HOW TO AVOID CONFLICT IN THE CLASSROOM IN A CHANGING SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT. LESSONS LEARNED IN RFL CLASSES WITHIN THE FY PROGRAM

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Abstract

The social, political and geopolitical problems of the world do not belong solely to state leaders and governments, but also to societies, as they affect our daily lives and impact what we say, how we react, and how we interact with others. These issues are even more pronounced in a multicultural class like the ones we encounter in the Foundation Year program, where professors have the responsibility of bringing all students to a common denominator and mitigating the cultural and socio-political differences between them. Both in Grammar and Culture and Civilization classes, these problems emerge from time to time, from sensitive issues as explaining the gender of the nouns or the qualitative adjectives in terms of colors, which some might find offensive as they might relate to skin color as well, to explaining the political state of the country without being perceived as taking sides. This paper outlines lessons learned during the FY classes when it comes to topics such as gender, discrimination, stereotypes, racism, wars and conflicts and how sensitive discussions should, from my perspective, be dealt with.

Keywords*: multiculturalism, foundation year, stereotypes, gender identify, politics*

MULTICULTURALISM

The concept of multiculturalism has received many definitions during time, each trying to explain what happens when people coming from different regions, different cultures and backgrounds meet and try to coexist. In ideal circumstances, these people should mutually recognize the right to live in common, to accept each other's different experiences, expectations and behaviors. However, it does not always happen like that, especially during the Foundation Year's classes, where students coming from different countries meet in a country that is also new to them and to which they must adapt. The concept itself emerged in the 1970's, in France, in the context of immigration and the need for inclusion for immigrant kids and for their adaptation to the new educational methods. Therefore, classes where immigrant students meet for common purposes are by definition multicultural classes. According to Rosado (1997), multiculturalism

> "is a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their

> socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society" (1997:2).

The author that proposes this definition underlines that the most important element of it is the *recognition* of the immense diversity of such a group, which implies then also *respect* (to treat people as they want to be treated). Equally important are the *acknowledgment* of the cultural expressions of a group and of its contribution and valuing what others have to offer, not pushing them away for being different than the majority.

> "The essence of multiculturalism, the undergirding concept of multicultural education, is the ability to celebrate with the other in a manner that transcends all barriers and brings about a unity in diversity. Multiculturalism enables us to look upon the Other, especially the Other that society has taught us to regard with distrust and suspicion and to be taken advantage of, not as a "potential predator, but as a profitable partner" (Rosado, 1997: 5-6).

In the university, multiculturalism takes a different form, as we are not confronted with only one culture that is different than the "target" country, in this case, Romania, but with a multitude of countries and cultures which are distinct from the Romanian one. These differences might sometimes lead to misunderstandings, awkward situations and even conflicts if not dealt with attention from the beginning.

I have identified during the last 5 years of classes some contexts wherein these types of tensions might be provoked, mainly happening during the Culture and Civilization and Grammar and Vocabulary classes. However, nowadays, besides a multicultural context, we are also dealing with new (but, actually, old) social movements, such as gender identity in the classroom, which even though should not be treated as a challenge necessarily, in a multicultural context and when teaching Romanian as a foreign language could lead to misunderstanding and undesired situations.

CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED IN THE FY PROGRAM

A. CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

The diversity of religion and culture of the FY students brings a multitude of benefits to the Foundation Year classes, especially to the Culture and Civilization ones, where students are encouraged to talk about their countries of origin and their customs and traditions. As professors, however, we must bear in mind that we are always dealing with students who might react differently to such diversity, who might not adapt well in their first weeks in Romania and who might come from cultures or countries that are "opposed" or which were historically in conflicts with other countries.

Therefore, our responsibility is to make sure that we create a safe space for the students to be themselves, to proudly present their culture and their identity in front of

others. To do so, the best practice is to make them understand beforehand that they are dealing with a multicultural class and that we shall accept and not be bothered or offended by other countries' customs or religions. Confronting them with their possible reactions avoids situations such are laughing or making negative comments when their colleagues are talking about their countries. When it comes to us, the professors, we shall ask the students – after establishing the schedule and the rules we have for the smooth development of the classes – if there are practices related to their religion or culture that we shall consider when establishing it. For example, for Muslim students, it is better to ask them, before Ramadan starts, if they are comfortable with the schedule – as fasting might affect their concentration level – and if they need at specific times to exit the class to pray. Encouraging students to embrace their values is not just a form of respect for their culture and religion but also a way for us, professors, to show that the expression of diversity is welcomed in the classroom, which makes room for more freedom.

Coming from different cultures also involves dressing and acting differently in the classroom. Even though wearing hijabs for example, by Muslim students, has never been an issue for Romanian universities or for Romania in general (as unfortunately is happening in other European countries), there are some cultural behaviors which, at first sight, might seem strange to us, the professors, but also to the other students. For example, in countries such as Iraq, men do not normally look in the eyes of the women (who are not part of the family) when talking to them. In Romania, however, this is totally different, as we are asking for eye contact when addressing the other person and it is a form of disrespect to not do it. We shall therefore not condemn such different behaviors coming from our students, but still to present them with our social practices so that they can understand Romanians' possible reactions to that different behavior.

All the differences can be addressed through proper questions such as: *What is your religion like? Are there things that make you feel uncomfortable in this class (religion or cultural-related things)? Do you need to go out and pray at specific times? Would you like to focus on easier lessons close to Iftar? How are social interactions in your culture? What do you normally do when…? How are classes developed in your country? etc*. The reactions to such questions would also have to be carefully expressed so that we encourage more openness from our students. Thus, we shall avoid saying *That is odd/ strange/ awkward/ stupid and instead use That is interesting/ revealing.*

B. STEREOTYPES

This leads us to a second challenge in the FY program: the existence of stereotypes, which might affect students' interaction with each other and, therefore, the reception of the information we give them in the classroom. Stuard Hall (2001) says that stereotypes simplify complex realities and often marginalize groups by presenting them in a one-dimensional, negative light. Eduard Said, in 1978, in *Orientalism*, underlined how Western society presented the East as exotic, barbaric, or backward to justify

colonialism, which resulted in the establishment of negative stereotypes. The concept has also been defined, during time, as simplified, fixed, and often oversimplified representations of groups of people, ideas, or cultures that are perpetuated through cultural media, social norms, and institutional structures. Most of the time, these are neutral or inaccurate information, and they often serve to uphold power dynamics, reinforce social hierarchies, and marginalize certain groups.

In the Culture and Civilization class, the first lesson should address exactly this topic, as it would make us understand better which are the things our students are bothered by, but it would also make them realize all countries and cultures have both negative and positive stereotypes which are, in most of the cases, based on false information. The lesson shall therefore encourage students to present which are the stereotypes (both positive and negative) other nations have about their people and nations and how those things make them feel. This encourages them to tell others what shall not be said or referred to in their interactions as it makes them feel uncomfortable. At the same time, we present what are the stereotypes others have about Romania and how we feel about them. Dedicated events could also contribute to this mutual understanding of each other's cultures. Within our university, we have an event called RAU Fest, wherein students from all programs, coming from different cultures, collaborate and create presentations of specific countries, with their customs (national symbols, food, clothes, music and dances). This way, students from the Foundation Year program get to interact with other foreign students but also with Romanians, which might also help them practice their Romanian skills.

C. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GENERATIONS

Apart from having students with different cultures and religions, we also have in the Foundation Year program students of different ages, coming from different generations. This is also something that might raise some challenges for the professors and the students themselves, as we must look for teaching strategies that can be embraced by the whole class. Students from the younger generations, the so-called Generation Z (2000-2012), are keener to teaching methods involving online tools, such as language learning apps, videos and even social media, but students from older generations, like the so-called Millennials (1980-1994/6), look for more traditional teaching methods, based on information-exercise-repetition. Different strategies could work in this regard: mixed-age work groups, peer monitoring (which involves the older students wanting to help the younger ones and guide them) and mixed teaching methods (both traditional and emergent strategies of teaching the Romanian language).

D. SOCIO-CULTURAL ADAPTATION

For many of the FY students coming to Romania represents the first time they leave their countries or their continent, so especially for the ones originating from Asia, Africa

and the Middle East the encounter with our culture and society results in a shock (the so-called "cultural shock") and that's where we, the professors, must make sure we do everything possible to make their adaptation process easier and more enjoyable. We must therefore not condemn their change of moods or unwillingness to, sometimes, not be active in the classroom, as some might be dealing with inadaptation or the feeling of missing home, but we must guide them through the best ways to interact with Romanians and to deal with the "unwritten" rules of our society. These guidelines shall also be explained when it comes to the Grammar classes, not just the Culture and Civilization ones.

For example, when teaching the FY students, the personal and politeness pronouns (especially for students coming from the US, where the difference between formal and informal is not made through such pronouns) we must give them exact examples of contexts where they must use politeness pronouns so that the others not misinterpret them or even spark conflicts. Also, when teaching the Demonstrative Adjectives, with both standard and colloquial forms ("acesta" versus "ăsta", which both mean "this") they should understand that the preferred form is the standard one, but if they want to use the colloquial one, they shall not use it when referring to people, as some Romanians might find if offensive. This information might seem not that important, but for our students might be helpful in real-life contexts.

E. POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL ISSUES

One of the most pressing issues that might emerge in FY classes is the one related to different political and ideological views, especially now that we live in such a changing and difficult context, where more and more conflicts emerge and societies seem to be increasingly divided in groups depending on their political views. As professors whose main objective is teaching the Romanian language, we must make sure we create a neutral space that does not lead to political debates. For example, during the presidential elections in Romania, both the first round and, then, after the cancellation of the second, the round that followed in May 2025, students started to ask in class who the candidates were and what views or values they expressed and why it was decided to annul the elections in December 2024. As tempting as it may be to express our views, we must guide the students to do their own research and draw their conclusions so that we do not influence their perspective.

Also, during the Culture and Civilization class, when talking about Romania's history and communism, we must make sure that we present them with facts and not make side comments about different regimes around the world or comparisons with nowadays countries as some of our students come from repressive regimes and might feel uncomfortable. There are also situations where students ask us during the class what our views are on different global conflicts or wars as the ones in Ukraine, and Gaza Strip or the civil conflicts in Africa and countries such as Congo or Mali, Sudan, etc. Besides

showing empathy for those suffering because of these wars, it is better to not talk too much about the sides involved in the conflict as other students might feel that we are not entitled to do that as we do not come from those countries to know more about the context, but they might also feel offended or sad.

In the FY program, we had students coming both from Israel and the Gaza Strip and some of them being quite "aggressive" when defending one of the sides. In such tense contexts, we must show those students that we empathize with them, but also with their colleagues who might not find such talks comfortable. We can offer these students our help and to continue the discussion outside the class, so that they do not feel unheard. This practice of avoiding political controversies is now necessary and has started to be more and more preferred by professors teaching in multicultural classes. Even though it is seen as a de-legitimization of critical discourse in the class ((Bekerman and Zembylas 2017), we can explain to our students that the main goal of the classes is the teaching of Romanian and that political debates stand outside the subject's purpose.

F. INCLUSION: GENDER IDENTITY

Even though gender identity is nothing new, lately we have seen global attempts to condemn the use of nouns' genders or personal pronouns without considering the preferences of the people we use them with. Fair enough. However, when teaching Romanian grammar there may be issues when discussing gender and the personal pronouns. More explicitly students might get offended if, for example, we correct their texts when describing themselves using Masculine or Feminine if they do not identify with the gender we assume they do. Linguistically, pronouns are words that refer to people by replacing proper nouns. Commonly used personal pronouns in Romanian for "he, she, him, her, they" are "el, ea/ ei, ele". Thus, when teaching the personal pronoun, though, and the differences in gender between them (el – singular masculine, ei – plural masculine, ea – singular feminine and ele – plural feminine) we can specify that there are the grammar genders but if they feel that they do not identify with the proposed grammar concepts they can choose their preferred ones, because personal pronoun is very important for meaning making and for representation. The same thing happens with adjectives as in Romanian where we have adjectives with four forms, depending on number and gender, and they must have the same gender, number and case as the nouns they are used with. Here as well we can discuss with our students and make them feel seen and understood by specifying they can choose the preferred gender of the adjective (when making self-descriptions, for example). Another context where tensions might emerge are the classes related to the adjective and, more specifically, the colors *black* ("negru") and *white* (alb"). Even though "color blindness" is a concept what is quite controversial (some people confuse the idea that *race does not matter* with *race does not exist*, as per Neville, 2000), as professors we shall both be conscious how different words could affect our students but we must also make sure we give them all the necessary

information to know how to react and interact with Romanians. Therefore, it is indicated to explain them that even though these adjectives are used by some Romanians to address the skin color, their use are perceived as racist and shall not be accepted. Even if such discussions might seem out of the classes' objective, students will appreciate finding a safe space where they can fully express themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

Teaching the Romanian language to foreign students is not only about language but also about being, most of the time, the first Romanian professors these students interact with in Romania; therefore, we need to create for all of them the conditions they need for a strong, solid but also enjoyable learning process. The above-mentioned recommendations are only that - "recommendations" - and do not pretend to be mandatory guidelines for RFL teachers. Embracing the new social trends and tendencies around the world, being fully connected to nowadays realities, and being open to understanding our students' backgrounds could be a starting point for a deeper mutual understanding of our cultures and for a better study process of the Romanian Language. We acknowledge, though, that there are many other social-related aspects that could improve this learning process and that need future attention from researchers.

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