

THE ROLE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN DEVELOPING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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Abstract: *By now it is well-known that the role of modern education is to equip students with several types of competences necessary for their future personal and professional life. One of these competences, namely communication skills, has a component whose development is, according to the author's opinion, mainly in charge of foreign language teachers. It is their role to create the shift from the ethnocentric level of students' attitude towards cultural issues to the ethnorelativistic stage that is to make their students aware of and accept cultural differences and to help them acquire skills necessary for intercultural encounters. The two main topics present study is focusing on are: to what extent it is necessary to intervene in this respect and which are the ways teachers can develop intercultural sensitivity and competence.*

The results of a questionnaire applied to more than 200 students of the University of Oradea, Romania - studying Economics, Medicine and Law - confirmed the author's hypothesis that in spite of the extended international relations and travel opportunities Romanian students are not really aware of cultural diversity and its overwhelming impact upon people's behaviour, reactions and way of thinking.

To change this situation, teachers, especially foreign language teachers may resort to techniques and methods like simulation games on cultural differences (Barnaga, Ecotonos, BaFá BaFá, Randömia Balloon Factory etc.) that intercultural communication trainers use successfully in their seminars to make participants aware of cultural diversity and help them manage real life situations involving international encounters and/or appeal to the opportunities offered by information and communication technologies and the internet, through youtube and different socialization platforms.

Keywords: communication skills; intercultural communication competence; cultural differences; foreign language teaching; simulation games; intercultural encounters

1. Introduction

In a world full of changes teaching foreign languages has undergone a change of paradigm as well. When at the very beginning of the XXth century in teaching and learning foreign languages accent was laid on grammatical accuracy, later on in the development of didactics, primarily at a lower level of language competence, there followed a considerable shift from correctness to communication, i.e. conveying and perceiving a message, and, at a higher level, to fluency of speech. As communication in a foreign language does not mean just change of ideas among individuals but interaction among persons belonging to different nations and

cultures their communication reaches another dimension, that of intercultural communication. With this change of paradigm in language teaching from accuracy focus to initiating intercultural communication, a spectacular change of language teachers' role is inherent. While language teachers of the past had the role of teaching their students how to speak correctly and thus acquire language competence in the respective foreign language, nowadays they take more and more the role of cultural mediators developing intercultural communication skills with their students (A. Hamburg, 2011).

2. Theoretical Overview: Communication, Intercultural Communication, Intercultural Competence, Intercultural Communication Skills

Terms like communication, intercultural communication, intercultural competence or intercultural communication skills one could come across in the previous passage are very fashionable in present days and frequently used but maybe a closer analysis and interpretation of the concepts are still necessary. What is communication in fact? One definition could be that it denotes an interaction between individuals in which message is transported bidirectionally, perceived and decoded by the participants disposing of the same decoding system. Synthesising the various definitions circulating in literature, Lustig and Koester present communication in their reference work on intercultural competence in the following way: "Communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people create shared meanings." (M.W. Lustig, J. Koester, 2010: 13). Let's analyse the components of this definition one by one. When conveying message people use a set of common symbols to create shared meanings, hence the symbolic character of communication. As symbols transmitted by others have to be interpreted and meanings be attached to them so that the message can be understood, communication is an interpretive process in which all participants collaborate to create and sustain meaning and their transactions take place in a certain setting. This is a physical context - referring to location -, a social one - referring to events-related expectations - and interpersonal one - pointing to one's expectations about people's behaviour depending on the relationship between them. Having a fluid character, there is no doubt communication is a process in which people share ideas transporting meaning from one person to another. Extending the aforementioned definition of communication to the field of international interactions, intercultural communication could be seen as a "symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people" coming from different cultures "create shared meanings." (see Lustig and Koester)

This communication is different and definitely more difficult than the interaction among people of the same nation as the symbols shared meanings are based on are strongly culture-related, the expectations, beliefs, values, norms guiding one's behaviour and the way of interpreting symbols may be very different across the world. People may speak the same language even as a mother tongue or speak a common language but still think in a collectively determined way very differently about things. While Americans and New Zealanders are very informal and direct in their interactions, willing to stress upon their qualities, not so are the British who prefer to be vague in communication and modest in their appearance and style. Thus, to be able to interpret and accept the symbols conveyed by people having different cultural backgrounds and to convey one's own symbols in a way

acceptable for them, one needs intercultural communication skills, i.e. the competence to communicate in an effective way and appropriate for the physical, social, interpersonal context. This means that intercultural competence is contextual - the same behaviour might not be appropriate in different cultural backgrounds or with different members of this cultural group - and needs to be appropriate - meeting the expectations of the counterpart - to be effective in achieving communicational goals.

In developing intercultural competence one has to go through different stages from awareness, through acquiring knowledge and skills, up to being motivated to apply intercultural skills when dealing with foreigners. The first stage refers to the state of being conscious of the fact that people from different cultures might think, react and live differently from what one is accustomed to. This awareness combined with acceptance shows that one has passed the ethnocentric phase (see Bennett's model of intercultural competence, 1986). To get to the ethnorelative stage and acceptance, one should acquire knowledge about different cultures and cultural attitudes. Putting this theoretical knowledge into practice is necessary for developing skills for intercultural interactions. One's motivation to apply these skills in interactions with people from different cultures is strongly related to the acceptance of respective cultures and the willingness to look at the world through the eyeglasses of relativity, i.e. not to consider elements in other cultures worse or better than the same aspects in one's own culture, but just different.

In my opinion, in making students aware of cultural differences, of the existence of not only individually but to a great extent collectively determined culture-based differences in beliefs, value systems, norms etc., language teachers and especially foreign language teachers should play a relevant role. Of course there rises the question if on the background of extended travel experiences, students' exchange programs, growing globalization and last but not least of a society where more ethnic groups live side by side it is still necessary to draw people's attention upon these differences.

3. Methodology

In my research I started from the idea that in spite of the existing contacts to the representatives of other cultures students are not really conscious of different cultural patterns guiding human behaviour. To check my hypothesis I have chosen to apply a questionnaire consisting of seven questions five of which point to various cultural aspects and the other two inquire about contacts to foreigners/other cultures. The passage below reproduces the questionnaire as follows:

Questionnaire

Please mark on a scale from **1** to **5** to what extent the following statements match your opinion. (1 means "not at all" and 5 stays for "to a great extent").

- 1.** There is a single condition so that people from different nations can communicate efficiently with each other and this is the knowledge of a common language.
- 2.** Knowing the culture of a nation doesn't only mean knowing its history, art, literature and so on, but its set of beliefs, symbols, convictions, too.

3. People not having a personal/individual opinion of things and the world in general are indifferent, indolent and dispose of a limited intellectual capacity.
4. Not being punctual at meetings shows lack of education and indifference to one's partner.
5. In business life everywhere in the world primary goal is to develop good relationship with one's business partner.

Answer these 2 supplementary questions, please!

1. Have you ever spent more than 3 weeks in a foreign country? If yes, on what occasion?
2. Do you have personal contacts to foreign students (e.g. Erasmus students) at the faculty you are studying at or to foreigners in general in your private life? If yes, how often do you meet each other or how intense is your contact to them?

3.1. Context of Study

This questionnaire was distributed to about 250 students of the University of Oradea, Romania - 77 of them studying Economics, 88 Law, respectively 75 Medicine - having foreign language classes in English, German and French. The latter target group is supposed to have more intense and frequent contacts to other cultures because of the foreign students studying at the Faculty of Medicine and maybe even answering to the questionnaire. The first target group was chosen because of the author's affiliation and the necessity to train students for their future professional life.

3.2. Results

According to the values given to the first affirmation merely about 12% of the questioned Economics students present awareness of cultural differences, 70% of them show no awareness at all and there is a segment of 18% of medium values representing persons feeling that there should be something in the background but not being very conscious of the existence of cultural differences among people. The results are quite the same with Law students with just 8% of them showing intercultural sensitivity versus 70% ignoring cultural issues and with Medicine students with about 7% culturally sensitive and about 74% lacking any competence in this respect.

Almost all respondents were inconsistent giving to the first item answers that show little awareness of cultural differences but presenting at the second one much more sensitivity to these aspects or vice versa. As about 84% of the responding Economics students, about 72% of Law students, and respectively 80% of the students studying Medicine seemed to agree to a great extent with the content of the second assertion, as a sign of intercultural sensitivity just opposite to their attitude in the case of the first affirmation, it is likely they had misunderstood or misread it and answered accordingly.

With the third assertion the values indicating different levels of intercultural competence are not so dispersed any more either in the case of Economics or in that of Law or Medicine students. The results are as follows: about 41% of responding Economics students showed no awareness at all, the rate in the case of Law students is about 47% and with Medicine students 40%; 26% of the students studying Economics, 28% of those studying Law, respectively 25% of

Medicine students proved to be culturally sensitive while 33% of Economics, 25% of Law and 35% of Medicine students presented medium values on the scale of intercultural competence. The relatively low rate of answers proving no awareness of culturally different perceptions is to a great extent due to Romanian society's cultural profile. Being rather collectivist, Romanians do not necessarily condemn not having a personal opinion of things, the assertion corresponding thus to their cultural pattern.

The last two affirmations produced once more diffuse values, with assertion number 4 about 68% of Economics students turned out to lack awareness of cultural differences regarding punctuality, only 18% presenting intercultural sensitivity in this respect and further 14% being somehow conscious of the existence of different cultural patterns. The relation in the case of assertion number 5 is 71% indicating total ignorance while only 13% showing signs of awareness and 16% supposing that people might have different attitudes according to their cultural belonging, too. 76% respectively 65% of responding Law students presented with the last two affirmations no awareness of cultural differences while the ratio of culturally sensitive students was only 11% respectively 14% and further 13% respectively 21% were to some extent conscious of people all around the world living and acting according to different sets of rules. Medicine students had a rate of 68% of answers proving lack of cultural sensitivity with affirmation number 4 respectively 61% in the case of the last assertion. 12% of the questioned people presented in the case of assertion number 4 full awareness and about 17% showed some awareness of cultural issues and these values are about 19% respectively 20% with the last affirmation. Following chart offers a synthetic overview of the results of the questionnaire regarding students' awareness of cultural differences.

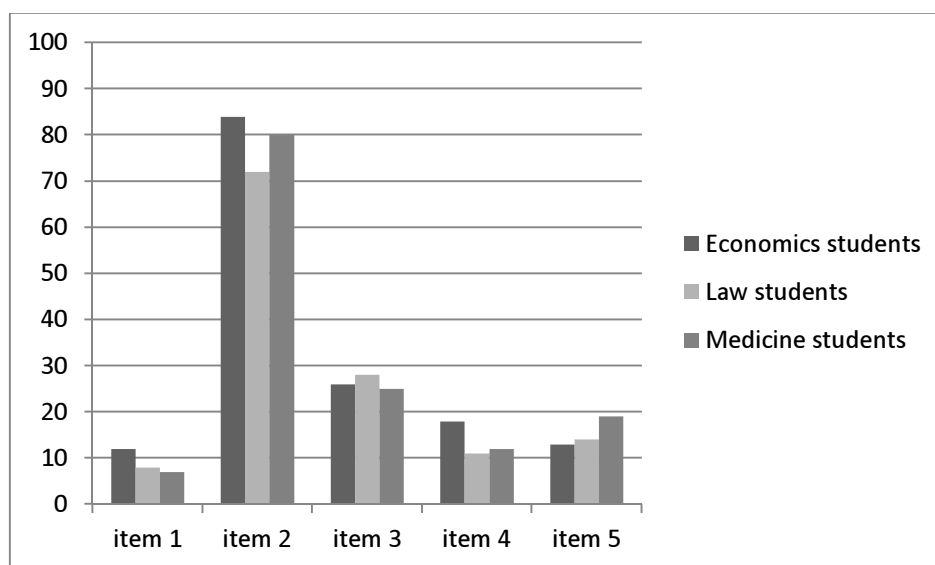


Figure 1: Ratio of the awareness of cultural differences with Economics, Law and Medicine students of the University of Oradea (data given in percents)
Source: own creation

Thus the results of the questionnaire confirm the initial hypothesis and show that in foreign language class it is not enough to teach/learn the respective language as real life encounters in a globalised world require from participants not just linguistic, but at least to an equal measure, intercultural competence as well. The research presents at the same time some surprising findings: quite many of the Economics (23), Medicine (18) and Law students (20) taking part in this survey and having some contact to foreign cultures - either through visits abroad or personal contact to foreigners - are not really aware of cultural diversity while some other participants (14 Economics, 18 Law and 15 Medicine students) with no experience of other cultures and countries still show a certain sensitivity to cultural issues.

Practical studies on intercultural competence like the one conducted by Inkeri Ruokonen and Seija Kairavouri (Intercultural Sensitivity of the Finnish Ninth Graders, 2012) show that there are societies like the Finnish one where due to the multi-ethnic composition of the country and arts education youth has reached the ethnorelativistic level of intercultural sensitivity (see Bennett's model, 1986) and proves to be thus interculturally more competent or at least aware of the importance of cultural background in people's lives.

The second step in acquiring intercultural competence is to get acquainted with different cultures and to learn about them for the sake of getting to know each other better, of learning to interpret other people's reactions and manifestations right and to think in terms of relativity when interacting with other cultures. When students realise that different cultures may have different attitudes to time, power, hierarchy, gender roles, success, task and performance, the place of the individual in society, to the unknown and so on, they are likely to give, later on, in professional situations, the correct interpretation of representatives of other cultures being late on an appointment or keeping them waiting in the lounge while being busy with several other apparently not so important matters and answering even to private phone calls. This knowledge due to the research work of Geert Hofstede (1991), Richard Gesteland (1997) and others would prevent them, at the same time, from losing temper and inherently face when dealing with people whose task/relationship orientation is different from theirs or would help them manage situations involving items of gender, age or status in a way convenient for all parts.

I consider it is primarily the task of foreign language teachers to introduce students at least into the culture of nations whose language they teach and of related nations. For instance a teacher of German should offer a general overview of the cultural patterns of Germanic people including not only Germans and Austrians but also other people of Germanic origin like the Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Norwegians, a teacher of English should present the cultural portrait of the British, Americans, Australians, New Zealanders and accordingly a French teacher is supposed to outline the characteristics not only of French culture but even the cultural patterns of other Latin people, too.

To extend students' horizon regarding cultural differences teachers of different foreign languages could resort to co-teaching so that their students get to know even more cultural profiles or, as Sorina Chiper recommends it in one of her studies (2013), to the opportunities offered by information and communication technologies and the internet, through youtube and different socialization platforms. Furthermore, in creating awareness of cultural differences, in the process of cognition and parallelly in developing and training intercultural skills,

simulation games such as Barnga, Ecotonos, BaFá BaFá, Randömia Balloon Factory and others described by Hofstede and his co-workers in their practical work (2002) prove to be very useful. All these games developed for professional business environment by experts and trainers in intercultural communication are based on participants experiencing an “aha-effect” in their encounter with diversity and aim to develop skills for managing these situations and for problem solving. When items of interculturality come up in foreign language class, to the didactic situation and existing facilities adapted versions of these games could be applied. In most cases, students will like them and they will contribute to creating a link between theory and practice.

4. Simulation Games in Developing Intercultural Competence

4.1. Barnga

One of the simulation games mostly applicable for classroom conditions and most suitable for creating awareness of cultural differences is Barnga created by Sivasailan Thiagarajan and Barbara Steinwachs (1990). The game consists of building several groups of students/participants and giving them the assignment to play the same card game but with a slightly different set of cards or according to different rules. The trick is that they do not know it and are not allowed to communicate verbally - in oral or written form - with each other, they may use just signs, body language, mimic, drawings. After having read the set of rules according to which they should play each group begins to play. After a few minutes one member of each group should move to another team and the game continues with such changes occurring periodically until each group is made of participants playing according to different rules without knowing it. In the state of confusion created by these circumstances some participants may think the others are cheating when winning the game or something is wrong with the cards, other people may suppose that the rules are different without having the certainty that it is really so. In the debriefing (discussion) stage of the game there follows a discussion upon what happened and upon participants' feelings and thoughts related to the events. This is the point where students become aware of the game simulating real life situations in international contacts where the counterparts may have good intentions but just “play” according to different culturally determined rules.

4.2. BaFá BaFá

In another simulation game called BaFá BaFá two teams are built: “Alpha culture” and “Beta culture”- where Alpha culture has a relationship-oriented, collectivist, hierarchical profile and Beta culture is on the contrary a highly competitive, individualist trading culture. The participants learn the behaviour rules of “their culture”, begin to act according to them and to interact with the other “culture”. At the end of the simulation phase after having “lived” in another culture, according to other rules than they might be accustomed to or having encountered behaviour norms different from theirs, participants should speak about their feelings related to it. These are usually varying from confusion, to withdrawal, anger, ignoring or even despising the values of other cultures. The misunderstandings and stereotypes resulting from this interaction build the starting- point for the debriefing stage where

situations and problems are discussed and solutions are sought for, thus “BaFá BaFá shakes participants out of thinking in stereotypes of anyone who is different.” (www.stsintl.com/business/bafa.html)

4.3. Ecotonos

Ecotonos developed by Nipporica Associates and Dianne Hofner Saphiere (1997) offers a multicultural problem solving simulation of real workplace situations by dividing participants into three fictitious cultural groups: Aquila, Delphinus and Zante. All the three groups operate according to “culture rule cards” pointing to such characteristics as leadership style, teamwork, gestures, listening style, problem solving, each type of card having three variations representing different positions regarding to the respective characteristic (e.g. leadership style can be consensus-oriented, democratic or autocratic). All teams get one variation for a few characteristics building their cultural profile. After discussing in the group the rules according to which they are supposed to act, all teams get the same task. During the working process teams are recombined in such a way that finally they consist of representatives of all three cultures in different proportions in order to simulate real life situations such as joint-venture, multicultural, majority-minority teams.

4.4. Randömia Balloon Factory

Simulation of working across the cultural Divide (Western individualist cultures versus Eastern or Southern more collectivist societies) is the purpose of Randömia Balloon Factory created by Cornelius Grove and Willa Hallowell (2001), too. In this game Western trainers (US-Americans, Anglo-Canadians, British, Irish, Germans and others of the same cultural type) from the country of Richland want to train workers in a manufacturing plant in the Third world (Randömia) to achieve more efficiency. The trick in this game is that only one group gets instructions regarding the cultural rules they should follow, the other one is supposed to act just as they would do in real life. That means, if participants come mainly from Western cultures, part of them building one group are asked to be collectivist, harmonious, indirect and hierarchical while in the case of participants being representatives of the other cultural type one group should act as individualistic, direct, egalitarian and assertive people without telling what culture they represent just introducing themselves in a way one representative of that culture would do. As a result of the simulation game participants realise that applying one’s own approach to treat and solve problems is not very productive in real life situations and disdaining the other culture’s values is no way to follow either.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The present study offers conclusions on more levels. The results of the questionnaire applied furnish educators more pieces of vital information: on one hand that Romanian youth is to a great extent not even conscious of the existence of cultural differences and their impact on people’s behaviour, and on the other hand that encounters with members of other cultures or visits abroad do not produce automatically awareness of cultural issues. Thus, it is necessary to tackle and verbalise them in class as part of the foreign language course even if it is time-consuming, because the benefits are much greater than the aforementioned disadvantage. While making acquaintance with different cultural patterns and

training intercultural skills by means of simulation games, students use foreign language in real life-like situations and develop thus their linguistic competence, too.

Consequently, foreign language teachers should acquire also some competence as intercultural communication trainers because offering students means of efficient communication with representatives of other nations and developing, besides language skills, intercultural communication skills as well, they do their students good and contribute even to a better understanding among cultures.

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