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TRANSCULTURAL APPROACH TO TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES: A RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The article undertakes an analysis of a transcultural approach to teaching foreign languages in Russia. A transcultural approach is scrutinized and discussed given its potential to compete with multicultural and intercultural approaches to teaching foreign languages in Russia. A transcultural approach is an uncharted territory in Russia with few teachers knowing about it and many academics expressing skepticism about its necessity. While the importance of a pluri/ multicultural approach lies in recognition of cultural diversity and an intercultural approach sets the ground for coexistence in diversity, a transcultural approach is meant to facilitate a true dialogue of diverse cultures through developing non-essentialist views on culture and changing students' model of communication. The mission of a transcultural approach is to develop transcultural competence where transcultural competence means being able to understand culture as an entity not restricted by language, ethnic, territory barriers. The key principles of transcultural approach to teaching foreign languages are (1) the flexibility of learning through languages and (sub)cultures; (2) the accent on raising linguistic / metalingustic / crosslinguistic awareness; (3) the importance of cultural / metacultural / crosscultural awareness. The article outlines some innovative classroom practices, which are drawn from various research papers and practical guides for educators.

1. Introduction

Political crises of modern times, primarily associated with migration and immigration, have caused global reflections on the policy of multiculturalism. Ideological arguments about ways and means of establishing a dialogue of cultures are being held worldwide, with some countries like Canada and Singapore hail their policies a success, and others like Germany, UK, France – report a complete failure (Ward et al., 2018). These conclusions resonate with the experience of the world universities working with multinational students, who claim multiculturalism "a big fat lie", and force the universities to admit that the education process fails to provide students with equitable, relevant, and satisfying learning experience (Cadman & Song, 2012a, pp. 3-4). On the other hand, such multinational students have brought dynamics to classrooms making the universities realize that an internationally diversified environment can deliver better education and research for all students and academics (Cadman & Song 2012b; Smith & Segbers, 2018).

The ideas of equality, relevance to the ongoing historic changes in societies, and languages define the changing socio-cultural context of teaching foreign languages. These ideas are indicated by current research where ideological concepts such as linguistic imperialism, hegemony discourse are highlighted and contested as "legacies of deficit thinking, linguistic purism, language standardization, and racism and the racialization of ethnolinguistic minorities" (Pacheco et al., 2019, p. 2).

All over the world learning and teaching languages have been characterized by mobility, mixing, political dynamics, and historical embedding for quite a while (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011). Though teachers of English express both their enthusiasm and skepticism towards these changes and feel that they need to be supported in terms of their knowledge, skills, resources, and time (Suzuki, 2019). To name a few revolutionary ideas I should mention that the very common notions such as "native versus nonnative speaker" are being ousted by "using a home language – learning a new language". Also, new criteria of assessment are adapted to classify mistakes in a language learning class as "error, student's norm, dominant norm, possible reasons for difference" (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 14). Moreover, such stages of proficiency in language as "beginning", "intermediate", "advanced", and "proficient" are preferred to be substituted with "entering", "emerging", "transitioning", "expanding", and "commanding" (NYSITELL, 2018). Such innovations are not a mere change of wording, they indicate a new stance or a new ideology which shifts views on a learner's identity in language.

All the above-mentioned things characterize the problematic area of transcultural approach to teaching foreign languages. Because of these changes it is gaining momentum and being backed with solid research in linguistics (translanguaging) philosophy (transculturality, heteroglossia), psychology (intergroup theory), pedagogy (multilingual pedagogy).

2. Problem Statement

All culture-based approaches to teaching foreign language set the goal of bridging cultural gaps, uniting opposing ideas, and facilitating understanding. But the directions of these approaches vary. While the ultimate objective of a multi(pluri)cultural approach is to recognize the difference, and an intercultural approach aims at coexisting in diversity (Guelherme & Dietz, 2015, p. 6), a transcultural approach is

often misunderstood as if concentrated on making students adopt some kind of hybrid, globalized perception of culture, which is characterized with universal values and a sense of belonging to a single community of citizens of the world.

A transcultural approach was born on the margins of globalized culture and grew from the concept of "transculturality" developed by Cuban philosopher and anthropologist F. Ortiz. Along with another "trans-" concept "translanguaging" this framework marks a new paradigm of thinking and communication, in which language and culture are believed to have "dynamic and fluid, rather than static and impermeable" boundaries (Lee, 2017, p. 3). This new emerging episteme is meant to transcend "the named and bounded categories that have historically shaped our thinking about the world and its inhabitants, the nature of knowledge, and communicative resources" (Hawkins & Mori, 2018, p. 1).

The prefix trans- in "transcultural" signals crossing borders and boundaries of autonomous cultures and languages and referring to fluid practices that go between and beyond socially constructed notions and practices engaging one in meaning making process and subjectivities. It also indicates the trans-formative nature of the approach (Canagarajah, 2018; Garcia & Wei, 2014; Mazak & Carroll, 2017). "Transformative" is used in the sense that it aims at changing stereotyped and socially constructed concepts and revealing the complexity of one's identity/ies.

However, the question stands if this approach is relevant for Russia and I claim that it is, on the ground that "transcultural" does not only imply the complexity of relations between different cultures but also between subcultures. Philosophically, we speak about a new model of communication that echoes Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia and introduces a variety of voices (Blackledge & Creese, 2014). The environment which characterizes the specificity of learning foreign languages in Russia could be described in terms of different views on religion, ethnic background, political affiliation, etc. Russia has always been a multiethnic society where various religious, political, and national groups have to coexist. From this perspective, I believe that a transcultural approach, which transforms students' views on personal identity and builds them in understanding culture as a complex entity not limited by territorial, cultural or language boundaries, creates inner resources for tolerance and mutual understanding between cultures and subcultures.

Making this idea more explicit in the context of teaching foreign languages, I emphasize that other culture-based approaches could serve as a trampoline to a transcultural approach. The implementation of transcultural approach involves other culture-based approaches in the dynamics of moving from a multi/pluricultural approach, which indexes differences of one separate culture to another one then, to the aggregate of separate unities and finding what universal things they have in common in the interspaces, which are created by an intercultural approach, and then to hybridity, mixture, mobility or, in other words, transculturality of interrelated unities.

Put differently, culture-based approaches do not exclude each other but set different vectors to a perception of culture. A pluricultural approach gives the scope of cultures and provides extensive knowledge of cultural variety. An intercultural approach presents the perspective of your own culture from other cultures' viewpoints and delivers a chance to accept other cultures' existence by finding the common axiological grounds. A transcultural approach teaches to understand cultures as "intertwined

border-crossing contours characterized internally by a pluralization of identities" (the term is coined from de Souza, 2017, p. 9).

The mission of a transcultural approach to teaching foreign languages is to develop transcultural communicative competence. The key notions which could be derived from the definition of translingual and transcultural competence by Modern language association (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2017) include the ability to "reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture", to comprehend others speakers as members of foreign societies yet still retaining your own complex identity as a member of a particular nation. It also implies the ability to relate to other subcultures within a particular culture.

It is obvious that these concepts are easily applied to other culture-based approaches so this definition does not work. From my point of view, a transcultural approach includes the ability to reflect on the world as a complex multifaceted reality which influences your identity, to comprehend your culture/subculture and the languages you know as fluid entities, yet still having a clear idea of who you are and where you come from.

The notions derived from the American definition of transcultural approach indicate the importance of mediation between cultures and reverberate with Guilherme and Dietz (2015, pp. 8-9) outline of transcultural competence as the ability of 'cultural translation from one worldview into the other,' 'the capability to connect different points of view through the elicitation of dilemmas and their reconciliation'. The values quoted by Abad (2013, p. 68) as belonging to transcultural competence – tolerance of ambiguity, open-mindedness; flexibility; respectfulness; adaptability; sensitivity; creativity – are meant to facilitate the ability to mediate. Yet on the practical side of teaching and learning new languages, most of these values are already a component of the curriculum in Russia. From my perspective, developing the ability to perceive your culture and language in the context of the global changes as moving, adapting, and transforming, will make both mediation between cultures and understanding other cultures realistic.

Having said all that, I would like to outline the research questions of the article, because researchers in Russia have only recently started contemplating a transcultural approach, so several challenges still need to be met.

3. Research Questions

What are the key principles of a transcultural approach?

What classroom activities can a teacher use to effectively realize the principles of the approach?

Is the transcultural approach relevant to Russia?

Is there a Russian perspective of a transcultural approach to teaching foreign languages?

4. Purpose of the Study

The objective of the study is to define and operationalize the term "transcultural approach to teaching foreign languages", to find its relations with the nomenclature established for the field and set its possible prospects for Russia with clear principles and classroom practices.

5. Research Methods

Research methods include a written literature review, historical and social analyses, observations and group discussions, personal experience, introspection, as well as document analyses.

6. Findings

The review and evaluation of the key terms in the framework of "trans-" research lead to embracing three main principles of transcultural approach:

1. The flexibility of learning through languages and (sub)cultures

The first key principle of a transcultural approach lies in the claim that language is a social resource not limited with boundaries and students are allowed to use all their linguistic repertoire to maximize their communication (Contex, 2018; Garcia et al., 2016; Garcia & Lin, 2016; Vogel & Garcia, 2017; Li, 2016; 2018). Since sociolinguistic reality is seen as complex, dynamic, and multifaceted, students need to be taught to use language as a dynamic, mobile resource. This means flexibility of learning through two or more languages/varieties of language and implies the role of the home language in learning a second or a third language.

Languages are regarded as resources, but not as unwanted interference in the purity of the target language. This principle affects the perceiving identities of learners. In my experience students who learn English as a third language differ drastically. We even call those whose second language is French – the French or those who master Italian – the Italians because their second language has a considerable effect on their identity. Revealing all these identities in an English class is crucial to activating their whole linguistic repertoire and their overall cultural experience. Making regular comparisons in grammar patterns, vocabulary, and pronunciation and focusing on cognates, derivatives, and compounds enable learners to realize how they can use all their linguistic resources in the multilingual repertoire.

Understanding that identity is constructed in the course of communication gives freedom to a teacher to let the speaker decide which language resources they can use. This has its limitation in language education but as a short and regular activity, it is very helpful. It stems from the belief that languaging is a social practice where users of language reveal "different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity" (Li, 2018, p. 23).

The ultimate objective of a transcultural approach is to develop an understanding of different dimensions in language and culture and to build up learners' receptive proficiency to other languages and cultures through exposure to multilingual resources. In the context of ELT, this means an introduction to varieties of English and a range of cultures, and routine mediation of the learning process by home language and other languages a person knows.

2. The accent on raising linguistic/metalingustic/crosslinguistic awareness

The fundamental goal to raise linguistic awareness is to get learners to consider language in the context of modern views in cognitive linguistics. Some researchers express concern that building methodology on the perception of language as a code and assumptions of structuralism could lead to regarding language and culture as a "self-defining and closed structure, set apart from spatiotemporal

context" (Canagarajah, 2018, p. 31). Such beliefs result in the separation between competence in language and competence in speech (echoing Saussure's langue and parole), the view on languages as codes and little focus on the agency of individuals engaged in using, creating, and interpreting signs for communication.

A transcultural approach builds its views on a holistic vision of language, which grasps language as an inseparable and interconnected module in the human mind. Language is observed in relation to other cognitive systems such as memory, attention, emotion, etc. and studied in the context of multi-competence. This has significant implications for understanding the human mind and its ability not to divide different languages or between language and other cognitive systems, and the multiplicity of linguistic and cognitive resources available for users in social interaction (Li, 2016).

Developing linguistic/metalinguistic /crosslinguistic awareness means raising students' sensitivity to linguistic/metalinguistic/crosslinguistic features while learning communication in another language. The focus is on the complexity and multifacetedness of language that learners might accept as monocultural and monolingual. In practical terms, it involves teaching strategies of learning a language in view of 1) analysis of your personal ways and means of learning the languages you know (your language learning biography); 2) making regular comparisons between languages to establish similarities and differences, working with vocabulary across languages to realize that a learner has a variety of linguistic resources in their multilingual repertoire; 3) understanding what role cultural context plays in the process of learning a language (your personal cultural biography); 4) learning to regard the home language as a cognitive tool for learners through which learning is scaffolded. Above all, linguistic /metalinguistic /crosslinguistic awareness leads to a better perception of what is general and what is specific concerning the linguistic organization of different languages.

3. The importance of cultural/metacultural/transcultural awareness

Cultural awareness is sensitivity to the role culture plays in using language and communication. Drawing from several sources, Hadas (2016) articulates transcultural awareness as an ability to recognize "the influence of culture on the sphere of human behaviour, communication and cognition, as referred to representatives of other cultures (C2's) and one's own (transcultural self-awareness), as well as acknowledging the complex and multilateral character of these processes" (p.3). Specifically, the learning process is organized to be able to see culture in the words and actions of speakers.

Similar to the way linguistic awareness relies on scaffolding by the home language, cultural awareness relies on scaffolding through prior knowledge. In effect, "prior knowledge and the learners' own language provide a cognitive framework through which new knowledge is constructed and regulated" (Hall & Cook, 2012, p. 291).

The process of raising cultural/meta cultural/transcultural awareness expands students' linguistic and cultural repertoires by connecting "their familiar everyday linguistic and cultural patterns with the target linguistic and cultural patterns" (Lin, 2018, p. 21). It centers on establishing regular cultural and linguistic relevance to personal stories of students and their prior experience in language and culture. As a result, continuity rather than segregation of resources is secured.

In a nutshell, a transcultural approach is put into practice through content (multilingual and multicultural resources) and tactics you use to turn this content to its most effectiveness through reliance

on students' prior knowledge and experience on other languages and cultures, which include their home culture and language. Some innovative classroom practices to support the principles could be outlined.

- writing compositions on different topics in different languages

This activity raises metalinguistic awareness and is set to develop an understanding that learning a new language one brings with them proficiency in other languages (Canagarajah, 2013). Students need to be made aware of the goal of this activity, which helps to reinforce writing strategies across languages after students reflect the differences and similarities in style, discourse genres, the way the discourse is organized. Garcia and Wei (2014, p. 121) cited Cenoz and Gorter (2011) and reported similarities in content and organization when writing such compositions.

In my teaching experience, I practiced this task with Bachelor and Master's degree students with Russian as a home language and English, French, German as other languages. During the reflection session, the overwhelming majority admitted that the language set the flow and drove them to have the text written in the way it was. The thought that the structure of an essay was similar in all languages was obvious for them, but they all emphasized that the language determined their choice of constructions.

- watching a soundless video and mediating within the text

This activity develops the ability to work with a mixture of semiotic and linguistic recourses and mobilize the complex linguistic repertoire of a learner.

The task is described in Ortega (2018, p. 59). The steps of the activity include dividing students into two groups. Some students for each group watch a soundless video and explain what happens on that video simultaneously to the other peers. Some other students from the group read an article adapted from a piece of the same news in one of the students' languages, depending on their L3, and are asked to mediate within the text, understand it and be able to explain the main ideas of that article in a different language from the text to the other peers of the same group. At the end of the activity, participants have a three-minute discussion in their target language to gather all information.

- research projects on translanguaging and transculturality

A good example of the activity, which deals with language and culture awareness is a project to research the streets of a city or town in view of translingual landscape features. Another alternative is to study the translingual discourse of peers as opposed to the academic discourse of their educational facilities.

- watching a video of a multilingual speaker who explains their own linguistic experience

This activity raises crosslinguistic awareness and transcultural awareness. It helps to recognize various projections of one's identity into their discourse and learn to perceive one's identity as a complex entity. A good practical example that involves this activity is a discussion based on the Ted Talk video of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who speaks of "the danger of a single story" (https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story).

- writing your language biography

A short essay that covers the number of languages students know, their cultural environment of learning a language, reflections on what role the cultural environment played/plays in their communication raises metalinguistic and transcultural awareness. Some possible trajectories to this activity are introduced in (Celic & Seltzer, 2011, p. 11).

- in their/my shoes technology

This activity, which raises meta(sub)cultural awareness, was introduced by Oxford Learning in one of their free leaflets for educators. The activity is designed to help students become more aware of perspectives that might differ from theirs and the factors that may shape those perspectives. It asks students/pupils to imagine that they are standing in the shoes of another person – real, hypothetical, or fictional.

- working with webpages of multinational companies

This activity helps students realize that they can understand information in a language that they do not personally speak thanks to the contrastive analysis and the comparison of webpages. It also helps develop critical thinking in the context of cultural stereotypes exploited in the media. Ultimately, it aims at developing metalinguistic and metacultural awareness.

7. Conclusion

A transcultural approach belongs to the system of culture-based approaches and has its fundamental differences. While the components (knowledge, skills, attitudes) of the three main approaches – multi (pluri-)cultural, intercultural and transcultural are more or less the same with a great emphasis on tolerance and empathy, knowledge of language varieties and diversities of culture, ability to communicate in a dialogical way, a transcultural approach is gaining momentum because of the two most important things.

Firstly, backed by research in linguistics, philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, and methodology, it is based on a holistic vision of language as one of the complex cognitive systems characterizing the human mind. Secondly, a transcultural approach views culture as an entity without linguistic, territorial, and ethnic borders and aims at developing an ability to understand it as such. Classroom practices of transcultural approach concentrate on facilitating non-essentialist views on culture and work with the inner resources of a person to ensure a true dialogue. It results from the changes in the way a person leads communication: if they see no boundaries to their culture which could be schematically envisaged as a dotted circle, it becomes easy to ensure mutual understanding because you see no borders to prevent you from experiencing what is there in another dotted circle of culture.

A transcultural approach relies on learners' existing knowledge of language or culture and develops them further by revealing their interdependence and complexity. It leads to a better perception of language learning and develops a learner's abilities to communicate on a wide multinational globalized cultural arena over (1) flexibility of learning through languages and (sub)cultures, (2) linguistic / metalingustic / crosslinguistic awareness, and (3) cultural / metacultural/ transcultural awareness. The transcultural approach aims to develop receptive proficiency to other languages and cultures by revealing different dimensions in language and culture.

In Russia, this approach has its own perspectives as it can work to facilitate dialogue between both cultures and subcultures. Fundamentally, it teaches a new model of communication which competes with postmodernist hyperreal models or autonomous monocultural models.

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