



ORIGINAL PAPER

Developing Intercultural Competence in Romanian Language Courses for International Students

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Abstract:

After 1989, Romania was faced with the challenge of integrating increasing numbers of foreigners who arrived in the country to work or study, in other words, to live for shorter or longer periods of time. Without any colonial past and deprived of contacts with the world abroad for many decades, the post-communist Romanian society has had to acquire the necessary skills to handle interaction with people of diverse cultural, historical, linguistic or religious backgrounds. The social need to efficiently communicate and work with foreigners rapidly became more stringent in the higher education system, as a result of international academic mobility. Starting from the assumptions that culture and language are closely linked, and developing intercultural communicative competence is an educational goal in itself, the aim of this paper is to address certain cultural aspects that are involved in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language. It briefly reviews the literature on the topic, and focuses on practical suggestions that teachers can make use of in the multicultural classroom of Romanian as a foreign language. The presentation leads to the conclusion that the acquisition of intercultural competence is an on-going process that will continue long after the language course has been completed.

Keywords: *cultural diversity, foreign language teaching, intercultural communicative competence, intercultural learning, training.*

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Introduction

The increasing speed of globalisation has turned the world into the now famous “global village”, thus succeeding in bringing people and places closer than ever before. Borders of any sorts – geographical, political, social, ethnic, racial, gender, religious, personal – are being negotiated and renegotiated to the point of becoming irrelevant. Giroux underlines the positive dimension of this phenomenon, arguing that “the borders of our diverse identities, subjectivities, experiences, and communities connect us to each other more than they separate us ”precisely because“ such borders are continually changing and mutating within the fast forward dynamics of globalization” (Giroux, 2005: 21).

Border crossing, be it physical or ideological, has led to more interaction among people of very diverse backgrounds, who need to communicate and develop relationships based on mutual understanding of their diversity. Lee Wilberschied stresses the idea that communication skills and cultural awareness are crucial in building relationships not only on a personal level, but also on national and global levels, since a wide range of activities in the fields of commerce, education, diplomacy, national and international security, or challenges such as pandemics, wars and subsequent migration, environmental issues, or poverty, require rapid and intense cooperation among countries (Wilberschied, 2015: 2).

In the field of foreign language teaching, the introduction of the cultural dimension is obviously challenging traditional teaching, and consequently teachers must find ways to face this challenge and adapt their methods, classroom materials, and even their own thinking to the new demands of our globalised world. In this article, we briefly review the literature on the topic in order to outline the aims of intercultural education, and examine the knowledge, skills and attitudes that an intercultural speaker should acquire, according to the *Common European Framework of Reference*. Next, we shall consider the particular case of the study programme called the “Preparatory year of Romanian language” (*Anul pregătitor de limba română*) which offers one-year language classes to international students who wish to pursue their academic studies in Romania. The discussion will outline the main challenges of teaching in multilingual classes, and offer examples and practical suggestions to Romanian teachers with the aim of increasing their awareness regarding the challenges of intercultural education.

The cultural dimension of language teaching

Communication across cultural boundaries intrinsically depends on individuals’ ability to speak foreign languages. In the field of language teaching, the learners’ need to efficiently use the language in real life communication has marked a shift in focus from grammar accuracy to language proficiency. This idea informed the Communicative Language Teaching, a methodological approach initially designed for English language teaching. Since the 1970s the communicative approach has introduced a set of “principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of language activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom” (Richards, 2005: 1). The method, deemed universal, emphasises that learners need to acquire not only grammar knowledge of the target language, but also knowledge of social contexts and norms (Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Farrell and Jacobs, 2010; Harmer, 2001). However, Kramsch and Hua outlined that: “The negotiation of meaning that formed the core of the communicative approach applied to referential or to situational meaning, not necessarily, as was later argued, to cultural or to

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ideological meaning.” (Kramersch & Hua, 2016: 38) It is clear that culture influences language, or any language is the quintessence of a culture, the “mirror of a particular culture” (Wei, 2005: 56); therefore, being competent in a foreign language means understanding the culture of that language. This is the reason why, over the past years, researchers have argued that the communicative approach is less practical than other approaches based on developing learners’ intercultural communicative competence (Pegrum, 2008).

In the 1990s, the language teaching profession started to take into consideration the fact that there is a close connection between language and culture, or as, Perkins pointed out, “language doesn’t exist outside a cultural context” (Perkins, 1988: 25). As a result, the goal of language teaching and learning is the development of intercultural communicative competence which enables learners not only to interact with speakers of the target language, but also to build human relationships based on intercultural awareness. This shift in the paradigm of language teaching and its goals has also been adopted by the Council of Europe’s *Common European Framework of Reference* which, apart from describing what learners need to study in a language course and defining the levels of linguistic competence, acknowledges the importance of intercultural awareness and intercultural skills. Thus, this document includes sections which stress the necessity of promoting intercultural communication.

The process of teaching Romanian as a foreign language at the preparatory year has greatly benefited from the introduction of the cultural dimension into the aim of language teaching and learning. Coming from various countries around the globe, the students have different nationalities, different linguistic, cultural, social, ethnic, religious backgrounds. In this multilingual, multicultural learning context, promoting mutual understanding and acceptance of difference are main requirements in the process of developing learners as intercultural speakers.

Intercultural communicative competence: aims and content

Reviewing the research in the field of intercultural communicative competence in search of a definition, Moeller and Nugent came to the conclusion that there is no “precise” definition in the literature (Moeller & Nugent, 2014: 4). The reason lies perhaps in the fact that intercultural competence consists of “a cluster of capabilities” (Wilberschied, 2015: 1), such as empathy, flexibility, tolerance etc. as the basis of the recognition and appreciation of people’s diversity, and of the role it plays in human interaction. In broad terms, intercultural competence implies “the ability to put yourself into someone else’s shoes, see the world the way they see it, and give it the meaning they give it based on shared human experience” (Kramersch & Hua, 2016: 44-45). Byram makes a distinction between *intercultural competence* which focuses on people’s “ability to interact in their own language with the people from another country and culture”, and *intercultural communicative competence* which takes into account language teaching and learning and refers to one’s “ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language” (Byram, 1997: 71). Liddicoat et al. offered a definition of *intercultural language learning* which “involves developing with learners an understanding of their own language(s) and culture(s) in relation to an additional language and culture. It is a dialogue that allows for reaching a common ground for negotiating to take place, and where variable points of view are recognized, mediated, and accepted” (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kohler, 2003: 46).

The aims of focusing on intercultural dimension in language teaching are:

- to help learners acquire both linguistic and intercultural competence;
- to prepare students for future interaction with people of different cultures from theirs;
- to encourage students to understand and accept that people from other cultures may have different ideas, values and behaviours;
- to make students perceive interactions with other cultures as enriching experiences. (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002: 10)

Intercultural teaching parts with the traditional assumption that learners should focus on acquiring a native speaker's linguistic competence, because this objective is utopian and potentially harmful. It aims instead "to develop learners as **intercultural speakers** or **mediators** who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity" (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002: 9). From this perspective, learners need to be trained to treat their interlocutors as individuals with their own identities, not as representatives of a cultural category.

In order to help learners become intercultural speakers, teachers should encourage them to acquire specific *knowledge*, *skills* and *attitudes*, which constitute the components of intercultural competence (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002: 11). We believe that the appropriate intercultural attitudes are the basis or the starting point in the process of teaching/learning a foreign language. They refer to one's willingness to accept that his/her values and beliefs are not necessarily the only ones or the correct ones, and also to one's ability to understand how his/her culture might be seen from outside, through the eyes of someone from another culture (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002: 12). Houghton discusses the outcomes of having an intercultural attitude based on respect, empathy, tolerance and openness towards people from different cultures: "Genuinely taking the perspectives of others into consideration while critically reflecting upon themselves can enhance the quality of learners' evaluation of self and other insofar as the standards of the base culture are not automatically and ethnocentrically applied without critical self-reflection coupled with the careful consideration of alternative viewpoints." (Houghton, 2012: 45) Consequently, personal development in terms of intercultural communicative competence can be seen as "internalization of other cultural frames of reference through empathy, which can transform identity and equip people to mediate between cultures" (Houghton, 2012: 45).

Knowing the target language culture has been considered essential in the process of learning a language because, even though there is not an "essentialist language-culture duality", no one can deny a "close connection, an interdependence, a complex relationship between language and culture" (Risager, 2007: 162, 163). The challenge for teachers is to decide which cultural aspect to focus on, since certain stereotypes, promoted by mass-media, do not necessarily stand for the essence of a culture. Romania, for instance, is associated with Dracula, but this is just Bram Stoker's fiction, not a representative myth of Romanian culture. According to Sandra López-Rocha, stereotypes can be used in class in order to prompt cultural awareness, insofar as they are deconstructed and misrepresentations addressed (López-Rocha, 2016: 108). On the other hand, in recent years, the focus in teaching culture has shifted from literature, history, philosophy and the arts, to "culture as a shared way of life" (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002: 9). From an intercultural perspective, the focus should be on knowledge of "how social groups and identities function and what is involved in intercultural interaction" (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002: 12).

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Another difficult issue related to teaching cultural knowledge refers to the fact that cultures are constantly changing and there are different cultures and languages within one particular country. It is therefore virtually impossible for teachers to predict the knowledge that learners will need in their interaction with other people whose values, beliefs and attitudes anyway change in life, depending on everyone's personal evolution, life experience etc. Learners need to prepare themselves for the unexpected and be ready to deal with uncertainty and even ambiguity. As a result, teachers should seek to develop learners' skills of observation and discovery, of "finding out new knowledge and integrating it with what they already have" (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002: 13). Based on what they find, learners should be helped to acquire the skills of comparing ideas or events from different cultures by putting them side by side, along with the skills of interpreting their findings and relating them to what they already know. Skills are therefore "as important as attitudes and knowledge" (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002: 12-13) in the process of becoming a successful intercultural speaker and mediator.

Incorporating culture in the Romanian language class

The preparatory year of Romanian language features a palimpsest of cultures as it brings together learners from various countries on different continents. It is a learning context in which intercultural dialogue is the only possible interaction, as opposed to an ELT classroom in Romania, for instance, where such a dialogue can only be simulated and role-played. Studying in a multicultural environment per se, it is not to be assumed that students will acquire the skills they need by simply being exposed to different cultures. The exposure leads to learners' "development of a positive cultural identity and their respectful interaction with the cultures and languages of others around them" (Csillik & Golubeva, 2020: 19); yet, it is the teacher's role to guide the learners and help them build the intercultural skills and attitudes that will enable them not only to interact efficiently with each other in the classroom, but also to establish relationships with people outside the classroom.

There are two main aspects of the preparatory year that should be taken into consideration:

1. The target language, i.e. Romanian, is studied in the target country, i.e. Romania; consequently the students are "immersed" in the local culture and are likely to acquire cultural knowledge and skills in a relatively short period of time. Pourkalhor and Esfandiari outline researchers' findings that study programmes abroad are "the best experience second language students can have if they want to become acculturated and communicatively competent in the second language" (Pourkalhor & Esfandiari, 2017: 30).
2. Given the multilingualism of the learners' groups, the language of tuition is English. Their competence levels in English vary; therefore, misunderstandings occur at times in the process of teaching/learning. Despite this drawback, English has a cultural advantage in the sense that, since very few native speakers register for the preparatory year, English is not the "dominant language" (the language spoken by the majority of students); it remains "neutral" in the sense that it is neither the native language of the students, nor of the teachers.

Overwhelmed by the learners' linguistic diversity as they may be, the teachers must show that they respect the languages and cultures of all students. They could learn greeting words in different languages, or prepare the classroom with welcoming notes written in the languages spoken by the learners, thus creating a culturally friendly learning environment. Students can also be encouraged to bring printed materials from their countries, such as newspapers, magazines, or projects they had worked on (Csillik, 2019: 10, 11). Unlike an ELT classroom, for instance, where learners are expected to speak English as much as possible, in the case of multilingual/multicultural classrooms, the use of maternal languages is not completely discouraged because it gives students freedom, the possibility to express their own individuality and their belonging to a particular culture or social group. This pedagogical strategy of "translanguaging" (using different languages interchangeably) helps learners "to overcome language constraints, to deliver verbal utterances or written statements effectively; and to ultimately achieve successful communication" (Csillik & Golubeva, 2019: 170).

In order to build skills of observation and discovery, and promote cultural awareness and mutual respect in the classroom, teachers should openly address the issues of similarities and differences between languages and cultures (Csillik, 2019: 11). Sharing cultural experiences is very important in the process of outlining differences in a constructive way. At the same time, the more the students discover about the others' values, beliefs, tastes, the more refined their skills of thinking, negotiating and finding solutions will be. Thus, the learners can be asked to present themselves in front of the classroom, to talk about their families, preferences etc., or to write projects on their countries, local traditions, music festivals, national personalities. The students certainly have many things in common that they can discover through a series of classroom activities. For example, the teacher can ask them to work in pairs, to discuss together, to find five things they have in common, and then to report back the five similarities.

Discussing similarities and differences also proves to be a good strategy for overcoming prejudice. Byram, Gribkova and Starkey stress the idea that pre-judging "a particular group or individual based on their own stereotypical assumptions or ignorance" involves "feeling rather than reason" (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002: 27); therefore, teachers should ensure that discussions challenge ideas, not the people who express those ideas. The Romanian language classroom typically requires careful management to ensure that conflicts of view do not turn into personal conflicts. Tensions may occur among the class participants, generated by the political, social, cultural, racial conflicts which exist in their home countries. At times, students may bring to classes stereotypes and prejudices about certain cultures, which hinder relationships with their colleagues who come from those particular cultures. A useful classroom activity, designed to challenge stereotypes, is the critical analysis of an authentic text on sensitive issues, such as migration or xenophobia. The students are asked to look for certain discourse features, such as perspectives, arguments, connotations, or implications, and then to compare the text with similar ones in their countries (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002: 27, 28). This strategy aims at "distancing" the readers from the text, i.e., prompting them to move beyond feelings and critically analyse the sensitive issue of the text from different perspectives.

It is certain that the multilingual/multicultural context of the preparatory year can be a very sensitive ground, and it is the teacher who has the key role in making this ground stable for learners to be able to develop their intercultural communicative competence. Researchers agree that teachers need quality training in order to cope with

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the challenges of multicultural students. Byram, Gribkova & Starkey consider that first of all teachers need classroom management skills - they should know how to organise the classroom and the activities, paying particular attention to group work and team-building. Then, they should seek or design learning materials that do not merely inform, but stimulate learners' curiosity to explore and analyse discourse, since cultural understanding is not necessarily about factual information, but about processes (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002: 33-34).

Last but not least, it is essential that teachers keep in touch with the latest methodological approaches and educational trends, by participating in workshops, training sessions, international projects, or teaching exchange programmes. The training in intercultural teaching will make them understand that their own ideas, convictions and value systems are not the standard ones, that they should enquire about the linguistic, social, ethnic, or religious particularities of their students (by using questionnaires, interviews, formal and informal discussions), and be ready to accept different points of view, in order to avoid statements or practices which may not be adequate or beneficial in the multicultural context in which they work (Gay, 1994: 11). Teachers must learn to be aware of their personal biases and prejudicial judgements about other people and cultures, exhibit patience and tolerance, try to remain neutral, and take into consideration all students' views. In other words, it is important for teachers to develop their own intercultural skills in order to be able to handle multicultural learners and help them become competent intercultural speakers.

Conclusion

The preparatory year of Romanian language is an academic study programme which, by bringing together people from various countries, epitomises all the major cultural issues of our globalised world. It stands proof of the necessity of introducing intercultural education in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language, since the main objective of the course is to make learners true intercultural speakers. The success of the programme depends, to a great extent, on the teachers' skills of teaching in a multicultural/multilingual context, hence the importance of appropriate teacher training.

By respecting diversity, by cultivating empathy and tolerance, teachers and learners alike will create the premises for the development of their intercultural communicative skills, which will help them to interact and build relationships with people outside the classroom. It is worth remembering that societies develop, individuals progress, cultural identities are reconstructed, borders are drawn and redrawn, migration goes on, hence intercultural learning is a lifelong process, and individuals' skills will all the time need to be refined and readjusted to different people, different cultures, different contexts. It can therefore be inferred that the research on the topic of intercultural education is just at the beginning.

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