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L2 Skills Preparation for Scholarship Students

The authors explore the reasons why there are deficiencies in pre-exchange preparedness of scholarship students, what may be done to correct them and the benefits in making changes for our students, as well as incoming ERASMUS students from abroad. One way to ease the consequences of such problems is proper mentoring activities, enhanced by using informal discussions in groups and informally prepared, extracurricular group projects. Another way to correct these deficiencies is through teaching intercultural communication to students. Subject material of such courses may be tailored to counterweigh students' prejudices and attitudes, which often arise from a lack of information, to bring the students from ignorance to knowledge, as well as from ineptitude to competence, to prepare them to dialogue with strangers. Only through proper preparation may our students reap the maximum benefit from time spent in study abroad, and ensure that visiting students better integrate into the student population here.

Years of examination and experience with students leaving on and returning from exchange programs abroad show that the overwhelming majority of our students heading abroad on ERASMUS exchange scholarships often go unprepared. Whether one assesses their linguistic abilities or their intercultural competencies, the majority of our students who get the opportunity to study abroad are unfortunately not leaving our campuses with the proper L2 and intercultural skills they need to gain the most from their time abroad. Below, we examine this problem placed in the greater context of L2 language learning deficiencies nationwide, and by contrasting the present situation with the stated needs of EU and international workforce development. This paper then explores the reasons why there are such deficiencies in pre-exchange preparedness, what may be done to correct them and the benefits in making changes for our students.

First, one must understand that the dilemma of students being unprepared for study abroad goes hand in hand with a more significant problem, one which is prevalent across the landscape of higher education in Hungary: students lack the requisite competence level in their individual field's technical and professional L2 usage, and this deficiency is further worsened by the almost total lack of competence in communication skills usage. The problem is one that has a cascading effect across generations, and especially renders many employees ineffective; they simply do not possess the requisite knowledge to handle the international business needs of their employers. Silye (2006) and Hajdú (2006) identified the ESP language and communication competence needs of students, graduates, workers and the demands of the job market on employees. Their papers both showed:

- 1) potential employees, presently employed persons and employers all recognize the necessity of every worker's competently using high level technical L2 and (intercultural) communication skills,
- 2) all groups examined in the study recognized the need to develop higher education programs in answer to these needs,
- 3) each group called for lifelong learning in these areas for all adults,
- 4) each group equated high professional knowledge and skills in the areas examined,
- 5) the employers specifically placed great emphasis on the further training of employees in intercultural and professional communication competencies, and
- 6) all the examined groups recognized that the current system for language training in secondary and tertiary education could not alone go far enough in ensuring proper language, intercultural and professional communication skills, i.e., that higher education programs responding to all these needs were crucial for ensuring high quality, marketable workers on the EU job market.

Our students furthermore enter university without an acceptable level of basic knowledge of how language and grammar work. As Lukács writes, “[...] in Hungary there is a considerable language deficit both in quantitative and qualitative terms” (2002). In that same year, in a survey conducted by the EU, only one out of four Hungarians claimed the ability to converse in one of the five major languages spoken in the European Union (English, German, French, Spanish, Italian), placing Hungary in among the nations worst prepared linguistically for functioning in the EU's multilingual economic, social and legal environment (Eurobarometer 2002). Indeed, if what those Hungarians polled then actually reflects the true situation of L2 competency in the country, then we find ourselves in the company of only the Rumanians, Bulgarians and Turks in being unprepared to place our graduates and workers into middle and high management positions in companies, government agencies and NGOs that work with foreign contacts.

In light of this evidence, one might already want to ponder the reasons behind sending our students abroad on programs such as ERASMUS in the first place. The answer is that our students, as all young people, need to be exposed to different environments, they need to learn independent thinking, they need to learn how to solve problems on their own and they need to manage their own conflicts, especially with others who do not see the world the way they do. They need the part-time job experiences that prepare one for the bumps that will come later in their careers. (K. Tar 2005) In short, our students need to mature. They are often too tied to

home and their parents; they are too naive and thus unprepared for the job market. The question for us as language educators is how we would then wish to send students abroad, if we do not ensure they go with the L2 and communicational tools they need to survive abroad. Yet, the problem is not ours in higher education alone.

There is a growing disparity between the expectations made of tertiary language education and that which is offered to pupils in secondary and primary levels. As Wiwczaroski (2006) has published elsewhere, the Trojan Horse endangering foreign language teaching in higher education is the Hungarian reliance on foreign language testing systems, which are not at all used to judge actual learner competence in L2, but rather as a free pass for the learner to extricate his/herself from foreign language learning. At one time, this was not the case: Certificates earned from state language examinations used to enjoy special status. Their holders gained significant advantages on the job market, grammar school graduates got (get) extra points towards their acceptance for study at colleges and universities, and they even received extra scholarship grant funding. However, realism has set in among many foreign language teachers and employers that these examinations do not adequately reflect a learner's actual ability to *use a language competently on the job*. As Einhorn (2002) writes, these language examinations largely test grammatical knowledge on the written test, and communicative situations which have been specifically trained for in advance and learned outright on the oral test. My department has given language level gauging examinations to all incoming students without a language examination for several years now, and these show that only an average of 20% of all incoming students demonstrated enough knowledge to be able to take a university level language course. The majority of the students fails these exams, and has to enroll in remedial pay courses, in order to bring their competences up to the minimum level required to take technical language courses. The question I would like to raise is: how did these students pass their high school leaving exam, much less pass years of English courses in grammar school, if they cannot pass a simple grammar test upon entering university? In essence, we see little transformation since the time of the change of regimes, when we review what Tóth wrote in 1991: "Both in the areas of secondary and higher education, the state language examination is the learning objective... it fulfills the task of the national curriculum and greatly hinders the success of teaching on a daily basis."

And yet, education and proper preparedness of all students in the correct usage of a foreign language and intercultural communication is regarded as a precondition for the survival and development of modern societies today, due to e.g. rapid demographic, socio-political and economic changes. Logically, we must examine and react to the employment needs of

changing populations, e.g. in the former Soviet Bloc states which are now members of the EU and our partners; these citizens will see their degrees and qualifications replaced by the new tertiary educational system of the Bologna Process. Lisbon 2000 called for efforts to develop and ensure high quality, market-oriented adult education, with grounding in foreign language learning. The EU's *White Book* encourages the attainment of new knowledge, the establishment of close ties between educational institutions and the job market, the struggle for inclusion of all age groups of working age in the job market, and the knowledge of at least three European languages. The Bologna Process even calls for the attainment by every citizen of high level, professional L2, and especially English language, skills and competencies in their chosen field of employment. In increasingly more European companies, the official working language is what is often termed *International Business English*, and sometimes even called *EuroEnglish* or *Global English*. Holden (2002: 222; 228-229; 317) suggests the term "interactive translation" to describe that work in which members of multicultural teams negotiate common meanings and understandings. He further notes that interactive translation requires "participative competence". The latter term denotes a willingness to discuss problems in a productive way, not only in one's native language, but in foreign languages, as well. Members of multicultural teams often have a varying knowledge of English and use different kinds of accents. Therefore, all the partners in a multicultural conversation require well-grounded intercultural competence. In other words, L2 language learning, and especially that of English which leads to the attainment of high level ESP skills, is invaluable, from primary school through adulthood.

Especially from, but also to, Hungary, workforce mobility is on the rise. There are thousands of Hungarian expatriate workers active abroad, and not only in menial labor types of employment, but also working as technical and medical experts, in business management, and in finance. Still many Hungarians venture abroad without the requisite intercultural competencies and language skills needed to integrate well into anything more than poorly paid jobs. There are also thousands of immigrants who have moved to Hungary, both from other European Union countries and from the east, e.g. China. Yet, it is improbable that a Hungarian, especially if working outside of Budapest, has a foreign co-worker on any one working day. In either case, Hungarians largely remain unprepared to face the globalization challenges put on companies and workers here, or on Hungarians doing business or working abroad. Graver still, our students are not even prepared to successfully complete even one semester abroad on ERASMUS scholarships.

Our response to preparing our students to go abroad is to use careful mentoring, grammar and lexicographical instruction, and to combine these with the use of the *Culture Assimilator* (Cushner & Brislin 1996), a programmed learning package consisting of critical incidents, in the classroom. *Critical incidents* are short descriptions of situations where there is a problem of cultural adaptation, or where there is a problem rising from cultural differences between the interacting parties. In a Culture Assimilator, the incidents are equipped with alternative explanations and feedback. Learners are expected to choose the "best" explanation considering the context. The Culture Assimilator method is often classified as a *cognitive* technique, because it focuses on the learner's acquisition of knowledge. However, the process by which the information is acquired by the learner is in a sense *experiential* (Kolb 1984): Information is acquired through a process of trial-and-error, which simulates the experience of one's entering a new culture, but without the risks of failure and embarrassment hazarded in real life. Because the materials in Culture Assimilators also cover the *affect*, i.e. attitudes and emotions, as well as *behaviors* and *skills* of the people involved, the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of intercultural competence are brought together in the Culture Assimilator method - both in the content of what is learned and the process of learning. This method also employs the *behavioral techniques* of feedback and reinforcement, exposing learners to a wide variety of situations in the target culture(s), which focus on differences in perceptions and interpretations in behaviors, simulate important aspects of the experience of entering a new culture, e.g. ambiguity and uncertainty, center on key cultural differences between learners' own culture and the target culture, and foster learners' active involvement.

The Culture Assimilator is "of considerable use" in preparing individuals such as exchange students and various professionals for interaction in culturally diverse contexts, as it can, e.g.:

- impart knowledge of the subjective culture of the target group
- improve knowledge and application of concepts relevant to intercultural communication
- develop the ability to analyze and solve intercultural problems
- help to develop more accurate expectations in intercultural interactions
- increase intercultural sensitivity to cultural diversity
- help to interact more effectively with people from the target culture
- enhance intercultural adjustment, and
- improve task performance on international assignments.

Cushner and Landis (1996: 193; 195) state that there is "ample evidence" that changes are produced in learners, but the extent of those changes is still questionable.

The question left to us as teachers is how we might integrate exercises such as the *Cultural Assimilator* into a L2 learning environment, and thereby use them to prepare students to go abroad on ERASMUS programs. The remaining problem is getting students into courses. Presently, students at my Faculty may only receive intercultural communication and relevant preparatory special purposes L2 training by enrolling in a 4-year minor course in Professional Language Communication. Yet, the number of those enrolling, compared to total enrollment of students at the Agricultural Centre, is dismally low. Per class year, we receive an average 20 students, compared with the thousands available. In other words, per each 3-year B.Sc. class, a maximum 40 students out of several thousand are prepared to go abroad on ERASMUS scholarships, and most of these never even apply. The remainder remains unprepared for the challenges of a globalized job market, with little or no real special purpose L2 knowledge or competence, and zero knowledge of intercultural communication. And our university issues these L2 illiterates a university diploma, a fact that speaks volumes about where we are in European education, and where we should be heading.

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