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CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN TEACHING ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Foreign language teaching is based on the assumption that we understand each other if we share the same code and use it appropriately. In teaching foreign languages we share the belief that one language can be translatable into another; the difficulties are met in the teaching of culture. The search for common points in different cultures that can transform cultural barriers into cultural bridges have been conveyed by different disciplines over the last decades. Culture is a social construct and the role of language as a social practice has been largely reanalysed through four main directions in language teaching: establishing an intercultural sphere, teaching culture as difference, teaching culture as an interpersonal process and crossing disciplinary boundaries. Teaching language through culture is closely related to cultural reality and cultural imagination. Constructing perceptions about a new culture depend largely on the learner's social and cultural background. In order to overcome cultural distance and build cross-cultural understanding students should not be exposed to isolated cultural facts but to universal and common typologies such as rituals, customs, governance, entertainment, arts, and beliefs. Teaching Romanian language through Romanian culture and civilization builds cultural awareness based on highly motivating language-learning resource materials and also underlines the idea that cultures may be different but people share common values and attitudes.

Keywords: Culture, communication, cultural awareness, teaching

1. Introduction

Foreign language teaching is based on the assumption that we understand each other if we share the same code and use it appropriately. In teaching foreign languages we share the belief that one language can be translatable into another; the difficulties are met in the teaching of culture. When students learn other languages, they gain knowledge and better understand the culture that uses that language. Gregorian et al. (2018) reinforce this idea and consider that the act of communication will only be successful if linguistic competences are also based on cultural ones, in order to avoid misunderstandings that may arise during the conversation. It should be borne in mind that, in the interlocutor's culture, a sentence, even if it is lexically and grammatically correct, may be interpreted in a different way than what is intended to be conveyed. These difficulties can arise from the fact that culture means difference and sometimes a source of conflict. The elements of culture used in language learning are nothing but a challenge for teachers and students to understand each other and learn something new. Both of them must surpass the limitations of age, race, gender, social class, family history, nationality, education, life experiences, conversational styles, human motivations. Language teachers have often followed different dichotomies, which varied according to educational philosophies and theories. Thus, Kramsch mentions skill versus content, seeing language as a tool devoid of any intellectual value; Halliday (1990) talk about the Grammar versus Communication approach which refers to the use of language in communication after learning its structures; Rosenblatt (1978) distinguishes between reading to learn and learning to read, that is, decoding forms in text, decoding information from texts, and making sense of text; Widdowson (1975) talks about Language versus Literature which refers to the use of literary texts as a means of teaching language and Language versus Culture. Often, culture is seen as mere information conveyed by the language not a feature of language itself while cultural awareness becomes an educational objective distinct from language. On the contrary, if language is seen as a social practice, culture becomes the core of language learning. To that purpose, attention to context implies pedagogic methods which foster direct and indirect ways of transmitting knowledge and encourages diverse experiences and reflection on the diversity.

2. Problem Statement

The "social and academic implications of the change in the environment" in which foreign citizens study are noted, first of all, by those who encounter this phenomenon (Tarasova, 2017, p. 1174), and reality demonstrates that they are prone to anxiety or even depression due to the loneliness (Song, 2017) or to the large number of changes in their lives. The search for common points in different cultures that can transform cultural barriers into cultural bridges have been conveyed by different disciplines over the last decades. The need for cultural competence "from the outside" (Leucea & Țeican, 2019, p. 86) and the role of language as a social practice has been largely reanalysed through four main directions in language teaching: establishing an intercultural sphere, teaching culture as difference, teaching culture as an interpersonal process and crossing disciplinary boundaries. In order to establish a sphere of interculturality, the connection between linguistic forms and social structure has to be set precisely. Understanding a foreign culture implies putting it in relation to one own culture. An intercultural

approach includes reflection on both target and native culture and is seen as an eminently educational process. Teaching culture as difference is based on the fact that meaning comes from its social uses, therefore we are invited to replace the description of cultural facts by teaching a process of understanding otherness, being linked to the phenomenon of globalization and the revival of national identity. However, culture cannot be seen only in national terms; considering multi-ethnic societies, national traits are not unimportant but they can also take into account age, gender, ethnic background, social class. Many educators connect the teaching of culture to other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology to encourage teachers to broaden their reading and to help students to enhance their cultural perception.

Teaching language through culture is closely related to cultural reality and cultural imagination. Self-perception and perception of others are formed over time depending on the cultural and social background. Cross-cultural education can develop another perspective and build a more complete understanding that would enable learners to take both views. As Kramsch (2010, p. 210) mentioned in his paper, there are four-step approach to cross-cultural understanding: reconstruct the content of production and reception of the text within the foreign culture, construct with the foreign learners their own construct of reception, examine the way each culture views the other, lay the ground for a dialogue that would lead to change. Consequently, to be aware of the intercultural perspective involves the development by the teacher of some teaching activities designed to aim at the awareness of one's own culture, the awareness of different cultural aspects and the development of the ability to explain one's own cultural point of view.

2.1. The culture we teach

The culture taught in different educational institutions has been a traditional part of curricula. It often uses what we call achievement culture or big C that is history, geography, institutions, literature, art and music and little C or behaviour culture which includes culturally influenced beliefs and perceptions expressed through language and also through cultural behaviours. The cultural aspects to be taught fall into three categories: products (folklore, literature, art, music, and artifacts), ideas (beliefs, values, institutions), and behaviours (customs, customs, clothing, food, and leisure). Intercultural competence facilitates a better understanding of individuals with different cultural backgrounds, effective inter-communication and inter-relationship, and the achievement of optimal actions, according Nowicka (2018). Most often, achievement culture has benefited from a clear identified curriculum of topics to be covered, while little C have been treated in a peripheral way. Being essential for students' understanding of the target culture, it should be systematically treated in the language material to be studied. We believe that" in the contemporary world, with its structural tension between globalization and identity, the growing interdependencies of people from different cultures do not annihilate their cultural identities, but force them to redefine themselves in a new world, which has become global and polycentric, a world in which the identity of cultures, as Claude Levi-Strauss said, is "a function of the relationships between them, not a consequence of their isolation" (Barbăneagră et al., 2018, p. 7). He also provides a framework to facilitate the development of cross-cultural skills with the following goals: to help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people have culturally-conditioned behaviours, to understand that social variables such as age, sex, social class and place of residence influence the way people speak and behave, to become aware of conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture, to

increase their understanding of the connotations of words and phrases in the target culture, to develop the necessary skills to organize information about the target culture and to stimulate students' curiosity about the target culture.

Teaching Romanian culture and civilization for foreign students meets the same challenges because "to evoke the intercultural dynamics means evoking culture, its expressions and its foundations (...)" (Grosjean & Tsehaye, 2022, pp. 78-79). Our opinion ranges somehow at a fair distance between achievement and behaviour culture as we consider that both of them can be useful in teaching culture through language if we operate a careful selection of topics to be studied and goals to be attained. Thus, topics like history, geography and music (lyrics) can be approached by cooperative learning, fully combined with behaviours in task-oriented approaches. A wide range of materials can be used for both categories including textbooks, audio materials (music and lyrics), videos, cuttings from newspapers, pictures, postcards, symbols, symbols and replicas. The use of these materials should be carefully planned by the teacher who will encourage his students to work together, to share and discuss what they have discovered and to interpret the information in comparison with their own culture, through "cultural empathy" (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). It is important for teachers to also take into consideration the self-knowledge, knowledge of their own "teaching and learning experience or learning" (Reuker, 2017, p. 11) and other prior knowledge related to areas that may affect students.

3.   Research Questions

Taking into consideration that most students have no systematic knowledge about their culture and not enough knowledge about the target culture, the following research questions can be formulated in relation to what kind of texts and didactic materials should be chosen in order to have thematic and linguistic relevance for the Romanian culture and civilization course. Consequently, it is important to build bridges but also important to understand the boundaries. In the same time, the training of learners should start with activities that require learners to adopt different ways of seeing the phenomenon. Another challenging aspect refers to the situation when there are no equivalents and we need to find ways to build dialogue and personal response,

4.   Purpose of the Study

Starting from the assumption that achievement culture and behaviour culture are both important parts in cross-cultural education, we proposed as objective of the present study to identify the foreign students' perception about the content, structure and methodological approaches of the Romanian culture and civilization course with a view to improve cooperative learning and task-oriented approaches in studying culture.

5.   Research Methods

The research had been performed on a fixed sample made up of 40 international students who are currently enrolled in the preparatory year. The research was based on a questionnaire elaborated by us, made up of 14 closed and open-ended questions, which referred precisely to students' perception of the

290

course, and methods used in the classroom. We have to mention that Romanian culture and civilization is studied in the second semester of the school year, after having studied Romanian language for one semester.

Table 1. Questionnaire on students' perception about the Romanian culture and civilization course

Questionnaire about students' perception of Romanian culture and civilization course
1. Can you please mention your age
2. Country of origin
3. What are you currently studying at the University of Pitesti?
4. What did you know about Romania before coming here?
5. From whom/where have you found most information about Romania?
6. What was your favourite topic of the Romanian culture and civilization course?
7. What was the most uninteresting topic of the Romanian culture and civilization course?
8. Can you mention something similar to your culture in Romanian culture?
9. Name something which is very different from the culture in your country
10. What methods are used in the classroom for the course? (lecturing, expository text, videos, pictures, music, collaborative learning, others)
11. What methods are used in the classroom for the seminar? (debates, reading, essays, others)
12. Can you mention the main weakness of the course?
13. Can you mention the main strength of the course?
14. What other information would you like to get as compared to the information offered by the course?

6. Findings

The results obtained after having applied the questionnaire from the Table 1 revealed specific information about students' perception about the structure of Romanian Culture and civilization course and about the methods used in the classroom for the course and seminars. The answers to the first question showed that all students are aged between 18 and 27 years of age. The second question indicated that the groups are heterogeneous and multicultural (in point of ethnicity, religion and social class) from Syria, Jordan, Morocco, African countries, Belize, Iran, Kazakhstan, Arabic ethnics being predominant. All participants are enrolled in the preparatory year and learn Romanian language.

For the fourth item students gave different answers among which we mention the most relevant: they knew that Romania is a country in Europe with an academic environment where they can study in safety, that studies are accredited and that Romania has a long tradition in the education of international students.

The fifth questions showed that 12 students (30%) had some information from Romania from their parents or relatives who had previously studied here, 9 students (22,5%) found some information on official media sites and chose to study here as life conditions and tuition are less expensive while a number of 19 (47,5%) had little or no knowledge about the country, they found some basic information about tuition and disciplines after as they have obtained a scholarship to study bachelor or master degree.

The sixth revealed that 35 students (87,5%) prefer behaviour culture (customs, leisure and food, the art of living) while only 5 students (12,5%) would prefer achievement culture (geography, music, education). As concerns the most uninteresting topic of the Romanian culture and civilization course, the participants indicated Art (28 students, 70%), History (12 students, 30%), topics included into

achievement culture. Our conclusion is that the topic in teaching culture should be aimed more at an emotionally charged method, which strongly motivates or influences the behaviour of the student in a wide variety of situations.

For question number 8, a number of 32 (80%) students showed that hospitability as an attitude to foreigners is similar in their culture, while 8 students (20%) indicated similar customs in traditional medicine. Question number 9 showed that students acquired a lot of information about Romanian culture and were capable of emphasizing the differences between the source and the target culture; the main difference in achievement culture is religion and in behaviour culture is folk music. The question referring to the methods used in teaching the course obtained the following results: respondents showed that expository text is used the classroom for the course (20%), along with collaborative learning (30%), while others like videos and pictures (30%), music (20%) are also used. For seminar we have collected that assignments have a percentage of 50%, debates 80%, and readings a very small percentage (20%). As for the main weakness of the course, all respondents showed that the quantity of information is sometimes too vast for the timeframe of the course and seminar. The answers for the last question revealed as main strengths of the course are the teacher and the fact that it provides a large perspective of the issues related to Romanian culture through language which would help them for social and cultural integration during their future studies. The answers collected for the last question showed that students would like more extracurricular activities related to the main topics, they would like to have more concrete experiences related to Romanian social and cultural reality, the students want to learn how to react appropriately in a social situation, how to manifest a positive attitude which is important for making oneself acceptable in the foreign society.

7. Conclusions

The results obtained showed that foreign students attending the preparatory year come from very different ethnic backgrounds and had little knowledge about Romanian culture and civilization before arriving in Romania. They consider that Romanian culture and civilization course is very attractive and very useful since it helps them integrate socially and culturally during their stay. Also, it is to be noted that some topics like history and art do not interest them too much; they prefer topics related to behaviour culture such as customs, leisure and food. As concerns the methods used in the classroom for the course and the seminar, the respondents mentioned the expository text, collaborative learning, debates and other appropriate interactive methods. The main flaw of the course refers to the quantity of information provided by the main topics as compared to the timeframe allotted to the course and seminar. This could be a good point towards a reorientation of the course towards a more reduced length in some themes related to achievement culture and towards topics of interest. The students proved that they had acquired essential information about Romanian culture and civilization and they can distinguish the similarities and differences between their culture and the target one. They also underlined that a common attitude of every cultural area they belong to is the hospitability towards foreigners; also, that some basic rituals relate to mutual behaviours, valid for everyone. This supports the idea that cultural awareness may be built with appropriate methods and means since cultures may be different but people share common values and attitudes and that the ”cross-cultural and intercultural interaction invariably implies that the

communicating entities appear as subjects of culture, representatives of a certain sociocultural community" (Malyuga et al., 2018, p. 566). Therefore, teachers need to create in the classroom a space where to connect "experiences both inside and outside of school" with cultural perceptions, practices and knowledge (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2019, pp. 54-68).

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