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The ‘intercultural’ teacher - a new response to the teaching career

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Abstract

Starting from the salient needs, pressures and trends underpinning ‘the global village’ world around us, the paper revisits the concept of the foreign language teacher’s profile from a renewed perspective – the ‘intercultural’ practitioner. Are today’s teachers – in terms of professional competence and personality - expected to be different from what they used to be a few years ago? If they are, why and how is this remodelling of profile taking place?

Seeking answers to these questions, the discussion in this paper will focus on the main requirements imposed on the teaching profession by the culturally-diverse and globalized world around us. All of us, as active members of the local teaching community, need to be aware of what professional challenges lie ahead of us. To this effect, the author is trying to pinpoint the components of the ‘intercultural’ teacher’s profile not only intuitively but also based on the research coming from the field of foreign language education. According to the view expressed in the article, the formation of the modern ‘intercultural’ foreign language practitioner requires a ‘culture’ change in the profession which invites teachers to step outside the traditional frameworks of thought, behaviour and practice towards further professional and personal growth in keeping with the times.

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1. The need to ‘interculturalise’

In order to understand why today’s teaching professionals may be the subject of a demand to changing their profiles, we will first consider the changing setting of the 21st century world.

Nowadays, the growing human mobility across national borders, the proliferation and use of information and communication technologies, professional and personal intercultural contacts among people have become essential characteristics of our current way of living. Cultural diversity, pluralism and globalization have grown to be the

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inherent hallmarks of today’s society and they already constitute permanent dimensions to every domain of human activity, from business to leisure. Society and education cannot be kept apart – they are tightly bound entities that deeply affect and influence each other. The institution of the ‘school’ cannot ignore the pervading social, economic, political or cultural influences around it, particularly when it performs its function of education towards individuals and society. The school must be a consistent reflection of society in the mission and values it assumes.

At present, education at all levels, from primary schools to universities, is undergoing a worldwide transformation of its objectives, values, and practices. As a consequence, it is essential for national educational systems everywhere to reassess their traditional standing and comply with the requirements of a globalized world in which cultural diversity has become the unwritten rule.

The imminent reform of the ‘school’, as an educational-service delivery organization, is called upon for the intake and accommodation of the intercultural values which are continuously pervading curricula and methodologies. However, we need to be aware that the renovation of the educational system cannot be implemented without the complete and unconditioned involvement and support of its teaching practitioners as the main agents of social change. There is a broad consensus regarding the fact that, no matter what reform strategy is being pursued, the quality of an education system will rest on the quality of its performers, i.e. teachers. This proposition is endorsed by the specific nature of the profession; teachers are expected to accomplish a complex dual task: convey information and model individuals at the same time. Functioning in a knowledge-based society with culturally flexible boundaries and becoming competitive in the changing economic, political and cultural dynamics of the modern world should be reflected in the way learners are educated for life. To be able to respond to this demand in their everyday practice, teachers need to develop and re-align their own way of thinking and acting in education to the changing context.

2. The reformation of the FL teaching practitioner

Having roughly outlined the background of contemporary education and its implications for teaching, we can now consider the way in which foreign language educators can comply with the requirements of functioning professionally in an intercultural context. First, we are going to analyze whether there is anything in their previous experience that can help teachers become ‘intercultural’. Then, we will investigate what ‘being intercultural’ entails for teachers.

2.1. Looking back

Learning to live together involves the ability to communicate with others and language plays a significant role in this respect. Today, the mastery of a foreign language has become the first ‘passport’ for the intercultural integration of individuals. Maybe more than any other professionals in the field of education, teachers of foreign languages need to keep abreast of the recently emerging requirements regarding the training of their learners: successfully coping with a multicultural reality outside the classroom. Linguistic or communicative competences alone are no longer enough for the empowerment of the students who are likely to operate in increasingly international, culturally diverse academic and professional environments. Thus, teachers of foreign languages are called upon not only to transmit the information but also to create and develop those competencies, attitudes and values that will enable their learners to adjust to living in a changed and changing society. More than that, they are also the ones who will provide their students with a first-hand social and moral model of what it means to be ‘intercultural’. To be able to achieve these tasks successfully, teachers themselves need to learn and acquire an awareness of how to become ‘intercultural’.

But what does ‘being intercultural’ mean? According to most definitions and in very broad terms, it means that someone is open to other cultures, accepts cultural differences, is able to communicate and interact with people who belong to different cultures and develops tolerance to cultural ambiguity. It is obvious that such a definition cannot work with teaching, particularly in linguistically and culturally homogenous contexts. Given this fact, ‘being intercultural’ becomes more than a statement or static description of teachers’ being interested in, curious about or
empathetic towards cultural diversity. We believe that, for educators, being ‘intercultural’ should mean developing a deeper understanding of what they do in the light of an effective intercultural experience.

Although such a proposition may sound intriguing, our vision is that experience with any kind of ‘otherness’ can constitute a valuable ‘intercultural’ experience that may open the door to becoming ‘intercultural’ in the modern sense. How does this apply to the teaching profession? From such a perspective and to a certain extent, the teacher has always been involved in a kind of ‘intercultural’ practice. There is research which endorses the view that intercultural communication does not differ dramatically from intracultural communication:

“But no matter how the complications of speaking very different languages or having grown up in very different environments may cause particular hurdles to intercultural communication, a basic example such as the intercultural builders' language-game proves that there is no principled difference between intracultural and intercultural communication. On the other hand, speaking the same language is undeniably no guarantee for getting oneself freed from coming across particular hurdles of “intracultural communication”, which can be equally fraught with misunderstanding or conflict.” (Ma, 2004, p.107)

Teachers guide the psychosocial development of the individuals they educate, and beyond any scientific and pedagogic competencies, they model interhuman and cultural (i.e. intracultural) relationships. Each individual in the class is the bearer and messenger of a different individual 'culture' in terms of different family and social backgrounds, different learning experiences, etc., even though he/she speaks the same language and shares the same national culture. There are about 25 learners in each class and teachers deal with about four or five groups of learners on one single day. So, every time a teacher enters the classroom, there are 25 different ‘cultures’ with which the practitioner negotiates perspectives and relationships in order to communicate and maintain social harmony. To be able to do that requires a flexibility of mind which allows teachers to cross borders and accept differences. This is a valuable insight on the basis of which we can make the assumption that teachers have always been ‘intercultural’ by the specific nature of their profession. We believe that, no matter how frightening or difficult a change of profile may look, teachers are able to respond to the challenge of interculturality – they have always been, in an unconscious way. The only difference would be that now they are urged into developing an informed awareness of their teaching practices, aims and identities.

2.2. Looking ahead

One imperative for a change in today’s teaching practice comes from the shift of the educational focus from a national perspective to a globalized one. The global education trend places higher education in the middle of global changes. A turning point in the reformation of higher education is given by the 1999 Bologna Declaration, agreed upon and signed by Ministers of Education from 29 countries. The document is based on clearly defined goals, i.e. the creation of a European space for higher education in order to enhance the employability and mobility of citizens and the increased international competitiveness of European higher education. One of the major elements of the reform is the internationalization of the curriculum which will be open to European values. Thus, the Bologna Statement stresses the need to achieve a common space for higher education within the framework of the diversity of cultures, languages and educational systems. This provision basically calls for the integration of a deliberate intercultural dimension into the process of teaching and, respectively, learning. Teachers have a key-role in implementing the required change: if the information conveyed and the psychopedagogic model are below the quality standards aimed at by the reform of higher education, then the learners will not receive the appropriate training in accordance with the assumed objectives.

The second imperative for a change derives from the intrinsic nature of the teaching profession. A career in teaching involves continuous and ongoing professional development: practitioners need to keep up with the latest developments and trends in the field. Such a process is not meant to be a remedy to the possible ‘gaps’ in the initial, strictly philological training for teaching but, in its post-modern acceptance, it is conceived as a lengthy process of continuous learning aimed at accomplishing and renewing professional practices by updating the knowledge acquired during the initial training stage. Thus, life-long training for the teaching profession means the practitioners’ commitment to engage themselves in expanding their knowledge, perfecting their skills, analyzing and developing their own professional attitudes. From a broad perspective, the objectives of life-long, in-service training reside in the teacher’s own personal and socio-professional development and growth, i.e. modernizing basic competencies but
also acquiring new ones, employment of new strategies, methods and means of teaching, learning and assessment, the promotion of an interdisciplinary approach, the application of educational paradigms at school and class level, the development of the psychosocial behaviours necessary for the management of human resources, as well as the stimulation of individual and teamwork pedagogic research for innovation.

Relating these considerations to the major problem discussed in the paper, we would like to make a personal observation: so far there seems to be nothing new in the requirements for an ‘intercultural’ teacher because the continuous development of communication competences constitutes an essential part of the process of any practitioner’s professional growth. These competencies are part of both the European profile for language teachers and the national Professional Standard for all groups of teaching personnel. The European Profile of the Efficient Teacher describes ‘communication competence’ as the ability to have free discussions with the learners, to make oneself understood, to select appropriate information and behaviour sequences, to reconcile apparently opposing views, to create feedback opportunities for learners, to operate with the non-verbal language and to initiate responses to clear communicative purposes. In a word, this is almost everything an ‘intercultural’ teacher is expected to do.

The teaching/learning process is no doubt a process of specific communication. According to Asante (1992), teaching is, to a wide extent, the profession of communication. As stated before, didactic communication involves the transmittal of both information and ‘influences’. The messages sent or received within this specific type of communication are semantic (e.g. data, information) and ectosemantic (e.g. attitudes, beliefs). They provide the communication flow between the teacher and the learners, between the educator’s fully developed personality and the learner’s developing personality.

Given the fact that the educational process is a complex structure, the act of teaching involves granting an increased consideration to the way in which the information is conveyed and managed by the teacher. Didactic communication is intended to attain specific goals and produce effects on the learners; it is expected to generate changes in their personality in terms of their state of knowledge, emotion, attitude and capacity for action. The teacher and the student are both locutors and interlocutors: they will operate reciprocal changes in their initial ‘state’ due to the amount and nature of the information contained by the messages they receive. Both parties contribute to the communicative interaction and develop what Soitu (1997) coined as the knowledge of how to reach each other - direct the message toward the other, understand each other’s communication needs and eventually reach mutual understanding. The ’knowledge’ of getting through to the other involves the synchronization of non-verbal elements (e.g. face expression, gestures), language (using the same meanings for words and images) and values (accepting the other’s values). Aren’t all these the very prerequisites of intercultural communication?

Roughly speaking, the principles of an open communication, which every modern teacher should adopt, are:  
- to foster interaction in the classroom;
- to provide opportunities for the learners to express their own views;
- to stimulate active interaction among learners;
- to use convincing arguments in the explanations they give;
- to listen attentively without interrupting;
- not to correct immediately so as not to inhibit the learners. Error correction should be made by feedback;
- to organize the class into working formats that are appropriate for the learning tasks;
- to motivate the learners by making the input attractive and interesting;
- to use the voice qualities (pitch, loudness, tone) to draw attention to the most significant parts of the message content;
- to keep eye contact with the interlocutor(s), in this particular case, the learners.

Another important point is that, as far as foreign language teaching is concerned, the field literature pays an increased interest not only to the act of teaching as such but also to the model of behaviour provided by the teacher. As early as 1978, Gertrude Moskowitz had outlined a portrait for the ideal foreign language practitioner based on several characteristics. First, the FL practitioners must be thoroughly knowledgeable in the foreign language they teach. Obviously, teachers must know a lot, if not everything, about the subject they are teaching, in this case, the target language. Thus, they will be able to help students understand and learn, by fully explaining concepts and providing answers to all questions. Secondly, teachers should use the target language for teaching and focus teaching on developing the four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking, in order to build the learners’
communicative competence in the foreign language. Then, they must use varied methods for teaching and build their learners’ motivation for learning. Good teachers always succeed in inspiring their students both in class and out of class. Teachers have the power to motivate, through their attitudes, actions, and even through the lessons or activities they engage their students in. Last but not least, teachers should react promptly but tactfully to the learners’ mistakes, speak less than the learners in order to stimulate the latter’s free expression and create a relaxed learning environment that makes learners easily adjust to classroom life.

All the characteristics that made up the profile of a good foreign language teacher in the early 80’s are still valid and relevant today, although the teaching objectives have been changing to accommodate the needs of a globalized world and the intercultural communicative competence has ruled out the mere communicative competence. If we were to group and interpret these characteristics from a current perspective, we would obtain three clearly defined categories pertaining to the teaching of foreign languages: mastery of the foreign language, methodology/didactics and attitude/social conduct. Furthermore, if we correlate these categories with the intercultural approach in teaching foreign languages, we could say that, in order to become ‘intercultural’, FL practitioners must develop

- their own intercultural communicative competence built on theoretical knowledge from the field of intercultural education/communication and implementation of theory into didactic practice. How can teachers teach ‘something’ if they themselves are not familiar with it?;
- their knowledge of foreign language teaching methodology based on the latest theories regarding learner-centredness, teacher’s roles, teaching and assessment techniques, strategies and methods, selection and design of teaching materials, etc.;
- an optimal level of motivation. How can you positively motivate others for learning unless you are motivated for learning yourself?

In a very interesting book on teachers’ motivation, Pânişoară & Pânişoară (2010, pp. 16-17) talk about types of motivations essentially relevant to teaching, of which ‘the curiosity or the need to know’ and ‘the emotional and behavioural availability’ have a clear relevance to the ‘intercultural’ practitioner. It is obvious that an intercultural approach in education requires the teaching professionals to develop a certain attitude toward the information they transmit, a specific behaviour within their classes and an affective dimension (in terms of empathy, tolerance, cooperation, openness to dialogue) of their practices.

A major goal of the ‘intercultural’ teacher is to form learners who will be able to live, study or work in a multi/pluri-cultural world, in which the target culture is just one of the many other cultures. Therefore, the teacher must influence and foster the learners’ sensitivity to ‘otherness’, and not to a particular unique culture. On the other hand, in order to withstand the pressure of today’s world, learners should be also reminded of who they actually are: they need to develop an awareness of their own cultural identity. Hence, the ‘intercultural’ teacher must be the one who will guide the learners on the way to

- discovering connections between culturally-diverse entities,
- developing the need to know and find out more about other people,
- realizing their own cultural identity and accepting who they are.

The same ideas are expressed by Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey (2002, p.10) who make the point that “the ‘best’ teacher is neither the native nor the non-native speaker, but the person who can help learners see relationships between their own and other cultures, can help them acquire interest in and curiosity about ‘otherness’, and an awareness of themselves and their own cultures seen from other people's perspectives.”

3. Food for further thought

In this paper we have discussed the new demand that the contemporary culturally-diverse society places on education in general and on foreign language education in particular, i.e. providing individuals with competencies that will enable them to establish relationships and communicate across cultures. But the aim of developing the learners’ intercultural competence presupposes the existence of a similar, even greater competence with their educators. The ‘intercultural’ becoming of learners depends on teachers ‘being intercultural’ already. This means that teachers must operate a change of their traditional profile in terms of attitude to teaching/learning, classroom practice, beliefs and behaviour. Roughly speaking, we have shown that the new profile of the FL teacher to an intercultural configuration does not greatly differ from that of any professional practitioner’s in the field of
education: a mind open to the new, ready to experiment with alternative didactic methods that are likely to encourage and motivate the learners and trained to ensure the achievement of proposed learning objectives. However, the new profile calls for an increased awareness of teaching aims, reflection on current practice and preparation for action in keeping with a constant openness and flexibility. If we were to suggest guidelines for implementing the change of profile, we would say that teachers should
- re-examine their beliefs, attitudes and practices from an intercultural perspective;
- engage in challenging learning about the area of intercultural communication;
- focus on themselves as learners and reflect on their learning:
- share ideas and practices with colleagues;
- connect and experiment what they learn with and in their classrooms.

The introduction of an intercultural dimension into the educational system via its practitioners’ competences, attitudes and practices is a prerequisite for national cultural success, as much as it is a prerequisite for the adjustment of the whole educational system to the global knowledge based society. Such a venture involves teachers’ willingness to accommodate change and manage it with sensibility and responsibility. Teachers should never forget that their mission, both as professionals and individuals, is to model their learners’ values, course of action and perceptions of reality. By adopting a new stance toward continuous professional development, teachers will contribute not only to the social integration of their learners but also to strengthening their own identities and ‘active citizenship’ competences, but more importantly than all, to their ability to operate comfortably between cultures: the learners’, the school’s or their own.

We believe that even the slightest change in a person’s way of thinking or doing things represents a step outside a familiar ‘culture’ and an entrance to another cultural dimension; the openness to new experiences is an essential ingredient of anyone’s ‘intercultural becoming’.

References