THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE – IS IT A MERE CONCEPT OF ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION OR HAS IT BECOME ALREADY A SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL REALITY?

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Abstract:
As a result of an unprecedented human mobility, the intercultural encounter has turned into normality, almost. In such a context, multicultural coexistence and professional cooperation may only prove to be successful through a proper communication process. The increasing importance of foreign languages at work, as well as in everyday life represents an obvious indicator for the undergoing changes, especially through globalization and technological development, in the world of work, as well as in social life. Starting from data collected based on a survey, this article attempts to establish to what extent the intercultural communication competence is required for learners in their professional and everyday life.

Key-words:
Foreign languages, cross-cultural dialogue, intercultural encounter, intercultural communication competence.

1. The function of intercultural communication competence in professional life and in everyday life

It has turned already into a habit to ask the learners, when starting foreign language courses, why are they attending such a course. The stated reasons, either studying or a job abroad, professional contacts with foreign companies or everyday communication with friends/acquaintances from abroad, share a common point: mobility, namely movement from their own cultural and linguistic environment to another environment, an obviously different one. The interviewees feel that they have a far better chance of personal and professional development provided that they master at least one foreign language.

The key skills required in the modern knowledge-based society have already been established in 2000 at Lisbon by the educational experts of the European Council. Besides the skill of using new information and communication technologies, the social and citizenship skill, entrepreneurship, social interaction skills, the ability to use a foreign language is seen as a basic skill in training the

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contemporary human being. The European Council is fully aware of the key role of linguistic and intercultural competences for the economic, political and cultural development of the new Europe. The requirements are obvious in this respect: each European citizen should have knowledge of two more foreign languages, besides his/her mother tongue, teaching of foreign languages should start from the pre-school stage, and foreign languages should be used as much as possible throughout the teaching process. European citizens must also be aware of the opportunities for personal and professional development, presented to them due to knowledge of more foreign languages.

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* has established an important objective, namely to teach language users who are proficient from the intercultural perspective. This objective is related not only to the ability to properly use a foreign language from the grammar point of view, but also to the ability to overcome misunderstandings resulted from cultural differences. The process of teaching/learning foreign languages deals with a shift of emphasis. Learning foreign languages for a multilingual context means now learning foreign languages for intercultural communication. The tighter is an individual linked to the mother tongue and thus to his/her own cultural environment and thinking, assessment and action patterns specific to his/her culture of origin, the harder it is for him/her to accept another culture and to take cultural and linguistic diversity as a normal phenomenon. The foreign language teachers, through the process of teaching/learning foreign languages, are called to perform the key task of training the learners for a cultural sensitiveness so that they move away from a dangerous ethnocentrism.

A key purpose of the modern process of teaching/learning foreign languages may consist from training the intercultural communication competence, namely the possibility for an individual to express himself/herself in a foreign language and to understand what is being uttered in that same language. However, the intercultural process of teaching/learning foreign languages should focus more towards the so-called *"intercultural speaker"* (Byram 1997: 38), who, in communication situations, proves to have acquired skills beyond a strictly linguistic proficiency, mostly placed in the socio-cultural and social realm, as he/she is

"(...) someone who has a competence different from that of the native speaker, someone who is able to see and establish relationships between languages and cultures, rather than someone who tries, and usually fails, to imitate a native speaker." (Byram 1999: 364)

Every time the intercultural communication concept is debated, a question is raised regarding the relationship between communication and culture. Learning foreign languages obviously results in a contact with a foreign culture, and knowledge of the target culture leads to a better understanding of the entire foreign

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context. However, the relationship between language and reality/culture is far more complex than this statement. Starting from theories of Sapir and Whorf, we can support that perception of the world is influenced by linguistic structures, which entail already an image of reality. The two linguists considered immediate perception of reality to be deceptive, as

"*the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds*" (Whorf, 1956:213).

Taking to opposite direction to that proposed by Sapir and Whorf, many theorists in the field of communication science, especially of linguistics, think that the two fields, language and culture, are inseparable:

"*From a finite experience of speech acts and their interdependence with socio-cultural features, (children) develop a general theory of the speaking appropriate in their community, which they employ, like other forms of tacit cultural knowledge (competence) in conducting and interpreting social life.... From a communicative standpoint, judgments of appropriateness may not be assignable to different spheres, as between the linguistic and the cultural; certainly, the spheres of the two will intersect.*" (Hymes, 1972: 279, 286)

On the other hand, there are numerous critical opinions, especially related to the concept of *lingua franca*, which are fighting a relationship between language and culture, supporting the possibility to ignore such interdependence in certain communication situations, especially, as specified by Widdowson, in pedagogical ones, therefore those related to learning a foreign language:

"*A language will obviously develop so as to meet the conceptual and communicative requirements of its users and the users will exploit it to express their own cultural values. But one can learn and use a language in dissociation from its past or present cultural affinities. There is no equation between language and culture (...) The two are not bound inextricably together. The symbolic relationship between them is not fixed.*" (Widdowson, 1988:18)

However, people managed to learn and continue to learn foreign languages, mainly due to similarities, and also to distinctions between different linguistic and cultural systems, which are highlighted exactly through human interaction, especially in intercultural communication situations. International cooperation and coexistence with people from other cultures involves for all actors in the network to have highly developed social skills. Also, they must prove flexibility with many branches: organizational, linguistic and especially cultural one.

Professional fulfillment means today, first and foremost, professionalization through complex qualifications, ranging from knowledge of the selected vocational field, to special skills and competences, which can be acquired throughout initial vocational training and which are to be established and

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developed afterwards by exercising the job and by gathering experience. The vocational profile thus involves theoretical knowledge, as well as practical experience. To this profile, however, we must add training the skill of using foreign languages, which is responsible with the development of intercultural communication competence.

2. Intercultural encounter in the world of work and in everyday life contexts

As a result of unprecedented human mobility, intercultural contact has become almost ordinary. However, due to interpreting the behavior of the foreign interlocutor through the lens of our own cultural model and, many times, due to impossibility to predict a behavior, the intercultural encounter continues to generate fear, uncertainty, and frustration. The contact is regarded as an intercultural one only when two representatives of at least two different cultures are facing each other. The differences are to be identified, first and foremost, in the identity of the actors involved, who, naturally, have not become socialized in the same cultural context. In this case, it is not the culture itself which generates interest, but culture under its immediate shape, meaning those elements which differentiate or bring cultures together. The intercultural contact becomes operational through communication alone, while communication happens through foreign languages. The genuine intercultural contact entails first-hand, personal, individual experience, therefore authenticity:

"*Die fremde Sprache und Kultur können als ein Spiegel fungieren, der unbewußte Züge und Besonderheiten der muttersprachlichen und eigenkulturellen Interaktion offenlegt.*" (Kaikkonen, 2001:85)

The intercultural contact is a dialogic action ("*dialogos"* from ancient Greek, where "*dia*" means "*between*", and "*logos*" – "*something reasoned*"), through which the actors involved step into an intermediate space, where they intend to communicate their thoughts and experiences. This intermediate space, which has received different designations in theoretic approaches – "*intermediary space*" (Bolten, 1999), "*third place between their own and foreign*" (Kramsch, 1995), "*third position/third space*" (Bachmann-Medick, 1999), "*buffer zone*" (Alexandru, 2003), has practically the same meaning: it reconciles cultural and linguistic elements from both contexts and releases synergetic forces.

Through intercultural contact, in this intermediate space of dialogue, a "*melting of horizons*" takes place, in Gadamer's understanding, as each actor involved achieves a new position, which oversees the one he/she brought into communication initially, and the acceptance of new represents an "*enrichment*" of the self. This crossroad for cultures and languages, whatever its designation, draws also the attention over the fact that the relationship between *own* and *foreign* is not

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a definitive opposition, instead it relies on transitions, transgressions, transpositions. Only so a shift of perspectives becomes possible.

The intercultural perspective also establishes by definition that an intercultural encounter is not about individuals as themselves, but about representatives of a certain culture, who are characterized through a number of common elements: language, history, understanding of the world, religion. These features hallmarks, consciously or unconsciously, thinking and behavior for members of a group, thus they could be identified, and also differentiated from other groups.

The main symbols, which allow for cultures to be compared, vary depending on certain dimensions. An example in this respect is Hofstede's research (1993) regarding dimensions of a culture. Through his empirical research he came to the conclusion that the four socio-psychological dimensions, common to all cultures subjected to analysis – distance from authority, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/feminity and tolerance towards ambiguity – make the difference between cultures to a larger or a smaller extent.

Dependency towards authority expresses the relationship between a boss and a subordinate within an institution or organization, therefore the extent to which disparity of power is exercised within a culture. The roots for differences in terms of behavior in front of authority are to be found in family, as it is the pattern to follow in inter-human relations throughout the entire life. If inter-human relations are built on subordination, hierarchy, subjection, authority, disparity in cultures displaying high values of dependency towards authority, in those cultures with a low level for this factor the dominating features are freedom, democracy, independence, inter-dependence, equality, personal initiative, self-determination.

The individualism/collectivism dimension displays the degree to which individuals are integrated in social groups. The difference results either from membership to a large, powerful, closed group, where the focus is placed on "*us*" (collectivist cultures), or from membership to a relatively restricted group, permissive inside and outside, where the focus is placed on "*me*" (individualist cultures).

The masculinity/feminity dimension brings under discussion the nature of behavior within a culture. Masculinity defines a determined, strong, materialist behavior, based on recognition and challenge, while feminity, on the contrary, orients itself towards sensitiveness, cooperation, safety, quality.

New, unknown, unfamiliar situations make up for a permanent threat, this is why individuals need a forecast, a foresight in order to decrease their anxiety and incertitude. The fourth dimension identified by Hofstede and entitled "*uncertainty avoidance*" refers exactly to the behavior developed by the actors involved in such situations. The keys for mastering the situation are message transparency and interpretation clarity.

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It is important to learn how to live in an intercultural context, how to approach daily life from the perspective of cultural and linguistic difference and diversity, in order to develop the ability to undertake an intercultural dialogue.

3. Starting point and research context: the intercultural dimension of the learning and teaching process for foreign languages

The focus of the teaching/learning of foreign languages around the needs and requirements of the target group, as for those who want to train and develop an intercultural communication competence for professional purposes, call for the availability of teaching staff able to design an educational supply that matches demands.

This perspective raises, on one hand, the question whether learners or trainers perceive the existence of the intercultural dimension within the teaching/learning process of foreign languages and, on the other hand, to what extent are they aware that teaching/learning foreign languages is an intercultural type of dialogue, even if the school environment is relatively or even entirely homogenous. I start from the assumption that the process of teaching/learning foreign languages involves an intercultural dimension no matter which is the degree of homogeneity of the educational environment. The process of teaching/learning foreign languages is not built upon conveying and respectively learning the target language alone, but also upon explaining and respectively understanding the target culture.

My starting point is represented by the following question: To what extent is the intercultural communication competence required to learners throughout the process of teaching/learning foreign languages, in their work and in their everyday life.

4. Empirical research

In order to check whether my point of view coincides with that of pupils and students, I have performed an empirical research, based on surveying 650 individuals, who are directly involved in the process of teaching/learning foreign languages and who activate in almost entirely homogenous school environments[1]. The distribution per categories of subjects is the following: 50 university teachers in the field of Philology, 200 foreign language teachers in pre-university education, 200 students from departments of foreign language and literature, potential future teachers of foreign languages and 200 pupils. Thus all the four links involved in the educational process were taken into account. Research was performed in the time interval of January-June 2009.

[1] The research is far broader, we only display here data regarding the needs for training intercultural communication competence at the level of pupils and students.

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The 200 pupils were in the 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th form when the survey was performed in the „Ienăchiță Văcărescu" National College of Târgoviște. The 200 students were learners attending the courses of the Faculty for Foreign Language and Literature of the „Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University of Bucharest and, respectively, of the Bucharest University. The sample included students from all four years of study. What is typical for both cases is the homogenous school context from the cultural and linguistic point of view.

The survey of the sample included in the research was performed with the help of a standardized questionnaire. I have used this tool, as it allows for questioning a high number of subjects. The collected data may be relevant for the specialized teaching decisions as well as for the field of educational policies.

The focus of research is placed on the theoretical concept of the intercultural communication competence, and also on its relevance in practice and on possibilities to translate it in professional and everyday life. This is why I have taken into consideration for this article only the answers of pupils and students, as the preoccupation for conveying the intercultural communication competence finds itself in front of an important task: to clarify what is being understood through this concept within the educational environment. Pupils and students are actually those who shall directly use this competence and, starting from their needs, teachers may also develop patterns, methods and strategies of teaching.

5. Presenting and interpreting research results

The first question (*To what extent do you feel that the following concepts are required in your social and professional life?*) brings forward a few key skills, namely: the skill to interact, to accept cultural and linguistic diversity, to adapt to other cultures and mindsets, for socio-cultural and linguistic reflection, the intercultural communication skill, for communication in several foreign languages, the skill of perception/understanding cultural differences. As one can see in Figure 1, in the opinion of the 200 pupils interviewed, the very important and important skills for their social life and professional fulfillment are: plurilingualism (1.26 pts.), interaction skill (1.40 pts.) and intercultural communication competence (1.72 pts.). All items were answered on a Likert scale with five steps ranging from (1) „the most important" to (5) „the least important". The following hierarchy of items was configured ranging from the most important to the least important: plurilingualism (1.26), interaction skills (1.40), intercultural communication skill (1.72), acceptance of cultural and linguistic diversity (1.91), adaptation to other cultures and mindsets (1.93), perceiving/understanding cultural differences (1.95) and socio-cultural and linguistic reflection (2.17). Obviously, the focus is generally placed on interaction and especially on communication in at least one foreign language. The hierarchy of chosen skills shows the fact that pupils with ages

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ranging from 15 to 19, who are enrolled in a general high-school, are aware of the way in which these skills are trained and developed. This is something that they know only as a result of their own experience, by covering the educational plan. They start learning the first foreign language already from kindergarten or primary school, then they continue with a second foreign language or even more and this is how plurilingualism is trained and developed. Only then the next two skills start to be trained and developed – the interaction skill and the intercultural communication competence –, as resulted from the hierarchy of pupils, which considers these important in their social and professional fulfillment. It is also very clear for them that training the ability to interact and to have intercultural communication depends on the level of knowledge for the target language. This is why learning of at least one foreign language is very important in this stage.

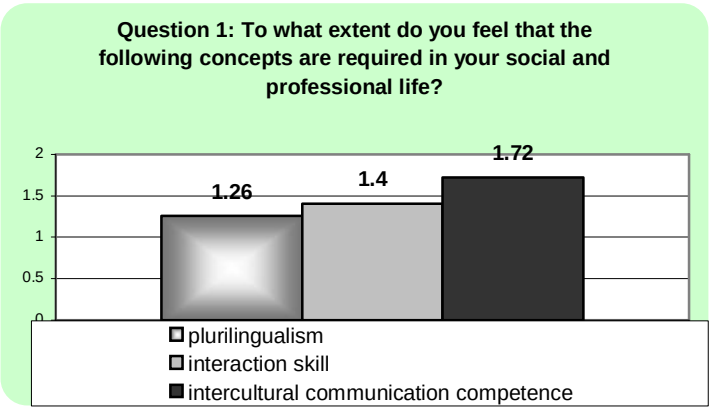


Figure 1

The topic of the next figure is precisely the relationship among the above mentioned skills and the process of teaching/learning foreign languages (Question 2: *To what extent can the following skills be assimilated during the foreign language classes?*). The clear conclusion of Figure 2 is that the skills that may be trained and developed to a very large and large extent within the process of teaching/learning foreign languages are the following: plurilingualism (1.45 pts.), interaction skill (2.00 pts.) and intercultural communication competence (2.09 pts.). One can notice, also, that the order of skills is preserved unchanged. This is what confirms the reason – personal experience – indicated as the main criterion in establishing the hierarchy of skills for the previous question.

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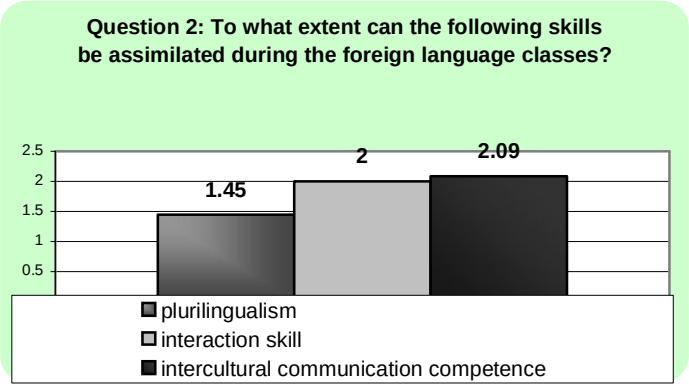


Figure 2

With the help of the next question I wanted to check if pupils have actually perceived these skills during foreign language classes and which are the skills provided as options that they developed the most. (Question 3: *Which of the following skills have you already developed during foreign language classes?*) Out of the seven skills (interaction skill, acceptance of cultural and linguistic diversity, adaptation to other cultures and mindsets, socio-cultural and linguistic reflection, intercultural communication competence, perceiving/understanding cultural differences and plurilingualism), 23% of the interviewed pupils have indicated plurilingualism as being the skill that they have already developed during the foreign language classes. This can be explained through the structure of the educational plan: one or two foreign languages are mandatory subjects of study for pupils and even a third foreign language is an optional subject of study for the Humanities profile of study. The socio-cultural and linguistic reflection is the skill with the lowest percentage (6%), which was to be expected. By also taking into consideration the answers of teachers from the pre-university educational environment, the explanation would consist from the fact that comparative analyses are not performed on a regular base, as needed, between the target culture and language and the Romanian culture and language. The contrastive analysis and the dialogue on cultural differences and similarities could contribute to a better perception of the foreigner, to an increased awareness of our own identity and our own cultural values. The percentages registered for the other skills are: interaction – 18%, perceiving/understanding cultural differences – 15%, intercultural communication competence and acceptance of cultural and linguistic diversity – 13% and adaptation to other cultures and mindsets – 12%.

During the next stage, I wished to find out which are the factors that may contribute to training and developing the above mentioned skills. The most

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important factor, as one can see from the figure (Fig. 3), as expected, is the foreign language teacher with 1.27 points. Then the following: time intervals spent in the foreign/target socio-cultural context (1.35 pts.), contact with nativs in the target context (1.37 pts.), contact with foreigners in the socio-cultural context of the foreign language learners (1.40 pct.), audio-visual teaching/learning materials (1.65 pts.), tourism (1.86 pts.) and authentic texts (2.05 pts.), factors which may also play an important role. It is absolutely obvious that, on one hand, the foreign language teacher is considered a middleman, a representative of the target culture, a fact which is self-understood for the educational contexts that are homogenous from a cultural and linguistic point of view and, on the other hand, immediate contact with the targeted cultural and linguistic environment, their own experience, in other words, a genuine intercultural encounter might help them to better and easier understand the target culture as well as their own culture. This explains the very high percentage of the surveyed sample (97.5%) who thing that the foreign language teachers should have a proper vocational training. This means that initial vocational training should also include an intercultural dimension, so that teachers may convey, train and develop the intercultural communication competence.

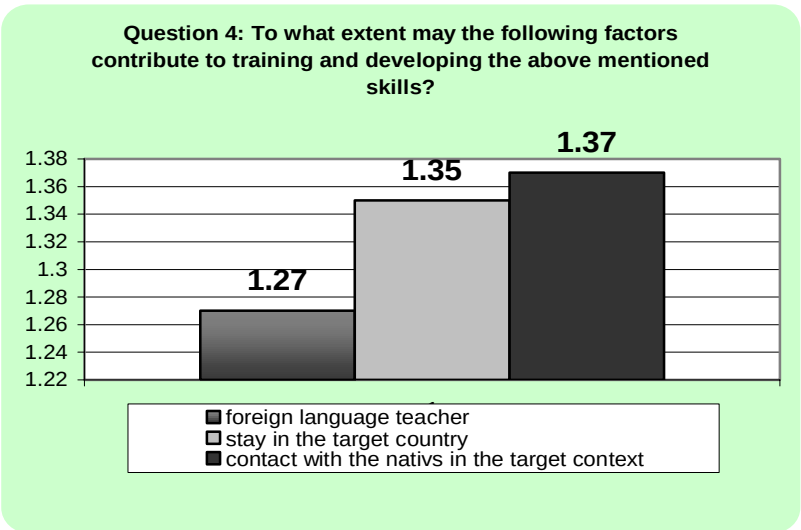


Figure 3

The pupils consider the foreign language teacher to be the most important factor in conveying the intercultural communication competence. What is the reflection on this conclusion from behalf of students in foreign languages who

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wish to become foreign language teachers? For the 200 interviewed persons, learning foreign languages means to a very large extent (1.38 pts.) to have a better future, namely a safer professional, as well as a social route. They feel that plurilingualism is a key condition for social and professional life in the modern globalized society, and they are aware to a large extent (2.05 points) of the fact that this globalization is translated at the same time into shifts at economic, political, social, as well as educational level. From an intercultural, cross-border-based perspective, initial vocational training represents for students to a large extent (2.33 points) a complex process entailing three layers – knowledge, sensitiveness and actionality. These layers should, according to the opinion of the interviewed, represent the basic initial training of foreign language teachers.

6. Final remarks

For pupils, as well as for students, a foreign culture is conveyed through the foreign language, and the foreign language teachers "*are cross-border professionals*", even if the educational environment is homogenous from the cultural and linguistic point of view. The process of teaching/learning foreign languages is a two-folded intercultural dialogue: increasing awareness of our own identity through reflection on our own language and culture and developing new fields of action by training the intercultural communication competence.

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