TEACHING ROMANIAN TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS – AN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE[1]

Abstract: *Teaching Romanian to international students represents an important element for the image of our educational system and for our culture. All universities offer study programs to international students, which include preparatory language and culture courses that can facilitate, on the one hand students' cultural adaptation and orientation in both the new educational system and the society and, on the other hand, their successful intercultural communication. The article is based on a qualitative research done at The Polytechnic University of Bucharest. Students of different nationalities participated in two exploratory focus groups, and the findings reflect a set of principles and methodological recommendations referring to: perceptions regarding the competences of an "intercultural speaker", obstacles in communication and in the cultural adaptation, opinions on the teaching objectives of the intercultural communication competence in a language classroom. We consider that the study programmes for teaching Romanian to international students in universities should take into account both the linguistic aspect and the intercultural competence.*

Key words: *intercultural, international students, Romanian as a foreign language.*

The Impact of Diversity on Education

What characterises our society nowadays is the availability of knowledge and the openness to mobility. The advancement of the new technologies and the facilitation of travelling for different purposes have increased the opportunities of exchanging ideas, working in multicultural teams on common projects and studying abroad.

The enlargement process of the European Union and the constant preoccupation of universities to align their study programmes to the European standards have facilitated an openness to interaction, exchange and acquisition of knowledge.

Students have been constantly looking for challenges offered by the mobility programmes which include different opportunities, both in terms of studying and working, to acquire intercultural experience. Nevertheless, experience alone cannot guarantee for the acquisition of the intercultural communication competence, defined as a set of knowledge, abilities and attitudes meant to facilitate effective intercultural communication and interaction. Personal experience in multicultural environments should be corroborated with different formal study programs which could provide students with the necessary competence to manage effective intercultural relations.

That is why, many universities offer their international students different preparatory programmes which help them acquire the language level needed to continue their studies and/or the insight into the new culture for better adaptability and for managing their culture shock or decreasing their anxiety/uncertainty level.

Recently, the intercultural situations have increased and diversified; we can notice that in various contexts of life we are dealing with people of different nationalities – students, professionals, co-habitants, tourists etc. All of them have something in common: the need to manage successfully in a culturally diverse environment.

M.Byram (1997) advises that not only the visitor to a country, regardless of his/her reason for visiting, but also the native people of that country should acquire the

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intercultural communication competence. Since communication is a bidirectional process, both interlocutors should be interculturally competent, that is, they should learn how to build a common space in-between the two cultures which have come into contact by constant negotiation, by mutual understanding, by the elimination of stereotypes, by tolerance and adequate behaviour etc.

In this respect, the educational communication between the teacher and his/her international students is not different from any other intercultural communication. The interlocutors are also social actors, having different cultural identities and the didactic communication is a process which involves coding and decoding the message. Moreover, in an educational setting the international students have different expectations related to their learning and communication styles; they have different cultural identities, but they are also accustomed to different educational systems and practices. Any educational program whose aim is to increase students' adaptability to the host educational setting and requirements should take into account the diverse learning needs and styles or the various learning and communication expectations of these culturally diverse students.

According to the literature in the field of intercultural education (Fennes, Hapgood, 1997; Golnik, Chinn, 1986; Althen, 1994; Paloş, 2007; Little, 2008) and also to the empiric observations done by the researcher the intercultural university group of students is characterized by:

- small groups of students, so that the teacher could know the group and the individual students;
- a certain composition of the university culturally diverse group – cultural pluralism and low degree of homogeneity;
- need for teaching methods which should be adequate to the learning styles and expectations, to the teaching methods relevant for the socio-cultural background of the learners;
- a curriculum or a syllabus which should reflect cultural diversity;
- a physical climate with elements which should support learning, motivate, offer comfort and should promote the idea of equality and tolerance;
- less visible intragoupal hierarchy, given the principle of intercultural education – cultural ethnorelativism;
- the teacher's role as a facilitator and equal partner in the academic relation, which erases the status differences and allows for equal participation in the educational process;
- building a mutual educational space, in which all the interlocutors of different nationalities feel safe and comfortable by adjusting and understanding one's own and other's reactions, constant feedback and negotiation.

We believe that working with an intercultural group of students requires specific pedagogic objectives, methods, activities and teacher-students relationship.

The Research Methodology

The aim of our research is to build an adequate teaching framework for the development of intercultural communication competence of the foreign students enrolled in university studies. For this purpose we organized two exploratory focus-groups with participants from the Polytechnic University of Bucharest, Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages.

The focus group is a research method based on collective free discussions, which explore a certain subject by a series of questions. The researcher can take notice

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of the types of interactions inside the group and can draw conclusions on students' opinions and the attitudes related to the subject. We have to mention that the discussions do not occur spontaneously, but they are moderated by the researcher in order to be compliant with the specific objectives of the research. The focus group is a method based on oral communication and has a higher or lesser degree of freedom, according to the aim of the research: explorative or confirmative. The role of the moderator is very important because he/she ensures that the discussions are to the subject and that all the members of the group understand the questions and offer relevant answers.

In our research we organised two explorative focus groups, with international students in the first and second year of the Polytechnic University, who have various nationalities. All of them are English language speakers at upper intermediate and advanced levels and the discussions were held in English so that everyone could understand the language. The time allotted for the interview was 1.5 hour for the first focus-group and 2 hours for the second focus-group. At the beginning of the focus-group the researcher explained the students that the answers would be to the benefit of their training sessions and also explained the concepts of *intercultural speaker* and *competence* so that the questions should be clear.

The objectives of the focus-groups were:

- knowing the students' background: age, cultural origin, languages spoken, prior intercultural experience;
- finding out students' interests in interacting with native people and their attitudes regarding diversity;
- identifying the difficulties they have in the communication with Romanian students/teachers/unknown persons;
- finding out students' perceptions regarding the competence profile of an *intercultural speaker*;
- identifying students' perceptions regarding the teaching/learning methods of the intercultural communication competence inside and outside the classroom;
- identifying students' opinions regarding the objectives of the Romanian language and culture course.

The group interview started with an introductory question, asking the students to introduce themselves by telling their age, nationality, year of study and the foreign languages they can speak. The rest of the questions focused on the following aspects: prior intercultural experience, the frequency of interaction with the Romanians, obstacles in communication with the Romanians, the definition of *the intercultural speaker*/*intercultural communication competence*, the teaching methodology for developing the intercultural communication competence in the language classroom and outside it, the objectives of a language and culture course which aims at the development of the intercultural communication competence.

The students belong to different cultural origins, such as: Pakistan, Brazil, Algeria, Poland, Greece, Nigeria and the United States of America, in the case of the first focus-group. In the second focus group their cultural origin is: Turkey, Iran, Nigeria and Cameroon.

The discussions were held based on a set structure of question-and-answer but there were some moments when the respondents interacted and expressed their agreement and disagreement and contributed with important comments. In this situation the moderator-researcher added supplementary questions wih an aim to promote students' understanding of the topic, or to ensure that relevant answers are

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given. In this way, the interview was satisfactory in terms of relevance, clarity, details offered and exchange of information.

The Research Findings

The qualitative analysis of the focus-groups is centred upon the following categories: attitudes regarding diversity, opinions of what effective communication means, perceptions of the organisation of the Romanian language and culture course.

The students' preferences/opinions can be summarised as follows:

- the following teaching methods are found in the top 3 rankings: interactive methods, oral communication, and methods of exploring reality;
- the need to have a communicative intercultural approach to teaching Romanian, that is less focus on grammar rules;
- language has an instrumental role: it is perceived as a tool for interacting and socializing with the native persons, which involves learning the language in different life contexts and understanding the cultural behaviour of the interlocutors;
- the fundamental need is to learn the conversational language, based on usefulness, on knowing the linguistic and cultural elements related to everyday life and to the oral language;
- there are alternative ways of learning the cultural elements by the individual experience of interaction and by independent study (searching the Internet, reading books, articles etc);
- acquiring and developing the intercultural communication competence involves knowing the target language and becoming familiar with the target culture;
- the location of teaching and learning the intercultural communication competence is both the traditional educational setting – the classroom – and the more modern setting, outside the classroom, which connects school with the society.

As a result of the analysis of the findings, we can mention that the respondents have two main types of attitudes regarding diversity, meaning positive and negative ones; neutral attitudes have not been registered. From among the respondents with negative attitudes, some of them also have less prior intercultural experience before coming to study in Romania and others have expectations from the new society based on similarities with their culture of origin. These respondents argue, for example, that in their country things are done in a certain way and here everything is different, things do not follow the same pattern. This may seem uncomfortable and threatening for them. In our opinion, the interpretation of culture by one's own cultural references and having expectations of similar behaviours or social rules is a sign of incapacity to decentre from one's own cultural models. Other students use explicit stereotypes and prejudices, such as the Romanians do not have respect for foreigners" simply duet o the fact that "some clerks do not want to speak English", which show once again the necessity of introducing the intercultural approach to language teaching, which could help the students become aware of diversity, relativise points of view and overcome the culture shock.

We can remark the reason mentioned by the students, regarding their interest in practicing the Romanian language, that is to practice and enlarge the vocabulary. Few interviewed foreign students initiate the conversation in Romanian and more expect the native speakers to speak English as an international language.

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Regarding *the intercultural speaker*'s competences, the respondents believe that both interlocutors in an intercultural situation should know at least one mutual language, preferably English, for the communication to be effective. This seems to be more important than knowing the target language. For an effective intercultural communication it is also important that the non-native interlocutor should be aware of the lifestyle from the target culture and society. In their relationship with the teachers, the foreign students who were interviewed rely very much on the teachers' ability to speak foreign languages, so that they could communicate successfully at the personal and the professional level.

At the level of the interaction with the Romanian students, the respondents' perceptions are more negative, since the majority feel neglected or rejected. The Keywords used by the interviewed foreign students are „ lack of respect".They need more respect from the Romanian students and a more open attitude and interest in welcoming them in the Romanian groups. In the forerign students' opinion the degree of interaction with the Romanian students is lower due to their low level of the Romanian language competence. Thus, the respondents feel that group integration is conditioned by a good level of language competence. They also mentioned that they feel a need to receive linguistic feedback: the Romanian students should facilitate their integration in the group and correct their language mistakes.

As concerns the study of the Romaian language and culture for foreigners, the respondents need is directed towards conversational language, that is, knowing the language in everylday life contexts. Also, the respondents highlight the alternative ways to become aware of the cultural elements related to everyday life: independent learning by searching the internet, reading books etc and interacting, at individual level, with the native people. This ensures, according to their opinion, the acquisition of the cultural elements, but also the language practice.

The perceptions regarding the location of teaching the intercultural communication competence coincide with the literature in the field, related to the ethnographic method in teaching foreign languages from an intercultural perspective. According to the respondents' opinions, the development of the intercultural communication competence should be approached, from a pedagogical point of view, by interactive methods, oral communication methods and direct exploration of reality Many students underlined the instrumental role of language, which help them socialize and integrate in the native groups. Therefore, the speaker of a foreign language is seen as a social actor, who interacts with other social actors of different nationalities.

Conclusion

Teaching multicultural classrooms involves constant adjustment of the communication behaviour and of the teaching practices, since the mixed culture group dynamics is different from the unicultural situations characterised by a higher degree of homogeneity. Moreover, an intercultural educational situation may require a selection of the pedagogical objectives, of the teaching methods and activities or of certain communication patterns.

David Little (2008) empasises the fact that organising a training session for a multicultural group requires special attention to the learning needs and expectations and, therefore a needs analysis should be performed in all situations.

The students of different nationalities may prove to be more vulnerable and insecure, which triggers the need to adopt an empathic teacher behaviour, which should give more care and support than in a usual unicultural classroom.

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Still, teaching international students remains a fascinating domain and teaching lamnguages from an intercultural perspective does not involve a new set of methods or activities, but it requires a selection of some methods used by language teachers and an adjustment of the language activities which could promote intercultural understanding and reflective learning.

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