LANGUAGES' CONTRIBUTION TO INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN TEACHER TRAINING

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The development of intercultural competences becomes one of the main objective of the teacher training programmes. Students enrolled at teacher training programmes become the agents for sharing European values, for reacting thoughtfully when they deal with otherness and for promoting cultures across Europe. Knowledge of languages is not only beneficial for work, travel or sharing information. The purpose of the study is to establish a relationship between foreign languages, the intercultural competence and the practical response of educational programmes to building the intercultural competence. The article also suggests examples of intercultural practical activities designed for different language levels.

Key-words: intercultural competence, teacher training programmes, foreign languages, practical activities, European values, contribution

The educational response to appearing disturbings in society related to racism or conflicts between peoples or different cultures has become one of the priorities to face in any educational system. The intercultural education model provides a holistic view which is based on mutual respect, exchange, cooperation and peaceful coexistence among people from different cultures. Research on teaching and learning foreign languages in recent decades has shown a remarkable shift that has led to the development of new concepts in foreign language didactics and methodology. In the communicative approach and in its further development – the intercultural approach – the perspectives changed the whole process and shifted from teaching o learning, i.e. from designing universal methods of teaching to strategies and techniques that help integrate the features of specific groups of students (age; gender; profession; linguistic/socio-cultural background) or individuals (needs; previous knowledge of the world/target socio-culture/other languages; interest/motivation; capacity/aptitude). Also, the procedural knowledge replaced the declarative, i.e. the focus is not on what students are expected to learn (linguistic/socio-cultural content) but on the question how they learn (techniques and strategies of learning). This humanist perspective, the

continuation of a long-standing cultural tradition in Europe, has now led to a teaching method we have come to call intercultural education, designed to allow learners to react thoughtfully when they come into contact with the various forms that otherness can take.

In this perspective, the intercultural education has the purpose of developing open, proactive, thoughtful and critical attitudes in order to learn to positively understand and successfully manage contact with otherness in school and society. It is especially designed to develop curiosity for discovery and personal, attentive management of cultural diversity. The intercultural education is a complex task that must be based on a plural, dynamic conception of cultural and social identity. It has the task of influencing attitudes and, by extension, beliefs and values in order to encourage various forms of acceptance of otherness on an emotional level (in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which remains the world's most widely agreed upon legal document) while considering contact with otherness as a possible way of contributing to personal development.

According to C. Cucos (2000, p.56), in general and in terms of intercultural education, in particular, the renewal of teacher's role focuses on issues such as:

• developing students confidence in the classroom;

• addressing issues from the perspective of the student;

• benevolent acceptance of similarities and differences between people;

• respect for students rights and expression of attitudes of sensitivity to the needs and interests;

• developing students ability to become active members of the local community, national and global;

• considering social and global context, fostering common approaches between teachers in order to manage issues;

• promoting tolerant attitudes, openness, reflection;

• recognition and respect for cultural differences by building positive relations of equality;

• promoting equal opportunity in education.

The terms used - *openness, reflection, criticism, curiosity, benevolence,* etc. - can be simultaneously considered descriptors of the desired educational outcomes and are often formulated in terms of attitudes to be instilled in learners. Some legal documents usually refer to the following list of values/attitudes:

- Respect for people from other cultures;
- Openness to and curiosity about people from other cultures;
- Openness to learning about other cultures;

- Willingness to question what is usually taken for granted as 'normal' according to one's previously acquired knowledge and experience;
- Willingness to empathise with people from other cultural backgrounds;
- Willingness to suspend judgment;
- Willingness to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty;
- Willingness to co-operate with individuals from other cultural backgrounds;
- Valuing cultural diversity and pluralism of views and practices.

A great problem nowadays is that most teachers consider that only special subjects like civic/ society education or religious courses bear sole responsibility for dealing with attitudes and values and prefer to devolve that responsibility. In any event, intercultural education must be tailored to fit each subject: history, geography classes and the so-called scientific subjects should initiate pupils into the particular cultural universe of the communities that form around areas of research, the acquisition and discussion of knowledge, and the ways in which knowledge is disseminated. No one form of this sort of intercultural education can prepare students for community life and civic responsibility, since each form helps to prepare them in a different way.

Given that learning foreign languages is a direct and powerful way of experiencing otherness on a physical and emotional level, the intercultural aims of language teaching, particularly the teaching of foreign languages, must be thought of. Also, learning foreign languages is an important means of interacting with other contemporary societies, which, on the face of it, is not generally a great personal challenge for learners, because interaction takes place within the school setting: learning foreign languages is a subject like any other, with its own working methods and techniques. Nonetheless, learning languages requires deep personal commitment regarding the disparagement, acculturation or affirmation of individuals' own way of life, a desire to fit in, emotional or existential motivation, and wanderlust, etc.

Language teaching represents a space in which each learner is affected by his or her relationship with otherness to a greater or lesser degree. As such, it encourages learners to express their personal convictions and attitudes, which are often deeply rooted in a specific national cultural experience, although interaction with the media can reduce the perceived foreignness of social systems and behaviour that are different from their own. The principal

characteristic of language lessons is that they represent an educational space in which attitudes are revealed and can thus be explicitly questioned.

Teachers are perhaps the most important partners in reforming the education system, so it is important that the teacher training system meets these new developments in the curriculum.

Given the diversity of training methods, it is necessary to reflect on what characteristics should be presented by initial teacher training programmes s to promote the acquisition of intercultural skills. Following different experts, the teacher training must conform to the following characteristics:

- *Teacher training programmes should be contextualized and flexible*. Teacher training programmes should offer adequate responses to real and changing situations that derive from school and social contexts. Taking into consideration that there are no valid and permanent application formulas for any context, every training process must start from the needs and interests of the students, and be flexible to include the adaptations and changes that are necessary.
- *Teacher training programmes should conncet theory with practice*. Teacher training programmes stimulate the development of the necessary competences for the professional exercise relating theoretical learning with practice.
- *Teacher training programmes should focus on reflection and collaboration*. Teacher training programmes should provoke critical reflection on the elements that have an influence on school practice and favor the work with the different social agents that make up the educational community, as well as include active participation in cooperative experiences.
- *Teacher training programmes p*romote the acquisition of intercultural competences from all the training disciplines i.e. the *intercultural transversality.*

It is a well-known fact that teacher training process does not necessarily conform to all the principles. Moreover, the design of the study plans do not always explicitly contemplate the intercultural competence that future teachers have to develop at the end of their initial professional training. It can be deduced that intercultural teacher training presents an eminently optional character in academic curricula. As a result, only teachers with interests in doing so participate in it. However, only the academic courses can be an occasion for future teachers to discuss and reflect about different pedagogical approaches, teaching strategies and practices in intercultural education. It can be also mentioned that intercultural teacher training is not always presented transversally in study plans, and therefore does not reach all the teaching staff, but rather is aimed especially at the teaching staff in direct contact with

students of foreign origin and/or who belong to cultural minorities. Finally, the vast majority of future secondary school teachers state that they almost never engage in intercultural work outside the university.

At this point, it is evident that in the initial teacher training there are gaps in relation to the attention to the cultural diversity of the students. Also, designing intercultural activities to allow learners to react thoughtfully when they come into contact with the various forms than otherness seems to be the greatest challenge for teachers.

In many teaching programmes, attaining the goal of putting the concept of intercultural education in practical terms and positing the necessary conditions for specifying those terms is often difficult, especially when it comes to designing activities to work towards it in practice. Before starting to teach students how to design intercultural activities, academic key-factors should take into consideration the following issues:

- Level of students perceptions and attitudes in relation to the intercultural issues;
- Level of teaching staff perceptions and attitudes in relation to the intercultural issues;
- Characteristics of the teacher training programmes that favour the intercultural issues;
- The main shortcomings of the training programs in the field of intercultural teacher training.

Taking all these into consideration, we suggest some activities that enhance the intercultural competence for intermediate and upper-intermediate level students of teacher training programmes. The activities are related to the cultural environment topic.

CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

AIM	**COMPETENCES**
To become more aware that culture influences the way of viewing the world, making decisions and interacting with others in order to resolve problems from the perspective of cultural differences	To explain concepts such as identity and culture
	To interpret, analyze and discuss these concepts
	To make judgements about what cultures are
	To develop a system of interpretation which enables to perceive the particular characteristics of a culture (meanings, beliefs, cultural practices)

1. THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

Level: Intermediate / Upper – Intermediate

Units of competence:

- To reflect on their own understanding of the culture
- To discover and appreciate the concept of culture related to other peoples
- To appreciate the value of beliefs and norms shared by a group of people

Materials: a board or large sheet of paper, smart phone, computer, tablet

Description of the activity

Students think of elements in their life that they would consider as a part of their culture. They explore who they are. They do this quickly so as to mention the first things that come to their minds.

Students share their ideas.

Students are given an example by the teacher of other existing definitions of culture.

The sum total of all the beliefs, values and norms shared by a group of people.

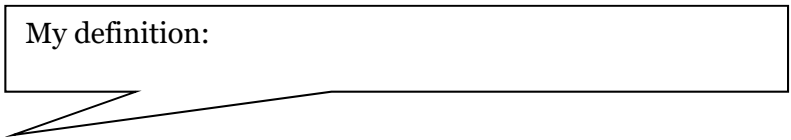
The way you have been conditioned in a society to think, feel, interpret and react.

All you need to know and believe in order to be accepted in a society.

A large pool of experience composed of learned programmes for action passed on from generation to generation.

Students create a mind map using https://www.mindmaps.app/ , https://www.mindmup.com/ or a poster using the application www.canva.com around the concept 'culture', taking into account what they have mentioned previously and adding other concepts after further reflection. They analyze in depth their norms, beliefs and behaviours (as a first step towards accepting, understanding and enjoying otherness).

Students attempt to create a common definition of culture. They become aware of their own definitions and of the fact that a definition of culture is very difficult to write.



2. DIFFERENT VIEWS ON CULTURE

Level: Intermediate / Upper – Intermediate

Units of competence:

- To illustrate their own understanding of the stereotypes
- To show awareness of the differences between one's perception of one's culture/other cultures and the perception by other individuals
- To think critically and reason about generalizations and stereotypes

Materials*:* a board or large sheet of paper, smart phone, computer, tablet

Description of the activity

1. Teachers focus on the notions of *preconceptions, misconceptions* and *stereotypes* within the context of their original statements.

   Different corners are organized in the room – each representing one of the countries involved in the activity. Each student receives a quotation, reads it and chooses the corner which represents the country of his/her quotation. Once all students have made their decision about where they belong, they share the contents of their quotation with others and explain why they have chosen this specific country.

   Students react to the statements, expressing their agreement or disagreement.

   Students gather more observations of people and events related to their country and keep a record of it, they find stereotyped statements about a culture: http://www.culturecrossing.net/

   Students review their original statements and decide whether they are still relevant.

   The teacher can suggest some examples of stereotypes:

   They are direct and say exactly what they mean. Some people may think that they are rude but they are not – it is their culture. [the Netherlands]

   When you meet a person, shake their hands. Good friends and family kiss each other on one or both cheeks. Some men kiss a woman's hand when saying hello. [Poland]

   For meetings, always be on time. They believe that it is rude to be late. [Germany]

   Examples of stereotyped statements about a culture can be found on http://www.ovalbooks.com/xeno/index.html .

   The final product could be a portfolio featuring information about statements about different countries, nationalities and cultures.

   Students can use https://bookcreator.com/ or present the information using https://padlet.com/.

CASE STUDY: ONE PERSON'S EXPERIENCE

Level: Intermediate / Upper – Intermediate
Units of competence:
To reflect on their own understanding of the stereotypes
To show awareness of the differences between one's perception of one's culture/other cultures and the perception by other individuals appreciate the value of beliefs and norms shared by a group of people
To think critically and reason about generalizations and stereotypes
Materials*:* a board or large sheet of paper, smart phone, computer, tablet
Description of the activity
Students read the text about the contrast between two working cultures: Canadian and Taiwanese and the list of possible actions.
Then they choose from the list below those activities they think the Canadian should do.
3. Rank them in order of priority.
4. Students add any other actions they think necessary.

Two working cultures

Dave Thompson is a Canadian working for a 'Baby Bell' company which owns shares in a Taiwanese mobile phone company. They have recently acquired a licence to operate in this crowded and competitive market. Dave has been posted to Taiwan on a three-year contract. He has now been living there for three months. He has good experience of the mobile phone business, both technically and strategically, and was previously involved in the startup of a new mobile phone company in Lithuania.

He believes he has the opportunity to make the new company a great success by adopting the management style of his home company: open, innovative, confident and aggressive. In Taiwan he faces a tradition based on Chinese hierarchies and family-run businesses. The Taiwanese company

Dave works for belongs to one of these families, but the current generation sees the advantages of a western approach in what is for them a new kind of business. So they back his efforts to 'turn the company around'.

Dave's biggest problem is one of time: he wants to get on with building up a western-style company, and is prepared to trust people, take risks, and act fast to improve market share in a rapidly developing market. The deregulated market is not so transparent to him, depending as it does on old traditions, complicated business practices, and personal connections.

On top of all this, only a few of his top managers speak English. The rest of his managers speak Mandarin, and have to be addressed through an interpreter.

Although Dave is keen to leap into action, his colleagues need time to build up trust with him, as with all strangers. They also believe in consensus, not the kind of questioning and challenging of ideas which leads easily to conflict. At meetings, they always appear to accept what Dave suggests, deferring to his status as a respected senior and an outsider. Dave decides he must do something. He draws up the following list of possible actions:

- learn Mandarin
- bring in more Western managers
- organize lectures for his employees on Western business practices
- learn more about Taiwan
- slow down his approach
- send some of his managers to work in North America
- organize a one-day seminar on business cultures
- organize a meeting at which all the cultural problems are discussed
- bring in a local management consultant

In class watch the video on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQvqDv4vbEg about eye contact in business. Based on the video, what techniques can students suggest to reduce miscommunication with other cultures?

Students can use https://bookcreator.com/ or present the information using https://padlet.com/.

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