Chapter 8

Integration without language skills

A utopia (promoting language learning, integration and intercultural awareness)

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1 Introduction

Following the initiatives of the European Union to promote multilingualism in Europe, Hungarian universities participate in a range of international exchange programs and welcome a growing number of foreign students from all over the world. Prior to engaging in their studies, the majority of these students spend one year in Hungary to attend a preparatory English language-learning program. Ideally, during that time they also acquire a reasonably good command of the Hungarian language in order to facilitate the interactions in their daily lives, and prepare medical students for their internship at a Hungarian hospital or a doctor's office.

The integration of these students into the local community, however, appears to be particularly difficult. They follow their studies almost exclusively in English and consider Hungarian, both extremely hard to learn and undeserving of significant investment due to its limited applicability. Thus, the students' motivation is lowered from the outset.

In response to these specific conditions, an innovative learning program has been developed by the International Studies Centre of the University of Pécs (Hungary). The opening paragraphs of this chapter give a general description of the framework of studies at the University of Pécs followed by an overview of the program components together with the underlying methodology. First, the series of textbooks created for this purpose and ways of using new technologies to gather and share linguistic and cultural information are presented. Then, we discuss the role of language teachers as particularly relevant entry points to the local culture and language as well as facilita-

tors, who can create an environment in which intercultural discourse naturally occurs. The last part of the chapter describes a task-based project in the framework of which students establish contacts with native Hungarian speakers outside the classroom in order to acquire essential competences and skills, and the necessary self-confidence to use the language in their everyday lives.

2 Framework of studies at the University of Pécs

In one of its resolutions concerning language instruction, the European Council emphasizes the need to

> [...] take steps to encourage diversification in the languages taught in the Member States, giving pupils during their school career and *students in higher education the opportunity to become competent in several languages of the European Union* [emphasis added]. [...] It is therefore desirable to *encourage contacts with native speakers of the language* [emphasis added] being studied (a) through the opportunities for virtual mobility offered by the new technologies and [...] (b) through physical mobility. [European Council Resolution, 1995, pp. C 207/1–2.]

Under the aegis of promoting multiculturalism and multilingualism, the University of Pécs welcomes approximately 3,000 foreign students from all over the world each year, who, after a one-year preparatory language course for English for academic purposes, pursue their studies in medicine, architecture, engineering or other subjects in Hungary. Almost all courses during their studies are conducted in English and, although offered at all levels (A1-C2) of the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR), Hungarian language courses are optional and awarded with a relatively low number of credit points in comparison with other subjects. The 90-minute-long lessons take place twice a week. Out of the 3 000 foreign students only one-tenth choose to enrol in these classes and decide to invest time and energy into classroom language learning. This is all the more surprising as the majority of the students spend, on average, four to six years in Hungary. About 400 medical students attend specialized Hungarian courses for medicine during two semesters. These classes are mandatory due to the fact that these students need the Hungarian language for their studies; they must, indeed, complete internships at Hungarian hospitals and doctor's offices.

Before exploring possible ways to cope with this particular situation, let us turn our attention to the most relevant criteria that influence the general attitude of learners towards the language to be learned. In his book on second language acquisition, Ellis (2008) argues that there are multiple factors that affect the rate of acquisition and ultimate achievement of proficiency in the target language. These factors can be of social, psychological, linguistic and cultural nature, the most important components being: social dominance, cultural congruence, size of the native community, intended length of residence, language shock, culture shock, motivation and ego-permeability (Ellis, based on Schumann, 1978). With respect to the criteria listed above, some cultures and languages are highly attractive to learners and language proficiency in the interest of integration is sought more intensely than in the case of other languages.

Hungarian makes part of this latter group, while English ranks as the absolute winner of the first category. Furthermore, the Hungarian language has the reputation of being a very difficult language that is rarely spoken outside Hungary, and therefore considered to be of little practical use. These considerations obviously affect the motivation of the students even if they, as mentioned above, will stay in the country for a longer period of time. (On motivation and the prestige of languages, see also Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002.)

As a consequence, only a limited number of students acquire a reasonably good command of Hungarian (level B1 or B2 of the CEFR), essential for integration in the local environment. In fact, many students choose to integrate in the international community instead, and use English as their *lingua franca*. They have occasional contacts with Hungarians during their stay, and use the language in fairly scarce interactions only. Based on 64 respondents, to the question *How often do you use the Hungarian language and for what purpose?* asked on the end-of-course evaluation sheet, the majority of students provide answers alongside the following two lines:

> "Here, I am part of the international community where everybody speaks English. I do not need the Hungarian language." [Annouk, 24, Belgium.]
>
> "I would like to have more contact with the local people but it is very difficult. When they hear that I am a foreigner, they switch to English even if their English is not so good. This is very discouraging." [Maren, 22, Germany.]

Although many students would not like to miss out on an opportunity to explore a new language and gain a better insight into another culture, their integration into the local community seems to be rather difficult. The obstacles to overcome seem so daunting that they prefer to maintain contact with the international community, and communicate in English. It may be surprising but the way learners perceive their situation does not depend on their intended length of stay in Hungary.

In response to these difficulties, the International Studies Centre of the University of Pécs has developed a language-learning program that offers proper guidance for students to overcome their apprehensions against the Hungarian language, and to facilitate their integration into the local community. This program is articulated along three main axes and focuses on methods that (a) offer a very structured, functional approach to the Hungarian language; (b) promote intercultural awareness and explore the richness of a multilingual, multicultural learning community; and (c) enhance learning by taking advantage of the numerous opportunities offered by a native-speaking environment.

3 The study material: *MagyarOK* textbook series

Michael Lewis (1997), who formalized the term and basic methodology of the *lexical approach*, claims that learners are aware that "native speakers use the language in a certain way" (p. 11) and "speech communities do not simply make up new ways of saying things all the time" (*ibid.*). It is therefore important that language instruction

focus on fixed expressions and fully contextualized phrases frequently occurring in dialogues. It is all the more a valid approach as recent findings of corpus linguistics indicate that these elements make up a larger part of discourse than unique phrases and sentences. In his book on lexical priming, Hoey (2005) puts forward the theory that large numbers of prefabricated elements are stored as units in the brain and primed by repeated encounters. Acquiring such prefabricated elements facilitates correct priming, relieves cognitive effort and increases the naturalness of speech (Lewis, 1997; Davis & Kryszewska, 2012).

The presentation of vocabulary in the *MagyarOK* study material draws on these linguistic findings. The material covered in the books relies as much as possible on real-language data from available linguistic corpora such as the Magyar Nemzeti Szövegtár [Hungarian National Corpus] (n.d.) and the Hungarian / English Corpus (Hungarian Academy of Sciences Institute of Linguistics, n.d.), as well as the authors' own audio collections of recorded interviews and interactions among native speakers. A statistical analysis was conducted to decide about the organization of the vocabulary according to relevance and frequency. This method accounts not only for a more reliable selection of words and multi-word items corresponding to the language level given, but also for the presentation of the selected elements in their typical environment. In accordance with the lexical approach, grammatical structures are viewed as features of the language, the use and function of which are highly determined by lexis (Lewis, 1997). The tasks and activities are designed in a way that students can observe and use the linguistic elements in meaningful interactions and narratives.

The methodology for language acquisition in the classroom was designed along the guidelines of a communication-centred, multi-modal approach. Research has shown that humans are more likely to retain information when it is communicated *via* more than one channel (see *e.g.* Matsumura, 2001). It is therefore essential to propose activities that involve a maximum number of sensory organs and various social forms to enhance long-term vocabulary retention and to accommodate different learning types. Taking advantage of the fact that large quantities of relevant linguistic input are available not only in the immediate environment of the learners but also *via* the Internet (Dudeney, 2000), the curriculum has integrated numerous activities that make use of the new technologies in an effective way. These tasks have been designed with the intention to motivate learners to produce more language than they otherwise might have done. They are invited to prepare presentations on various aspects of their country and culture (food, music, paintings, etc.) with the help of available data on the Internet. They can also participate in various activities *via* the new social media (chat-rooms, discussion platforms, etc.), explore available corpora of the Hungarian language, and use their mobile telephone for data collection from native speakers.

The four books of the *MagyarOK* series cover levels A1 (Breakthrough or Beginner), A2 (Waystage or Elementary), B1 (Threshold or Intermediate) and B2 (Vantage or Upper Intermediate) of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages. In 2013, the series was awarded the European Language Label for innovative teaching methods.

4 Redefining the teacher's role and raising intercultural awareness

As Krumm (1994) points out in one of his articles, "learning a language implicitly means seeking access to that particular culture" (p. 158). Intercultural competence is therefore a crucial element of successful socialization and integration that must be practised in the classroom. The role of language classes in this process is essential because they provide an environment where preconceptions about the target language and culture can be discussed, attenuated and alleviated.

Our learners follow their studies in English and have not sufficient contact with members of the Hungarian community that would enable them to satisfactorily develop their linguistic skills, and consider themselves as (potential) parts of the local community. In this context, language teachers have an unusually high impact and responsibility: they represent the most relevant entry points to local language and culture. As a consequence, the attitude of the language teacher towards his/her own culture and the culture(s) of the students largely determines if the students will learn, at least to some extent, the target language, and whether they will feel capable to integrate, at least to some extent, into the local community.

Activities in which students are invited to draw on their knowledge and experience, engage in discussions about linguistic and cultural matters are examples of meaningful interactions that teachers can offer in their lessons. Such activities have always been essential features of the communication-centred classroom, and not without cause. Long (1996) argues that a communication-centred learning environment facilitates effective language acquisition due to the conversational and linguistic modifications that occur when teachers interact with their students, and provide them with the input they need. Krashen (1981, p. 10) expresses this thought in a charmingly simple way:

> The best language lessons may be those in which real communication takes place, in which an acquirer understands what the speaker is trying to say. [...] *We teach language best when we use it for what it was designed for: communication* [emphasis added].

By modelling certain tasks such as composition and presentation of longer narratives, and by participating in classroom discussions in a natural way, teachers are able to give large amounts of personalized linguistic input as well as insights into culture, language and community, and invite students to share their own experiences and observations.

When designing communication-centred tasks for the classroom, one must not forget, however, that cultural acceptance is bidirectional by nature. Learners expect not only to receive insights into the target culture but also that their culture be acknowledged and accepted by members of the target community (Eriksen, 2007). For this reason, the curriculum at the International Studies Centre largely builds on tasks and activities that explore the richness of a multicultural and multilingual learning community and raise intercultural awareness by giving opportunities for learners to present their

own culture, and gather information about the culture of their fellow students. The activities create an environment in which intercultural discourse naturally occurs and the students' contributions form the basis for meaningful dialogues, and are explored to the fullest. The vast resources of authentic linguistic data, and massive amounts of visual material available *via* the new technologies can be used to provide visual and linguistic support. Feedback from five 30-minute-long interviews conducted with teachers, and feedback sheets from 43 students show that once students have been involved in exchanges about topics to which they emotionally relate, and when they know them better than anyone else in the classroom, their attitude towards language learning changes. Once they have noticed curiosity and positive attitude on behalf of their teachers, who are representatives of the target language and culture, their willingness to interact with native speakers increases.

In addition to classroom interactions, a task-based project has been created, which invites learners to initiate contacts with native speakers. Its aim is to facilitate their integration into the local community. This project will be described in the following paragraphs.

5 Building bridges between the classroom and the outside world: Guided interactions with Hungarians

When designing a curriculum, the largely social character of second language acquisition must be taken into consideration (see *e.g.* Atkinson, 2011; Larsen-Freeman, 2011). The advantages of an environment where the target language is spoken are obvious. Learners receive various authentic stimuli continuously, and have the opportunity to observe native speakers coping with everyday tasks. Experience has shown, however, that learners appreciate some guidance as to how they can benefit from everyday interactions to enhance their learning, and acquire the necessary pragmatic competences for successful integration. A task-based project has been established for this purpose, in the framework of which learners seek contact with native speakers, interview them or execute tasks with their help. Project outcomes count towards the end-of-semester grade for the course.

The themes discussed during these interactions relate to the topics covered in the textbook. Each chapter of the book is complemented by, at least, one such interaction with native speakers, amounting to, at least, four projects per semester in total. The interactions include everyday-life situations, such as asking for directions and prices, as well as interviews about various subjects —home town of the person(s), Hungarian literature, food, daily routine, geography or economics, etc.— depending on the student's level. A questionnaire is drawn up in the classroom together to help learners prepare for the encounter. In this preparatory activity, learners write down not only their questions but also several possible answers and reactions to these answers, so that they are able to participate in a longer interaction. (This step is particularly important at the A1 and A2 levels.) All learners are encouraged to listen not only for content but also for linguistic elements and patterns used by the native speakers, and to record the conversations for successive linguistic analysis in the classroom or as individual homework.

Some students report that this project has boosted their learning and motivation significantly:

> "If it had not been for this project, I would still not talk to Hungarians. This was a great experience. [...] I enjoyed talking to natives. I am now more confident to interact with them." [Concha, Spain.]

Other learners emphasize the difficulties and recognize, nevertheless, the usefulness of the interactions:

> "These projects brought me closer to Hungarian life. At the beginning, it was very difficult for me as a beginner to talk to Hungarians. I was slow and sometimes got frustrated because I could not understand the answers. I did the second project with a student whose Hungarian was better than mine and that went better." [Hakan, Turkey.]

A third group of learners took great pleasure in testing their Hungarian with native speakers:

> "I liked preparing the questionnaire and see how grammar is manifested in the actual interview situation. [...] I had to improvise sometimes and change the form of the questions." [Brigitte, UK.]

Encounters of this type, although they may seem somewhat artificial at first sight, result in multiple benefits: they are sources of relevant linguistic input on the one hand, and social events on the other. They help learners overcome the difficulties of establishing contacts with members of the local community using the target language. Furthermore, learners have the opportunity to observe, use and expand what they have learnt in the classroom, in other words they experience the Hungarian language "in function".

6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have presented an innovative learning program developed by the International Studies Centre at the University of Pécs (Hungary) that promotes a structured, functional approach to the Hungarian language, and places intercultural awareness as well as integration in the local community into the foreground. The program has been developed to respond to the particular needs of students who enrol in a Hungarian university but follow the majority of their courses in English. Taking this particular context into consideration, the curriculum combines classroom learning with projects outside the classroom.

The four volumes of the *MagyarOK* A1 to B2, textbooks used in the language courses present authentic language based on available corpora, embedded in meaningful interactions. Taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the new technologies,

Internet- and mobile phone-based activities provide further linguistic input that can be successfully explored with an appropriate methodology. The teacher's role is redefined as a facilitator for intercultural exchange and entry point to culture and community, who can give valuable, personalized insights into the life of the local community, and offer activities to bridge the gap between learning in and outside the classroom. The *MagyarOK Experience*, a series of projects involving various forms of interactions outside the classroom, allows students to initiate contacts with members of the local community right from the beginning.

Although some aspects of the program presented above still need further study to evaluate their effectiveness more precisely, relying on the students' feedback, one can safely say that the program in its actual form contributes to the acquisition of sound linguistic and pragmatic skills, while facilitating integration in the local community.

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