PRACTICE AND THEORY IN THE ACQUISITION OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN A FRENCH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES COURSE

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Abstract

Learning, according to psychologist Marie-Luce Gibello-Verdier, is an intimate adventure which is lived through the dynamics of a triple interaction: in the middle of the act of learning there is the idea that we create about ourselves, then the relationship which, on the one hand, we build with the new objects of knowledge and, on the other hand, the one that we experience with those who are giving us the information. This article is mainly focused on the third component, which is closely linked to the intercultural competence. This refers to the ability of individuals to observe and analyze all aspects of their foreign interlocutors, thus developing an awareness of all the aspects in order to adjust their own behavior. French with specific objectives (FOS) cannot be learned strictly limited to the linguistic aspects without taking into consideration the cultural dimension of that field. These cultural information indispensable to the effectiveness of the professional exchanges are less accessible than the discursive aspects: the teacher may select written and oral text to analyze and interpret the communicative competencies, but approaching information solely of cultural character represents a true challenge. The language aspects are explicit, while cultural data are implicit. This article suggests a few reference points in approaching this subject, which are to promote the development of some collaborative and sociocultural strategies.

Key words: intercultural competence, French language with specific objectives

By intercultural competence one understands the persons' capacity to observe, analyse all the aspects of the foreign interlocutors' behaviour, as well as the awareness and behaviour adjustment in such interaction situations. (Carras, C., Tolas, J., Kohler, P., Szilagyi, E., 2007). According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, issued by the European Council, abilities and intercultural competences are defined as „the ability to establish a relationship between the native culture and a foreign culture, raising sensitivity regarding the notion of culture and the capacity to recognize and use varied strategies in order to establish contact with people from another culture. Furthermore, the capacity to play the role of the cultural agent between one's own culture and the generally foreign culture, as well as the ability to efficiently handle situations comprised of cultural misunderstandings and conflicts." (CECRL, 2001).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

In their paper *Le management interculturel*, Gauthey Franck and Dominique Xardel, identify the cultural variables specific to all the germanic countries (among which, Germanophone countries, Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian, Netherlands) and those specific to the Latin culture (Romanic languages), as follows:

Some of these cultural variables can be found, for example, in the medical area, where the body and intimacy in general, play a very important role, and the different approaches and therapeutical traditions have a considerable impact upon the behaviour and the patient-doctor relation and may cause sometimes misunderstandings or embarrassing situations. For example, a Chinese doctor, who has a holistic approach towards the illness, will ask his patient to undress completely, even if the object of the consultation is an infection to the finger. This request may be perceived in a negative manner by an European patient. Furthermore, the hierarchical relations of the professional world differ very much from one country to another. A commercial negotiation in Japan may differ significantly from the manner in which this unfolds in Europe. To the same extent, time reference is different from culture to culture and may generate conflicts or misunderstandings which affect the relations of the two interlocutors: for example, even a 15 minutes delay at a professional meeting in Germany is considered lack of respect and may have negative consequences, while in other countries, for example, in France or countries in South Africa it is a normal event and requires no subsequent justifications.

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Table 1

The Latin and Anglo-Saxon cultural trends

Latin trend	Anglo-Saxon trend
- Deductive reasoning (concepts first)	- Deductive reasoning (facts first)
- Polychrone organization (flexible time, multi-tasking)	- Monochronic organization (respect for time, one task at a time)
- Implicit communication (relative importance of the non-verbal language)	- Explicit communication (importance of verbal language, conciseness in messages)
- Importance of emotional relationship at work	- Division work, relationships
- Orientation towards „to be" (quality of life, consumption)	- Orientation towards „to do"(to work hard to succeed, saving)
- Catholic religion	- Protestant religion
- High formality (protocols, rituals, etichete, courtesy, distinction between „you" and „you" as in „You Sir")	- Low formality (simplicity is appreciated, no distinction between „you" and „you" as in „You Sir")
- Resistance to change, conservative spirit, Christian democracy	- Low resistance to change, innovative spirit, social-democracy
- Strong hierarchy (Pyramid-like structure, authoritarianism, numerous hierachical structures, low social mobilization, importance of the role of the elite, selective educational system)	- Weak hierarchy (rake-like structure, participation, less hierarchical levels, strong social mobilization, few elites, democratic educational system)
- Syndicate (low syndicalisation, ideology, unintegrated in the professional area)	(strong syndicalisation, pragmatism, integrated in the professional life)
- Decision flow (order)	- Decision flow (debate)
- Company size (mainly small and medium)	- (large companies)
- Economic development (intermediate)	- (high)

These cultural data, requisite to the efficiency of the professional exchanges are less accessible than the discursive aspects when teaching a foreign language: straine: the reacher may collect sufficient written and audio maerials and may use and analize during the classes in order to enhance the communication competences, but it is more difficult to access those information of strict cultural character, because the cultural data are mainly implicit Cultural differences become visible mostly by contrast and reveal themselves during the contact between two cultures, that is why the teaching and enhancing of the intercultural competence constitues a real challenge.

A practical solution is encouraging students in having contacts with their peers, with teachers or specialists from other cultural environments, who might allow the encounter with their own manners of representation through educational exchanges, forums, discussion lists, blogs, etc.

Another revealing example of the importance of the cultural factor is the experience I had when counseling and guiding three students from the Horticulture University, who benefited from an internship training grant in France. This experience was considered in the end as full of benefits in the academic, linguistic and personal area, but encountered difficulties and might have failed due to some cultural differences, which I will explain in the context of the notion „cultural shock". Concepts, atiitudes and different ways of putting into practice some ordinary aspects influences interpersonal relationships.It is well-known that in France, having dinner is a very important social-cultural event, representing maybe the only moment of the day when the members of the family can meet and share impressions; that is why dinner may last until very late. Unlike our country, where in man families this is a secondary aspect and benefits from greater autonomy and one

mermber's refusal to participate is not considered an offence, the way it happens in France area

On the other hand, mentioning and explaining certain aspects which pertain to the dress code during a foreign language class may turn out to be very useful: for example, from my experience in Germany and United States I found out that this side is secondary, extremely appreciated teachers on the professional level came to classes dressed in shorts or wearing sandals and socks.

Following the tragedy on the 11th of March, in Japony, for many western observers, the reaction of the Japanese was contradictory and strange. A man, while smiling, told that he had lost his house during the earthquake, and then his wife and son drowned in the tsunami wave. This is a socking fact, especially for a western person, if you are not acquainted with the Japanese principle entitled „*tatemae*", according to which it is not polite to burden somebody by showing your own suffering, because the interlocutor would be put in a delicate situation, having to respond with compassion; on the contrary, one is expected to act according to the society, even if this means burying one's own suffering or wearing a mask towards the others (Richter, 2011).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Intercultural teaching has the role of minimising or avoiding these cultural shocks, which have been defined by Cohen-Emerique (Luc Colles, 2007) as beeing „the emotional experience which occurs in those who, finding themselves temporarily or due to their profession outside their sociocultural context, make contact to the foreignness sphere." There is an analyses model which distinguishes between four phases of the cultural shock, which allows us to be better aware of the social identity:

1. The initial contact with the foreign places: varied reactions such as melancholy, enthusiasm, curiosity;
2. Adapting stage: the person in question can be dissapointed by the results obtained after the first contact, because they do not match the expectations;
3. Confronting and stress: the person in question feels different emotions regarding the situation; the problem of identity appears;
4. Adapting to the stress stage: multiple reactions are possible, positive or negative.

In order to counter these aspects, the foreign language teacher may advise using phrases which do not contain a verb following an adjective or negative sentences which suggest a lack. At the same time the teacher could make use of written or oral texts on a certain subject which may lead to many different points of view.

All these aspects confirm the fact that a foreign language is not learned in order to aquire some knowledge in that language, but to be able to access and use the foreign language in a certain area. This concept was stated by M. Drouere si L. Porcher: „D'une manière générale, il n'y a plus d'autre enseignement de français langue étrangère que des enseignements à objectifs spécifiques. [...]. Et, d'ailleurs, que signifierait aujourd'hui un enseignement sans objectif spécifique? Il n'y a plus de place pour la gratuité de l'apprentissage et sa non-utilisation dans la vie concrète". Therefore the foreign language course with specific objectives configures a teaching-learning problematic very different from what a language course generally means, in terms of shaping teachers, establishing the course content according to the particularities of the target public, etc. Cultural aspects are the core of the FOS, as D. Lehmann stated: „C'est pourtant là une donnée fondamentale: il y a des obstacles culturels à la communication entre spécialistes appartenant à des cultures diverses, qui sont premiers et qu'une intervention didactique simplement limitée aux seuls aspects linguistiques ne permet pas de lever." At the same time, FOS does not target all the cultural aspects, but only those elements which have direct repercussions in the professional world, for example:

- The social-economic-historical data which contour the wide cultural context in which work will take place (for example, in the French economic environment, as well as in the Romanian one, the tension between centralization and decentralization);
- The anthropological data which reveal what R. Carroll named „invisible evidence" and which act upon the concept of time, space, hierarchy, authority, environment, conversation, explicit, implicit, etc. and whose knowing is essencial in order to interact and work with the Other;
- The culture of the companies which have a different distribution of the equality relations, hierachy, attitude towards person and work, which the individual willing to work in a foreign company should know in order to be able to integrate.

CONCLUSIONS

Intercultural competence, which also relates to the understanding of a certain culture, codes and functioning ways, constitutes an essential

dimension in the foreign language course, even if, unfortunately, it is very often neglected, although always stated among the objectives of the educational materials.

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