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## Catalonia calling you : Intercultural Encounters as an example of a cultural sensitivity-raising project for Polish students of English

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## **Catalonia calling you: *Intercultural Encounters* as an example of a cultural sensitivity-raising project for Polish students of English**

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## **Catalonia calling you: *Intercultural Encounters* as an example of a cultural sensitivity-raising project for Polish students of English**

Technological and economic globalization, as well as European integration in the early 21 century has transformed the way Polish students interact and cooperate at the national and, more importantly, international level in English, which has achieved the status of a global language (Crystal, 2007). However, it is not only the virtual/online sphere of their contemporary interaction but also the more traditional face-to-face communication that some students actively engage in. Technological literacy aside, one of the critical issues underpinning modern communication in English is the awareness of our interlocutors' distinct cultural backgrounds. Only being sensitive to and aware of the rhetorical conventions stemming from cultural differences can help people truly appreciate encounters with representatives of other cultures and avoid communication breakdowns (Kennedy, 1998).

*Intercultural Encounters* is an international project run by the Institute of English at Opole University in cooperation with the Faculty of Pedagogy at Vic University in Catalonia, which is an attempt to address the need for developing intercultural competence, cultural sensitivity and openness to various communicative models among Polish students. The project started off in the 2011/2012 academic year in the form of a Moodle platform online elective course offered by both universities to their students. Continuing the success of the first edition, two subsequent editions took place in the 2012/2013 and 2013/2014 academic years. As a follow-up to the online student meetings and projects, Opole University and Vic University initiated a student mobility exchange which made it possible for the students to interact in person with foreign partners. The exchange takes place on an annual basis and has continued since 2014.

The first stage of the project consisted in running an online course *Intercultural Meetings* hosted at the Moodle platform with the general aim of broadening and developing students' intercultural sensitivity, combined with increasing their fluency in both written and spoken English. At Opole University, Polish *English Philology* and *English in Public Communication* BA students took part in the

project offered at the Institute of English. At Vic, Spanish BA teacher training students took *Intercultural Meetings* as an obligatory course as a requirement for the completion of their study program.

By participating in the course, the students took advantage of the possibility of establishing closer working and personal relationships with their foreign colleagues and of developing a better understanding of the partner's culture and its preferred rhetorical conventions (cf. Kaplan, 1966). For some students, especially the Spanish ones, it was the first chance to come into contact with someone of Polish origin. Additionally, the pedagogical merit of the course was to provide the students with an opportunity to further practice and develop their English language skills to complete shared tasks that were based on genuine knowledge-gaps and that made use of specific production formats (Connor, 1996). It was divided into three stages: (1) Getting to know each other, (2) Intercultural exchange and (3) Project evaluation.

The first stage of the course lasted up to two weeks and consisted in exchanging slideshows and/or photographs with a commentary related to the students' place of residence, family, interests and other aspects of their personal lives. The exchange of the materials was designed to stimulate a response in the other party, which translated into identifying and explaining the other student's culture specific habits and communicative patterns.

At the second stage, the students had to complete a number of tasks related to the presentation of different aspects of their culture to their colleagues from abroad. Due to the complexity of the tasks, this stage lasted longer (approximately six weeks). The students started with simple presentations of various artifacts of their culture, such as music, literature, customs and habits, simultaneously commenting on their foreign colleagues' presentations. The final assignment required from the students to work in groups in order to make a series of short videos on tourism as well as various cultural events held in Opole and Vic respectively.

In the final week of the course, the students were asked to fill in an evaluation form designed to measure the extent to which the course had some bearing both on the students' ability to perceive and appreciate the other culture and on the development of their intercultural sensitivity.

The follow-up phase of the *Intercultural Encounters* project was a student mobility exchange between Opole University and Vic University, during which Spanish students came to Opole and Polish students went to Vic. During these intercultural encounters, the students were given an opportunity to interact with their foreign colleagues face-to-face and to explore similarities and differences between their culture-specific customs and communicative habits. The students were able to experience the other culture not only by participating in in-class interactions but

also, and perhaps more importantly, by engaging in after-class common activities with their foreign colleagues. Despite sharing the common lingua franca of standard English, participants could experience specific rhetorical patterns that were peculiar to their partners' culture, for example as regards formality levels, politeness strategies, narrative conventions, pragmatic appropriateness or discourse coherence.

An innovative aspect of this phase of the project was the assumption that cultural sensitivity and intercultural rhetorical competence can be developed through the observation of and participation in the educational processes specific to another culture (Byram and Grundy, 2003; Szymańska-Czaplak, 2012). Since the educational focus of the project was on early education and teaching English to young learners, apart from a variety of workshops and lectures on education and educational system of a given country held by theoreticians and practitioners, an integral part of each such student exchange was a school visit during which the students not only observed but also took active part in the educational process by conducting sample classes. The school visits were of mutual benefit to the Polish and Spanish students, as the Polish and Catalan educational system with respect to teaching English are significantly different. In Catalonia English is taught via the immersion method (also known as CLIL: Content and language integrated learning), which only starts to gain recognition and to be acknowledged in Poland nowadays. The Spanish students, on the other hand, had a chance to explore a more traditional model of teaching English as a separate subject. This means that in Poland English with its formal aspects is the object of learning and practice, while in Spain English is a vehicle to learn something else and to do task-oriented activities.

The latest edition of the student mobility exchange was held in Vic on April 18-22, 2016 in the form of international workshops titled *Teaching English to Young Learners*. The event met with an international acclaim and gathered students from Poland, the Netherlands and the UK. The cultural diversity of the participants significantly enhanced the experience and exploration of cross-national educational perspectives. The students were able not only to get to know different educational systems in Europe but also to cooperate with their colleagues in preparing and conducting classes at Catalan schools, learning from one another different approaches and teaching methods which they may find useful in their future teaching careers.

To help students reflect on the experience of *Intercultural Encounters*, the organizers conducted a survey among the Polish participants of the event whose results testify to the event's remarkable success and immense benefit for the students. The survey comprised the following four questions:

- 1) Reflecting on your preliminary ideas on *Intercultural Encounters*, did the event organized in Vic come up to your expectations? Would you like anything to be altered/improved in the next edition?
- 2) Enumerate 2 or 3 differences between Polish culture and the cultures represented by other participants of the event. Consider your interaction in both formal and informal contexts.
- 3) Comment on the way in which the differences in participants' culture background influenced your way of interacting with others – did they facilitate or provide an obstacle to effective communication? Justify.
- 4) Which aspects of different educational systems in Catalonia/England/Scotland/the Netherlands seem to be crucial? Concentrate on the strangest/unexpected/bothering examples.

Considering the students' preliminary expectations it is worth noticing that most of them were eager to take part in the event; however, some of them worried to have such an intense English-only contact, spending the time together not only during workshops but being accommodated with host families. They also admitted that although lectures and classes included in the programme seemed interesting they were not sure if they could fully appreciate school visits since some of them were not studying to become future teachers of English. However, reflecting back on their worries the students report that, surprisingly to some of them, they enjoyed every moment of their stay in Vic. What is more, they enumerate school visits as the most enriching experience of all. The prevalent comment is "I wouldn't change anything, everything was great".

Some students report that it was hard for them to accept the aspect of teaching young learners as a culture-marked element. Communicating on the Moodle platform in the first semester with Spanish partners they mainly referred to their own lifestyles and products of culture. However, having spent the whole day at school in Catalonia they admit that contrary to their expectations they really perceived the event as the one truly enabling them to be involved in the process of cross-cultural communication, more than the classes and workshops at the university where they were discussing cultural aspects in groups of 4-6 students of different nationalities (rather than having the experience of them). The participants also point out that they appreciated school visits because they proved to be situationally-real: at school they met pupils and teachers speaking Catalan, Spanish and English in their natural context; on the other hand, since their Spanish partners did not take part in the workshops, Polish students found the situation artificial. Thus, the school visits turned out to be the most appreciated aspect of the whole event by both groups – future teachers of English as a foreign language and those who study English to

work in business or tourism sector, where cross-cultural communication plays an important role.

Apart from the aspects mentioned above, some students report that their expectations concerned possible improvement in their communication skills in English, thanks to the fact that once abroad they have to speak English to be understood. They hoped to be more willing to communicate in English with their international partners than their regular classmates since they knew they would become their conversational partners only for a week so they do not have to be afraid to lose their face making mistakes. On the other hand, they knew English is a foreign language for other participants as well so it is effective communication that counts, not accuracy.

Referring to positive aspects of the event the respondents mention meeting new people, no matter which culture they represent, and discovering their lifestyles by talking face to face. Some students got involved in the conversation spontaneously, some needed warm-up activities but others required constant stimuli. Some liked the lectures (as “providing food for thought”), others would appreciate just being involved in cross-cultural communication, whatever the topic.

Some students admit that they had no expectations beforehand as it was a new experience for them and they are happy it proved to be a positive one since only in this way they may benefit from it in the future. One student admits she had no positive expectations at all, she just wanted to visit Spain for the first time and thought she would “survive the workshops somehow”. She then adds: “I couldn’t have been more mistaken. It is the people and conversations I will remember, not just the places”.

One student expected a much more formal event, especially at the beginning; she was worried that one week might not be enough to open up to other people and cultures and is positively surprised she made such a good start: “It was the very first lecture that started with a formal welcome and two hours later finished with everybody engaged in a conversation. I expected more formal classes, like in Poland. The workshops were less formal, they were fun. Every day brought a new, positive experience.”

The question on cultural differences proved to be difficult for the respondents. Discussing cultural values needs reflecting on one’s own culture, observing the similarities and differences and only then trying to find the right wording to express one’s feelings. Probably this is why some of the students responded with the comment “I didn’t notice any serious difference”. Some of them felt the difference but their attempt to describe it changed into a general comment only: “their lifestyle is different”.

The students point out that the differences they observe are not an obstacle to successful communication. Describing the unique features of Catalan people they



enumerate their constant emphasizing that they are not Spanish but Catalan, speaking Catalan as their first language even if in many contexts they speak Spanish more often. One student commented that it is surprising for her that Catalan people define themselves not by enumerating their typical characteristic features but by contrasting themselves with the Spanish. What is more, culture is an important aspect of their life because they talk about it a lot – contrary to Polish students who sometimes have to think hard before they can comment on cultural issues. They are also more eager to learn about other cultures than Polish people.

Many respondents emphasize that Spanish and Catalan people are extremely open, they spend time in groups talking all the time; however, their groups have no strict boundaries, people change groups during the day and groups have no problem accepting a newcomer. One respondent found it quite surprising because in her Polish context back at home groups are more fixed for a longer period of time and it is difficult to get into the group you are not on friendly terms with and start a conversation straight away. She also points out that Polish people more frequently value the comments and behaviour of foreigners as good or bad, perceiving differences as bad or at least awkward and not as an asset.

Another observation refers to the treatment of immigrants. One respondent points out that in Poland one can hear many negative comments on the issue of immigration in all its aspects. However in Vic, where in fact there are many immigrants, the students did not witness a single example of negative comment or offensive statement regarding immigrants. She concludes that people of different nationalities are not discriminated against in Vic, contrary to behaviours she sometimes observed in Opole.

Many respondents also pointed out to differences in lifestyle and everyday behaviours: late dinners and socialising late at night; Spanish people being less stressed, more relaxed and easy-going rather than reserved; nobody being in a hurry, often smiling and kind, with positive attitude rather than complaining; Spaniards starting and entering conversations more easily, not blindly following the opinions of others and having no problem expressing their own opinions even if they are not mainstream; Spanish people being more open, often asking questions, eager to learn about others. What was noticed included that while greeting they kiss you twice rather than three times, but what is even more surprising is the fact that they kiss newly met people. The Catalan partners also used less formal communication in the contexts where Polish people use more formal patterns, e.g. shortening the distance between lecturers and students, as if they were close friends, “or maybe they *are* close friends?” as one of the respondents tried to interpret.

One of the respondents even comments that Polish people were the least open of all the other nations they socialized with during the event: “I observed that the



Polish students were the ones who integrated the least”. Only at the closing party the differences in openness disappeared, however they reappeared the next morning.

On the other hand, many Polish students notice that the differences did not prevent successful communication; on the contrary, they constituted the topic for reflecting upon and exchanging ideas, considering them from manifold perspectives rather than just one’s own: “During the event I could try to identify with a foreign culture; I find it a valuable experience, no matter which culture you take into consideration – you just start understanding other people rather than judging them”. Many students point out that the event was such a big success since everybody was trying to do their best to open enough to appreciate the experience: “Frequently, cultural differences were just a starting point, a pretext to get involved in interaction”.

One of the respondents noticed that the open posture of the representatives of other nationalities, especially Spanish and Catalan, followed by Scottish, English, and Dutch, helped to “unblock” Polish students to take part in conversations: “If you see other people are open, it’s easier to make contact”. Other respondents point out that “it was fantastic to talk in English all the time, we hardly ever do it in class during our studies” and that they appreciate “using English for real-life communication rather than learning untypical structures for the sake of the exam”. The students emphasize that constant necessity to speak English helped them to develop self-confidence: “Usually I get blocked even before I start considering speaking; I believe this is not only my personal problem since many Polish students frequently don’t even dare to participate in the conversation in classroom”. However, as another respondent notices, in some cases the language turns out to be a barrier in expressing what one really thinks: “Then we used a lot of gestures and positive facial expression to substitute for chaotic and sometimes illogical explanations”.

On the other hand, some respondents admit that such openness on the side of their foreign interlocutors was perceived by them as problematic rather than encouraging. “I found it annoying at first, I thought such openness is not natural, it’s so much different from what I usually behave; but I was trying to get involved and finally I really did”. Another Polish student commented: “At first I felt awkward and uneasy, I perceived Spanish people as behaving in a funny way; with time, however, all this embarrassment disappeared and I didn’t feel out of place any more. Once I accepted their everyday behaviour (like kisses with everybody as a form of greeting) I felt the process of communication started going smoothly. I noticed that the Spanish also appreciated the fact that I respect and accept their form of greeting and don’t distance myself any longer.”

Since this year's edition of *Intercultural Encounters* was based on educational aspects, respondents were asked to comment on the differences in educational systems in partner countries (question 4). Although most of them pointed to the high cost of studies in other countries and free-of-charge education in Poland as the most striking difference, some Polish students get deeper in their comparisons emphasizing sociocultural aspects. The respondents point out to more friendly atmosphere and less formal relations between teachers and pupils; to earlier admission of children in schools; to interactive and interesting methods of teaching that include stimulating cooperation; to assimilating immigrants into Catalan educational systems as well as to the diversity of educational systems across Spain. Finally, many of them admitted that education as a main topic of the workshops turned to be a good choice because "it concerns each of us."

*Intercultural Encounters* is planned as an on-going project between Opole University and Vic University in Catalonia. It is likely to be continued in new forms that could be adjusted to the professional needs of incoming students of English who might specialize in English for tourism, teaching or business. Given the students' positive reactions and the promising results of more formal measurements of the gains in students intercultural sensitivity (Raluy and Szymańska-Czaplak, 2014), it can be ever more finely-tuned to helping students appreciate cultural differences and become open to various rhetorical conventions that impinge on how English (or various Englishes) tend(s) to be used in the context of international communication.

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