Foreword

This book is part of the cultural turn in language teaching, which has taken place since the 1980s in various forms in different parts of the world. A common point of departure has been the assertion that foreign language teaching should not only focus on language (and/or literature at later stages), but also include a cultural dimension in a broader sense. Language teaching should demonstrate that there are connections between language and culture.

*Foreign Language Teachers and Intercultural Competence* is the result of a large empirical investigation that seeks to explore the cultural dimension in terms of intercultural communicative competence (of teachers and learners). In so doing, it positions itself among the approaches that have been developed in the European context, especially through the multifaceted work of Michael Byram. The main point of departure of this approach is the conviction that language teaching has two sides: a language side and a culture side, and that one of the greatest pedagogical challenges consists in integrating these two sides so that students get a sense of their interconnectedness. The approach is characterized by a dualism and an assertion of an intimate relationship between the two. Such compounds as the following are typical: language-and-culture, language-culture, culture-and-language, and as pointed out below, this is a way of thinking which is becoming familiar to language teachers in schools.

There are also other ways of conceptualizing the relationship between language and culture, the most important being the conviction that language is culture, that the focus should be on defining and teaching the cultural dimension of language itself, or of discourse. One example is work with literature, which may be seen as working with language/discourse as a cultural practice. Another example is the interest in defining cultural areas of language use, such as politeness norms, and non-verbal communication accompanying and enriching verbal communication. These approaches do not base themselves on a language-culture dualism, but prefer to coalesce language and culture into a single unity dominated by language. It remains to be seen if language teachers also
take an interest in this way of conceptualizing the language-culture relationship in their professional practice.

Furthermore, the book reports an investigation that focuses on intercultural competence rather than cultural competence. Though there are many ways of understanding these concepts, one possible distinction is that cultural competence involves knowledge, skills and attitudes concerning a specific cultural area such as that associated with (one of the) target language countries, whereas intercultural competence involves knowledge, skills and attitudes at the interface between several cultural areas including the students’ own country and a target language country. The development of intercultural competence is thus seen as a process that includes the students’ experiences and competencies from their own cultural backgrounds, a process that allows them to reflect on their own cultural assumptions as an integral part of the further development of their skills and knowledge of the world.

Among the many players in language teaching and learning, the authors of *Foreign Language Teachers and Intercultural Competence* have chosen to focus on the teacher, and in doing that they highlight a border area in the professional identity of language teachers. Though more and more teachers see themselves as teachers of language and culture (whatever the relationship), the education of language teachers is often not organized in a way that helps them to accomplish this task in a professional way. It is still mostly up to the individual teacher to introduce elements of culture learning, or to develop the topics of textbook materials, in a pedagogically satisfactory way that allows for discussion, reflection and personal development. The book relates this issue to the issues of teacher cognition in general: how do teachers think about their own practice and about the preconditions for that? How can one describe their metacognitive awareness?

The investigation is a quantitative, comparative study that comprises questionnaire answers received during the summer of 2001 from foreign language teachers in seven countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Poland, Mexico, Greece, Spain and Sweden. Thus it is a rather broad investigation. There is no specific reason for the choice of countries; it is the countries that the already existing network of researchers had contact with. The basic unit of the comparative analysis is the individual country, and the general purpose of the broad investigation has been to find out if it is possible to describe an average profile for foreign language teachers. Thus the aim is to define mainstream attitudes to the cultural dimension of language teaching among ordinary teachers. The group of researchers conclude that it is possible to define such an average profile.
The book does not pretend to be a work about theory; the authors do not, for example, delve into the complexities of the relationships between language, literature, culture and globalization. The focus is on data about how teachers perceive the cultural dimension of foreign language teaching and learning, how they perceive their students’ knowledge of and attitudes to target language countries, their reports on their own teaching, the significance of study trips and exchanges, and their own experiences with target language countries via travel and the use of media of different kinds.

*Foreign Language Teachers and Intercultural Competence* thus provides a good basis for the further development of this field of study with regard to theories, methods and practices. The authors suggest in-depth qualitative studies of teachers and their perception of their overall situation, and they suggest innovations in initial and in-service teacher education. The investigation gives rise to many interesting questions that might be included in follow-up studies, such as: What are teachers’ attitudes to the aspects of intercultural competence that focus on critical cultural awareness and the development of students as citizens (Guilherme, 2002)? What is intercultural competence today, taking into consideration actual political and cultural developments on the global scene? What is the role of language learning for students’ (and teachers’) general identity development in a complex world?

Last, but not least, this book is rewarding because teachers will be able to recognize themselves in the results and in the discussions of them. Because the researchers asked teachers questions that focus on the practical reality of their classes and on the concrete teaching and learning processes and conditions, they received reactions that reflect everyday perceptions of teachers located in the conflict between pedagogical ideals and practical possibilities. The book thus gives us a picture of the foreign language teacher that is both more concrete and more comprehensive than what we knew hitherto.

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