7 Content modules in UK and US universities – their unique contribution towards the development of intercultural competence and criticality

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Abstract

This paper explores the unique contribution of content modules towards the development of criticality (Barnett, 1997) and intercultural competence (Byram, 1997) in Modern Languages (ML). It draws upon the findings of a PhD study investigating the implications of the division between language and content, as experienced by German Studies students in two American and two British universities. Findings from this study echo to an extent Brumfit et al. (2005), who found that in language modules "the focus on criticality development itself is less central than in other areas of the ML curriculum, especially the 'content' courses" (p. 159). In interviews, both staff and students across all four universities referred to upper-level or content modules as the area which contributed the most to students' development of intercultural competence and criticality, yet content-based language courses were also cited. Implications of these findings are discussed and recommendations are made for the future of ML in Higher Education (HE).

Keywords: language degrees, content modules, higher education, criticality, intercultural competence, languages.

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1.   Introduction

Culture and literature courses (also referred to as content modules in the UK) are often understood as belonging to the 'area studies' component of ML degrees. These modules provide a context for the critical study of culture and help situate the discipline within the humanities. Yet, as a result of the way language degrees are structured in the UK, as Brumfit et al. (2005) argue, "consideration of the exact nature of the interaction between language and content is often neglected" (p. 158). The teaching of 'language' as a parallel component alongside 'content' has been identified as problematic both in British and American HE. Gieve and Cunico (2012) point out that in the UK it is common to offer grammar and translation classes within language modules, which consist of "texts bearing little or no connection to any of the 'content' modules that run in parallel" (p. 275). While foreign language departments follow a different structure in the US, for the most part consisting of two years of language study (lower-level) followed by two years of content-based language and content classes (upper-level), the separation of language and content has been similarly reported as problematic. The Modern Language Association (MLA, 2007) report makes reference to the issue, arguing that "a two-tiered structure impedes the development of a unified curriculum" and that the foreign language curriculum "should consist of a series of complementary or linked courses that holistically incorporate content and cross-cultural reflection at every level" (p. 5).

The importance of intercultural competence has been further specified in the Quality Assurance Agency (2015) subject Benchmark Statement, suggesting that "students of languages develop awareness of similarities and dissimilarities between other cultures and societies, and their own" (p. 16). This is even more explicitly articulated in the MLA (2007) report, which argues that "the language major should be structured to produce a specific outcome: educated speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence" (p. 3), and in the *Review of Modern Foreign Languages provision in higher education in England* (Worton, 2009), arguing that universities should take a more 'active leadership' role by placing emphasis on intercultural competence and multi-lingual skills.

The contribution of content modules towards the development of students' criticality and intercultural competence discussed in this paper has been identified in previous research. Brumfit et al. (2005) reported on a research project (Southampton Project) on criticality development in undergraduate students in two academic disciplines at one British university, one of which was ML. The researchers highlight the important role of content modules in supporting the development of criticality, as mentioned in the abstract, but also point out that it may be "the rich combination of language with cultural content, of learning in the university with acquisition on the year abroad, that may be the valuable contribution being made overall" (Brumfit et al., 2005, p. 161). The value of literature specifically has been acknowledged in Matos (2011), who argues that "literature may help develop an essential feature of the intercultural personality: the ability to decentre and take up the perspectives of the other, to see the world from another place" (p. 2). Phipps and Gonzales (2004) similarly expose the marginalised status of literature within the ML curriculum and argue that it should rather be "central to learning to be intercultural" (p. 138).

Bearing the above theoretical perspectives in mind, this paper provides an overview of staff and student perspectives on the contribution of content modules to the development of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997) and criticality (Barnett, 1997).

2.   Method

2.1.   Participants and setting

The doctoral study, from which the findings are drawn, employed a mixed methods design consisting of a student questionnaire and interviews with students enrolled on the German degree programme and key faculty members. Four institutions agreed to take part in the study, two of which are located in the north of England (Universities A and B) and two in the US (C and D). The universities taking part were given a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality

and comply with ethical requirements. The curriculum in place at University A offered all content courses taught in English with language modules (writing and oral components) taught in parallel. At University B, on the other hand, content was taught in German, with the exception of the first year[2]. With regards to the American universities, University C's German department is well-known, as it adopts an innovative genre-based content-oriented curriculum throughout the degree programme. University D, on the other hand, while not having eliminated the two-tiered structure, offers content-based language modules, which similarly appear to offer students a context in which language and content can be taught jointly.

2.2.   Data collection, participants and analysis

Questionnaire and interview data was collected over a period of ten weeks in the spring term of 2015. A total of 56 students responded to the questionnaire, and 21 expressed interest in the follow-up interview. A further interview was conducted with seven members of staff across the four universities. Quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire using a six point Likert scale. Interview participants were contacted by mail and the interviews were carried out on the university campuses or through Skype. Interviews were interpreted qualitatively and the questionnaire data was analysed statistically using SPSS. This paper reviews a selection of results, primarily qualitative, which focus on the findings related to the unique contribution of content modules to the development of intercultural competence and criticality among undergraduates/university students.

3.   Discussion

While the participating universities differed significantly in their curricula, data drawn from all four institutions indicated that content and upper-level modules played a significant role in the development of students' criticality and intercultural competence. The findings reflect both a student and staff perspective.

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2. This was the case at the time of the data collection (in the 2014-2015 academic year).

The Head of German at University B illustrated how these modules played a role in the students' development of these competencies:

> "I think [the development of criticality] is more something that happens in our modules rather than doing it independently. It's rather when you start talking about things… and they are guided through certain texts... that you make them think, then they engage with it".

In the student questionnaire over three-quarters of the participants agreed that content modules provided a greater opportunity to develop a critical awareness of cultures than language modules (Figure 1).

Figure 1.   Pie chart: content modules provided a greater opportunity to develop a critical awareness of cultures than language modules.
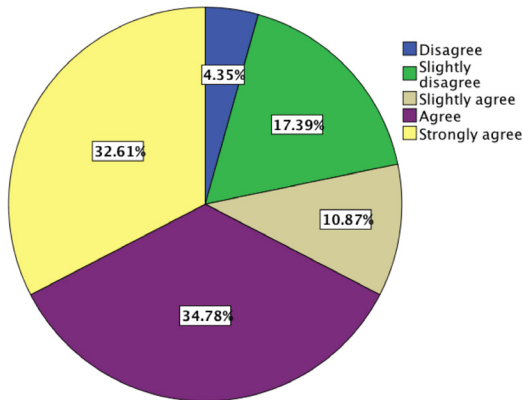
These views were echoed in the follow-up student interviews. Mary, of University B, described topics in the language modules as "superficial" and felt that as a result they could only be critical to a "certain extent":

> "I think it's critical to a certain extent with the language modules […] my problem with the language modules in general is that they tend to be very… I think the German word *oberflächlich* (superficial/shallow)

is quite good. […] If your aim is to teach how to write good German… I don't know… I think with the content modules there was constant challenge of having to go away and research it yourself".

Zak, of University A, also "felt like the teachers were more critical with [him] in the content modules". While content modules were mentioned across all four institutions as contributing to the development of intercultural competence and criticality, reference was also made to the language modules, particularly at University C where the department had redesigned the curriculum in order to address the 'language' and 'content' divide.

JFK, of University C, made reference to how his intermediate German class helped him reflect on the concept of *Heimat* (homeland):

> "From day one, from the first class, I've been learning about the Turkish migration in Germany, differences between East and West, I learned about the concept of *Heimat*. It's already critical".

At University B, the language coordinator, who was teaching both language and content modules as well as coordinating the Year Abroad assessment task, referred to this as an "advantage":

> "I have the advantage of teaching language and content. I've taught 1st year and 2nd year content. Second year content is taught and assessed in German and I found that really interesting because you can really emphasise the links between the topics, the themes that you're talking about in language and content and how they overlap".

The reference above is particularly interesting as it presents a perspective from an academic, who was responsible for teaching both language and content and took this opportunity to establish relevant links across the curriculum. Students' views on whether they felt language and content should be better integrated also differed significantly across the four institutions, as illustrated in Figure 2, ranging from mean values of 5.22 (agree) to 2.78 (between slightly disagree and disagree).

Figure 2.   Mean scores and bar graph – perceived need for greater integration

University A	University D	University B	University C
5.22	4.50	3.35	2.78
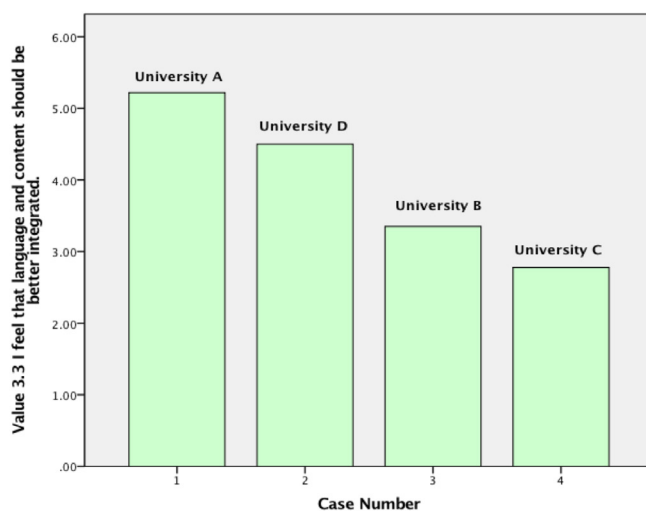
4.   Conclusion

The findings suggest that content modules make an invaluable contribution towards student development of criticality and intercultural competence, thus echoing to an extent Brumfit et al. (2005). However, as the results appear to indicate, language modules can also effectively support students' development of these competencies, particularly where faculty have explored ways to establish links across the two curricula and beyond.

The following recommendations are made for ML in HE: firstly, that content modules and upper-level content-based language modules (in the US) be acknowledged as an invaluable context for university-based learning of intercultural skills and criticality; and, secondly, to recognise that the separation of language and content needs to be addressed in order to explore more effective

ways of fostering students' criticality and intercultural learning across the entire curriculum.

5. Acknowledgements

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Edited by Carmen Álvarez-Mayo, Angela Gallagher-Brett, and Franck Michel