

# Intercultural projects in English lessons

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## Abstract

The project focused on the intercultural dimension in English lessons with learners in the 5th-7th grades. The original plan was to investigate how we can design activities that enhance the development of the students' intercultural competences and how we can assess these activities and their outcomes. We set out to do different activities in class and in cooperation with students from other countries. In the first part of the project, the Danish school worked together with a school in Austria and one in Montenegro. In the second part, the Danish school worked with a school in Finland and one in India.

In the original group we started with the topic Christmas, which made sense because the timeframe was November-January. We wanted to work on a topic that all children could relate to in one way or another, but since Christmas is not a neutral topic in this globalized world, we decided to work on an even more transnational topic in the second part of the project: "Lunch in different cultures".

We were interested in letting the students find differences and similarities in these cultural aspects and in the process starting to develop their own cultural competences and ability to navigate in different cultures in a non-judgemental manner. We wanted to work on the stereotypical things and let the students learn from each other and discuss traditions.

What was really interesting was the students' great interest in getting to know each other. We experienced a great deal of tolerance towards each other when communicating directly online.

We would like to do more projects on these cultural matters and work on more transnational topics. The online communication is really helpful in these types of projects and we would like to try out some group work online and do more interviews and writing tasks. We will have to work on how to organize it as we had quite a few problems with the computers and the internet connection.

## Keywords

intercultural competences, communication, culture, assessment, transnational

## Rationale

The primary aim of second and foreign language acquisition is to enable learners to communicate with people coming from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in a multicultural world. Therefore, students need to develop intercultural communicative competences.

There is, however, still little emphasis on the cultural dimension of language learning because the intercultural competence usually does not feature among the criteria for the school leaving certificate.

Therefore, there is often a focus on the development of the grammatical and lexical competence. However, this is not necessarily enough to enable L2 speakers of a language to socialise, negotiate or make friends in the foreign language.

So how can we help the students develop their intercultural competence?

What are the materials and methods that can best help us to develop students' intercultural competences? How can we assess whether our students' intercultural competence has sufficiently developed?

## What did you want to change and why?

The situation in most English lessons today is that the cultural dimension is given low priority. If the topic is tackled at all, then English-speaking countries are focused on, most of the time geographically or historically. The following example proves how low the priority is - even in approved schoolbooks.

The Austrian students were 12 years old and had been studying English for two years. They are taught English using the school textbook "MORE 2" (Helbling Verlag). The content of the book is split into 20 Units and only three (!) of them deal with intercultural topics.

The teacher has to come up with appropriate teaching material that does not promote stereotypes, is up to date and reflects the interests as well as the language abilities of the students. Apart from that, the intercultural competence is difficult to assess and is not tested in any way in the English tests available (Danish as well as the Austrian school system).

In Denmark, we are beginning to see a stronger focus on the cultural dimension in our textbooks. The students can read about different countries, mostly the English-speaking ones, but the tasks still mostly focus on the written and oral competences and not so much on the cultural aspects. The students are not tested on the cultural aspects either. They are expected to be able to compare different facts to an English speaking country, for example at what age it is legal to buy alcohol in Denmark and the US, etc.

We wanted to give the cultural dimension more attention, in order to develop the students' intercultural competences and improve their motivation for language learning, as well as to develop their cultural understanding and interest.

## What was your research question?

What methods can we use to enhance the development of the students' intercultural competences and how can we assess the outcome?

## Describe the setting

### Project 1

- Avedoere School, primary and lower secondary school, Hvidovre, Denmark
- Lower secondary school in Upper Austria
- Lower secondary public school in Montenegro

### Project 2

- Avedoere School, primary and lower secondary school, Hvidovre, Denmark
- Jookala school, primary school, Raahe, Finland
- Delhi Public School – Bangalore North India

Classroom or group situation(s): 5th and 6th grade students, aged 11-12

## Describe the action research process

### Part 1 of the project

As a start-up activity during the first project we established a questionnaire for the students to make them reflect on their own Christmas traditions by answering the following questions:

- How do you celebrate Christmas in your family?
- What do you and your family eat and drink on Christmas Eve?
- What rituals and customs are important for you and your family?
- What do you like about Christmas?
- Is there anything you do not like about it?

The students responded in a highly positive way to the questionnaire, which they always do when they and their current lives are the focus of attention.

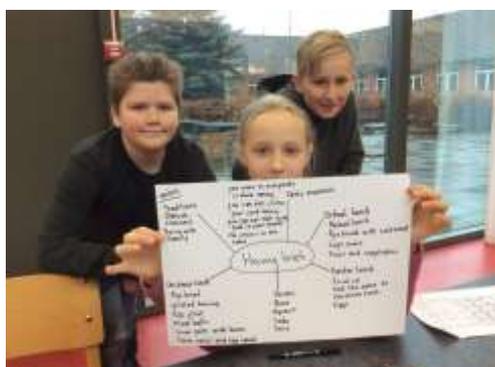
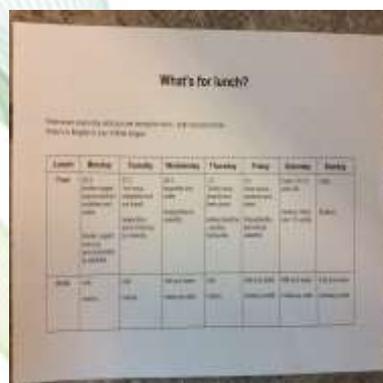
## The questionnaire was followed up by various activities

- All students made posters, movies and Christmas cards and decorations for the other schools - both in English and mother tongue. The decorations were placed on an international Christmas tree (In Denmark we made an international wall instead, due to the fire regulations :-)
- Denmark made a video with a presentation of the posters.
- The students read about the other countries' Christmas traditions and we talked about differences and similarities.
- Students sang and filmed two Christmas songs, one in English and one in their first language to exchange the video with their peers.
- Roleplays  
Students made and acted out a dialogue about celebrating Christmas in their country and sent the video to partner schools.
- Posters with family values - the students drew a hand on a piece of paper and wrote five important family values - one on each finger.
- Austrian students wrote personal letters to the students in Montenegro telling them about how they celebrated their last Christmas with their families.

Overall, the exchange was a positive experience for the school students involved and the teachers learnt a lot about cross-national co-operations. Due to the topic (Christmas), it was very difficult to complete the action research project after the end of the year and contacts between the schools became difficult. However, the first project showed a way forward, which led to the idea for the second project.

## Part 2 of the project

In the first part of the project the focus was very much on the cultural differences and similarities and we wanted to put greater focus on the assessment part and the actual action research. Denmark continued the project with teachers from Finland and India and this time our theme was "Lunch in different cultures". All students could relate to this topic and this time we wanted to be more specific on the aims.

Country	Breakfast	Lunch	Evening	Flavours	Price	Quantity	Notes
Denmark	Hot dog, Danish bread, coffee						
Finland	Hot dog, Danish bread, coffee						
India	Hot dog, Danish bread, coffee						

## Timeframe: 4 months from February-May 2018

### Action plan (lessons and activities)

1. Brainstorming on the topic “lunch” - we have a strong tradition in Denmark about having lunches - Christmas lunches, Easter lunches, packed lunches for the school children, smørrebrød etc

The brainstorming contains two questions:

- What type of food do we have for all these lunches
  - What are the values connected with these lunches? (Why do we do it?)
2. Survey in class - what do you have for lunch? Let’s look at our packed lunches, take photos and talk about our different choices.

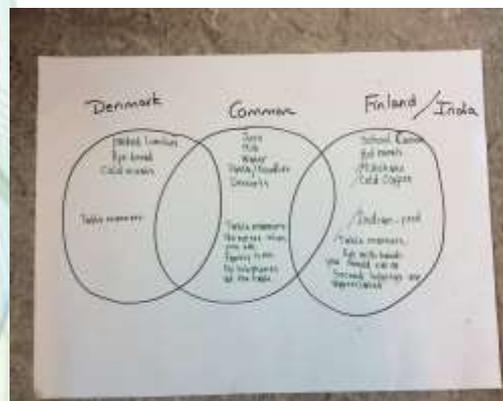
Next step: Presentations

3. Survey for our partner school in India - and maybe in Finland as well? What do you have for lunch:
  - at school;
  - at home (on a normal weekend day);
  - on other, more festive occasions, like Christmas, Easter, etc.

Name 3 values you connect or associate with having lunch.

The survey was conducted as an interview with Indian students online and was a written one for the students in Finland.

- Presentation of a typical Danish lunch - sent to India - and maybe Finland
- Venn’s diagram - lunch in different countries - similarities and differences. Differences and similarities
- Creating a lunch game for our partner class in India to play
- Creating a multimodal book about the Danish lunch traditions compared to lunch in India and Finland (Book creator or similar) for our partner class
- Assessment and evaluation



## Create a game, presentations and a multimodal book

The students were assessed on 3 things - at 3 levels:

### 1) Remember and understand traditions from other countries (knowledge/savoirs)

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Level of recognition	Level of comparison	Level of analysis
Minimal facts for specific features of other cultures	Diversified facts: ways of living, traditions, other cultural values	Thorough knowledge about specific characteristics of other cultures/products, practices, traditions, values etc.
Stereotypical images	Diversified images	

### 2) Communication with students from other countries (know-how/savoir-faire)

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Level of functioning	Level of interacting and adjusting	Level of negotiating
Display minimal experience in functioning in non-ambiguous intercultural situations	Display appropriate use of linguistic patterns to act and react in ambiguous intercultural situations	Display language analysis comparing and questioning different language patterns
Difficulty to adjust to unfamiliar intercultural situations	Use of appropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviours	Readiness for negotiations in conflict situations

### 3) Explain and discuss cultural differences and similarities (being/savoir-être)

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Level of understanding	Level of accepting and interpreting	Level of integrating and internalizing
Realising that there are differences in beliefs and values	Appreciating different beliefs and values from other people and cultures	Adjusting to and integrating different beliefs and values from other people and cultures
Cultural awareness	Critical appropriation	Transcultural competence
Tolerance and sensitivity	Sympathy	Empathy

We wanted to try out different ways of assessment and asked the students what they liked best.

- Interviews - focus: What have you learned...?
- Portfolios - the student's own assessment
- Presentations - share with own class and partner schools
- Venn diagram - and a talk about differences and similarities
- Creating a lunch game
- Creating a multimodal book with the information

### Action research tools used

- Survey - interviews and written questions
- Discussions
- A questionnaire for the students to make them reflect on their traditions
- Focus -group discussions
- Video for observation
- Brainstorming
- Venn diagram
- Game
- Multimodal book

## Main findings

- The students were highly motivated working with the cultural dimension. They found it very motivating to communicate with students from other countries.
- The students liked the theme of Christmas and were surprised to find out that it is mutual in all three countries to spend time with family, to be kind and caring and to celebrate peacefully. Love, happiness and forgiveness are key values in all three countries.
- Time is a relevant factor when working with the intercultural projects. It takes a lot of time to coordinate and communicate with the other classes and their teachers. The key must be to make a clearly structured plan from the start and follow that.
- It is very important that the teachers involved are completely committed to the project to ensure good communication and progress throughout the project.
- It is difficult to assess the intercultural competences as it is related to many aspects, including feelings and attitudes.

## What were the problems and limitations?

- We found that time was a major limitation. With only 1 lesson a week, it is very hard to find sufficient time to have the discussions about the traditions and values in other countries, to have enough time to finalise outputs and send them off to the other schools.
- Another significant challenge is online communication. We experienced a lot of problems with the computers, the internet connection - and the scheduling of the online meetings. We put in a lot of effort to make the meetings work as we knew from the students that they found this very motivating - and we experienced that it was very valuable in terms of developing the students' intercultural competences.
- In Austria there is another difficulty. The teachers of one year have to give identical tests. So the period between the tests leaves little freedom to work on additional topics.
- Choosing a theme like Christmas makes it even more limited as the students are not motivated to work on this theme in January and February. We were aware of this issue, but we chose the theme since all 3 countries have this tradition and it would be both familiar and fairly easy for the students to work with and reflect on. In part 2 of the project we chose lunch as a topic. It's a transnational topic and all students could relate to it and found it really interesting to work with.
- As the cultural dimension is not a major priority in the curricula of the respective countries we needed to be quite creative to make our project and focus fit into the planning of the rest of the school year.

The project has a significant focus on (and need for) vocabulary - words and phrases concerning food, eating, traditions, rules, etc. We did not spend enough time (or didn't have enough focus) on vocabulary building and scaffolding, so we experienced that the students sometimes lacked the vocabulary for what they wanted to say. In a future project we would start off with more intensive work on this matter.

## **What did you learn?**

We learned that it is really satisfying to work on real-life-topics and very rewarding to see the students being highly motivated. The students also impressed us with the respect they showed towards other traditions and cultures.

The students were highly motivated working with the intercultural dimension and communicating with other students.

They found all communication with students from other countries very motivating - and they remembered things better when they talked about it with others.

Assessment of intercultural competences takes time and is done better when discussing the different issues. It is difficult to write about.

## **What are your next steps?**

We would have liked to stay in contact to exchange on whatever is going on in the three schools. It turned out to be very hard to do that - due to lack of time and different schedules.

I look forward to working more on this aspect as it is both relevant to our society and the students find working with intercultural competences very motivating.