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# Intercultural understanding in teaching and learning English An opportunity for Swedish compulsory education<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the prospects of developing intercultural understanding through English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Swedish comprehensive school. The study draws on perspectives applied to culture theory (Street, Hannerz, Thavenius, Sjögren), current theories about language and culture (Kramsch, Byram, Risager), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough) and curriculum theory (Svingby, Englund). The intercultural dimension of EFL is analysed as an order of discourse with competing discourses: research discourse, education authority discourse and language teacher discourse. The findings are summarized as two categories: opportunities and obstacles for developing intercultural understanding in EFL education. Finally the three discourses are related to each other and a model is presented showing a space for the interpretation of teaching and learning in EFL.

## Introduction

As education at school is part of its historic, geographic and social context, this study is geopolitically limited to a contemporary Swedish perspective. The setting is English as a foreign language (EFL) as taught to 13-16-year-olds in compulsory schooling. There are of course other perspectives from which the subject of the thesis could be viewed.

My own view is that of a former language teacher (English, Swedish and Swedish as a second language) and present teacher educator. Since I qualified as a teacher, radical changes have occurred affecting the role of language teaching: among others the major increase of internationalisation, a constructive approach to learning and a holistic view of education. Thus Sweden is no longer a rather isolated state populated by Swedes, knowledge is not seen as a matter of transferring fixed neutral messages and language teachers are very much responsible for fostering basic values. There is a growing interest in curriculum issues connected to language education to develop solidarity, cultural awareness and autonomy (Tornberg, 1996). Function and contents have been highlighted as a result of a communicative approach.

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The English language is taught from the age of seven or nine up to 19 as a compulsory subject. Media, business and tourism have given English a high status and a position which is almost that of a second language for a considerable part of the population. It is considered a necessary tool for international contacts and higher education. Though its influence is challenged by a small group of purists, English holds the unquestioned position of *lingua franca* (*ELF*). In EFL education there is a cultural dimension which is traditionally focused on Britain and the USA. If English is taught as a tool for international and intercultural communication there is a need for a new approach to the cultural dimension, that corresponds better to the current role of EFL. How is this intercultural dimension approached in research, in curricular documents and among language teachers?

### **Aim of the study**

The aim of this study is to examine the prospects of developing intercultural understanding through English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Swedish comprehensive school. This overall aim is split into two subordinate aims:

- to analyse and problematize the intercultural dimension of EFL as three discourses: research discourse, authority discourse and teacher discourse
- to relate the above discourses to each other in order to reveal a space for the interpretation of teaching and learning culture in EFL.

To be able to fulfil this task a further aim will be formulated later for an interview study of teachers of English.

It is obvious that only a selection of research, curricular documents and language teachers has been included. There are of course other discourses about language and culture, *inter alia* those of parents, students, textbook writers, teacher educators. Thus only a limited number of possible discourses have been researched. As I have surveyed research and national guidelines elsewhere (Lundgren, 2001), the thesis has its main focus on teacher discourse.

### **Theoretical framework**

One purpose of research is to show alternative views, to question what is taken for granted. The researcher's task is a pragmatic one, to take part in the construction of values, not to uncover or dig up hidden facts. It is "a search not for truth but for any usefulness that the researcher's 'reading' of a phenomenon might have in bringing about change for those who need it" (Burr, 1995, p. 162). A school subject is mediated through the teacher. I argue that students have the right to be shown different educational perspectives. So have future teachers, parents, textbook writers and others.

The thesis is set in a broad social constructionist frame. I draw on the following theoretical perspectives applied to certain key concepts of the thesis:

The concept of *culture* is interpreted as an "active construction of meaning" (Street, 1993, p.23). In an age of internationalisation we can talk about cultural complexity (Hannerz, 1992). Culture is unstable, changeable and temporary (Thavenius, 1999). Sjögren (2001) sees culture as an analytic tool being replaced by identity, related to an increasing group of post-national young people in Sweden. Street, Hannerz, Thavenius and Sjögren highlight theoretical assumptions about culture,

which give practical implications for language teachers. Ethnicity, gender, class, age and other variables surpass nation as the main concept to classify otherness.

*Intercultural understanding* is interpreted as a general ability to understand otherness and to be aware of one's own values. I avoid using intercultural competence, as competence to me gives connotations to technical skills. Intercultural competence is often used as a tool for power and control (Risager, 2000).

*Critical discourse analysis* (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992) supplies the theoretical and methodological base for the thesis. In Fairclough's model for analysis the concepts text, discursive practice (production and distribution of the text) and social practice (context) form an integrated unit, a discourse. Teaching and learning culture in EFL is an area, or order of discourse, where different discourses compete about the "true" interpretation. The outcome of such a competition, or hegemonic struggle, either changes or reproduces the power relations within the order of discourse. Fairclough has been chosen for three reasons: firstly he regards research as empowerment and intervention, secondly Fairclough believes that language constitutes practice and vice versa, and thirdly CDA offers a methodological solution all in one, i.e. it is both a theory and a method.

*Curriculum theory*, (Svingby, 1978; Englund, 1995, 1997) is used supplementary to CDA, with respect to social practice. Svingby's frame factor influenced model for analysis has inspired the analysis of the social practice of the teacher discourse. Englund's concept, space for interpretation, supports Fairclough's theory of hegemony. Englund's tradition researches the contents of education e.g. in curricular documents and in teachers' texts (written or oral). The text offers discursive meanings which result in different pedagogical practice. Education and its contents are seen as a tension between forces. The final power is held by the state but it is a struggle fought at all levels. Education as transfer of ideologies is constantly changing due to power relations (Englund, 1995).

### **An overall model for analysis of the text of three discourses**

Despite certain internal differences in each of the three constructed discourses, they have been summarized in terms of five thematic aspects. The five themes are inspired by among others Murphy (1988), Delanoy (1996) and Morgan (1998) who contrast traditional cultural studies to recent intercultural learning. These five components are used when analysing the three discourses of the thesis:

1. What is the aim of EFL education? (Norm for language teaching/learning.)
2. To what extent is teaching language and teaching culture considered a unit? (Integration within EFL education and cross-curricular work.)
3. How is culture described? (Interpretation of the concept of culture.)
4. What is the role of EFL in a general educational context in the comprehensive school? (Language teaching/learning related to general educational objectives.)
5. What should the student learn? (View of knowledge.)

### **Research discourse**

The research discourse is mainly based on three researchers: Claire Kramsch, Mike Byram and Karen Risager. They all explicitly acknowledge *the intercultural speaker* (IS) as the norm for for-

eign language teaching and learning instead of *the native norm* (NS). An IS “has a capacity to discover and relate to new people from other contexts for which they have not been prepared directly” (Byram & Fleming, 1998, p. 9).

Byram’s theory of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997) dominates the investigated research discourse as it is the most practice oriented and the most developed. Byram builds on van Ek’s (1986) concepts which he redefines. ICC includes four competences: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discursive and intercultural (IC). IC is regarded as five *savoirs* (components of knowledge): Attitudes, knowledge of self and other, skills to interpret and relate, skills to discover and/or interact and critical cultural awareness. Byram argues that “all language teaching should promote a position, which acknowledges respect for human dignity and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction” (Byram, Nichols & Stevens, 2001, p.7).

<b>1. Norm for foreign language education (FLE)</b>	The intercultural speaker (IS) is the explicit norm.
<b>Consequences</b>	IS is a prerequisite for intercultural communicative competence. The native speaker norm is no longer valid.
<b>2. Integration</b>	Language and culture is studied in integration. Language studies are cross-disciplinary and cross-curricular.
<b>Consequences</b>	Linguistics and social studies meet; fruitful symbiosis or guarding of academic territory?
<b>3. Culture</b>	An anthropological view. Culture is a construction. Nationality is only one part of an individual’s identity.
<b>Consequences</b>	Knowledge <i>in</i> culture; FLT/L is extended; new cross disciplinary attitudes and competences will be demanded for teachers in schools and universities.
<b>4. FLE as part of general educational aims</b>	Culture learning in FLE acquires a critical dimension. Democracy issues are linked to it. An important aim for the student is to reflect upon own values.
<b>Consequences</b>	Language teachers in schools and universities need deeper knowledge of social science theories and cultural theories.
<b>5. View of knowledge</b>	A learner focused view. Knowledge is subjective and is individually constructed. Intercultural understanding is a process between individuals.
<b>Consequences</b>	Need for experiential learning. Qualitative assessment criteria necessary.

Table 1. The text of research discourse

### Authority discourse

The Swedish National Curriculum (Skolverket, 1994) draws on international agreements, conventions and recommendations with UNESCO, Council of Europe, European Union of *human rights*, *European citizenship education* and *international understanding*. At the beginning of the 1980’s the Council of Europe recommended its member states to introduce an intercultural approach to all

education. Sweden made this recommendation a parliamentary law in 1985. As a result an international perspective in all school subjects was introduced in the national curriculum in 1994 with reference to increased internationalisation. An international perspective aiming at intercultural understanding is a basic idea of all non-statutory documents and the national curriculum. They highlight key concepts like *democracy, solidarity, attitudes, identity formation, human rights, peace education*. There is an obvious kinship between the overall perspective for a common value base in the national curriculum and the above research discourse.

However the syllabuses for foreign language education and national tests of EFL express a competing discourse. The text level of that discourse is summarized below as an authority discourse. The revised syllabus of EFL from 2000 differs from the one four years earlier in the following way:

- Intercultural understanding is more strongly stressed.
- The concept of intercultural competence is introduced.
- The perspective is broadened from English-speaking countries to an increasing English speaking environment.
- The student's ability to "develop intercultural understanding" shall be assessed.
- Intercultural competence is integrated in a "comprehensive communicative competence".
- The need for a progression from beginners to the end of upper secondary education is explicitly pronounced.

These are certainly new signals. The problem is however that all these directions (which by no means stand out as clear as in the above list) are left to the individual school to interpret and transform into actual classroom work via a local plan. So far there are no directions and no help for teachers how to do this. There are no theories referred to, no discussion of alternative curricular emphases and no methodological suggestions.

The text of an educational authority discourse (based on the syllabus of EFL) is summarized as table 2:

<b>1. Norm for FLE</b>	Implicit native speaker norm. The difference between norms is not problematized.
<b>Consequences</b>	Earlier discourse of culture in FLT reproduced.
<b>2. Integration</b>	Language and culture are studied within the borders of a school subject.
<b>Consequences</b>	The present construction of FL at school counteracts a cross-disciplinary approach and integrated work at school; Objectives of national syllabuses focus on traditional skills.
<b>3. Culture</b>	Culture is connected to nation, to English speaking countries. The concept of culture is not questioned.
<b>Consequences</b>	Culture is implicitly regarded as static and homogenous. This signals to teachers that the priority is knowledge <i>about</i> culture, culture is cognitive factual knowledge.
<b>4. FLE as part of general educational aims</b>	The connection is indistinct between overall aims and objectives of NC and the same of the syllabus of EFL.
<b>Consequences</b>	The link to democracy issues disappears in attainment targets and assessment criteria.
<b>5. View of knowledge</b>	Prescribed self reflection only refers to language acquisition, not to intercultural learning. Intercultural competence is not defined, but shall be assessed without guiding criteria. Attainment targets concerning culture refer to factual knowledge.
<b>Consequences</b>	Developing intercultural understanding and intercultural competence becomes synonymous with traditional cultural studies (re- <i>alia</i> ). Assessment is removed.

Table 2. The text of educational authority discourse

## Teacher discourse

### *Background*

It is shown by some previous studies in other countries of language teachers' perceptions of the intercultural dimension of foreign language education (Byram & Risager, 1999; Sercu, 1999; Lázár, 2000, 2001, Guilherme, 2002) that

- The role of English as a lingua franca is stressed but “culture” is connected to nation.
- The concept of culture is not problematized.
- A critical approach to teaching culture is non-existent.
- The demand for quantitative assessment of students guide language teaching towards measurable products.

No national studies have yet been published researching teachers' perceptions. My aim is to answer the research question: Which prospects to develop intercultural understanding are evident in a teacher discourse? This overall question is answered after researching two subordinate questions:

(a) How can the practical theories of some teachers be exemplified? (b) How does the social practice of a teacher discourse appear as obstacles and opportunities for teaching?

### *Method and design*

The research interview as a tool for constructing knowledge (Kvale, 1996) implies that there is no fixed meaning but a creative interaction between two active parts. The interview is a continuous process of meaning. During the interviews I kept turning back all the time asking questions like: “You said at the beginning of our talk that ... how does that agree with what you are just saying” etc. I also asked some of the informants to recapitulate our conversation, to sum up etc. Still I am aware that what is said is merely what is said, what the teacher thinks can never fully be recorded.

Ten qualified and very experienced teachers of English (teaching the ages of 13-16) were individually interviewed twice, first face-to-face (for 45-60 minutes) and six months later by telephone (for 20-30 min.). All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. After the first occasion the informants were sent “their” text and asked to comment upon and clarify certain issues (respondent validation).

The interviews followed an open interview guide. I tried however to cover the following aspects:

1. How does the teacher relate to the intercultural dimension of EFL?
  - (a) What, according to the teacher, is the meaning of “intercultural understanding”?
  - (b) What, according to the teacher, does she want the student to understand and why?
  - (c) What does the teacher tell about her own practice to help create this understanding?
2. Which obstacles and opportunities for EFL education with an intercultural perspective are expressed by the teacher?

The interviews are presented in three ways:

- Four extensive “portraits” are recorded showing different personal practical theories. They illustrate question 1 above. Comments are made on each of them, using language and culture theories from the research discourse.
- The accounts of all ten teachers are related to the same overall analysis model (using the five themes) used for the three discourses.
- The social practice of teacher discourse generated as a result from the interviews covering (a) collective social practice (Fairclough): society and central guidance through national syllabuses (macrocontext); (b) individual social practice: the local school environment (microcontext).

### *Findings of the analysis of teacher discourse*

All teachers say that intercultural understanding is important, but very few see it as an explicit task for the foreign language teacher. Very few comments are made about societal changes and central guidelines (macrocontext) as reasons for an intercultural approach to teaching and learning English. The guiding text that the teachers refer to is the national assessment. The fact that it does not assess intercultural understanding sets the norm for what counts as important and valuable knowledge. This applies even to teachers, who account for a personal commitment to citizenship education, solidarity, tolerance etc.

Obstacles to teaching English from an intercultural perspective dominating the interviews could be found in the teachers' microcontext. All except one refer to factors outside themselves. Only one teacher discusses her own part in the missing perspective: "I have not really got down to thinking about it". The obstacles for the teachers according to the interviews could be characterised as follows:

- A traditional view of cultural studies is still prevalent; there is no discussion about the issue of intercultural understanding.
- Everyday school practice is hectic and full of practical problems to solve; they are constantly overworked.
- Language acquisition assessment criteria set the agenda for their teaching.
- There is no time for self-reflection or reflection with other teachers.
- Knowledge about methods is lacking; no one refers to the need for theories.
- The students are not interested in the intercultural dimension of EFL.
- Teachers mention four qualities that are essential to developing the students' intercultural understanding:
  - Students must be able to feel empathy. They have a tendency to polarize, they are prejudiced, narrow-minded and egoistic.
  - Students must be mature. Not until upper secondary level is it possible for them to take the position of the other.
  - Students must have acquired a high level of language proficiency.
  - Students must learn to understand that there are alternatives to factual knowledge. They are trained to give priority to memorizing facts.

In consequence some teachers regard the students' lack of intercultural understanding as a negative basis for developing intercultural understanding. To me it seems a Catch 22 situation. The teachers, who tell about successful intercultural teaching, (1) see their students as curious about otherness and the world outside themselves and, (2) are prepared to let the students use their mother tongue in discussions when their English is not sufficient and (3) require from them personal reflections and value their ability to argue for a standpoint. But even those teachers do not assess the students' intercultural understanding. The text of the teacher discourse (interviews) is summarized as table 3:



<b>1. Norm for FLE</b>	Implicit native speaker norm. The difference between norms is not problematized.
<b>Consequences</b>	Earlier discourse of culture in FLT can implicitly be reproduced.
<b>2. Integration</b>	Polarized conceptions: the majority express a focused view of school subjects; one teacher explicitly expresses cross-curricular preferences. The need for integrating communicative competence and intercultural competence is only expressed by one teacher.
<b>Consequences</b>	The present construction of FL at school counteracts a cross-disciplinary approach and integrated work at school; Objectives of national syllabuses focus on traditional skills.
<b>3. Culture</b>	Culture is connected to nation, to English speaking countries by all but one teacher. The concept of culture is not questioned. Culture is “how other people live and think”. Factual knowledge is part of the teaching but the teachers want their pupils to “understand that there are alternative ways of thinking to ours”. Some talk about readiness for a multicultural society. Two teachers talk about ethnic minority students as a resource for the language classroom.
<b>Consequences</b>	Culture is implicitly regarded as static and homogenous; This fact signals to students that priority knowledge is <i>about</i> culture, culture is mainly regarded as cognitive factual knowledge.
<b>4. FLE as part of general educational aims</b>	Two teachers represent polarized views. The others take up positions between.
<b>Consequences</b>	Focused subject oriented perspective versus holistic view.
<b>5. View of knowledge</b>	An implicit learner centered and constructivist view. On a general level the learner shall be educated to live in an internationalized society. Only one teacher discusses the implications for the language teacher role.
<b>Consequences</b>	Cultural awareness etc. is not the responsibility of language teachers. Cultural dimension is reproduced.

*Table 3. The text of teacher discourse*

## Discussion

I see the present order of discourse as a result of power relations. The governmental officials, who are in charge of the national guidelines for foreign languages, rely to a great extent on former language teachers and reproduce a former discourse for culture in current EFL. The syllabus is not up-to-date with current research, but adhere to it in so far as it uses certain concepts (intercultural competence, intercultural communicative competence, intercultural understanding) referring to the *Common European Framework* (Council of Europe, 1998/2001) and emphasise the need for assessment and progression of intercultural understanding. Teachers are powerful as they are in charge of contents and actual classroom pedagogy. If official guidelines are vague and contradictory

it is safe to stick to earlier practice. The possibility of making an independent local interpretation in a local plan for teaching EFL is not used by the teachers. The teacher discourse is reproduced.

The third discourse, research, has little power. Research is general, abstract and, concerning the intercultural dimension, very little introduced in Sweden.

## **Conclusion**

The relations between the three discourses investigated and the consequences of the relationship have been summarized above. The aim of this thesis has been to examine the prospects for developing intercultural understanding through English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Swedish comprehensive school. By analysing and problematizing three discourses, research discourse, authority discourse and teacher discourse, the conclusion is summarized as opportunities that promote, versus obstacles that prevent, education for intercultural understanding in ELF teaching.

### *Opportunities that promote educating for intercultural understanding*

- There is a developed theoretical base available (Byram, Kramsch, Risager and others). The researchers explicitly build onto the norm of the intercultural speaker. The theories are in full agreement with the overall educational perspective for the Swedish school, the common value base.
- International non-statutory agreements and the national curriculum prescribe that understanding of otherness shall be visible in actual practice across the curriculum.
- The national syllabuses for all foreign language education have introduced the concepts intercultural understanding and intercultural competence. The official commentary supplement uses the concept intercultural communicative competence.
- Intercultural understanding shall be assessed.
- The fundamental attitude of the interviewed teachers is: It is important to develop students' understanding of otherness and self.
- An increasing number of multicultural students in Swedish schools can contribute to alternative perspectives.

### *Obstacles that prevent education for intercultural understanding*

- Current research does not reach teachers.
- The national syllabus is not anchored in theory; it contradicts international and national overall educational aims; the text narrows the perspective towards factual knowledge, its concepts are vague and assessment criteria.
- National tests do not assess intercultural understanding, teachers are guided by quantitative criteria, language proficiency dominates teaching.
- Secondary school organisation, focused on specific subjects (e.g. ELT) as taught by language specialists, obstructs cross-curricular thematic education.
- Teachers lack time and supervision for didactic reflection and development, which leads to an uncritical attitude to new concepts in central guidelines; traditional culture studies dominate.
- External circumstances in a local microcontext are classified as main obstructions.
- There are teachers who see students' lack of ability to take the perspective of the other as a major obstacle.

The prospects for developing intercultural understanding in EFL will change if hegemonic power and dominance within the order of discourse of the intercultural dimension is changed.

Finally the above discourses are summarized and related to each other in order to show a space for the interpretation of teaching and learning culture in EFL (table 4):

NORM FOR TEACHING/LEARNING ENGLISH	
English is studied as a national language	English is studied as a tool for international contacts
The student shall * achieve a near native cultural competence * get to know an Anglo Saxon cultural heritage	The student shall * act as a mediator between cultures * learn to question his/her own views * value alternative perspectives
<b>Ideal: native speaker</b>	<b>Ideal: intercultural speaker</b>
VIEW OF INTEGRATING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AND VIEW OF CROSS -CURRICULAR WORK	
Focus on the subject Distinct boundaries between school subjects and different parts of the subject	Focus on social education Cross-curricular work Integration within the subject FLT/L is part of NC international perspective, overriding curricular aims and guidelines
<b>A focused view of school subjects</b>	<b>A holistic view of everything that goes on at school</b>
PERCEPTION OF CULTURE	
Culture as essence Culture as a homogenous concept.	Culture as a signifying process - an active construction of meaning Culture is continuously changing
<b>Culture as products</b>	<b>Culture as process</b>
VIEW OF KNOWLEDGE	
Fact-based learning encouraged Teacher - centered Objective Transmission Reproduction	Affective, experiential learning encouraged Student-centered Subjective Knowledge as a social construction
<b>Knowledge about a homogenous "majority culture"</b>	<b>Readiness for a heterogeneous multicultural existence now and in the future</b>
AIM OF CULTURE STUDIES	
Give maximal chances in a competitive international job market	Offer personal development towards active global citizenship Increase critical cultural awareness Develop a deepened solidarity Discover and repudiate ethnocentrism Cultural learning is part of general citizenship education
<b>Instrumental and rational motive</b>	<b>Democratic motive</b>

*Table 4. Space of interpretation for the intercultural dimension of EFL*

## Epilogue

It is a moral and ethical question to me to fully use the opportunities for citizenship education in teaching English as a foreign language in compulsory schooling in Sweden. Thus it is natural to criticize my study for being normative. The researcher's own discourse is vital in the analysis. As there is no objective research but merely discursive constructions, I am fully aware that with another investigator the results would be different. The aim of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is to question "truths" that are taken for granted. The concept of intercultural understanding has been highlighted as a "floating significant" within an order of discourse where a hegemonic struggle is being fought. My task has been to problematize "the battlefield" and question its concepts. The thesis has tried to turn something apparently objective into something political. What is implicitly taken for granted has been highlighted as something which one can be for or against (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000, s. 151). This has been done with the purpose of stimulating the debate about the aim of the intercultural dimension of EFLT/L in Swedish foreign language education.

Finally the thesis suggests ways of increasing positive prospects. A more constructive dialogue between different discourses would create new opportunities for developing intercultural understanding. I point to the vital role of teacher education in bridging the gaps between research, educational authorities and language teachers. Teacher education is also a powerful discourse, which I hope to be able to research now that my present work is finished.

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<sup>2</sup> Includes only literature mentioned in the summary of the thesis.

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