

## Developing Multilingual and Multicultural Competence in the Context of Learning Norwegian at Bachelor Level

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### Abstract

*The field of foreign language learning has gradually acknowledged the intertwined relationship between language and culture. This, in turn, led to the development of new goals as concerns the learning of a foreign language. This paper presented various theoretical aspects related to the need of addressing cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects when interacting in a diverse sociocultural context while using a foreign language as a means of communication. The paper also intended to provide practical aspects related to good practices that have been used in the Norwegian BA programme. Thus, students were encouraged to acquire various skills in order to become proficient communicators in different communicative instances and in diverse multicultural contexts.*

**Keywords:** *multilingual, multicultural, intercultural communicative competence, foreign language learning, poetry, Jan Erik Vold.*

### Introduction

This paper consists of two major sections. The first section focuses on presenting various theoretical aspects related to the need of addressing cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects when interacting in a diverse sociocultural context while using a foreign language as a means of communication. The second section provides practical aspects related to good practices that have been used in the Norwegian BA programme. A key idea that can be identified throughout the paper refers to teaching language and culture in an integrated manner. This perspective permeates all the elements that relate to the field of foreign language teaching

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and learning (i.e. grammar, vocabulary, language skills or classroom management).

### **Theoretical underpinnings**

The field of foreign language learning has undergone various shifts of perspective from *linguistic competence* (Chomsky), to *communicative competence* (Hymes 1972) and afterwards to *intercultural communicative competence* (Byram 1997) in order to address the changes that have occurred in educational and sociocultural settings. The field of foreign language learning has gradually acknowledged the intertwined relationship between language and culture which led various researchers (Byram, 2007; Sercu, 2005; Lázár, 2000; Risager, 2007; Liddicoat & Scarino; Kramsch, 2003) to discuss about the emergence of an 'intercultural turn'. Hence, foreign language learning is perceived to be both a communicative and an intercultural endeavor that provides among other things opportunities to understand otherness, to communicate efficiently across cultures and to become more aware of one's linguistic and cultural characteristics.

Culture learning is not exclusively the domain of language educators but the fact that communicative language competence is made up of a linguistic, a sociolinguistic and a pragmatic component (CEFR 2001, 13) led to the understanding that foreign language learning implies an adaptation of one's discourse to the demands of a new frame of reference implied by the particular sociocultural context of the target language. Language always occurs in a context and thus "in foreign language teaching the socio-cultural component is inseparably melded with the linguistic component" (Neuner, Parmenter, Starkey & Zarate 2003, 35). This merger between the two distinct fields of language and culture learning needs to be transferred to the formal educational setting in definite pedagogical aims. According to the competence-based paradigm in education, competences are considered to be comprised of three elements:

- knowledge (factual information, concepts, theories within a certain field of activity or subject);
- skills (procedural knowledge, i.e. how to use the acquired knowledge in order to carry out different processes);
- attitudes (a certain disposition or mindset to interact with people or act in different situations) (Council Recommendation 2018, 7).

In addition, a competence is a lifelong learning experience that develops in each stage of one's life, in formal, informal and non-formal learning contexts by putting to good use particular knowledge, abilities and attitudes in concrete situations. In this respect, a competence has a formative value and it develops gradually through exposure to different tasks and contexts. The Reference Framework issued in 2006 by the European Parliament and the Council of Europe (Council Recommendation 2018, 7) has established eight key competences for lifelong learning that should be developed and constantly updated throughout one's lifetime. Because this paper focuses mainly on the topic of developing foreign language competence and intercultural competence we have selected for discussion only two competences:

- multilingual competence
- cultural awareness and expression

Multilingual competence refers to the ability to use other languages besides one's mother tongue in order to communicate appropriately and effectively through different channels (verbal or in written form). The competence of cultural awareness and expression urges one to become more reflective of how the interpretation of a message can be influenced by certain cultural representations. In addition, it addresses issues of identity or of rediscovering self in a context that cherishes respect, acceptance and tolerance. Table no. 1 below indicates the three components of the multilingual competence (Pop 2019, 34):

Table no. 1. **Multilingual competence**

<b>Multilingual competence</b>	
<i>Knowledge</i>	Demonstrate sound knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in the foreign language; demonstrate awareness of different registers of language use and discourse; master the pragmatics of the language.
<i>Skills</i>	Demonstrate skills related to literacy (understand spoken and written messages in a foreign language, be able to convey a message using different channels of communication); be able to use appropriately the foreign language in different intercultural contexts; master adequately non-verbal language.
<i>Attitudes</i>	Exhibit respect and curiosity towards other foreign languages; demonstrate willingness to learn a new language; refrain from using biased or discriminatory language

Table no. 2 comprises the three elements of cultural awareness and expression (Pop 2019, 35):

Table no. 2. Cultural awareness and expression

<b>Cultural awareness and expression</b>	
<i>Knowledge</i>	Demonstrate knowledge of culture specific and culture general expressions of culture; demonstrate understanding of how people from different cultures have diverse views on life, ethics, time, proximity etc.; become aware of one's own development of identity; become aware of social and cultural norms both in one's mother tongue and in the foreign language;
<i>Skills</i>	Ability to express cultural values; ability to identify and relate to culture specific beliefs and values; be knowledgeable about the way in which language use is subjected to implicit and explicit elements of culture; ability to adapt one's discourse to a specific cultural context; be able to interact effectively with people from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds
<i>Attitudes</i>	Demonstrate positive attitudes towards the mother tongue culture and the target language culture; demonstrate curiosity for discovering a new culture; be open-minded and tolerant to elements of culture that seem distinct from one's own culture.

As indicated in table no. 1 and table no. 2, to be a proficient and accurate communicator in a foreign language entails the acquisition of all the three components of a competence: knowledge, skills and attitudes. Cozma, Butnaru and Cucuș (2001, 30) consider that foreign language learning encapsulates an affective functioning that is interwoven with the cognitive functioning. Thus, by learning a foreign language the individual is urged to reflect more on his/her own identity, on the encounter with new cultural representations and on the changes that are brought by this encounter. Also, it engages actively the individual to interpret *self* (intra-culturality) and *other* (inter-culturality) in diverse contexts of social and cultural exchange.

### **A discussion about the goals of foreign language learning in our modern world**

In the context of increased study and job mobility, of technological advancements and the internationalization of study programmes, education is expected to play a more active role in providing learners with the appropriate tools and competences to manage successfully different sociocultural backgrounds and different types of interactions (online or

face-to-face). Because language is a marker of social and cultural identity (Gardner 2012, 77-78) and is part of and bears our identity (Skjekkeland 2012, 69) the learning of a foreign language has been acknowledged to be a multifaceted endeavour. Since foreign language learners must act as mediators between their own culture and the target language culture, the competence in a foreign language should no longer be decided by the competence of a native speaker model. Byram (1997) suggests that attaining a native speaker competence is not a realistic objective for a foreign language learner. Learning one's mother tongue takes place in a specific sociocultural environment where learners receive full exposure to the language and to the conceptual structures that the language employs. But in the case of foreign language learning "students' experience and activities in the target language are almost always restricted to the time spent in the classroom" (Kecskes & Papp 2000, 2). Still, with the emergence of new digital technology and increased mobility the foreign language classroom tends to become in our view less and less artificial. The use of digital and authentic resources can bring in the classroom a boost of motivation, increased interest and better acquisition of the language. Hence, the amount of language exposure in the classroom is not sufficient and therefore even if communication in a foreign language is good and understandable it tends to lack "the idiomaticity of native speaker speech" (Kecskes & Papp 2000, 8). Therefore, teaching should focus more on integrating in the classroom activities that resemble real-life situations such as role-plays or gap information activities.

More focus is placed in our modern world on procedural knowledge, namely on how one can use his/her knowledge of a foreign language in order to manage different tasks at work, when travelling, when studying or when negotiating meaning. The foreign language should not be regarded as a mere subject in the timetable because the foreign language has utility also outside the formal educational environment. The Council Recommendation (2016, 3) suggests that "non-formal and informal learning play an important role in supporting the development of essential interpersonal, communicative and cognitive skills such as: critical thinking, analytical skills, creativity, problem solving and resilience". These set of skills reflect the current standards of managing communication in a foreign language in different contexts and for different purposes.

Developing intercultural communicative competence, a concept coined by Byram (1997) represents a prerequisite competence in a

globalized world. Intercultural communicative competence implies a lifelong learning process of being able to master both language competence and intercultural competence in order to manage successfully communication across-cultures. In the formal environment of the classroom it is the teacher's responsibility to develop learners' language competence and intercultural competence in order to facilitate mediation between the mother tongue language and culture and the target language and culture. Outside the classroom, in informal and non-formal environments, it is students' own responsibility to develop language and intercultural competence in view of the experiences they are faced with. Intercultural communicative competence can take the form of explicit learning such as lectures or case studies or of implicit learning (projects, role-plays, debates or field trips).

But aiming to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence requires a certain didactic dimension. Culturally responsive teaching focuses on recognizing the uniqueness of different students, on accommodating teaching to individual learner needs, on designing culturally responsive curricula and on teachers' willingness to adopt a different mindset. Teachers who practice a culturally relevant teaching "know how to support student learning by consciously creating social interactions that help them meet the criteria of academic success, cultural competence and critical consciousness" (Hollie 2018, 26).

### **The BA programme in Norwegian at Babeş-Bolyai University**

The Norwegian language is taught at the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literature within Babeş-Bolyai University both as a major and as a minor specialization. After studying Norwegian for three years, students can choose to write their BA thesis in Norwegian. Since the Norwegian Language and Literature BA programme is unique in Romania the number of students who register for this programme has gradually increased in the past years.

The programme provides students with an integrated approach to teaching i.e. focus is placed both on learning Norwegian and on becoming familiarized with the Norwegian culture. Students get to know and learn about significant aspects of Norwegian culture and civilization as they "are offered a comprehensive view of the way in which the Norwegian language functions in different communicative contexts" (Pop 2015, 31).

The BA programme in Norwegian intends to develop students' intercultural communicative competence both in formal and in informal/non-formal environments (projects, informal meetings with native speakers, exchange study programmes etc.).

Babeş-Bolyai University is a multilingual and multicultural university that takes pride in offering teaching tracks in Romanian, Hungarian and German. Therefore, this integrated approach to teaching a foreign language is in line with Babeş-Bolyai University's principles, values and vision.

Because culture tends to be dynamic, symbolic and adaptive the acquisition of a foreign language becomes a complex, multifaceted phenomenon (Abrahamsson 2009, 11). Students who study Norwegian acquire knowledge of Norwegian literature, arts, social conventions, norms, awareness of dialect differences etc. The textbooks they use comprise both explicit (literature, arts, music, holiday customs, food habits etc.) and implicit (beliefs, values, norms etc.) cultural representations. Multilingual skills are developed while performing this BA programme that has a double specialization. In addition to studying Norwegian, students can choose to study another foreign language. This is an aspect that can increase their chances of employability. Thus, students registered at the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literature are not monolingual speakers. Multicultural skills are developed while students perform their BA programme as they become "more aware of their own cultural programming and cultural encodings when interacting with individuals belonging to other cultures" (Pop & Bocoş 2014, 300). The aim is to prepare students to manage intercultural contact both as prospective teachers and as individuals who are going to work and live in diverse sociocultural contexts.

Students' multilingual and multicultural skills are further developed by attending study abroad programmes at institutions of higher education. The BA programme in Norwegian offers, with the help of higher education institutions in Norway, Erasmus scholarships, EEA grants and summer courses. Because studies abroad provide one with the possibility to be immersed in the target culture, to interact with people who speak different languages, to develop respect and cultural sensitivity or to understand one's own cultural values, they are conducive according to Duke (2014) to the development of intercultural skills. These skills can be used later on in job related contexts or in one's personal life. Although international experience alone does not guarantee intercultural

communicative competence research has shown that studying abroad is a good approach to enhancing intercultural learning (Weber 2005 in Tsai & Houghton 2010, 90) and that it promotes the development of intercultural communicative competence (Sercu 2002 in Tsai & Houghton 2010, 90). The first stage acquired by students studying abroad is intercultural learning that is “a process of interaction in a particular linguistic and cultural context” (Paige and Stringer 1997 in Tsai & Houghton 2010, 90). Exposure to authentic cultural experience both in formal and informal contexts would allow students to apply sociocultural knowledge and make use of different types of discourse. Still, whether intercultural learning leads to intercultural communicative competence is a debatable matter since other factors such as the characteristics of the study programme and the environmental factors related to intercultural adjustment are at stake.

### **The second section**

#### **Authentic materials as means of teaching language and culture in an integrated manner**

Unfortunately, in foreign language teaching and learning, learners rarely deal directly with the ‘real world’ of the target language. This need of exposure to the target language and culture is supplemented by the use of authentic materials. A working definition of an authentic material would suggest that it comprises different types of texts, belonging to different registers or styles and which were created for diverse purposes (information, entertainment etc.), whose target audience are the native speakers. These authentic materials have not been created with didactic purposes in mind but these can be used in the foreign language classroom for teaching and learning purposes. Resources can be authentic (i.e. nothing had been changed or adapted) and semi-authentic where the text has been graded to a certain language level.

The following authentic materials are used by teachers and learners in the BA Norwegian programme: literature, videos, newspaper articles, recipes, songs, maps, journals, travel guides, menus, advertisements, blogs, multimodal resources etc. As regards the BA programme we have in mind the following criteria for choosing authentic materials:

- authentic resources should be related to the main topic under discussion

- authentic resources should not be culturally biased or present false items of information
- the content of the authentic material should be valid from a linguistic and an educational point of view
- authentic resources should be interesting to work with and motivating
- authentic resources need to be relevant for the learners allowing space for practicing the foreign language
- authentic resources should be appropriate to learners' age and language level
- authentic materials should be used in order to develop activities that resemble real-life situations

We consider that authentic materials represent efficient teaching tools for depicting both linguistic and cultural content. These could be used in order to develop multilingual skills (receptive and productive skills, vocabulary and grammar) and multicultural skills. Practical courses in Norwegian usually tackle a resource from different perspectives:

- *Language enrichment*: students become more aware of how linguistic elements occur and function in different contexts.
- *Cultural enrichment*: students develop their intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes.
- *Personal involvement*: students are encouraged to reflect on the whole content of the resource and "shift their attention beyond the more mechanical aspects of the foreign language system" (Collie & Slater 1997, 5).

Working with authentic resources implies a set of advantages as well as challenges. Hollie (2018, 145) states that "a culturally authentic text is a piece of fiction or nonfiction that illuminates the authentic cultural experiences of a particular cultural group". Thus, it is imbued with cultural representations and learners could become more culturally sensitive and engage in a dialogue between their own culture and the target culture. Still, because language learners are sensitive to structural and cultural differences in a foreign language context (Kecskes & Papp 2000, 89) this can generate misunderstandings due to the emergence of a negative language transfer or inability to be tolerant or to accept ambiguity.

Students registered at the BA programme in Norwegian also engage in working with multimodal resources. In a world that is more and more digitalized, they need to be able to develop also their digital skills. A

multimodal resource represents in fact a resource that comprises different types of information that are being delivered through different channels: visual, audio, text, pictures etc. Another way in which students develop, in an informal manner, their intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes is provided by extracurricular activities (e.g. choir, Old Norse reading group, city walks with native speakers, National Day and Christmas celebrations) organized by the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literature.

During the Norwegian courses, seminars and practical courses, students' multicultural and multilingual competences are enriched through various tasks such as: to analyse a literary text by focusing on specific cultural elements related to different Norwegian cultural representations. For instance, when dealing with poetry, we chose two different poems written by the Norwegian contemporary poet Jan Erik Vold (b. 1939): "Bildet stanser på Barkåker – Diktet" ("The Image Stops at Barkåker – Poem") selected from the volume *Mor Godhjertas glade versjon. Ja* (*Mother Goodhearted's Happy Version. Yes, 1968*) and the poem "Elg" ("Elk") published in the eponymous volume, in 1989. The students are encouraged to analyse the two poems by using both bottom-up and top-down approaches. First of all, students have to focus their attention on specific language elements to be found in the two poems. Secondly, they consider some general concepts and make inferences by finding connections with other similar poems written by Romanian authors. In this sense, most of Vold's poems are concrete and new simple<sup>3</sup> poems, presenting the everyday life, family, friends, memories, travel experiences. His poems are easy to analyse and the reader is likely to find several intercultural and intertextual elements. For instance, in the poem "Bildet stanser på Barkåker – Diktet" ("The Image Stops at Barkåker – Poem"), the students can find various elements and depictions which are the result of a train journey in Norway, from Tønsberg to Oslo, "the whole poem is created based upon different travel notes that make it into a travelogue poem, describing the poet's experience while travelling" (Răduț 2018, 202): "[...] the landscape, [...] / is based upon / notes from the train journey and it is composed / today, / 26.II.68, let us begin over again, with a new line / and a new heading, with capital letters: / The Image Stops and Barkåker".

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<sup>3</sup> *new simple poems* – are simple and common poems, thus getting directly to the reader. Janet Garton defines the term "ny-enkelhet" "(a term for which there is no precise equivalent in English, suggesting a deliberate choice of simplicity, even naiveté of form and expression)"

Right from the start, students are asked to select from the whole poem three different elements of the intercultural communicative competence, namely knowledge, skills and attitudes. Firstly, they have to read the whole poem in order to understand its meaning and its message. This activity implies also dealing with specific grammar and vocabulary knowledge, which helps students to explain the unknown words and to find the theme of the poem. Secondly, while trying to understand the content of the poem, they also have to underline the specific words and phrases which make reference to an intercultural setting. The whole poem contains various elements that depict a common Norwegian winter with specific national elements such as Norway's flag with the help of chromatic elements encountered in the nature: "a wintry landscape", "a frozen brook", the hill, the grey/metal/leaden-coloured sky", "the spruce trees", "snow" (sometimes written in capital letters), "track across the snow", "kick-sled", "the white snow", the powder snow", "piles of planks covered by snowfall", "and the more I see of this snow, the more I/ love this/ snow, the whiteness, our winter, forget about/ the Barkåker-image'", "rolling in the snow", "throwing snowballs,/ playing tag", "digging snow caves in snowdrifts and putting candles in there", "one is not born by chance here in the north,/ blue and white/white and blue - and deep, deep inside/ somewhere/ a red small beating heart". All these words are strongly related to the Norwegian wintry landscape, thus allowing students to become aware of cultural norms and representations. Students use the foreign language in order to compare these with those from their mother tongue.

When referring to intertextuality, the students can identify the following lines "around the age of 14, I was going to a Nat King/ Colematinee", which make reference to the "American musician hailed as one of the best and most influential pianists and small-group leaders of the swing era"<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, students can reflect on the connection between the Norwegian and the American culture.

Another concrete example of another *new simple* poem is the one entitled "Trikkeskinnet" ("Tramlines") which offers the students a specific, short and virtual sightseeing tour of Oslo including a few streets and shops situated near different tram stops: "the city lies bound/ in its net of tramlines.../[up Therese Street]/[...]/[in Sporvei Street]/[to Adamstuen].

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nat-King-Cole>, retrieved the 20th of April, 2019.

In order to vary the teaching method, the poem “Elg” (“Elk”) was recited by Jan Erik Vold together with the American trumpeter Chet Baker (1929-1988), the Norwegian pianist Egil Kapstad (1940-2017), the Belgian jazz guitarist Philip Catherine (b. 1942), and the Norwegian bassist Terje Venaas (b. 1947). Vold is also known for his performance poetry recited on a musical background in front of an audience either in a concert hall or in a cafeteria or why not for the people travelling by tram in the city of Oslo. In order to approach this cultural element related to jazz music, the teacher plays the poem “Elg” (“Elk”) for the students, while Vold reads the poem together with the aforementioned multicultural orchestra, recorded on the album *Blímann! Blímann*, 1988 (*Telemark Blue*, 2009 – an English version of the album *Blímann! Blímann*). After listening to the performance, the students engage in reading the poem in order to identify specific cultural and multicultural elements, such as: “elk”, “you see me/ on/ road signs”, “outlined against a Canadian/ sun/ set”, “I live in a story of Tarjei Vesaas”. At this level, the intercultural elements are more visible, the poet combines the reality (Canadian sunset) with fiction (the story of Tarjei Vesaas (1897-1970) – who was a well-known Norwegian writer, but also a very good friend of the poet). This poem was republished in a bilingual version in the anthology *Vold's Voice*, in 2014.

Thus, the poems of Jan Erik Vold are a never ending source of interculturality and of real knowledge and why not of inspiration, being able to offer students the impulse in reading more and finding out other details about different contemporary subjects (jazz, American and Norwegian musicians, literature, Norwegian and foreign artists, Norwegian writers and poems, cities in Norway or journey travels). Besides this cultural and intercultural perspective, there are also poems which can be analysed from a lexical and a cultural perspective. Vold wrote the so called grammatical poems in which students are made aware of different grammatical notions and rules, ready-mades, typographical poems and nursery rhymes. His poems help students enrich their vocabulary in Norwegian by learning useful words and practical phrases. When on the 15th of February, 2015, in an interview with Jan Erik Vold, I asked him about his view on poetry, he said: “We need poetry. [...] Poetry is faster, it gets to the point more quickly, and poetry is language in a concentrated form. So just like mathematics in school, you have an assignment in which you are given a fraction, and you have to simplify the fraction. We can say that the entire fraction is the novel, but the simplified fraction is poetry. [...]

Poetry has always had a musical element to it, just like the language we use. There are sounds, and I believe there are songs and music in the old texts like the Bible"<sup>5</sup> (Personal Interview in Răduț 2018, 337, my own translation)

With respect to the musical element, Vold's poems can be used as a teaching resource when we teach Norwegian phonology, especially the Norwegian tone which is a peculiarity related to the Norwegian sound system. On the one hand, another possible task which can illustrate better this multicultural exchange is that during the seminars of Norwegian Semantics and Translations, the students are encouraged to use their imagination and their creative skills in shaping a commercial/advertisement by using different phrases, words acquired from previous texts, together with interesting and captivating images. On the other hand, students can create the cover page of a magazine or a travel guide.

### Conclusions

To sum up all the ideas presented in this paper we conclude that all the teaching activities performed at the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literature have focused on developing students' multilingual and multicultural competences. Because students need much exposure to the target language and culture it is advisable to supplement the use of textbooks with authentic materials that depict various cultural representations. In this respect, we have made use of the following authentic materials: literature, videos, newspaper articles, recipes, songs, maps, journals, travel guides, menus, advertisements, blogs or multimodal resources. A special focus was placed on Jan Erik Vold's new simple poems.

### References

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<sup>5</sup> "Vi trenger poesie. SÍ poesien er mye raskere, kommer til poenget veldig fort og poesien er i beste fall konsentrert språkbruk. SÍ akkurat som i matematikk eller regning fra skolen, har du oppgaven hvor du fikk en brøk og sÍ skulle vi forkorte brøken og da kan du si at hele brøken er romanen, men forkortelsen av brøken det er poesien. [...]Poesien har alltid hatt et musikalsk element til seg akkurat som språk vi bruker, det er jo lyder og det tror jeg det er i gamle tekster som Bibelen og slike ting, det er en sang i de tekstene."

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