



Nottingham 2011



The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution

Assessing oral proficiency for intercultural professional communication: the CEFcult project

Ana Beaven¹ and Antje Neuhoff²

¹Università di Bologna, Bologna, Italy*

²Technische Universität Dresden, 01062 Dresden, Germany

Abstract

Technology has been part of the language learning process, both inside and outside the classroom, for decades, helping to bridge the gap between different contexts of learning. At the same time, the concept of lifelong-learning has widened our understanding of what learning is, what different forms it can take, and of the importance of considering the learning process as one that will continue once formal education is over and the learner has entered the world of employment.

Learner autonomy has also taken a central role, and has brought with it a shift in the role of the teacher in the language learning process. Self-assessment is one aspect of learner autonomy, and is crucial in enabling learners to set themselves clear objectives and thus take responsibility for the learning process itself. In addition, the importance of including the development of intercultural competence in the language classroom has been advocated by many linguists and educationalists (Kramsch, 1986; Byram et al., 2001; Byram, 2008; Corbett, 2003; Sercu, 2005).

It is against this background that the European-funded project CEFcult (2009-2011) was developed. Its main outcome is the production of an online environment for the collaborative assessment of oral skills and intercultural competence in the foreign language. The target groups are language teachers, in-company trainers, those about to start or return to work, and undergraduates and graduates who are preparing themselves for first-time employment. The tool places side by side the widely known and standardised descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for spoken production and interaction, and the descriptors for intercultural competence in a professional setting, developed within the Intercultural Competence Assessment (INCA) project. CEFcult provides a set of authentic communication scenarios, each containing various tasks through which learners can assess their skills for intercultural professional purposes in different European languages. Although the tool can also be used autonomously, in a classroom setting, teachers can set the learners suitable scenarios, get them to perform the speaking tasks and record the oral communication activities. After uploading the samples onto the online tool, they can be assessed by the teacher, by other experts (including teachers in other countries), or by other learners. The tool can also be used for self-assessment. By encouraging self- and peer-assessment, CEFcult can positively engage learners in a process of reflexive learning that will lead to greater autonomy. However, it also enables the teacher to be an active part of this same process.

After a brief introduction to the theoretical background and pedagogical choices underpinning the project, we will illustrate the pilots carried out at the universities of Dresden and Bologna, and discuss some of the implications for learners and teachers.

© 2012 EUROCALL All rights reserved

Keywords: intercultural competence, collaborative assessment, oral skills

* Contact author. Tel.: +39-051-2097750
E-mail address: anamaria.beaven@unibo.it

1. Introduction

CEFcult (2009-2011) is a European project funded by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme. Building on the WebCEF project (2006-2009), its main objective was the development of an online assessment environment for oral language skills and intercultural communicative competence in professional communication. In this way, CEFcult brings together the needs of businesses and of educational institutions in Europe.

2. The online environment

The online environment contains first of all a number of scenarios (tasks) designed to elicit specific linguistic performance in an intercultural context. The user can complete the chosen scenarios and record his or her oral production directly onto the online tool. These video clips can then be used for self-, peer- or expert assessment, using a grid containing the CEF descriptors for oral production, as well as the INCA descriptors for intercultural competence. As well as the scenarios and assessment tool, the environment also contains training materials.

3. The scales

The scales used in CEFcult are those included in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). The main scales used as those for linguistic competence (oral production and interaction): range, accuracy, fluency, coherence and interaction. However, some scenarios are designed to be assessed with the sociolinguistic competence and the pragmatic competence scales, which are more strongly related to intercultural communicative competence.

3.1. Intercultural Competence Assessment (INCA)

The INCA scales (www.incaproject.org) assess six different elements of competence: respect for otherness; tolerance of ambiguity; knowledge discovery; empathy; behavioural flexibility; communicative awareness. These elements are defined taking into account three factors: motivation, knowledge/skills, and behaviour.

Although space constraints make it impossible to analyse all six elements and their descriptors, as an example we shall present “Respect for Otherness”. This, according to the INCA theory document (available from www.incaproject.org), is “manifested in curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend belief about the ‘naturalness’ of one’s own culture”. It can be observed in the individual’s willingness “to suspend usual assumptions and seek out new knowledge from others in a relationship of equality and, as a consequence, to question their own existing assumptions” (motivation), in their “knowledge of their own assumptions and those of their society, and the ability to critically assess the logic of a system of beliefs, values and behaviours” (knowledge/skills), and in the interest shown “in the other’s experience and in the daily experience of a range of social groups within a society, and not only that represented in the dominant culture” (behaviour). The table below shows the descriptors for the three levels of competence.

Level	Openness: respect for otherness
Basic	Is not always aware of difference and, when it is recognised, may not be able to defer evaluative judgement as good or bad. Where it is fully appreciated, adopts a tolerant stance and tries to adapt to low-involving demands of the foreign culture
Intermediate	Accepts the other’s values, norms and behaviours in everyday situations as neither good nor bad, provided that basic assumptions of his own culture have not been violated. Is motivated to put others at ease and avoid giving offence.
Full	Out of respect for diversity in value systems, applies critical knowledge of such systems to ensure equal treatment of people in the workplace. Is able to cope tactfully with the ethical problems raised by personally unacceptable features of otherness.

Table 1 – INCA descriptors for “Respect for Otherness”.

4. Scenario: Working in a Multinational Team in Europe

As mentioned above, in order to assess (or have assessed) their intercultural competence, learners have to complete tasks on the CEFcult platform. These tasks are grouped in larger "scenarios", in the sense of hypothetical situations, specifically created to elicit the learner's oral production. The scenario can consist of trigger texts and/ or videos on relevant topics.

Within the CEFcult project, a number of scenarios were developed, including "Taking part in an online screening interview for a career in an international organization" with tasks such as presenting oneself, discussing one's suitability for the desired post or describing previous experiences. Another example is the scenario "Participating in an international summer course for foreign language teachers" which aims, among other things, at raising awareness of some features of one's communication style.

The scenario presented here is called: "Working in a multinational team in Europe", and was designed for the individual user. Some tasks are based on those created by the INCA project team (<http://www.incaproject.org>). The scenario is made up of six tasks, each testing one element of intercultural competence as defined in INCA. The setting is defined in the introduction:

You have been selected to take part in a two-year long work project with European partners. The project language will be English, used as a lingua franca. This will involve your spending 3-4 weeks in another European country, but also some meetings abroad, written and spoken online collaboration, and hosting the members of the team in your own country.

The six tasks concern aspects such as finding information before travelling abroad, attending meetings, socialising with people from other countries, hosting colleagues, chairing meetings etc. The learner is typically asked to imagine a hypothetical situation and react to it.

The CEFcult tool, which is freely available online and extremely user-friendly, requires the learner to record him or herself directly onto the tool using a webcam. The responses are saved and can then be subjected to self-, peer- or expert assessment, by using the grids containing the CEF and INCA scales. It is the user him or herself who chooses who has access to the recorded samples. (For a detailed description on how to use the CEFcult tool please refer to the user manual available from the website: www.cefcult.eu)

5. Piloting the assessment of Task 5, relating to "Respect for Otherness"

As an example of the piloting recordings, the video response of speaker J. for task 5 was presented to the conference audience, with the aim of raising their awareness of some of the complexities of this kind of assessment. J. was an exchange student in Bologna at the time of the piloting. Task 5 is an oral production activity, which intends to elicit the speaker's competence for the element "Respect for Otherness":

One of the behaviours which many colleagues find frustrating concerns time-keeping: some colleagues tend to arrive late to the meeting while others are extremely punctual. Some start leaving the meeting before it has ended, while others always stay until the end. The project coordinator has asked you to chair the next meeting. He/she has also asked you to moderate in order to try to make the meeting as successful as possible, and make it less frustrating for those who feel less at ease. Now imagine you are opening the meeting, and explaining to the colleagues what you could all do to deal successfully with the issue of time-keeping. When you are ready, record yourself while you give this initial presentation.

The length of the sample is 2 minutes 36 seconds. The audience was asked to assess this speaker's competence using the INCA descriptors for the specified element. In the lively discussion that followed most people agreed that he could be granted no more than a basic level of competence for this task. The arguments were that J. resorted to common stereotypes about the unpunctuality of "southerners", that he seemed to impose his own values on others by taking it for granted that his own value system (regarding punctuality) was better than that of others.

However, it was clear that this task posed some problems: for example, it raised the issue of whether something as complex as intercultural competence can be assessed on a hypothetical situation rather than on authentic behaviour.

6. Conclusions

As a result of the piloting sessions, a number of conclusions were reached.

- In general, it was agreed that the CEFcult tool seemed particularly useful for raising awareness of Intercultural Communicative Competence. However, it also became clear that assessing ICC was an extremely complex procedure and should therefore be used with extreme care, if at all, in high-stakes assessment.
- The internal validity of the tasks was even more problematic for ICC than for language assessment: some tasks proved to be unsuitable as they did not elicit the speaker's knowledge/skills/ attitudes for the desired INCA element, and needed to be reformulated.
- The usefulness of self-assessment is not necessarily obvious to all students. In addition, it is important that learners can compare their self-assessment with other peer- or expert assessments of the same samples.
- Some learners considered that culture-general scenarios were not particularly useful, and called for culture-specific situations (for example, having to work in Madrid, doing business with a French partner, etc.).
- Finally, as mentioned above, a major concern amongst the project partners was the artificial setting of the scenario, in which the learner was asked to imagine talking to or interacting with a partner, but was in fact recording a monologue. This makes it impossible to react to what is being said, which is usually the case in real life. It is in fact arguable whether the assessment of intercultural competence can be limited to one of the speakers in a dialogue.
- Another issue raised was whether intercultural competence may be impeded by lack of sufficient linguistic skills. In other words, learners with a low level of proficiency may not be capable of showing their intercultural competence to the full.
- Linked to this last point is the fact that the INCA framework was not written to assess Intercultural Communicative Competence in the foreign language. A future development may be to develop scales for ICC within the CEF.

References

- Byram, M., Nichols, A. & Stevens, D. (2001). *Developing intercultural competence in practice*. NetLibrary, Inc.
- Byram, M. (2008). From Foreign Language Education to Education for Intercultural Citizenship. Essays and Reflection. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- CEFcult Homepage: <http://www.cefcult.eu/>
- Corbett, J. (2003). *An Intercultural Approach to English Language Education*. Clevedon & Buffalo: Multilingual Matters.
- Council of Europe (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- INCA scales: www.incaproject.eu
- Kramsch, C.J. (1986) From language proficiency to Interactional Competence. *The Modern language Journal*, 70. 366-372
- Sercu, L. (2005) Testing intercultural competence in a foreign language. Current approaches and future challenges. *BELL Belgian Journal of English Language and Literature* 3: 151-167.