ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AT THE CROSSROADS OF INTERCULTURALITY AND TRANSDISCIPLINARITY

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ABSTRACT:

The current paper investigates the concept of transdisciplinarity from the perspective of an 'intercultural' approach to foreign language teaching. It puts forward the proposition that the intercultural approach to language teaching shares common grounds with transdisciplinarity in terms of knowledge, attitude and view of the world. To exemplify this point, one of the key concepts of intercultural study, i.e. 'otherness' is discussed in relation to its discipline boundary-crossing character. Another point raised in the paper is that transdisciplinarity equally means the creation and adoption of new approaches that are to be integrated into current practice and that are socially oriented.

Key words: *transdisciplinarity, education, language teaching, culture.*

The Need for Transdisciplinarity in Education

The paper starts from the truism that the modern world has become a network of overlapping problems. Due to their complexity, these can no longer be dealt with by means of the individual, specific knowledge that one discipline alone provides. The school as the main provider of knowledge must revise its approach to instruction if it wishes to maintain its basic role of educating people efficiently. Knowledge and society cannot be separated into distinct entities for one simple reason: individuals will do what they know and what they have learned mainly through instruction. Universities are not only the next and sometimes last level in the individual's learning process; they play a key role in human development, not only in terms of the skills necessary for labour markets, but also in terms of the social and personal training of those who will have a decisive impact on entire societies. That is why education on the whole, but higher education in particular, needs to redefine its rapport with the changing society of the 21st century. One of the main purposes of education at tertiary level is to generate new knowledge building on existing one, and then work within and across disciplines to develop capacities and skills that will respond to the challenges of a globally changing world. With all the convergent impacts of globalization and the information revolution, the educated play a vital part in today's world. Education must reflect and

keep up with emerging societal and cultural trends, in order not to lose its due relevance to the recipients' and their communities' needs.

The current world has turned into a fabric of intercultural interactions which require a certain capability to communicate with other people. The basic principle of what is now called 'intercultural communication' lies in the understanding that one must look at the surrounding world through several perspectives. This knowledge cannot come only from linguistics, it should be endorsed by input from other disciplines like anthropology, sociology or cultural studies. Educational practices based on multiple intelligences and varied learning styles share with transdisciplinarity the common core of the belief that there are legitimate and possible alternative ways of perceiving the world. This proves to be particularly valid in the case of adopting an intercultural approach to the teaching and learning of foreign languages, because the foreign language provides access to interaction with culturally diverse people, which basically means different perspectives on the world.

Globalization as a world phenomenon sees the mobility of a huge flux of people, students, professors and researchers, towards academic environments of another culture. It is becoming clearer and clearer that education has to provide the 'tools' that will enable and mediate the dialogue between cultures. Interculturality and transdiciplinarity share a common challenge: *otherness*. As Nicolescu[1] points out there is one fundamental characteristic of the transdisciplinary evolution of education which calls for the recognition of oneself in the face of the Other. Thus, *"To live together with"* does not mean simply tolerating the other's differences of opinion, skin color, and beliefs; submission to the exigencies of power; negotiating between the in's and out's of innumerable conflicts; definitively separating interior from exterior life. The transcultural, transreligious, transpolitic and transnational attitude can be learned. To the extent that in each being there is a sacred, intangible core it is innate. Yet, if this innate attitude is only potential, it can forever remain non-actualized, absent in life and in act. In order that the norms of a collectivity be respected they must be *validated* by the interior experience of each being. The transcultural, transreligious, transpolitical and transnational attitude permits us to better understand our own culture, to better defend our national interests, to better respect our own religious or political

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[1] Nicolescu, B. (1997). *The transdisciplinary evolution of the university condition for sustainable development*. Accessed May 19, 2015 at http://perso.club internet.fr/nicol/ciret/bulletin/b12/b12c8.htm

convictions. Just as in all other areas of Nature and knowledge, open unity and complex plurality are not antagonists."

Thus, applying these words to the field of intercultural language teaching/learning, the added dimension of transdisciplinarity would empower the educated for the intercultural experience and make them apt enough to deal with any given situation of 'otherness'.

Having given all these preliminary considerations, the paper will further focus on the relationship between transdisciplinarity and the teaching of English as a foreign language in an intercultural configuration.

Transdiciplinarity in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

The wish to integrate a transdiciplinary approach in the education of foreign languages in higher education does not mean that the discipline of 'English Language Teaching' as such should be dissolved. On the contrary, it involves teaching it with cross-references that will acknowledge the dynamic relationship with other disciplines and with societal problems.

In today's intercultural world, you cannot teach a foreign language without making room for 'culture' in the classroom. Intercultural competence plays a key role and is a desirable goal in modern foreign language education as language and culture are considered to be inseparable constructs.[2] The forms and uses of the linguistic expression are influenced by the cultural values of the community in which that language is spoken. Since cultures are different and diverse, developing the students' awareness of the cultural appropriacy of verbal and non-verbal behaviours in a particular speech community, the language teacher brings in a transdisciplinary dimension to the traditional FL teaching and learning.

The Nature of Transdisciplinarity in Language Education

The nature of foreign language didactics makes it a transdisciplinary science because, though closely related to language and language teaching/learning, it equally reflects and serves societal structures, such as educational systems and cultural identity. More importantly than that, a transdisciplinary approach to foreign language teaching shows the marked move from traditional teaching to a model that trains the learners to

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[2] Byrnes, H. Toward academic-level foreign language abilities: Reconsidering foundational assumptions, expanding pedagogical options. In B. L. Leaver & B. Shekhtman (Eds.), *Developing professional-level language proficiency*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 34-58

communicate effectively with other people, be it in other disciplines or other cultures.

Communication with other people raises the issue of finding a common language which, perhaps, entails more than finding the right words to do that. It requires flexibility, the wish to learn and ultimately the ability to look at things through the lens of others and then readjust current position from those insights.

As for crossing boundaries into other disciplines, the intercultural approach integrates knowledge coming from a range of other fields and could be considered an instance of genuine transdisciplinarity. For instance, considering the example of the concept 'otherness' alone, which is essential to configuring an intercultural approach, teachers and students will access the realms of psychology, sociology and particularly, sociological analysis, i.e. how social identities are constructed. From the perspective of language teaching/learning, intercultural communication is based, to a certain extent, on the understanding of what 'social identity' means. The latter reflects the way in which other groups relate to the social categories within their society and culture. Social identity is important to realising who we are and how we wish to be perceived by others. Similarity and difference, the dichotomic duo of interculturality, is a central player in the process of achieving a sense of identity and social belonging. "Woman is the other of man, animal is the other of human, stranger is the other of native, abnormality the other of norm, deviation the other of law-abiding, illness the other of health, insanity the other of reason, lay public the other of the expert, foreigner the other of state subject, enemy the other of friend."[3]

Social identity surfaces through interaction with other people, and identities gain consistency through agreement, disagreement and negotiation with others, which are mainly expressed through verbal expression. So, once again teacher and learners alike cross over to the field of language, speech acts and specific language functions which are culturally-biased. Overall, the process of intercultural teaching/learning acquires transdiciplinary dimensions since "every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are also constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. They are, in other words, engaged in identity construction and negotiation."[4]

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[3] Bauman, Z. *Modernity and Ambivalence.* Cambridge, U.K., Polity Press & Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1991. (p.8.)

[4] Norton, (1997:410) Norton, B., 1997. Language, identity and the ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly* 31, 409–429.

An intercultural approach to teaching the English language will incorporate transdisciplinary knowledge in order to signal cultural appropriacy in communication. The range of linguistic expressions for agreeing, disagreeing or negotiating will reflect the importance of social categories, gender and power distance and display the identity of the party engaged in interaction. Thus, learning does not only include the acquisition of a language but also acquiring knowledge of the world.[5] Within such a perspective, the foreign language becomes the mediator between individuals and their surrounding world, and governs the construct of social relationships with others.

The irony is that transdisciplinarity itself can be looked at from several perspectives. According to some researchers, transdisciplinarity is not equal to the sum of input from individual disciplines as we tried to show above. Transdisciplinarity also involves a radical change in the attitude to doing things. In the case of foreign language education it targets the move from traditional, teacher-centred classes to communicative methodology focused on the learner and learning. Thus, transdisciplinary teaching encompasses the creation and adoption of new approaches that are to be integrated into practice while considering complex social issues.[6] Communication across cultures in a globalised world is a social issue. Intercultural teaching and learning is based on the discovery and exploration of new concepts. Intercultural teaching also uses an interactive pedagogy and project-type activities which make a radical change to traditional pratice. This creates another opening for a transdisciplinary approach because teachers and learners work together to access sources of knowledge, share information and actually remodel the educational process to include not just instruction, but the expansion of knowledge.

Starting from Vygotsky's view[7] on the relationship existing between instruction and development, we can then assume that foreign language teaching/learning in an intercultural configuration develops the learners'

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[5] Lantolf, J. 2000. Introducing sociocultural theory. In: Lantolf, James (Ed.), *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*. Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, pp. 1–50.

[6] Crowe, H.A., Brandes, K. et al. Transdiciplinary Teaching :Professionalism across Cultures. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, pp. 194-, vol.3, no. 13, July 2013

[7] Wertsch, J.V. (1985). *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind.* Cambridge. MA: Harvard University Press.

cognitive[8], social[9] and personal[10] capacities which are recognised as transdisciplinary capacities that are developed in the learning of different school subjects.

Conclusion

Bridging the gap between knowledge and society is the challenge universities face in the 21st century if the fabric of universities is to reflect the complex weave of problems facing humanity and acquire societal efficiency. Transdisciplinarity is one way to bridge the gap because it complements the existing system with a new type of approach which crosses disciplines, focuses on concrete problems and calls for cooperation, first and foremost, in the area of education. After all, the objectives of transdisciplinary converge with those of the intercultural approach: not only to understand the world in all its complexity but to develop a deeper understanding of it.

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[8] skills related to reasoning and logical thinking, e.g. analysis, synthesis, inferencing, sequencing, understanding complex relationships, drawing conclusions, using abstract concepts, problem solving, hypothesis testing, etc.

[9] skills such as acceptance of others, working cooperatively with others, toleration of other points of view, etc.

[10] qualities such as confidence (or self-esteem), initiative, responsibility, autonomy, etc.

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