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Raising Students' Intercultural Competence through the Process of Language Learning

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to identify the concrete means through which intercultural education elements may be included in the academic curriculum, across all subjects. The area in which I chose to apply an experiment was English Teacher Education, for pre-service (BA) and in-service students (MA), as well as for postgraduate students of Economics. The sample of students consisted of BA students of English Philology, MA students of English, French and Romanian Philology and MA students in Business Administration in Tourism and Services. By the end of the semester, students and teacher trainees managed to understand several intercultural aspects.

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1. Introduction

Undergraduate students, and teacher trainees in particular, receive during their university studies, little, if any, training in intercultural education, apart from the exchange programmes that they may take part in, especially Erasmus+ study or placement programmes, which offer them hands-on experience and training in coping with different cultures. Considering the globalisation process and the mobility and volatility of the labour market on the one hand, and the need of future teachers to adapt to the new generations' demands and expectations, students need to get at least the basics of intercultural education, alongside their linguistic education. Their future insertion in the working life will definitely call for a thorough understanding of different cultures which they might get in contact

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with. Moreover, awareness of diversity, and openness towards ethnic tolerance, antiracism, social and professional inclusiveness are all prerequisites for a successful international career. The university education should therefore include all these elements across the curriculum, so that universities can achieve through all possible pedagogical instruments an education “for all”. Given all curricular constraints revolving around university policy makers at institutional level (e.g. time and space mainly), teachers need to find the best methods to intersperse their courses with specific knowledge and skills that will increase their intercultural competence. It goes without saying that it is language teachers who are in the best position to adopt a culture-bound philosophy of education.

2. Literature Review

Over the last three decades, we have been witnessing some debate among practitioners and researchers in the field of linguistic and intercultural education, advocating an ‘intercultural approach’ to second language teaching, which entails a re-examination of the underlying assumptions about what language does, and what language education in general should attempt to achieve. Contemporary *communicative* methods used in second language teaching largely regard language as a means of bridging an *information gap*. Communicative language learning also puts forward the hypothesis that by bridging a series of information gaps, learners will *naturally* develop their linguistic competence and skills, eventually to the point where they will attain native-speaker competence.

It has to be said, nevertheless, that this approach to language and linguistic development has tended to underestimate culture. Stern (1992: 206) remarked that, despite sustained and consistent work, particularly in America, focusing attention on the importance of culture in language teaching, *the cultural component has remained difficult to accommodate in practice*. Cultural content, was often noticed to have been removed from teaching and learning materials. Pulverness (1996: 7), in an analysis of the situation stated the following about English language teaching:

English was seen as a means of communication which should not be bound to culturally-specific conditions of use, but should be easily transferable to any cultural setting. Authenticity was a key quality, but only insofar as it provided reliable models of language in use. Content was important as a source of motivation, but it was seen as equally important to avoid material which might be regarded as ‘culture bound’. Throughout the 1970s and much of the 1980s, syllabus design and materials writing were driven by needs analysis, and culture was subordinated to performance objectives.

Luckily, however, there have been more recently some attempts to integrate *culture* into the communicative language curriculum. While adhering to the obvious importance of language seen as a means of communicating information, proponents of an intercultural approach also underline its social functions; for example, the ways in which language is used by speakers and writers in order to negotiate their place in social groups and hierarchies. It has long been clear that the ways in which these negotiations take place differ from community to community. Therefore, a language course concerned with *culture*, broadens its scope, shifting from a focus on improving the *four skills* of reading, writing, listening and speaking to wider issues, in order to help learners acquire cultural skills, such as strategies for the systematic observation and understanding of behavioural patterns. Moreover, as learners acquire a deeper understanding of how the target language is used with a view to achieving the explicit and implicit cultural aims of the foreign language community, they need be stimulated and encouraged to reflect on the ways in which their own language and community functions. The intercultural learner will ultimately function as a mediator between different social groups that use different languages and language varieties.

The most important goal of an intercultural approach to language education shouldn’t be so much *native speaker competence*, but rather an *intercultural communicative competence*’ (c.f. Byram, 1997). Intercultural communicative competence encompasses the ability to understand the language and behaviour of the target community, and explain it to members of the home community – and vice versa. To put it differently, an intercultural approach trains learners how to be ‘diplomats’, capable of viewing different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding. This aim effectively comes to supersede the long-standing, if ever achieved, objective of teaching learners to attain ‘native speaker proficiency’. Nevertheless, it is but natural that an essential aim of an intercultural approach still remains language development and improvement, though this goal is closely complemented by the equally important aim of intercultural understanding and mediation.

The intercultural approach to English language teaching and learning continues to draw upon linguistics and psychology, although it gives equal weight to other areas of research and practice in the humanities and social sciences. Among these disciplines, such as anthropology and literary studies, some are well established; others, such as media and cultural studies, are relatively young and still in evolution.

For the first time, it was Byram (1997) who provided a detailed critique of cultural studies and its relationship to foreign language teaching, and ELT in particular. Considered from the perspective of a language education pedagogy that has been concerned with learning processes and methodological effectiveness, cultural studies still have to be developed:

It does not work with explicit learning theories, or with issues of adapting methods to particular age groups. It does not address issues of affective and moral development in the face of challenges to learners' social identity when they are confronted with otherness in the classroom or, just as significantly, in the hidden approach of the informal learning experiences of residence in the country. CS discourse does not, furthermore, include discussion of teaching methods and learning styles appropriate to different kinds of classroom interaction, in different environments inside or outside the country in question. (Byram, 1997: 59)

The research carried out by Byram's focused on teenagers learning European languages in state schools, and particularly on the exploitation of school trips to the target country for raising intercultural awareness. No wonder then that his priorities lie in developing frames of reference and decentering skills that will foster intercultural communication, rather than in the intellectual abstractions and aridity of cultural studies and its focus on ideological critique and interpretative disciplines. Byram posits that cultural studies and foreign language teaching could easily exist one without the other, but also recognises the potential value to foreign language teaching of a critical cultural analysis, albeit one with stronger emphasis on the processes of learning, and increased sensitivity to the demands of non-native speakers in a wide array of learning situations.

3. Research Methodology

The area in which we chose to apply an experiment was English Teacher Education, for pre-service (BA) and in-service students (MA), as well as for postgraduate students of Economics. The sample of students consisted of 28 BA students of English Philology, 21 MA students of English, French and Romanian Philology and 17 MA students in Business Administration in Tourism and Services. We introduced elements of contrastive lexical analysis, with special emphasis on stylistic devices, from which we derived cultural and social similarities and differences between the two languages and cultures (Romanian and British English). The most important research method employed was the pedagogical experiment that we implemented throughout a semester. We then compared the results between the three groups of undergraduate and postgraduate students. The students were given, at the beginning of the semester, a test focusing on metaphorical language, as well as a questionnaire that was designed to check intercultural knowledge and attitudes. The teacher trainees were assigned an extra questionnaire aimed at identifying pedagogical knowledge. After the intervention, which consisted of explicit training (both linguistic and intercultural), the students were assigned a new test and questionnaire, following the same structure and testing the same knowledge and skills.

The questionnaire meant to test the intercultural knowledge and attitudes included 10 multiple choice questions on well-known stereotypes of different nationalities: concerning issues such as gift giving, greetings, body language, weddings and funerals, etc., and seven questions referring to students' attitudes clustered around 7 topics: Facing challenges – the ability to cope with stressful situations; Inquisitiveness – interest in other people and cultures; Risk taking – propensity to experience new situations; Self-confidence – belief in one's own ability to handle new experiences; Self-awareness – knowledge of one's own personality and behaviour; Foreign Languages – interest in learning a foreign language; International Career – interest in traveling internationally for your career (the answers were arranged according to a 5-item Likert scale).

The metaphorical vocabulary test was aimed at identifying students' knowledge of business metaphors that are either culture-bound (golden parachutes – En., salarii nesimtite – Ro; paying the piper – En., dupa fapta si rasplata - Ro) or universals (time is money – En., timpul costa bani – Ro) and consisted of 10 multiple choice items and 10

open-ended questions – five expressions (metaphors / idioms / similes) to be translated from English into Romanian and five from Romanian into English.

After the initial test, during the English classes, which followed the normal educational path, according to the given syllabus – the topics and the language focus were all preserved – we inserted explicit training in intercultural education – during each class we analysed different metaphors / idioms/similes, etc. pertaining to different countries. The methods used mainly were debates, case-studies, role-plays, poster / advertisement design, story/script writing, etc. Group-work was greatly used and students also did a lot of home/field work.

4. Findings and Interpretation

The final data revealed that students from all three groups had limited knowledge of cultural differences or ways of teaching culture at the beginning of the experiment. However, we identified students’ willingness to learn more facts about different cultures, although there might exist some inter-ethnic resistance. By the end of the semester, students and teacher trainees managed to understand several intercultural aspects pertaining to both cultures. Another positive aspect was the fact that their linguistic knowledge also improved significantly. Teacher trainees expressed their eagerness to start teaching English from an intercultural stand.

Table 1. Results to the intercultural knowledge pre-test and post-test

No of correct answers	10		9		8		7		6		5		4	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
BA Philology students	1	6	4	5	7	4	5	3	2	3	1	-	1	-
MA philology students	2	7	5	6	8	5	7	6	3	4	2	-	1	-
MA Business students	1	3	2	4	6	4	4	3	2	3	1	-	1	-

The correct answers that students gave initially were mostly related to the significance of time for German people or space for Latin origin people. More specific questions, such as dress or colour codes remained unanswered. A significant improvement was registered after the experiment, which proved that students acquired more knowledge about different cultures’ peculiarities.

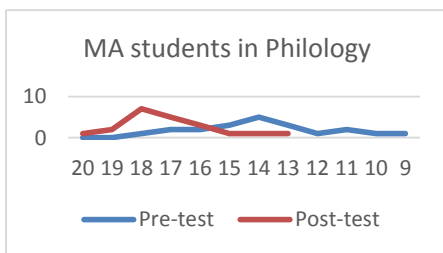


Fig. 1 Results to English vocab pre- and post-tests

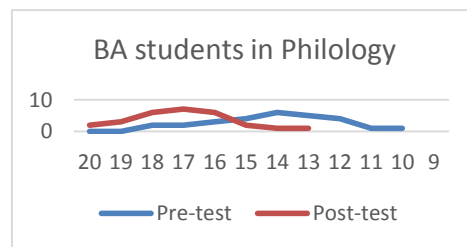


Fig. 2 Results to English vocab pre- and post-tests

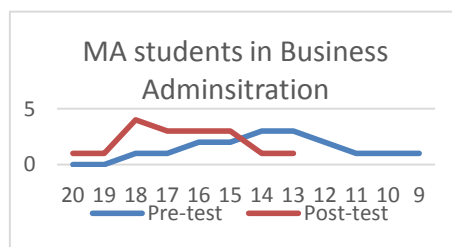


Fig. 3 Results to English vocabulary pre- and post-tests

The results to the English vocabulary pre-test and post-test show clear increase in the knowledge that students acquired during the semester.

As far as the results to the attitudes questionnaire applied to the students at the beginning of and after the experiment, it can be inferred that explicit training of language and culture can result in a significant increase in students' attitudes toward interculturality. The most significant improvement was the in the case of the MA students in Business Administration in Tourism and Services, who recorded the greatest increase in the interest and openness towards foreign languages, in our case with a clear preference for English. Given the students' age (they ranged between 21-25 years old), it came as no surprise that students from all programmes found facing challenges as an aspect that characterise their personality. However, not very many displayed initially an interest in other people's cultures, habits, traditions. Students also displayed a rather high level of lack of self-awareness, as they seem rather unconcerned with their own identity and with the understanding, and most importantly, non-judgmental acceptance of otherness. Another aspect which I found unexpected was students' disregard for the possibility of pursuing an international career, working for a multinational company abroad, especially considering the area of academic programme of Business Administration in Tourism and Services. Philology students, however, represent a peculiar group, in the sense that given the double concentration of the academic programmes in Romania (it is not possible to study only one foreign/native language, the philology programme, although not considered double, it always comes in the combination: Romanian/Foreign Language (major) + Foreign language/Romanian (minor). Therefore, there exist students who although they have as their minor English or French, they are still primarily focused on Romanian language and literature, and display less interest in foreign languages.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the experiment revealed that students would be willing to have intercultural education elements, in their academic courses, across the curriculum, especially in the case of the English language courses. English teacher trainees in particular proved openness towards teaching cultural aspects to learners. Our recommendation would be that all teachers, of different subjects need to find appropriate pedagogic means of introducing intercultural education aspects in their classes, so as to equip students with the right instruments needed to perform successfully in the current globalising world and to meet the challenges of the new professional landscape. This should be done starting from an early age, and that is why teachers of English in primary and secondary schools should educate their learners towards an intercultural, global citizenship.

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