A MODEL FOR TEACHING CULTURAL AWARENESS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

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Abstract: Our paper addresses the issue of teaching cultural awareness in foreign language classes in order to highlight the role of enhanced intercultural awareness in building and promoting a spiritual and moral growth of youth. Our aim is to propose a model for teaching cultural awareness in foreign language classes, with particular reference to the Romanian educational system and the present realities of the Romanian society. Since the Romanian society has lately been challenged by changes brought about by globalization and digitalization in education and on the labour market, we believe that our conclusions may be extended to educational systems from countries all over the world.

Keywords: culture, intercultural competence, cultural awareness, moral values, cultural diversity

Introduction

The finalities of the Romanian educational system are established in compliance with the EU regulations on the key competences for lifelong learning, namely: 'cultural awareness and expression', communication in the mother tongue and in foreign languages, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, digital competence, learning to learn, social and civic competences, and sense of initiative and entrepreneurship (CEFRL). These key competences are held to support the individual to adapt successfully to a world constantly reshaped by technology and globalization. Skills similar to the European key competences have also been identified at a global level, as defining the goals of 21st-century education: "knowledge of human cultures, physical, and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, integrative learning" (AACU). In a critical review of the literature on 21st-century skills, Mishra & Kereluik (2011: 6) synthesize three broad categories of skill-related themes,

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namely: Foundational knowledge, Meta knowledge and Humanistic knowledge. Each of these categories comprises several sub-categories that are further defined by various types of knowledge, literacy and competence. In Mishra & Kereluik's classification of skills, cultural awareness and intercultural competence are designated by the term of "cultural competence", a sub-category of the "humanistic knowledge" category that also includes life/ job skills, and ethical and emotional awareness (idem, p. 10). In the 21st century, due to increased cultural diversity – a consequence of globalization – social and economic success depends, to a wide extent, on cultural competence. It may be briefly defined as "appreciation of the creative expression of ideas and emotions by all types of individuals", often including aspects of person, interpersonal and intercultural competence "evidenced through effective communication and collaboration" (idem, p. 11). The literature refers to cultural competence as related to these key concepts: intercultural knowledge, civic knowledge and engagement, knowledge of culture and physical world (AACU), skills for a global world (Zhao, 2009), communication in foreign language, social civic competence, cultural awareness and expression (CEFRL), global awareness (P21CS). Teaching culture in schools is essential for personal and professional growth in a globalized world. Intercultural awareness helps build the moral values of honesty, respect for others, tolerance, responsibility for one's actions, kindness and generosity, as well as the spiritual values of compassion and wisdom (the last two translated into actions based on the rule of doing to others only what we would wish done to ourselves). By learning about different cultures, individuals eliminate prejudices and stereotypes, become more tolerant towards others, approach foreigners with an open mind and positive view. Moreover, intercultural awareness supports responsibility for one's actions as it enhances knowledge about the different customs of various cultures: customs of greeting, paying visits, spending leisure time, the codes of eating or dressing. The idea that cultural issues should be taught in schools as a way of promoting and developing understanding and tolerance among children and youth is also highlighted by Komorowska (2006: 63), who enumerates the reasons in this respect: international conflicts, the rise of nationalism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

In order to approach the concepts of cultural awareness, cultural and intercultural competence and understand their relation to the teaching-learning process, we should provide a definition of culture and the dimensions it involves. According to Lustig and Koester, culture represents "a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values

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and norms which affect the behaviours of a relatively large group of people" (1999: 30). Culture "forges a group's identity and assists in its survival" (Orbe & Harris, 2001: 6); for Samovar et al., culture includes the way in which we are sometimes, implicitly or explicitly taught to view the world and behave in accordance with that view: "the deposit of knowledge, experiences, social hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relationships, concepts of the universe and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual or group striving" (2000: 7). As culture influences what an individual knows, how he came by that knowledge, the role one plays and how he should play it, the values one cherishes, it is therefore essential in the teaching-learning process.

The need to teach cultural awareness in foreign language classes

It is highly important that cultural competence be built in schools. Modern societies are characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as exchanges between cultures. It is not only students, but teachers also, who need to be able to interact with people of other languages and cultures. Therefore, language education should include competences needed to promote communication characterized by openness, mutual respect and social cohesion. The ultimate goal of language education is no longer to achieve native speaker proficiency, but to build intercultural understanding and mediation through language learning (Corbett, 2003: 2). Most foreign language teachers have already shown an interest in the intercultural approach by resorting to literary texts or cultural activities promoting tolerance and openness towards diversity. The intercultural approach to foreign language teaching and learning should not be regarded as distinct and separated from, for example, the task-based or the student-centred approaches. On the contrary, the intercultural approach relies on elements from other approaches to the educational act: for example, the acquisition and learning theory that recommends learning by communication; or, task-based learning according to which students have to perform communicative tasks in order to use the language; cooperative and interactive learning are student-centred approaches that promote peer learning, also enhancing the students' learning motivation. All the educational approaches mentioned above imply classroom activities that have a clear purpose, as also does the intercultural approach. The intercultural approach enables an extension of current teaching methods and a reconsideration of them. Given that few learners achieve native speaker proficiency, the intercultural approach proposes the

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building of observation, explanation and mediation skills, a part of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997: 3-4).

Learners with socio-cultural competence will be able to interpret and compare different cultural systems, as well as to "manage the dysfunctions and resistances peculiar to intercultural communication" (Byram & Zarate, 1998: 13). Teaching foreign languages with the aim of building intercultural competence implies taking into consideration the learners' needs and motivation. A research by Otwinowska-Kasztelanic (2011: 13) revealed that Polish teenagers (which can be extrapolated to teenagers in general) need to compare their culture with many other cultures and are open to acquiring intercultural competence. The study also revealed that teachers were not ready to assume the role of intercultural mediators. Although the students were highly interested in other cultures, their motivation for learning English was related to surfing the Internet and studying and working abroad, not to the intention of moving to an English speaking country for good. Their openness to knowledge about other cultures materialized as curiosity in learning interesting things about the whole world, not just about the English-speaking countries. Whereas students displayed openness towards various cultures, teachers tended to prefer teaching more about Britain and the USA, probably a result of their training and the teaching aids used.

Regarding the role that culture plays in communication, more specifically classroom communication, it has been argued that due to the fact that individuals are faced with so many stimuli, they have developed mechanisms for sifting and deriving meaning out of the information received. During this information filtering, the (physical, social and psychological) context plays a relevant part: the communication may take place in the classroom, the principal's office or at home; the relationship – the social feature of the context – may be that between teacher-student, teacher/ parent, teacher/ teacher etc.; the psychological traits of the communicational context include the participants' attitudes, feelings and interests; culture affects the extent to which the participants focus on these features of the communicational context (Hall, 1976). Hall distinguished between high-context messages and low-context messages. A high-context message comprises most of the relevant information in the physical setting or internalized in the person, therefore, much of the meaning in the message is implied. Examples of high-context communities include the Japanese, Hmong, Koreans, Chinese and Latinos. The members of such communities have already built certain expectations regarding how to perceive and

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respond to a particular communication event, hence explicit verbal messages are unnecessary for understanding. Members of low-context communities need a great amount of explicit information to reduce uncertainty and this information is obtained via verbal codes. Most Romanian classrooms rely on low-context exchanges. Teachers should provide clear, explicit instructions and expectations and students should also give clear, direct, explicit answers. Departing from these types of messages increases the risk of misunderstanding. Teachers from low-context cultures may find managing communication with high-context students challenging and sometimes frustrating because high-context communication is indirect and circular.

Besides developing cultural identities at young people, language educators should also aim at building pluri- or intercultural competence. The *CEFRL* defines "plurilingual and pluricultural competence" as the language communication and cultural interaction skills of a social player, who, at various levels masters several languages and has experience of several cultures" (CEFRL: 168). Byram lists five elements involved in building intercultural competence, namely: attitudes, knowledge, skills, learning to learn abilities, critical awareness. Intercultural competence translates as the ability to observe other people's behaviour but to withhold judgment or criticism, to draw comparisons between one's own culture and other cultures, compare behaviours and "cooperate with representatives of other cultures in spite of differences" (Byram, 1997: 50-63). The idea is further supported by Bernaus et al.: language education "is all about making languages a means of communication in the sense of a mode of openness and access to otherness: linguistic otherness, cultural otherness and otherness of identity" (2007: 12). Culture translates as forms of politeness, culinary practice, popular songs and fashion, as well as in how distance from or solidarity with others is expressed. Like language, culture undergoes constant transformations. While global communication threatens to erase cultural differences, the very cultural differences that resist erasure gain enhanced stability, visibility and continuity. In a globalised world, language learners need to become intercultural language learners, in order to be able to identify and compare cultures, and thus "negotiate the distance between their own (culture) and another culture"; the language learner thus becomes not just a competent user of another language, but also "a mediator between cultures, a cultural diplomat" (Corbett, 2003: ix-x). Byram (1997: 34) has identified five so-called *savoirs*, namely the kinds of knowledge and skills needed to mediate between cultures:

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1) Knowledge of self and other, how interaction occurs and of the individual's relationship to society;

2) Knowledge of how to interpret and relate information;

3) Knowledge of how to engage with the political consequences of education and being critically aware of cultural behaviours;

4) Knowledge of how to discover cultural information;

5) Knowledge of how to relativize oneself and value the attitudes and beliefs of others.

From the perspective of these *savoirs*, an intercultural curriculum expects learners not only to acquire knowledge about the target culture, but also to anticipate how people from the target culture might behave. Building cultural awareness and intercultural competence requires that language activities focus on exchanging cultural information, as well as support students in engaging in reflections upon how information is exchanged and the cultural factors that determine the exchange.

A model for teaching culture in foreign language classes

Older versions of courses in foreign languages were criticised for their monotonous content due to their emphasis on skills. The later 1980s saw a movement towards teaching foreign languages through a variety of topics; in its extreme form, it pleaded for teaching a combination of one foreign language and another school discipline, for example, teaching Geography through French: approaching culture "as a topic has the advantage of direct relevance to the learning of another language and the motivational factor of simultaneously encouraging enquiry into and review of one's own cultural habits (Corbett, 2003: 33). Looking at and reflecting upon culture may influence the way in which information is exchanged in other classroom activities or tasks: factual writing, spoken conversation, role plays and simulations, to name just a few. Briefly, lessons focused on building intercultural awareness encourage the learner to actively and systematically seek cultural information, which further affects his or her language behaviour. In order to focus on building intercultural awareness during foreign language classes, teachers should resort to certain types of information and apply certain strategies, for example, how to negotiate cultural identity through language or extract cultural messages from visuals. The absence of cross-cultural courses in the training of teachers is also highlighted by Powell & Caseau: the teacher "recognizes the vast diversity in her class, but is unsure how to deal

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with it. The one cultural studies course she took in college focused on the history of African Americans. Although interesting, the course did not provide Ms. Young with the skills needed to teach in a culturally diverse classroom" (2004: 45).

Research shows that culture plays a certain role in learning preferences (Guild, 1994: 23). For example, white students have been found to value independence, analytical thinking and objectivity, whereas students from minority groups tend to process information holistically, pay more attention to the social context and are more intuitive (Powell & Caseau, 2004: 54). But, there has not been drawn a clear connection between culture and learning style. While teachers have acknowledged a relationship between culture and learning, there have been few recommendations on how to integrate culture into classroom practice. One remarkable framework in this respect is Claxton's connected teaching model that comprises four central features (Claxton, 1990: 33-35):

1. the teacher is a 'midwife' – helping students to build their own knowledge – rather than a 'banker' – a deposit of knowledge;

2. the focus in connected teaching is on problem posing and problem solving;

3. dialogue is a two-way communication: knowledge is not transmitted by the teacher to the student, but is built and negotiated through the interaction between and among learners; this promotes collaboration and community rather than competition and individualism;

4. disciplined subjectivity: the emphasis is on the student and the teacher tries to view the learning content from where the student stands.

Culturally responsive teaching has been defined as occurring "where there is equal respect for the backgrounds of all learners, regardless of individual status and power, the learning processes embrace the range of needs, interests, and orientations to be found among learners" (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995: 17). The essential features of culturally responsive teaching have been identified as follows (Gay, 2000: 30-32):

1. it validates the cultural knowledge, traditions and styles of diverse students; it incorporates multicultural information into the instruction of all subjects, using a variety of teaching strategies;

2. it is comprehensive: teachers convey knowledge by using cultural referents; teachers are willing to learn about the different cultural and historical background of the students in the classroom;

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3. it is multidimensional: a topic can be approached from several perspectives; for example, teachers could collaborate to teach the concept of protest, by resorting to literature, music, art, interviews and historical records; students may discover how different groups express and deal with protest;

4. it is empowering: students are successful because culturally responsive teaching celebrates individual and collective achievements, boosts the students' morale and motivation, supports students with resources and personal assistance;

5. it is transformative, by building at students the ability to recognize discrimination and prejudice as well as skills to combat them;

6. it is emancipatory: students are given the freedom to explore new ways of knowing, to argue, question and understand that there is no total and permanent truth.

Culturally responsive teaching is productive: by incorporating the students' interests and experiences into the classroom, all the students benefit from an enhanced 'fund of knowledge' in reading, writing, mathematics or other different subjects (Reyes et al., 1999: 14). In order to achieve culturally responsive teaching, a teacher should cover the following stages (Gay, 2000: 111):

a. develop a cultural knowledge base relying on the cultural characteristics of different cultural groups and thus establish a context for learning;

b. convert cultural knowledge into relevant curricula by means of images displayed on bulletin boards, pictures of heroes, statements about social etiquette, images about cultural groups as reflected in the media that are to be discussed with the students;

c. demonstrate cultural caring: teachers should exploit the communication styles (discourse features, logic, rhythm, vocabulary usage, role relationships of speakers and listeners, intonation, gestures, body movements) of various ethnic groups and build on the students' experiences, widening their intellectual horizon; the teacher's failure to understand differences in the students' communication styles may generate serious classroom management problems;

d. deliver instruction through *multiculturalized* practice: for example, cooperative learning strategies derived from the teacher's knowledge that some ethnic groups prefer group-work tasks.

The main question regarding assessment of intercultural knowledge in the foreign language class is whether to test both culture and language simultaneously, or each of them separately? The answer lies in specifying the goals of the foreign language course

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and, consequently, building tests in accordance with them. The course syllabus should state whether the course aims at increasing language proficiency, gaining factual knowledge about the target culture, or mediating between cultures (Corbett, 2003: 193).

Teachers and students need constant support not only in designing and solving communicative intercultural tasks, but also in dealing with cultural differences. In this section of our paper, we shall propose a model for teaching cultural awareness in foreign language classes and building the students' intercultural competence by addressing the question: how is cultural knowledge to be included in the classroom? Our model proposal acknowledges the fact that it is impossible to teach all culture-related knowledge as well as teach it in a manner that suits the needs of all learners in one or two foreign language courses. Our model proposal views the main goal of teaching cultural awareness in language classes as being that of familiarizing learners with the reality of difference existing between cultures and empowering them to approach that difference if not in a constructive, active and generous way, at least with an open-minded, tolerant attitude. There are three main existing approaches to teaching culture in the communicative language class, namely:

1. using cultural content to support language use: language and culture are seen as inseparable and cultural topics motivate learners and raise their interest in communication (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993: 6-7);

2. acculturation is one of the curriculum goals of language teaching: briefly, this approach holds that acculturation supports learners to function within the new culture, while maintaining their own identity (Byram et al., 1994: 7);

3. enculturation as the goal and/ or effect of language learning: enculturation means the "assimilation of learners into the host culture" by means of indoctrinating them in a 'common culture' consisting of "facts and myths that bind a nation" (Corbett, 2003: 26).

We believe that the intercultural approach to language teaching and learning relies on some of the ideas of the approaches mentioned above. We may enumerate the features of an intercultural educational approach as follows:

- cultural topics are, indeed, regarded as interesting and motivating by the learners;

- learners learn a language also with the purpose of functioning well within another culture (acculturation);

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- raising cultural awareness is one of the goals of language study at the global level, as it supports the building of certain values and attitudes;

- raising cultural awareness builds critical-analytical skills.

The intercultural approach differs from other approaches to language teaching by adopting strategies from ethnography, linguistics, semiotics; testing is aimed both at intercultural knowledge and language skills. Our model proposal relies on the assumption that any language teaching method is inevitably cultural: teaching a foreign language implies, first and foremost, teaching greetings; greeting is a cultural act that differs across cultures: there is a cultural note in formal vs. casual greetings, in greetings of young to old and vice versa, in greetings between employer and employee, greetings that involve bowing, handshaking or touching one's forehead. Obviously, good teachers will give answers to culture related questions that learners may ask; but, by building cultural awareness and intercultural competence at students, learners are empowered to provide the answers to culture related questions on their own, as they become able to independently analyse and interpret a wide range of situations. There are no absolute, universally applicable rules for a language course in order to make it more culturally friendly. But, a community's beliefs and values are built and expressed linguistically, hence such knowledge becomes an implicit goal for the language course.

Our model proposal also relies on the idea that building cultural awareness and intercultural competence at students during foreign language courses should meet the learners' needs and roles. The intercultural approach views the learner as cultural observer and analyst, an "ethnographer" (Corbett, 2003: 36): engaging in observation and analysis of different cultures helps build tolerance; moreover, by being able to understand other cultures, at the same time also eliminating misunderstandings, learners find enjoyment in studying the language of the respective culture. Also, learners are prepared for the possibility of getting engaged in actual conversations with members of the respective culture. Another aspect that we should consider in relation to building cultural awareness and intercultural competence at students is the learners' age, namely, what is the appropriate age at which applying an intercultural approach to language study may really benefit learners? Research has shown that starting with the age of 12, most learners should be able to engage in intercultural exploration tasks (Johns, 1992: 195).

In the intercultural approach to language study, the teacher's role is, first and foremost, that of negotiator or mediator between the learners' interests and the curriculum

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and/ or syllabus demands. Another role of the teacher is that of provider of the materials for the language study. The teacher is also a guide and advisor: on the one hand, the teacher organizes the classroom activities, on the other hand the teacher may also provide guidance for further individual study.

Our model for teaching cultural awareness and building intercultural competence in the language class requires that teachers take into account certain specific goals when designing tasks for classroom activities. According to Nunan, a task involves six essential components or aspects: goal, input, activities, the learner's role, the teacher's role and settings (Nunan, 1989: 10). Goal-setting should consider several factors: the learners' access to the target culture (study visits, media, online interaction with members from that culture), their level of participation in the target culture (tourism, education, business, immigration). Thus, the goals of cultural tasks that the language teacher should consider combine language practice and intercultural analysis, for example:

- to investigate the role of everyday conversation in keeping a group together;

- to look at how a person's status within a group is negotiated through conversation;

- to analyse conversation from a gender perspective (the roles of men and women in conversation, in different cultures);

- to research, describe and explain behavioural patterns of various communities (subculture, scientists, business people etc.);

- to interpret visual images, fiction and non-fiction texts in order to extract cultural messages.

The input that Nunan (1989: 10) includes as part of the teaching-learning task designates the stimulus provided by the teacher for the learning to occur and may be, for example, a written or spoken text for discussion, a visual image for interpretation, a media text for analysis. It is important to use authentic teaching materials, namely written or spoken texts that were not mainly produced for teaching purposes; nevertheless, the teacher himself/ herself may elaborate the teaching material, for example, guidelines for conducting an interview/ survey (questions from the interview may provide cultural information) and reporting on the data obtained, instructions for project work based on ethnographic observation or setting the topics for debates on cultural issues.

The primary purpose, or effect, of all conversations is to transfer information from one person to another. But, the underlying purpose, or effect of conversations is to regulate

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membership of communities. In other words, we talk not necessarily to gain certain knowledge, but to discover the attitudes of our conversational partner regarding the topic under discussion and hence get an idea of his or her more or less general beliefs. One example of conversational activity with cultural purpose in the foreign language class is role-play where one student has the task to tell a true or fictional story about an unfortunate event and another student has to express sympathy towards the narrated event and the student narrating it. Expression of sympathy levels varies across cultures. Therefore, this is a good opportunity for all the students in the class to practice sympathy, tolerance as well as reflect on how various cultures express sympathy, namely through a series of verbal and body manifestations ranging from total silence to interrupting speech with supportive gestures, remarks, exclamations or questions. Another example of conversational activity with cultural purpose is an elaboration of the activity described above; it implies telling increasingly sad or dramatic stories by all the members of a group: the first student in the group narrates the story of a sad event; the second student narrates a story that is even sadder than the story of the first student; the third student narrates an even more dramatic event than those narrated by the first two students, and so on. For example: the first student tells a story on 'How I got my knee scar'; the second student narrates of how he/ she or somebody else broke a finger in a bike accident; the third student tells a story about a sportsman losing conscience during a sporting competition. Thus, all the members of the group share experiences on a certain topic, as well as evaluations of those experiences; they also practice the expression of sympathy, giving advice or what should be done in such situations. This type of conversational activity builds group solidarity and the sense of belonging to a group. Gossiping on a given topic is another example: students may be asked to imagine they are gossiping about what a certain person – for example, a controversial public figure – did; they have to accuse, blame and excuse the behaviour of the respective person by highlighting that person's cultural background, education and beliefs. Approaching different types of texts, genres and discourse during foreign language class reading, speaking and writing activities may be done from an intercultural perspective to show that, essentially, different texts have different audiences. Thus, students learn to consider the characteristics of their audience (cultural background, beliefs, values) when preparing a speech, a press conference or press release etc.

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Conclusions

Teacher training and the design of teaching materials that are used in the foreign language classroom should be changed in order to support the building of intercultural competence and cultural awareness in school. Building intercultural competence and cultural awareness should constitute one of main aims of teaching. Pre-service teachers should be supported through special courses, whereas in-service teachers may attend training courses and workshops on this topic. The basic teaching materials (e.g. foreign language course books) should include more intercultural topics related not only to the country to which the respective foreign language is directly and clearly related (for example, the UK, the USA and France), but also to other anglophone and francophone countries, as well as countries that may have no connection whatsoever with the English and French languages. In other words, the language spoken in one country should not be a criteria for selecting the topics that are to be discussed in the foreign language classroom. The foreign language should represent only a tool for comparison. It seems rhetorical to ask whether to promote intercultural competence and cultural awareness in Romanian schools. Educators, syllabus writers and teachers should all direct their activity towards achieving this goal, in order to help students identify with their own culture on the one hand and, on the other hand, approach the difference and apparent strangeness related to another culture with openness and curiosity. The future language teacher may be defined as a "catalyst for an ever-widening critical cultural competence … an agent of social change" (12, p. 8). Foreign languages should be taught as tools that facilitate the widening of the students' horizon and general knowledge, the building of moral values (honesty, respect for others, tolerance, responsibility for one's actions, kindness and generosity) and spiritual values (compassion and wisdom).

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