Cross-Cultural Education and Intercultural Competences for Professional Mobility

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Abstract: The *new world order*, with its political, economic or social changes exposes us to cultural difference. In this respect we are citizens of the world. Both people and environment are faced with challenges of cultural and linguistic nature which must be met in order for material, physical and emotional needs to be satisfied.
Learning needs are highly personal, and everyone needs different kinds and degrees of support in order to adapt. Our paper will describe the transformation: the individual undergoes when becoming aware of intercultural challenges as a result of his/her mobility or that of others with whom he/she must communicate effectively, and also the impact of that learning on his/her attitudes, behavior and communicative performance. Europe is rich in languages and cultures. People with different ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds depend on communicative and intercultural competences to live together. Good quality of language education helps building healthy societies based on inclusion and participation and supports social, cultural and economic development.

Keywords: Communication, Communicative Performance, Challenge, Foreign Language, Competence, Mobility

1. Introduction

There is a motivation for the issues we focus in our paper given in the preface to the report of the International education committee for the 21st century presented by Jacque Delor to UNESCO while trying to establish the place of education in a globalized world:

"Education…more than ever is the participant of the origin process of new world community as it has appeared in the heart of the problems connected with the development of the person and various communities. The educational task exists in giving the chance to everybody to show the talents and the whole creative potential…" "The mankind even if it does not always express it openly, requires an ideal and values, which …we name moral. There is no more noble problem facing to education, than to wake up at each with allowance for his traditions belief and complete respect of pluralism, the lifting of spirit and thought up to the comprehension of the world universality so that the person has somehow surpassed himself. It is a question […] of mankind survival"[1]

The Romanian higher education has to face many challenges, including the tasks of remaining intellectually and culturally viable in a rapidly changing world. The Romanian higher education needs to prepare students to live competitively in the global market place and to face the global economic crisis and this competitiveness should be based on information and globalized knowledge. A possible response to such a challenge could be "…the internationalization of higher education". Darla Deardorff, when speaking about the U.S. institutions of higher education, states: "the specification of anticipated outcomes of internationalization are often general and vague, with goals stated broadly that the institution will *become internationalized* or that a goal is to graduate *cross-culturally competent students or global citizens* without

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giving further meaning to these phrases." [1]. This statement could be also applied to the European universities.

The intercultural contact and experience offers the individual excellent opportunities to revise their mental constructs, open up and enrich his/her perspective, expanding horizons through intellectual modesty, personal and professional investment and democratic commitment.

2. Cultural learning

Intercultural communication implies cultural learning which was defined by several scientists such as: D. Clackworthy [3], Joseph Luft, Harrigton Ingram and Handy[4]. In their opinion at the lowest level of is the belief that all people are alike, then comes a recognition that there are differences, seeing ways of synthesizing the different ways, selecting and making things run smoothly.

The process of cultural learning can be helped along by experience, reflection and training. Intercultural training not only provides information but also develops skills and encourages attitudes to enable people to progress along the cultural learning curve.[5]

3. Cultural Dimensions of Communication

According to Robert Gibson [6] the studies referring to intercultural communication are relatively new and most of them come from the USA. There are several famous scientists to be mentioned in this domain of research:

Edward Hall (anthropologist) who is particularly famous for his research on low and high context cultures and different concepts of time.

Kluchhohn and Strodbeck (both anthropologists) identified five key orientations of basic importance to human beings: human nature, man-nature relationship, time sense, activity, social relations.

Hofstede (social psychologist) identified five dimensions of cultural communication: individualism/collectivism, uncertainty, avoidance, power distance, masculinity/feminity, long-term orientation.

Trompenaars has tried to make the problems of intercultural communication known to a wider audience. He identified three main cultural dimensions: relationships with people, attitudes to time, attitudes to the environment.

The cultural dimensions of communication can be:

Non-verbal communication which is the process of communicating through sending and receiving wordless messages. Such messages can be communicated through gesture, body language or posture; facial expression and eye contact, object communication such as clothing, hairstyles or even architecture, or symbols and infographics. Non-verbal communication may include body language (kinesics) and includes body movement, body position, facial expressions; eye contact (occulistics); touch (haptics); body distance (proxemics)

The way people dress for different situations (business negotiations diplomatic meeting, etc) differs across cultures. Normally informal dress denotes lack of respect for the partner. Again a too relaxed partner in his chair can suggest the same things. Some cultures impose that particular parts of the body should not be exposed (i.e. Arab cultures – the sole of the foot should not be exposed. Body language can very easily misinterpreted creating unpleasant situations. Paralanguage, and turn talking are also important aspects in different cultures.[7]

Communication style is very important from the point of view of:

Context and we return to what Hall called" low and high context" cultures. A high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalised in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context communication is the opposite, the mass information is „ vested in the explicit code". We should take into account directness and the person and tasks. [8]

Time is another dimension of intercultural communication. Time (chronemics) makes cultures be clasified as polychronic and monochronic. In polychronic cultures it is acceptable to do several things at the same time and the approach to deadlines is flexible while in monochromic cultures one thing is done at a time with great stress being laid on deadlines and schedules. The concept of time was also classified by Lewis, R., in his book *When Cultures Collide* in:

Linear concept of time, cyclical concept of time (yearly routines), event-related concept of time[9]

According to Hofstede (1991)[10] the attitude to past, present and future differs widely between cultures. For some cultures the recording of the past is more important, others stress the present and others think in the long term.

Cultures with short-term orientation tend to have the following features: respect for traditions,people are prepared to overspend to keep up with neighbors , small amount of savings, people expect quick results.

Cultures with long- term orientation tend to have the following features: traditions adapted to modern context, people are thrifty, large amount of savings, people persevere for slow results.[11]

Space .Just as body distance can vary between cultures so can the perception of s pace.

Individualism. Individualist cultures stress self -realization whereas collectivist ones require that the individual fits into the group. The collectivist idea is illustrated by the Japanese saying "the nail that stands out must be hammered down". In individualist cultures people look after themselves and their families whereas in collectivist ones they look after a wider group in exchange for loyalty.

Universalism and particularism. A universalist person may say of a particularist partner "they cannot be trusted because they will always help their friends", whereas the particularist will say of the universalist "you cannot trust them; they would not even help their friends" [13]

Uncertainty. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance have, according to Hofstede, "a lower tolerance for ambiguity, which expresses itself in higher levels of anxiety and energy release, greater need for formal rules and absolute truth, and less tolerance, for people or groups with deviant behaviour"[14] For high uncertainty avoidance cultures” what is different is dangerous ” while in low uncertainty cultures ”what is different is curious”.

Male and female. It is again Hofstede, who explains this dimension, called ”masculinity and femininity”[15] In masculine cultures the roles of men and women are distinct and ”men are supposed to be assertive tough and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life.” In feminine cultures the roles of men and women overlap, men and women ae supposed to be modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life.[16]

Nature. Brake and Walker (1995) identify three attitudes towards nature and environment: control: people can dominate their environment, it can be changed to f it human needs. harmony: people should live in harmony with the world around them; constraint: people are constrained by the world around them. Fate, luck and change play a significant role. [17]

4. Intercultural Competences

Intercultural competence represents one of the most important goals in cross cultural education and also foreign language education. Romanian integration in the European Union means more than just politics and economy, it means culture first of all and intercultural competence represents the path that one should take in order to integrate themselves into a larger community.

Intercultural competences’ major trait is the learners’ possibility of coming into contact at different levels with other cultures and their representatives at the same time developing a sense of awareness about the differences and similarities between his/her culture and the culture he/she comes into contact with.

Claire Kramsch advances the concept of “third place” or “third culture”. She believes that culture should be taught as an interpersonal process and that the teacher’s role is not that of presenting or exhibiting cultural facts but, he/she should assist language learners in understanding the culture they come into contact with. The author also states that in the process of increasing multiculturality of various societies, learners should be made aware of certain factors like age, gender, social class.[18]. When entering a different world people

should realize all the differences involved, starting with patterns of behavior and ending with ways of expressing. These represent steps that everyone must take when interacting with a different culture and to be able to achieve these actions people have to search for common background knowledge. This knowledge allows them to take the first step into comprehending the differences of the new world they are entering in. This is exactly the context that Fowler calls "the communities store of established knowledge" that is "structures of expectation that allow people to make sense of the world around them". [19]

Intercultural competence can be achieved in two different ways. One way for learners to achieve intercultural competence is by having only classroom experience with the language. The other way is by coming into direct contact with the language via direct discussions and interactions with native speakers. The aim for both these ways is the same. While the classroom experience is centered upon interaction in a foreign language between native speakers, the direct experience implies interactions in a foreign language between native and non native speakers. This can be achieved through e-mails, video conferences, live conferences, etc.

In the process of language learning and teaching Internet is the domain of a rapidly increasing interest. The reason is elementary that is net-worked communication technologies provide "unprecedented access to authentic discourse for developing communicative abilities in the language learners are studying, as well as facilitating on-line exchanges and promoting intercultural understanding". Using the Internet language learner can gain access to a lot of interesting information that would be otherwise impossible to reach. We can mention here all kinds of genuine books and texts, magazines, journals, periodicals, discussion forums, blogs, etc.

Among other electronic means for promoting learning a second language are the blogs which have been seen to serve a number of functions in the second language classroom thus recently there have been voices to stress the importance of blog-using for the promoting of "critical interpretive reading skills, developing writing abilities and fostering intercultural understanding among second language learners in formal, structured educational settings" [20].

"In this process learners become *intercultural speakers* who not only *establish a relationship between their own social identities an those of their interlocutor, but [they] also…act as mediators] between people of different origins and identities"* [21]

When preparing the students for intercultural exchange the teacher should help them develop skills that will allow them to recognize and resolve misunderstandings, gain new knowledge and later use it in new circumstances.

Another skill that the teacher must foster and encourage is the ability of the learners to cope with real life events. When taking part in these intercultural exchanges learners should be open-minded, objective, curious and tolerant of other individuals' beliefs and attitudes, at the same time relying on their own system of beliefs and ideas. Even if the learners' systems may differ or contradict themselves, this aspect cannot be allowed to affect the intercultural exchange in a negative manner. Both sides should keep an open mind realizing that the goal is not to influence each other but to make each other aware of their cultures.

5. Mobilities

It is a known fact that mobility is a rather old feature that characterizes the human behavior. We can validate this statement by saying that human mobility has caused radical alterations to civilization throughout the ages. Still even after such a long experience there continues to be a need to equip people with a set of competencies which are both personal and professional, in order to enable them to make the most of the opportunities of the world they live in. Thus being aware of intercultural competencies will help us become inter-culturally mobile.

Nowadays the world mobility has surfaced again and again being the main team of many transnational programs, both on the main land and beyond. The year 2006 becomes the "European Year of Workers Mobility" being designated as such by the European Commission. Beyond our continent the term mobility has also been a main concern and as Peter Sutherland, the United Nations Secretary General's Special Representative on International Migration and Development, stated in his speech at the 7th meeting of the

Commission on Population and Development that "the world was moving from an era of migration to one of mobility" since "countries were no longer divided strictly into sending and receiving countries, but were increasingly sending, receiving or even transit countries" [22]

Looking beyond the arguments about the terms used for people who are part of this cultural mobility, be them migrants or expatriates one can conclude that they all share a common feature: both these categories are the representatives, vehicles and producers of cultures. "They carry they cultural baggage(s) and they adapt, accommodate, resist and create culture[…]" [23]

People who move to one space to another will eventually settle down and be part of communities which can be either homogeneous or heterogeneous. People integrate more easily in homogeneous communities due to the common background in culture language, traditions, beliefs, etc. With the heterogeneous community the integration is more difficult since there is no common background and intercultural exchanges have to take place. People will have to develop commonality by communicating into a generally accepted language, achieving thus inter-culturality and inter-language. The road to realizing this can only be achieved by learning.

The intercultural learner is placed between the languages and cultures and has a very dynamic inter-language and inter-culture. Regarding this problem, Selinker [24] defines the inter-language as "the existence of a separate linguistic system based on the observable output which results from a learner's attempted production of a target language norm", while Kordes [25] developed the term inter-culture as: "the individuals' degree of cultural competence and this fluctuates between the native and the target culture and departs from the first culture as their familiarity with the target culture increases".

We can also develop these competences by keeping in mind certain "meaning-making" mechanisms available when engaging in cross-cultural action and communication. Intercultural communication and interaction competence, essential in newly forming community, can be achieved only when mastering these mechanisms. Intercultural mobility comes thus as the outcome of intercultural communication and interaction. "Effectiveness in intercultural communication and interaction refers to the extent to which *mutually shared meaning and integrative goal-related outcomes* are achieved". [26]

6. Conclusion

There are many opinions referring to intercultural mobility but I found as being the most interesting the one which describes intercultural mobility in reference to the God of the past and future, Janus, meaning that one must permanently look to the future trying to better oneself, in the same time keeping a constant watch to his/her starting point. Today's global events have determined people to excel in their field of activity, since economically developed nations look only for specialists. Thus, young people, professionals, especially in poorly developed countries, such as Romania, strive to find a better working and living conditions. They display their professionalism for others to see and appreciate in order to be eligible. In other words, intercultural mobility is a never ending process.

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