

## IN PURSUIT OF INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AND THE 'PROCRUSTEAN BED' OF EFL-TEACHING

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to scan some of the problems that arise from the introduction of a multicultural dimension in foreign language teaching, with a clear focus on the role tutors should and have to play. A shift in emphasis in EFL-teaching from form-oriented approach to a more communication and culture-oriented approach opens a far wider perspective not only towards the very core essence of foreign language teaching, but also towards the generous framework of symbols, ideals, values and symbols that lie at the very heart of multiculturalism. Given the current European outlook, circumscribed to the same concept of globalisation that has managed to 'shrink' the world to the dimensions of a global village, foreign language teachers are called to shape a kind of intercultural foreign language education. Knowledge means broader horizons, understanding, tolerance, culture, as Nietzsche saw it in his critique of modernity, where he affirms that because modern culture has become a matter of perspective, a way of knowing rather than a way of practicing culture, it has lost its force. This concept of intercultural awareness the paper approaches could stimulate in young people a double fold perspective, one towards their own culture and one towards the culture of other speech communities and nations we now form a political, social and cultural and linguistic union.

**Key words:** foreign language teaching, culture, intercultural competence, teacher cognition, hermeneutics

The teaching of foreign languages has never seemed to be more dramatically urgent and vital, should we consider only the generally accepted truth that language is the most significant social activity human beings are involved in; moreover, it is not a question of choice, it is a must that has long acquired the status of compulsoriness.

People have always approached the problem of communication with great attention and interest. Words soon came to represent reputable weapons, far more feared and sophisticated than the crude sharp profile of blades that would bring the final argument. They understood that the art of dialogue served the one who mastered its subtleties, but rewarding as it was, it also proved to be demanding.

This is what turned it into a *procrustean bed* for all those who approached it with carelessness and indifference, for all those who forgot about Demosthenes and his effort to be as eloquent as possible even when, with his mouth full of stones, he was silencing the roar of the ocean.

Still, the origins of modern language education are to be found in the study and teaching of Latin in the 17th century. It is a well known fact that, for many centuries, Latin had been the dominant language of education, commerce, religion, and government in much of the Western

world, but it was displaced by French and English towards the end of the 16th century.

In his *Opera Didactica Omnia*, printed in 1657, John Amos Comenius outlined his theory of language acquisition. He is one of the first theorists who wrote systematically about how languages are learned and about pedagogical methodology for language acquisition. He held that language acquisition must be allied with sensation and experience, supporting the idea that teaching must be oral. Furthermore, he suggested that the schoolroom should have models of things, whereas when and failing that, pictures of them should be provided to the students. As a result, he also published the world's first illustrated children's book, *Orbis Sensualim Pictus* in 1658.

This book covers in a very basic format all the main areas of knowledge as they were understood in the seventeenth century, varying from biology, physics, geometry, trades, philosophy, music, recreation, law, to politics. Addressing a target audience of six to seven year olds, *Orbis Sensualim Pictus* is made up of a series of lessons that stand for an 'object lesson', in which all the words given are illustrated in drawings that accompany the lesson, thus aiding in memory and understanding.

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However, it was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the study of modern languages had become part of the European academic curriculum. Based on the purely academic study of Latin, students of modern languages did much of the same exercises, studying grammatical rules and translating abstract sentences. In a swing of attitude towards the basic teaching procedures, the oral work turned to become minimal, whereas students were instead required to memorise grammatical rules and apply these to decode written texts in the target language. This approach accounts for the birth of the method that is now known as the 'grammar-translation method'.

Time has passed, the world refined the art of dialogue, diplomacy opened the gates towards a far wider global horizon, and the need to be versatile in pulling down barriers of understanding turned out to be of vital importance. From a time in which there was neither a general accepted policy nor an educational consensus about the part foreign languages should play in students' tutoring, trends have shifted towards a position in which foreign language teaching plays a central part in our primary, secondary and tertiary curriculum and in adult-education.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

In drafting this paper we have focused on two main directions, past having carried out literature review with a view to establishing a series of landmarks in foreign language teaching. Thus, one of the directions we have approached in a diachronic perspective was mainly theoretical, whereas the second one opens a more practical dimension towards a case study conducted via a questionnaire among 250 students. This second step consisted in the actual identification of students' personal insight not into the complex, general, somewhat abstract concept of foreign language teaching, but in their personal response towards the intercultural dimension that accompanies the above mentioned process. The aim of the questionnaire was to determine and assess the individual perception of the multicultural framework that has come to equal the very core

substance of the European Union, whose motto is *United in Diversity*.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In a Europe that has striven for unity for centuries in far more than one aspect, communication between individuals across borders and cultures is of utmost importance. The Lisbon Treaty that came into force on December, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009, challenged the old continent to dream even more of what Churchill used to call *The United States of Europe*, and in this new socio, cultural, economic and politic architecture, the power of the uttered and written word has reached the very value of existence, since, paraphrasing André Malraux, one can safely support the idea that the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be, no doubt about it, the very epitome of communication.

It is but imperious for every citizen of Europe to master at least two foreign languages, for otherwise, one of the fundamental freedoms acknowledged and guaranteed by the European construction, namely the free movement of persons would turn into a phrase devoid of content and meaning. In this respect, we refer to the 1995 *European Commission's White Paper Teaching and Learning – Towards the Learning Society* that stated that *upon completing initial training, everyone should be proficient in two Community foreign languages*. The Lisbon Summit of 2000 defined languages as one of the key skills.

Therefore, foreign language teaching and learning continue to remain a central task of any European educational system, that is called to invest a lot of time, attention, training and financial resources into developing the necessary skills required by all those who dwell within the boundaries of what no one would like to become a Babel tower. The mastery of foreign languages, circumscribed to the European current realities, to what is known as the *citoyenneté Européenne* is thus of supreme importance.

By 1998 nearly all pupils in Europe studied at least one foreign language as part of their compulsory education, the only exception being the *Republic of Ireland*, where primary and secondary schoolchildren learn both Irish and English, but neither is considered a foreign language although a third European language is also taught. Pupils in upper secondary education learn at least two foreign languages in *Belgium's Flemish community*, *France*, *Denmark*, *Netherlands*, *Germany*, *Luxembourg*, *Finland*, *Sweden*, *Switzerland*, *Greece*, *Cyprus*, *Estonia*, *Latvia*, *Lithuania*, *Poland*, *Romania*, *Serbia*, *Slovenia* and *Slovakia*.

English is the language taught most often at lower secondary level in the EU. There, 93% of children learn English. At upper secondary level, English is even more widely taught. French is taught at lower secondary level in all EU countries except Slovenia. A total of 33% of European Union pupils learn French at this level. At upper secondary level the figure drops slightly to 28%. In comparison with the first two, German is taught in nearly all EU countries, but only 13% of pupils in the European Union learn it in lower secondary education, whereas the percentage increases to 20% at an upper secondary level.

Despite the high rate of foreign language teaching in schools, the number of adults claiming to speak a foreign language is generally lower than might be expected. This is particularly true of native English speakers. In 2004, a British survey showed that only one in ten UK workers could speak a foreign language, less than 5% could count to twenty in a second language, whereas 80% claimed that they could work abroad anyway, since *everyone speaks English*.

In 2001, a European Commission survey found that 65.9% of people in the UK spoke only their native tongue and this accounts for opinion of the former chief inspector of English schools, Mike Tomlinson, who described Britons as *barbarians* when it came to learning foreign languages. Linda Parker, director of the Association for Language Learning, pointed out that *a major part of our problem is that English is a world language and we find it easy to manage in other countries and with speakers of other languages. We live on an island she continued and are not as aware of other languages as those in countries where there are many other languages on their borders. [...] We do not live in a language-learning culture and we rely on other people learning our language rather than making the effort ourselves.*

Learning a foreign language implies much more than simply learning words, developing accurate pronunciation skills, grammar rules and exceptions, it goes beyond the mere development of the four basic skills that any speaker should master, i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking, respectively. It is all about enlarging personal boundaries, opening new perspectives, providing explanations for different social, cultural realities, it is about teaching individuals to understand and respect people coming from other cultural horizons.

It may be the laboratory where Europeans can forge the European spirit, that magic lace that brings together centuries of history and traditions that share a common spatial heritage, but yet differ

in the very essence of every people's individuality and ethnic background.

Foreign language teaching can contribute to a thorough understanding of our neighbours, of the way they dress, drive, party, decorate their houses, or simply spend their free time, to say nothing of the fact that it also constitutes an ideal instrument of decoding their traditions and beliefs. Through this complex teaching-learning process many preconceptions as well as socially, politically inculcated resentments and stereotypes about one culture or another can be carefully and attentively dismantled. Engaged in a meta-communicative awareness, the foreign language trainers are called to develop in their students a wise sensitiveness for the otherness of another culture, of the otherness of another fellow European. The insight into the way in which foreign language discourse is conducted guides the learner into the heart of this otherness of another culture.

One of the major benefits comes with the fact that the learner is invited to put things into perspective, namely he/she is induced to analyse his/her culture first instead of just simply turning it into the absolute norm by which everything else is judged and measured. This is one of the greatest exercises of tolerance students are invited to make. Let us consider some opinions voiced by native speakers of English, who took part in a national survey carried out in 2004, and let us reflect of the things we have just mentioned.

*The British are incredibly insular and generally incompetent when it comes to contact with other cultures, not just languages. Apart from anything else it creates a very bad impression - that of boorish, ill-educated barbarians who have never left their small villages.* (David, UK emigrant in Spain)

*Learning a second language isn't just about being able to communicate with a non-English speaker, it also serves as a wonderful mind-opener. After a year or so struggling to get by in a foreign land in a foreign tongue, many people are more willing to be patient with tourists and immigrants in the UK.* (David, UK emigrant in Japan)

One of the undoubtedly positive side-effects of globalisation is the spatial dynamism that circumscribes the freedom of movement to a practically limitless, boundless, cross-cultural-based universe.

The term *intercultural education* was first introduced in the United States of America, where it was already used during the two world wars to describe educational programmes for the integration of different ethnic groups in North American society. In a multicultural space, with a

number of cultural minorities, such as immigrants, refugees or older ethnic groupings, intercultural education has aimed at integrating different cultures and at improving their quality of life. In countries with a fairly homogenous cultural background, intercultural education is principally concerned with the education of citizens towards internationalism and multiculturalism.

The conviction that language and culture belong together in foreign language education was provocatively expressed in the title of one of Michael Byram's books, *Teaching-and-Learning-Language-and-Culture*, that came out in 1994. The use of hyphens that link the words of the title wanted to draw attention to the fact that a separation of cultural studies from language learning cannot be justified. For the two concepts are intimately bonded, complementing each other, in an almost utter symbiosis.

Hence, it is of great importance for foreign language teachers to cultivate and endorse the European spirit and spirituality, for it is expected of them to be sensitive to the uniqueness of the various European (sub)cultures as reflected by the variety of speech-communities in the European area. It is this knowledge, open-mindedness, sensitivity that may play a decisive role in keeping the individual safe from cultural stereotypes and prejudices. For quite a considerable number of years, foreign language teachers would mainly concentrate their efforts on the study of morphology and syntax, profiling thus the four language skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading) that every pupil was to acquire. However, at that time, the recognition of the social dimension of language was almost, if not totally missing.

Teachers realised that it was not enough for the pupils to be able to produce grammatically correct phrases if they lacked the skill of using these phrases in real communicative contexts. Furthermore, nowadays, success in foreign language teaching lies with a teaching strategy adapted to the context, since the current status-quo of the academic curricula outlines a necessary intercultural language education.

This new paradigm entailed a shift in the overall aim of foreign language instruction from *linguistic competence* over *socio-linguistic competence* to *communicative competence*. The term communicative competence was developed in the Anglophone world by Dell Hathaway Hymes' critique of Noam Chomsky and in the Germanophone literature by Jürgen Habermas (Van Ek, 1986). Hymes maintained that linguists, desiring to decipher foreign language acquisition, must take into consideration the way in which not only grammatical competence, but also the ability

to use language appropriately is acquired. Thus, he focused on the sociolinguistic competence and this concept turned to serve as fundamental to the development of communicative language teaching. Van Ek (1986) presents what he calls a framework for comprehensive foreign language learning objectives, which are explicitly developed in the context of this view of how foreign language teaching must be justified through its contribution to learners' general education. He emphasizes that foreign language teaching is not just concerned with training in communication skills, but also with the personal and social development of the learner as an individual.

Van Ek's model of *communicative ability* cited in Byram comprises six *competences*, together with autonomy and social responsibility.

1. *Linguistic competence*, namely the ability to produce and interpret meaningful utterances, which are formed in accordance with the rules of the language.

2. *Sociolinguistic competence* that is the awareness of ways in which the choice of language forms is determined by such conditions as setting, relationship etc.

3. *Discourse competence*, or the ability to use appropriate strategy in the construction and interpretation of texts.

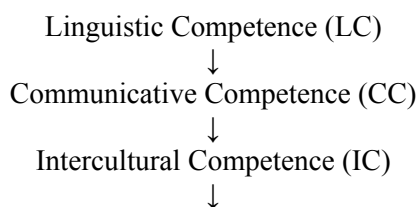
4. *Strategic competence*, that appears when communication is difficult, we have to find ways of 'getting our meanings across' or of 'finding out what somebody means'; these are communication strategies, such as rephrasing, assigning for clarification.

5. *Social competence* involves both the will and the skill to interact with others, involving motivation, attitudes, self-confidence, empathy and the ability to handle social situations.

6. *Socio-cultural competence*, when socially and culturally, languages are differently framed. Being in one specific cultural or social situation or trying to master it outside the context requires a specific reference frame.

The socio-cultural competence was added to the list at a later stage. Van Ek realised that a person cannot be regarded as communicatively competent unless he or she possesses a certain insight into the socio-cultural context which every language is an integrated part of, and which tends to function as a frame of reference for its speakers.

In the 1990's another concept emerged, namely the *intercultural competence*, and it was perceived as the guiding concept for the overall aim of foreign language education. Thus, schematically outlining the development of aims in foreign language teaching, Byram offers the following structure.



Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

All in all, communicative competence draws on how one foreign language learner uses his/her foreign language command and what he/she in different settings and interactions utters as appropriate; however, linguistic awareness may never be sufficient unless it goes along with cultural awareness.

*“It is desirable (if it is not a necessity in the face of European integration) to increase awareness of the European/international dimension in teacher education, and this European/international dimension will have to be a totality of perspectives – geographical, cultural, socio-economic, historical and political – For the rest, different people will have different opinions about political positions to be taken, about the aims of European teacher education, about teaching/learning strategies in introducing a European/international dimension and about effects produced in the field of knowledge, skills and attitudes of the younger generation”.*(Th. Sander, 1993, p.48).

Foreign language teachers are thus by excellence the ones that forge this European identity-awareness, the ones who sow the seeds of understanding, open-mindedness, and acceptance of the otherness of that Europe that lies beyond one culture's borders. This awareness ties bonds with other speech communities and dismantles stereotypes.

A questionnaire was designed in order to qualitatively assess the response some European students offered to the question of importance of this intercultural education. Mention must be made that the interviewed students were second-language learners, and, most importantly, they were majoring in agriculture and economics, both of them very technical specialities that have very little to do with the cultural dimension of the European spirit. 250 students offered their point of view, after having previously been familiarised with the extra-curricular information about the cross-cultural dimension. They were required to rank the importance of the supplementary intercultural information on a scale from 1 to 10, according to their own point of view, their personal interest in the subject, and the part this kind of

information would play in the forge of their European identity. The results that reflect their views are more than encouraging, for, above all statistical interpretation, they reflect the interviewees' open-mindedness and desire to expand the horizons of their knowledge. This is to be reflected by the following chart that presents the response to the problem of intercultural education given by 250 students from the “Ion Ionescu de la Brad” University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine'-Iasi, Romania (figure 1). The 250 interviewees were first, second, third and fourth year students majoring in agriculture, upland agriculture, environmental engineering, and economics.

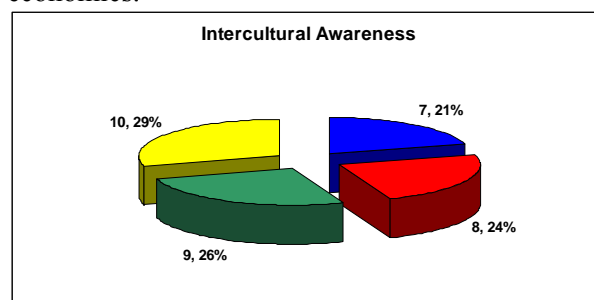


Figure 1 Intercultural Awareness

The final analysis of the questionnaire mirrored a tight and balanced scoring, with a slight but constant increase towards the upper segment of the scoring scale.. Thus, 21% of the interviewed students considered that 7 should be the score given to the importance of the intercultural education, 8 was the choice of 24%, 9 reflected the point of view of 26 percent of the students, whereas the highest score overlapped the highest percentage of the interviewees, namely a 10 given by 29 percent of them.

## CONCLUSIONS

The development of a *citoyenneté Européenne* has to become a sound dimension of foreign language teaching. Words do not limit themselves to simply uttering and articulating realities, they are also destined to craft an intercultural awareness in the learner. It is this awareness that accounts for a better communication not only across borders, but also within the very limits of one culture; a better understanding of the others starts and entangles a sound knowledge of one's culture and roots. Foreign language teachers are among those who should carry the lantern of the European spirit and help spread its light throughout the continent, turning them into leading actors in the unification process of Europe.

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