

INTERCULTURAL TEACHER'S EDUCATION IN THE BALKAN COUNTRIES FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

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Abstract: *This paper aims to analyse possible strategies of raising teachers' intercultural sensitivity in the Balkan countries, starting from the hypothesis that we all are less ethnocentric concerning cultural differences in education. The study I have initiated on this topic envisages combating the laissez-faire effect in this regional educational process. I will describe and comment on the key factors in the development of intercultural awareness from the beginning to an advanced stage where this is impropriated as a natural attitude to cultural diversity in a European part of the world with many similarities, in such a way that cross-boundary students can feel at home in any of the Balkan countries. Their integration in the large family of European learners is the desideratum of Romanian educators that I join in the endeavour to promote and appropriate intercultural policies through teaching foreign languages from this perspective, against cultural marginalization and discrimination of any kind. In light of these premises and in response to an increasing diversity in higher education students, some of them being immigrants, I will focus on teachers' training for the new challenges they have to face up within this new framework, without the formal delineation of an obsolete cultural map and I will emphasize teachers' need to adjust to a new educational environment that should be increasingly reflected in the curricula of foreign languages and not only. Dealing with minority-group students calls an urgent preparation for a background of new emotional, behavioural, social, cultural and political issues disregarded before.*

An appropriate pedagogy for intercultural teaching of adults can bring about the necessary methodological changes and integrate the Balkan countries in the new paradigm of a modern education.

Keywords: *intercultural, background, marginalization, strategy, pedagogy*

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Interculturality – New Challenges

In my presentation I would like to open up discussion about some approaches that can be relevant to working with colleagues and students in intercultural research contexts. Secondly, I choose to suggest ways of considering culture beyond the narrow limits of a predetermined topic. Although it has to do with meanings, artifacts and symbols in a particular background and at various historical times, the analysis of relations between cultures at all times slides easily into questions of ethnicity and nationality. I have chosen to address interculturality in education within the Balkan region to highlight its specific values. I have used “interculturality” as a term denoting the concept for looking reflexively at our origins, identities and ways of communicating as part of a larger family of Balkan people, also noticing the way in which this region has become specific our research agendas, public policies and our relations with others involved in teaching, ways in which majority indigenous identity is reinforced in the region, through intercultural strategies that include public, bilingual communication. Joint research projects are meaningful actions that may generate better quality data building collaborative relations through participatory work, for shared benefits either using field notebooks to record and subsequently reflect on research outcomes with the beforehand preparation of bilingual transcripts where applicable, taking into account the subjects’ verbal and non-verbal expressions of resistance, expected or maybe unexpected reactions on the purpose of shaping research interventions. «Reports of personal experience could also be helpful for recognizing the issue of value relativity. Moreover, opportunities should be provided through didactic and experiential learning approaches to focus on issues and real examples that involve critical reflections on personal attitudes, values, political position and teaching behaviour towards ethnic and cultural diversity.»¹

Intercultural competence is a concept popular today, its content being discussed in a great variety of contexts. It is not possible to arrive at one

¹ Leeman, Y., & Ledoux, G., Preparing teachers for intercultural education. *Teaching Education*, 14(3), 2003, 279.

particular definition of the concept since it is always contextually determined, construed according to the most recent discourses on competence, culture, communication, language acquisition. Experiencing the intercultural dimension represents an emerging competence. The intercultural dimension is connected to a conceptual framework that cannot be reduced to the simple realization that multiple cultures exist, endowed with distinctive features and identifiable and comparable attributes. It insists on the importance of relationships among cultures and implies the mutual influence that is generated from such a relationship. There is a need for competence, meant as the ability to deal with complex problems or carry out multiple tasks, in the specific area of interculturality, with a valence that is not technical or determined by a specific discipline, but as a global perspective of the phenomenon. An intercultural communicative competence includes various components that can be summarized in the now classic triad of knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Directions have been traced by the Council of Europe and the European Commission on integrated learning of languages. In this case, languages become the vehicle for studying some subjects in the curriculum, and are no longer objects of study and only that. Another indication for research is regarding receptive learning of more than one language through the development of strategies that facilitate the transferability of cognitive processes, knowledge, and skills already acquired from one language to another, from the mother tongue to the first foreign language and from it to the second, and so on. Thus, the European Commission (1995: 47) writes: «Languages are also the key to knowing other people. Proficiency in languages helps to build up the feeling of being European with all its cultural wealth and diversity and of understanding between the citizens of Europe... Multilingualism is part and parcel of both European identity/citizenship and the learning society»².

Teacher training, today more than ever, has to deal with skills linked to an intercultural communicative process. In this context, however, we have decided to analyse intercultural dimension areas, which certainly are not exhaustive regarding the phenomenon, but are, anyway, pre-eminent in the determination of the reasons why intercultural dimensions are a

² <http://europa.eu.int/en/record/white/edu9511/>

fundamental requirement on the learning and teaching of languages. A certain attention is given to the urgency to innovate the processes of learning. It is held to be desirable to use approaches to teaching that integrate linguistic education and input of content concerning the social context and the context of integration, which are currently considered extremely episodic. A certain amount of attention is dedicated to better exploitation of the places of informal and non-formal learning. An aspect around which significant concurrence is reported regards the necessity to improve the competence in intercultural relating of teachers. Teacher training in the area of intercultural competence should serve to create widespread awareness, avoiding a delegation of the functions of contact to just the cultural mediators. The experience of exchanges and partnerships within the *Socrates and Erasmus* Programmes often leads to the exposure to a new language and another culture, as has been shown in the survey with the selected subjects. The experiences of encounter and the direct contacts with people belonging to other cultures obviously do not guarantee, because of the mere fact of taking place, the ability to adopt different points of view and willingness to respect differences; on the contrary, the exact opposite phenomenon can occur, of imperviousness, if experiences and encounters are not accompanied by true interventions of teaching interculturality. Attitudes of defence of one's identity can be produced as a result of the inability to understand the culture of the other person beyond the filter of one's own culture.

Intercultural competence is an enormously popular concept nowadays, its content being discussed in a great variety of contexts. It is not possible to arrive at one particular definition of the concept - it is always contextually determined, coloured by the latest discourses on competence, culture, communication, language, etc. The development of intercultural competence ought to lead to a critical cultural awareness and a political awareness of oneself as a citizen. I would add that it ought to lead to a political awareness of oneself as a citizen of the world. This is because I feel that language teachers, by virtue of their experiences with various languages and various language areas have special opportunities to contribute to developing the global vision and involvement of their students or participants.

Sharing diversity within and between cultures

Across Europe, one of the main objectives of educational policy to promote dialogue is by providing resources for *language learning*. This takes many forms such as language training that is *available to all students* to learn e.g. the language of a neighboring country or the mother tongue of students with a foreign background. It is *aimed at minorities and migrants* to learn and practice the official language of the country where they live in order to e.g. facilitate integration and provide them with better opportunities to participate in the marketplace.

In this sense, intercultural dialogue processes or encounters are to go beyond a mere 'tolerance of the other' and can involve creative abilities that convert challenges and insights into innovation processes and into new forms of expression. The "shared space" in which such processes take place can be located outside of physical spaces, situated in the media or in a virtual environment. «teachers' intercultural competence is tightly linked with teaching effectiveness».³

In connection with intercultural learning, research into intercultural communication has mainly been interested in defining learning content and thereby answering question such as *What is to be learned? How should it be taught?* etc. There has also been a huge interest in developing best teaching and training methods at all times, which again reflects the emphasis on practice in large portions of the literature on this specific matter. Therefore, there has been relatively limited interest in detailed exploration of the learning processes that take place, either in the cultural encounter in practice or in relation to formal teaching sequences. This focus on content and teaching method does not harmonise with the strong emphasis on the learner and the learning process which is otherwise typical of modern pedagogical research. That intercultural learning is dependent on what the learner already knows, thinks and believes is in fact more consistently included in interculturally oriented foreign language methodology than in intercultural communication research. For instance,

³ Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T., *Educating culturally responsive teachers*. Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2002, 114.

the concept the intercultural speaker has been precisely introduced in recognition of the fact that the content that the foreign language learners acquire, as well as the learning processes they undergo are basically different from the corresponding processes taking place in native speakers of the respective language.

Raising cultural awareness and sensitivity of teachers

Teachers should develop the awareness of the role that language and culture play as a teaching and learning medium. In terms of language acquisition, this eventually entails a basic understanding of the English structure and oral or written and colloquial or academic dimensions of English (Fillmore & Snow, 2002). It means understanding the challenges that ELLs cope with in learning academic contents in a language they do not have a good command of. Moreover, from a cultural perspective now, teachers need to realize how learning opportunities may be mediated through culturally-based assumptions regarding mixed classrooms and literacy conventions that at first are not shared by all students. They should be able to respond to the instructional implications of this culture awareness. «Both structured experience and directed immersion programmes will help improve metacognitive strategies for applying culture-specific and culture-general knowledge in teaching.»⁴

Calling attention to foreign languages

The current interest in mainstream teacher preparation programs in educating present and future teachers is a long overdue response to the ever changing situation. The study suggests that linguistic diversity with its implications for language and content learning must become visible throughout teachers preparation program. Awareness of the language cultural role is particularly important given the tendency of mainstream educators and policy-makers to assert that what works for native speakers

⁴ Sercu, L., Assessing intercultural competence: a framework for systematic test development in foreign language education and beyond. *Intercultural Education.*, 15(1), 2004, 73.

will also work for foreign learners. While many concerns and apprehensions remained professional recognition and allowed participants to address both their individual and school-specific needs, it contextualized teacher development (Shulman, 2005) and led to changes in teachers' knowledge, awareness, attitude, and practice. Mainstream teachers are asked to do things in very different ways, trying out new approaches within their classrooms. It is attractive in theory, but the question remains if it really works and how the model may be better to traditionally structured school units.

A real challenge of language teaching nowadays is to make interculturality and communication a unitary activity, since: «the development of culturally relevant pedagogy is dependent upon the individual teachers' bicultural competence and is context specific. Other scholars also note that teachers' personal cultural identity and subjectivities affect their daily actions and pedagogy».⁵

Conclusions

Such factors as prior education, personal attitudes and language skills are necessary antecedents to the development of teachers intercultural competence. This is a process of evolving cultural identity first of all: awareness of the socio-political dimensions of language use and language education, sociolinguistic consciousness, learning about students' language backgrounds, experiences and proficiencies, orientation to social interaction for authentic communicative purposes and expertise development for teaching field experience acquisition through various grants and possibly visits to other Balkan countries.

The professional development model is based on a carefully designed theoretical framework that draws from three main work areas: socio-cultural teaching and learning theories, a sociolinguistic view of second or third language learning, or even a model of the teacher expertise's development. These theories help define how people learn, what language

⁵ Horenczyk, G., & Tatar, M., Teachers' attitudes toward multiculturalism and their perceptions of the school organizational culture. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 18(4), 2002, 435–445.

is, how it is learned, and therefore how it should be taught and how teachers, as adult learners, develop their potential to become accomplished practitioners. These three perspectives are integrated with tools and processes designed to develop the domains of professionalism which teachers grow in cross-cultural communication, requiring a multitude of factors: knowledge, vision, motivation, reflection, knowledge of their context, and last but not least practice.

The particular efforts involved in establishing teacher education as suggested should not be realistically measured and never underestimated. The desideratum is quite complex, which requires dedicated work and commitment by many people over many years. As I have said before, there are many opportunities for action in order to influence policies at national and local levels. We can somehow reorganize the curriculum of teacher education in institutions and create in-service and pre-service programs that may go separately from the regular curriculum, luckily through grants or teamwork with groups of teachers for the development of further orientations, and requirements of skills for teaching foreign languages within a state. Since interculturality is always the main challenge in the field of foreign language teaching, it is easy to understand that so far there have been more theoretical discussions than practical suggestions. The problem still remains to fill the gap between theory and practice, in the sense that we cope with diversity at all times. For this, a task-based working framework may be proposed, based on several complementary ideas such as cooperative activities, critical thinking and culture-oriented contents in order to develop both intercultural and communicative competence. In this article I have reviewed what I consider to be the best ways that can justify the introduction of cultural content into the language curriculum so that

At the end I optimistically express the assumption that all teachers will have enough opportunities to develop their expertise for teaching field experience, as long as there is motivation and dedicated work, on the way of becoming international or at least European professionals.

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UNASSAILABLE PREDICAMENTS: FINDING OUR LOST SELVES

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Abstract: *At the beginning of the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf referred to and elaborated on the fundamental changes she noticed occurring in the relations among “masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children...”. These shifts predicted by the famous British writer with such accuracy, were meant to bring profound changes in all the areas of our “common” life, from religion to politics and general human behavior. We found ourselves today, one century later, living another type of transformational “transition”. The way in which we relate to one another and with all types of institutions changes and evolves most of the time taking unpredictable turnabouts. There is a clear erosion of trust in any type of authority (be it political, professional, familial or religious) and a decentralization of power and, in the same time, paradoxically, a higher confidence in what can be achieved on our own and/or in our close relational circle. The sense of our own identity becomes variable, while the sense of intimacy and the familial circle expands. The present paper scrutinizes with a magnifying lens the space extending between our hopes for the future and the experiences bequeathed from the past, emphasizing the fact that only cogitation could shed some light and reveal new shared understandings about ourselves, the others, our aspirations, relationships and unassailable modern relations, about social conditions which we are all continuously crafting as worthy citizens of the twenty-first century.*

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At the dawn of the last century, Virginia Woolf was writing that “*in or about December 1920, the human spirit changed*” and, we could say, looking back at those days that she wasn’t wrong, after all: her observation proved itself valid, indeed. World’s greatest writers are also prescient, special people who uniquely perceive the transformations taking place in their fellow human’s psychological structure, as well as important and profound character, sociological and relational shifts. These observations, presented more or less overtly, become after a genuine artistic creative alchemy traits ingrained in the characters populating the worlds they imagined and wrote about.

Long ago, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Woolf referred to fundamental changes she observed in the relations between “*masters and slaves, husbands and wives, parents and children...⁶*”. These shifts, described so accurately by Virginia Woolf, were meant to bring profound transformations in all areas of our “common lives”, from religion to politics, to the human behavior in general. We find ourselves today, one century later, living another transformational “transition”. The way in which we relate with our peers and with all sorts of institutions is changing (social networks and the media, the expansion of the virtual communication means, of the mobile phones etc), evolves many times unpredictably.

There is a clear erosion of any type of trust in authority (be it political, religious, familial etc), and a decentralizing of power and – in the same time, maybe paradoxically, a higher level of confidence in ourselves, in our own strengths and abilities (whatever you do with your own hands is well done) and in our close relational circle. The feeling of our own identity becomes variable, while the intimacy sentiment and the familiar network

⁶ Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”, p.422-423 Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, Vol. 3, London: Hogarth Press, 1966, Read the entire text at: <http://www.columbia.edu/~em36/MrBennettAndMrsBrown.pdf>, Consulted on april, 10, 2014.

expand. What was once, long time ago, considered private or personal, now it is spread in the blink of an eye and shared with thousands of people, just by clicking a button on our laptops. The internet, Facebook , as well as other globally expanded socializing networks are undoubtedly at the core of these shifts, triggering and creating every time new assumptions.

Not so long ago, *Time Magazine*⁷ declared 26 years old Mark Zuckerberg Person of the Year 2010. A Harvard dropout, Zuckerberg, the inventor of Facebook, is the initiator of the socializing platform that already overpasses 600 million users. Our common life, under the circumstances of a generalized globalization, cannot ignore the existence of this social network, which could be considered, if it were a country, the third considering the number of its “inhabitants” (researchers maintain that the number of Facebook users is approximately equal to the population of India) and it covers with its virtual connective tissue almost a tenth of the planet. After more than one century after Virginia Woolf’s pertinent observation, one could undoubtedly and wholeheartedly exclaim that the spirit of the entire humanity changed, again!

The new (hu)man, contemporary with these overwhelming and captivating evolutions, transforms himself not only sociologically, but also physiologically. Dunbar’s number⁸ (150, coefficient expressing the number of stable social relationships that a human could have during a lifetime, number linked with the dimension of the human *neocortex*) rises exponentially, with the expansion of every individual’s social circle, active inhabitant of the century of virtual communication. There is no surprise to anybody to find out that the average number of friends someone has on Facebook is 150 and it is continuously growing.

⁷ Time Magazine, January 2011.

⁸ Robin Dunbar, scientist, anthropologist, evolutionist biologist, professor at Oxford University.

American researcher E.O Wilson⁹ maintains that “*we are threading our way on a (socio-biological n.a.) yet uncharted territory...*”, if we take into consideration the fact that, due to the most recent strides in technology, the human being can interact and socialize with fellow human beings many times more than our ancestors, who, during a lifespan could barely know 150 people. Where is common life situated nowadays? Where are its limits? How would this excessive socializing influence the development of the individual self, in the case in which Tzvetan Todorov is right and we all “*change our behavior in a way or another to answer the demands we presuppose coming from the other...*”¹⁰ How long would such introspection take, if we multiply the period necessary for such a reflection with the number of people of our close relational social circle? What neuro-physiological influences would this have on the human psyche such an operation, which takes place, clearly, far from our immediate, voluntary control over it?

Here is what T. Todorov says following the previous idea:

*“The self reflected by anticipation is towards the retrospective self more circumstantial and more punctual: it depends on the concrete identity of the present interlocutor, instead of being an imprecise average of all the past interlocutors...it transforms the present behavior...”*¹¹

Could we anticipate a map of human behavior for the next decades? How “uncharted¹²” could this be? How do we manage to find from here, from the virtual space of interplanetary communication, the way back to our own selves, so very lost in the maze of all these relations, which strain our own sociality and sociability as species? The answer might be hidden

⁹ American scientist, considered the father of socio-biology.

¹⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *Viata comuna, Eseu de antropologie generala*, Editura Humanitas, 2009, page 170.

¹¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *Viața comună, Eseu de antropologie generală*, Editura Humanitas, 2009, pag. 171.

¹² E.O Wilson: “*We’re in uncharted territory*”.

somewhere inside of us. On the stage of our inner theater, the premiere is always different, forever new, perpetually waiting to be (re)discovered. We have to distinguish, Todorov says, between the three roles we need to accept: “the positive self, the negative self and the ideal self”. Maybe, who knows, the long-awaited answer might be the therapy through theater. The multitude of the possible relations displayed among the characters on all the stages around the world would be able to represent the potential virtual mimesis of these relations, easily recognizable and anticipated by the youngsters born in a century of communication and of the internet. The different temporal dimensions of these relations would probably be able to trigger a fall in their inner self, in the depth of their soul, eliciting a (re)discovery of an inner reality overwhelmed to saturation by the abundant, but paradoxically unsatisfying information received relationally. Since the theater could be the solution, the stage would be the therapy.

“*Our current lifestyle is losing its charm and doesn’t procure the satisfaction it has offered to us a while ago*¹³”, maintained the authors of *Thinking Sociologically*¹⁴, in the chapter *The way we live our lives*. Chasing time every day and the chimeras of a purely material existence, we risk not to find ourselves anymore, and failing to do that, we would be on the verge of losing touch with our most profound inner being, doomed to perish, victims of depression and existential void. Surrounded by superficiality and lured towards excessive consumption of goods, looking for illusory satisfactions, we succeed on wrapping ourselves in layers of indifference and lack of interest.

French sociologist Jean Baudillard, cited by Bauman and May, maintained that it would be an illusion to “*look for an authentic self out*

¹³ Bauman, Zygmunt and May, Tim – *Thinking Sociologically*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2008, page 169.

¹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman and Tim May, p. 169.

*there, on the market... all that we acquire is an **appearance**, which doesn't reveal the more profound reality of what we really are. The appearance is fabricated, taken over and thrown in a seduction of boundless consumption..."*

The prediction of the French sociologist hints towards a sphere of interpretation akin to the genius intuition that Virginia Woolf has had at the beginning of the last century:

*"the people would retire to seek experiences more authentic than the alternatives..."*¹⁵

What authentic experiences might be the ones that Bauman and May are talking about? What relational standards would apply in the centuries to come? What would be acceptable and modern and what not? Would the guidelines that rule our lives today be considered outdated and outmoded by posterity? Considering the pace at which the notion of intimacy evolves nowadays, anything and everything is possible.

If we ponder for just one moment upon what the socializing media networks involve, we can neither acknowledge nor ignore their undeniable ingredients: on the one hand narcissism, on the other, voyeurism. We could as well acknowledge that every single one of us possesses to a certain extent some sort of a combination between these two elements and implicitly explain this way the reason why the social media networks bloom overnight and are so successful to large audiences. This type of social media deduces and manipulates profoundly perennial human character aspects and changes the very immutable nature of our humanity.

This virtual culture, that changes through distortion the nature of human relations, produces the video-child. Entire generations of children don't open a book, their one and only source of information and knowledge being their computer or tablet, and their favorite way of

¹⁵ Bauman, Zygmunt and May, Tim – Thinking Sociologically, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2008, page 169.

entertainment, the TV. Certainly, every new situation brings along and encompasses both positive and negative elements, in what it might be an unstable equilibrium, at least for the primary observation period.

Nobody could deny the importance of rapid and facile access to information and general knowledge via the above mentioned channels of obtaining it, but we could nevertheless deny the seriously damaging side effects, with only slightly predictable consequences of this method/practice/habit within the population at large. One of the most advanced medical specialties developed primarily in the 21st century is child psychology. Not very well known and insufficiently treated, child depression annually produces casualties among teenagers and young adults.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Carl Gustav Jung has discovered that mysterious something that brings us, humans, together and links us all with its invisible influence: the collective unconscious, this common, universal spirit that surrounds us like a diaphanous medium and brings us together as the amniotic liquid of humanity, out of which, later on, we hive off, born into our own individualism, following the straight path towards the inner self. We are heading probably genetically programmed towards our inner selves anyway, regardless if we want it or not. This inner journey, for some of us clearer than for the others, hauls us like an unstoppable stream into becoming who we really are. To better understand these processes and succeed in protecting ourselves from the negative influences of an incredibly wonderful century, oozing exceptional achievements, who knows, maybe only the magic of books could save us.

“This flickering screen will never ever take the place of the book¹⁶...”

This potential remedy could, at times, seem insufficient, but if we don't try it, we will never know. We will never be able to find our lost souls, nor will we be able to step down from this informative/communicational merry-go-round if, exasperated by the

¹⁶ Andrei Codrescu, *Wakefield*, Polirom, București, 2011.

clamor and hubbub of our surroundings, we won't find the time to sit by an open window, and pick up a good book.

From Chekov's letters, the well renowned Russian writer and physician, I found out the cure for the exasperation of intelligent people. This is his well educated advice, telling friends and posterity how he approached this inconvenience: "... *I read. No matter what they say, it is more pleasant to read than to write...I think that if I will still live another 40 years and all this while I would read, and I would learn to write with talent, meaning concisely – over these 40 years, I would shoot at you with such a huge cannon, the whole sky would shake! Meanwhile, now, I am a Lilliputian, just like anybody else...*"¹⁷

Between the expectations we have for the future and the experiences bequeathed from the past, there is a huge gap which only cogitation could abridge, enlighten, and reveal new shared understandings about ourselves, the others, our aspirations, relationships and unassailable modern relations, about social conditions which we are all continuously crafting as worthy citizens of the twenty-first century.

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