



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Teaching Foreign Languages: Between Tradition and Contemporary Synchronicity

LavinIU Lăpădat<sup>1)</sup>, Maria-Magdalena Lăpădat<sup>2)</sup>

### Abstract:

Teaching a foreign language has uncovered new challenges with the evolution of society and education as a whole. The entire concept of synchronicity, the ability to connect to a contemporary platform of teaching has fostered significant necessities for adaptation, a prevalence of abandoning old methodologies towards the pursuit of innovation and collective interest. Teaching a foreign language to eclectic clusters of students has become a challenge not only from a didactic standpoint but from a communication point of view as well. Undoubtedly, technique and psychology as well as information content remain relevant, however, as educators and formulators of information, we must strive towards remaining close to that which is contemporary. The information we deliver as teachers of a foreign language cannot and must not be restricted to traditional structures of grammar, vocabulary and so on. We need to stay connected to an entire apparatus of updated cultural and informational references. The aim of this paper is to explore both the mechanisms of didactics and social communication from a contextual, adaptive and correlative standpoint. Our duty as teachers is not only to teach students, but to also explore strategies which help us teach ourselves. A foreign language should be perceived more along the lines of a living organism, constantly expanding, constantly adapting, engulfing new elements and forsaking elements that are now socially and culturally viewed as obsolete, destined to ultimately become forgotten and archaic.

**Keywords:** *teaching; foreign language; tradition; contemporary; adaptation.*

---

<sup>1)</sup> Assistant Professor, Ph.D, University of Craiova, Department of Applied Modern Languages, Romania, Phone: 0040773985380, E-mail: lapadat\_lavinIU@yahoo.com.

<sup>2)</sup> Assistant Professor, Ph.D, University of Craiova, Department of Applied Modern Languages, Romania, Phone: 0040731297911, Email: magda\_faurar@yahoo.com.

Taking into consideration the teaching prerequisites associated with teaching Romanian as a foreign language at the Faculty of Letters, the University of Craiova, as well as the personal and collective experience of every teacher at the Preparatory Year, we can safely affirm that professional language training must be substantially rooted in both classic and modern platforms of relevance. It is not our duty to reinvent the Romanian language, but it is our absolute prerogative to contextualise it, to bring it firmly and robustly into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and make it relatable to highly versatile and eclectic groups of learners. To this end, we use ever resource at our disposal, both linguistic and cultural in order to help our guests and our learners transition towards a new world of learning whose principal gatekeeper is, in fact, our beloved Romanian language. Before the pandemic, we were afforded the opportunity to closely interact with our students and use our presence in the classroom to unlock substantial pathways of intercultural learning. It is often said, however, that when one door closes, another one opens in its place. Online education protocols clearly do not provide the same level of direct integration, yet, they have vastly improved real-time interaction and student-teacher contact. Availability is now, virtually, an around the clock concept. If, before the pandemic, we focused chiefly on books, courses and other hardcover materials, now, we are sending tremendous amounts of linguistic and cultural data at the click of a button to students living thousands of kilometres away. Online teaching has opened the doorway not simply to our versatility and resourcefulness as language educators, it has also improved the professional competence of our students, it has turned them more responsible and responsive, increasing not only attendance in its virtual form, but also the level of interest and curiosity of our students.

The passing of time requires more and more education from the perspective of openness to multiple values, because in this way a better integration of the individual in a polymorphic and constantly changing world takes place. In the beginning, intercultural pedagogy was born in the context of the concerns of overcoming the educational difficulties encountered by the children of immigrant workers. These problems have led to the idea that differences are not just barriers to communication, but, on the contrary, enrichment and better mutual knowledge. These conceptions empowered multiculturalism, which, unlike assimilationist politics, has always supported cultural diversity. With the acquisition of the concept of interculturality by language teaching in the 1980s and 1990s, its success was so great that it spread to other disciplines.

One of the main objectives of intercultural education is to prepare people for a better perception, acceptance and respect for cultural differences. Individuals are never without a cultural background. They have certain conceptual tools that end up functioning as distorting prisms if they try to look at and understand other cultures only through them. These filters can create certain malfunctions or misjudgments. According to Alptekin: “learning a foreign language becomes a kind of enculturation, where one acquires new cultural frames of reference and a new world view, reflecting those of the target language culture and its speakers” (Alptekin, 2002: 58). In this sense, several analysis mechanisms can be used, within a foreign language course, to reveal other ways of relating between the mother and the foreign culture, with the aim of discovering and understanding the other, not only through a simple description or stereotypes. The latter represent the beliefs about the psychic and / or behavioral characteristics of some individuals, social groups or social processes, organized in a simple, patterned and preconceived framework that is not based on a process of direct observation of reality,

## Teaching Foreign Languages: Between Tradition and Contemporary Synchronicity

but it is based on arbitrary, routine reasoning that is not related to the individuals or social groups evaluated.

For an effective communication between groups or individuals belonging to different cultures, it is necessary to be aware of one's own stereotypes and to overcome them, thus creating a meeting space based on common values that ensure the functioning of a real dialogue.

According to Cabré, foreign language training can be viewed from the perspective of openness, as well as specialisation and precision: "The main purpose of special languages, i.e. allowing objective, precise, and unambiguous exchange of information particularly between subject field experts and professionals, makes dialectal variation very minor. The issue is not one of affirming one's own geographical origin, but rather one of communicating unambiguously. In this sense, presenting a highly specialized scientific text in a written article or a conference paper does not require the same discourse as a spontaneous oral communication on the same subject. Finally, the intentions or purposes of the communication, both in general and special language, also condition the syntactic, morphological, and textual devices used." (Cabré, 1999: 77-78).

The possibility of openness is proposed, by some researchers, through a certain capacity for interculturality, the result of a learning process aiming at two objectives: 1. increasing the ability to perceive everything which is foreign. This ability means that we question our own certainties and patterns of perception and accept that they are not enough when it comes to interpreting something foreign. The new situation created brings forth insecurity, as we cannot respond to external stimuli through reactions and attitudes that are common to us. Under these conditions, teaching foreign languages should facilitate such openings. 2. the willingness to accept and explore our respective differences. Usually, in the case of meeting foreign students, there are two ways to react: the first manifests itself by rejecting the difference and the unavailability to get used to that other person; the second way is to perceive the student from a constructive perspective. (Hans, 1996: 180-181).

The concept of culture shock illustrates the outcome of such meetings. Margalit Cohen-Emerique defines it as "a reaction of uprooting, and even more of frustration or rejection, of revolt and anxiety [...]; in short, an emotional and intellectual experience that occurs in those who, taken out of their context by chance or professional reasons, are put in the situation of having to approach the stranger in a way [...]. This shock is an important means of awareness of one's social identity, insofar as it is rethought and analyzed" (Cohen-Emerique, 1984: 195).

This shock includes not only verbal language, but also nonverbal language, the whole set of norms, concepts about things and the world in general. Situations of this kind surprise the individual swinging between two models, reacting accordingly in several ways. Pierre Casse's model (1981), later taken up by other authors, proposes four phases. Initial contact with the foreign student is a first phase in this process. It is the moment when personal assumptions come to the fore to perceive the new situation. Behaviour and reactions can vary greatly from one person to another. The second phase comes with an attempt to adapt to the newly created situation. In most cases, the results obtained are productive. The third stage is characterized by the presence of curiosity and confusion. Under these conditions, the issue of identity is frequently raised. Thus, the phenomenon of assimilation can occur, which means the abandonment of one's own identity in favour of the dominant community, and a possible integration considers its preservation in parallel with the new culture of the receiving community. The lack of

willingness to develop relationships with the dominant community can produce separation, and segregation that is the result of obstruction by the dominant group, however, this is a rare occurrence. The last stage, the fourth, is when the adaptation to the new linguistic and cultural environment takes place. (Casse, 1981).

In exploring the multicultural dimension of language training, Moran states that: “A cultural phenomenon involves tangible forms or structures (products) that individual members of the culture (persons) use in various interactions (practices) in specific social circumstances and groups (communities) in ways that reflect their values, attitudes and beliefs (perspective).” (Moran, 2001: 25-26).

Another phenomenon that occurs in the case of multicultural educational situations is that of cognitive dissonance. The relationship of dissonance is one of disagreement, of contradiction, of opposition. According to Leon Festinger (1962), the totality of conscious representations of an individual can be decomposed into cognitive elements or notions. These represent knowledge, beliefs, and opinions about the environment and oneself. They fall into dissonance when one implies the rejection of the other, from a psychological point of view. This phenomenon forces the individual to avoid elements that can generate dissonance (Festinger, 1962). It is our duty as teachers, language trainers and cultural ambassadors to prevent this dissonance from occurring and facilitate the integration of the students on all pertinent levels.

This theory of dissonance can also be applied in situations of contact between two cultures, and in the case of the consequences produced as a result of these interferences. For example, students from immigrant or disadvantaged backgrounds have developed behaviours different from the usual ones present in the classical educational setting. At the same time, they may prefer and appreciate interpersonal relationships based on human rather than intellectual values. These differences can create dissonance in the process of acquiring a foreign language and, with it, the assimilation of a new culture.

Teaching methods should use this dissonance in order to avoid the conflict aspect and to generate a positive perspective when it comes to evaluating other individuals. In order to achieve the desideratum in question, it is necessary to value the culture and the language we want to learn.

The intercultural perspective is described in the compartment dedicated to general competences in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* and considers the acquisition of cultural aspects in the process of teaching-learning a foreign language, as a mandatory requirement, not only from the perspective effective communication, but also active and constructive learning that can be applied later in social, professional and cultural terms. The foreign language class should be the link between two cultures, through which the student has the chance to discover other values, other mentalities and realities. Communicative competence, described and analysed by CEFR, is the primary goal of learning a foreign language. The idea circulated and applied as a method until today, that only the acquisition of language competence is important in this learning process, is no longer sufficient and completely true. As a result of new pedagogical approaches, the student must learn to correctly use the ethno-socio-cultural elements and to acquire sociolinguistic attitudes and behaviours that aim to contribute to the development of a real dialogue and appropriate to the communication context. From the perspective of understanding, the student must have the necessary skills to correctly identify, recognize and interpret the attitudes and

## Teaching Foreign Languages: Between Tradition and Contemporary Synchronicity

behaviours of his or her interlocutor regarding gestures, historical or cultural elements. Under these conditions, researchers in the field propose the concept of social learning.

Language is not just a simple communication tool that consists of the factual transmission of information, but a cultural treasure that encompasses the history and evolution of a people that has been gathered throughout its existence: behaviours, attitudes, values and mentalities, a whole existential philosophy. Thus, the history of a people, the social and fundamental norms of a society are essential factors in understanding the culture and civilization of that people. In this sense, it is recommended that those who learn a foreign language be aware that it involves the correct understanding and interpretation of the ethno-socio-cultural elements specific to the given language.

A new didactic approach is required in the teaching and learning of foreign languages, in which the teacher aims to use and combine in a natural, harmonious way cultural elements in the teaching process of all types of lessons, whether it is about an hour of grammar, translation, or vocabulary. The notions of culture and civilization should no longer be seen as something separate.

The intercultural perspective proposes a communication competence based on the ability of the interlocutors to correctly identify and use cultural aspects in linguistic interactions. The demands of the period of time in which we live compels the authors of foreign language textbooks to structure and present the cultural elements in a much wider space, without being limited only to aspects of encyclopaedic knowledge (cultural, architectural, artistic, heritage of a country), but also to introduce elements of anthropology, presenting practices of daily life, customs and traditions, the way in which family and social relations work, etc.

Social relationships are especially important in the process of learning a foreign language, as they provide us with images and essential information about attitudes, values and the social behaviours that we need to know when we are in a position to interact with a native speaker.

Learning a foreign language means having the necessary skills to perceive the classification systems by virtue of the relevance based on the operational patterns of that respective community. Consequently, learning a foreign language must prepare the student for concrete life situations, for various experiences and intercultural exchanges. This learning process should not be limited to simulating communication situations or focusing only on the abstract, conceptual dimension of learning. The teacher should give the student the opportunity to play the role of a social actor, which will determine him to manage and take responsibility for the learning act. This is where the concept of action perspective comes into play, inherent in an intercultural pedagogy, which offers students the opportunity to become social actors themselves, with the competence to solve concrete tasks. One of the main objectives in such conditions is to develop students' personal autonomy and to prepare them for an active professional life, which imposes more and more requirements and responsibilities.

We can say that European citizens will only benefit from the current linguistic diversity if they learn to communicate with each other. To achieve this goal, universities should be essential elements in mediating the process of learning other languages. Intercultural pedagogy allows the student a better development of personality and abilities to learn other languages, offers him the alternative to discover and live new cultural experiences, bringing a much more complex vision on language training in universities. The latter being the main institution for the formation and education of

future citizens who belong not only to their own community but, increasingly, to a global society. In this sense, it is very important to organize activities, intercultural, interdisciplinary and extracurricular experiences that would have the role of putting into practice the concept of language learning through discovery and through their own experiences. The intercultural perspective, used in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language, has the role of preserving its own identity by becoming aware of the mother tongue and culture, on the one hand, contributing, at the same time, to the development of intercultural communication skills.

It is no longer a novelty that there is a close connection between language and culture, and by knowing other languages man becomes aware of his own cultural identity. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the cultural dimension of foreign language education, and today's teachers need to promote the training of intercultural skills among students of different fields. One of the most important changes in language learning and teaching in recent decades has been the recognition of the cultural dimension as a key component. This change has greatly transformed the nature of the language teaching and learning experience. The objective of language learning is to train the ability to communicate in a foreign language, which refers to a person's ability to act in a foreign language in appropriate linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic ways.

According to Kramsch, language teaching is anchored in both the material and the immaterial aspect of social and professional functionality. He states the need for "a common universal ground of basic physical and emotional needs to make the foreign culture less threatening and more accessible to the language learner." (Kramsch, 1993: 224)

Students learn languages for several reasons. Of course, one of the most important reasons is to learn how to use language in real communication with speakers of various mother tongues. A foreign language is likely to be used in two types of environments: in interaction with native speakers or in communication with people who know another foreign language.

Studying a foreign language is more of a necessity than a tendency or a preference. The interest in learning and speaking it is determined by world trends: globalization, interculturality, the need to educate personalities who agree to live in a diversified, multicultural and tolerant society, to understand people who represent different cultures, while ensuring progress and prosperity of national culture. Learning a foreign language consists not only in acquiring phonetic, morphological, grammatical, semantic vocabulary and structures, but also in new ways and ways of thinking, reflecting, visions and philosophies about contemporary civilization.

This fact was proven by the findings from the psychology of communication, the interaction can only work if the participants share a certain vision of the world, acquired during the socialization period. Consequently, as today's communication, across cultural boundaries, is growing and cultures are undergoing constant transformation, the acquisition of certain means of access and the interpretation of cultural meanings and practices has become inevitable. Learning a target culture is a strong motivator, as it presents immediate contact with the actual use of the target language and country.

The aim of the research is to improve the process of training intercultural competence in teaching a foreign language to students, as well as training skills for studying all the aspects of the language. The objectives of our research are to help

## **Teaching Foreign Languages: Between Tradition and Contemporary Synchronicity**

students reach a certain level of competence, in order to be able to read specialised texts and to help them be open and positive to foreign cultures. We believe that a foreign language teacher can use new and interesting tools to make the teaching of a foreign language more attractive and effective.

Communication is a substantial part of our daily lives. The term is very broad. It is used in a variety of ways, for any kind of influence exerted by one system on another or any type of action aimed at the open expression of thoughts, feelings or the exchange of information. Communication means influencing other people by using signs (in a broader sense) to make them understand the message. Communication, thus, generally requires two participants: a sender, addressee, communicator, who transmits (directly or indirectly) and a recipient, a translator, who receives the information. The roles of these participants alternate during the communication process.

This is about misinterpretations, misunderstandings, and thus inconsistencies can arise. We expect our communication partner to see the world as we do. Each individual filters his or her perception of the world according to his or her prior knowledge, skills, and experience. All people's communications depend on a common knowledge of the world (academic knowledge, empirical knowledge and knowledge of the common values and beliefs of social groups, knowledge of nonverbal elements in communication). This knowledge could be specific to the culture. This makes the communication of members of the same cultural community predictable enough to be understood. On the other hand, it is more difficult for foreign speakers because they do not share a common knowledge with native speakers. The acquisition of common cultural knowledge can be promoted by the development of intercultural awareness. Language itself is always formed by a culture. Being proficient in a language requires an understanding of the culture you have defined. Learning a foreign language suggests the existence of an awareness of culture and the way in which culture targets its own culture. A student in the field of intercultural competence must be able to understand and be aware of his own culture, be aware of how his culture is seen from the outside, by other cultures, understand or see the target culture from his own perspective, and be aware of how he or she see the target culture.

Language training must include communicative competence which involves grammatical competence or the ability to make correct linguistic statements, sociolinguistic skills or attention in the social context and the rules of the given culture, speech competence as a use of language in context and strategic competence or the ability to deal with situations of authentic communication.

Knowledge of foreign cultures is usually relational, meaning it is connected to the knowledge acquired through socialization with their own social groups and often presented in contrast to those significant characteristics of their own national group and identity. However, in teaching intercultural communication, students need to be aware of where these preconceptions come from and thus how their perceptions of others are filtered through their social identity. Consequently, from the point of view of intercultural communication, cultural knowledge, in addition to the knowledge of social interactions, is a relational knowledge of the institutions of everyday life, of social distinctions and differences and the knowledge of international relations and national identities. It is relational in the sense that it encompasses the experience of these phenomena perceived by both parties in their own culture and is complemented by the accounts of the foreign student's country.

According to Kramersch (1996), the teaching of culture in the learning of traditional foreign languages was limited to the transmission of information about the people in the target country and their general attitudes and worldviews. The fact that language is a social practice and culture is a complex social construction that has been ignored. Kramersch differentiates new directions of thinking for teaching culture, which seem to be current today:

- Establishing a sphere of interculturality;
- Teaching culture as an interpersonal process;
- Teaching culture as a difference;
- Crossing disciplinary boundaries (Kramersch, 1996: 233).

Because communication in a foreign language is also communication between cultures, an intercultural approach includes a reflection on both the target culture and the native culture. In this sense, effective language teaching must embrace both perspectives.

If language is seen as a social action, then meaning is constructed through social interaction. As a consequence, we should not teach fixed, normative cultural facts, but rather a process of communication and suggest appropriate and useful strategies for understanding otherness.

Students need to be aware of the heterogeneity of culture: due to the growing multiculturalism and multiethnicity of societies, national cultural characteristics have lost even more of their global validity. It is getting harder and harder to tell. The Germans are doing this or the British are doing this. Cultural identities are made up of a number of aspects; one must always take into account additional specifications such as age, sex, religion, ethnicity, social class, education, etc.

Teachers are encouraged to broaden their range of knowledge by reading literature, studies signed by social scientists, ethnographers, sociolinguists, to present information beyond the field of linguistics and challenge, and may even motivate their students and give them an attractive presentation of the target community.

Intercultural foreign language teaching can be achieved or at least addressed by allowing students to realize, recognize and embrace difference, to meet a person with other cultures and social particularities and to make them aware of the relativity of their judgments. Therefore, cultural content in language teaching must be determined in such a way as to present the difference in an appropriate way.

Cultural knowledge about a target country covers an extremely wide field that does not match the framework of foreign language education. A non-systematic approach to providing information would leave students rather confused, with a task of unstructured information, but without real knowledge, without an understanding of the reality of foreign culture and thus without intercultural understanding. Making a selection is problematic and again focuses on the question of the native speaker as a model in language teaching. Knowledge ranges through the rules of conversational general politeness to nonverbal behaviour or phraseology.

The general nature of the language and culture course should allow students to: actively engage with alternative interpretations of phenomena in foreign culture and compare them with their own, and to access and analyse more complex manifestations of the values and meanings of national cultures, as well as existing cultures within limits, as presented in cultural objects and cultural institutions, including literature, film, history, education, political parties or social welfare.



## Teaching Foreign Languages: Between Tradition and Contemporary Synchronicity

Byram et al. (1994) has established a list of proposals, either for integration into the language study itself or as structured information presented independently in separate learning units. These are: “social identity and social groups, social interaction, faith and behavior, socio-political institutions, socialization and life cycle, national history, national geography, national cultural heritage, stereotypes and national identity” (Byram et al., 1994: 48-51). The specific implementation of these general categories depends on the nature of the course, the class structure, the needs of the students and, most importantly, the foreign language and society of the target country represented in the teaching materials.

The role of the teacher is traditionally based on the presumption that he or she has primary authority in all respects in language class. However, the teaching of intercultural competence does not necessarily require an all-knowing teacher and, given the extremely wide field of culture, it would even be impossible for teachers to meet this requirement. Teachers should rather act as mediators between cultures, although this term sounds vague, as motivators, provocateurs in discourse, open-minded and guides in foreign society.

Foreign language teachers who try to increase the cultural awareness of their students, unfortunately, most of the time, have to deal with problems, such as the lack of systematic knowledge of students or their native culture or the target culture, to be able to interpret, analyse and draw conclusions about the cultural phenomena presented to them later. A teacher can teach to the limit, he or she explains, discusses and makes students understand essential elements.

The goal is to reach a correct solution or to fill a gap, but also to explore the limit and to explore oneself in this process, which is conditioned by the desire to engage in self-removal from cultural bias. Culture, deriving from such an intercultural dialogue, differs from both: the native culture and the target culture. It does not offer any fact or any solution to these problems. The final image, the understanding often appears after repeated reflections, possibly much later. Therefore, students should learn how to develop critical thinking, learn autonomously, collect and analyse information and approach with different types of linguistic and cultural contributions.

Teacher training should therefore aim at understanding the core of intercultural communication, determining the relationship between language and behaviour (in one's own and target culture), developing skills in acquiring and processing information about culture and selecting techniques suitable for teaching. The personal experience of the target language culture should be standard. Students are invited to attend and participate in mobility programs, such as Erasmus.

The modern world continues to change and it is the role of teachers to respond to current challenges. The teaching process should reflect the needs of a modern society and develop the student's critical thinking and skills. Combined with the basic knowledge of the target culture, students will be well-prepared and able to understand the context and cultural factors, face to face with communication and mediated messages.

According to most cultural models, languages are related to the cultures, communities and societies that are used for communication, and students should be encouraged to become competent speakers of a foreign language. To this end, language teachers should guide them in acquiring different skills, contributing to the development of their knowledge, helping them to reflect on their own culture. Thus, language teachers

need to be familiar with what lies behind the new skills and strategies that their students need to develop for intercultural understanding.

At the Faculty of Letters, the University of Craiova, we have always approached Romanian language training from an integrated, eclectic perspective. The specific elements of knowledge of language, grammar, vocabulary and syntax have been designed to work in conjunction with platforms of cultural, contextual and historical meaning. Because of this universal, intercultural approach, we have managed to make Romanian relatable to foreign students from virtually every continent and culture on the planet, allowing the procurement of linguistic knowledge that is laced with relevant cultural archetypes that will not only aid the students in their endeavour to adjust socially, but above all, in their strive to become absolute professionals and reap the benefits of our country's robust educational system. From this standpoint, Romanian goes far beyond an instrument of linguistic support, it becomes the gatekeeper to specialised, professional and academic development and evolution.

#### References:

- Alptekin, C. (2002). "Toward intercultural communicative competence in ELT." *ELT Journal*, 56(1), 57-64.
- Byram M., Morgan C. et al. (1994). *Teaching and Learning Language and Culture*. Clevedon, Philadelphia, Adelaide: Multilingual Matters LTD.
- Cabré, M.T. (1999). *Terminology. Theory, Methods and Applications*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Casse P. (1981). *Training for the Cross-Cultural Mind*, Washington: Sietar.
- Cohen-Emerique M. (1984). "Chocs culturels et relations interculturelles dans la pratique des travailleurs sociaux. Formations par la méthode des incidents critiques." *Cahiers de sociologie économique et culturelle*, 2, 183-218.
- Festinger L. (1962). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hans N. (1996). "L'apprentissage interculturel: conditions de réalisation et objectifs." In Colin L., Muller B. (eds.), *La pédagogie des rencontres interculturelles*, Paris: Economica, pp. 180-192.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moran, P. R. (2001). *Teaching culture: perspectives in practice*, Ontario, Canada: Heinle & Heinle.

---

#### Article Info

*Received:* December 04 2020

*Accepted:* December 09 2020

---