Multilingual and Intercultural Competences in the European Context

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We currently work at a university located in the southern part of Austria, with borders with Slovenia and Italy just a 20-minute drive away. It is a border area that is fascinating from a research perspective, but also a fascinating place in which to live. It is a place where three major cultural and linguistic traditions meet. Within Europe, there are many similar border regions, and also historically and politically disputed territories and borders. Currently we also have the situation, where borders are open or closed, depending on regulations in relation to the pandemic. So, we are both extremely passionate, within the local as well as the global context, about promoting ideas of multilingualism and intercultural competence within and across borders.

We would like to look at how, from a future competences' perspective, multilingual and intercultural competences are key resources. But also, specifically in the context of EU integration, how they are partly overlooked. And we would also like to provide an introduction to the borders and the connections between multilingual competence and intercultural competence as we see it. This presentation aims to give you an overview of some of the themes that we think are important today.

So, to reiterate, we consider multilingual and intercultural competences to be absolutely key competences in the European context. We are familiar with discussions around borders, across border areas in regions throughout Europe, and we know that a third of the entire EU population live in these cross-border regions. They are considered as a laboratory for integration and they should, ideally, be privileged spaces for developing multilingual and intercultural competences. However, we will argue that this is not always the case.

EU institutions have clearly called for a 'two plus one' policy on languages across the EU and strongly promote the idea of unity in diversity. Yet, at the same time, we know that cross-border cooperation faces many obstacles among which linguistic and cultural barriers are quite prevalent. So, this provides the basis for or the background to our interests in engaging with these topics.

From a teaching and research perspective, we are also particularly interested in looking at how multilingual and intercultural competences are similar but yet different, and how they are both intertwined and extremely complex.

We would also like to touch upon the assumption of how simply being multilingual or simply living in a border context should help make us more interculturally or more linguistically, multilingually competent. However, we know that this is not the case unless individuals, groups or cultures very specifically and consciously develop these competences.

What is multilingualism?

At first we would like to explain how we define multilingualism and what we think is the most valuable approach for this kind of study and research. As you are probably aware, there are many definitions of multilingualism depending on which aspect you are taking into consideration. Just to give you a few examples, we could consider the individual dimension or the social dimension depending on whether we are talking about people or society. Or, to give another example, we could take into consideration the dimension of proficiency or of use, thus we can study multilingualism from a point of view of the

competences of the speaker – how well do they speak the language – or the point of view of use – when do we use the language. In this latter case, for example, you might be familiar with the definition that Francois Grosjean gives in his book, 'Bilingual Life and Reality', in which he says 'a bilingual person is a person who uses the two or more languages in everyday life', thus on a regular basis.

Another example is whether to use the atomistic or holistic view of multilingualism. What does this mean? Atomistic approaches adopt a monolingual view of multilingualism, essentially seeing languages as separated in the brain, looking at multilingual skills by isolating the learning of the target language, rather than taking into consideration that languages influence and nurture each other, which would be the holistic approach. And it is this latter approach that we decided to adopt as we believe it to be both relevant and important for our studies.

Essentially, the holistic view of bilingualism, of multilingualism, proposes that multilingualism is an integrated whole which cannot easily be decomposed into different and separated parts, meaning that multilinguals are not simply 'many monolinguals within the same person'. The capacity they have is a specific linguistic competence, a specific linguistic repertoire. The holistic approach considers that all languages interact in the brain and this can be observed in practice when analysing multilingual practices in specific social contexts.

Multi-competence, empathy and tolerance of ambiguity

So, this brings us to the idea of multi-competence. What do we mean with multi-competence? Multi-competence is a complex type of competence which is qualitatively different from the competence of monolingual speakers of a language. The idea is that, when we acquire languages, the fact that we acquire a new language can have an effect on the other languages we already know, i.e. our first language and the second language that we studied previously. So, the knowledge multilingual speakers have of their language is different from the knowledge that monolingual speakers have. And, as you are probably aware, there are many studies confirming that being able to communicate in different languages can give you certain advantages, not only the many linguistic advantages but also cognitive advantages, for example, the idea of having meta-linguistic competence, meta-linguistic awareness. You may be aware that multilinguals have a better memory, better creativity and so on. And in terms of cognitive competence, they are supposed to be better at planning and solving complex problems, for example.

I would like to briefly mention two studies that are relevant and which consider the relationship between multilingualism and certain psychological aspects or personality traits. The first study is that of Dewaele and Li, conducted in 2012 and concerning the connection between multilingualism and empathy. They wanted to see if the knowledge of more than one language is linked to a higher level of empathy. In the study, they showed that frequent use of multiple languages is linked to a higher level of cognitive empathy. But rather than proficiency being the key – how well someone knows the language – it was the frequent use of languages that made the difference. Essentially, those participants in the study who used languages frequently had higher scores in cognitive empathy. Thus, it is not important that they were born in a bilingual context, it was not important that they had experienced living abroad; what was important was the fact that they used the languages on a regular basis. The conclusion of this study was that multilinguals, using different languages on a regular basis, tend to be more skilful in conversations, they are able to understand the point of view of the person they are talking to and this is considered as a sign of being multi-competent.

Another study that we would like to mention briefly is Dewaele 2013, a study connecting multilingualism with tolerance of ambiguity. Again, the aim of this study was to see if knowledge of more languages is linked to a higher level of tolerance of ambiguity. The result of the study was that there was a correlation. But an interesting fact from the study found that, once the threshold of three languages is reached, the effect of knowing more than one language no longer effects the level of tolerance of ambiguity. Therefore, if you know at least three languages, according to the study, you will have higher tolerance of ambiguity scores. And again, this was not related to being born in a bilingual or multilingual family, meaning that growing up in a bilingual or multilingual environment does not in itself make one more tolerant of ambiguity. Rather, what makes one more tolerant of ambiguity is once again the fact of using different languages on a regular basis. So again, this is considered as an indication of multi-competence. And this also suggests that the presence of multiple languages in one's mind has effects that go beyond the actual knowledge of the languages themselves, beyond cognitive tasks: the study argued that multilinguals may be more tolerant individuals and thus better citizens.

As with multilingual competence, living in a context in which you are surrounded by different cultures does not automatically mean you have a higher degree of intercultural competence. Exactly as with the linguistic or multilingual competence, it is about experiencing and using those cultures and being conscious about and aware of those cultures.

Intercultural competence

But before going into any more detail, we should define what intercultural competence is and explain our approach. The constructivist intercultural perspective means considering cultures, or a cultural group, as having some form of mutually shared meaning within a particular boundary. So, if we take a culture or a cultural group as any group that shares meaning within a boundary, it could be, for example, Catalans in the North as one cultural group and Catalans in the South as another. Or it could quite simply be a group of film buffs who are located either in the North or the South or anywhere else, but who share a common love of film. So, essentially, we see a cultural group as any group that shares meaning within a particular framework. And we consider that we all have many, many different cultures which also have an impact on who we are as individuals. And we should note that it is not the cultures themselves that communicate with each other, but rather it is always the individuals.

So, if we define intercultural competence as essentially a measure of how effectively and appropriately an individual interacts with others, then it clearly also relates very strongly to communicative competency. So again, here we see the overlap with multilingual competency. This communicative competency is of course linguistic or pluri-linguistic competency; but it goes beyond that, to components such as active listening skills and also mindfulness in communication. And to breakdown the other elements associated with intercultural competence further, one of the main things that intercultural competence relies on is an understanding of one's own perceptual frame of reference. Thus, we need to know how we see the world, why we see it in that way and what influences have an impact on this perspective. These are normally elements that are in our unconscious: the frames of reference are learned, partly conscious, but also very often unconscious. We are not intuitively aware of our own cultures, for example, and we are not often taught how to understand how we are and what has an impact on us. This is important and is also one of the things we believe requires further reflection, on both understanding the unconscious and in trying to make what is unconscious

conscious. This is especially so given that, in order to understand the other, we need first to understand ourselves.

The developmental model of intercultural sensitivity

With regard to intercultural sensitivity and empathy, as has been pointed out, the whole idea of empathy is hugely important in any form of interaction, including in intercultural competence. There is a very famous model, developed by Milton Bennett (1986, 1993, 2004, 2013), known as the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, which traces how we develop intercultural sensitivity in experiencing difference and experiencing differences with others. The model has six stages which take us from the ethnocentric stages to the ethnorelative stages. And getting to the ethnorelative stages, the stage where we are showing high intercultural sensitivity, high intercultural competence, is very difficult. The reason I mention it here is again to move away from this idea that intercultural competence is purely intuitive, because it certainly is not. In Milton Bennett's research, both observational and through testing, he shows that less than 10% of the population ever reach the final stage in the ethnorelative model of intercultural sensitivity, and this is also the case for people putting considerable work into developing their intercultural competencies.

Also, one of the key competences that we see associated with intercultural competence is the ability to shift perceptual frames of reference. In order to do this, you need to have a certain cognitive acuity or cognitive agility and this is something that we can learn. There are multilinguals and bilinguals who intuitively shift between different linguistic and cultural contexts, but it is not always automatic. As an aside note, it is also considered to be a top leadership skill in a business context. But in order to have this level of cognitive flexibility, we have to have a certain degree of ability to tolerate ambiguity. Which brings us back to the question of tolerance of ambiguity, being able to engage with ambiguous situations, as dealt with in the study previously mentioned by my colleague.

Complexity and the practical implications of competences

Thus, one can see that the topic has a great deal of complexity: the complexity in defining what we mean by multilingualism, multilingual abilities and multilingual competence; the complexity of describing and studying intercultural competences; and then, of course, the complexity in putting the two things together, the interrelation between multilingualism and intercultural competence. And this means that there are ample opportunities for further research, something that we strongly believe is required, regardless of context or regardless of cross-border regions.

Currently, we here at the Carinthia University of Applied Sciences, are about to conduct a survey into multilingualism and personality traits. We are interested in investigating further the relationship between multilingualism and empathy and specifically tolerance of ambiguity. We wish to see if there is a connection between language knowledge, language use, as mentioned above, and specific personality traits. We believe this is important as, if this is the case, you can imagine that we might invest more in achieving multilingual competence as this includes many other competences besides simply knowing more than one language.

And furthermore, there are many practical implications: for example, the practical implications of higher levels of multilingual and intercultural competences are clear, especially if you consider the crisis situation that we are currently experiencing with the pandemic. If we consider that multilinguals

have a higher tolerance of ambiguity, then we might say that multilinguals are perhaps better able to tolerate and face the crisis situation when compared to those people who do not have this type of competence. So essentially, we believe that these competences can be applied in many different contexts that are not strictly related to languages or to language learning.

The EU and the potential of cross-border resources

We consider that these elements of tolerance of ambiguity, empathy, and also the ability to speak different languages and the ability to effectively interact with others, are hugely important skills and very much feel that these are resources that cross-border regions have in offer. Cross-border regions are privileged spaces, but ones that are not being used enough. So, we see these as offering untapped resources that require greater effort to develop further. And from an EU perspective, particularly as regards EU integration, what better way to continue with the work of integration than attaching higher value to these skills and working further on developing these competences.