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Socio-cultural competence as a precondition for mastering Czech as a foreign language

The implementation of the objectives of the political organisation Council of Europe – among other things, awareness raising concerning the linguistic diversity of today’s multicultural Europe (see Hádková 2006 for more details) – has been manifested in the recent decades by an increased interest in learning Czech as a foreign or second language both in the Czech Republic and abroad. The Czech school system has had to respond to the fact that the Czech language has become a multicultural means of communication since the 1990s by adopting a number of system changes and reforms.¹

¹ The identified status quo and an analysis of official documents have shown that the state administration focused mostly on legislative, economic, and organisational issues in the 1990s. The communication aspect of integration as a very important precondition for the successful economic, cultural and social integration of foreigners in the majority society has been paid, in our opinion, too little attention despite the nearly twenty years of the status quo. Among other things, it has been manifested by the trend of methodological instructions for teaching foreigners at Czech schools since 1993.

The former Schools Act (Act No. 29/1984 Coll. on the System of Primary Schools, Secondary Schools and Tertiary Professional Schools) makes no explicit mention of the obligation to grant EU citizens access to education under conditions equal to Czech citizens, but already back then a number of international treaties has been in force protecting foreigners against discrimination and granting an equal right to education. Notable examples include the Children’s Rights Treaty (Art. 28); Amending Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Art. 2); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Art. 13); and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 26).

According to Framework Teaching Plans, one of the goals of the Czech school education is to „guide learners towards tolerance and consideration to other people, their cultures and spiritual values, and teach them to coexist with others.”² It must be understood that the process will be no short-term issue as it will require „long-term activity on the part of educational institutions” (Cabanová 2006, p. 46).

Already since the mid 1960s (along with the emergence of social linguistics as a separate discipline), language teaching has been combined with studies of the cultures and societies in which the given languages are used. Culture has become a code under which people communicate within their interactions with the surrounding world, i.e., affect one another, be it deliberately or unwittingly.

A language is rooted in the realities of the culture, social life, and customs of a given linguistic community, and cannot be explained without constant referencing to such broader contexts of speech. No two languages represent an identical social reality, as even the most common realities, such as family relationships, manners of address, dining

The new Schools Act No. 561/2004 Coll., in effect since 1 January 2005, treats education for foreigners explicitly (Art. 20); everybody without exception is granted the right to access to education under conditions equal to Czech citizens. Given the above-standard relations among EU Member States, the children of citizens of those countries are granted certain exclusive rights, aimed at increased practical enforcement of the right to free movement within the EU, e.g. preparation for integration in primary school free of charge, including teaching Czech in a way that suits their needs, and support to the teaching of the learners’ mother tongue and culture of their country of origin, which shall be co-ordinated with the common tuition at school, in co-operation with the country of origin if possible. Such preparation free of charge, and the training of the teaching staff are co-ordinated by the respective regional authorities (depending on the learner’s place of residence in co-operation with the administration of the school). The Ministry defines the form, content, and organisation of the preparation free of charge in a specific executive decree. The foreign learner is enrolled in the preparation based on a written application by his legitimate representative; the school principal is obligated to integrate the learner in the preparation within 30 days of the application.

² Framework Teaching Plans for Primary Education – 3.2 Objectives of Primary Education.

customs, greetings, etc. have different connotations in different languages. It is precisely this interrelation between a language and a culture that makes it often difficult to find an exact equivalent of many expressions in various languages.

As the Czech Republic has implemented a language teaching policy already since the 1970s, the growing numbers of resident foreigners should not cause insurmountable difficulties. The situation (common by now in the developed world) has to be resolved using all existing knowledge and experience based on both pre-existing and recent studies.

A considerable foreign experience indicates that only by respecting the principles of multiculturalism³ can foreign pupils and students learn and master the mother tongue of the destination country of their migration. However, the key is not only to know the language as such, because to communicate successfully it is not sufficient to produce grammatically correct sentences: the speaker needs to produce utterances in dependence on significant communication factors and circumstances.

Each language communication takes place in a specific cultural, social and natural environment, while it concerns individuals (whose numbers keep growing) as well as various habits, therefore it should be (in line with the fundamental principle of multiculturalism) a means of increasing the prosperity of the shared inhabited territory.

While studying a foreign language, besides the four primary levels (phonetic, lexical, grammatical, and syntactic), one also learns the socio-cultural context. Alongside lexical and grammatical awareness, the learner needs to acquire a competence to use the foreign language in a socially acceptable manner, to know how to use the language appropriately in the given context, i.e., to acquire communication com-

³ At present, multiculturalism is represented by a social and political process caused by increased population migration resulting in the co-existence of people of differing customs in various respects. The ethnic, religious, cultural, and social diversity is used as a potential for the overall prosperity of the society.

petence. In contrast to grammatical competence, the former is more closely bound to social interaction at the utterance level: to a real speaker or listener who will express and interpret meaning in many different environments and situations.

A modern language teaching policy therefore has to encompass the socio-cultural competence, defined by the characteristic properties of a given society and culture, and reflected in the conduct of its members when communicating verbally. According to prof. Jan van Ek, a learner should learn to master the competence alongside the linguistic, socio-linguistic, discursive, strategic, and social competences. The Common European Language Reference Framework defines communication competences (lingual, socio-lingual, and pragmatic) and general ones (assuming knowledge of the socio-cultural environment and life in the countries where the language studied is spoken) as the target competences of language teaching. The ignorance of the socio-cultural competence may affect a foreigner's verbal efforts significantly and raise serious communication barriers which may lead to misunderstanding and failure to reach comprehension. Therefore, mastering socio-cultural competences not only facilitates but also accelerates the act of communication.

Teaching Czech as a foreign language, Czech teachers are confronted with numerous differences among their foreign learners, which have to be respected as understanding the differences may help the teacher to understand the difficulties faced by the foreign learners in studying the language as well as interpret their spoken and written mistakes and thus reduce their occurrence.

The need to equip the teacher with some linguistic („philological”: Baláková 2005, p.178), including phraseological (ibid.), and socio-cultural basics results in the need to resolve the sociological-pedagogical-communicational problem, which is the linguistic barrier and low level of Czech communication among the children of immigrants in all types of schools. Thus only can the perspectives of foreign learners for acquiring education in all other subjects be improved and the learning process facilitated.

To elicit spontaneous response and active co-operation among children of foreigners in class is extremely difficult particularly where the learner comes from a faraway country with a markedly different culture.

Teachers in Czech primary and secondary schools have had some experience with teaching Slovak (more in Baláková 2006, 2007; Kováčová 2006, 2007; Kráľová 2007), Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Kazakh, Armenian, Mongolian, German, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Arabic learners (more in Zimová, Balkó 2005; Šindelářová 2005, 2007). However, the numbers of Korean and Japanese learners have been increasing over the past decade, whose integration in the Czech school system presents the Czech teachers with an enormous difficulty, which is why I would like to highlight certain differences in the conduct of these foreigners within the classroom group.

For one thing, the status of the teacher in Korea and the Czech Republic is vastly different. The Korean teacher is regarded as an authority and has to behave and dress accordingly. Female teachers are confronted with certain preconceptions regarding their emancipation: girls have a closer relationship to the female teacher, but at the same time, female Korean learners judge or even „improve” their female teacher’s appearance ceaselessly. The situation is somewhat easier for the male teacher, but still he has to wear a suit and tie, dye his grey hair, and avoid the merest signs of intimacy towards the girls. Given the teacher’s ultimate authority in Korea, the Korean learner can never be expected to speak uninvited, and will never be on first-name terms with the teacher. In the Asian custom, criticism is considered impolite, which is why a Korean will never point out any imperfection in the teacher’s lecture.

Teachers in Korea are very well paid, which is why they pay the learners’ bills on school outings etc. When the learners are invited to the teacher’s private dwelling, they make themselves at home: they understand that they have crossed a certain taboo border, been accepted as pupils, and become members of the teacher’s family. Such an invitation, however, is exceptional in Korea. The Czech teacher should

avoid such situations, as invitation to the teacher’s home tends to signal for the Korean learner to start acting possessively towards the teacher, including claims for his free time.

In communication with a Korean learner, the Czech teacher is well advised to avoid certain topics and respect several Korean principles.

Koreans are intensely nationalistic, which is why certain neuralgic points are best avoided: the common mistakes are praise to the Japanese, deliberations on the impossibility to reunify the country, judgments on the country’s presidential system or degree of democracy, or calling Korea a developing country. Korean citizens realise that their nation is small and relatively poor, which leads them to emphasising and playing up certain myths, such as the long history, culture, economic success, etc. That may be why such a large proportion of the family budget is spent on clothing and food rather than on housing.

Two types of Korean population are encountered in Czech multi-ethnic classes: either children of rich parents, who often cause problems as they replicate their own conduct in Korea assuming the teacher’s venality; or individuals truly interested in studying Czech, who are very diligent yet modest.

Friendships between Koreans made at school will often last all their lives; mutual help is taken for granted. That is why even at Czech schools, Korean learners must not be condemned for relying on each other, thinking collectively, and copying each other’s writings.

While teaching in a multicultural class, Koreans have to be asked for answers constantly, not relying on their own activity: activity in class is not in line with their inherited idea of school conduct. Korean learners will only answer questions, as they are not expected to ask questions themselves; they will never start a conversation with an elder or foreigner, including their Czech teacher. The teacher has to take into account their distinct lack of self-activity and inability to take part in collective discussions and conversations in class. Their oral testing is virtually impossible in the initial stages of teaching, as their own school evaluation system is based entirely on written testing. Any speeches in class have to be first prepared in writing and then merely read

out. When describing a certain object, they will first mention unimportant details and only give the essential information in conclusion.

It is typical of Koreans to express their personal views very timidly, carefully, and often present them so that they are equal (or very similar) to the others', in order to be acceptable to the others. The Czech teacher then has to consider very well how to make learners of the Korean nationality to speak about themselves, their opinions, hobbies, plans, etc. In general, we can say that Koreans have a passive or even negative relation to their privacy; in fact, the word „privacy” does not exist in the Korean language. Although they are keenly interested in the others, in a conversation they will only speak vaguely about their childhood, family, friends, and beliefs. Nevertheless, no communication is possible in Korean without asking the two fundamental questions, *How old are you?* and *What do you do/Where do you work?* These enquiries are not seen as impertinent. Korean learners wish to know what others think about them, so they will listen to others, think about them, reinforce the social relations, and always act with the objective not to hurt or embarrass others by inappropriate words. That is why they tend not to speak about unpleasant things, never raise their voices or gesticulate. Tonelessness and obscurity are considered virtues in Korea, particularly in people of high social status. A smile, as well as a scratch behind the ear or on the crown of the head, means that the person is confused or embarrassed, which is why a Korean smile may cause misunderstanding. For instance, the teacher will be reasoning with the learner to improve his preparations, and the latter will start smiling to conceal his embarrassment. When asked to speak, a Korean learner will first cast down their eyes, stare at the ground, and then only begin answering, often after a good while. When speaking, Koreans often make long pauses: however, these „silences” are not caused by the low level of their linguistic competence, but their relation to silence and speech in general; a silence may express respect to the interlocutor as well as understanding and even denial. In everyday life, a „silent” man is regarded as morally dependable, and taciturnity is considered one of the major virtues in Korean women.

A fixed stare at a Korean interlocutor (eye contact, so common in Czech conversation) is unpleasant. Quite to the contrary, a Korean will never look the interlocutor in the eyes if wishing to show respect.

Korean learners will often answer questions indirectly, so the Czech teacher cannot expect them to provide a quick and direct reply. The skill of „manoeuvring” through a conversation is prized highly in Korean society; a direct negative reply is very rare. Confusingly, *nae* is the Korean for *yes* rather than *no* (*ne* in Czech). Korean conversations contain many expressions of uncertainty (such as *maybe*, *perhaps*, *probably*, *possibly*), thus making room for the other speakers.

Koreans will avoid saying things that might unsettle others. This is probably related to the use of *yes/no* when responding to a negative question (so common in Czech): Koreans will avoid opening a sentence with the negative *no*. They may be afraid of disturbing the harmony of the class with a negative word, so they will answer a question like *Nebyl jsi ve škole?* (Were you not at school?) by expressing their agreement with its content, that is, *Ano*, *nebyl*. (Yes, I wasn't.) Thus a *yes* from a Korean does not always signify an affirmative, but very often it stands for *I understand*, *I am listening*, *do go on*.

Communication in class is also often affected by the presence of girls, as their attitudes and responses are defined by three fundamental types of relationship: to their father, husband, and son. From the early age, Korean girls are brought up to be obedient, submissive, and modest. They are expected to be in good command of themselves in public and to suppress their opinions, emotions, wishes, and desires.

A set of binding rules defines exactly with whom an individual may communicate, when and how. In contrast to a single Czech dichotomy (second person singular for familiarity versus second person plural for politeness), Korean has three dichotomies (formal – informal; intimate – common; friendly – indiscriminate). Like in most Asian cultures, communication is defined by the social hierarchy, age and sex of the interlocutors. For example, the Czech words *bratr* (brother) and *sestra* (sister) have no exact counterparts in Korean: only words for *older brother*, *younger brother*; *older sister*, *younger sister*

exist. It is equally unimaginable in the Czech cultural environment that different degrees of politeness would be expected between younger and older learners.

Intercultural differences are also noticeable in the attitude of Korean learners to written text, where the written-is-law rule is absolute: the only conceivable way to work with a piece of text is to memorise it. That is why great patience is required in teaching Korean learners to work with text rather than plainly memorising it. In Korea, teaching in general is based on memorisation, which is why the learner can memorise a great many words without context and comprehension. The frequent implication of this is that Koreans have great difficulty speaking in class yet do much better in writing. They are used to learning about the language rather than learning it as a means of communication.

Koreans often express themselves non-verbally. In Czech, non-verbal means complement speech rather than substitute it. The way people sit, stand, eat, etc. says a lot about a culture. Conduct acceptable in one culture may be impolite in another. A Korean greeting is frequently no more than a nod or a smile. Touching is much more important than in the Czech culture: Koreans express their friendliness, respect and reverence by touching. Koreans try to guess what others think and feel, but not using verbal communication or eye contact, but rather using non-verbal means.

In Ústí Region (North-west Bohemia), teachers often see many learners of the Japanese nationality in their multi-ethnic classes, whose parents have come to establish new businesses in the region. Since Japanese is diametrically different from Czech, the teachers face many difficulties teaching Czech as a foreign language. There is no mediating language – the knowledge of a communication code shared by the learner and the teacher – in this case Japanese, being the learner's mother tongue. No other global language – English, for instance – can be used either, as Japanese tend to have a very low level of English, so the teacher has to rely on the direct method in the transition to communication in Czech, which is rather lengthy for complete beginners.

What is more, there is no Czech coursebook aimed at Japanese learners. Only several handbooks and older textbooks can be used, but those are complicated and unsuitable to the learners. In addition, there is no dictionary containing grammatical information and recent vocabulary. Thus, the Japanese learner has no option but to get at least an English-Japanese-English dictionary, which very often results in distorted meaning and the misapprehension of many expressions.

The very low level of mastery of English among the Japanese is the result of the way the language is taught at Japanese schools, where learning by heart is dominant. The learner is supposed to memorise grammatical rules and a certain range of vocabulary. The primary objective of the Japanese school system is to tackle written tests, not to acquire a language in all its forms. The fact that foreign languages are taught by Japanese teachers who cannot make themselves understood in the languages results in the very low level of knowledge of foreign languages in Japan.

Given that the Japanese school system generally emphasises written production (which is why the Japanese learners prefer writing to speaking), they cannot express themselves orally adequately. In class, they are passive; they are used to avoiding all self-assertion and discussion, being quiet observers instead.

Japanese uses a different set of replies to negative questions, preferring not to respond logically, in contrast to Czech (and English, for instance). For example, the question *Nepůjdeš zítra do kina?* (Will you not come to the cinema tomorrow? in fact meaning How about coming to the cinema?), a Japanese person will reply either *Ne, půjdu.* (No, I will.) or *Ano, nepůjdu.* (Yes, I won't.) In Japanese, *yes* and *no* to a negative question are more like agreeing or disagreeing with the content of the question. The Japanese will reply to a positive question like a Czech would; however, the reply to a negative question, so common in Czech, may surprise and a Japanese learner will often reply „incorrectly”, as they are thinking „in Japanese”.

Another difference can be seen in spoken language when using the verbs *arrive* and *leave*. For example, in a telephone conversation whe-

re one of the speakers is in Bratislava and the other in Prague, the two verbs will be used the other way around. In Czech a sentence would be *Přijedu do Bratislavy zítra*. (I'll arrive in Bratislava tomorrow), whereas the Japanese will say *Odjedu do Bratislavy zítra*. (I'll leave for Bratislava tomorrow). In Czech, the usage is to „move to the place from where the interlocutor is calling”, while in Japanese you „stay in one place”, viewing the situation solely from your perspective, not from the other's; this is the reason for the Japanese learner's difficulty using Czech verbs of movement. Where both speakers are in the same place, the Japanese will use *arrive* and *leave* in the same way a Czech person would.

The Japanese language has a very elaborate set of polite phrases, which are used much more than anywhere else in the world. Depending on the social status, a distinction is made between the intimate, polite, respectful, and formal styles. A communication with another person becomes difficult if you fail to judge the social status of your interlocutor and to adjust the structure of your utterances accordingly.

Their great advantage compared to learners of other East Asian nationalities is that the Japanese have no preconceptions or taboo topics. The Japanese have only entered contact with the Western culture relatively recently and have allowed it to influence them massively. Problems in communication therefore may not arise from different cultural backgrounds as much as simply from the different ways of speaking.

It is imperative to realise that when teaching Czech as a multicultural means of communication, the teacher is expected not only to deal with the linguistic skill alone and to be trained in pedagogy and methodology, but also to consider other factors that are no less important to the formation of all communication relations at school – the learner-to-teacher as well as learner-to-learner relations – as the communicators' personalities reflect their social, territorial, and religious roots in various norms of behaviour and action, which may ultimately have a negative impact on the course of the school dialogue and life in the class when forming the majority and minority groups.

Communication competence as a complex goal of language teaching can only be acquired when the teaching agenda corresponds to the needs and interests of learners, which far exceed the scope of the class, and when it introduces the learners collectively to the complex network of relations among the people in the new community, things, events, cultures, ways of thinking, and customs of the speakers of both the departure and target languages.

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