Cross-cultural problems in trans-European distance learning programmes

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the modern methods of Distance Learning is of great importance, not only in the field of Language Teaching and Learning, but also in all other fields of Education and Training.

One of the main characteristics of our continent is its linguistic and cultural diversity. This diversity is considered as one of the strongest assets of the European Union, but at the same time it creates serious problems. Therefore, one very important objective should be the development of ways and means, which will allow us to minimize the problems related to the linguistic and cultural differences existing in Europe, and thus transform these differences into even stronger assets.

In the present paper a systematic study is made of the cross-cultural problems we are facing during the implementation of Trans-European Distance Learning Programmes.

Some of these problems are the following: Calendar and curriculum of the courses, methodologies used for overcoming the language barrier problem, methodologies used for enhancing the intercultural communication among tutors and learners, design and production of the learning materials for the courses.

Instead of using a “lingua franca” (such as English or French), new approaches may be necessary for overcoming the language barrier problem. Managers of Distance Learning Programmes are now obliged to produce an active policy, a “management” of language. Such a language management needs to be based on negotiated agreements between participants of the Programmes.

1. ODL AND LANGUAGE IN THE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

The most recent developments in the field of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Europe were initiated by the European Union (EU). After having invested in the physical mobility of people (e.g. students and teachers within the ERASMUS Programme), the EU now aims to promote virtual mobility through telecommunication. To this purpose EU offers substantial financial support to transnational, and consequently transcultural ODL projects.
From a wider point of view these projects may appear as a paradox. The EU, as a primarily economic and political construct, on the one hand, supports the delicate position of an international group of nations, which claim that they will retain their own rights and responsibilities in matters of culture, and consequently of education. On the other hand, EU imposes regulating initiatives that affect these nations in the development of their education, and consequently their culture.

For Europe, ODL is considered to be extremely important for the creation of the European citizenship, and a necessary pre-condition for the establishment of a fully operational EU. Many key texts issued by the EU reveal its awareness that tradition and culture are serious obstacles towards the integration of states, citizens, enterprises, etc. Although physical distances are limited in Europe, cultural distances are significant. However, while they are systematically considered as an obstacle, at the same time, they are stressed as one of the EU’s strongest assets.

ODL in Europe then has an effect far beyond ODL itself. While dealing apparently with innovation in university didactics, the practices of ODL are directly related to the economic and socio-political objectives of actors involved in those practices, regardless of their status in educational institutions, training organisations, companies, or governments.

The most obvious example of mutual influence between culture and ODL is probably to be found in the use of language. Language tends traditionally to be seen as a barrier in ODL models, but could be considered in a more constructive way (Van den Branden and Lambert, 1999). As Fishman (1993) points out, the language policy adopted by the EU (i.e. equal treatment of all national languages, and respect of the individual citizen’s language) is an innovation in the history of mankind. Indeed, it is striking how strongly the principles of the EU’s “ethnolinguisitic democracy” differ from those of other international organisations.

These considerations reveal that, as far as organisational options are concerned, new approaches to language may be necessary. Instead of mechanically borrowing the didactic and linguistic solutions from the political traditions of “language policy”, the managers of new societies, and in particular the managers of ODL and virtual societies, are now obliged to produce an active policy, a “management” of language. Such language management needs to be based on negotiated agreements between participants, which are consistently implemented in activities, in such a way as to secure smooth realisation.

Language management is not limited to ODL. It may become one of the preconditions for the success of any new society, and it will certainly become very important in virtual societies. The change of society models
may go hand in hand with the redefinition of telecommunication and language.

2. THE CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN EUROPE
One of the main characteristics of our continent is its linguistic and/or cultural diversity. This diversity is observed at various levels:

1) In the Member States of the European Union an important evolution is taking place during the past two decades, due to the great variety of cultural groups, such as, "traditional" linguistic and dialectal minorities, resident foreign workers, immigrants that have become or are just about to become nationals of the country of residence, descendants of people whose nationality has changed as a consequence of a territorial conquest, etc. The FORD report (1990) of the European Parliament gave a figure of 8.2 million legal immigrants in EEC countries coming from third countries. Also, the total number of foreign students in schools of the Member States is approximately between 7% and 9%. Furthermore, the proportion of children, that have a daily contact with native speakers of other languages different from their own, is estimated around 50%. It seems that cultural and linguistic diversity is becoming, and being accepted, as a norm.

2) In addition to the cultural and linguistic diversity mentioned above, which is caused by rather small population groups, as compared with the total population of the country concerned, we also have in some European countries large local population groups with pronounced linguistic and/or cultural differences. In this way, an additional linguistic and/or cultural diversity is created. This is, for example, the case of Belgium with the Flemish, French and German speaking communities.

3) Finally, when moving from one European country to another, we cross numerous national population groups with big linguistic and/or cultural differences, that create the general linguistic and/or cultural diversity, which is one of the main characteristics of our continent.

It is obvious that all these categories of linguistic and/or cultural diversity should be taken into account in any educational and training programme in Europe. This is valid:

a) For the educational and training programmes which are organised in each European country, mainly in the traditional face-to-face mode, but also with the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLE). These programmes are organised by the national educational authorities of the country concerned. Therefore, it is their responsibility to plan and implement the necessary measures in their educational institutions, which will eventually bring satisfactory solutions to the problems created by the cultural and linguistic diversity in the corresponding country.
b) The same is also valid for the Trans-European educational and training programmes, which are mainly based on the use of VLE. These programmes are organised by various institutions and enterprises in the countries involved. It is, therefore, the responsibility of each organiser to design and implement its programme in such a way, as to face satisfactorily the cultural and linguistic diversity observed in the area of the implementation of the programme.

In the following, an effort will be made to discuss briefly the main cross-cultural issues that arise in the second case.

3. SOME OF THE MAIN PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN THE USE OF VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS ACROSS EUROPE
We will now focus our attention to the cross-cultural problems arising in the case of distance learning courses, organised jointly by a number of educational and training institutions, which are distributed over a large area of Europe, and therefore involving learners and tutors, who belong to different cultural and linguistic environments (Trans-European distance learning courses).

Some of the problems we are facing in this case are the following:
1. the calendar of the course,
2. the curriculum of the course,
3. the methodologies used for overcoming the language barrier problem,
4. the methodologies used for enhancing the intercultural communication among tutors and learners, and
5. the design and production of the learning materials for the course.

In the following, the problems mentioned above are analysed in detail. These problems were extensively discussed in the framework of the IVETTE Thematic Network, which was funded by the European Commission (Mavridis, 2000).

4. THE CALENDAR OF THE COURSE
When planning the calendar of a Trans-European distance learning course, one has to take into account a number of relevant factors, such as:
a) The fact that the academic year in the various countries involved in the course usually follows a different calendar: In some countries the academic year is subdivided into two semesters, while in others it is subdivided into three terms. Also, the dates of the beginning and the end of these subdivisions, and therefore of the corresponding vacations, are different in each country. Finally, the bank holidays in the various countries do not always coincide.

b) As it is well known, the various European countries belong to different time zones. Thus, the hours of the day during which real-time joint
learning activities can be scheduled (such as computer-conferencing or video-conferencing) have to be selected very carefully.

c) Due to the latitude differences among the various European countries, we have significant climatic differences from country to country, as well as differences in the duration of day and night. This fact should be taken into consideration, when scheduling real-time joint learning activities.

5. THE CURRICULUM OF THE COURSE
The curriculum of a Trans-European distance learning course should also be selected very carefully. Among others, one should take into account that the national curriculum for primary and secondary education is different in various European countries. In addition to this, the curriculum of undergraduate and graduate studies for the same scientific discipline is different in various European universities. Finally, the training needs of the workforce, which must be considered, when preparing the curriculum of a continuing education and training course, vary in most European countries. It should be noted that in the case of postgraduate courses it is easier for the participating institutions to agree on curriculum content, since there are no legal constraints about the programmes of postgraduate education, apart from the administrative ones.

Another important point is that according to Van den Branden and Lambert (1999), technology-based ODL should also be considered in terms of the cultural differences, that become apparent in the culture-based attitudes formed towards the use of technology. Research in the framework of the European Open University Network Project revealed cultural differences between larger European regions in attitudes towards the use of educational technology in education. Inhabitants of Northern and Western European countries show a significant preference for study with computers, which is not valid in the same degree for students and professionals coming from Southern and Central/Eastern European countries. The latter believe that a high level of educational competence is necessary, when working with educational technologies, and prefer working with computers in small groups. They also believe that audio and visual information, rather than computer-based information, is necessary for the learning process.

6. THE METHODOLOGIES USED FOR OVERCOMING THE LANGUAGE BARRIER PROBLEM
The language barrier challenge is perhaps the most difficult problem we are facing, when trying to carry out a Trans-European distance learning course. This problem affects numerous aspects of the course, such as:

a) the design and production of the learning materials,
b) the establishment of interactivity among tutors and learners,
c) the support and control of the progress of the learning process.

A great variety of solutions of the language barrier problem have been applied so far in various projects, in connection with the design and production of the learning materials. Thus:

a) When part of the learning materials are in the form of printed books, we can include in these books explanations and vocabulary in more than one languages, covering the main linguistic groups to which the learners belong. For example, this was the case with the course under the title “In the Country of Aristotle: A Course for Learning Modern Greek as a Foreign Language / Beginners’ Level”, which was organised by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in the framework of the TELESCOPIA Project, and funded by the European Commission. The same solution was also applied during the course under the title “In the Country of Aristotle: A Course for Learning Modern Greek as a Foreign Language / Intermediate Level”, which was also organised by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in the framework of the FORUM Project, and funded by the European Commission. In both cases, the learning materials in the form of books contained explanations and vocabulary in English and French, together with the Greek texts.

b) When the learning materials are in the form of pre-recorded videotapes distributed via satellite television, we can use a proper combination of the videotape and transmission standards, which will allow us to transmit the same video with up to four language channels, thus giving the possibility to each learner to select the language of his/her preference. This was the case with the distance learning course under the title “Greek History and Civilisation”, which was transmitted by Innovation in Education and Training Ltd., in the framework of the Programme of the Pan-European Association EUROSTEP. During these transmissions the ESA OLYMPUS DBS satellite was used. In this case, all analogue videotapes containing the learning materials included four language channels corresponding to the following languages: Greek, English, German and French. Thus, each learner had the possibility to follow the course in one of these languages, according to his/her preference.

Concerning the language barrier problem in connection with the establishment of interactivity among tutors and learners, and also in connection with the support and control of the progress of the learning process, one solution frequently used is to carry out the tutorials in two levels:

a) The local level. In this case the establishment of interactivity is the task of the local tutors in each participating institution and/or country, and is carried out in the local language, and

b) The central level. In this case the establishment of interactivity is the task of a common team of tutors for all the participating institutions and/or countries, and is carried out in a common language. It is obvious
that the common team of tutors comprises most of the local tutors used in the local tutorials.

As an example of language management, Van den Branden and Lambert (1999) mention the EUROLITERATURE project for virtual student mobility. About 20 European universities, scattered all over Europe, participate in the course activities of the project. Each participating university teaches a course to third and fourth year students on common subjects within the domain of European literature, and sets up a local web site for communication among local participants of the course (teachers, tutors, students), as well as for the local provision of learning resources. The common EUROLITERATURE web site, situated at the University of Bergen, Norway, is the joint communication and information platform for all participating universities. This platform contains learning resources, news on ongoing course activities and interesting events, links to participating universities, etc. Lectures of special interest are provided to the universities through multipoint videoconferences, as a supplementary source of information, thus giving students and staff access to experts in special fields, when they are not available at their "home" university. An important aspect of these activities is the obligation of students to write papers jointly with peers from other universities in a different country. In this way, they are confronted with real experiences of "cultural differences", within the corresponding scientific field.

From the perspective of language management, this project is multilingual; the content of local web sites and the local communication are in the mother tongue of the participants. The outcomes of local activities, that should become known to all participants, are summarised mostly in English, and sometimes also in French. A common language is used for joint activities (e.g. the Bergen project web site, the videoconferences), but the participation and follow-up of these activities, are organised locally in the mother tongue. During the videoconferences there are time intervals, which give the opportunity to the participants to have a summarised translation of the content of the videoconference, to discuss matters in their mother tongue, and to prepare their videoconference interactions in the common language. The collaborative papers that follow are prepared in a language agreed by the involved participants, which is not the same for all the papers. In opposition with most other EU ODL projects, the EUROLITERATURE language model moves away from the traditional monolingual language policy, as well as from the "ethnolinguistic" democracy. This model rather moves towards the application of inter-language solutions.

In this project, the participants faced language as a possible communication barrier. It is expected though that technology will contribute to the solution of this problem. Videoconference lectures can also be
organised with some creativity in a multilingual mode, by providing simultaneous translation through headphone sets. In most cases, this translation can be provided by one of the participants, especially when they deal with technical subjects, which need only a limited vocabulary, and when most of the participants are more or less familiar with the subject of the lecture. Speech recognition and automatic translation (eventually connected with sub-titling), offer promising possibilities for the immediate future.

7. THE METHODOLOGIES USED FOR ENHANCING THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AMONG TUTORS AND LEARNERS

Another important problem which we are facing, when trying to carry out a Trans-European distance learning course, is the problem of intercultural communication among tutors and learners. This problem affects numerous aspects of the organisation of the course, such as:

a) the design and production of the learning materials,
b) the establishment of interactivity among tutors and learners,
c) the support and control of the progress of the learning process.

A variety of solutions of this problem have been applied so far in various projects. Thus:

a) Concerning the design and production of the learning materials, we must take into account that the inclusion of the prospective learners’ language in the learning materials does not solve the problem of intercultural communication. There are numerous other parameters affecting the structure of the learning materials, which are closely related to the linguistic and cultural environment of the various groups of learners, such as the monetary units, the temperature scales, the geographical names, the historical events, etc.

b) During the procedure of supporting and controlling the progress of the learning process, we are using the so called “study letters”, which correspond to the various learning units of the course. Each study letter contains: First, some additional learning materials referring to the corresponding learning unit. Second, instructions about the best possible use of the learning materials, and finally one assignment. In the majority of the cases these assignments are “individual assignments”. This means that each learner receives from the corresponding tutor his/her own assignment, which s/he must prepare and return to the tutor. The tutor corrects and evaluates the assignment and then returns it to the learner.

In some cases, besides the individual assignments, we also have the so called “group assignments”. This means that the tutor subdivides the learners into a number of groups, trying to include in each group
learners, who belong to different linguistic and/or cultural environments. Then, the tutor proposes to the members of each group the corresponding group assignment. The members have to co-operate for the completion of this assignment, using the interactivity facilities of the course (e-mail, news group, videoconferencing, etc.). In this way, the intercultural communication among the learners is highly promoted. This procedure was used during the two courses under the title “In the Country of Aristotle: A Course for Learning Greek as a Foreign Language”, which were mentioned before in chapter 6.

8. THE DESIGN AND PRODUCTION OF THE LEARNING MATERIALS FOR THE COURSE

The joint design and production of the learning materials to be used for the Trans-European distance learning courses is a very important, but at the same time a very delicate matter. A great number of difficulties might arise, when trying to solve this problem: The relevant staff members of all the institutions involved in the course, do have the reasonable ambition to believe that they are among the best specialists in the corresponding field. Therefore, a very careful procedure should be followed, so that consensus is achieved among them about the parts of the learning materials, which will be designed and produced by each of the participating institutions. The subdivision of the tutorials into two levels, i.e. the local level, and the central level, could be of some assistance in overcoming the relevant difficulties. The local tutors will have the possibility to give to their own learners any additions and/or amendments of the common learning materials, in the framework of the local tutorials.

According to the experience of EuroPACE 2000, the views concerning the content of the course differ significantly between industry and universities. The universities want to emphasize the good quality of the course as a result of their high scientific standards. On the other hand, the industry demands high quality content, but with a practically oriented slant. The partners do not always find satisfying solutions to this problem, which results in compromises, leaving everyone uncomfortable.

The experiences within the VirtUE Project (Van den Branden, 1998) demonstrate that cultural biases can also affect the acceptability of courseware. Restricting the adaptation of “foreign” courseware only to translation - a common practice in the international exchange of courseware - may be unsuccessful. A possible solution to this problem is “localising” the relevant courseware, either by the course developers, or through local adaptation at the user level. Such adaptation should seek to incorporate local cultural material, not only for its own value and accessibility, but also for
facilitating the understanding of general concepts found in imported distance education programmes (Weatherlake, 1995).

9. EPILOGUE
From the above discussion, it has become evident that in any Trans-European distance learning programme we are facing numerous and difficult cross-cultural problems. The organisers of such programmes must, therefore, design and execute their programmes in such a way as to find and implement satisfactory solutions to these problems. This is especially valid for the language barrier problem, for which new approaches may be necessary. The managers of a Trans-European distance learning programme are now obliged to produce a "management" of language, which will facilitate the cooperation among the participants of the programme concerned.

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