Contextualising Culture in Teaching a Foreign Language: the Cultural Element among Cultural Awareness, Cultural Competency and Cultural Literacy

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Keywords: *cultural awareness*; *cultural competence*; *cultural literacy*; *foreign language teaching*; *cultural element*

1. Introduction

The authors of the present study have been motivated to approach this subject by their professional experience in the field of teaching Romanian as a foreign language to expats and not only for more than 10 years. In addition, dedicated research into this matter, active participation in conferences with lectures on the same topic, as well as previous publications focused on including the cultural element in the process of teaching a foreign language recommend us to pursue this path that may change the perspective of tackling the road of achieving knowledge and competency in apprehending, understanding and using a foreign linguistic instrument of communication. Thus, reference to the presentation called *Cultural Literacy in Teaching a Foreign Language* defended in 2017, at Bucharest, on the occasion of the 17th edition of the International Conference of the Department of Linguistics, "Diachrony and Synchrony in the Study of the Romanian Language", and the paper *The Importance of the Cultural Element in Teaching a Foreign Language* published in the "Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov" (Nechifor, Borca 2016: 99–108), are just two arguments to support and prove our constant interest in the matter, the ongoing process of experimenting with designing the series of manuals from A1 to C2 levels of language competency being the other permanent preoccupation in the field.

2. Literature review

2.1. Society and culture

Starting from basic research questions such as: what is culture?; what is its relation to language?; which and whose culture should be taught?; what role should the learners' culture play in the acquisition of knowledge of the target culture?; how can we avoid essentializing cultures and teaching stereotypes? and "how can we

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„Philologica Jassyensia", an XVI, nr. 2 (32), 2020, p. 287–304

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develop in the learners an *intercultural competence* that would short-change neither their own culture nor the target culture, but would make them into cultural mediators in a globalized world?" (our emphasis) (Kramsch 2013: 57), the next target will be to try to better understand and define the framework of analysis, the relationships between a society and its culture, a culture and its language, which are of utmost importance in order to generate the correct context for the discussion in case.

Thus, an either supra- or sub- affiliation has been assigned to a society in connection to its culture and, consequently, was perceived as either defining and infusing its characteristics into the elements of culture, or, at the opposite end, as absorbing them and simply reflecting them. But probably the best representation of this relationship was rendered by T.S. Eliot (1973), when he referred to it in terms of *incarnation*, thus putting on a par, in a symbiotic or osmotic mechanism the symmetrical influence that society and culture can have over each other, generating one another and continuously determining one another, as a dynamic and perfectly equilibrated organism. Consequently, when accounting for the particular elements that configure a culture in its traits, one has to always include visible items from language, arts, politics, literature, sports, philosophy, economy, physical setting, history, music, habits, or religion circumscribing that territory. However, sometimes, the majority of them can be reduced to icons that pass the test of time and survive, rightfully or unrightfully, in the public eye as defining emblems, of that nation. That is why, when teaching a foreign language to new candidates, they have to be referred to accurate resources and have to be offered the information that, in a nutshell, can make the politically correct profile of that nation and its society in its characteristic terms.

Karen Risager, trying to understand what makes a culture that particular culture, when asking herself: "What forms of culture are associated with the Russian language? What forms of culture are associated with the English language?" (Risager 2005: 190) stated that: "No language is culturally neutral. All natural languages (i.e. their users) constantly produce and reproduce culture (i.e. meaning)" (Risager 2005: 189) only proving, once again, Eliot's theory of *incarnation*, when equating society and culture and establishing a connection to Benedict Anderson's opinion when he stated, in 2000: "Yes, the fact that I was born a French is a hazard; but after all, France is eternal" (our translation) (Anderson 2000: 15). But what may come as an irony with some nations is their unquenched thirst and determination to define their identity, irony that practically transposes into identifying them as social individualities through this very process of permanently trying to find their identity. And, according to Chiriță, this was the exact case of the Romanian people whose "trait of their national specificity is their perseverance in the endeavour of deciphering this specific" (Chiriță 1998: 74) (our translation). And this may be yet another reason, especially in what we are concerned, as a minor culture on the canvas of cultures in the world, to implement within our language classes, when teaching Romanian as a foreign language, but without diminishing the importance of this approach to any language taught as a foreign language, cultural elements in a manner that was made visible by Nechifor and Borca (2016: 99–108) in a previous paper and by Borca (2019) in her series of manuals dedicated to teaching Romanian as a foreign language which are tailored according to this principle.

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As Nistor puts into perspective, modern philosophy makes the difference between "minor" cultures and "major" cultures" (Nistor 2002: 63), the concepts properly belonging to the Romanian philosopher, Lucian Blaga (Blaga 1994: 8). And even though the difference or the characteristics of each is still undistinguishable to some, "suffering from deep imprecisions" (Blaga 1994: 8), minor cultures can be associated to "ethno-graphical" cultures, while major ones can also be named "monumental" cultures. However, what is made clear by the creator of the distinction himself is the fact that not all researchers attribute to these two concepts a pejorative connotation and that the ages of the cultures are not determining factors in naming them with the two denominations used as such. Still, the exterior, dimensional criterion not being a sufficient one in further illuminating the status of these two types of cultures, the philosopher suggests another approach, by using a complementary "qualitative-structural criterion" (Blaga 1994: 8) which has the merit to cast light over the matter by generating "a sort of a prism by means of which a certain stylistic matrix is created" incorporating "complexes of structures" "under the particular form of a culture" (Blaga 1994: 12). Thus, the minor or the major aspect of a culture becomes exclusively a problem of the psychology of their creators, but a minor culture should never be neglected out of being catalogued as minor, on the contrary, its richness and savour ensuring the lasting effect of a perpetual blooming surprise. And what other good example for such a culture could there be if not the folkloric Romanian culture (Blaga 1994: 13)[2], with its village essence whose elegy Blaga even made on the occasion of his admission inaugural speech at the Romanian Academy.

2.2. Language and Culture

Nevertheless, there is a further, even more significant connection that needs to be taken into account when tackling the perspectivisation of the cultural element, besides the relationship established between a society and its culture: that of the bound generated between language and culture.

While Emmitt and Pollock (1997) consider that a language has its roots in culture and that culture, in its turn, is reflected in the language and passed on from one generation to the next, Hantrais is of the opinion that "culture is the beliefs and practices governing the life of a society for which a particular language is the vehicle of expression" (Hantrais 1989: 17). Therefore, everyone's opinions depend on the culture which fostered them, which, in their turn, are described using the language which has been shaped by that culture. That is why, the understanding of a culture and of its people can be improved by the acquaintance with their language. Furthermore, in a more integrative way, Kramsch saw the rapport between language and culture from two perspectives: synchronically and diachronically, i.e. socially and historically, practically embodying the sociocultural aspect of the approach. But besides them, she identified another one:

> Discourse communities are characterized not only by facts and artefacts, but by common dreams, fulfilled and unfulfilled imaginings. These imaginings are mediated

[2] All quotations from Lucian Blaga were rendered in our translation.

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> through the language, that over the life of the community reflects, shapes, and is a metaphor for its cultural reality. Language is intimately linked not only to the culture that is and the culture that was, but also to the culture of the imagination that governs people's decisions and actions far more than we may think (Kramsch 1998: 8).

So, besides sharing a social context which imposes, over time, certain patterns of behaviour, reactions, beliefs, etc. which are all reflected in the language use of that community which is, in this way, characterised in its fundamental traits, the people communally living together on a certain territory are also witnesses to the changes that the passage of time brings upon their lifestyle, which is again caught and relayed by language as an instrument of a chronicler. But besides the fact that "the people express facts, ideas or events that are communicable because they refer to a stock of knowledge about the world that other people share" (Kramsch 1998: 3), thus expressing a cultural tangible reality, they also materialise their dreams, hopes, aspirations and future visions through language, shaping a prospective reality: "people do not only express experience but they also create experience through language" (Kramsch 1998: 66). Consequently, from a pragmatic point of view, the characteristic traits of different peoples, including verbal and non–verbal aspects, reflect the fact that "language embodies cultural reality" (Kramsch 1998: 14), from the way in which people speak or write to each other, use the tone of their voices, have a certain conversational style, gestures or mimics. That is why, sometimes, the social rejection of someone's language, when only hearing it, is typically associated to the anathema and resentment that certain societies have regarding others, but this has usually nothing to do with the person speaking the language, or to the sound of it per se. And the explanation resides, again, in the powerful connection established between a society, its users, the language they speak and the culture imbued in it. Subsequently, the need to feel included, accepted, the sense of belonging to a community only starts with acquiring its language, while all the other cultural aspects contribute, in fact, to the larger perception of one's nidation to a new world:

> To identify themselves as members of a community, people have to define themselves jointly as insiders against others, whom they thereby define as outsiders. Culture, as a process that both includes and excludes, always entails the exercise of power and control (Kramsch 1998: 8).

From this, it is obviously derived that learning a new language involves the learning of a new culture (Allwright, Bailey 1991). Consequently, teachers of a language are also teachers of culture (Byram 1989) and it is also their role, not (only) that of some other teachers' of, for example, history, geography, etc. to deal with it. Thus, according to Leveridge, the language teacher must instruct her students regarding

> the cultural background of language usage, choose culturally appropriate teaching styles, and explore culturally based linguistic differences to promote understanding instead of misconceptions or prejudices. Language policy must be used to create awareness and understandings of cultural differences, and written to incorporate the cultural values of those being taught (Leveridge 2008: web page).

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3. Grounding the research

Starting from the motivational and needs analysis of foreigners regarding their desire, choice and sometimes necessity to approach learning the Romanian language, the basic idea of focusing on the cultural element during this process emerged as inevitable, being pragmatically encompassed in the diversity of reasons offered by the subjects interrogated regarding this aspect. On the occasion of the 2010, 2011 and 2012 editions of the *Learn Romanian in Romania* Summer School organised in Braşov under the patronage of the Romanian Cultural Institute in collaboration with *Transilvania* University of Braşov, the participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire regarding their motivation for choosing to learn Romanian as a foreign language. 60 answers invoked "personal and professional reasons", 21 of them said they wanted to become undergraduate and then postgraduate students of a bachelor and master programme in Romania, 39 sought to polish their level of Romanian obviously having had previous experience with taking up this language, 2 resorted to their previous experience with the programme and, "because I studied the intermediate level and I liked it" they wanted to continue within the same framework, one of them needed to develop his business, 5 others wanted to obtain the Romanian citizenship and to permanently establish themselves in Romania, another person perceived learning Romanian as an opportunity and as an advantage for her occupation and even as a bonus entry in her CV, while another person mentioned still job related arguments, but connected to his career as a diplomat ("to be able to successfully fulfil my mission as a diplomat in Bucharest"). But what came striking from the answers was the sense of belonging to the community, the desire to integrate in a world which was not theirs, the desire to melt in the pot of the newly adopted language, culture and civilisation. Thus, mention is worth being made of the following arguments, which double motivated us, not only as observers of the phenomenon, but also as members of the organising team and of the teaching staff of the summer school: "to be able to get hired and to get integrated in the community", "to live and work better in Romania, professionally and socially" (101 persons), "in order to be able to talk with Romanian people and therefore, being more easily integrated within the society and the professional environment" (81 persons), "to better communication with my colleagues in company, with friends and family" (19 persons), "pleasure" (11 persons), "to be able to communicate as much as possible with Romanian people in their own language in order to experience more of the Romanian culture (to understand the Romanian culture better, for what I think, language is indispensable)" (48 persons), "I like Romanian language and I'm respecting it. This respect do I want to show with learning it" (2 persons), "When I heard of a Latin language so isolated from all the others, I thought that it would be interesting to learn it some day; and when that day came, I did so… (the Romanian philosophy, musicology, language and literature)"[3].

[3] All these answers are accessible, upon request, in the authors' Google Drive, as extracts from the questionnaires previously mentioned. All the quotations rendered above were kept as in the original answers, hence the presence of some language mistakes, which we decided to preserve out of authorship considerations and according to the idea of being faithful to the original versions. However,

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This outlook regarding the reasons and motivation people had when approaching the study of the Romanian language contributes to profiling the concept of the cultural element and its status, but also its nature, thus dissolving the controversy which made the subject of certain discussions regarding whose culture should be taught, i.e. the students' learning a foreign language or that of the language they want to learn. According to Gay, "the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters" (Gay 2002: 106), an opinion shared by Au and Kawakami in 1994, Foster in 1995, Hollins in 1996, Kleinfeld in 1975 and Ladson-Billings in 1994 and 1995, as mentioned by Gay herself. Starting from teaching defined as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (Gay 2002: 106) it was assumed that "when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly" (Gay 2002: 106), thus smoothing the process of acquiring a new language.

In view of this perspective, but also considering the arguments above, the loss in the process of teaching a foreign language through the cultural lenses of the source language, of the mother tongue of the candidates, out of the sole reason to ensure a familiar background context and atmosphere for learning, is tremendous on the part of the degree of complexity the very basic idea of delving oneself into another language entangles. And mention should be made, solely of pragmatic motives, that even for being granted a new citizenship, there are countries which still require, as part of their selection process, besides all the administrative and legal documentation and proofs of status, past records, job stability and performance, recommendations, etc., a language test and an examination of the knowledge regarding that country's history and geography. Linking this to the practical aspects of a societal approach to immersion of one person into the life of the new country whose citizen one wants to become, into the spirit of that nation, culture and civilisation and corroborating this with the reasons many of the candidates interrogated by us offered for their motivation to learn Romanian, the profile of a cohesive language school dealing with teaching foreign languages become intricately connected to having a special curriculum design whose core should encompass the cultural element of the target language being taught.

Nevertheless, what is to be retained from Gay and considered from the viewpoint of culturalism when dealing with instruction in a multicultural environment, is the concept of "culturally responsive teaching", whose five essential traits establish a welcomed perspectivisation over being a conscious teacher in a classroom full of different cultural backgrounds:

> developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring and building learning

the last quote, belonging to Dominik Kreuzer, a participant in the Summer School of 2010, is rendered in our translation, as the answer was provided in Romanian.

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> communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction (Gay 2002: 106).

Examples extracted from our first-hand experience in multicultural classes obviously support the importance of awareness regarding cultural sensitivity in such a diverse teaching environment. Thus, talking about the inhabitants of mongoloid origin of the Arctic regions of North America, Russia, Alaska, Nunavik and Greenland in terms of Eskimos in a class where a student comes from North Canada and is up to date with the politically correct terminology denominating them can turn into a very sensitive cultural issue, generated by the teacher's lack of knowledge regarding, for example, the amendment brought in May 2016, to modify the Department of Energy Organization Act and the Local Public Works Capital Development and Investment Act of 1976 in order to modernize terms relating to minorities. Thus, Alaska natives would have proved to be a far better term to be used in the context of that class focused on identifying national characteristics of different peoples of the world without jeopardising the integrity of the discourse regarding such a delicate aspect as this one seemed to be for M. S., the Canadian candidate to learning Romanian mentioned above. In the same line of thought, referring to the inhabitants of the large territory of the entire American continent simply as "Americans" without specifically localising the exact part of the three Americas stretching on that continent, appeared confusing and troubling for L., a Brazilian local, who couldn't reason with the discussion and stopped the class for clarifications. Moreover, teaching the concept of "exotic fruits" associated to oranges, lemons, pineapples, mangos, kiwis, grapefruit, bananas and so on to a population of students coming from areas such as Asia and/or South America can represent an offence of huge dimensions, only proving cultural unawareness on the part of the teacher in that context. The same would be accusing students raised under a very strict political regime whose educational policy requires them to learn a great deal of information by heart of having copied in the exams when all they actually did was to reproduce the data learnt line-for-line, thus complying with the internal set of regulations and with the rules traditionally rooted in them by their home educational establishments, as it is the case of North Korea and China. Last, but not least, being able to decipher even non-verbal cues associated to certain nationalities can equip a teacher in such a multinational class with the extra skill that usually makes him/her the professional needed under such circumstances. An example can reveal the importance the Asians give to the philtrum, which is the sub-nasal groove connecting the base of the nostrils to the upper lip and which, when perspiring, can give a person away regarding his/her state of nervousness, reason for which the Asian even consider a philtrum reduction surgery, as brought to our attention and knowledge by L., from South Korea.

4. Venturing a claim

In view of all these considerations, hence the necessity of initiating, preserving and developing a complex programme of teaching Romanian as a foreign language, within which, besides the Romanian classes, a culturally diverse agendum is a must, comprising elements of Romanian culture in its diversity: field trips to

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historical, geographical, and spiritual places, music hearings, traditional dance lessons, acting classes, journalism issues, topic oriented conferences, cooking workshops, film evenings, etc. in order for the candidates to learning Romanian to get familiar and accustomed to our way. Such a Summer School existed for 25 years, between 2008 and 2018 having even been organised in joint partnership by the Romanian Cultural Institute and the Faculty of Letters of *Transilvania* University of Brasov, but its spirit needs to be multiplied and implemented within every such programme, being it a preparatory year for foreign students, interested in accomplishing their education in Romania, institutionally organised Romanian classes or simply tutorials or customised private classes. And this would be really possible if the cultural element were widely approached and minutely described, in all its facets, nuances and components, as well as rigorously defined in its characteristic features. Its implementation would target all levels, being them language levels, as considered according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, or linguistic levels, from phonetics to pragmatics, as unfolded, with examples, by Nechifor and Borca (2016: 104–107) whose attempt will be carried on in a subsequent, more ambitious forthcoming project. This one encompasses the concept of *cultural literacy* as a compulsory element to be taken into account in the process of teaching a foreign language and targets the idea of introducing, as a 5th component next to the classical set of the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening, the notion of *cultural element*, by emphasising its importance and by trying to define its territory, benefits, characteristics and limitations. For this, the authors put forward and would like to introduce in the specialised literature addressing this matter the concept of *culturacy*, a term coined from *cultural literacy*, which would obviously be a part of the five-folded pattern of skills necessary to be acquired by anyone trying to learn a foreign language. But, in order for delineations to be clear cut and distinctions to be straightforwardly perceived, a quick overview of the nature of the *cultural element* will be made, as well as a presentation of the background of the situation concerning the concept of *cultural awareness* in the context of multicultural classes when teaching a foreign language. So, what is required is a more in-depth analysis of the complexity of the teaching environment in the context of a canvas of backgrounds which individualize among the distinct participants in the multicultural language class, as well as a better understanding of the difficulty of implementing the target language's cultural element in the routine of teaching process.

For this, another extremely sensitive concept has to be correctly perceived and embodied in the behaviour, approach, style and methods of a teacher performing in such classes and that is *cultural awareness,* none other, actually, than what Kramsch (2013: 57) referred to as *intercultural competence*. Described in terms of *practical intelligence*, or *social intelligence* by Robert Sternberg (2002), or approached from the point of view of *cultural stereotypes* by Hanh Thi Nguyen and Guy Kellogg (2010), cultural awareness can make the difference between a successful and fruitful foreign language class and a non-successful one against the background of the cultural diversity and of the multitude of social, religious and educational learning styles and cultural habits of the students enrolled in such a class. And the target here is double-folded: on the one hand, to equip the teachers of these multicultural classes

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with this skill in order to avoid embarrassing situations and to ensure a comfortable atmosphere and a politically correct teaching environment and, on the other hand, to develop this skill into the students, so as to make them aware of cultural differences, but more importantly to introduce them to the culture of the language they are about to learn in such a way that, at the same time with acquiring the classical four language skills to become sensitive and aware of the new context that will require them to use the new language into.

According to Amy Thompson, associate professor of applied linguistics at University of South Florida:

> Language learning inevitably involves learning about different cultures. Students pick up clues about the culture both in language classes and through meaningful immersion experiences (Thompson 2016: web page).

Her interpretation also refers to the benefits which can be derived from this experience, both at a cognitive and at an emotional level, the most important one, but, unfortunately, not so obvious one, being that

> language learning improves tolerance. This happens in two important ways. The first is that it opens people's eyes to a way of doing things in a way that's different from their own, which is called, «cultural competence» The second is related to the comfort level of a person when dealing with unfamiliar situations, or «tolerance of ambiguity» (Thompson 2016: web page).

4.1. Cultural awareness

Cultural awareness is, according to our opinion, the first step to be apprehended and acquired by both the students and the teacher of a multicultural class, but also exchanged between them when involved in a multicultural educational environment.

Described by Tomalin and Stempleski as "sensitivity to the impact of culturally-induced behaviour on language use and communication" (Tomalin, Stempleski 1998: 5), the term cultural awareness encompasses the idea of sympathy in communication by displaying subtlety to the difference between what you code and/or decode and what the interlocutor codes and/or decodes, i.e. being conscious that human interaction differs from one people to another, from one culture to another, from one society to another, from one nation to another. That is to say that, the moment one realises that on the inside we can be all alike but also "irreducibly unique and different, and that I could have been you, you could have been me, given different circumstances – in other words, that the stranger… is in us" (Kramsch 1996: 3), the concept of cultural awareness stands good chances of leading to perceiving that there is

> a gradually developing inner sense of the equality of cultures, an increased understanding of your own and other people's cultures, and a positive interest in how cultures both connect and differ. Such awareness can broaden the mind, increase tolerance and facilitate international communication (Tomlinson 2001: 5).

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According to Ibrahim El-Hussari's point of view, cultural awareness ties the knot between text and context, weaving a more grounded canvas of successful communication in a multicultural environment:

> Cultural awareness is a process in which language learning offers an opportunity for students to develop a shared world of interaction and experience through discovering the meaning of text in relation to its context of situation, a process during which students negotiate and create a new reality by using their own frames of reference, deriving basically from their life world experience and socio-cultural background (El-Hussari 2011: 115).

The implication is that the lack of cultural awareness restricts how the foreign language speaker exploits his linguistic potential. Stern states that "one of the most important aims of culture teaching is to help the learner gain an understanding of the native speaker's perspective" (Stern, 1992: 216–217). Thus, the pretty embarrassing role of a *fluent fool*, in Barnlund's words (1999: 6), can be avoided for any candidate to learning a foreign language, as understanding a foreign language does not rely exclusively on linguistic accuracy but also on understanding the speaker's whole range of meaning which depends just as much on comprehending cultural norms and expectations. Thus, studying the culture alongside the language has already elbowed its way to aspiring to the status of a fifth official skill. "Human understanding is by no means guaranteed because conversants share the same dictionary" (Barnlund 1999: 6), the inference being that "learning the cultural roots of a language is essential for meaningful fluency" (Seelye, 1993: 275). *Meaningful fluency* is a concept which is spectacular from the point of view of a linguist in the shoes of a foreign language teacher, as inducing fluency in the linguistic performance of a student, especially in speaking, has probably always been seen as the supreme talent in a teacher, but associating meaning to this fluency trespasses the boundaries of language teaching and roots itself in the pragmatism of cultural awareness.

Of the two sides of cultural awareness that Liddicoat put forward in 2002, the static versus the dynamic, the former does not make the interest of the present study as according to it, learners are mere passive recipients of cultural information, while the latter boosts the vision over the entire process of foreign language teaching, learners being actively involved in the catalytic process of acquiring language and culture at the same time, before firstly having been made aware of their own cultural heritage, their own cultural luggage, and, consequently, their culturally pre-set behaviour. And this simply comes hand in hand with Campinha-Bacote's view, according to which cultural awareness is defined as the "self-examination and in-depth exploration of one's own cultural and professional background." (Campinha-Bacote 2002: 182), the process involving the "recognition of one's biases, prejudices, and assumptions about individuals who are different" (Campinha-Bacote 2002: 182). Her view, which we happen to share, as expressed above, sees cultural awareness coming first, and cultural competence afterwards, cultural competence consisting of five constructs: cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural skill, cultural encounters, and cultural desire. Carter and Wheeler only come to support the same logical sequencing, when talking about incorporating cultural awareness into professional development and practice and stating that central in the

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development of cultural competence is cultural awareness (Carter, Wheeler 2019: 217–228).

4.2. Cultural competence

Cultural competence represents, in our view, the second stage, after cultural awareness, which can be referred to as already having a profile, which can be framed, described, circumscribed, taught and learnt, made subject of analysis, discussed about and perceived as real, in term of both subjectivity and objectivity. Being culturally competent means that, on the one hand, as a student in a multicultural class, one can not only be aware of differences and complexities, but can already know how to deal with them, handle them, and respond to their specificity. On the other hand, as an instructor, after becoming aware of the difficulty of teaching to a multicultural class exactly due to the same differences and complexities, one can manage the entire process in a professional way, having correct reactions, politically correct answers, a lot of bibliography to cover from this point of view. In a bit more amusing terms, being culturally competent embodies the step of being aware of the cultural awareness and being able to deal with it, listing "cultural mishaps" in a lesson plan, next to the classical rubric called "possible / anticipated problems".

The concept of cultural competence can also make the transition from the awareness everyone has to have with respect to cultural differences, to embracing the particularities of the target language's culture, from swirling around tolerance, acceptance and inclusion to the the parameters which define the new culture one is about to learn its language and the characteristic features which define it. It is on the psychological territory of this concept that the cultural element of the target language can be introduced and taught, at all its levels, in order, afterwards, for the cultural literacy to fully be instated, with all its rightful determinations, laws, delimitations, frames, etc.

Approached from an ethical point of view, with focus on politeness in both professional and private spheres, by professor Juanita Sherwood from The University of Sidney,

> Cultural competence is the ability to participate ethically and effectively in personal and professional intercultural settings. It requires being aware of one's own cultural values and world view and their implications for making respectful, reflective and reasoned choices, including the capacity to imagine and collaborate across cultural boundaries (Sherwood 2015: web page).

Its connection to cultural awareness is made clear by Sherwood who sees this one as "the starting point […] to understand your own cultural values and world view" (Sherwood 2015: web page) if you want to "participate ethically and effectively in intercultural settings" (Sherwood 2015: web page), as displaying the cultural competency characteristics of engaged attention, compassion, and operative dedication can help us create a warm environment and initiate the appreciation of similarities and differences among cultures. Cultural competence is the skill a person has or has developed to effectively interrelate, do one's job, and promote politically

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correct relationships with people of various cultural backgrounds. According to Guzman, Durden et alii,

> Gaining cultural competence is a lifelong process of increasing self-awareness, developing social skills and behaviours around diversity, and gaining the ability to advocate for others. It goes beyond tolerance, which implies that one is simply willing to overlook differences. Instead, it includes recognizing and respecting diversity through our words and actions in all contexts (Guzman, Durden et alii 2016: web page).

4.3. Cultural literacy

Cultural literacy is the concept targeted by us, which, in order to be correctly perceived and implemented needs to have the previous two steps taken by all the parties involved in the educational process of a foreign language multicultural class, as it practically proves one's skill in the culture of the foreign language taught, can be subjected to testing, and comes only after the cultural element of the target language has been introduced as such within the classes. *Culturacy*, as we suggest, until further conceptual debate and conventional coinage of a more appropriate term arises, is, according to our view, the fifth necessary skill, next to the four basic ones, which can help build the complete profile of the experience of learning a new language. When attempting to sum up the knowledge that matters to the Americans and to build the bank of their essential knowledge, *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* of 2002 depicted people, places, ideas, history, politics, American literature, wireless technology, gene therapy, science and technology, and events that shape the American cultural conversation. As Hirsch writes in the preface,

> Community is built up of shared knowledge and values -- the same shared knowledge that is taken for granted when we read a book or newspaper, and that is also taken for granted as part of the fabric that connects us to one another (Hirsch, Kett et alii 2002: viii).

That is why, a wide range of cultural elements have to be accounted for, starting from cultural icons, mythology and folklore, proverbs, idioms, philosophy and religion, literature, writing and speaking conventions, fine arts, anthropology, psychology and sociology, business and economics, to physical sciences and mathematics, and even medicine and health practices. However, as mentioned at the beginning of the study, this is not to happen outside the language class, but within, every step of the way, at all language levels, and in all its multifaceted linguistic insertions, from phonetics to pragmatics, sorted out in a coherent approach of implementation. Subsequently, helping the candidates acquire a foreign language through "nonexplicit information from their environments" including here "meaningful gestures or other social cues" (Sternberg 2002: 13–43), as well, and promoting other modalities of understating a culture starting from its culinary aspects and ending with people's behaviour, conversational styles, to name a few, can lead to attaining "not only linguistic forms but also ways of thinking and behaving" (Nguyen, Kellogg 2010). And even if many have already considered including other skills, besides the basic ones, in the process of teaching-learning-assessing a foreign language, among these some referring to translating, as the fifth

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skill (Naimushin 2002), to digital literacy (Hafner, Chik et alii 2015; Maarit, Pelttari et alii 2014), or to critical and creative thinking, inference and deduction, building on previous knowledge and differentiation (Grant 2013), still the majority of the new opinions cluster around culture (Tomalin 2008a and 2008 b: web pages; Vernier, Barbuzza et alii 2008; Merrouche 2013; Özüorçun 2014).

5. Conclusions

Being culturally competent in the modern world, not only in the foreign language class, is an asset nowadays. Travelling has reached unimaginable percentages, exchanging students and staff mobility has become a normality for universities, working in a multinational environment either on the territory of your home country, as an employee of a subsidiary branch of a multinational company, or abroad, on the territory of another culture has turned into a desired career target for postgraduates and for all this, when anyone wants to start acquiring a foreign language, they should do it appropriately, placing it not only in a communicative context, from the point of view of the contemporary teaching approach, but more than that, against a complex and coherent cultural background. This one comprises, on the one hand, understanding the behaviour and profile of the other students in a class, according to their habits and customs, and, on the other hand, understanding the very essence of the language one is about to pick up in order to correctly place it in its natural context. In this way, any candidate to learning a foreign language will be able to catalogue an unfamiliar situation as provoking and not as terrifying, any frustrating social interaction as challenging rather than inhibiting, and not last, according to Thompson, "individuals with higher levels of tolerance of ambiguity have also been found to be more entrepreneurial (i.e., are more optimistic, innovative and don't mind taking risks)" (Thompson 2016: web page). This very last argument closes the circle regarding some of the reasons which stood behind the choice the candidates we subjected to interrogation gave us when asked about their driving force behind learning Romanian as a foreign language.

Even organisations, companies, firms and holdings understand the importance of cultural competency and act accordingly, in terms of knowledge, awareness, sensitivity, competence, thus attempting at defining the concept or the sole purpose of building strong and healthy work environments:

> Cultural competency is a deep dive for organisations. It is being committed to best practices, not just awareness. Cultural awareness is a big step, but organizations have to keep moving forward and measuring their progress toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. As our workplaces become more culturally diverse, organizations understand the need to collaborate internally and externally (Brownlee, Lee 2013: web page).

Seemingly establishing themselves as promoters of the importance of cultural competence, the universities in Australia and the USA have dedicated pages on their websites profiling this concept. The Australian Universities even designed a National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency (2011) according to which they see their role, as universities, as "change agents" in the multicultural educational environment (Nolan 2011: web page). And it is none other

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than Western Sidney University which invites its students to understand what cultural literacy is, why it is important, how it is especially relevant in Western Sydney, and what Western Sydney University does to help its students develop their cultural learning, how Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, knowledge, and peoples make a unique contribution to an inclusive Australian identity and provokes students to question how literate they are about their own culture, thus testing cultural literacy and encouraging understanding its importance. The American universities tried to develop an engagement model of cultural competence at the university level (Nolan 2011: web page) and even to apply cultural and linguistic competence to a framework for creating learning spaces for the enhancement of experiential learning (NCCC: web page), as it is the case of the National Centre for Cultural Competence belonging to Georgetown University. And it is none other than Princeton University that introduced in their educational policy the compulsory study of an additional language, irrespective of the students' language competency when entering the university, as it was perceived as contributing to reducing the wave of delinquency among international students which wreaks havoc all around campuses. And there are none others, in Europe, than the European Commission's departments of translations (DGT) and interpreting (DGI) which implemented as their domestic policy the encouragement of their current employees to start learning new languages while in service, instead of hiring new entries for new needed languages, the development of their interns' cultural competency being primordial in the process. In the same line of thought, there are other universities which have a special page and programme dedicated to the concept of cultural literacy which reads, from the very beginning: "Because you live in a diverse and global society with people of many different cultures, your cultural literacy will help you at university and in your career" (WSU: web page), thus, almost bridging Thompson's belief that "knowledge of different languages is crucial to becoming global citizens" (Thompson 2016: web page).

But besides counting the benefits of being culturally literate in terms of cognitive and emotional aims, according to which, as Thompson (2016) puts it, the adults are less exposed to developing dementia, the bilingual brain strengthens its ability to filter distractions and learning several languages in a complex context improves creativity (Thompson 2016: web page), Harmer (1991) also emphasises the contribution this one brings to motivation. Starting from Gardner and Lambert (1972), who supported that a foreign language appeals more to the students who want to integrate in the culture of its users, as they are "more attracted to the culture of the target language community" (Harmer 1991: 4), thus activating what Gardner and Lambert called *integrative motivation,* Harmer mentions that a lot of external factors determine the success or failure of the process of learning a foreign language. Among these, a very important one is the attitude of the parents, friends, community, social circle, etc. towards the culture of the language under acquisition (Harmer 1991: 4).

However, *instrumental motivation* (Gardner and Lambert 1972), which is activated in the case of the persons who simply see learning a new language as an instrument or a means of getting a better job, for example, may turn to have more importance than integrative motivation, since foreign language learners are not

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likely to have sufficient knowledge and experience to take part in the culture of the people who speak the target language in their early stage of language learning, as Dörnyei (1990) suggests. And just because the universality of Garner's model may be suspended (Schmidt, Boraie et alii 1999) due to the impossibility of all learners to be in contact with the target language's speakers and can have very few opportunities to integrate in their culture, integrative and instrumental motivations can turn not to be mutually exclusive Brown (2000) offering as an example the case of international students residing in the USA, who desire to learn English for academic purposes but, at the same time, want to be integrated within the people and the culture of the country.

The conclusions of the present study can stand as premises for our next approaches to the same topic, which will focus, on the one hand, on defining a clear profile of the cultural element, from as many points of view and on as many levels as possible, and, on the other hand, on envisaging a practical approach to the third component of the teaching process, i.e. assessment, regarding the way in which the cultural element can be subjected to being tested, according to a coherent conventional, possibly standardised, system able to objectively account for the knowledge accumulated concerning the culture associated to the language taught. Thus, going back to the collection of answers amassed from the candidates we interrogated for the purpose of this study, mentioned at the very beginning of the paper, "along with the grammar test an optional civilization test could be offered to students", as Carole J., from Lyon put it in 2017, in her capacity as attendant of the Romanian Summer School, in Iasi.

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Abstract

The basic aim of this article is to establish the place the cultural element holds within the triad cultural awareness, cultural competence and cultural literacy, on the background of a multinational class in which a foreign language is taught and its momentum in the teaching process, but only after clearly delineating the core features of each concept, as well as their logical sequentiality. Founding the research on a corpus of answers collected from candidates to learning Romanian as a foreign language regarding their reasons and motivation to approach its study, and considering a whole body of examples gathered as a result of our first-hand experience in teaching Romanian as a foreign language, the paper also discusses the connection between society, language and culture. But, most importantly, this study puts forward the concept of *culturacy*, a term originally coined from cultural literacy, as the fifth and compulsory element to be included in the set of skills of foreign language learning. The limitations are, for the moment, connected to the approach *culturacy* can have in assessment, but the forthcoming paper, focused on establishing a solid profile of the cultural element in teaching a foreign language, has already considered this aspect.

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