

Interculturality as the main dimension of modern languages education

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Introduction

The last two decades witnessed an upsurge of interest towards cultural dimension in the pedagogical theories of education and appearance of a new contemporary educational theory – a theory of intercultural education. Nowadays few question the vital importance of intercultural education in the modern world and the progress it has made in the field of pedagogy in recent times. The dramatic shift that occurred from multicultural to intercultural education is accepted almost unquestioningly and implies that the main aim of modern languages education today is to change the diversity of languages and cultures from a factor hindering an intercultural dialogue between nations into a means of mutual understanding, enrichment and formation of complex identities of people such as being multicultural and multilingual mediators between different cultures.

In the context of globalization, with an accepted ethnical, linguistical and cultural diversity of every person, intercultural dialogue becomes one of the priorities of educational systems in modern societies, the crucial means of reaching intercultural consensus and eliminating tensions between different cultures. It has been increasingly recognized that people, especially youth, need to be interculturally educated or literate and be able to negotiate meanings across languages and cultures in such a way that it can lead to mutual understanding between different nations. In our complex, globalized world a multicultural person is becoming the norm. Intercultural education for effective intercultural communication becomes imperative and as English is accepted as international language, the traditional ideology as well as practice of the English language teaching has to be changed. The English language teachers face new challenges since nowadays they are perceived as intercultural communicative competence teachers and meet new demands of educating the youth to be interculturally literate and teach English as intercultural education.

Intercultural education

Intercultural education theory appears to be well established nowadays in many countries (Byram, 1997; Corbett, 2003; Elizarova, 2005; Kramsch, 1996; Sercu, 2006; Song, 2008; Ter-Minasova, 2008). The term '**intercultural education**' is commonly accepted as a composite, being less a thing than a process; an organic and dynamic one that ensures an intercultural dialogue between different cultures, and results in acquiring a complex set of different identities of interlocutors across cultures.

The concept of intercultural education can also be perceived in relation to the understanding of intercultural literacy. G. V. Elizarova conceptualizes intercultural literacy as "the understandings, competences, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation and identi-

ties which enable effective participation in a cross-cultural setting" [5, p. 237]. According to G. V. Elizarova, an interculturally literate person "possesses the understanding, competencies, attitudes and identities necessary for successful living and working in a cross-cultural or pluralist setting." Such an educated person has "the background required to effectively 'read' a second culture, to interpret its symbols and negotiate its meanings in a practical day-to-day context" [5, p. 219]. The following specific 'attitudes' that intercultural education should try actively to promote and assess at the time in order to acknowledge the intercultural dimension are outlined:

- willingness to seek out or take up opportunities to engage with otherness in a relationship of quality;
- interest in discovering other perspectives on interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in one's own and in other cultures and cultural practices;
- willingness to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment;
- readiness to experience the different stages of adaptation to and interaction with another culture;
- readiness to engage with the conventions and rites of verbal and non-verbal communication and interaction [4, p. 206].

These attitudes have implications for the way people live their lives and interact with others, for education in general, and for modern languages education in particular. Languages have a central role in this context because they mediate the interpretation and construction of meaning among people. If intercultural education has to engage students in life, learning, and future employment it needs to change and modern languages education is an integral part of these changes. The challenge in languages education is not only to acknowledge the intercultural dimension but for teaching and learning to become intercultural.

According to A. Scarino, these important issues concern the way language, culture, learning and teaching are understood by the majority of scholars. To integrate intercultural dimension into the modern languages education the following approach is being introduced [10, p.4]:

- in relation to language, there is a need to view a language that it is not only a structural and a grammatical system that foregrounds the language in use, but it is always subject to the variable interpretation of participants in interaction;
- in relation to culture, there is a need to view a culture that it is not only recognizes facts about or ways of doing things in diverse cultures, but also informs the way people understand themselves and others;
- in relation to teaching, there is a view of teaching that not only recognizes the need to impart knowledge

and create contexts for using and applying it, but also that teachers mediate that knowledge;

- in relation to learning, there is a view of learning that not only recognizes the need to acquire new knowledge and to participate in communities of users of that knowledge, but that learners are always would-be interpreters.

An orientation to languages teaching and learning that sees language, culture, learning and teaching in this way can be defined as **intercultural language teaching and learning** and thus, interculturality becomes the main dimension of modern languages education.

Culture in language teaching and learning is usually defined as a/the culture associated with a language being learnt. Also by this term the following notions are usually understood: a way of life, a set of social practices, a system of beliefs and a shared history or set of experiences. A culture may be synonymous with a country, or a region, or a nationality or it may cross several countries or regions. As L. Sercu states it is highly possible to belong to or identify oneself with more than one culture. Thus, it enables scholars to set out new purposes for language learning and teaching. Effectively, it fundamentally reconfigures the long-accepted goals of **communicative language teaching** by seeking: an integration of linguistic and cultural learning to facilitate communication and interaction; a comparison of others and self to stimulate reflection on and (critical) questioning of the mainstream culture into which learners are socialized; a shift in perspective involving psychological processes of socialization; and the potential of language teaching to prepare learners to meet and communicate in other cultures and societies than the specific one usually associated with the language they are learning [9, p. 55].

Intercultural language teaching

M. Byram and A. Nichols stress that developing the intercultural dimension in **language teaching** means accepting the following aims as the primary goals of language teaching [2, p. 5]:

- giving learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence;
- preparing them for interaction with people of other cultures;
- helping them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviors; and
- ensuring them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience.

In other words, when the prime aim of teaching is formation and further development of intercultural communicative competence, intercultural dimension should be fully integrated into the academic curriculum. Intercultural communicative competence is being seen as a complex combination of valuable knowledge and skills. In terms of intercultural language teaching **the components of intercultural competence are considered to be knowledge, skills and attitudes of a culture** that is under consideration. Together with the values one holds because of one's belonging to a number of social groups of a given society and part of one's social identities they form the intercultural competence of an interlocutor. The foundation of intercultural competence is in the attitudes of the intercultural speaker and mediator. **'Intercultural speaker'** is considered to be

someone who has an ability to interact with 'others', to accept other perspectives and perceptions of the world, to mediate between different perspectives, to be conscious of their evaluations of difference (Byram and Zarate, 1997; Kramersch, 1998; Ter-Minasova, 2008). Where the otherness which learners meet is that of a society with a different language, they clearly need both linguistic competence and intercultural competence.

Intercultural awareness in language learning is often perceived as a 'fifth skill' - the ability to be aware of cultural relativity following reading, writing, listening and speaking. But C. Kramersch points out "if...language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed as enabling language proficiency Culture in language teaching is not a ... fifth skill, tacked on ... to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing" [7, p. 1]. Language itself is defined by a culture. It is commonly accepted that one cannot be competent in the language if one does not also understand the culture that has shaped and informed it. Students cannot learn a second language if they do not have an awareness of that culture, and how that culture relates to their own first language/first culture. It is not only therefore essential to have cultural awareness, but also intercultural awareness.

Intercultural language learning

The process of **intercultural learning** and its implied goal **intercultural communicative competence** have recently become a commonplace in the world of modern languages methodology since in modern languages learning recently there also has been a move towards **intercultural language learning**. Scholars adhere to the idea that a learner must be an active mediator between his own and a foreign language culture. (Byram, 1997; Elizarova, 2005; Kramersch, 1999; Liddicoat et. al., 2003; Scarino, 2009; Ter-Minasova, 2008). These authors state that in the context of learning communication is at least potentially intercultural. It entails students learning to move between two languages and cultures - the students' own language and culture, and the languages and cultures they are learning. The major characteristic of intercultural language learning is that it engages with the process of understanding and interpreting human communication and interaction - not only with observation, description, analysis and interpretation of phenomena shared when communicating and interacting, but also with active engagement in interpreting 'self' and 'other'[10, p. 68; 11, 1; 12, p. 147].

Intercultural language learning has become an important focus of modern languages education for it has resulted from "an acknowledgement and understanding of the links between language and culture as well as an understanding of "how communication works across cultures" [12, p.259-260]. In intercultural language learning language, culture and learning are fundamentally interrelated into a single educative approach, according to which, culture learning is defined as the process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures.

Intercultural language learning is about how language and culture come into play in creating and exchanging meanings. It develops in students the capability to recognize and integrate into their communication an understanding of themselves as already situated in their own language and culture when they communicate with others, and to recognize that others also approach communication from the background of their own experiences within their own language and culture. Thus, intercultural language learning can be understood as a process of personal growth on the part of the learners. In this respect they relate their own self to others in an intercultural environment as an intercultural speakers or mediators of new meanings, experiences and reflections. This personal growth can be realized through the development of intercultural communicative competence [6, p. 24].

Intercultural communicative competence entails not only communicative competence in the linguistic and pragmatic terms of the language used in the intercultural encounter, moreover it needs awareness of various sets of cultural scenarios and the ability to mediate between different cultural identities [6, pp.74–75]. The **intercultural communicative competence** can be defined as a person's ability to engage in productive intercultural dialogues of meanings and relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds. To make the intercultural interaction productive, one needs to have the ability to construct meaning and rapport with people from different cultural backgrounds through appropriate and effective use of verbal and nonverbal language [5, p. 236].

Nowadays there is general agreement among the supporters of intercultural learning as to its key underlying goals and their consequences for language instruction. K. Risager in her review of approaches to culture learning, explains that, in contrast to previous approaches to language and culture learning, students are no longer expected to simply take on positive attitudes towards the target culture and its members [8, p. 250]. M. Byram underlines that "attitudes which are the precondition for successful intercultural interaction need to be not simply positive, since even positive prejudice can hinder mutual understanding" [3, p.34].

The modern languages and intercultural competence teacher

At present language teachers face the challenge to address a new professional role, such as **teachers of modern languages and intercultural competence**. The main part of this new role is to understand and recognize the nature of intercultural development and change in students. If teachers are to develop recognition and assessment of intercultural competence they need empirical illustrations of typical knowledge, behavior and attitudes/traits in students in the classroom.

To help students become more aware of the world around them, and to better interact with that world are the crucial roles of the teacher. Modern languages teachers tend to have a wide variety of different backgrounds in different disciplines. They have various experiences, and in many cases may have travelled a lot and got to know several different cultures. They may have undergone the experience of living in, adjusting to and understanding a different culture. There is a lot that they

can bring to the job. They are unique mediators of cultural relativity and diversity.

The role of the teacher is therefore to develop skills, attitudes and awareness of values just as much as to develop knowledge of a particular culture or country, or of different cultures within one's own country. That is why nowadays the main aim of teaching the intercultural dimension is assumed to be not the transmission of information about a foreign country but rather the intercultural dimension is to be concerned with the following:

- helping learners to understand how intercultural interaction takes place;
- how social identities are part of all interaction;
- how their perceptions of other people and others people's perceptions of them influence the success of communication;
- how they can find out for themselves more about the people with whom they are communicating [2, p. 10].

In this respect one more crucial point is selecting of teaching materials and working out a range of specific learning activities, especially problem solving tasks.

Developing intercultural competence does not mean doing away with traditional information gap or related activities, but developing them so that: 1) culture becomes a regular focus of the information exchanged; 2) students face specific problems, the solution of which enables not only to acquire knowledge but also to develop specific attitudes and communicative skills; and 3) learners have the opportunity to reflect upon how the information is exchanged, and the cultural factors impinging upon this exchange of meanings. For this purpose problem solving tasks are of great help.

The adequate development of learners' intercultural competence can't be achieved exclusively through policies, materials, learning activities or residence abroad. Without teachers' awareness and understanding of the main issues in intercultural communication, students' progress is under threat. In turn, language teachers' intercultural skills cannot develop without appropriate training. It is clear that professional growth is essentially a question of time. Only then teachers will be able to fulfill their responsibilities with a greater confidence.

Conclusion

Interculturality imposes great challenges upon modern languages education, as well as language teaching and learning, and the new role of languages teachers. It has become the essential and crucial dimension for the modern languages education in general for it provides great opportunities and new possibilities to educate students in such a way when they come to perceive and accept not only the vital diversity of the contemporary cultures and relativity of values, beliefs and norms in the concrete contexts, but they come to understand the vital importance of changing their views and developing such attitudes that enable to create new meanings during intercultural communication and provide them with new concepts, ideas and thoughts.

Interculturality also plays a vital role in contemporary languages teaching for it aims at providing learners with not only linguistic competence but intercultural communicative competence as well. Moreover, it enables students to get prepared for interaction with representatives of different cultures, to perceive the diversity of cultures and their distinct perspectives, values

and behaviours. It facilitates youth to accept intercultural communication as enriching and helpful experience leading to reaching intercultural consensus and mutual understanding.

In terms of intercultural learning interculturality ensures a personal growth of every participant of a learning process in such a way that this personal growth does not become a hinder of intercultural communication but for every person a crucial means of becoming multilingual, multicultural and intercultural individual at the same time, in other words it helps greatly to form a complex identities of contemporary youth who will be able

to negotiate successfully different meanings across cultures.

The role of modern languages teachers is becoming more and more important. Nowadays teachers are not only educators but they are mediators of cultural diversity and relativity. Professional growth is crucial for only an intercultural competence teacher is able to facilitate intercultural development and change in students. Only a teacher who accepts the idea of interculturality being the main dimension of modern languages education is able to ensure education in general and teaching and learning in particular to become intercultural.

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