Implementing Intercultural Foreign Language Education. Belgian, Danish and British Teachers’ Professional Self-concepts and Teaching Practices Compared

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In foreign language education, new professional demands are made on teachers. Foreign language teaching can no longer be regarded as a mainly linguistic task. Teachers are now required to teach intercultural communicative competence.

Internationally, the assumption seems to be that teachers are already moving in the advocated direction and are willing to support the new objectives put forward. The observation that this belief remains largely intuitive with little rigorous evidence to support it, constituted the rationale for the research we report on here. The study’s aim was to inquire into how Flemish English, French and German teachers’ current professional self-concepts and teaching practices relate to the envisaged profile of the intercultural foreign language teacher, and to compare these findings to those obtained with respect to Danish and British teachers in an earlier study. Our findings inspire optimism that progress is being made and that teachers in the different countries investigated are willing to support intercultural objectives. Their teaching practices, however, can as yet not be characterised as directed towards the full attainment of intercultural communicative competence.

Keywords: Foreign language education; Intercultural communicative competence; Professionalism in foreign language education; Teachers’ professional self-concepts

Introduction

In foreign language education, new professional demands are made on teachers. Foreign language teaching can no longer be regarded as a mainly linguistic task. Teachers are now required to teach intercultural communicative competence (Council of Europe, 1997).

Internationally, the assumption seems to be that teachers are already moving in the advocated direction and are willing to support the new objectives put forward. Teachers are supposed to already have left the traditional foreign-culture teaching approach far behind, and to have moved well in the direction of multicultural and intercultural teaching (Risager, 1998).

The observation that this belief remains largely intuitive with little rigorous evidence to support it, constituted the rationale for the research we report on here. The study’s aim was to inquire into how Flemish teachers’ current professional self-concepts relate to the envisaged profile of the intercultural foreign language teacher, and into the extent to which their teaching practice can be characterised as directed towards the attainment of intercultural communicative competence instead of towards communicative competence.
Inspired by a study carried out by Byram and Risager (1999) amongst Danish and British teachers, it also wanted to compare Flemish, British and Danish teachers’ profiles, and relate them to the envisaged profile of the intercultural foreign language teacher.

**Professionalism in Foreign Language Teaching: From Teaching Communicative Competence to Teaching Intercultural Communicative Competence**

In the literature on foreign language teacher education, professionalism in foreign language teaching now tends to be defined in terms of five areas of study, namely linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, pedagogy and teaching methodology. Foreign language teachers are expected to know how languages and (intercultural) communication work, and to be themselves skilful users of the foreign language they teach. They have basic insights regarding how languages are learned, and know how to use these insights to structure the learning process. They know how student motivation, attitude or aptitude may influence the learning process, and how to manipulate these factors so that they come to affect the learning process favourably. Finally, they know how to assess, select, design, sequence and exploit input materials, and how to manage a classroom and the language learning process in order to promote their learners’ acquisition of communicative competence in a foreign language (Willems, 2000).

Since the 1980s, the realisation that a special aspect of communication in a foreign language is that it is cross-cultural has taken firm root (Berns, 1990). To become a competent speaker of a foreign language, learners need to acquire the necessary linguistic, pragmatic and discourse competencies to be able to communicate successfully in intercultural contact situations. They also need to understand how culture affects communication, and learn how to mediate between cultures. To that end, they need to acquire insights in the ways in which cultures can differ, and a positive disposition towards engaging in intercultural contact situations (Sercu, forthcoming; Smith et al., 1998).

This insistence on the development of learners’ intercultural skills, attitudes and knowledge required a revision of the concept of professionalism in foreign language teaching. Sociolinguistically speaking, the language teacher’s curriculum requirements are now two-fold. On the one hand, teachers need an adequate sociocultural knowledge of the target language community and a thorough command of the pragmatic rules of use of the foreign language in contexts that may be considered to belong to their professional sphere (e.g. staying with a foreign colleague to organise class exchanges and/or e-mail contacts). They understand that cultural models differ and that they pervade our outlook on life and communication with others. They are familiar with the levels of communication (e.g. notions, speech acts, non-verbal level of communication) at which intercultural misunderstandings may arise, and are able and willing to negotiate meaning where they sense cross-cultural misunderstanding. In addition, they are skilful creators of (cross-curricular) learning environments that promote their learners’ acquisition of intercultural communicative competence. They are knowledgeable about their pupils’ perceptions of and attitudes towards the foreign peoples and cultures associa-
Teachers and Intercultural Competence Teaching

ted with the foreign language they teach, and know how to choose input materials with a view to modifying any wrongful perceptions learners may have. To that end, they know how to assess learning materials from an intercultural perspective (Edelhoff, 1993; Felberbauer, 1997; Willems et al., 1998).

In sum, teachers of intercultural communicative competence also need to be acquainted with basic insights from cultural anthropology, culture learning theory and intercultural communication. They need to be willing to teach intercultural competence and need to know how to do so (Edelhoff, 1993; Felberbauer, 1997; Paige, 1996; Willems et al., 1998).

Methodology

Operationalisation of ‘professional self-concept’

Teachers’ professional self-concept was operationalised in terms of the above-described qualifications (knowledge, attitudes, skills), which foreign language teachers should acquire in order to be considered professionals in their field. Within the confines of this paper we can only give some examples of the way in which each of these qualifications was operationalised. Thus, when it is said that ‘teachers need an adequate sociocultural knowledge of the target language community’, this was operationalised in terms of a series of five-point scale items inquiring into teachers’ perceptions of their degree of familiarity with the various dimensions of the foreign culture(s) which tend to be associated with the foreign language they teach. Similarly, when it is said that ‘teachers need to be knowledgeable about their pupils’ perceptions of and attitudes towards the foreign peoples and cultures associated with the foreign language they are learning’, this was operationalised in terms of a series of 10-point scale items inquiring into teachers’ beliefs regarding their learners’ perceptions and attitudes, and in terms of a number of open questions, where teachers were asked to describe the perceptions which they thought their learners had with respect to the people and cultures associated with the foreign language they teach.

Research instrument

The full operationalisation of our principal concept resulted in a web-based questionnaire, containing mostly closed, but also some open questions, which yielded data allowing description of teachers’ present professional self-concepts and their present culture and language teaching practice. The main themes addressed in the questionnaire were: personal data; your current teaching job; your perceptions of the objectives of foreign language education; your pupils and foreign languages; your familiarity and contacts with the foreign culture(s) associated with the foreign language(s) you teach; culture in foreign language teaching; foreign language teaching materials; school trips; exchanges; (cross-curricular) intercultural activities and projects. In addition, the questionnaire contained a series of statements, which had to be scored on a five-point scale and which specifically inquired into the respondents’ willingness to integrate an intercultural dimension in their foreign language teaching, and into the factors conditioning that willingness. At relevant stages in the text, further explanation will be provided as to how data were collected with respect to the various aspects of the concepts investigated.
Research group

Stratified sampling was used to ensure that relevant subgroups within the population of Flemish foreign language teachers were represented proportionally. Seventy-eight teachers of English, 45 teachers of French and 27 teachers of German participated in the research. About two thirds (62.50%) of the respondents teach in general secondary education, 23% in technical or vocational secondary education, and 3.50% in artistic secondary education. When the three language groups were compared in terms of background variables (age, sex, years of experience, section of education taught, degrees obtained) no significant differences were found.

Results

Below we first describe a number of facets of teachers’ professional self-concepts. They pertain to the teachers’ perceptions (1) of the aims of their profession; (2) of the extent of their sociocultural background knowledge; and (3) of their pupils’ foreign language and culture learning profile. The fourth and last facet concerns the teachers’ degree of willingness to promote the acquisition of intercultural competence through foreign language education. The results presented in the second section reveal how teachers implement culture and language teaching in their classrooms. In the third section, we compare our data with those obtained amongst Danish and British teachers in an earlier study (Byram and Risager, 1999).

In what follows, we mostly speak of foreign language teachers as a group, no longer distinguishing between teachers of French, English and German, for, although the three language groups did appear to behave statistically differently with respect to individual independent variables, on no occasion could the groups be observed to behave differently with respect to the same parameter. On a number of occasions we nonetheless point towards an interesting difference between the three language groups.

Teachers’ professional self-concepts

Teachers’ perceptions of the aims of their profession

In order to find out how teachers define the aims of foreign language teaching, they were invited to rank eight statements, addressing either linguistic, (inter)cultural or learning skills objectives, in order of decreasing importance. As can be seen from Figure 1, English, German and French teachers are in agreement as to where the priorities lie in foreign language education. They define the objectives of foreign language teaching mostly in linguistic (statements 1 and 2), not in (inter)cultural terms (statements 5, 6 and 8).

A second ranking question aimed to inquire into how teachers define ‘culture teaching’ in a foreign language teaching context. As can be seen from Figure 2, the cognitive dimension of intercultural competence appears to find clear support amongst teachers. Teachers of English, French and German all appear to define ‘culture teaching’ mainly in terms of providing information (first, third, fourth and sixth statement). Interestingly, they define ‘culture’ primarily in terms of daily life, routines, history, geography, political conditions and big C culture (see the objectives ranked first, third and fourth),
Teachers and Intercultural Competence Teaching

Figure 1 Teachers’ views regarding the objectives of foreign language teaching.

(1) Promote the acquisition of a level of proficiency in the foreign language that will allow the learners to use the foreign language for practical purposes (language learning objective). (2) Enthuse my pupils for learning foreign languages (language learning objective). (3) Assist my pupils to acquire the skills that will be useful in other subject areas in live (such as memorise, put into words, formulate accurately, give a presentation, etc.) (learning skills objective). (4) Promote the acquisition of learning skills that will be useful for learning other foreign languages (learning skills objective). (5) Promote my pupils’ familiarity with the culture, the civilisation of the countries where the language, which they are learning, is spoken (culture learning objective). (6) Promote the acquisition of an open mind and a positive disposition towards unfamiliar cultures (culture learning objective). (7) Assist my pupils to acquire a level of proficiency in the foreign language that will allow them to read literary works in the foreign language (language and culture learning objective). (8) Assist my pupils to develop a better understanding of their own identity and culture (culture learning objective).

and not so much in terms of shared values and beliefs (see the objective ranked seventh). Also, teachers of French, English and German appear to be in agreement as to the second most important objective of culture teaching in foreign language education after the provision of information. All of them rank the objective ‘develop attitudes of openness and tolerance towards other peoples and cultures’ second. Since teachers define culture teaching mainly in terms of providing information, it can be assumed that their teaching practice will not be geared primarily towards promoting their pupils’ acquisition of intercultural skills, such as empathise with people living in the foreign culture, reflect on cultural differences and on one’s own culture and identity, and know how to handle intercultural contact situations.

Teachers’ perceptions of their sociocultural background knowledge

To find out how familiar teachers deem themselves with respect to a number of cultural topics, they were asked to score each topic either as ‘very familiar’, ‘sufficiently familiar’, ‘not sufficiently familiar’ or ‘not familiar at all’. They were instructed to choose ‘very familiar’ when they felt they were so
Figure 2 Teachers’ perceptions of ‘culture teaching’ in foreign language education.

(1) Provide information about daily life and routines. (2) Develop attitudes of openness and tolerance towards other peoples and cultures. (3) Provide information about the history, geography and political conditions of the foreign culture(s). (4) Provide experiences with a rich variety of cultural expressions (literature, music, theatre, film, etc.). (5) Promote the ability to handle intercultural contact situations. (6) Promote reflection on cultural differences. (7) Provide information about shared values and beliefs. (8) Promote the ability to empathise with people living in other cultures. (9) Promote increased understanding of students’ own culture.

familiar with the topic that it would be very easy for them to talk about it extensively in their foreign language classroom, ‘sufficiently familiar’ when they felt they were familiar enough with a particular topic and could say something about it in class, ‘not sufficiently familiar’ when they considered themselves not well informed about a particular topic, and ‘not familiar at all’ when they felt they did not really know anything about that particular cultural aspect.

As is observable from Figure 3, teachers of French, English and German alike consider themselves most familiar with aspects relating to ‘daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink’, and least familiar with ‘international relations (political, economic and cultural)’. It is only with respect to ‘daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink’ that the larger number of teachers (60.40%) indicate that they consider themselves ‘very familiar’ with the topic. Interestingly, the topics with which teachers consider themselves most familiar are the topics normally dealt with in foreign language textbooks, namely ‘history, geography, the political system’, ‘traditions, folklore, tourist attractions’, ‘literature’ and ‘education and professional life’. The topics which textbook investigations have shown to be only rarely and scarcely touched upon in textbooks (Sercu, 2000) are the topics about which teachers appear to be least familiar. These topics include ‘values and beliefs’, ‘different ethnic and social groups’, ‘youth culture’ and ‘international relations’.
Teachers and Intercultural Competence Teaching

Figure 3 Teachers’ perceptions of the extent of their sociocultural background knowledge. (1) Daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink. (2) History, geography, political system. (3) Traditions, folklore, tourist attractions. (4) Literature. (5) Education, professional life. (6) Values and beliefs. (7) Different ethnic and social groups. (8) Other cultural expressions (music, drama, art). (9) Youth culture. (10) International relations (political, economic, cultural).

Teachers’ perceptions of their pupils’ foreign language and culture learning profile

Data with respect to teachers’ perceptions of their pupils’ foreign language and culture learning profile were collected by means of three closed and one open question. A first result concerns teachers’ perceptions of their pupils’ familiarity with the culture associated with the foreign language they teach. Teachers were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale to what extent they agreed to the statement, ‘My pupils are knowledgeable about the culture of the foreign language I teach’. The mean scores obtained for pupils of English, French and German are 5.07, 4.53 and 4.33. These scores thus indicate that English teachers consider their pupils more knowledgeable than French or German teachers.

The data, secondly, reveal that teachers of English and French believe their pupils have a (slightly) favourable attitude towards the people associated with the foreign languages they are learning. Their answers to ‘My pupils have a positive attitude towards the people associated with the foreign language I teach’ yield scores of 6.84 and 5.36. By contrast, the score obtained for pupils of German does not amount to more than 4.30, which indicates that teachers deem pupils’ attitudes towards Germans to be less favourable than those towards French, British or American nationals.

Thirdly, teachers were asked to describe via an open question what specific ideas regarding the foreign countries, cultures and people associated with the foreign language they thought their pupils bring to the foreign language classroom. The data reveal that teachers believe that a common core of stereotypical ideas is present amongst pupils. Pupils are said to be familiar with
traditional stereotypical ideas, like ‘Germany = sauerkraut and sausages’, but
to also associate countries with more topical topics, like ‘UK = foot-and-mouth
disease’ or ‘USA = Bill Clinton’. Teachers also repeatedly state that their pupils
are not very knowledgeable about foreign cultures, and that what they know
is mostly derived from television. Tourist travels are the second most
important source of information, with France being considered a far more
popular tourist destination than either the UK or Germany.\footnote{1}

In order to find out whether and to what extent Flemish foreign language
teachers at present support the aim to interculturalise foreign language edu-
cation, the respondents were asked to score a series of statements on a five-
point scale. Teachers were asked to indicate whether they ‘agreed completely’,
‘agreed to a certain extent’, were ‘undecided’, ‘disagreed to a certain extent’
or ‘disagreed completely’ with 24 statements addressing various conditions
under which they would support the interculturalisation of foreign language
education. Each condition was addressed by means of two statements so as to
be able to validate teachers’ answers.

Our data show that teachers do support the new aims set and are willing
to become teachers of intercultural communicative competence. The two state-
ments that most directly inquired into teachers’ degree of willingness to inter-
culturalise foreign language education were ‘I would like to teach intercultural
competence through my foreign language teaching’ and ‘I would like to pro-
mote the acquisition of intercultural skills through my teaching’. The mean
scores obtained for these statements are 4.22 and 4.29, which allows the con-
clusion that teachers are clearly in favour of teaching intercultural communi-
cative competence in foreign language education.

Table 1 summarises some of the independent variables, which were found
to co-varyate with the dependent variable ‘willingness’. The higher the degree
of agreement which teachers express regarding the statements listed, the more
willing they will be to promote the acquisition of intercultural communicative
competence. A positive $r$-value expresses degree of agreement. Where $r$ is
negative, this means that the higher the degree of agreement with the state-
ment, the less willing teachers will be to interculturalise foreign language edu-
cation.

Kinds and frequency of culture teaching activities in the foreign
language classroom

One indication of the way in which teachers implement language and cul-
ture teaching concerns the kinds of teaching activities which teachers practise
in their foreign language classrooms and the frequency with which they do
so. As can be seen from Figure 4, the data obtained for teachers of French,
English and German again show similar patterns.\footnote{6} The activities, which teach-
ers appear to practise most often are, ‘I tell my pupils what I heard (or read)
about the foreign country or culture’ and ‘I tell my pupils why I find some-
thing fascinating or strange about the foreign culture’. It is only with respect
to these two activities that the majority of teachers ticked the option ‘often’.
Teachers and Intercultural Competence Teaching

Table 1 Correlations between the dependent variable ‘willingness’ and independent variables expressing some of the conditions under which teachers are willing to interculturalise foreign language education. *F* Prob. < 0.05

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clustered statements: Statements expressing the conviction that the teaching of intercultural competence should be undertaken cross-curricularly</th>
<th>( r^a )</th>
<th>( F^b )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural education is best undertaken cross-curricularly</td>
<td>0.502</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every subject, not just foreign language teaching, should promote the acquisition of intercultural skills.</td>
<td>0.390</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clustered statements: statements expressing the conviction that more knowledge and a larger familiarity with the foreign culture will lead to a more tolerant attitude</td>
<td>0.345</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The more pupils know about the foreign culture, the more tolerant they are</td>
<td>0.274</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing additional cultural information makes pupils more tolerant towards other cultures and people</td>
<td>0.367</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clustered statements: statements expressing the conviction that intercultural skills cannot be acquired at school</td>
<td>(-0.253)</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural skills cannot be acquired at school</td>
<td>(-0.182)</td>
<td>0.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the foreign language classroom pupils can only acquire additional cultural knowledge. They cannot acquire intercultural skills</td>
<td>(-0.290)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( r^a \) = Coefficient of correlation. \( r \) indicates the degree of relationship between two variables. Coefficients of correlation vary in size from 0 (absence of relationship) to a high of 1.0 (a perfect correlation, rarely seen). Correlations may be either positive or negative. Correlations discovered in education and social sciences are rarely higher than 0.70 (or the equally high 0.70), but much lower correlations can often be useful and enlightening.

\( F^b \) = probability level that a finding is significant. The concept of significance has to do with whether an observed difference or correlation is probably real, or whether it is probably attributable to chance variations that routinely occur when samples are selected. To say that a finding is significant at the 0.05 level is to say that the odds are at least 95 out of 100 that the finding is not due to sampling error. The 0.05 and the 0.01 levels provide high degrees of certainty.

With respect to all other culture teaching activities, with the exception of the activity ranked last, the majority of the teachers ticked the option ‘once in a while’. Thus, it can be said that teachers do not generally talk about stereotypes in their classrooms, illustrate aspects of the foreign culture with visual materials or promote the pupils’ autonomous exploration of an aspect of the foreign culture. No critical comments tend to be made regarding the image presented in the foreign language textbook or in the media. Interestingly, the activities that are practised most often can be characterised as teacher-centred activities. It is the teacher who talks about the foreign culture, and the learner’s role appears to be confined to that of listener.

Interestingly, the correlational analysis performed on the data revealed that the more frequently teachers apply particular culture teaching activities in their foreign language classroom, the more willing they are to interculturalise foreign language education (\( r = 0.413 \), with \( P = 0.000 \)).
Figure 4 Kinds and frequency of culture teaching activities in the foreign language classroom. (1) I tell my pupils what I heard (or read) about the foreign country or culture. (2) I tell my pupils why I find something fascinating or strange about the foreign culture(s). (3) I talk to my pupils about my own experiences in the foreign country. (4) I talk with my pupils about stereotypes regarding particular cultures and countries or regarding the inhabitants of particular countries. (5) I ask my pupils about their experiences in the foreign country. (6) I ask my pupils to describe and aspect of their own culture in the foreign language. (7) I use videos, CD-ROMs or the Internet to illustrate an aspect of the foreign culture. (8) I ask my pupils to compare an aspect of their own culture with that aspect in the foreign culture. (9) I decorate my classroom with posters illustrating particular aspects of the foreign culture. (10) I comment on the way in which the foreign culture is represented in the foreign language materials I am using in a particular class. (11) I ask my pupils to think about the image, which the media promote of the foreign country. (12) I ask my pupils to independently explore an aspect of the foreign culture. (13) I ask my pupils to think about what it would be like to live in the foreign culture. (14) I touch upon an aspect of the foreign culture regarding which I feel negatively disposed. (15) I bring objects originating from the foreign culture to my classroom. (16) I ask my pupils to participate in role-play situations in which people from different cultures meet. (17) I invite a person originating from the foreign country to my classroom.

Cultural topics addressed in the foreign language classroom

The extent to which teachers touch upon different cultural aspects during foreign language teaching constitutes our second indicator of the degree to which current foreign language teaching practice can be assessed as promoting the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence. Data regarding this indicator were collected through asking teachers to choose between 'I deal with it extensively', 'I only touch upon it once in a while' or 'I never touch upon it' with respect to the cultural topics included in Figure 5.

As can be seen from this figure, the data obtained for teachers of French, English and German again show similar patterns. A second observation concerns the fact that it is only with respect to 'daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink' that the larger part of teachers (60.14%) ticked the
Teachers and Intercultural Competence Teaching

Figure 5 Cultural topics addressed in the foreign language classroom. (1) Daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink. (2) Traditions, folklore, tourist attractions. (3) History, geography, political system. (4) Education, professional life. (5) Youth culture. (6) Literature. (7) Other cultural expressions (music, drama, art). (8) Values and beliefs. (9) Different ethnic and social groups. (10) International relations (political, economic, cultural).

option 'I deal with it extensively'. Interestingly, these topics coincide with what textbook investigations have revealed to be the topics most frequently addressed in foreign language textbooks for teaching beginners' and pre-intermediate courses in Flanders (Sercu, 2000). Also, these topics are exactly the ones with respect to which teachers state to be most knowledgeable (see 'Teachers' perceptions of their sociocultural background knowledge above). With respect to all other topics the larger number of teachers ticked the option 'I touch upon it once in a while'. This then implies that all teachers touch upon all topics at some time.

Interestingly, the correlational analysis performed on the data revealed that the more extensively teachers deal with culture in their foreign language classroom, the more willing they are to interculturalise foreign language education (\(r = 0.366, \text{ with } p = 0.000\)).

Flemish, Danish and British teachers compared

From the presentation of our research findings, it will have become clear that, although Flemish teachers support intercultural objectives and are willing to promote the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence through their foreign language teaching, their teaching practice can as yet not be characterised as intercultural.

In this section, we want to compare these findings to those obtained with respect to Danish and British teachers in an earlier study (Byram and Risager, 1999). A comparison of the different datasets will demonstrate to what extent Flemish teachers are exceptional or comparable to teachers in other countries with respect to their language and culture teaching profile. Byram and Risager
collected data amongst 653 Danish and 212 British teachers. All respondents completed a questionnaire. In addition, 18 British teachers and 42 Danish teachers were interviewed.

As regards teachers’ perceptions of the aims of foreign language education, Byram and Risager (1999) found that very few teachers in Denmark or England think the cultural dimension of foreign language education is more important than the linguistic one, but that it is their responsibility to also teach about the foreign culture. Culture is typically conceived as a phenomenon, which is nationally delimited and defined, linked to a national language, and that, consequently, foreign language teachers do not spontaneously demonstrate much awareness of cultural diversity within one country nor of cultural complexity. In this respect, Danish and British teachers appear to be in accord with Flemish teachers.

The same is true with regard to teachers’ willingness to interculturalise foreign language education. Byram and Risager (1999) underline that they found a growing awareness amongst their respondents of the significance of the cultural dimension as European integration proceeds, and a clear willingness to teach both language and culture.

As regards teachers’ perceptions of their pupils’ perceptions of the foreign cultures and people associated with the foreign language(s) they are learning, the general impression is that Danish and British teachers, like Flemish teachers, believe that their pupils basically hold traditional stereotypes, but are gradually developing more diversified ideas, as more and more of them get the opportunity to travel to European countries.

Though for methodological reasons, Byram and Risager’s data cannot easily be compared to our data, we can nonetheless conclude that teachers in both studies agree that daily life and routines, food and drink, history, geography, education, traditions and customs and youth culture should be touched upon in foreign language classrooms in secondary education. In the three countries, teachers appear to give low priority to topics, such as international relations and the country’s significance for the home country, or values and norms. Contrary to Danish and British teachers, Flemish teachers attach higher importance to tourism and travel, and to Culture with a capital C. Byram and Risager observe that there were some interesting differences between Danish and English teachers. Danish respondents put more emphasis on ‘history’, ‘ethnic relations and racism’ and ‘social and living conditions’, and much less on ‘tourism and travel’ and ‘working life and unemployment’. By comparison English teachers do not include ‘history’ or ‘ethnic relations and racism’ in the first 10. Apart from these two themes neither group includes any others, which might be considered to draw upon sociological analysis: political system, gender roles and relationships, religious life and institutions, environmental issues. Both groups also omit topics from ‘high’ culture: literature and film, art, theatre, and give low priority to themes which might be described as relating cultures to each other or inducing reflexivity: ‘the country’s significance for Britain/Denmark’ and ‘stereotypes’.

With respect to culture teaching practices, Byram and Risager (1999) briefly comment on teachers’ perceptions of their teaching practice. They state that teachers use a range of activities in the classroom to work on the intercultural
dimension of foreign language education. These activities include discussions, work with television programmes or other means of communication (e.g., e-mail correspondence), or inviting a foreign guest to the classroom. Teachers are convinced that direct contact is most effective in promoting change in pupils’ perceptions or attitudes regarding the target people or cultures. Perhaps most notably, they state that most teachers do not have a systematic plan as to how to go about teaching intercultural competence, or as to how to deal with stereotypes and prejudice in the foreign language classroom.

When inquiring into the details of implementing language and culture teaching, it appeared that respondents in both Denmark and the UK considered it important to promote the acquisition of a substantial body of knowledge, since more knowledge is believed to lead to more tolerant attitudes. With respect to the way in which the foreign culture should be presented, an interesting difference appears to exist between British and Danish teachers. Whereas British teachers think they should present a positive image of the foreign culture, Danish teachers opt for a more realistic presentation. Finally, like in Belgium, there is a tendency amongst respondents to give low priority to the promotion of reflection by learners on their own cultural identity, though a number of Danish teachers explicitly point out that they consider it important that pupils should become aware of their own national identity.

From the summary of some of the main findings presented in Byram and Risager (1999), it can be concluded that Flemish, Danish and British teachers’ perceptions of intercultural competence teaching and teaching practices run parallel to a large extent. Teachers are clearly willing to teach intercultural competence, yet in actual teaching appear to not move beyond a traditional information-transfer pedagogy in any of the countries, though interestingly, different topics appear to enjoy largest priority in the different countries compared.

Discussion

Before commenting on some of the most notable findings, it should be acknowledged that our results share the limitations of any self-report indices. With respect to a number of questions, it was relatively easy for the respondents to give desirable answers rather than answers which are fully true to reality. Thus, teachers may have overstated the frequency with which they employ particular culture teaching techniques or address particular aspects of culture. To our mind, the results should be interpreted in the light of this possibility, which seems to imply that the (inter)cultural dimension may be even less well represented in foreign language teaching than our data suggest.

With respect to the Flemish data, one of our hypotheses was that, in view of the differences in teaching circumstances of German, French and English teachers, the number of significant differences between the three language groups would have been larger. This surprising, but in a sense fortunate result, seems to allow the conclusion that foreign language teachers in Flanders may have to surmount fewer barriers than expected when attempting to integrate an intercultural dimension across all foreign languages taught. The fact that differences in teaching circumstances do not seem to affect teachers’ teaching practice is also somewhat worrying. One might have expected that teachers
who perceive their pupils as being negatively disposed towards the foreign
cultures and people associated with the language they are learning – as is the
case for teachers of German – would be more inclined to employing pedagogi-
cal approaches that could contribute to changing this negative disposition than
teachers who perceive their pupils as being positively disposed towards them.
Though we believe teachers are already employing pupil-centred approaches
to teaching communicative competence in the foreign language, they appear
to not yet have adopted pupil-centred strategies to teaching intercultural com-
petence.

Our second hypothesis, namely that Flemish teachers might continue to
define the aims of their profession mainly in terms of the acquisition of com-
municative competence in the foreign language and not in terms of inter-
cultural communicative competence found confirmation. Even when being
favourably disposed towards the teaching of intercultural competence, Flem-
ish teachers appear to have not yet left the traditional foreign cultural
approach for the intercultural approach to language-and-culture teaching.
The y define culture teaching mainly in terms of the passing on of cultural
information, not in terms of promoting the acquisition of intercultural skills
and attitudes, and devote an only small proportion of their teaching time to
culture teaching.

We may wonder why this is so. Teachers can hardly deny the fact that
they have a responsibility in preparing their learners for a world in which
intercultural contacts will be frequent, especially in situations where foreign
languages are used. However, they may be convinced that it is not their job
to assist learners to acquire intercultural competence, but rather that of other
teachers or other authorities. They may not know that they too are expected
to teach for intercultural competence. The reasons which teachers mention for
not getting round to culture teaching more often shed some light on teachers’
beliefs regarding the possibility to implement intercultural approaches to
foreign language education. These reasons pertain to practical circumstances,
teaching materials, or their own lack of preparation, but also to the pupils
who are thought not to be willing to devote effort and time to the acquisition
of intercultural skills. Revising the contents and teaching approaches currently
adopted in foreign language textbooks might help to expedite the introduction
of intercultural approaches. Teacher training sessions in which teachers can
develop intercultural approaches to teaching that depart from their pupils’
needs, perceptions and attitudes might equally help to speed up the
implementation process. Acknowledging teachers’ reservations and working
towards alleviating their objections may be another track to follow.

Thirdly, we had expected the profiles of teachers in Flanders, Denmark and
the UK to be more different than our findings reveal. These three countries
can be assumed to have different foreign language teaching traditions. In Flan-
ders and Denmark, parents and pupils may be more convinced of the need
to learn foreign languages than in the UK. Pupils’ perceptions and attitudes
regarding the foreign cultures, countries and people that tend to be associated
with the foreign language taught may be different, depending on the kinds
of relationships that exist or existed between their country and the target coun-
tries. For teachers and pupils in Flanders and Denmark, it may be easier to
travel to the foreign country primarily associated with the foreign language
they are learning than for teachers and pupils in the UK.

In spite of these differences, an average ‘foreign language and intercultural
competence teacher’ could be profiled. This may mean that local teaching cir-
cumstances may be less different than presupposed. The fact that teachers in
the three different countries mention the same reasons for not getting round
to culture teaching more often, adduces evidence for this interpretation. It
may also mean that local teaching circumstances really are different, but that
the respects in which they differ do not affect teachers’ perceptions regarding
the integration of intercultural competence teaching in foreign language edu-
cation. Thus, though teachers do not perceive their pupils’ attitudes and per-
ceptions regarding foreign cultures in exactly the same way in the different
countries, these differences do not affect teachers’ beliefs regarding intercul-
tural competence in foreign language education. As a matter of fact, it appears
that teachers tend to take little account of their pupils’ abilities, needs and
interests in the area of culture learning and the acquisition of intercultural
competence, and adopt teacher-centred approaches to culture teaching.

It is clear that the fact that explicitly advocating ‘intercultural learning’ will
not suffice to interculturalise teachers’ thinking or teaching practice. What is
needed is a more extensive proliferation of the idea that there is a need to
move towards the integration of an intercultural dimension in foreign langu-
age teaching, and full support for any initiatives taken to interculturalise pre-
service and in-service teacher training, and foreign language education.
Departing from teachers’ beliefs and trying to alter them seems to hold the
best promise for altering teaching practice. The substantial body of American
literature regarding professionalism in intercultural training may help to
further teachers’ thinking regarding the contents, objectives and methodology
of intercultural competence teaching (see, for example, Brislin and Yoshida,
1994; Fowler and Mumford, 1999; Paige and Martin, 1996). To evolve teachers’
beliefs and to assist them in reshaping their teaching practice so that it
becomes better able to promote the acquisition of intercultural competence,
teachers themselves need to demonstrate intercultural competence. They need
to revisit their commonsense notions of what it means to teach and learn a
foreign language in the light of their encounter with a new philosophy,
namely a philosophy that truly recognises the intercultural nature of all
encounters between speakers originating from different cultural backgrounds.

Notes
1. No significant differences where found between the three language groups with
   respect to the independent variable ‘teaching objectives’.
2. No significant differences where found between the three language groups with
   respect to the independent variable ‘culture teaching’.
3. No significant differences where found between the three language groups.
4. ANOVA proved these scores to be significantly different at the .10 level.
5. Within the confines of this paper, we cannot go into an elaborate description of the
   images which teachers think to be alive amongst pupils. Readers interested in the
   results obtained with respect to pupils’ perceptions regarding the cultures and
   peoples associated with the English, French and German language can contact the
   author of this article.
6. No significant differences were found between the three language groups with respect to this independent variable.

7. Whereas we asked teachers to indicate with respect to a list of topics how frequently they touched upon each of them in the foreign language classroom, Byram & Risager (1999) asked teachers what they thought should be the topics addressed in foreign language education, offering a list of 20 themes or topics and asking the respondent to identify the ten most important ones.

References


