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# THE INTERNATIONAL SUMMER COURSE ON METHODOLOGY OF INTERCULTURAL LEARNING AND TEACHING YOUNG LEARNERS

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The seminar in Esztergom was one of three International Summer Schools held this summer in different locations in Hungary, and was organised by the British Council in cooperation with the Hungarian Ministry of Education and the Hornby Trust.

A group of teachers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Hungary, Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, and Ukraine met in the friendly and tranquil Hotel Oktav, in the suburbs of Esztergom. During the welcome reception we were all quickly acquainted with each other, the course tutors (Uwe Pohl, Gyongyi Vegh, Mark Andrews, Julie Mills and Ewa Burliga), and the organisers (Erzsi Csontos, Aniko Paal, Hajnalika Harangozo), thanks to a touch of subtle choreography by the British Council's INSET project manager Csilla Hos.

The activities at the seminar took place throughout the day and can be roughly divided into three sections:

- the core programme, within which the participants were divided into two groups according to their field of interest,
- a selection of workshops held by a variety of presenters and a number of publishers, all complementing the core programme,

- additional activities and visits, which were held jointly for both groups.

A small group of participants were given the opportunity to attend additional trainer training sessions held by the course directors.

The accredited course on intercultural learning was led jointly by the team of three course directors with different cultural backgrounds: Uwe Pohl (Germany), Gyongyi Vegh (Hungary) and Mark Andrews (Britain). The principle of analysing classroom activities by focusing on "What, How and Why" was established at the very beginning. According to this principle, our teaching should thus include considerations on content and methodology along with reflections on the reasons for familiarising our students with intercultural issues. It seems that such an analysis can also be profitably applied to describe the overall framework of the seminar in Esztergom.

## **WHAT**

The busy timetable set up various activities from morning till late evening every day. During the regular contact hours with the tutors, participants had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with a number of materials and teaching activities that can be readily transposed into our every day classroom practice.



A variety of reflective techniques was introduced based on authentic materials, field work, poster presentation, language compilation, and sample units of *Zoom In* (a new intermediate course book structured around intercultural issues, the outcome of a British Cultural Studies project in which all the course directors were actively involved).

The sessions held by Richard Bolt, a visiting tutor from Poland, focused on some less obvious aspects of authentic materials that can be profitably exploited in acquainting our students with intercultural topics.

The afternoon schedule offered a variety of workshops held by presenters from different countries and were geared to enhancing the interests of the participants of both groups while still dealing with issues related to the main framework of the seminar. The topics tackled were the following: *Intercultural teaching to young learners* (Judit Kardos Fekone – Hungary), *Language and culture* (Krisztina Rödler – Hungary), *Culture and literature* (Katalina Purda – Hungary), *Education to nonviolence* (Eva Jonai – Hungary), *Creative writing: developing reading skills* (Vanda Balasiu – Romania), *Intercultural issues in a business context* (Neva Čebtron – Slovenia). The promotional workshops held by the publishers (Cambridge University Press, Express Publishing, Longman, MacMillan, Oxford University Press, Tankonyvkiado) matched the main themes of the summer school as well.

A more entertaining approach to cultural topics was introduced in the evenings through games, songs, dances and video viewing in the course of events such as the Irish Evening, British Festivals, and Scottish Dancing. The truly international nature of the group manifested itself particularly during International Night, but was also evident in the sing song evenings around the barbecue fire and in the final performances by the Intercultural Group and the Young Learners group. The weekend excursions to Esztergom, Visegrad and Budapest were dedicated to gathering fieldwork data.

Even during the official visits by represent-

atives of different government institutions (Hungarian Ministry of Education and Esztergom City Council), their remarks stressed the interrelatedness of cultural insights and language acquisition and voiced their concern over the demands posed on teachers and students by the globalised economy. The British Ambassador to Hungary, Mr Nigel Thorpe, the Director of the British Council Hungary, Mr John Richards, and the Assistant Director, Mr Peter Brown stressed the need to strengthen links between teachers of English in this region. In an informal discussion with the participants, Mr Thorpe also pointed to a number of issues related to his rich cross-cultural experience.

Another visit that created a strong international atmosphere was that of Mr Roy Cross, the Deputy Director of English Language Teaching at the British Council. His presentation, describing the activities supported by the ELTeCs and the Hornby Trust all over the world, was permeated with intercultural insights and showed a deep understanding of the demands that teachers of English are faced with in this new era everywhere. However, recent developments of this technological era also bring about the opportunity for better understanding among the peoples of the world if we are ready to embrace these challenges. In this sense the support to spreading summer schools to a number of venues on different continents aims at reaching out to less privileged members of the teaching community and gives everybody the possibility to become an equal part of the same.

## ■ HOW

The participants were familiarised with the critical issues in intercultural learning and acquainted with a wide range of materials and ideas for awareness raising. A number of approaches were introduced that can help adapting current teaching materials to prompt discussions with an intercultural dimension and give rise to a more reflective judgement of oth-

erness, thus helping to overcome the bonds of ethnocentrism.

Participants were actively involved at all times and were encouraged to take all the above events as an opportunity to explore cultural issues. English was spoken at all times and really functioned as a *lingua franca* within this international environment, which meant that many a culture-specific notion had to be rendered in our common tongue. In fact, this practice proved that we all have a great deal in common and many concepts and practices were discovered to have spread to different cultural circles. Thus, group recording of new vocabulary, which was practised on a daily basis, became a way of comparing various ways of wording similar concepts within different language communities. Fieldwork geared our attention to the diversities and commonalities of everyday routine within various environments and triggered many lively discussions and inspiring revelations. The consciousness of sharing many similarities ultimately prevailed over spotting areas of possible misunderstandings and contrasts. We also realised that we all had intercultural experiences and knowledge accumulated from our home environment and can translate such apprehension into empathy with new people and situations.

The various approaches to introducing intercultural topics and issues to our students thus started to be more targeted, more reflexive, mirroring newly acquired insights. A range of authentic materials, from simple visual aids to video spots and novels, were considered as prompts to enhance students' interest in these topics. Fieldwork and small scale research were assessed as a suitable means for exploring familiar situations, our daily routine and practices, whereby students' previous intercultural experience can be anchored and used as a vehicle to unravelling the "strangeness" of other cultural circles.

The ease and excellent coordination with which the three tutors jointly coached the group engaging in intercultural learning was in it-

self an extraordinary display of their pedagogical creed put into practice and one which all participants readily embraced.

## WHY

This last part of the analysis of our work seems to be missing in many contexts, but can turn our attention to important issues as Mr Uwe Pohl stressed. Do we not take for granted a number of practices, approaches, methods and topics that seem to be part and parcel of teaching English?

Thus this questionword underlay all the intense and exhaustive discussions of the trainees with the tutors. Why do we prefer one method over another? What can our choice of approaches and materials trigger or achieve? What intrinsic values can our classroom decisions imply? All of these questions make teachers' work a constant challenge and a rewarding job.

Examining these questions brought us to the conclusion that, when tackled with an open mind, intercultural topics can lead to a deeper understanding of the function of a language as a culture specific instrument and an expression of a certain tradition. Understanding linguistic expression as part of a larger structure and discerning its many facets can help us cope with the feeling of strangeness that overcomes us all as we hear our own voice pronouncing words in a foreign language at a certain stage of language acquisition. Thus empathy can bridge the gap between foreign, exotic and familiar, as well as help us express ourselves better in another language by dispelling ethnocentrism. With respect to learning English, such approaches can help us and our students to start feeling at ease in expressing our own world in this new language system and to gain better command of English by gathering additional insights into the culture it traces.

Links among newly acquired friends from the Summer School in Esztergom will last and certainly bring about more exchanges and





common projects. It is important that such events are held in the very centre of Europe, because they provide many teachers from the larger region with an opportunity to take part and learn about the newest developments in our field of work. Let us hope that in view of the success of the Hungarian Summer Schools in 2001 the British Council and the Hornby Trust will continue to organise and support

these events in the next years, and thus help set up a kind of centre for advanced teacher development courses in Hungary by promoting a number of events appealing to a large number of interested teachers at an accessible cost. The International Summer Course on Methodology in Intercultural Learning was proof that the whole region could benefit greatly from this initiative.