has been widely discussed in applied linguistic research. It is suggested, e.g. by Bandura³⁴, Miłułka,³⁵ that a FL teacher should be an intercultural mediator. The teacher is expected not only to possess good knowledge of foreign culture and of his own culture but also to demonstrate sensitivity to other cultures and eagerness to develop himself as a member of an intercultural dialogue. Needless to say, the teacher should constantly develop the repertoire of techniques to enhance his students ICC.

The studies (e.g. Bandura,³⁶ Miłułka³⁷) show that even experienced teachers do not feel prepared to become intercultural mediators for

31 M. Spychała, 'Model kompetencji interkulturowej a kryteria oceny materiałów na uczenia na przykładzie podręczników do nauki języka hiszpańskiego', in *Dydaktyka Języków Obcych na Początku XXI wieku*, eds. M. Jodłowiec, A. Niżegorodcew (Kraków, 2007), 267–74.

32 M. Wajdzik, 'Developing intercultural communicative competence in Upstream Intermediate – coursebook evaluation', unpublished MA thesis (Kraków, 2014).

33 A.J. Piwowarczyk, 'Kultura w podręcznikach do nauki języków obcych jako czynnik wpływający na rozwój międzykulturowej kompetencji komunikacyjnej', *Neofilolog*, 47/1 (2016), 67–80.

34 Bandura.

35 K. Miłułka, 'Mediator interkulturowy – nowa rola nauczyciela języków obcych', in *Nauczyciel Języków Obcych Dziś i Jutro*, M. Pawlak, A. Mystowska-Wiertelak, A. Pietrzykowska, eds. (Poznań–Kalisz 2009), 61–70.

36 Bandura.

37 K. Miłułka, 'Edukacja międzykulturowa – założenia, cele, zadania', in *Słowo w Dialogu Międzykulturowym*, W. Chłopicki, M. Jodłowiec, eds. (Kraków, 2010), 355–64.

their students. Polish teachers of foreign languages, as found by Bandura,³⁸ express the opinion that this role should be shifted to native-speaker teachers. Much attention is given to preparing both in-service and pre-service teachers for this challenging role (e.g. Siek-Piskozub³⁹). Another example is the European Master for European Teacher Training Project (described by Niżegorodcew),⁴⁰ whose main aim was to design the course for teacher trainees that can enhance intercultural competence.

Summary and conclusions

The overview presented above indicates that in Poland ICC has become an important subject of investigation. ICC is explored in many different research contexts – international projects, studies undertaken by individual researchers, and also MA theses. In terms of methodology applied, the most popular are questionnaire studies, studies based on course design, evaluation of teaching materials, including course-book evaluation, as well as action research studies (i.e. studies in which researchers draw on their teaching experiences). A substantial part of the presented studies explore practical aspects of learning and teaching of ICC, such as principles and techniques of training students and teachers, designing teaching materials. Unfortunately, very few studies focus on evaluating ICC of FL learners. The overview of intercultural research points to a relatively small number of studies explore theoretical foundations of developing ICC.

Intercultural research in Polish Academia is burgeoning. It seems that in the future more studies should address the issue of evaluating ICC, which is an important aspect of formal instruction. More attention should be paid to theories and models that can serve as foundations for developing ICC and the springboard for further empirical research. It

38 Bandura.

39 T. Siek-Piskozub, 'Enhancing autonomy in the context of an "ICC development" seminar', in *Exploring the Microcosm and Macrocosm of Language Teaching and Learning*, E. Mańczak-Wohlfeld, M. Jodłowiec, eds. (Kraków, 2013), 217–28.

40 A. Niżegorodcew, 'Semestr mobilny w unijnym projekcie kształcenia nauczycieli szkół średnich', in Pawlak, Mystowska-Wiertelak, Pietrzykowska (Poznań–Kalisz 2009), 257–65.

would be also advisable if applied linguists look at ICC from a more interdisciplinary perspective, which would mean embarking on more collaborative research with representatives of other disciplines, such as philosophers and sociologists.

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