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Explicit intercultural education in foreign language courses at introductory level : a methodological challenge

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Explicit Intercultural Education in Foreign Language Courses at Introductory Level

A Methodological Challenge

Tatiana Bruni

1. Introduction

University College Utrecht (UCU) is the international Honors College of Utrecht University. UCU offers an academic education in the spirit of liberal arts and sciences in a small-scale educational setting. It was opened in 1998, offering courses taught in English to selected Dutch and international students. At the time it was the first modern Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) international honors college on the European continent.

Over 650 students are currently enrolled in the program, representing more than 50 nationalities.

Table 1: Student body composition at UCU

- 68% Dutch
- 8,6% Double nationality
- 20,1 % Non-Dutch European
- 7,7% Non-European (Asian 3,2%; Middle East 1,5%, American and Canadian 1,2%, African 1,2%; Latin American 0,4%, Australian 0,2%)

When University College Utrecht was founded, the design of the foreign language program was based on the idea that a foreign language is an important academic skill that students in higher education should acquire together with many other academic skills as part of a broad education. The new challenges in our global world require more and more “greater mutual understanding and acceptance of difference in our multicultural and multilingual societies”. (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002, p. 5)

The educational philosophy of University College Utrecht incorporates this goal. Foreign languages should be more than a skill; they really are a ‘window to culture’ and therefore learning a foreign language contributes to the achievement of the aforementioned goal.

The team of foreign language teachers at UCU is facing an experimental phase, in which the courses are reviewed and redesigned to also meet specific learning outcomes related to intercultural competence.

2. Features of the Bachelor Program

A UCU education is characterized by its broad and interdisciplinary nature. This means that the curriculum does not have a fixed structure; in-

stead students combine different courses to assemble a personal study program. To understand the position of language education at UCU it is important to understand what our educational philosophy entails and how the curriculum is built up, which I will shortly illustrate in the two subsections below.

2.1. LAS educational philosophy

According to the Educational Philosophy of UCU “...intellectual growth occurs as both broad and deep learning challenge previously held beliefs.[...] The broad and interdisciplinary character of the college means students gain depth in one or more disciplines and the ability to think beyond paradigms.” (UCU)

Key words of this educational philosophy as applied in the academic setting of UCU are:

Teaching and Learning Process

- Mutual commitment
- Talent development
- Active learning
- Interdisciplinary thinking
- Critical thinking
- Creative thinking
- Assessment as part of the learning process

Social, international and intercultural development

- Social growth
- Social engagement
- World citizenship
- International approach

Participating in a social community

- Social development
- Social engagement
- Tight community (because of residential setting: campus)

2.2. Curriculum design

Most students opt for a broad *major* in one of the three Departments: Humanities, Sciences or Social Sciences. A *major* consists of at least 10 courses in one department (for a Bachelor of Arts) or 12 (for a Bachelor of Sciences). Within one department students are required to take courses up to the advanced level in at least two different disciplines. Other graduation requirements are the *Breadth requirement* (courses in the two other departments) and the *Language & Culture requirement*. This latter requirement should, together with the international approach and the multicultural international setting, help achieving the goal of educating world citizens (being world citizenship one of the key words listed above).

The Language & Culture courses that UCU offers are the following:

- Beginner level:

Introduction to Dutch / Chinese / Italian / Hispanic studies

exit level¹ Intermediate Low

- Elementary level:

Dutch / Chinese / French / German / Italian / Spanish

Language & Culture I

exit level: Intermediate Mid

- Intermediate level

Dutch / Chinese / French / German / Italian / Spanish

Language & Culture II

exit level: Advanced Low

The courses at UCU have two class sections of 1:45 hours for 14 weeks, and a weekly work load of ten hours.

3. Language Education at UCU

3.1. Language requirement

Until the academic year 2009-2010 students had to fulfill a foreign language requirement: they had to take a third language (other than their mother language and English) to a level equivalent to Advanced Low on the ACTFL² scale of proficiency (ACTFL, 2012). There were a number of reasons why this system was felt to be in need of revision. Languages were primarily considered academic skills, and thus pretty much isolated from the rest of the curriculum. Furthermore, even if most students spoke more than two languages already, assessing their proficiency level in languages not taught at UCU proved very problematic. This meant that students often had to learn an additional language at UCU, while they would rather have taken content courses instead. Finally, students cannot major in one foreign language; neither was possible, in the past, to take a minor in a foreign language. Therefore most students experienced the language courses as an imposition, and gave a low priority to them, which often led to underperforming.

Consequently, the *Language Requirement* was replaced by two different requirements:

Language & Culture requirement for students who speak at least a mother language different from English and English: they are required to take one Language & Culture course (either L&C1 or L&C2, depending on their assessed proficiency. The beginner courses can be used to start learning a new language, but cannot fulfill this requirement).

Second Language Requirement for students who only speak English. They are required to learn a second language up to the exit level of Advanced Low (ACTFL standard): this means that they have to complete a L&C2 course.

During the academic year 2008-2009 the courses were incorporated in the Humanities department and the year after, the Head of the Humanities department asked the language instructors team to redesign the courses into 'Language and Culture courses'. The new Language & Culture courses would have to become a platform where students learn skills that contribute to achieving some of the educational objectives of UCU, such as speaking different languages; relating cultural differences to disciplinary knowledge; using the knowledge of cultures in explaining actual problems in society; understanding and appreciating cultural differences and being able to live with different value systems in daily life, and reflecting on one's own value system. In this way the L&C courses would contribute to the achievement of one of the goals of the Liberal Arts educational philosophy of UCU, which is to educate world citizens.

3.2. From academic skill courses to intercultural skills courses

The task that the team of language instructors was given was to make the 'cultural component' of our language courses visible, that is: to define specific learning outcomes and to translate those outcomes into course content and assessment. The courses should include academic reflection on culture, but we were not provided with a clear and measurable definition of what was intended with culture. In collaboration with the Centre for Teaching and Learning of the University Utrecht in the academic year 2010-2011 we started a pilot period of three years, in which we would design and test different course designs and activities, before we would agree on a model.

The intended learning outcomes for the cultural component

The starting point for the discussion on what our students should learn in the Language and Culture (L&C) courses is the UC educational philosophy. The official document sums up UC's cultural ideal:

"UCU students bring different talents, styles and cultural backgrounds to the college. These differences are part of the rich learning environment UCU has to offer. This environment offers a unique place for students to learn to respect, communicate and live with people from all over the world. Living at UCU clearly stimulates this, allowing students to experience other cultures morning, noon and night. Also in the courses students are encouraged to look beyond their own cultural beliefs. UCU aims to create graduates who are world citizens and will contribute to society, wherever they work and live." (UCU), section 2.1 'World citizenship'.

This means that our graduates should be able to "speak their languages; relate cultural differences to disciplinary knowledge; use the knowledge of cultures in explaining actual problems in society; understand and appreciate cultural differences and be able to live with different value systems in daily life, and reflecting on one's own value system". (UCU), "section 3, International and intercultural orientation". The international setting, the curriculum, the interdisciplinary approach, the group work and finally the

interaction with students from many different backgrounds provide our students with many chances to arrive at the required level of intercultural competence. The document mentions no fewer than 11 types of skills that a UC graduate may be expected to possess, but nowhere does it mention how exactly s/he is supposed to learn cross-cultural or intercultural skills. This ideal, of course, would need to be worked out into measurable objectives: intended learning outcomes.

The Faculty of Education of Utrecht University started a project to support us in the process of defining what ‘culture’ we wanted to teach and how to do it. Together with the colleague that led the project, dr. Annemieke Meijer,³ we agreed that what was needed was a focal point where the student experience is made explicit and reflected on, and is placed in an intellectual context. The intercultural experience that UCU actively organizes needed to be raised to a meta-level if it was to work to its full advantage. According to Jones & Brown (eds.):

It is important to recognize that a cross-cultural capability agenda is not simply about *accommodating* differences in our student body. It is about the even more complex task of *challenging* all students and staff to be capable of recognizing, of making informed responses towards, and of living and working comfortably with the diversity they encounter now and in the future. Students who are not challenged to recognize and evaluate their own values, beliefs and behaviors and those of their discipline and its application are unlikely to be able to recognize or lay claim to world-wide horizons. (p. 204)

We decided it was exactly the Language and Culture courses that could provide the platform and the moment to organize this. As such, the L&C courses would be at the core of the UC experience.

3.3. Cultural and intercultural competence

According to Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) cultural competence consists of *affective*, *cognitive* and *behavioral* components. When it comes to educational design, however, *behavioral competence* is a highly problematic concept. It is the intended learning outcome that educators hope but can never be sure to reach, as it will only manifest itself in real life. For this reason, we decided to formulate the learning objectives of the L&C courses in terms of *cognitive* and *affective competence*.

Table 2: Description of the 5 basic objectives of L&C courses

A student who has fulfilled the L&C requirement	
1.	has improved his or her competence in the language s/he has been studying by at least one level (compared to entry); for a student who learns a new language s/he has fulfilled the L&C requirement if the exit level is at least intermediate mid (ACTFL standard)
2.	is familiar with the most important contemporary characteristics of the culture s/he has been studying
3.	has the intercultural communication skills needed for everyday contact with members of the culture s/he has been studying

4. is familiar with the main historical developments and issues that are needed to understand contemporary culture
 5. has the tools needed for the ongoing reflection on intercultural contact and the further development of intercultural skills in general
-

From intended learning outcomes (ILOs) to the content of the courses

For the pilot, a (grade) breakdown of 60% for the language acquisition and 40% for the cultural component was agreed. Successfully translating the intended learning outcomes into the content of our courses meant that several factors had to be taken into account. Questions that arose were, for example: Should we use the target language or English in the beginner level courses to reflect academically on culture; how to describe and ‘quantify’ the cultural ILOs for assessment purposes; should we assess knowledge or skills (what skills?), and finally, if we devote more class time to ‘culture’, will the level of the language proficiency that the students reach decrease and if so, is this acceptable?

4. The Italian Language Courses at UCU

4.1. Learning outcomes: my choices

When faced with the challenge of redesigning my own Italian courses I knew that most UCU students have a multicultural background and speak more than two languages. The question that I asked myself was if this meant that they are also able to reflect on intercultural experiences and encounters from an academic perspective.

In a document of the Council of Europe that was created to develop the intercultural dimension in language teaching, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey write:

The ‘Common European Framework of Reference’ [...] introduces the ‘Intercultural Dimension’ into the aims of language teaching. Its essence is to help language learners to interact with speakers of other languages on equal terms, and to be aware of their own identities and those of their interlocutors. It is the hope that language learners who thus become ‘intercultural speakers’ will be successful not only in communicating information but also in developing a human relationship with people of other languages and cultures. (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002, p. 7)

In this light I decided to focus on the aspect of reflecting on and enhancing intercultural awareness and intercultural competence. To achieve this I wanted to engage students in cultural projects and in (inter)personal (inter)cultural reflections.

4.2. Course design

My teaching philosophy is communicative and learner-centered. In my view this means that students should be stimulated to actively participate, not only in class activities, but also in the entire learning process by taking responsibility for their individual learning as well as that of the group. I

make use of collaborative tasks that integrate different skills, and I believe in the instrument of peer consultation to enhance the learning experience.

Table 3 below shows some aspects of the course design of the courses ITA10 - Introduction to Italian Studies (in the left column) and ITA11 - Italian Language & Culture 1 (in the right column) for the academic year 2011-2012.

My focus on intercultural reflection does not show only in the choice of the materials and of the type of activities that I use, but also in the assessment instruments that I decided to use, as described below.

Table 3: Course design ITA10 and ITA11

Introduction to Italian Studies - UCHUMITA10		Italian Language & Culture 1 - UCHUMITA11	
Course materials			
Language acquisition	- Course book - Grammar book	Language acquisition	- Course book - Grammar book
(Inter)cultural reflection	- <i>La Bella Figura. An Insider's Guide to the Italian Mind</i> (by Beppe Severgnini) - Extra materials	(Inter)cultural reflection	- Online materials (through a webquest) - Extra materials
Cultural assignments (self-study, discussion in class)			
Personal Guide to Italy and Italians (cultural magazine)	Guided assignments (some freedom in topic choice)	Cultural project of the history of eating habits in Italy	- Readings as preparation for a group presentation - final essay
Cultural group project	Expansion of one discussed aspect (intercultural reflection)	Web quest about teenage culture in Italy	Different types of individual and collaborative assignments with a video production as final task
Assessment			
Language acquisition	- Grammar & Vocabulary tests (30%) - Writing Proficiency Test (holistic, 15%) - Oral Proficiency Interview (holistic, 20%)	Language acquisition	- Grammar & Vocabulary tests (30%) - Writing Proficiency Test (holistic, 15%) - Oral Proficiency Interview (holistic, 20%)
Culture	- Personal Guide (25%) - Cultural Group project (10 %)	Culture	- Project (25%) - Webquest about teenage culture in Italy (15%)

4.3. The beginner course: Introduction to Italian Studies

One of the key points of our educational philosophy is the concept of world citizenship:

This environment offers a unique place for students to learn to respect, communicate and live with people from all over the world. [...] in the courses students are encouraged to look beyond their own cultural beliefs. UCU aims to create graduates who are world citizens and will contribute to society, wherever they work and live. (UCU, p. 4)

For the beginner course I decided that our starting point would be 'Italy today': analyzing current society and the issues it faces. As I described in the course manual, "We will explore in particular the image of Italian soci-

ety as seen from an external and an internal point of view, focusing on topics like stereotypes, cultural differences both among Italians and between Italians and non-Italians, and on the contribution that Italy gave and still gives to Western culture.” (Bruni, 2011, p. 3)

My aim is to train students in applying an intercultural perspective to their reflection; therefore it is necessary for students to familiarize themselves with the model of Intercultural Communication (ICC) of Michael Byram. According to him “the components of intercultural competence are knowledge, skills and attitudes, complemented by the values one holds because of one's belonging to a number of social groups. These values are part of one's social identities.” (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002, p. 7)

- Intercultural attitudes (Savoir être)
- Knowledge (Savoirs)
- Skills of interpreting and relating (Savoir comprendre)
- Skills of discovering and interaction (Savoir apprendre/faire)
- Critical cultural awareness

I developed two types of activities. Firstly, we read and discussed the book *La bella figura. An insider's guide to the Italian mind* by Beppe Severgnini. Beppe Severgnini is a columnist for Italy's largest-circulation daily newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, and covered Italy for *The Economist* from 1993 to 2003. According to the *New York Times*:

Mr. Severgnini presents his guide as a tour that is partly geographical and partly conceptual. Over the course of 10 days, he travels from Milan to Tuscany to the far south: Sicily and Sardinia. But the places are merely excuses for little treatises on beaches, restaurants, cell phones, condominiums, gardens and offices, all sprinkled with clever observations and telling statistics. (Grimes, 2006)

For each chapter of the book I created guided reflection activities. The outcomes of those activities were presented in class, usually by small groups that discussed their individual reflections on a specific issue first, and presented an overview to the rest of the students.

Secondly, students were expected to take part in a cultural project by gathering materials on specific contemporary cultural topics outside the classroom, and build a personal ‘Guide to Italy and Italians’ (a sort of cultural magazine), while reflecting on their own expectations and cultural assumptions. They could choose from a great variety of cultural aspects: I selected some of the categories (domini) listed by Paolo E. Balboni in his book *Parole comuni culture diverse* (Balboni, 2003) in chapter 7.1: ‘Uno strumento per l'osservazione culturale’ and chapter 7.2: ‘Uno strumento per l'osservazione interculturale’.

Both kinds of activities will be presented more in details in the following two sections.

Activities related to the book La bella figura

During the semester, students read and reflected on Severgnini's book. Severgnini presents his guide as a tour that is geographical (he visits thirty places from north to south in ten days) but at the same time conceptual:

"Although *La Bella Figura* will take you to big cities and scenic regions, your real destinations are the places where Italians are at their best, worst, and most authentic: the chaos of the roads, the anarchy of the office, the theatrical spirit of the hypermarkets, and garrulous train journeys; the sensory reassurance of a church and the importance of the beach; the solitude of the soccer stadium, and the crowded Italian bedroom; the vertical fixations of the apartment building, and the horizontal democracy of the eat-in kitchen" (Scheda libro *La Bella Figura*).

The course activities related to this book included at least one research task on topics presented in the chapter, and some reflection questions. Students were free to select the topic to do research on. In the next class, students were divided into groups on the basis of the topic they selected, and together they prepared an overview of the topic and presented it to the class. In this way, students had to negotiate their ideas and findings. Furthermore each student was informed about the topics he or she did not select.

Table 4: Sample of an activity related to the book *La Bella Figura*

Attività culturale 1 'La bella figura': Friday (1-23) Leggi il capitolo 1: <i>Friday</i> (pagine 1-23). Rifletti: - In how far does the information and analysis in this chapter confirm your idea and experience of Italy and in how far does it differ? - What new facts and habits did you learn? - What did strike you the most? Ricerca (su Internet): - find pictures, ads, commercials, videos, cartoons, texts that support or contradict in your opinion what told by the author. - find out what 'Carabinieri' exactly are (add a picture) and what's their place in the Italian society. - find out what Gannon exactly says about Italy (Severgnini quotes him on page 19). And does he describe your country as well in his book (see Google books)? How? - If possible, add pictures, ads, commercials, videos, cartoons, texts that in your opinion support or contradict what told by the author.
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Cultural magazine

In addition to the discussion of the book, students had to engage in a cultural project: they were asked to create a portfolio, a 'personal guide to Italy'. A portfolio would be an instrument

“to assess ability to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange (*savoir être*), to step outside their taken for granted perspectives, and to act on a the basis of new perspectives (*savoir s'engager*). [...] If however, assessment is not in terms of tests and traditional examinations, but rather in terms of producing a record of learners' competences, then a portfolio approach is possible and in fact desirable.” (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002, p. 23)

For this cultural magazine, students were free to choose topics from an extensive list. The topics were typical ones, chosen for the fact that they might cause intercultural misunderstanding. Students were guided in their reflection by the instruction they received. See table 7 for the categories students could reflect upon.

Students wrote their reflections in English until the mid-term break, which occurred after 7 weeks. After the break they were supposed to answer the reflection questions in Italian, while they could still present the topic in English. In my instruction I addressed the subject of intercultural competence and listed the skills, knowledge, attitude and critical awareness that individuals need to acquire to become 'intercultural speakers' (as outlined above).

Students were encouraged to collect materials of different kinds, so not only (online) articles, but also songs, images, videos and more; to make use of the great opportunities offered by social networks to get into contact and follow Italians, and to collect material both from non-Italian and Italian sources, so that they could compare differences and similarities in point of view or habit.

The reflection questions were the following:

- Why did I choose this material?
- What topic [of the list shown in table 7] is it related to?
- What does this tell us about Italy and Italians?
- Is this similar or different to my own cultural habits and values? How?
- Does this sustain my image of Italian society so far? If not, what could be the reason?
- How does this relate to what Beppe Severgnini tells about Italy, if applicable?
- How do I think about it? Write a personal comment.

Most of the students succeeded in writing short reflective reports in the target language in the second part of the course, conveying their intended message in an understandable way. During class discussions, they were able to express some basic ideas and feelings in the target language, but we switched to English when their language skills were inadequate to sustain a

deeper level of discussion.

It was very interesting to see how students selected their topics. Sometimes they become curious after reading *La Bella Figura*, some other times they jumped into a topic that had struck them either on television or on the Internet, and at other times they had dealt with a topic in another course and wanted to investigate it further. Often the same topic was presented from different angles, or triggered very different expectations and reflections. The assignments were provided with feedback on the quality of reflection and if written in Italian also on the language. In class, students who worked on similar topics were grouped to present their reflections after each other. This stimulated not only class discussion, but it put also intercultural awareness in practice, as students had to acknowledge different point of views and feelings on the same issue.

To assess the cultural magazine the following aspects were taken into account: the variety and relevance of the collected material, the level of reflection, and the way in which the collected materials were connected with the student's own experience and with the course material and class discussions.

Table 5: List of categories for (inter)cultural reflection (not complete)

The cultural topics you can explore could include, among others:

1. Social relations

- a. Attitude towards a foreigner
- b. Relationship between younger and adults
- c. Attitude towards superiors
- d. Sentimental relation; courtship
- e. Homosexual relation
- f. Habit of offering drinks, cigarettes, etc.
- g. Ways to apologize, to make up for a mistake, etc.

2. Home and family

- a. Size of the family
- b. Roles in the family
- c. Relationship parents/children
- d. Age of independence of the children, age when children leave the parental house
- e. Typology of the house
- f. Sorts of houses (city/village/country/holiday house)
- g. Tradition and innovation in the house

3. Social Organization

- a. Transport
- b. Mass media
- c. Religion(s)

To sum up: in this course, students are presented with a book (in English) that would be the starting point for reflection on Italian culture in comparison with the own culture and on individual (pre)assumptions about Italy. Guided assignments on the book would help students deepen the topics presented, reflect and engage in discussions. Furthermore, students are expected to reflect on chosen topics (from given categories of intercultural sensitive topics). This would give them the chance to connect the course with their (academic) interests, take responsibility for their own learning and therefore enhance their motivation.

Evaluation of the course

Although in general I was very happy with both the students' participation in class discussions and the progress they made in their language proficiency, there are of course issues that I would like to improve. One of the biggest challenges my team and I faced when we started discussing the new course design was our fear that having to use the English language for reading, discussion and reflection, in particular in the beginner level courses, would decrease the exposure to the target language, and therefore the chance for students to master the required proficiency exit level. This would mean, in the long run, that we would have to revise the exit level of the entire track. This would hit in particular students who take a specific language in preparation for an exchange program in countries such as Italy or Spain, where they would not be able to take courses in English. In my course design, I tried to balance the use of English and Italian by asking students to write their reflection in Italian after the mid-term break, and to use Italian as much as possible for class discussion. Still, many students found it quite difficult to discuss complex issues in Italian, and turned to English very often. In the official course evaluation, many students declared that they liked the cultural part and the discussion the most, but that at the same time their priority was to learn the language. In their perception, they learned less than expected.

A second problem I faced, because of my own design, was the heavy work load, both for the students and for me. The courses at UCU have two class sections of 1:45 hours for 14 weeks, and a weekly work load of ten hours. Students wrote in their evaluation that they spent most of the time preparing the cultural activities (portfolio entries and oral presentation) whereas those assignments, altogether, only counted for 10% of the final grade.

Reading and giving feedback to so many different cultural reflections was quite intensive for me as well. I had to keep track of the different topics to be able to organize a class discussion on a specific topic from different point of views. I also had to assess oral presentations and to read and grade final papers, all in the final two weeks.

4.4. The follow-up course: Italian Language & Culture 1

In the follow-up course the students explored two cultural topics more in

depth: the history of eating habits and the (sub)cultures of teenagers in Italy. The reason for choosing the first topic is that Italian food and cuisine are one of the first aspects that people mention when they think of Italy. I wanted my students to get a historical perspective on what is perceived as national, while there is a huge amount of regional differentiation derived not only from geographical differences but also from historical reasons. As for the second topic, I wanted students to work on a topic they could easily connect with, as it is related to people of more or less the same age. Furthermore, it connects with some of the topics dealt with in our course book: clothes, fashion, and (Italian) style. In this way they would expand the vocabulary on these topics by researching authentic material, learning how Italian teenage express themselves and use their acquired skills to act like Italians, putting their knowledge into practice.

The first cultural project was centered on the book *Delizia. The Epic History of Italians and their food* by the British historian John Dickie.⁴ Students read the introductory chapter in which the author challenges the common view on Italian cuisine. They were asked to write before and after the reading a reflection in Italian on a class blog that I created.⁵ Before the reading they were expected to think about their image of the Italian cuisine and eating habits. After the reading they were asked to reflect on if and how their image has changed.

The second assignment was a collaborative one. Some of the other chapters of the book were divided among groups of students, who had to present their chapter to the class. As each chapter of the book contains more sub-chapters, each student was assigned one subchapter, but the responsibility of the final product would lie with the entire group. Each member of the group was also expected to evaluate the group work. The presentations were in Italian, and altogether covered the history of food from the Renaissance to contemporary society.

As their final assignment, students wrote an individual essay (in English): they had to pick an Italian painting or image in which food consumption or eating habits were portrayed, and to analyze the image not from an artistic point of view, but as a narrative, using the notions acquired so far.

For the second cultural project I created a webquest about the cultures of teenagers in Italy, with the title *Faccio tendenza* (which can be translated as 'I set the trend').

A webquest is an assignment which asks students to use the World Wide Web to learn about and/or synthesize their knowledge a specific topic. A "true" webquest, as originally designed by Bernie Dodge and Tom March, requires synthesis of the new knowledge by accomplishing a "task," often to solve a hypothetical problem or address a real-world issue' (Webquest 101 – Putting Discovery into the Curriculum).⁶

Creating a webquest means defining the desired output (the final product), making a first selection of appropriate material on internet, and designing subtasks that make use of those materials and that lead the student to the completion of the final product. A webquest consists therefore of several

steps. Each step can involve one or more tasks, and both individual and group work. Students had to engage with authentic material (blog posts, YouTube clips, posters and pictures put on the Internet by Italian teenagers, and materials that deal with the topic like for example news items and magazine articles. All the materials are in Italian, and in the case of the materials produced by Italian teenagers the language and the orthography often reflect slang (MSN and Internet). The webquest was connected to a reflection blog where students are expected to post reflections in Italian on what they were learning.

The aims of the webquest are:

- Review and expand vocabulary about clothes, style, hobby
- Discover on internet different teenage groups and describe them (analyze & understand)
 - Their style
 - Their slang and way of communicating
 - The competition among the groups
- Discover what group you could belong to (by means of a test)
- Act as a group member!

Types of tasks that students had to perform were creating vocabulary lists; writing an article to compare features and attitudes of the different groups and comparing those groups with teenage groups in the students' own countries and discovering which groups they could potentially belong to. The final product was a video presentation in Italian of one teenage group. Students had to work with peers and act as group members, which is: using the appropriate slang and visual features of the chosen group. The different tasks of the webquest were assessed as follows: individual and group work assignments: 60% (a rubric was provided), personal reflection on group work (10%), comments and reflections on the blog (30%).

I think there are several benefits of using a webquest. This education instrument is designed from the perspective of the learner, to trigger curiosity; for learning through the active construction of meaning, to enhance cooperative learning, to support learners' thinking at the levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation and finally to be exposed to meaningful and real (linguistic) materials. By focusing on learning the relevant vocabulary in advance and by engaging in tasks in the target language, such a webquest connects language acquisition with cultural literacy and intercultural reflection.

In this level 2 course students can further develop the intercultural skills that they have acquired in the beginner course. Those skills enable them to reflect on their own culture in comparison to the Italian culture; to be aware of their individual view on the target culture and of the process that creates such a view; to be open to challenge their point of view. Of course the choice to focus more in depth on only two aspects of the Italian culture can be risky, as some students may not be particularly interested in the chosen topics. However I believe that these two topics provide them with both

a historical and a contemporary insight on the target culture, which are both learning outcomes of our Language and Culture courses.

5. Discussion

During the three years' pilot for integrating academic reflection on culture in the foreign language courses, teachers are experimenting with course designs and assessment instruments. While the experiences of the first two years are mostly positive, there are still two issues that require a further, in-depth discussion.

The first issue is related to questions such as: do we aim to assess (inter)cultural knowledge or (inter)cultural competence, and how can we perform such an assessment at the different levels?

The second issue is related to the question of how to effectively introduce culture and cultural reflection to beginner learners. To what extent do we want to make use of the English language? When and how do we introduce tasks in the target language? Furthermore, can we and do we want to strive for uniformity among the different languages both in terms of course design and of type of assessment?

To answer these question each Language and Culture instructor will have to evaluate their choices in detail during the pilot project, in order to find agreement on learning outcomes, course design and type of appropriate assessment.

6. Conclusion

The model presented in this paper is a first experiment to incorporate explicit intercultural education at the introductory and elementary level, in this case for Italian language courses in the setting of the bachelor program of University College Utrecht. The courses were designed for a pilot project. The aim of this project is to create Language & Culture courses where the student's intercultural experience is made explicit and reflected on, and is placed in an intellectual context.

The focus of the cultural component of the two courses described lies in the intercultural awareness and the activities are designed to enhance reflection on the student's own culture as well as on foreign cultures.

The biggest challenges I faced as the instructor of these courses was linked to the choice of using the English language to a great extent in the course Introduction to Italian Studies, because of the beginning proficiency level of the students. Students greatly appreciated the reflection on and discussion of themes from Italian society, but their priority was learning the language and they felt this goal was not always reached.

So far, the foreign language teachers would prefer not to adjust the exit levels of the different courses to the slower pace in the language acquisition process caused by the impact of the new explicit cultural component.

A second, more generic issue is the assessment of the cultural component: what instruments are the most suitable? The answer depends to a great extent on the intended learning outcomes, but at the same time the individual preference of the instructors should also be taken into account.

During the first two years of the pilot my colleagues of the Language & Culture department and I have been positive about the learning outcomes we defined and about how we managed to translate those outcomes in course content. Those best practices will be used to evaluate the pilot. This evaluation, together with an extensive discussion of the challenges presented in this section will have to lead to agreement among the instructors about the future of the Language and Culture program at UCU.

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1 The exit levels refer to the ACTFL Guidelines for Proficiency. These Guidelines, provided by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, present the levels of proficiency as ranges, and describe what an individual can and cannot do with language at each level, regardless of where, when, or how the language was acquired... They are an instrument for evaluation of functional language ability (A language user's ability to accomplish real world communicative tasks such as handling a simple social transaction or resolving a situation with a complication.). From: <http://actflproficiencyguidelines2012.org>, retrieved on June 7, 2012.

2 When UCU was founded, it was decided to adopt the ACTFL Guidelines for the various language skills because these guidelines are the result of a very well documented and researched curriculum and testing endeavor that was derived from and linked to the ILR, the Interagency Language Roundtable conference's level descriptors that offered rubrics for describing levels from zero to very well educated native speaker/writers/listener/reader proficiencies. Those descriptors were in use for all official business in the US and a point of reference for all language teaching in the US and beyond. The ACTFL Guidelines would thus help us in setting up a non-language specific set of level and course descriptions.

3 Dr. Meijer discussed the desired changes with the Head of the Humanities Department and the Director of Education and interviewed the foreign language instructors. She then wrote a discussion document called Language as a window to culture: Language & Culture courses at UC - a concept. This document has been extensively discussed by the instructor of the language courses. I use a large part of this document to present the background of our courses and the process we went through in designing the new Language and Culture courses.

4 John Dickie Delizia. The Epic History of Italians and their food, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., London, 2007

5 Class Blog 'Campus Italia', see <https://campusitalia.wordpress.com/corso/>

6 Webquest Faccio tendenza!, see <http://zunal.com/webquest.php?w=106636>