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Topical Issues of Linguistics and Teaching Methods in Business and Professional Communication

**DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS IN TEACHING
ITALIAN FOR BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: TEXTBOOK
SELECTION CRITERIA**

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Abstract

The wide variety of course books for teaching the Italian language for professional purposes and business communication, currently available on the publishing market, gives the teacher a free choice to solve a specific educational problem. However, it is necessary to have special tools for searching, selecting and using the textbooks both in higher education and in corporate training context in order to prepare students for working in a global labour market and to effectively enhance the attitudes, skills and intercultural awareness they need to interact successfully in a business and professional environment. This article attempts to theoretically justify and define the main criteria for analysing the intercultural dimension of Italian language textbooks which is essential for professional language learning and teaching since culture is a crucial facet in foreign language education. The original aspect of the enucleated analysis criteria is constituted at the non-essentialist view of culture to which they refer.

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1. Introduction

Despite the constant appearance and improvement of new high-tech and interactive means of teaching foreign languages, the “textbook still remains the main tool in the foreign language education”, as noted by Dmitrenko (2017, p. 32), which should contain the information about the country’s and the notions about its culture.

Much has been written about the pros and cons of using the textbook: on the one hand, the textbook helps to bring order to the complexity of educational processes and represents one of the various resources that teachers can use (Richards, 2001). The central role of the textbook has also been repeatedly demonstrated in intercultural learning (among others, Byram, 1990; Méndez Garcia, 2005; Risager, 2018). The textbook is also one of the main tools which help students to understand the country whose language they learn. It has often been the subject of scientific research in intercultural language education.

2. Problem Statement

This research focuses on the role that the textbook plays in promoting intercultural language learning. Based on a non-essentialist approach to culture (Holliday, 2011) and the theoretical studies of Russian and foreign scientists dedicated to the intercultural approach to foreign language education (Berdichevskiy, 2016; Byram, 2020; Hannerz, 1998; Kramsch, 2014; Tareva, 2011 and others), it enucleates some basic principles for the analysis of textbook, with particular reference to the contexts of teaching Italian as a foreign language for professional and business communications and tries to formulate some basic criteria of selection and analysis of textbooks .

3. Research Questions

This study focuses on the main aspects of the intercultural approach in foreign language teaching for professional and business purposes, enucleates some basic principles for the analysis of the Italian language textbooks and formulates its selection criteria.

4. Purpose of the Study

The study aims to formulate the main criteria for analysis and selection of textbook on base of intercultural approach to foreign language education. “It is the methodology of the intercultural approach that should be the basis to analyse the foreign language textbooks: its content, teaching purposes, structure, etc., which is significant for the procedure of selecting a particular textbook” (Tareva & Pavlova, 2020, p. 124).

5. Research Methods

We applied the following approaches used in pedagogic research to find the solution:

- study and analysis of scientific literature published in Russia and Europe;

- generalization of experience in teaching the Italian language for professional and business purposes with the intercultural approach.

It is a well-known and indisputable that the main advantage of using foreign language textbooks published in the country of the origin is the availability of authentic information. Such information allows students to get the most accurate idea of the national and cultural features and compare them with the realities of their own culture. Thus, the use of such textbooks in the educational process can attract the students' attention to the problems and various aspects of the cultural interaction. The importance of the cultural component of foreign language textbooks is supported by most Russian and foreign researchers (Berdichevskiy, 2016; Dmitrenko, 2017; Holliday, 2011; Kramsch, 2014; Risager, 2018; Tareva 2011).

Language textbooks can be analysed from various perspectives and on the basis of different approaches.

The evolution of intercultural language education, makes grows the attention to intercultural reflection, however without abandoning the traditional information of the target culture at the same time. Intercultural reflection distinguishes from cultural notions by the different theoretical approach. In fact, in the specialized scientific literature dedicated to intercultural language education (Byram, 2020; Sercu, 2006; Zarate, 1993 and others), culture is defined as the set of material and social characteristics shared by the members of a national or ethnic community (the history and traditions, the social practices, the language, the religion, the value system, etc.). In language textbooks it is manifested through the selection of topics, communicative situations and linguistic uses, especially at the pragmatic and lexical levels. This approach is defined as "essentialist" or "culturalist" (Holliday, 2011).

Recently, the previous definition of culture has lost its descriptive characteristics of contemporary reality because globalization has made societies diverse and heterogeneous (Kramsch, 2014). In contrast to the culturalist approach, the "non-essentialist" approach to culture is gaining popularity (Holliday, 2011). While the culturalism makes use of simple, stereotypical descriptions such as, for example, "Italians love family, they are hospitable but chaotic", etc., the non-essentialism avoids using defining labels: "Italians are...", attributing specific characteristics: "it is a typically Italian attitude", or talking about them in terms of similarities and differences: "Italians are more/less... than the French". In fact, from a non-essentialist point of view, culture consists of "small cultures" as A. Holliday says (2011) which are more informal and unstable by their nature as social groups, and of "large cultures" which are nations and ethnic groups (Holliday, 2011). Furthermore, culture is an ever-changing social force. No one belongs to only one culture; on the contrary, individuals participate in different cultural groups at the same time and bring their own diversity to each one of them, contributing to its continuous changing. Moreover, culture is the product of ideological construction. Groups increase their internal cohesion to achieve various goals, legitimize certain political choices, or obtain economic advantages.

Evidently the non-essentialist approach gives a far more articulate, complex and complete picture than the stereotypical culturalist one. On the base of the characteristics of culture above described, it is possible to define the criteria for analysing the intercultural dimension of language textbooks.

The purpose of intercultural teaching in the language classroom is to give the students a comparative method to relate the target culture to their own one (Byram, 2020). Rather than learning specific notions of the target culture (social practices, beliefs, values, etc.), the students should acquire

attitudes, skills, and awareness that are transferable to other cultures (curiosity about novelty, ability to analyse cultural facts, and so on).

One of the educational purposes of foreign language teaching is to make students reflect on themselves and on their community in light of the approach to another cultural system. The effect of this reflection is the decentering from one's reference systems, which means that those were familiar about one's own culture becomes alienated (Byram, 2020). Classroom interaction represents one of the main educational resources in intercultural language education (Kearney, 2016; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). In the non-essentialist perspective, the classroom context is the place of encountering the other. Indeed, taking into account that the diversity is measured by a plurality of characteristics (including linguistic, social, and gender), the most homogeneous group of students offers a variety of identity perspectives from which it is possible to create different didactic activities (Borghetti, 2016; Byram, 2020).

Tareva and Pavlova (2020) believe that it is necessary to use the methodology of the intercultural approach, because it proclaims the equality of cultures, their full-fledged interaction in the students' consciousness, in their speech acts in foreign language as a tool of dialogue. This methodology should be the basis for the analysis of foreign language textbooks, their content, learning purposes, structure, etc.

This methodology implies the research methods aimed to choose those foreign language textbooks, which can provide the greatest focus on the intercultural dialogue in foreign language teaching. Such methods should include a theoretical analysis of the intercultural approach, as well as the method of contrastive comparison of cultures to identify their intercultural potential.

The intercultural approach takes into account the textbooks content that can serve as the basis and the means for comparing the two cultures, for identifying common cultural foundations which are the universal values and different national properties and characteristics of contacting cultures.

6. Findings

The above mentioned principles can be transformed into the criteria for analysing language textbooks from a non-essentialist point of view:

- The overall approach to culture: the cultural groups are not exclusively national or ethnic or "large cultures", the textbook should also introduce other dimensions of social, professional, generational, gender diversity, etc. or "small cultures" (Holliday, 1999).
- The dynamism of cultural groups: culture should not be represented as a homogeneous and static entity, but as internally diverse and constantly changing.
- The presentation of individuals: individual culture should not be depicted as one-dimensional, because people are also characterized by their participation in different cultural groups.
- The commercial aim of the textbook: it should not prevail on the topics selected and proposed.
- The intercultural analysis: cultural characteristics should not be represented as ready-made, but the textbook activities should presuppose a comparison between the target culture, the students' one and any other.
- Transferability of learning: the student, in addition to specific knowledge of the target culture, should develop attitudes, skills and cross-cultural awareness applicable to other cultural groups.

- Self-reflection: the proposed activities should prompt students to reflect on themselves and the cultural groups they belong to.
- Intercultural dialogue in the classroom: the proposed activities should allow different forms of intercultural dialogue between class members.

The first two criteria lend themselves not only to describing and analysing textbooks, but also to elaborating intercultural activities that take their cues from the textbook itself, from its merits as well as its shortcomings. Indeed, as suggest Cortazzi and Jin (1999) the textbook itself need not be intercultural, but the activities that the teacher constructs on its base. These criteria serve to analyse textbooks from the point of view of the representation the Italian culture as a heterogeneous and constantly changing reality. The ideal is if textbooks would offer a varied image, balancing both diachronic elements, which means the differences between present and past, and synchronic one, means the various «small cultures» which animate and enrich the «big» national culture (Feng & Byram, 2002).

While the first two criteria conceptualize culture at the macro-level or the cultural group, the third criterion helps to interpret how individualities are represented at micro-level: whether people belong to a single culture or whether they participate in a variety of groups. The manuals should introduce “representatives of the target culture” who are “culturally and linguistically rich” because, perhaps, multilingual (Ros i I Sole', 2003, p. 148). The example could be the Swiss Italians of Canton Ticino, or the Italians of Alto Adige, Valle d'Aosta or Friuli who are bilingual or even tri-lingual.

The fourth criterion takes into consideration the commercial purposes of a textbook (Gray 2010; Risager, 2018), which are often expressed in stereotypical images of the target culture (Clarke & Clarke, 1990). It should choose a textbook that makes the most visible representation of Italian reality, offering the texts of different authors, genres, and opinions such as articles, reviews, interviews, movies, TV shows, etc. Furthermore, these textbooks should not contain ad hoc made documents, but the authentic ones, making citations of all sources used (author/web page and date). It would help students to make a more objective view of the target culture. Beyond the characteristics of the textbook, the teacher can propose a cross-cultural activities, inviting students to search, select and combine alternative, additional or supplemental materials that would project a different image of the target culture.

Criteria 5, 6 and 7 serve to observe whether and how textbooks stimulate the acquisition of a cultural observation method (criterion 5) that is applies the target culture (criterion 6) and requires forms of self-reflection (criterion 7). Consequently, the focus of attention shifts from topics to teaching methodologies.

Many topics are potentially useful in stimulating intercultural forms of language learning; for example, the issues like dialects and their relationship with Italian language, or the “made in Italy” production, or global issues like e-commerce, immigration, and so on, that lend themselves well to being viewed and analysed from an intercultural perspective.

In general, textbooks merely hint at parallels and comparisons between national cultures; only the teacher can enrich them, prevent them from being exhausted in lists of similarities and differences, and ensure the transferability of learning to other cultural dimensions.

Like the previous ones, criterion 8 focuses on the analysis of activities and exercises. The goal here is to understand whether the textbook has any communicative activities to stimulate a cross-cultural

exchange among the students. In this regard, both (Kearney, 2016; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), emphasize that classroom interaction follows the idea of intercultural language education.

Any activity proposed in the classroom has intercultural educational potential in itself (Borghetti, 2016). We need to consider how much the manuals can help teachers, and whether they predispose collective reflection cues that optimize the linguistic, social, religious, gender, etc. diversity of the class group. It is also not necessary for manuals to offer articulated activities to realize the idea of intercultural language education; on the contrary, the more cues are left to students and teachers for the interpretation, the greater the chance that their dialogue will turn into an opportunity for intercultural language learning.

7. Conclusion

This article presents some basic principles of textbooks analysis and selection criteria regarding the intercultural dimension of language education. An original aspect of the criteria proposed is the non-essentialist theoretical approach to which they refer. They allow us to obtain a comprehensive view of the textbook, as well as to exclude an unsuitable one at the very beginning. Knowledge and application of such criteria in practice can increase the level of didactic-methodological competence of the teacher, and, in particular way, the ability to choose and use the textbook in the educational process (Stepanova, 2018). Careful selection of textbooks is one of the main conditions for using the intercultural approach to language teaching and learning.

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