

# **Intercultural Communication in Teacher Education - the Participative Approach**

**Elena Tarasheva**

**New Bulgarian University**

## **Introduction**

The British Council in Sofia originated and assisted a project, under which British and Bulgarian students training to be teachers exchange visits and teach secondary-school pupils in the host country. The project was designed to supplement teacher-training with an intercultural and interdisciplinary perspective. The British representative was the School of Education at Durham University, and on the Bulgarian side five Universities with teacher-training strands took part<sup>1</sup>.

The students' task was to prepare and teach lessons presenting their country to the pupils in the host country. Teaching culture as a part of foreign/second language instruction is quite common. However, the genre of presenting cultural issues without the link to language learning made the classroom (referred to here as **project classroom**) quite specific.

This paper discusses how **otherness** affected the **situational context** of the project classrooms taught by the Bulgarian Student Teachers (ST). The data come from the STs' diaries, the tutors' observations and discussions with staff members at the schools and the STs. The instrument is Hymes's cross-section of communicative events in Kramsch's<sup>1</sup> interpretation.

## **Terminology**

Otherness, like many other concepts, is more easily noticed than defined. As Byram and Zarate<sup>2</sup> point out, it confuses with its variety of aspects: economic, political, regional, national, age, religious etc. Moreover, each aspect projects rather contradictory implications; for example, from the economic point of view, the Other can be a client,

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written in collaboration with David Stevens of the University of Durham, whose paper 'A Reflective Account of a Working Fortnight in Bulgaria with Twelve Post-Graduate Student Teachers of English and Geography in June 1998' appears in Section II of this volume.

or a rival on the job market. Unless every aspect and its implications are discerned, otherness would be chastised rather than understood. In this project, the STs were introduced to their British pupils as Bulgarian and taught about Bulgarian-ness, so the concept envisaged national identity, but provisions were made for regional, religious, age and professional aspects as well.

The term **context of situation**, as Schiffrin<sup>2</sup> among others states, highlights the role of the setting, the participants and their aims, as well as the ways the interaction is conducted, which makes it relevant for studying the intercultural communication between the Bulgarian STs in the project and the British pupils they taught.

### **The setting**

With respect to teaching, under this heading Kramsch discusses the importance of the place of the lesson, the timing of each activity and other components of the physical setting.

The place, both as the country where the teaching took place and the actual school and classroom, was unfamiliar to the ST, which resulted in **anxiety** about:

- orientation with regard to space and rules
- the jeopardy of losing face in front of the pupils, who were more familiar with the place.

The technicalities of having to act in a strange place, in effect, helped achieve the **critical distance** needed for ethnographic field notes. The STs' diaries display sharp observations, in most cases leading to interpretative conclusions:

“There are so many books in the classrooms and pupils can borrow and read them at home, which economizes time during the lessons.”(Lily) “With the carpets on the floors you can easily kneel, crawl and do drama but not all rooms have them, just like us, in Bulgaria.” (Maria) “Obviously the pupils were used to resorting to facilities like telephones, directories etc. during the lesson, which they did when we asked them to find out how to get to Bulgaria.” (Vessela)

Ethnographic observation has reduced the nebulous concept of **affluence** - which is what most Bulgarian STs expected to find in a

British classroom - to its pragmatic realizations, linking it to the relevance of the items.

The demythologization of the concept 'affluence' has gone even further:

"Most of what has been done to make the schoolrooms more friendly can be done at no cost - mainly posters and pictures made by the students." (Milena-L) "By just looking at the posters one can get an idea of what has been studied by the class." (Grozda)

The novelty of the classroom situation has highlighted the **pragmatic** value of the setting.

Reflecting on another component of the setting, **timing**, has led to significant and far-reaching conclusions. After their initial observation lessons, most Bulgarian STs found the use of time wasteful:

"Another thing that differs from our educational system is the fact that for 55 min. the kids do just one activity. When we discussed the lesson plan (previously prepared in Bulgaria E.T.) with our teacher she even told us that this plan can be taught in two or three classes. They are not used to rush in the classroom, as we do, which I personally find a bit of waste of time. (Teddy)

The same STs' interpretations evolved to justify what initially seemed wasteful timing:

"That day we observed a minutes' silence in commemoration of W.W.I. The teacher read a quite dramatic story about the war and the pupils had to role-play it. Everybody took the task so seriously that in the middle of the acting I felt as if I was a real living soldier suffering from the war and my eyes filled with tears. I think the purpose of these drama lessons is to develop the kids' own thinking and reasoning. They're also very helpful for those who are shy or have an inferiority complex. That is why this nation is so lively and gets in contact or even makes friends more easily than ours." (Teddy)

Some concluded about the general aims in education:

"I was amazed how few activities are done during one lesson. The aim is obviously to involve the students, to develop their personalities rather than to give them knowledge." (Teddy) "The aim of education here is not facts

but personalities that is why everything has to be experienced by the students and interpreted from their own point of view.” (Elitsa) “It is amazing how teachers manage to work with all the pupils in the class, paying attention to everyone individually.” (Martha)

Timing was obviously interpreted in terms of achieving **goals** and applying a **personal approach** to the pupils. A piece of advice given by one of the British observers, that the ST should have spent more time getting to know the class, pronouncing the names of all the pupils, rather than just a few, virtually stunned the ST. Such a move would be considered a waste of time in the Bulgarian classroom, where, evidently, participant roles rather than actual people motivate timing.

The STs also noted that most of the pupils who wish to speak during the lesson are readily given the floor, interruptions are tolerated when pupils ask for clarification and mistakes are corrected with discreteness, if at all. On the other hand, the rigour with which the discipline is maintained came as a surprise:

“At first I was frightened by the way the teachers shouted at the pupils when they were noisy while entering the classroom. But while they were completing tasks, noise was OK, provided the pupils were on-task.” (Antoanetta) “During the lunch break the head teacher eats his lunch in the hall, with pupils passing in both directions, making such a noise as to blow your head off. Still, it is a break, noise is allowed.” (Emilia)

Other signs of **discipline** read differently were: the breaks appeared too short for the pupils to move around; pupils were punished for untidy uniforms; the teachers followed a rather formal dress code; entering and movement around the schools were strictly regulated. “The West”’s reputation as the ‘land of freedom’ appeared in danger, while “the East” has shed these practices together with communism.

### **The participant roles**

The combinations of speakers and listeners in various roles in the classroom are discussed under this heading. Additionally, Kramsch has introduced the concept of animating the words of a textbook, as opposed to speaking in one’s own voice.

The traditional classroom roles in the project lessons were laden with several other meanings:

Pupil	-	Teacher
Pupil	-	Student Teacher
Native Speaker	-	Non-native Speaker
Culture mediator	-	Culture novice
Insider to the room	-	Guest

As **non-native** speakers, initially, the Bulgarian STs felt inhibited teaching native speakers of English, in their mother tongue, even though the subject matter was Bulgarian culture. The intuitive reason lay, presumably, in confusing subject matter and means of communication. Yet, the need for the teacher's superior mastery over the means of communication was justified, when it came to understanding the pupils' contributions and, even more significantly, to recognizing and transmitting communication signals - both functions vital for control over the course of the lesson.

Strangely enough, assuming the role of TEACHER helped overcome the non-native-speaker problem. When the ST, in her capacity of teacher, managed to steer the lesson into the pre-planned course, she could enjoy considerable linguistic safety. Directing, however, depended largely on understanding and transmitting the correct signal, which was successful only when the norms of behaviour were made very explicit and were negotiated on the spot. The class teachers, whose presence institutionalized the power to control the classes, also helped in this respect.

As representatives of Bulgarian **culture**, the STs feared their culture may be construed as inferior and hence, get little attention from the pupils. The British pupils, however, revealed a willingness to listen to foreigners presenting their native culture, indicating the importance they attached to first-hand authority. **Empathy** was a key to understanding the complexity of the interactions, as Davcheva<sup>4</sup> points out.

Apart from this advantageous disposition, the treatment of cultures on an **equal footing** was ensured by the classroom approaches. Whenever comparison was made, principled criteria were provided. It was the incorrect selection of comparison benchmarks that brought about inferiority claims, as in the following example:

The ST presented tourist brochures from Bulgaria and a shopping brochure about Stockton. Examining the resorts from all over Bulgaria, in one brochure and the shops in small Stockton, in the other, the class concluded: “Bulgaria is ancient and beautiful, there is plenty to see, whereas Stockton is commercial, there are just shops.” The ST realized their mistake and had to look for amendments.

Emphasis on decoding representations through critical reading - finding out the author, the intended audience, the purpose of each material - ensured balance and objectivity.

The **guest** syndrome was aptly utilized to create an information gap for the pupils to describe and, therefore, reflect on their own culture. So otherness had a very positive effect on eliciting the what of cultural material to be analyzed, which in other circumstances would be presumed as shared knowledge between members of the same culture.

The pupils in most of the English high schools were obviously very well accustomed to the role of the **student teacher**. They acted with sympathy and interest and observers could hear comments, like: “They are very good teachers, though it shows it’s their first time”, “Even our teacher can’t control this class” etc.

The anxiety of acting in an unfamiliar situation raised the STs’ awareness of what makes a teacher:

“One boy asked me to help with a task. I felt respected. If I can help, I am a real teacher... A girl prompted how to rearrange the tables in the classroom before the lesson. I felt humiliated that I had not thought of it myself.”(Nicky) “One of the teachers pointed to me that I write the letter ‘r’ differently, as the French do. I felt humiliated. I am not a student to be told about such small things.” (Martha)

The requirement that all the participants should speak in their **own voice**, rather than animate a textbook, encouraged the pupils to describe native phenomena, or comment on the foreign culture, which they felt motivated to do because of the information gap between representatives of different cultures. This added to the perceived significance of the exchanges. The STs, for their part, tried to resolve the problem of representativeness through critical reading, although the weaker ones still strove to disclaim and hide behind authority.

**Comment [E.T. 21]:** This is not exemplification from the ST’s diaries, it is part of my text.

### **The Ends**

The goals can be short-term, such as linguistic, cognitive, or affective outcomes of learning activities, or they can be long-term, such as motivations, or attitudes or specific professional outcomes.

The general educational aims, as it has been indicated, influenced and were reflected in the setting and the participant roles. The Bulgarian STs, whose teaching did not have a clear curricular link, relied mainly on the pupils' curiosity of otherness, backed up with tolerance to a different culture. Most pupils, luckily, identified with such a goal. The emphasis on direct contact and experiential learning which we observed in the British classroom additionally favoured the presence of foreign teachers.

It appeared also that a difference in the **validity** of goals in the two countries exists. In England affective objectives were valued more highly than in Bulgaria. For instance, the British observers regretted the lack of an air of celebration in the lessons taught by the Bulgarian STs. By comparison, in Bulgaria, exposing the pupils to material to admire, would not be considered a valid lesson goal. In the Bulgarian classroom cognitive objectives are given precedence over affective ones, whereas personalizing, involvement and reflection seemed focal for the English classroom. This difference was noticed in some ST diaries:

“David (Stevens, the tutor of the British ST- E.T.) pays attention entirely to the pupils' reaction in the class. An established pupils-teacher communication is considered an excellence.” Teddy

A review of the lesson plans reinforces the conclusion that the Bulgarian lessons are more laden with concepts and skills than the British ones.

### **Act Sequence**

This criterion refers to both what is said and meant by the participants, both in respect of form and content.

Introducing Bulgarian culture through **experiential-learning activities**, risky as it was, particularly for student teachers, was posited as a major objective in the project because it implies on the spot teaching, involves greater exposure to the classroom and reveals

the constructed nature of reality through discovery procedures rather than through an authoritative voice. In the project, it increased the importance of successful communication by linking the outcome of teaching to the response from the pupils. Thus, it was presumed to amend the shortcomings of the easier forms - the lecture and the Q&A session.

The method of **experiential learning**, to which the STs admitted to have had little exposure as learners, came to be admired:

“We observed a very interesting Geography lesson which was based on a problem-solving activity. I think that in this lesson the students can learn more because they take different roles, e.g. tourist guide, representative of the government and they have to argue their own point of view. At the end each is really eager to understand how to solve the problem. So unconsciously they have learned more about a topic than if they had read a textbook.” (Maria)

Nevertheless, otherness seemed to favour Q&A sessions, if ease of application is an indicator to go by. All STs practically had to extemporize Q&A sessions to meet an **expectation** that foreign visitors answer questions. Secondly, no matter how hard they tried to adapt to the existing routine of lessons in each particular school, their lessons **differed** in both procedure and aims, thus requiring a period of adaptation on the part of the pupils. Thirdly, and - it seems - most crucially, the STs' awareness of the **interaction rules** was not always sufficient for the necessities of a highly communicative classroom. Still, at Q&A sessions interest dwelled on trivial matters and its desultory course soon led to a dead-end. Facing up to experiential methods yielded better understanding and contributed to understanding otherness and developing negotiating skills.

The lessons, developed under the supervision of the tutors in Bulgaria, followed the **pattern** of introducing a CS skill and providing material, connected with Bulgarian culture, to practise the skill, or, alternatively, of presenting a concept through various authentic materials. Text-types included pictures, film, short stories, legends and tales, tourist brochures, essays by Bulgarian pupils.

Following the **cognitive sequence** - from the familiar to the new - posed the stumbling block of proceeding from a different basis - what was familiar to the British pupils was novel to the Bulgarian STs and vice versa. Highly intriguing and motivating as the movement to each other was, it necessitated close attention to the pupils' contributions.

When the STs' language proficiency survived the test, the result was excellent.

### **Key**

Key is defined as the tone manner or spirit in which a particular message is conveyed; serious or ironic, matter-of fact or playful.

Revering **politeness**, befitting the role of guest, rather than teacher, impeded the STs' efficiency in classroom management and resulted in a lecturing aloofness, thus limiting teacher/pupil contact in quantity and quality. The 'teacher' tone stimulated communication better, especially when enhanced by negotiation of the norms of behaviour.

Much to the disappointment of teachers and pupils, **humour** was too culture specific to be shared between the pupils and STs. British pupils would sometimes attempt jokes but would soon be discouraged because the desired effect did not get through, as in the following example:

Having provided a tourist brochure of Stockton, a Bulgarian ST asked the class: "Which are the main tourist attractions of Stockton?" A boy answered: "Superdrug" The class laughed, including the boy. The Bulgarian ST, unaware of what Superdrug was, thought she should punish jeering:" "Do not laugh at your class-mates!" After the lesson, when she realized that Superdrug was a shop, she appreciated the joke, which, in effect, reinforced the pupils' opinion during the lesson that Stockton offered more commercial facilities than tourist attractions.

### **Instrumentalities**

This refers to the choice of channel (oral or written) or code of communication (mother tongue, foreign tongue, mix of codes, code switching).

The **oral** channel exposed the ST to the accents, culture-specific references and the school jargon with which they had little familiarity. This is the reason why the most successful lessons were those which had been preceded by keen observation of classroom behaviour.

**Linguistic misunderstandings** were the easier kind to amend, as in this case:

When the Bulgarian ST asked the pupils not to write on a set of brochures, saying: “We want you to keep the brochures”, the observers expected the pupils might misunderstand and not give the brochures back after the lesson. Yet, the pupils had already adapted to this kind of meaning attributed to the word ‘keep’, probably because the pair had developed one of the most successful communicative patterns - to ask pupils to repeat their tasks as a way to make sure the message has given the right signal to the pupils.

The more difficult type of error was of the **sociolinguistic** kind, when the ST failed to recognize a communicative signal:

When a ST mispronounced /b r o u/ for /b r a u/ in the sentence “So the bear asked the woodcutter to hack her in the brow” a girl from the class interrupted, asking for clarification: “In the wha?”. The ST felt she should treat the turn as an unwarranted interruption and ignored it.

By contrast, the British counterparts, in their teaching in Bulgaria revealed excellent **negotiating** tactics. This skill is probably reinforced by the status of English as a language for international communication.

**Bulgarian** as a mother tongue was seldom resorted to, despite the fact that the Cyrillic alphabet turned out to be a major and rather ‘tangible’ attraction for the pupils, who had not been aware of its existence. Otherwise, the fact that English was not the STs’ mother tongue seemed to attract little attention.

One pair taught in the place of a French lesson, so they started the lesson in French. Later, the pupils were curious to know why French had been spoken. “They were not surprised that we spoke English for the rest of the lesson, being Bulgarian” (Kiril)

### **Norms of Interaction and Interpretation**

The criterion describes the way participants in the lesson interact and interpret what is said or what they are reading.

**Imitation** of the class teacher, as a way to produce the right communicative signal, was not always successful. For example,

“Excuse me” with a rise-fall-rise tone would hush the noisy pupils immediately when uttered by the class teacher, but not when it came from a ST. Deprived from the right source, signals read differently. That is why successful communication depended on making the rules of behaviour very **explicit**. Asking pupils to repeat instructions ensured re-negotiation. Reference to previous practices also helped: “Are you used to working in groups? Now we’ll split you into groups of five...” Alluding to rules accepted in the home country was highly successful, probably because it contributed to the pupils’ knowledge of the other’s culture: “At home pupils will be sitting as they answer”.

Surprisingly, the **appropriacy of praise and motivation** seemed to differ as well. “If you tell them how important it is for you to take to Bulgaria brochures produced by English pupils, they will do their best,” Dawn Whittingham, a class teacher, instructed a Bulgarian ST. In Bulgaria following the teacher’s instruction is taken for granted. Praise more often than not comes as a surprise, which was the case when the British STs invited their Bulgarian classes to applaud pupils who read aloud.

### Genre

Finally, genre is the type of oral or written activity students and teachers are engaged in - casual conversation, lecture, drill.

The genre of **culture lesson**, where the teacher presents her native culture to non-native learners in their mother tongue, as was pointed out before, was favourably influenced by the genuine information gap. The difference in the culture of pupil and teacher improved the comparative opportunities in the lesson, the need to reflect and discuss. A drawback could have been the fact that the pupils lack the motivation of learning the language, where culture would improve their competence. In fact, otherness appeared enough to stimulate interest. Empathy and curiosity, when rekindled with the right stimulæ, served the purpose of successful cultural discovery.

### Conclusions

The project lessons proved beneficial for the STs’ improvement of teaching skills by drawing their attention to details hard to notice in the classroom of their native culture, which was the effect of ethnographic observation. The necessity of getting across to the Other raised awareness of their own and the foreign identity and enriched

the repertoire of approaches to explore identity. The project lessons could serve as a model to extend to other teaching subjects, as a way of developing understanding and tolerance to otherness. Hopefully, the model will be noticed.

### References

1. Kramsch, C. (1993) Context and Culture in Language Teaching, Oxford University Press, pp. 34-69
2. Schiffrin, D. (1994) Approaches to Discourse, Blackwell, p. 371
3. Byram, M. and Zarate, G. (1995) Young People Facing difference, Council of Europe Publishing, pp.8–18
4. Davcheva, Leah (1999) Preparing the Ground for the Intercultural Training of Student Teachers of English, in the Proceedings of the conference Intercultural Experience and Education, Durham, October 1999 (forthcoming)