

CHAPTER 5

Exploring the Systematic Use of Intercultural Encounters in the English Classroom

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Abstract: This chapter presents a four-week intervention study in an upper secondary class that explores the systematic use and analysis of intercultural encounters in the English classroom. The overall purpose of the study is to provide some examples of activities in the language classroom that can lead to the development of intercultural competence in accordance with common interpretations of the concept of *intercultural competence*. The study thus aims to explore the extent to which teachers and students experienced that systematic analysis of intercultural encounters contributed to developing students' intercultural competence, and to what extent students show progress in analyzing intercultural encounters. The encounters, or critical incidents, to be analyzed were presented in the form of written dialogues, written descriptions of critical incidents, YouTube clips and film excerpts. An important insight from the intervention study is that students can benefit from reflection tools when analyzing intercultural encounters in the classroom, which in turn can promote intercultural competence development as part of teaching practice.

Introduction

This chapter presents a four-week intervention study that explores the systematic use and analysis of intercultural encounters in an upper secondary school class. The encounters are *critical incidents*, typically involving misperceptions that can lead to some form of tension or lack of understanding between people. Among other things, the ability to deal with such intercultural encounters is considered necessary in mediation

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when there are “situations, tensions or even disagreements that need to be faced in order to create the conditions for any understanding and hence any communication” (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 122).

The aim of the study is to answer the following two research questions: (1) To what extent do teachers and students experience that the analysis of intercultural encounters contributes to developing students’ intercultural competence, and (2) to what extent do students develop a more systematic approach to analyzing intercultural encounters? The overall purpose of the study is to increase knowledge about intercultural competence and activities that can be used for developing this competence in the classroom. The intervention was conducted at an upper secondary school in an urban area in southeastern Norway in close collaboration with two teachers of English who shared the responsibility for the intervention group. The study uses a quasi-experimental design (Shadish et al., 2002, p. 14) consisting of quantitative pretests and posttests with an accompanying qualitative test as well as a semi-structured interview with the teachers. The intervention involved one intervention group and two control groups.

Background

The Council of Europe identifies *intercultural competence* as one of the general competences that are “always combined with communicative language competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences)” (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 29). This confirms that intercultural competence is a central concept in European language policy, which is also reflected in the three national language curricula for English in Norway (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). For example, the *Curriculum in English* (ENGO1-04) for Years 1–10 and the first year of upper secondary school (Vg1) states that “English shall help the pupils to develop an intercultural understanding of different ways of living, ways of thinking and communication patterns” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019a).

Yet even if intercultural competence is a central concept in European language policy (cf. Council of Europe, 2018), there seems to be considerable

uncertainty about what it entails. One reason could be that there are hundreds of definitions, models and similar constructs to choose from (cf. Leung et al., 2014, p. 491), though this is hardly unique for this theoretical concept. A more plausible reason could be that the intercultural approach to teaching languages is relatively new, and it takes time to bring new knowledge about intercultural competence to teachers (cf. Byram, 2014, p. 221). In Norway, the concept started to become an integral part of the national curricula for English in the 1990s (Simensen, 2003, p. 5), but the term *intercultural competence* was not included in these documents. While the term is used in the present three Norwegian national curricula for English, there is still no clear explanation of the concept of intercultural competence other than pointing to “ways of living, ways of thinking and communication patterns” as areas to be understood interculturally (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c).

There is, however, some consensus about the most central components of intercultural competence among many researchers (Deardorff, 2004, 2006), such as empathy and the ability to change perspectives. In this regard, Byram’s (1997) model of “intercultural communicative competence” represented a big leap forward. Regardless of how this particular model has been adopted, adapted or criticized by others since, the basic idea of breaking down intercultural competence into sensible components has stood the test of time. The present study is clearly indebted to the work of both Byram for identifying some key elements of intercultural competence development in education, and others for taking the field of study in different directions (e.g. Deardorff, 2006; Dervin, 2016; Risager, 2007). Given the nature of this field of study, the diversity of such approaches should be welcomed, at the same time as having some consensus about basic components of intercultural competence can be an advantage for teachers.

Still, it remains a challenge to identify methods and activities that can enhance intercultural competence development in the English classroom, given that teachers of English are usually not intercultural experts. However, based on well-known aspects of language learning, such as working with fiction, studying target-language countries, and developing language awareness, teachers can find ways of developing intercultural

competence (cf. Brown, 2021; Dypedahl & Lund, 2020; Heggernes, 2021; Hoff, 2019). A useful reminder is Kramsch's (1993) assertion that culture is not "tacked on" to the teaching of basic language skills: "It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them (p. 1). By the same token, the approach to intercultural competence training in this study is that it "should be integrated into English courses in ways that also respect the original language skill goals of the course" (Snow, 2015, p. 286).

The relevance of this study is that it can provide some examples of activities in the language classroom that can lead to the development of intercultural competence in accordance with common interpretations of the concept and the Norwegian national curricula of English. Furthermore, the study represents an approach to intercultural encounters that seems to be more common in general intercultural training than in language training. According to Smith et al. (2003), "interculturalists and language educators have paid insufficient attention to each other's work ...". Since this still seems to be the case, the present study can contribute to bridging the gap between interculturalists and language educators.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

In this study, *intercultural competence* is defined as "the ability to relate constructively to people who have mindsets and/or communication styles that are different from one's own" (Dypedahl, 2019, p. 102). It is acknowledged that a word such as "constructively" is intrinsically problematic. However, an entirely unproblematic definition is hard to achieve. It is also acknowledged that "*interculturality is a point of view, not a given*" (Dervin, 2016, p. 2, emphasis in original). For example, the *Curriculum in English* (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019a) used by the students in this study is obviously influenced by educational and political ideology in both Norway and the Council of Europe. Nevertheless, the view on intercultural competence in this study is not in conflict with

what seems to be the view on intercultural competence in the national curricula for English.

As may have been observed, the two conceptualizations of intercultural competence used in the definition above (Dypedahl, 2019), *mindsets* and *communication styles*, can be found in the Norwegian national curricula for English as well, although phrased in slightly different terms: “ways of thinking” and “communication patterns” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). The focus on “ways of living” is not included in the definition because the understanding of intercultural competence in this study is based on interpersonal communication. Generally speaking, we have to relate to the way other people think and communicate in order for us to understand the intended meaning of a message, but we do not necessarily have to relate to their way of life beyond its potential influence on their particular mindset. Therefore, though intercultural understanding of ways of living is highly relevant for us to be able to relate to different contexts, this study focuses on mindsets and communication styles.

In order to operationalize the development of intercultural skills and assess them, intercultural competence can be divided into components of intercultural competence. These components are outlined in the model in Figure 1 below (Dypedahl, 2018), which is a further elaboration on Deardorff (2006).

The learning cycle is a process model, which underscores the assertion that intercultural competence development is an everlasting process. The upper box includes certain attitudes that are viewed as both premises for and outcomes of intercultural competence development, such as willingness to understand. Furthermore, intercultural competence is here considered to be closely related to the concept of *communicative competence* (cf. Council of Europe, 2018, p. 19; Sercu, 2004, p. 75). Therefore, linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences are considered to be both premises for and an integral part of intercultural competence development.

In the box to the right, “knowledge” includes knowledge about the concept of culture and knowledge of intercultural communication as a field of study, whereas “skills” include components that are considered

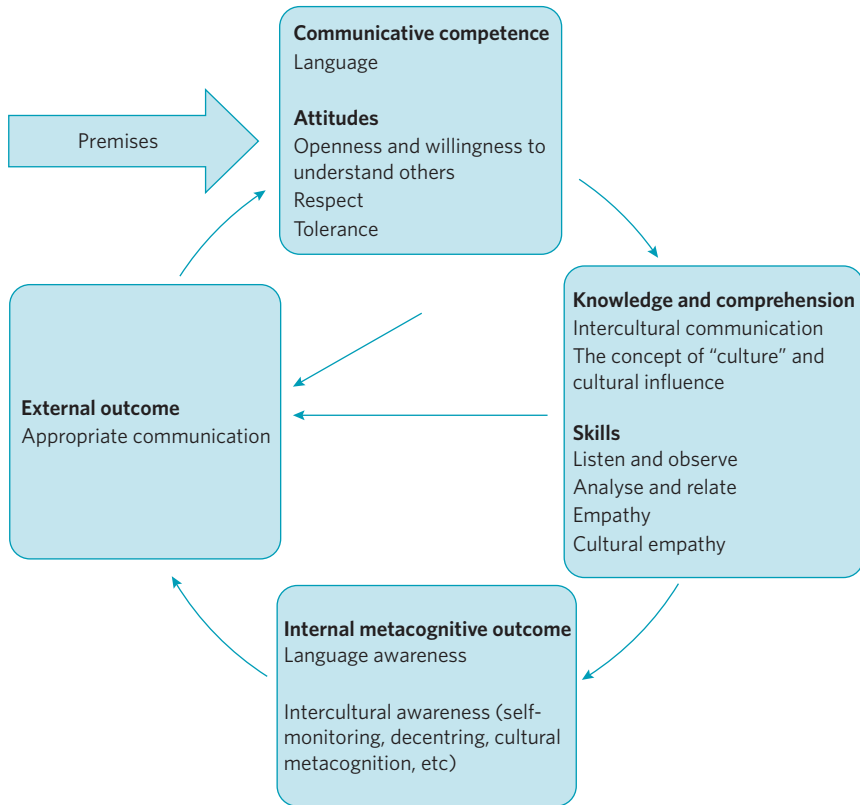


Figure 1. Learning Cycle of Intercultural Competence

central aspects of intercultural competence (cf. Deardorff, 2004) and cultural empathy, which refers to the ability to see the world from different contexts and societies.

The lower box focuses on metacognition, or a high level of consciousness relating to the concepts of *language awareness* and *intercultural awareness*. In this model, the latter term is used to refer to self-monitoring and decentering (analyzing situations from perspectives other than one's own). *Cultural metacognition* refers to "heightened sensitivity to the fact that individuals' motivations and behaviors are invariably shaped by the cultural contexts in which they are embedded" (Chua et al., 2012, p. 2) and "the ability to deploy cultural knowledge flexibly" (Klafehn et al., 2008, p. 320). This can include the adaption of other people's cultural references, which is one good reason for including studies of other societies in language studies.

The arrow pointing directly from the upper box to the external outcome indicates that people with communicative competence may of course communicate constructively without possessing any intercultural competence. Similarly, the arrow pointing from the box on the right to the external outcome indicates that it is possible to communicate constructively without having a high level of consciousness. (See the “Participants and methods” section below for how this model is applied in the student test.)

The use of intercultural encounters, employed in this study as a critical incident technique, can be attributed to Flanagan (1954). While the technique was not developed for intercultural training, it is suited for this purpose. Some recent studies from Norway explore the use of critical incidents to make healthcare students and healthcare professionals critically reflect on their intercultural encounters (Debesay et al., 2022; Horntvedt & Fougner, 2015).

Internationally, the inclusion of the critical incident technique in general intercultural training is very likely to be influenced by cross-cultural management (CCM) and international business research, which often rests on Geert Hofstede’s *dimensional approach to culture* (Kirkman et al., 2006). Hofstede’s dimensional approach means that different nationalities are placed along dimensions according to average scores for values, such as the individualism-collectivism continuum (cf. Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, pp. 73–114). The historical roots of dimensions or continuum scales in intercultural communication research are studies such as Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) and Hall (1959), which along with Hofstede’s studies can be classified as a functionalist research tradition that “has tried to *predict* how culture would influence communication” (Dahl, 2006, p. 9). It is furthermore associated with an essentialist perspective on culture, which according to Holliday (2011) “presents people’s individual behaviour as entirely defined and constrained by the cultures in which they live so that the stereotype becomes the essence of who they are” (p. 4). For example, if an essentialist understanding of culture is used when analyzing critical incidents, accompanied by closed-end questions indicating that there are key answers to human behavior, it may encourage a static and deterministic understanding of culture. In other words,

the risk is that culture is considered an active “agent” in communication between people, whereas human agency is restricted or disregarded. (Bandura, 2006; Nathan, 2015). As Nynäs (2006) writes, “One important question in intercultural communication theory is how we should conceive the relationship between culture and individual” (p. 25).

In accordance with the Council of Europe’s educational policy, this study considers “the language user/learner as a ‘social agent,’ acting in the social world and exerting agency in the learning process” (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 26). The perspective on culture is intended to be dynamic and focused on human agency, which means that human action is not considered to be determined by culture. At the same time, it is acknowledged that individuals both produce and are influenced by social structures (Giddens, 1984). A person’s life experience and cultural background will quite naturally influence their mindsets and behavior, but cultural background is complex. First of all, “cultural groups are always internally heterogeneous and embrace a range of diverse practices and norms that are often disputed, change over time and are enacted by individuals in personalised ways” (Council of Europe, 2016, p. 19). Moreover, *cultural background* is here understood as the sum of an individual’s multiple affiliations or group memberships, such as nationality, neighborhood, education, family, friends, ethnicity, religion, and gender.

Considering this emphasis on human agency, it may seem like a paradox that a technique associated with functionalism and essentialism is employed. However, the assumption is that the critical incident technique and the dimensional approach are just as well suited for a non-functional and non-essentialist approach to culture. The concepts of *mindset* and *communication style* are no less relevant today, and it is assumed that the exploration of these concepts can help giving students deeper insights. More recent studies also investigate the same concepts. Park et al. (2012), for example, find that “proportionally, there is much more variation across individuals than across cultures in direct communication style” (p. 184). Another study looks at the extent to which the power distance in face-to-face social relationship between teachers and college students in Thailand is affected by having Facebook interactions or not (Suwinyattichaiyorn et al., 2019). The conclusion in that study is that the individualistic nature

of social media seems to affect the level of hierarchical or non-hierarchical social relations in face-to-face communication.

Nevertheless, two measures have been taken to avoid a functionalist and essentialist approach to culture. Only open-ended questions are used when students are asked to analyze an intercultural encounter. Tran et al. (2020) conclude that the use of critical incidents with open-ended tasks is an effective method for promoting learners' awareness of intercultural communication. The other measure taken is using dimensions or continuum scales only for reflection on differences at the individual level (Dypedahl, 2020). The present study therefore does not take a dimensional approach to culture, but rather a dimensional approach to mindsets and communication styles at the individual level. Accordingly, it is also a conscious choice that many of the intercultural encounters used in the study do not involve people with different nationalities or include information about nationality.

The intervention was conducted as a peer-to-peer collaboration. This places the study within the rich concept of *praxis*, which “positions theory and research in a relation with practice such that they mutually inform one another” (Michell & Davison, 2020, p. 24). In this study, the role of the researcher was to support processes of intercultural competence development in close co-operation with the teachers. The choice is based on the premise that “education praxis can only be changed from within” by insider-practitioners (Kemmis, 2010, p. 25; 2012, p. 893). Although exploring peer-to-peer collaboration was not a primary aim of this study, it was still a very valuable aspect of the intervention. According to Michell and Davison, “[i]t is these social relations surrounding the tools, and not the tools in themselves, that are transformational for action and cognition” (Michell & Davison, 2020, p. 30).

Participants and methods

Participants

The study involved one intervention group, or experimental group, and two control groups, in addition to two upper-secondary teachers who shared responsibility for teaching English in the intervention group. The

participants in the intervention group and the two control groups were first-year students in upper secondary school (Vg1). The intervention group, comprised of 27 participants, was a regular general studies class (Vg1), which means that they had five hours of English a week. Of the participants, 19 identified as female and eight as male. The first control group, comprised of 23 respondents (17 female and six male), was an Art, Design and Architecture class whose members all took the same general studies English course. They also worked with the same texts during this period, but without having had any specific intercultural training. One of the teachers in the study was the English teacher of this class, but she specifically did not introduce the critical incident technique or the dimensional approach to mindsets and communication styles during the intervention period. The second control group was a regular general studies class, comprised of 17 respondents (15 female and two male), who neither had any specific intercultural training nor worked with the same texts as the experimental group did during the intervention. Further, while none of the teachers in the study taught English in this class, one of them taught a different subject.

The choice of participants was purposive in the sense that the intended study population was comprised of students in the first year of upper secondary school using the most recent *Curriculum in English* (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019a). However, beyond this limitation the participants were chosen by convenience sampling. The researcher had some knowledge of the school and one of the teachers in advance. The students were also chosen by convenience sampling, since at least one of the two teacher participants was involved in each of these classes.

Data collection instruments

Data were collected using a pre- and posttest for students in Microsoft Forms and one interview with the two teachers involved in the study. The pre- and posttest included a questionnaire containing 21 items for self-assessment and an intercultural encounter in the form of a dialogue for analysis (see Appendix 1 at https://web01.usn.no/~mdy/Appendix_1).

Using the model in Figure 1 as a starting point, the questionnaire was organized into seven parts, with three items covering each of the seven components below:

1. Tolerance of and respect for differences
2. Behavioral flexibility
3. Knowledge discovery (what to observe)
4. Communicative awareness (analyze and relate)
5. Empathy
6. Internal outcome: Metacognitive intercultural awareness (self-regulation and decentering)
7. “External” outcome: Strategies for behavior

Question 12 in the questionnaire, for example, is related to component 5 and reads: When people misunderstand me or I misunderstand them, I try to learn from it (see Appendix 1). The seventh component above has the word “External” in quotation marks because “External outcome” in the model in Figure 1 refers to appropriate or constructive communication in real life that can be difficult to self-regulate. Therefore, the internal outcome is divided into three items reflecting on self-regulation (items 17–18) and three items reflecting on the development of strategies for behavior (19–21), which is in turn indirectly linked to external outcome. Item 19, for example, reads: “In conversations with people who have a different cultural background from me, I am willing to change the way I communicate to make sure we have the same understanding of what is being said” (Appendix 1).

Responses were given on a four-point Likert scale going from 0 = “never” to 3 = “always” (see Appendix 1). Since this was the first time the questionnaire was used, the students could also suggest improvements or give feedback on how each question was asked. This feedback will be used to revise the questionnaire for future studies.

All the groups had an identical pre- and posttest. With regard to the self-assessment questionnaire, the purpose of the tests was to investigate whether the systematic use of intercultural encounters affected the self-assessment of intercultural competence in the intervention group

and compare it to the two control groups. By the same token, the purpose of letting all the students analyze the same intercultural encounter both before and after the intervention was to compare the extent to which the intervention group improved their analysis with the control groups. In addition, the intervention group took an identical delayed posttest in June, four months after the intervention. The purpose of this was to see if any possible impact of the intervention would have a long-term effect.

The interview was a semi-structured, 90-minute interview with both teachers present and which was conducted in Norwegian one month after the intervention. It was recorded and then transcribed. The interview took the form of a conversation and included a discussion of the following questions: How do you understand the concept of intercultural competence, and how can this competence be developed? To what extent has this project changed the way you understand the concept and how the competence can be developed? Have you found the critical incident technique and the dimensional approach useful, and if so, in what way? Have you found that these methods have encouraged an instrumental and stereotypical approach to intercultural competence development? The questions were integrated in the conversation and not necessarily phrased exactly as rendered above. The interview also included a discussion of the intercultural encounters and films included in the intervention study.

Intervention procedure

Before the intervention period, the teachers were asked to read a book chapter on intercultural competence (Dypedahl & Bøhn, 2020), including the definition of intercultural competence above and the model of intercultural competence used in the study, in addition to a chapter on reflection tools and continuum scales (Dypedahl, 2020). (These chapters are available as Appendix 2 at https://web01.usn.no/~mdy/Appendix_2 and Appendix 3 at https://web01.usn.no/~mdy/Appendix_3). The approach to intercultural competence in these chapters was not presented as a key to how intercultural competence should be understood by the teachers, but rather as a suggested theoretical framework for the intervention. The teachers also received some suggested intercultural encounters for

analysis. The package also included one YouTube clip along with a number of dialogues, brief cases and/or descriptions of encounters.

The four-week intervention was conducted from January 25 to February 19, 2021. The original plan was that one out of five weekly sessions would include an analysis of an intercultural encounter, but this was extended to several sessions each week. Since one of the teachers was also the Social Science teacher for this group (three hours a week), and cross-curricular work is welcomed, eight sessions a week were in effect available for work with intercultural encounters and related discussions. The analysis would make use of reflection tools such as dimension or continuum scales relating to direct/indirect communication, low/high context communication, individualism/group orientation, task/people orientation and hierarchical/non-hierarchical orientation (see Appendix 3 for more information).

The selection of intercultural encounters to be discussed in the classroom was made by the teachers and not the researcher. For example, some of the proposed cases were not chosen because they did not represent contexts or situations that the students could easily relate to. The first case the teachers chose to work with was an encounter involving an Indian girl visiting Canada, which could be related to politeness rules as well as direct and indirect communication. Furthermore, a dialogue in Asia that could be related to a hierarchical/non-hierarchical mindset dimension was used, as well as another dialogue that could be related both to a direct/indirect communication style dimension and a possible difference related to task and group orientation. The class also analyzed the suggested YouTube clip, which could also be related to task and people orientation.

In addition, the teachers decided to use the critical incident technique and dimensional approach on one text and two films during this four-week period, which in effect made the project much more integrated with the course. The text was an excerpt from Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*: "When Rich Came to Sunday Dinner". The films were *Outsourced*, a romantic comedy in which an American salesman is sent to India to train his replacement, and *Ali's Wedding*, which is a romantic comedy in which the son of an Iranian-born cleric in Australia must follow through with an arranged marriage, even though he is in love with an Australian girl

from a family with a Lebanese background. In each case, the researcher suggested encounters or scenes that could be analyzed.

For all the encounters, the role of the researcher was to suggest reflection tools to use for analysis. The teachers were also presented with a possible procedure for working with the encounters:

- Describe the situation.
- Describe what each of the persons involved says and does.
- What seem to be the expectations of the people involved in the situation?
- What seems to be the misunderstanding or tension in this situation?
- Could the reason be related to a difference in communication styles/patterns or mindsets (value differences / ways of thinking)?
- How would you describe the actions of the people involved based on your own background and from your own perspective?
- Take the perspective of each of the persons involved and try to describe the situation from their point of view. How might they reason in this situation, and why do you think they communicate as they do?
- Can you relate this incident to anything you have experienced yourself?
- What have you learned from this, and how can you apply your understanding of this incident to other situations?

Data analysis

The students are not identified at the individual level in the tests, so for each item it is the average score for the entire class that is shown in the “Findings” section. Slightly fewer students took the posttest (23 in intervention group, 22 in the first control group and 13 in the second control group, and 22 in the intervention group took the delayed posttest). Moreover, while there is also the occasional blank answer, the average score for each item is in any case based on the number of students who actually responded to each item in each test. For each group there is an

average score before and after the intervention. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests are run on the Social Sciences (SPSS) program to compare pre- and post-test scores of intervention and control groups and determine whether there are statistically significant differences between ranks (Corder & Foreman, 1972, p. 41).

The interpretation of the interview is based on how the researcher experienced the interview and a content analysis of the transcription. The transcript has been manually coded and organized into units according to the topics or questions outlined above, all of which represent the key research issues. The data have then been examined for insights relevant to the key research issues (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 383). The few quotes that have been selected are generally representative for both teachers, so they have not been identified as for example respondents 1 and 2. With regard to interviewer bias, it is acknowledged that the researcher might have an effect on the conversation, which can in turn affect the outcome of the study.

Validity, reliability and ethics

Since the intervention took place in the school during regular classes with in-person teaching, ecological validity should also be ensured (Neuendorf, p. 115). The combination of the information distributed to the teachers and the test given to the students (Appendices 1, 2 and 3), and the information in this chapter contributes to the overall transparency of the study. In terms of the study's validity, established theory supported every stage of the intervention stages, and the participants in the study are representative of upper secondary students at this level (Krippendorff, p. 334).

The study's reliability has been evaluated by letting a colleague with knowledge of intercultural competence development go through the data and interpretations and by letting the two teachers involved in the study evaluate the extent to which the researcher's interpretations represent their own interpretations and views. However, both reliability and validity could have been improved by repeating similar interventions in more classes. Obviously, since both the intervention group and the control groups come from a single school, it is possible that a more widely distributed sample would have produced slightly different results.

The participants in this study have given their written consent, and the collection of data has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Furthermore, the ethical aspect of the intervention has been taken into consideration by making the same methods available to the control groups and other classes after the intervention period.

Findings

The results for the pretests and posttests are divided into the results for the multiple-choice self-assessment test and the results for the students' analysis of the intercultural encounter before and after the intervention. The results for the self-assessment test before and after the intervention are illustrated in Figures 2, 3 and 4 below. For each group (intervention group, control group 1 and control group 2), they show the average score (0 to 3) for each of the 21 questions in the self-assessment test. The blue line shows the results in the pretest, and the orange line shows the results in the posttest. The grey line in Figure 2 illustrates the intervention group's delayed posttest.

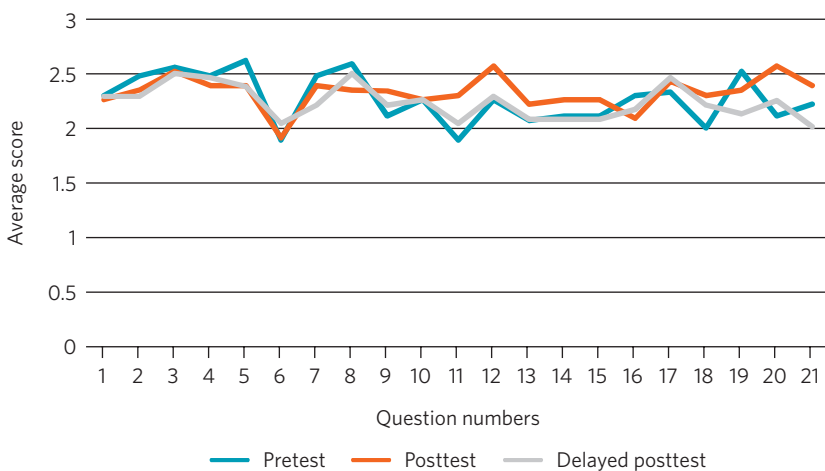


Figure 2. Average Intercultural Competence Score for Intervention Group

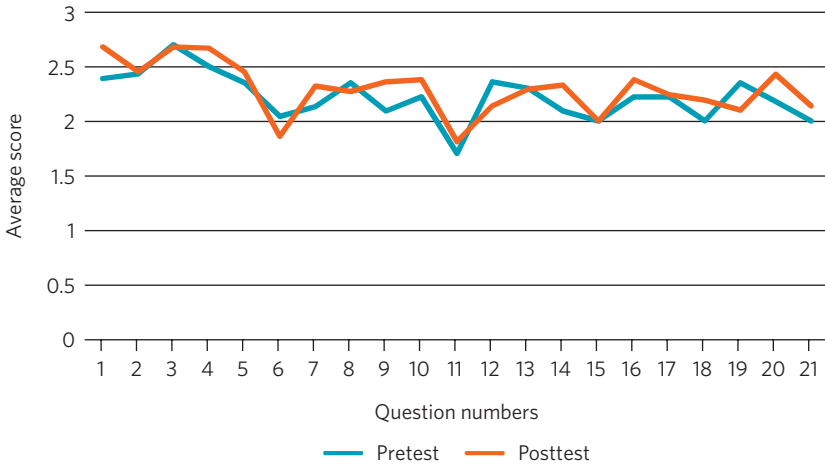


Figure 3. Average Intercultural Competence Score for Control Group 1

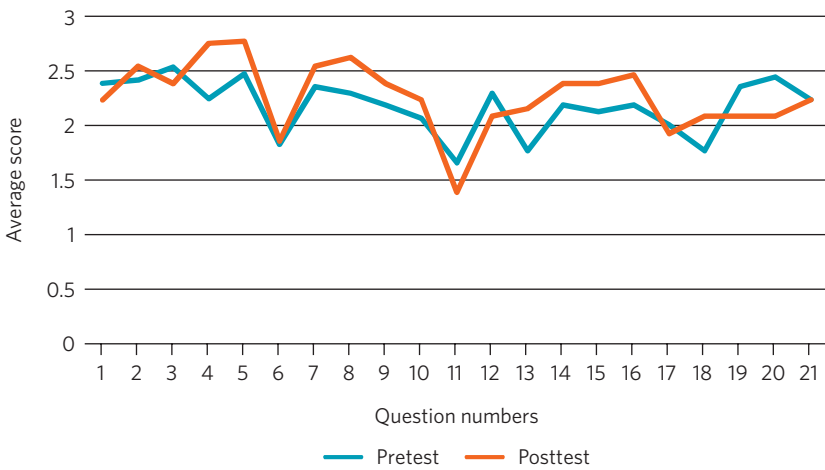


Figure 4. Average Intercultural Competence Score for Control Group 2

All the groups responded quite consistently to the questions in both the pretests and posttests, and the Wilcoxon test shows no statistical significance in the difference between the pretest and the posttest for any of the groups (the p-value is greater than 0.05). For the intervention group, for example, Wilcoxon signed-ranks test indicated that post-test ranks were not significantly higher than pre-test ranks ($Z = 34, p > 0.28$). Similarly, related-samples Wilcoxon signed rank tests between pre- and post-scores

of control group 1 ($Z = 157, p \geq 0.05$) and control group 2 ($Z = 146, p > 0.13$) yielded insignificant statistical results.

Compared to the self-assessment part of the test, the results for the analysis of the intercultural encounter are quite different. This is particularly evident in the answers to the following question: “What could be the reason they end up not co-operating, such as the words they use, communication style or attitude?” (see Appendix 1). In the pretest, the typical response regarding the cause of the misunderstanding is that the question was understood differently. Two of the students in the intervention group do mention communication style, but without specifying what type of communication style. Since the question clearly hints at communication style, these two concepts are also mentioned by students in control groups, although not many. The same types of responses are repeated by the control groups in the posttests.

In the posttest for the intervention group, however, 13 out of 23 mention communication style or attitude, and six of these specifically refer to direct and indirect communication styles. Of the respondents that did not specifically focus on communication style or attitude, one student points to the lack of empathy.

In the delayed posttest for the intervention group, many of the respondents maintain the same level of analysis. Communication style or attitude is mentioned by 12 of the 24 respondents, and four of these students specifically refer to direct or indirect communication. Many of the other students who use the term *communication style* also seem to have an idea of what it means, as seen in statements such as “one of them is very outgoing ... and the other is more reserved”. Of the students that do not specifically refer to communication style or attitude, one student writes that the people in the intercultural encounter did not take the other person’s “perspective into consideration”.

The interview with the teachers confirms the impression that reflection tools were being used in the analysis of intercultural encounters by many of the students in the intervention group. One of the teachers states that the reflection tools “are very important because they improve the understanding of the students” (my translation), a point on which both teachers agree. However, they also point out that the method needs to be practiced

over time. The teachers find this age group very receptive to learning new terms and concepts that they can use in discussions, and they regard it as an extra asset that can give discussions more direction. One of the teachers says that the dimensional approach «provides a very concrete starting point for the discussion» (my translation), making it possible to ask students where the people in an intercultural encounter may be on a certain scale and make them reflect on possible reasons for miscommunication. Considering that the project lasted several weeks, one of the teachers also says that she thinks “it is a very interesting way of working, not least with regard to deep learning” (my translation).

The teachers share a very diverse approach to the concept of intercultural competence and the concept of culture. As one of the teacher states, *culture* “is everything that contributes to your identity; it is in a way a combination of nationality and everything you learn from people around you, whether it be in school or your family ...”.

The teachers say that they have become more aware of terms and concepts in this process, and how they can be used. They point out that intercultural awareness, or similar concepts, have been on the agenda in their school and in the national educational system for many years. Discussing these issues is by no means new. However, having reflection tools does make it possible for them to work more systematically with teaching materials. As one of the teachers says, “It provides new opportunities” (my translation). For example, it is mentioned that this has come into use when working with the Netflix comedy series *Emily in Paris*, enabling students to more systematically analyze human behavior as well as laugh at people generally classified as “people like us” instead of laughing at “other people” from an ethnocentric point of view.

In the interview, one issue was the danger of stereotyping when students analyze intercultural encounters. However, the discussions were described by teachers as being very nuanced. According to one of the teachers, students leave the impression that “they are more open, and they are more aware of not stereotyping, because they are concerned about diversity with regard to sexual identity, cultural identity, ethnicity, etc.”. This awareness is for example evident when the students comment on how people are portrayed in *Emily in Paris*. Moreover, one of

the teachers also mentions that they discuss individual differences versus cultural background in class.

Another issue that came up in the interview is the importance of different identities being represented in teaching materials. *Ali's Wedding* is an example of a film that portrays people with other cultural backgrounds than the average American movie. However, some students who had watched the film and could to some extent identify with the characters also had concerns about the risk of stereotyping because it is a comedy. These are challenges that seem to be discussed in a very constructive way at this school and which will determine if and how to use this film as teaching material in the future.

Discussion

Generally, the findings in this study are encouraging with regard to the systematic use of intercultural encounters and a dimensional approach to mindsets and communication styles. In comparison to the pretest, the intervention group's use of reflection tools when analyzing the intercultural encounter in the posttest and the delayed posttest shows progress. Most importantly, the feedback from very competent and experienced teachers was very positive. The possible effect of the critical incident technique is confirmed by Tran et al. (2020), but they have found a stronger effect on students with low and moderate levels of initial intercultural awareness than students with a high level of initial awareness. This is an interesting observation that this study has not investigated.

There may be several reasons for the lack of any statistically significant progress evident in the intervention group's self-assessment test after the invention. It could be that the questions are not suitable for testing purposes, or the questions themselves might need improvement. The students' feedback indicates that many of the questions should include examples. It could also be that these groups regard their own competence level to be quite high regardless of any intervention. All of these students are part of a transcultural society and attend a school that focuses on diversity, and the awareness of stereotyping pointed out above shows a high level of maturity.

Still, this study demonstrates that competent teachers and a systematic use of intercultural encounters in the classroom can enhance students' intercultural competence development. The critical incident technique has, as one of the teachers expressed it, given the teachers "one more tool in the toolbox" (my translation). Since the analysis of intercultural encounters in this study further relied on a dimensional approach to mindsets and communication styles, there is also reason to see this aspect of the study as promising.

Among the most interesting aspects of the intervention discussed in the interview was the mature approach to stereotyping among students and their ability to discuss cultural differences and similarities in a very nuanced way. It can be challenging to maintain that communication occurs between individuals with their unique personalities and identities while at the same time maintaining that groups of people undoubtedly develop certain common tendencies with regard to how they think and behave. It is necessary to recognize tendencies without essentializing them. According to Scott and Bhaskar (2010), such tendencies "do not in any sense describe the real nature of human beings in any absolute way, though they may contribute to their social sedimentation" (p. 47).

Concluding remarks¹

There are obvious limitations in a study with a relatively short intervention period and relatively few participants, which makes it necessary to be cautious about conclusions or implications for practice at this stage. Nevertheless, there are valuable findings in this study that are very encouraging with regard to introducing the systematic use of intercultural encounters and reflection tools in other classrooms. The most important insights are that students can make good use of reflection tools when analyzing intercultural encounters in the classroom, and this tool is perceived as a good tool to have in teachers' "toolbox". Peer-to-peer collaboration between teachers and researchers also seems very well suited for

¹ I am extremely grateful to May Britt Kleppe Baadstø and Siri Hundstadbråten for making this intervention study possible.

knowledge development. The teachers in this peer-to-peer collaboration have asked for permission to use the self-assessment part of the questionnaire for administering to future students, and one of the teachers has on a later occasion – without being specifically asked to do so – commented that this intervention has had a positive effect on her own approach to promoting intercultural competence development in her teaching practice.

Under the same circumstances as this intervention study, other teachers would most likely be able to experience that this is a method that can both be integrated in other activities in English courses and add something to the development of intercultural competence. However, further investigation is needed to learn more about the use of critical incident technique in language classrooms. A bigger sample of students is necessary to draw more solid conclusions, and the development of individual students could be explored rather than merely obtaining average results for entire groups. Furthermore, other forms of data collection, such as interviewing students, could be considered to get more generalizable and more in-depth insights.

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