INTERCULTURALITY – A FUNDAMENTAL DIMENSION OF THE MODERN MILITARY HIGHER EDUCATION PARADIGM

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Abstract

There have been numerous ways in which intercultural education has been conceptualized, but most definitions focus on the abilities to accurately understand and act accordingly in a cultural context that is different from one's own. We find that one of the most important dimensions of intercultural education is the ability to effectively participate in interactions of all sorts, with members from other cultures or within the social parameters of another culture. Thus, we have identified an increased need to acquire intercultural communication skills, by developing intercultural competence, alongside and as an integrated part of the language. Through this paper, we intend to highlight aspects related to the concept of intercultural education and of the communication thereof, focusing on its dimensions, skills to be acquired, and the modalities of acquiring and developing intercultural competence in the military academic environment. We will conclude by reiterating the importance of intercultural communication in the context of the "global village" of the 21st century, and especially in the military environment, as it is a requirement for all military and civilian personnel to be able to interact with people from other cultures, as part of their profession.

Keywords: intercultural education, intercultural communication, intercultural communication skills, intercultural competence, military higher education.

Linguistic knowledge is one thing,
but understanding cultural conventions,
subtleties and nuances of a language
and culture is something different.
(Russel Zanca, 2003)

1. Introduction

Starting with 1990, there has been a significant increase in the number of military operations which urged NATO member states to get involved as part of a multinational coalition or alliance. Moreover, missions have become more diverse, including peacekeeping, peace enforcement and humanitarian tasks. As a consequence, Romania has had to take part in different international crisis and conflicts, as support for the multinational operations.

There is critical evidence that the subtle differences between organizational and national cultures of the countries that contribute with military personnel to the missions have a great impact on the general operational efficiency of the multinational force. This clearly demonstrates that the military, as an organization, is characterized by both interculturality and cross-culturality. Therefore, we must endow our troops with language and culture education and training. The need springs from the fact that without sufficient

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intercultural communication competence, operational success is not only affected, but also jeopardized.

Intercultural education promotes knowing and respecting another culture, traditions and lifestyle of the ethnic communities living in the area where the missions are being carried out. As a consequence, the soldiers participating in international missions have to be prepared in advance about the customs, traditions and social behaviours of the locals, to facilitate a better interaction and cooperation with them. An improved cooperation between the military and civilian local population, based on mastering advanced language and culture skills, can result in a more efficient mission completion. (Obilişteanu, 2011, p. 161)

2. Intercultural education – a theoretical approach

Intercultural education scientifically underlines interculturality, which represents an instrument for boosting the equality of chances of cultural insertion of the immigrant foreign population in the economic and social life of the host nation. (Bouchez & de Peretti, 1990, p. 4) Therefore, intercultural education targets students and cadets alike, be they local or foreign, immigrants or emigrants, seeking to train them in order to understand and respect diversity, to accept and promote cultural tolerance. A solid cultural education must allow the individual to transcend the aspects of their own culture, perceived as limited, and to free their spirituality as to integrate it in a wider global context.

At international level, the European Council has established a series of objectives for the intercultural education. These are to be implemented and achieved by the Cooperation Council (http://www.coe.int/en/web/programmes/eu-cooperation), the responsible body in this field:

- ✓ to allow access to specific knowledge and to instruments of cultural promotion;
- ✓ to establish cooperation between educators at European level;
- ✓ to raise the awareness of the member states in terms of the common spiritual heritage;
- ✓ to promote an environment based on active understanding and respect towards the cultural particularities of each nation.

Translated into education, we conclude that any form of training, especially in the field of foreign languages, must be approached from an intercultural dimension, based on several guidelines. It must imply all beneficiaries, be they majority or minority, by preparing them to live and function in an intercultural society. It must target the accumulation of cultural knowledge and its impact on the individual and group behaviour in what regards their own culture as well as other cultures. Intercultural education must build attitudes that imply respect for the cultural diversity and identity of another nation, in order to avoid discrimination and intolerance. We must stress the need to achieve these objectives through an interdisciplinary approach, which must focus more on forming behaviours and attitudes rather than on merely acquiring knowledge and information. It is

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especially efficient when the formal approach is extended outside the school, in an extra-curriculum environment (family, society, institutions, communities, and media).

The ultimate goal of intercultural education is to form intercultural competence. It is defined as the ability of the individual to adjust their attitude, behaviour and knowledge when interacting with people belonging to other cultures, the openness to manifest flexibility and a positive attitude towards other cultures in general, the capacity to review their own beliefs and values, and re-think them from the perspective of other cultures, so as to maximize the probability to achieve mutual objectives. (Tudorache, 2009, p. 45)

Researchers and scientists have argued the existence of a common core of concepts defining interculturality:

- ✓ intercultural competence – the ability to communicate efficiently in different intercultural situations; (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003, p. 423)
- ✓ intercultural sensitivity – the ability to experience and discriminate between cultural differences that are relevant to the process; (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003, p. 423)
- ✓ intercultural efficiency – the ability to successfully work and live in another culture/country; (Vulpe, Kealey, Protheroe & MacDonald, 2001, p. 10)
- ✓ intercultural intelligence – the ability to interpret and translate unfamiliar and ambiguous gestures in a given context. (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004, p. 3)

These guidelines are of paramount importance and need to be taken into consideration when establishing the educational parameters to be included in the curriculum of a language course at academic level. Future officers have to be trained according to the new characteristics of the international environment, where communication is no longer defined by language exclusively, but also by cultural awareness, understanding and tolerance. Therefore, training the cadets in order to achieve an intercultural competence is a prerequisite for accomplishing the new tasks and missions emerging in the international mission environments. When interacting in a multicultural context, efficient communication is the instrument that bridges the gap between different cultures. It is a process through which people share information, ideas and feelings. Consequently, we can conclude that the better mastered the tool of communication (the language) and the context in which it takes place (the culture), the more efficient the process of interaction and cooperation between the individuals belonging to different cultures. This is especially valid in the case of the military, and even more so in teams involved in multinational operations. It has been demonstrated that the ability to communicate in such situations is crucial, as it may influence the efficiency and the effectiveness of the mission. In a research conducted by Riedel and Karrasch (2002, p. 468), soldiers in multinational teams have identified communication as being the most challenging experience they have to go through as part of a multinational team in a mission.

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3. Intercultural communication

Intercultural communication can be defined as communication taking place between individuals and groups having different linguistic and cultural origins. It is viewed as an active relationship between people of different cultures, where culture is the structured manifestation of the human behaviour in social life, depending on specific national and/or local contexts (e.g. political, economic, institutional, professional, and linguistic). We call intercultural all interactions during which the participants do not limit themselves only to the codes, conventions, values, beliefs and manifestations of their own culture, but embrace the opportunity of discovering new aspects and dimensions of another culture, acquired and experienced as *foreign*. (Bruck, 1994, p. 345) One prerequisite of the existence of intercultural awareness is that the individuals participating in the act of communication are fully aware of their cultural differences. As a consequence, communication becomes interpersonal, direct and open, and tailored not only according to what separates the cultures, but also to what brings them together.

3.1. Intercultural competence

Intercultural competence comes in as a required tool to successfully bridge the gap between cultures, facilitating interaction and therefore communication. It is viewed as the active possession by individuals of attributes which contribute to efficient intercultural communication and can be translated in terms of *knowledge, skills and attitudes*. If intercultural communication is conceived as the ability to execute behaviours of communication in a successful manner, we can derive the conclusion that a person that is interculturally competent should possess the appropriate skills to interact effectively with the people and in an environment belonging to a culture that is different from their own and, at the same time, be able to accomplish their own communication objectives.

In this context, language competence becomes the essential element of intercultural understanding, and is considered a combination of four distinct components (specific, strategic, individual and social) which ultimately form, in the long run, what is accepted as intercultural intelligence. (Kogler, 2003, pp. 11-13) Viewed from the pedagogical dimension, intercultural intelligence is the result of training: cognitive, emotional, and behaviourist (Bruck, 1994, p. 345). The cognitive dimension refers to language training and education as to raise cultural awareness. The emotional aspect is seen in terms of understanding national highlights and threats, while the behaviourist dimension is built through specific training in role-playing and situational responses tailored according to the cultural context.

In addition to language training, when building up on intercultural competence, one must also teach non-verbal communication, such as tone, facial expressions, body language, gestures etc. Each culture possesses its own peculiarities, translated into extra-linguistic elements that typically shape not only the form, but also the content of intercultural interactions. At this point, we must stress the need to teach language as an integrative component of the concept of culture, which in turn encompasses values,

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beliefs, traditions, customs, norms, rituals, symbols, taboos, etiquette, attire, and time concepts, all of which are the source of the expectations and tailored responses we aim at forming through training.

3.2. Intercultural Communication in Military Higher Education

Intercultural communication is an implicit element in all forms of training and courses across all disciplines of higher education. It may be an autonomous subject having the content theoretically grounded in a specific discipline (linguistics, sociology), it can be connected interdisciplinarily to other fields of study, such as business or economics, but, most frequently, it is taught not only as knowledge and a skill, but also with the greater aim of promoting an appropriate attitude of awareness towards other cultures, as an integrated part of language teaching and learning.

Especially in military higher education, there has been a growing need to form not only professional skills and competencies, but also to align the education system to the needs and requirements of real life, more exactly to the characteristics of the current military context, continuously shaped and transformed by concepts such as cooperation, interoperability, standardization etc. The military organization is increasingly in need of becoming interoperable, which translates into an even more growing need to develop intercultural competence among the products of military academic education. In this context, intercultural education can be divided into training of the military culture within multinational operations and organizations and forming cultural competence, mostly targeted towards the future officers.

As part of the military higher education program of language study, cadets should be trained as to achieve not only communication skills in a foreign language, but also a broader competence, identified as cultural literacy. They must not only understand and appreciate the beliefs, behaviours, values and norms of their own culture, but they should also be made aware of how these might impact on and affect other cultures which they may interact with, at some point in their career. Starting from the premises that our cadets are trained for future deployments and will function as international soldiers in the military "global village", we reiterate the belief that a valid form of building intercultural competence within the military higher education starts from the idea of projecting this competence on the three aforementioned dimensions: cognitive, emotional and behaviourist. In other words, this paradigm is focused on the knowledge, attitudes and skills to be developed throughout the three years of study.

Conscious of the changes that take place in the current military context, especially when referring to the missions which the future officers will be tasked with in multinational theatres of operations, the English language teachers at the Land Forces Academy of Sibiu have rethought the courses, seminars and practical sessions to integrate new themes and topics aimed at sensitizing the military students about the importance of intercultural communication. Therefore, the content of the syllabus designed according to these newly identified needs, has been extended in order to cover a wide array of skills

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and abilities that go beyond language acquisition, into the area of communication and interaction. Throughout the three years in which they study English, cadets acquire self knowledge and knowledge of the others, learning first to tolerate, then respect and finally internalize the culture of the target language. They are also taught how to operate with critical thinking skills that are particular to the language of study: forming and expressing opinions, analysis, synthetisation, hypothesizing, negotiation, mediation, persuasion. Cadets are placed in contexts that are specific to international communicative situations and are required to give speeches, make presentations, and deliver briefings. Furthermore, they learn to be tolerant with other people's opinions and to interpret non-verbal communication by participating in free discussions and debates, individually or as a group, in order to solve joint tasks and build on their skills of cooperation and team work.

Although such initiatives have proven highly successful and efficient for the future career development of the cadets, we admit that limitations stem from the fact that, regardless of how well guided and controlled these activities might be, they are still carried out against the same cultural background, since most or all cadets share the same language and culture. In order to enlarge the learning context and supplement it with real-life cultural input, the management of the Land Forces Academy of Sibiu has taken numerous steps to sign partnerships with similar military higher education institutions, in order to capitalize on joint training programs aimed at developing the intercultural communication competence. As part of these joint initiatives, the cadets have had the opportunity to benefit from the experience of other military students and teaching staff from the thirteen partner academies (such as Theresianische Militarakademie, Wiener Neustadt, Austria; Royal Military Academy, Bruxelles, Belgium; Armed Forces Academy of "General Milan Rastislav Stefanik", Liptovsky Mikulas, Slovak Republic; The Gen. Tadeusz Kosciuszko Military Academy of Land Forces, Wroclaw, Poland; Turkish Military Academy, Ankara, Turkey etc.), by taking part in all sorts of student exchange programs: ERASMUS Student mobility Studies – SMS and ERASMUS Student mobility Placement – SMP (http://www.armyacademy.ro). Such programs target the development of cultural and linguistic abilities, based on the deep understanding of relational levels that aim at shaping efficient communication and building different ways of adjusting to various cultural contexts, especially the military professional one.

3.3. Intercultural Competence within International Missions

In order to fulfil the missions and tasks that are characteristic to the military environment today, future officers must develop both professional abilities and linguistic knowledge, especially operational language. This involves possessing high competence in military and NATO terminology and being familiarized with the usage and meaning of acronyms and abbreviations mostly used by member countries. Training in military cultural awareness is first of all acquiring factual terminology, through joint drills and exercises with the armies of the NATO partners.

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All soldiers should be trained to use the English lead and operations language, during their pre-deployment period. Since English is determined to be the operations language – one of the NATO's two official languages (http://www.nato.int/cps/ro/natohq/faq.htm) – the training must also encompass the cultural dimension, in addition to the linguistic one. In the context of UN and NATO leading culture and procedures, it is of paramount importance that training be shaped around two key aspects: first of all, to get the soldiers of the English speaking lead nation to be tolerant and emphatic towards the other partners, and, secondly, to train them to use the rules of engagements (ROE) which are fixed for an operation.

Language training of the officers participating in international missions should target at least STANAG 6001 level 2 (Limited Working Competence), elaborated according to the following Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Skill Level Descriptions for Competence in Intercultural Communication (http://www.govtilr.org/skills/competence.htm):

"Able to participate acceptably in many everyday social and work-related interactions. Shows conscious awareness of significant differences between the individual's own culture and the other culture and attempts to adjust behaviour accordingly, although not always successfully. Can typically avoid taboos and adhere to basic social norms and rules of etiquette, such as in accepting and refusing invitations, offering and receiving gifts, and requesting assistance. May sometimes misinterpret cultural cues or behave inappropriately for the culture, but is usually able to recognize and repair misunderstandings. Understands the need to manage own attitudes and reactions to cultural dissonance, and is usually able to do so. Normally functions as expected in predictable and commonly encountered situations, including public events and large gatherings, but may have difficulty when faced with less familiar circumstances. Able to participate in various social media activities. In a work environment, can appropriately issue straightforward directions and instructions, give or receive orders, whether in person, on the telephone, or in writing, and may be able to address some job-related problems. In some instances, demonstrates recognition of and makes appropriate reference to issues and topics that are customarily the subject of conversation, such as historical, cultural or current events". (as approved by the Interagency Language Roundtable, on Friday, March 18, 2012).

As we can conclude by interpreting the descriptors, in addition to developing language skills, even at this level, future officers should develop specific cultural abilities that allow them to interact in professional contexts, to differentiate between cultural nuances, to readily adapt their reactions and manifestations to the given situation, to interpret cultural behaviours. The ultimate goal is for the soldiers to successfully function in international professional situations (missions or exercises), to the aim of effectively accomplishing the tasks entrusted to them.

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4. Acquiring intercultural competence in the military academic environment

Translating the intercultural competence into objectives and correlating it with a system of pedagogical activities and methods contributes to boosting the intercultural training of the future officers of the Land Forces.

We insist on focusing the strategies to build intercultural competence on an interated approach that facilitates the acquisition of intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes, based on a methodical system of creative-participative and socio-cultural activities. At the same time, it is critical to align the final objectives of intercultural competence with the aims of the teaching-learning process, to determine the stages of forming intercultural competence, to establish standards and criteria to assess it, and, not least, to approach this component from an interdisciplinary perspective and to basically adapt the entire academic strategy to target the acquisition of this type of competence.

The strategy we champion is modelled around three main functions: the act of teaching and learning of the disciplines and contents that are culturally oriented (the cognitive function *to know*), forming the logical mechanisms translated into actions (the psychomotor function *to do*), and ultimately the final validation of the knowledge and skills acquired in the process, through creative, participative, and social activities (the component *to be*).

It cannot be denied that language proficiency is a critical element with a major role in forming intercultural effectiveness. While intercultural competence is keystone in understanding culture, language proficiency is by far the most important element underlining human communication. Language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality, is the cornerstone on which culture is built and the main instrument of transmitting cultural values, attitudes and beliefs across generations. (Kramsch, 1998, p. 37)

As a consequence, language becomes inextricably linked to culture, in its every aspect. It is a fundamental component of both individual and national identity, giving shape and form to the physical world, understood and transposed into experience. Without language, culture cannot be realized, understood, internalized or transmitted. Hence, concepts such as culture, interculturality, intercultural intelligence, intercultural communication or intercultural competence cannot be defined in the absence of the language component.

In the context of intercultural competence, language proficiency facilitates the ability of the learners (military students in our case) to observe and be aware of cultural elements, while developing the ability to efficiently interact with(in) a culture. Language proficiency will equip our soldiers with the needed abilities to interact with individuals belonging to a different culture, and to come, in their professional context, to the deep understanding of operationally relevant cultural realities. In our opinion, the interculturally effective soldier must develop language proficiency and intercultural competence from four distinct points of view. They are trained to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes and critical cultural awareness.

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We will see how these aspects mingle in a practical manner, as part of a proposed strategy of approaching forming intercultural competence through focusing on teaching language proficiency. Starting from the proposed objectives, we will present some methods, techniques and activities aimed at developing language proficiency, with a special target on the ultimate objective, which is forming intercultural competence.

At the end of the training program, military students will be able to:

1. distinguish key concepts and specific details regarding cultural values, attitudes, beliefs, norms and manifestations;
2. integrate the content of the target culture within measurable communicative behaviour;
3. promote cultural tolerance in a proactive manner;
4. understand and promote cultural diversity;
5. build and maintain cultural interactions through communication;
6. promote communicative attitudes and behaviours;
7. promote critical perceptions related to their own culture;
8. interact in an intercultural context.

We consider that the best way to accomplish these objectives is by employing a wide range of active-participative strategies, of which we mention the following activities: group discussions, debates, extemporaneous speeches, problem-solution speeches, expressing and argumenting opinions. These activities are carried out in a manner that promotes interaction, cooperation, collaboration, team/group work. In order to do that, we ask the cadets to solve problems together, negotiate and mediate solutions, use critical thinking skills in order to compare cultures and traditions and reach a consensus in order to solve a given problem. We also encourage our students to do extensive research on the proposed topics, by creating contexts in which information acquired through reading and listening is capitalized on during guided discussions, hypothesizing, participating in debates and round table talks. Since it is important that students be sensitized regarding the cultural differences that they may encounter and experience in a given situation, activities such as role plays or simulations also come in hand when we need learners to assume roles and act in situations that are not familiar to them, in order for them to develop tolerance, empathy, and ultimately cultural awareness. Group activities are also advisable so as to build the cadets' confidence in their own relational skills, to promote interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions and to strengthen the cooperation among members of different communities.

At this point, we should not ignore the role of the academic teaching staff in the process (Cosma & Cosma, 2006, p. 112). It is the teacher who is responsible with creating the cultural context of the target language to be acquired. A professional foreign language teacher is a good mediator of intercultural communication, facilitating the merging between two different cultures, experiences, paradigms, systems of values, through language. The teachers themselves must be a model of cultural competence and tolerance, demonstrating they have enriched not only their professional skills but also their

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personality as a consequence of getting into contact with and knowing a new language and culture. Culture is not an additional element of language, but the culture of the target language generates the context in which language abilities are formed. Therefore, through their attitude, experience, manner of organizing the teaching activities, message they put across, the teachers are able to create a suitable environment, similar to that of the culture and language being taught.

5. Conclusions

To sum up, we must stress the necessity of integrating language teaching in the process of acquiring intercultural competence, in the same manner in which no intercultural competence will ever be acquired in the absence of the language component. Although linguistic skills may be enough to convey information, it is well known that it is not a sufficient prerequisite for the act of communication per se. Communicating is not just understanding and being able to use lexical and grammatical structures. For communication to take place, it is also essential to understand the attitudes, behaviours, values, viewpoints, and basically the entire cultural setup of the culture of one's interlocutor. Exchange of information and interaction must not be exclusively limited to the linguistic level, but must extend beyond words, to elements of cultural identity and manifestation thereof.

In conclusion, we may argue that the military intercultural dimension is an absolute necessity in determining the parameters to boost the way in which missions are carried out. This does not depend only on the know-how of procedures and leadership systems, but also on forming an intercultural perspective in order to optimally understand and accept other cultures. Training must therefore supplement instruction aspects with the development of intercultural communication and language competence, so that functioning efficiently in an international military environment becomes an integrative part of the manner in which missions are accomplished. As applied to our military academic context, we must emphasize that especially leading officers, liaison officers and other key personnel have to be trained from a linguistic point of view and also on a cultural level, as they have to be aware of the peculiarities of the professional environment in which they are supposed to act. Language proficiency, intercultural education and intercultural communication skills are of paramount importance in order to develop true intercultural effectiveness.

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