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## Intercultural competence

– an aim for the teaching of English in Norway?

### **Abstract**

*The 1997 Norwegian national curriculum (L-97) pointed out the need for foreign language learners to develop ‘the ability to communicate across cultural divides’. The present article investigates how this perspective is followed up in the most recent national curriculum, LK-06, and discusses how intercultural competence can be dealt with in the teaching of English in Norwegian compulsory education. The author also indicates possible future developments by referring to some Council of Europe projects. The main focus is on the questions of how (inter)cultural topics can be selected and how intercultural competence can be assessed.*

In recent years, it has become more and more common to refer not only to communicative competence, but also to ‘intercultural competence’ as an aim for foreign language education. When it comes to the teaching of English in Norway, the 1997 national curriculum (L-97) introduced the view that successful use of language “is not a matter of language skills alone, but of the ability to communicate across cultural divides” (C-99 p. 239).

The present article investigates how this view is – and can be – followed up in the teaching of English in Norwegian compulsory education. I look at the English syllabus in the most recent Norwegian national curriculum (LK-06) as an indication of the present state of affairs, while I turn to various Council of Europe projects in my discussion of possible future developments. Since assessment usually has considerable impact on the priorities that are made both in teaching materials and in the actual classroom situation, I will also discuss the question of whether – and, if so, how – intercultural competence can be assessed. But first, the concept itself, intercultural competence, needs to be looked into. For what does this buzzword really mean?

### **What is intercultural competence?**

Simensen (2003 p. 8) argues that intercultural competence is, in fact, an educational cliché which it has become fashionable to use, although no one seems to know exactly what it means. Few people understand the pedagogical implications of the term, she says, and this has probably been the main obstacle when it comes to bringing intercultural issues into the foreign language classroom.

In her dissertation on the development of intercultural understanding in Swedish foreign language education, Lundgren (2002) provides evidence for this view. She shows that Swedish teachers – at least in the years prior to 2002 – had very fuzzy notions of what intercultural competence is, and of how it might

fit into a foreign language program. One reason for this, says Lundgren, is that the Swedish educational authorities themselves are vague and contradictory when referring to intercultural issues.

My own research indicates that the situation in Norway is similar to the one in Sweden (Lund 2007). I investigated the *L-97* curriculum and the English language textbooks for lower secondary school which were based on it. Although the curriculum is clear about the need for learners of English to concern themselves with intercultural questions, I found that neither the syllabus itself nor the textbooks communicate a clear understanding of what intercultural competence is. The materials provide students with some factual information about English-speaking countries and also with some glimpses of the English-speaking world that are, obviously, intended to increase their motivation to learn the language. However, the principles behind the selection of topics seem unclear and the topics' possible relevance for the development of the students' intercultural competence even more so.

It must be admitted that it *is* difficult to define 'intercultural competence', and it has been argued that the term has "become inflated, with everyone using it for their own particular purposes" (Frederiksen et al. 2000, p. 2). This is, perhaps, a natural development in an era when intercultural encounters and conflicts are being brought to everyone's attention, and when people around the world are becoming increasingly aware of the need to address, to try to understand and to cope with the challenges that cultural encounters may give rise to.

This situation, however, makes it necessary to define and describe the concept in a way that makes sense within the realm of foreign language education. Let us start with the definition that the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning* provides: "Intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively with people from cultures that we recognize as being different from our own" (Guilherme 2000, p. 297).

Since we have to do with language teaching and learning, it is hardly surprising that this definition focuses on the ability to communicate and to interact. Nevertheless, this is an important point to remember, since intercultural competence could easily be described only in terms of knowledge about different cultures, insight into intercultural phenomena and attitudes of respect and understanding for 'the other'. While the foreign language learner has to work with all these elements, he or she also needs the ability to put them to use in a situation that involves intercultural communication.

Attempts have been made to provide a detailed description of intercultural competence that can be used as the starting point for concrete, educational action in the foreign language classroom. In Europe, the model of intercultural competence developed by Michael Byram, professor of education at Durham University in England, has been most influential. Byram claims that intercultural competence consists of five main elements, or 'savoirs', as he calls them:

- Attitudes (savoir être)
- Knowledge (savoir)
- Skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre)
- Skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire)
- Critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager) (e.g. Byram 1997).

Most theorists who have entered the discussion of what intercultural competence comprises agree with Byram that the concept has to do with attitudes, skills and knowledge (e.g. Risager 1994, Byram & Zarate 1997, Chamberlain 2000).

*Attitudes* are most often described in terms of curiosity and openness towards other cultures. Other key words are 'cultural sensitivity', 'tolerance of ambiguity', 'respect for otherness' and 'empathy'. This also involves a willingness to question assumptions and previous 'knowledge' about other cultures as well as our own (e.g. Fennes & Hapgood 1997, Fantini 1997).

*Intercultural skills* are related to situations of intercultural encounters, and foreign language skills can, of course, be a central element here. But in order to cope with such encounters, we also need to be able to interpret the new meanings that are being conveyed to us and to relate this new input to the understandings that we already have. In addition, intercultural skills have to do with acceptable and appropriate behavior, i.e. with our ability to act in a way that will not be offensive or counter-productive in the given communication situation (e.g. Chick 1996, Corbett 2003).

When it comes to the *knowledge* dimension of intercultural competence, there are differing views. One is that cultural knowledge is relevant only if it can be useful in communication situations and if it can help students cope with the cultural challenges they might face (e.g. Guest 2002). However, to actually teach culture in this way is no easy task. How can we know exactly which contexts of language use the students need to be prepared for? For the teaching of English this represents a particular problem, since learners of this language may come to encounter people from virtually any corner of the world.

Therefore, voices have been raised in favour of focusing on cultural traits in general, rather than on specific information about specific countries (e.g. Damen 1987). This puts the main emphasis on cultural differences that might create challenging communication situations. Topics range from differences in everyday behaviour and politeness conventions to differences in religious beliefs, values and attitudes (Cortazzi & Jin 1999).

Yet another view places more emphasis on the students' general education and on the ways in which foreign language education can and should contribute to the students' 'knowledge of the world' (Council of Europe 2001, p. 101). Risager (2007) holds this position when she argues that an interculturally competent person is one who knows and cares about global issues and who sees him- or herself as a world citizen rather than as a citizen of a particular nation.

However, advocates of both views agree that it is not enough for students to 'learn' facts about and to 'know about' certain issues related to specific countries on a national level. One thing is that such information may promote popular stereotypes. Another is that communication takes place between individuals and not between nations. When learners use the foreign language, they have to cope with cultural differences at the individual and the local, not at the national level. To be able to do this, they must become sensitive to cultural complexity and diversity (Guest 2002, Dypedahl 2004).

Learners also need to become aware of their own cultural background and their own frames of reference. Therefore, a comparative perspective is needed, and foreign language teaching should stimulate students to see both their own culture and foreign cultures from different points of view. In her book *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, Kramsch (1993) argues for an approach where cultural topics are linked to *several* countries or cultures. Students need to be confronted with *many* cultures and multiple perspectives, she says, so that they can more easily identify and reflect on their own cultural identity as only one among many possible identities. Byram calls this the ability to 'decentre', i.e. to be able to remove oneself from the centre of the universe (Byram 1997, p. 73).

To ensure this, students need to engage not in 'surface learning', but in 'in-depth learning', as Jæger (2000 p. 45) calls it. Central elements here are independent thinking and critical reflection. This is where Byram's last 'savoir' comes in. 'Critical cultural awareness' is a prerequisite for students to be able to question their own modes of understanding.

### **Intercultural competence and LK-06**

When the 1997 national curriculum pointed out the need for learners of English to concern themselves with intercultural issues, this was done, first and foremost, in the introduction to the syllabus. In the requirements and guidelines for each grade level there were few, if any, references to this new perspective, and no indications were given as to how the new ideas could be put into practice. Therefore, many people involved in foreign language education approached the 2006 national curriculum with this question in mind; Does *LK-06* provide more concrete guidance that can help us bring intercultural issues into the actual classroom situation?

In the statement of objectives for the teaching of English, *LK-06* refers clearly to the need for students to concern themselves with intercultural issues. Intercultural skills are called for when the syllabus states that students need to be able to adapt their language to 'an ever increasing number' of communication situations and to 'take cultural norms and conventions into consideration' when using the language, in order to "succeed in a world where English is used for international interpersonal communication" (*LK-0*, p. 1). Next, the knowledge dimension of intercultural learning is addressed with reference to the fact that

English will “contribute insight into the way we live and how others live, and their views on life, values and cultures” (*LK-06*, p. 1). When it comes to the students’ attitudes, the syllabus states that “[C]ommunicative skills and cultural insight can promote greater interaction, understanding and respect between people with different cultural backgrounds” (*LK-06*, p. 1).

It could be argued that the curriculum sends a rather unclear message here, since it does not link the development of the students’ attitudes directly to the development of their communicative competence. In saying that ‘communicative skills and cultural insight *can* promote greater interaction, understanding’ etc., the syllabus seems to indicate that this *may* or *may not* happen, and that the teaching of English does not have to make sure that it actually *does* happen. Still, it must be concluded that the objectives in the *LK-06* English syllabus call for the introduction of intercultural issues in the teaching of English.

When we look at the competence aims that the syllabus presents for each one of the four stages in the Norwegian school system, we find that most of them are linked to the development of language skills. Although this comes as no great surprise, it is worth noticing that very few of the competence aims refer to situations of language use, and none of them mention how and to what extent cultural differences and different conventions of language use can come into play in such situations.

Some aims ask for fact-oriented knowledge about countries in the English-speaking world. They can perhaps be said to link up with the Council of Europe’s call for ‘knowledge of the world’, but they also reflect the traditional way of dealing with culture in a foreign language course. After seventh grade, for example, students are expected to be able to “talk about some persons, places and events in English-speaking countries” (*LK-06*, p. 5). At the end of their tenth year, students are to be able to “explain features of history and geography in Great Britain and the USA” (*LK-06*, p. 5).

Other aims are based on a comparative perspective and are therefore more compatible with the promotion of intercultural competence. After year four, students are expected to be able to “compare some aspects of the way of living, traditions and customs in Norway and English-speaking countries”, and after year seven to “compare the way people live and socialise in various cultures in English-speaking countries and in Norway” (*LK-06*, p. 4-5).

Quite a few of the competence aims have to do with the students’ work with literary texts. After year seven, for instance, students should be able to “read and talk about English-language literature for children and young people” (*LK-06*, p. 5). Although the syllabus does not mention this, it seems obvious that literary texts could provide a golden opportunity when it comes to exploring texts from an intercultural perspective.

Still, if we compare the formulations in the *LK-06* English syllabus with the descriptions of intercultural competence that we looked at earlier, we see some rather significant differences. Most importantly, the English syllabus does not

emphasize the importance of the development of the students' *attitudes* towards other cultures. Key terms such as cultural sensitivity, behavioural flexibility and empathy are not used, and there is no mention of the need to be able to shift perspectives or to enter communication situations with openness and respect for 'the other'. There is also a lack of concrete guidance or advice on how students can be helped to cope with cultural challenges in situations of interaction and communication.

Textbook authors and teachers may therefore interpret *LK-06* as falling into the traditional way of dealing with foreign languages, and continue to focus on the development of language skills without considering intercultural issues. The syllabus also makes it possible to continue former traditions when it comes to the teaching of 'culture', namely to bring in cultural topics without linking them to the development of the students' ability to communicate.

On the other hand, it *is* possible to interpret the syllabus in a different way. As Dypedahl (2007) points out, the syllabus does provide a 'moderate' call for work with intercultural issues, and the competency goals in *LK-06* can provide a platform for such work. With reference to recent developments in the field of foreign language education, not least the strong signals that have come from the Council of Europe, Dypedahl argues that teachers are obligated to bring intercultural perspectives into foreign language education.

But, the question remains; How can this be done? In our search for answers, it seems natural to turn to some of the work that the Council of Europe has carried out on foreign language education. In the following, I will limit my discussion to two central aspects of intercultural learning, namely the selection of relevant topics and the question of how intercultural issues can be taken into consideration in the assessment process. The Council of Europe projects that I mention can, the way I see it, provide inspiration as well as concrete guidance.

### **Topics that can support the development of intercultural competence**

Reflecting one of the aims in the *LK-06* syllabus, The *Bergen Can Do Project* (Hasselgreen 2003) opens for a comparative perspective on life in different countries. The project focuses on topics such as 'daily life activities and routines', 'social conventions' and 'values, beliefs and attitudes', with the intention of encouraging the learners to compare aspects of the target culture with their own. The project report presents a list of 25 topics, each with several sub-topics, but stresses that this list must be seen as an example and not as a finished product.

Nevertheless, the list is very interesting, not least because a number of secondary school students (40) in four different countries were involved in the process of topic selection. In order to make sure that the learners would find the material relevant, these students were invited to reflect on differences that they had noticed in other cultures, and to write an essay about their observations. The

project leaders then set out to systematize and to supplement the topics suggested in the essays.

However, the most important innovation in *The Bergen Can Do Project* lies in the way that the objectives for the students' work with the different topics are stated. The main emphasis is put on the students' ability to make use of cultural insight in a communication situation. This means that the students are not just expected to 'know about' the topics that are covered. The aim is to develop their ability to *cope with* daily life activities, to *deal with* social conventions such as 'good manners when meeting people', and so on.

The *European Language Portfolio* was developed and piloted by the Council of Europe in the years 1998 to 2000. Since then it has been adapted to the Norwegian school system, where it is referred to as *Den Europeiske Språkpermen* (Council of Europe 2008 a). One part of the Norwegian portfolio simply encourages the students to make a note of their intercultural observations and to comment on them:

My intercultural observations			
Language	When	Family, home, food and clothing	Comments / observations
.....	.....	.....	.....
		.....	.....

(Council of Europe 2008 b p. 20)

The topic areas that the portfolio suggests are:

- Family, home, food and clothing
- School, work, leisure and sports
- Customs, manners, greeting, politeness and body language
- Attitudes, values, religion and equal rights
- History, traditions and public holidays
- Other intercultural observations

Clearly, in order for students to have anything to report about, the teacher needs to provide them with input related to these content areas. At the same time, since the main focus of attention is on the learners' own intercultural observations, this opens for student initiatives and encourages them to provide suggestions and input. Such an approach offers a solution to the problem of how to link the topics taught to the students' own experience and to make the discussions relevant for them.

One section in the portfolio focuses on the students' 'meetings with language and culture', and asks them to report on similarities and differences that they have noticed:

My meetings with language and culture			
Experiences that have made an impression on me			
When	Where	Experience	Similarities and differences that I became aware of
.....	.....	.....	.....
		.....	.....

(Council of Europe 2008 b, p. 26)

Another section focuses on misunderstandings.

My meetings with language and culture		
Experiences that have made an impression on me		
When	Misunderstandings that have arisen	... and how I cleared them up!
.....	.....	.....
	.....	.....

(Council of Europe 2008 b, p. 27)

These sections in *The Language Portfolio* are useful in many ways. First, they draw the learners' attention to the challenges that intercultural encounters usually involve, and also to the interlocutors' responsibility to deal with these challenges. In this way, the sections can function as a timely reminder of the need to work with intercultural issues as part of foreign language learning. Second, the grids that are presented can help teachers and students organize their work, and the examples that come up as the course progresses can function as starting points for further investigation and discussion. Last, but not least: The ways in which the questions are formulated indicate that, when it comes to cultural and intercultural issues, observation, reflection and willingness to address and cope with differences may be just as important as 'learning' about them.

When that is said, the observations that the students make and the reports that they write within this framework can also be subject to assessment. Obviously, the teacher needs to set certain standards as to how many observations and experiences the students should write about and how the reports should be written. Standards could also be made for the level of insight that is expected in their reflections. Because of the link that usually exists between assessment and that which is emphasized in the classroom, it is essential to bring intercultural issues into the assessment situation if one wants to make sure that they are taught as part of foreign language education. I will therefore go on to discuss ways in which this can be done.

### What is assessment?

In order to investigate how the development of the students' intercultural competence can be made relevant in the assessment situation, it is necessary to establish, first, what assessment is – and can be. The way I see it, the term

'assessment' can refer to a whole range of different activities and processes, from final exams and certifications to the writing of logs and portfolio work. While the former are geared, primarily, towards summing up a student's competence, i.e. 'summative assessment', the latter usually aim at providing continuous stimulation during the learning process, i.e. 'formative assessment'. Assessment can also open for the participation of different people in different roles. We can, for example, talk about self assessment and peer assessment, in addition to the more traditional situations where the assessors are teachers and examiners.

### ***The Common European Framework***

In a European context, assessment of foreign language skills can hardly be discussed without referring to the influential Council of Europe publication *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* from 2001. Simensen (2007) maintains that this document has made its greatest impact in the fields of assessment and testing.

What the *Common European Framework* has done is to describe the learners' achievements in terms of six levels of language proficiency. The document states what learners *can* do with the language at each level and thereby provides a concrete scale for levels one to six. Thus, the lowest level for oral language use is described in this way: "I can use simple phrases to describe where I live and people I know" (Council of Europe 2001 p. 26), while the description of the highest level for oral language use starts like this: "I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and I have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms" (Council of Europe 2001 p. 27).

The *Framework* provides scales for assessment, including self assessment, for many aspects of the four skills and also for different language activities such as 'addressing an audience' and 'writing reports and essays'. In other words, the ambitions when it comes to describing all aspects of language learning and language use are very high. However, although the document reminds us constantly that socio-cultural and intercultural issues are important in foreign language learning, it does not provide any scales for the different levels of intercultural competence. Simensen (2003) argues that this is because it has proved too difficult to do.

### **Assessment and cultural knowledge**

I have already mentioned how cultural topics have, traditionally, been dealt with as part of the teaching of English in Norwegian schools. These topics, as they have manifested themselves in the students' textbooks may, of course, have been tested as part of the students' everyday work with the language. However, since both the requirements and the objectives related to the cultural material have been rather unclear, it has often been difficult to make the students' knowledge and insight in this area a part of the testing and assessment situation.

The final exam in tenth grade provides an example of this. The written exam has usually focused only on very general topics, such as ‘Colours’ in 2006 and ‘Money’ in 2007 (Utdanningsdirektoratet a). Often, in order to answer the questions in these exams students have needed general knowledge of the world more than specific knowledge about English speaking countries. In the year 2000, for example, students had to deal with a speech that Fidel Castro delivered to the World Health Organization about social conditions in industrialized and third world countries. In 2003, one of the texts had to do with female genital mutilation among children in Somalia (Reisjø 2006).

In recent years, national standards of competence, the so-called National Tests or ‘Nasjonale prøver’, have been developed to measure student performance. In addition, The Directorate for Education and Training (Utdanningsdirektoratet) has developed tests that are offered as ‘help in assessment and learning’. When both these tests focus exclusively on the development of language skills, it may create the impression that cultural topics are not very important and that there is no need to work with cultural and intercultural issues in the foreign language classroom (Utdanningsdirektoratet b, c).

### **Assessment and intercultural competence**

The *Bergen Can Do Project* that I referred to earlier indicates a way in which this situation can be remedied. According to the authors of this part of the report, it is possible to identify and to describe different stages in the development of intercultural competence, and to use these descriptions as the basis for assessment (Hasselgreen & Holm–Larsen 2003). Their argument goes like this; Although topics may vary for different languages and in different contexts of foreign language education, it will always be possible to identify the degree to which learners are able to demonstrate or apply their cultural knowledge and their intercultural awareness and skills.

Thus, in line with the principles of the *Common European Framework*, they present scales that indicate what it is that students are able to do at each level. At the lowest level, students show ‘Awareness of cultural difference’, while more advanced students have ‘Passive knowledge’ of cultural difference. At the third level, students have ‘Active knowledge’ while they, at the highest level, are able to implement knowledge about cultural difference (ibid p. 46).

The authors have also developed a self-assessment tool that can be used in order for students to reflect on their own development. In connection with the topic area ‘Values, beliefs and attitudes’, the lowest level of insight is expressed like this: “I am aware of basic features of religion, traditions, national identity and minorities of the country of the foreign language” (ibid p. 53). At a higher level, the students are able to use their knowledge actively in communication situations: “I can use what I know about politics, traditions, national identity and minorities in the country of the foreign language to adjust what I say and do” (ibid p. 53).

As I have mentioned earlier, the *Bergen Can Do Project* suggests rather than recommends how to organize and assess work with intercultural issues. Still, the suggestions are a timely reminder that there must, necessarily, be different stages in the development of intercultural competence as part of foreign language education. The project also reminds us how important it is to find verbal expressions for the different stages in this development, if one seriously wants to contribute to making teaching and learning strategies more concrete and systematic.

One rather tricky question related to the assessment of intercultural competence is this: How does one assess learners' attitudes? Some people have argued that questions of attitudes should definitely be left outside the assessment situation altogether, since we have to do with very sensitive issues. Attitudes, the argument goes, are closely linked to people's personalities, and we do not want to assess those (Simensen 2001).

Others have taken a different view, and the *Intercultural Competence Assessment (INCA)* project is one of them. This project is funded by the European Union within the Leonardo da Vinci framework and involves 14 partners from industry and research organizations all over Europe (INCA 2004 a). The aim is to focus on and to help develop the intercultural competence that young employees in the engineering industry need when they work abroad or in multicultural teams in their own country. This project has not been afraid to introduce scaled descriptions of the learners' attitudes, for example in the project's *Portfolio of Intercultural Competence*. Here, openness is described in terms of three levels of development, where the lowest and the highest levels are described in the following way:

*Level 1. Basic*

*When uncertainty arises from cultural difference, I adopt a tolerant attitude as long as the issue is not a sensitive one for me. (INCA 2004 b p. 14)*

*Level 3. Full*

*I fully respect the right of those from other cultures to have different values from my own and can see how these values make sense as part of a way of thinking. (INCA 2004 b p. 14)*

In this way, the *INCA* project indicates how attitudes can be described and talked about, by relating them to concrete challenges that users of a foreign language are likely to face. Although the validity and the relevance of the different descriptions can be questioned and discussed, the project does remind us of the need to show more rather than less respect and tolerance towards 'the other', and that efforts can – and should – be made to reach new levels of insight and understanding.

## Portfolio assessment

All this talk about different levels of intercultural competence may indicate that we are only concerned about summative assessment. Clearly, this is not the case. Descriptions of different levels of competence are also relevant in formative, day-to-day assessment in the classroom. In fact, most people who have discussed assessment in connection with intercultural competence have argued in favour of formative assessment, and portfolios are pointed out as the most central tool. Although teachers can use portfolio work in many kinds of assessment, including summative assessment, the main concern has been to develop a pedagogical tool that can stimulate and guide students throughout the learning process. We have already seen how the Norwegian Language Portfolio can function in this way.

Schulz (2007) describes a portfolio format that brings the ideas of documentation and reflection quite a few steps further. In line with much other theory on portfolio work, she argues that the first priority is to formulate clear objectives for the students' work with intercultural issues. She suggests five formulations, such as:

*1. Students develop and demonstrate awareness that geographical, historical, economic, social/religious, and political factors can have an impact on cultural perspectives, products, and practices, including language use and styles of communication. (Schultz 2007, p. 17)*

*5. Students develop and demonstrate an awareness of some types of causes (linguistic and non-linguistic) for cultural misunderstanding between members of different cultures. (Schultz 2007, p. 17)*

Students can then use the portfolios to document their work and their progress achieved on each objective. The process should involve teacher guidance and feedback, but also self assessment and critical reflection. Collaboration with others, the use of many, different sources of evidence and personal choice in topics and approaches are other important aspects.

This focus on the learning process prompts me to make a brief comment on the last part of the term 'intercultural competence'. In the previous discussion I have sometimes used the term 'intercultural learning' rather than 'intercultural competence'. This is because, to me, the word 'competence' seems to indicate a desired end product. However, intercultural challenges have to do with the need to always be open, to always keep considering new perspectives and understandings. Therefore, I would argue, with Fennes & Hapgood (1997), that 'intercultural learning' is a more adequate term than 'intercultural competence'. It indicates that work with contexts and cultures is a never-ending process, and that the main objective is related to persistent commitments and attitudes rather than to any desired end product.

## Conclusion

In the present article I have discussed some of the challenges related to *LK-06*'s call for the development of intercultural competence to become a part of foreign language teaching and learning. The main challenge, I have argued, is to make sure that work with intercultural issues takes place at all, in each individual classroom.

Assessment can be a key word in order to make this happen. One obvious measure could be to make intercultural issues a central element in the final exam in tenth grade, as this might provide a 'wash-back' effect on teaching, and make textbook authors and teachers aware of the need to focus on these matters. At the same time, there may be reason to question this effect. In her master's dissertation about the final written exam in English, Reisjø (2006) was able to document that the teachers in her district were not as influenced by the final exam in their day-to-day teaching as she had expected.

So, another measure could be to intensify the work that is being done to bring portfolio assessment into Norwegian classrooms. Korsvold (2003) points to the fact that the authorities could, simply, make portfolio assessment compulsory. However, in order for such a decision to be put into practice, most teachers would probably need extensive training. Of the teachers surveyed in Reisjø's work, 72 % answered that they do not feel that teachers have sufficient knowledge and practice in assessment and testing. This is just one indication that there is great potential for development here.

With regard to the selection of cultural content for a foreign language course, I have argued that the first concern must be to clarify the objectives that are linked to the students' work with the cultural topics. Relevant content can only be defined if the objectives are clear and the students themselves have a say in the process.

Curricular requirements are, of course, central here, but the textbooks that are produced according to the national curricula also have an important role to play. It seems that authors of textbooks in the future can make greater efforts when it comes to clarifying the rationale that is linked to the cultural topics that students are expected to work with. In order to improve the students' intercultural competence, it should be natural for textbooks to focus on cultural differences that may have an impact on communication situations.

At the same time, it is worth remembering that what goes on in each individual classroom is, to a large degree, determined by the local conditions there. It is easy to agree with Korsvold (2003) who argues that the most effective action to take in order to change classroom practices is to spend a lot of money on in-service training of teachers.

To me, it seems that new developments in the teaching of foreign languages in Norway are already under way. The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research has shown the will to initiate and support extensive research related to

foreign language education. A recent government publication, 'Language Opens Doors', presents the *Language Portfolio* as a key resource for teaching (Kunnskapsdepartementet 2007). One of the authorities' main concerns – so they say – is to develop strategies so that schools actually start to use this portfolio in everyday work with foreign languages. The activities that spring out of the newly established National Centre for Foreign Language Education (*Fremmedspråksenteret*) suggest so far that the authorities' good intentions are in fact being put into action.

A main element in the Norwegian assessment system has been continuous assessment by the teacher (*standpunktkarakterer*), i.e. the student's final grade. Lauvås (2007) has pointed out weaknesses with this system, since it has often been a highly privatized form of summative assessment with no quality control. At the same time, it is evident that such a system has potential since it can open for continuous assessment in a number of different ways, both formative and summative. Much depends on increasing the teachers' ability to assess intercultural issues. But if this can be accomplished, the continuous assessment system can represent a unique opportunity for new developments where cultural and intercultural perspectives are taken into consideration both in the teaching and in the assessment of English.

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