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Implementation of Intercultural Education in the Republic of North Macedonia

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Abstract. The intense nature of intercultural processes in today's society alters communication at a fundamental level - both in practice and in behavior. Modern socio and psycholinguistic theories call for intercultural discourse to be the key in interpreting social interactions among people in global society. At the same time, it is normal to change the requirements of individual competence, understood as a complex of knowledge, skills and attitudes, allowing the individual to deal effectively with situations that are increasingly determined by cultural differences. This paper points out that the learning process should extend from the teaching individual grammatical structures and theoretical knowledge to the promotion of communication skills and the acquisition of intercultural dialogue skills.

Keywords: intercultural competence, education, culture, communication.

Introduction

The intense nature of intercultural processes in today's society alters communication at a fundamental level - both in practice and in behavior. Modern socio and psycholinguistic theories and studies call for intercultural discourse to be the key in interpreting social interactions among people in global society. At the same time, it is normal to change the requirements of individual competence, understood as a complex of knowledge, skills and attitudes, allowing the individual to deal effectively with situations that are increasingly determined by cultural differences. In this sense, linguistic competence is interpreted as part of general communicative competence, which defines the close link between the issues of linguistic diversity and the social adaptability of the individual, as well as their importance for social stability, the discovery of a path not only to others but also to oneself. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to examine the educational aspects of these issues, interpreted in the context of intercultural communicative competence as one of the key objectives of modern education. Intercultural competence is the ability to integrate the competence of teaching in the secondary school which is actually the competence that influences the modern global economy and the multicultural society, while our state educational requirements and programs do not differentiate it clearly. The learning process should extend from the teaching individual grammatical structures and theoretical knowledge to the promotion of communication skills and the acquisition of intercultural dialogue skills. This is the challenge of the modern world to us and the challenge of the future to our education.

Language and culture

The relationship between culture and language was known many years ago but it has only been practiced and researched in recent years. The newest researches show that the interest for learning a language is bigger if the culture component is included in the curricula. Culture is dynamic and
is not an isolated, mechanical aspect of life that can be used to directly explain phenomena in the classroom or that can be learned as a series of facts, physical elements, or exotic characteristics [1]. People live in different cultural communities and share values and beliefs that are transmitted through stories, songs, beliefs, relationships and cultural events. There are many definitions of culture and it is really hard to find one over encompassing but an essential one in this context will be that culture is the deeply learned confluence of language, values, beliefs, and behaviors that pervade every aspect of a person’s life, and it is continually undergoing changes [2]. No matter which strategies the teachers are going to use teachers are by no doubt mediated by different cultural influences. According to Trubon:

Every teacher has his or her own style of teaching, there are different national and cultural academic traditions, and there are often national and cultural academic traditions, and there are often cultural differences in pedagogy regardless of styles, traditions and cultures, all good teaching in the world consists of one important goal, making connections with the students [3].

Very often English language teachers have students from a culture different than theirs. The communication with these students can be difficult because teachers sometimes lack understanding of the student's culture and their lifestyles. Usually the lack of cultural understanding leads to negative stereotyping, low self-esteem, frustration and finally a teacher's failure. The condition for successful intercultural communication is "the ability to recognize and analyze the communicants intercultural differences, which requires a certain personality traits such as tolerance to different views on life, to another personal experience, to other norms and cultural beliefs as well as empathy, respect for cultural traditions and behavioral differences, the ability to communicate adequately in a foreign language and so on" [4]. When possessing the images of their own and the culture of the students, the teacher should be able to reflect on the differences of those images and finally incorporate them into intercultural communication. That is why the methodology of foreign language teaching should aim towards developing students' abilities and qualities which are essential for accomplishing mutual understanding and effective communication with the representatives of the culture different than their own.

**Analysis of the prescribed students’ books for teaching English as a Foreign Language by the Ministry of Education in the Republic of Macedonia**

Culture is a reason plus for students to become more interested to study the foreign language they have chosen. By learning foreign languages students acquire knowledge and understanding of the culture of the language. They cannot learn the language for real until they learn the culture contexts used in that language. To realize that, the teachers have to make the cultural aspect more explicit altogether with the linguistic forms. A simple example worth mentioning is the formal and informal greeting in English language whereas if translated into Macedonian language it is totally different. The students will realize the meaning only if they become acquainted with the cultural and not only the linguistic norms. According to Thanasoulas "Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one...challenging (learners') ability to make sense of the world around them" [5]. This means the concepts of linguistic and cultural competence must be introduced into the classroom together. It is a mere fact that some teachers and students seem to forget that the knowledge of the grammar system of a foreign language needs to be complemented by the cultural competence. However, the implementation of the intercultural aspect in the lessons in foreign languages is not a simple thing. The textbooks primarily give access to the culture of the language along with literature texts, history and art of the language which is taught, and not so much an approach of teaching culture profoundly.

The prescribed books for state vocational and gymnasium education are the same for every school in our country. In the first year of secondary education, students use the book "Close-up" by Angela Healen and Katrina Gormley under the edition of National Geographic Learning. The book is rich in photography, texts and facts carefully selected to fulfill the needs of the students.
There are plenty of additional resources for teachers as well following the new trends of informational technology. The level is B1 and using this books students can read and learn about different cultures from the videos, texts and discussion points given at the end of every reading lesson. In the first unit named “Family ties” students can discuss about their family trees by using certain proverbs for discussion. The following unit named as “Food, food, food” teach them about types of food in different countries. A very interesting picture of a big sandwich gives the students the story of the hamburger and where it comes from. Since this is one of the new books prescribed couple of years ago, it can be stated that this book gives deeper cultural information and knowledge through different resources such as texts, facts, proverbs and video at the end of every unit. The book for the second year of high-school education is called “Think” and the authors are Herbert Puchta, Jeff Stranks and Peter Lewis-Jones and the level of English is the same as in the first year. What is problematic about this book is that it is totally different than the book in the previous year. The organization and the approach of the units are different and of course teachers and students need to follow different lesson planning and organization. The book consists of 12 units and the content of the grammar and vocabulary is very simple and shifts a lot if compared to the program of the previous year. A good thing about this book when speaking about culture is that after every second unit there is one lesson oriented towards culture through which students mainly through reading learn about different cultures around the world. The reading task is usually followed by a speaking and writing task where students can express their thoughts and feelings and usually make comparisons with their own culture. The book prescribed for the third year of studies follows the same book of the series of Think but on a higher level B1+. The same organization is used as in the previous year of studies, but in Think 3 the topics about culture are more profound and open discussions about stereotypes whereas students can think about certain intercultural issues through reading and writing. The prescribed book for the fourth year of studies is still the old one and awaits to be replaced with a new followed edition of Think4. For now New Opportunities Upper-Intermediate is used and in this book the contents about culture are not only organized in culture corners but are found around the whole book in parts named “comparing cultures” through which students are expected to discuss on different topics and they have to compare their own culture with another culture.

Taking the four books into account it can be stated that the cultural component included in these books needs to be upgraded with deeper knowledge and topics that will attract the students to become more interested in cultural matters. My impression is that there is an attempt to include the cultural component but in an artificial way. The reason for that is the fact that the intercultural pedagogical method develops cultural awareness and attitude of students which enable them to acquire greater responsibility for oneself, but also for others, with a transition from ethnocentric to the ethno-relative vision. As Byram emphasizes: “the significance of students learning about a certain culture within foreign language learning and changing the focus in foreign language from merely transferring messages into the cultural meaning behind even the simplest of messages will help contribute to the general education of all learners within an international community” [6]. Byram also suggests that teachers implement authentic materials such as documents, field work, audio and video recordings [6]; all of which can be found through the Internet which contains thousands of authentic websites, videos, and materials which educators can bring into the classroom to give students a more authentic experience regarding the culture of the target language.

Dealing with conflicts in the English language classroom in the Republic of North Macedonia

Conflicts exist in every culture. Societies are like underground waterways that have gone through our lives giving us messages that shape our observations, attributions, judgments, and thoughts of self and the other. In spite of the fact that societies are powerful, they are frequently oblivious, influencing in the process to determine ways to solve conflicts in subtle ways. Anne Campbell
points out that "the development of the individual cultural identity is a process of acceptance of the cultural norms, beliefs, attitudes and values of one cultural group and the concepts of the cultural identity fails to allow that individuals may identify with more than one cultural group, may change their cultural identity in a new cultural context, or may have developed the ability to move between different cultural contexts without losing their sense of individual identity"[7]. This confirms that societies are more than one dialect or one dress code, and nourishment traditions. Social groups may share race, ethnicity, or nationality, yet they additionally emerge from cleavages of era, financial class, political and religious alliance, dialect, gender etc. However, two things are fundamental about societies: they are continually changing, and they are identified with the symbolic measurement of life.

Conflict situations may happen in the foreign language classroom due to different reasons such as cultural misunderstandings, personal clashes, different goals in life, prejudice etc. If the teacher does not deal with conflicts and allows the conflict to escalate, students may act aggressively or frustrated. According to Morissette, instructors sometimes feel that whenever conflict occurs in the classroom that it is a reflection of their shortcomings as teachers [8]. Furthermore, this can result in hostile learning environment where students do not feel confident to study, participate or have friends in that surrounding. Conflict situations can be solved effectively through a variety of activities and strategies such as mutual understanding, giving opinions, debates. However, in order to achieve that numerous skills are needed: listening skills, assertiveness, intercultural knowledge which includes respect, empathy and sensitivity towards the other. The nature of teaching a foreign language includes dealing with different ethnicities and nationalities and many qualified English teachers usually experience difficulties adjusting to the culture of their students. These feelings of anxiety and a lack of understanding of the students’ culture can lead to conflicts in the classroom that interfere with learning [9]. Moreover, when teachers face cultures much different than their own sometimes they are not aware that the conflicts happen because they teach students from different cultural backgrounds. The reason for that is the lack of knowledge of intercultural communication and of course intercultural communication competence. Teachers who have developed the intercultural competence whether from trainings or going on mobility abroad are able to adapt to the students’ culture and will allow them to be effectively engaged and connected with students from different ethnicities than their own.

Conflicts may arise because of different reasons. Speaking about the Roma students in Strumica, the case is that they are not usually accepted by the rest of the students because of the different cultural values, and religion. What is appropriate for the Macedonian students may not be appropriate for the Roma students. Sometimes, the language can be a barrier - either the English or the Macedonian language in this case. Unfortunately, it is very common that Roma students go to school and do not know the Macedonian language and cannot communicate with everybody in the classroom. Very often in such cases cultural clashes are common and if the teacher remains calm and is not interested to address the situation, everything will go out of control. It is essential to overcome the cultural and language barriers and to solve the situation in a sensitive and careful manner. It is very important to find a way to communicate with all of the students. The teacher should have open communication with the students, finding a way to help them understand each other remaining calm, cool and honest. In addition, it is important to teach them how to respect themselves finding particular activities to make them speak freely about their culture, compare it to another, discuss the norms and traditions and from all these experiences they will finally learn how to appreciate and respect everybody in the classroom. Because of immigration and globalization the classrooms have become increasingly diverse so the differences between students are of huge importance. “As long as students remain in their own culture, they take their culture for granted. When surrounded by those who are different, they become more consciously aware of their own culture”[10]. Very often the awareness gives feelings of anxiety or even haltered leading to students' comments that may be disturbing or offensive.
Observing delicate situations such as clashing cultural conclusions because of the course material is a decent approach to start. Some course themes will stress contrasts between cultures in ways that will create unsurprising differences in behavior. In any circumstances, when an exasperating comment leaves unpleasant feeling for example furious, or outraged, it can rapidly energize the classroom in profound and alarming ways. At such cases it is evident how individuals’ dissimilarities can make a climate that disrupts the learning process. These situations of profound contradiction will definitely happen in the intercultural classroom, regardless being unequivocally or not. Recognizing contrasts and the clashing perspectives they bring enables teachers to be more successful similarly as the tendency to our students' uneasiness to empower the difficulties and make them end up as more compelling students. When differences in cultural norms and values between home and school automatically have the effect of alienating students there are different possibilities. Some of the students are able to switch cultural identities with ease and achieve better results at school [7].

My personal experience has taught me that it is very important to establish some rules for acceptable behavior in the classroom early in the term. Those rules can be written on a wallpaper and all the students should be able to see them whenever they enter the classroom. Another important thing is to follow the communication and interaction of the students. If the teacher feels some kind of a tension this should be discussed aloud in front of everybody and all the students should express their opinions and reactions. The most important rule is that students should treat each other with respect. They should listen actively and be aware of other students’ perspectives. Very good examples to do this are the following activities:

1. To ask students to talk about their beliefs by taking others’ views into account.

2. To ask each student to reformulate the other student’s point in a manner satisfactory to that person before responding to it. This will help prevent careless arguing.

3. Challenging students’ unwarranted assumptions (such as, “That’s an example of how all Xs act like Y.”)

4. Make argumentative debates with affirmative and negative teams whereas a thesis would be given and the teams should provide either positive or negative arguments, defend and justify them and accept the winner without having the feeling of a loser.

5. Encouraging students to use a perception check if they fear they have inadvertently offended another student (or modeling such behavior yourself). To do so, describe what you think another person is feeling/thinking and request that the person confirm or correct this. “You seem offended. Are you?” or “Did I paraphrase your last comment incorrectly?”

This will help improve intercultural communication by making sure every student feels heard and understood, even when there is a difference of opinion [11].

**Conclusion**

Intercultural communication is becoming essential part of the education system nowadays because of globalization, immigration and the multicultural work environments. The need for
training, knowledge and research in this field is increasing because of the recent trends in education. The prime aim of this paper is to increase teacher’s awareness in terms of intercultural communication in order to achieve better results in teaching English as a foreign language. There are still a lot of components that have to be improved such as teacher training programs, improving the school curricula in every school subject and finally the monoculture school policies which still occur in the Republic of North Macedonia. Finally, the English language teachers who want to raise their intercultural competence should consider the following tips:

6. Follow the recent trends of intercultural communication of teachers all the time
7. They as teachers should make the students become aware that stereotypes should disappear and the system of values will have some potential of making the students understand that this world can be a peaceful place to live in
8. Improvement inter-ethnic relations but firstly with education of the parents, then the students and of course more trainings for the teachers
9. Skillful teachers are crucial for the achievement of this proposed framework of intercultural competence

References

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