Professional language and intercultural studies: what and how to assess, and why?

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Introduction
Assessing intercultural competence in professional (English) language opens a can of worms: what should we assess, how should we assess it, and why should we assess it that way? In this paper I discuss the design of an entirely new Masters level module aimed at raising awareness of the complex issues surrounding the production of written texts in a variety of contexts. I describe the implementation of the module, and consider the assessment tasks and marking criteria used. I end by raising a number of questions about assessing intercultural competence and suggest that we need now to transcend the ‘third space’ in intercultural studies.

What is ‘Intercultural Competence’ and how should it be assessed?
The notion of ‘intercultural (communicative) competence’ (IC) is a complex nexus of ideas, arguments and opinions, which continues to excite debate in the field of language teaching and assessment. A simplistic view of culture would contrast two cultures and posit IC as the ability to operate between the two. Clearly, though, culture is not monolithic, and cannot be reduced to essentialist notions. Therefore, the attempt to contrast cultures and discuss the ‘third space’ between them is doomed to failure. A more helpful approach takes a non-essentialist view, which embraces culture as: “a fluid, creative social force which binds different groupings and aspects of behaviour in different ways” (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2010: 2).

But when it comes to assessment of IC, there are problems:
There is a risk of over-simplifying and misrepresenting a learner’s ability in order to ensure objectivity in measurement […] Should we emphasise knowledge of cultures and cultural practices or rather the capacity and skills of conscious analysis of intercultural interaction? (Byram, 1997: 30).

In addressing these issues, Sercu (2010) identifies four domains of IC: knowledge, skills, attitudes and traits and considers how/if these might be reliably and validly assessed. He discusses the problems of existing assessment types in different areas, and identifies the complex issues that each raises. Sercu concludes: “the assessment of intercultural competence in foreign language education is anything but straightforward” (2010: 31) and argues that in developing new assessment types in language education and intercultural competence “the pace continues to be slow” (2010: 32).

These considerations influenced the design and implementation of the assessment types on a new Masters’ degree in my institution. I present the example of one module (‘Précis and Document Drafting’) not as an exemplar for others to follow, but rather as an account of the difficulties I grappled with and the questions that arose, both of which are germane to anyone considering assessment of IC in language education.

Some background: MAPLIS
The Masters in Professional Language and Intercultural Studies (MAPLIS) was set up in 2009. Initially seen as a way to accommodate high-level students who were envisaged as holding ambitions to work in global organisations such as the United Nations (UN), World Health Organisation (WHO), or international businesses and non-government organisations, the objectives of the degree were to prepare these students for the demands of such employment. Students would be encouraged to engage in profound, critical discussion of theory and explore themes in the use of spoken and written language. Over the years,
MAPLIS has developed in scope; the Intercultural element has taken centre stage, attracting students from the UK, Europe and Asia, thus providing a vibrant mix of cultures and cultural experiences to draw on.

The ‘Précis and document drafting’ module
Most of the MAPLIS modules covered spoken language, and international communication. One, however, focused particularly on writing English in professional contexts. As ‘spin’ has become ever more part of an unspoken cultural consciousness, writers (and readers) arguably need to be able to make informed choices as they consider formal (and informal) communications in writing. The aims of the ‘Précis and document drafting’ module were as follows:

- introduce students to, and encourage critique of, the various currents of thought regarding aspects of written English in professional contexts
- develop analytical powers in comprehension of written (and spoken) texts
- develop skills in the concise re-expression of ideas
- give training in current best practice in writing style, so as to convey information and ideas cogently
- develop the ability to organise document content for maximum clarity
- develop critical awareness of the impact of choices made when writing documents

The participants in that first year came from a wide range of countries, including China, France, Italy, Spain as well as the UK. As time went on, students from other degrees asked to join the module, reaching an all-time high of 24 participants in 2011-12, and encompassing further nationalities, such as Germany, Japan, Poland, Russia and Slovakia.

The module was structured around weekly seminars over 11 weeks. The first hour was student-led: week-by-week, groups of students prepared an oral presentation on themes negotiated with the lecturer (me). Typical themes were:

- Prescriptive and descriptive approaches to writing (eg style guides)
- Style and language choices (lexis, metaphor, idiom)
- Written ‘voice’ and audience
- Language variation (use of dialect, idiolect and other non-standard forms)
- Text organisation
- Conventions, expectations and surprises in written documents
- What constitutes ‘good written style’?

The second hour of the seminar was a mixture of practical ‘hands-on’ activities, analysis of written texts, and discussion of ideas around written documents. Activities were designed to replicate tasks that students might encounter in their future employment. For example, a UN worker might be required to read large amounts of written text on a given subject, summarise the content and differentiate between different political viewpoints (explicitly or implicitly expressed) for a boss too busy to read the full texts. Thus summarising accurately and identifying authorial opinion(s), were key skills these students practised. Similarly, any worker in any organisation will have to write, and re-write, documents for public consumption, whether press releases, marketing documents, internal communications, or reports, letters and e-mails. The ability to organise material into coherent and concise text which conveyed information in appropriate language was therefore crucial. Finally, students needed to consider the theory underpinning their writing choices. They read about critical discourse analysis, language choice(s) and the politics of writing (see, for example, Clark & Ivanič, 1997) and considered the implications of this on their own writing processes.

Global and cultural insight, ethics and employability
Much of the work on this module was influenced by a model of learning which encouraged students themselves to engage in research developing global and cultural insight. They
examined texts (for example, newspaper editorials, e-mails, bulletins) using a skeleton framework of critical discourse analysis. Issues of ‘spin’ and different ways in which the same information can be presented were considered, with a view to understanding how writers attempt to engage, and even manipulate, their readers.

Students discussed how facts and opinions are reported; who writes what and why, and how reportage can be ‘spun’. In other words, they considered the ethics, ethical implications and ethical responsibilities of writers. In doing so, they were preparing themselves for the world of work, and developing a set of skills in successfully interpreting as well as producing written documents.

**So how to assess this?**
The module aimed to unpack the processes of writing texts for professional purposes, whether summarising longer documents for governments, ministers, company directors, or (re-)writing documents in business situations. But with students from very different backgrounds, all of whom were studying for a degree at a British university, there were many issues involved in designing assessments that would be challenging, engaging, and demanding, while also replicating professional communications in the workplace.

Above all, I did not want to replicate the very notions of essentialist culture that I repudiated at the beginning of this paper. Nor did I want an English language test. I decided that the assessments needed to be both formative and summative, and they needed to allow good students to shine in three different areas: (i) engagement with currents of thought about writing, (ii) ability to summarise texts while also identifying facts and opinions of the originals, and (iii) ability to organise and re-structure draft material into coherent and concise text.

Consequently, the following assessment points were imposed:

- **Assessment 1:** summarising 1-2 newspaper editorials (10%). This took place after four weeks.
- **Assessment 2:** re-writing a document (20%) This took place after eight weeks.
- **Assessment 3:** a 2-hour examination (70%) at the end of the module, comprising
  - An essay discussing a theme extracted from theoretical readings
  - Re-writing a document
  - Summarising two newspaper editorials

Since writing to tight deadlines and with strict word limits is also a frequent demand in the workplace, all the assessments were done under timed conditions, with clear word limits for all except the essay component in the final examination. My intention was for the first two assessments to be a way for students to learn and build upon their experiences, thus enabling them to put their new knowledge gained from feedback on these two assessments to good effect in the final examination. I also wanted to ensure that students’ strengths and weaknesses were acknowledged by the assessment: summarising a text is a very different skill from writing an essay, and both are different again from re-writing a document. Not everyone is skilled in every area, and indeed, some students performed well in summary writing, but struggled with re-writing documents, or essay writing, and vice versa.

The criteria used in assessing the student work were, of course, equally important. They focused on structure and organisation, clarity of argument and subject knowledge, ability to distinguish between fact and opinion, ability to eliminate irrelevance, and presentation (including linguistic clarity and accuracy). After careful consideration, bearing in mind workplace demands for summaries and other documents, I decided that going seriously over or under the word limit (more than 10%) would result in marks being deducted. I believe that the criteria were designed to favour content, argumentation and coherence above all, and it
was certainly true that many nationalities performed as well or better than the UK citizens. Nevertheless, I was constantly aware of the need to consider this when marking and assessing students’ work.

However, the construction of the module, activities and tasks, assessments and the possible interpretations of marking criteria raised a number of questions for me. I wondered: what are suitable ‘real-life’ documents that can be used for summary/re-writing tasks? How can we ensure that non-native speakers of English are not disadvantaged (and vice versa) on this module? Further, how should we assess IC in a module in a UK university? What format should the assessment take? What does it really mean to assess ‘intercultural competence’?

**Conclusions**

I wanted students to think about IC in terms of what we can do as readers of other writers’ messages as well as writers ourselves. How can we ensure that we are not manipulated as ‘they’ (politicians, journalists, commentators) would like us to be? What we can do as writers ourselves: what are our responsibilities? Finding ways of assessing these issues was not easy, and in many cases raised more questions than answers. Yet the students themselves frequently provided insights which aided the developing understandings of the whole group. As Holliday argues: ”People do not, however, cross intercultural lines without carrying important cultural identities and structures with them” (Holliday, 2013: 168). As we negotiate these intercultural lines, we are all involved in activating levels of intercultural competence.

Consequently, I support the view that ‘intercultural (communicative) competence’ transcends the third space between national boundaries. Successful graduates will shape the future for all inhabitants on the planet, and moving towards recognition of the choices that writers make, and how those choices can affect the messages sent out, is crucial. Designing appropriate assessments with a view to incorporating, addressing, and challenging, these questions is an ongoing battle, but one that is worth the effort.

**References**