Transmutation of culture to culture-oriented activities in foreign language education: the constructive challenge of intercultural awareness

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Abstract

Purpose: *Nowadays, it is commonly agreed that foreign language education does not exclusively consist of fields such as morphology, vocabulary, syntax, and phonetics. On the contrary, it incorporates aspects of culture and worldviews. The importance of the co-examination of second language acquisition and intercultural awareness has been the drive behind this paper in an attempt to address the fact that communication is unpredictable even when it takes place within specific frameworks.*

Methods: *Based on the present bibliographical research an approach towards intercultural communication is made from the scope of the culture-oriented activities in foreign language acquisition. In the first part, it is crucial to define all those complex components that surround this topic, while the second part, focuses on the perceptions around the activities that help achieve intercultural awareness.*

Results: *Lastly, the importance of intercultural awareness as well as the challenging nature of this endeavour, which amplifies the contribution of the contemporary educator within the field of educational policies consists one of the most important conclusions that this research has produced.*

1   INTRODUCTION

The trigger for this study is based on the statement that communication that fails to incorporate aspects of culture tends to result in unpredictable oddities (Baltag, 2017). Especially while functioning within a multicultural society, it is crucial to develop intercultural communicative competence (Alpetkin, 2002). Mitchell and Myles state that: *"language and culture are not separate, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other."* (2004, p. 235). The following image depicts the inevitable linked dipole of culture and language.

Figure 1: Points of articulation between culture and language. Source: (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kohler, 2003)
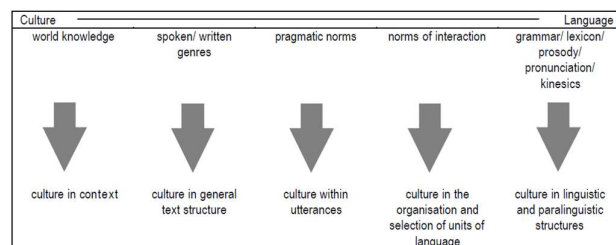
The concept of interculturalism can be traced back in 1959 and as of now it is considered a mature issue since it has been

the subject of many studies over the years. However, this concept has remained relatively inactive as practically and academically there has been a focused attempt not on interculturality per se but on intercultural education and intercultural awareness (Meer & Modooh, 2012).

Language and culture share an inextricable and interdependent relationship. Hall (1959) stated that culture is communication and then proceeded to establish that communication and culture are "equal" concepts, not in the sense that they are the same but in the sense that they consist the two segments of an equation. Therefore, teaching a foreign language in order to facilitate communication, de facto and per definitio includes a cultural hue, resulting to the need for the contemporary educator to address this issue.

However, there is difficulty in achieving cross-cultural living mainly because the new relationships that arise from the coexistence of the elements in the same social environment to be closer to integration due to residence (law of the territory – jus solis) and not to actual integration with the consequent acceptance (right of blood - jus sanguinis). From the aspect of intercultural awareness, inclusion is achieved through the right to participate and the essential participation both in the process and in the share of the produced which are resulted by creating a sense of responsibility.

2 CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

The necessity of addressing the concept of culture within the language learning process has been perceived as a method to achieve both language curricula goals as well as intercultural awareness (Çelik, 2021). It is a set of skills that derives from within the individual which ultimately leads to the realization of the reality and to a better understanding of the positioning of each culture in the global community. Within this context, healthy comparisons between an individual's culture and the target culture become prominent (Baltag, 2017; Karabinar & Guler, 2012). However, the educator should cautiously guide the learners to a right approach as new beliefs may contradict with one's value system and tamper with conscious behaviors (Bachan, 1990).

Apart from grammatical skills, an avid student should also acquire by the end of a lesson a set of skills such as sociolinguistic competence, cultural knowledge, and intercultural awareness. This view is supported by the list of competences for learners, as drafted by the European Commission, which includes multilingualism and cultural awareness among others (Council of Europe, 2001).

It is understood that the aim of intercultural awareness faces significant challenges. Limited knowledge of the teacher may result in inadequate learning of the correct interaction techniques with native speakers (Çelik, 2021) or in a simplistic approach to the culture by examination only of tangible products of it, such as food and art (Karabinar & Guler, 2012). A more common approach is the encouragement of participating in international exchange programs such as Erasmus (Martinez Duran, Gutiérrez, Beltrán Llavador, & Martínez Abad, 2016) and the use of original material produced by native speakers (Angelova & Zhao, 2016). One of the challenges that professors face is the diverse levels of proficiency in the language. However, in the case of culture awareness this method may be considered as beneficial since it might create intercultural awareness from an early age (Çakır, 2006). A key role is played by the developmental stage of each student regarding sensitivity, coping and attitude towards what, subjectively, is not considered ordinary (Dănescu, 2015).

On the other hand, a more experienced educator could provide learners with problem-solving exercises, including dilemmas based on cultural beliefs, cultivating their sensitivity and awareness (Ho, 2009). Furthermore, learners should be encouraged and guided to implement compensatory strategies so as to achieve highly satisfactory interactions (Vez, 2002).

Certainly, integrating active culture education into a foreign language teaching may benefit the teacher by increasing their intercultural awareness, differentiating their teaching style, and improving their syllabus design (Ho, 2009). To conclude, a culture-oriented requires a conscious approach and could possibly benefit both educators and learners in a vast variety of ways.

Interculturalism studies the way people from different cultural backgrounds react and move in the context of diversity and ultimately shaping a new cultural identity through the interaction of individual elements (Umarqulova, 2023). Practically, this term refers to the interactions and the set of contacts between distinct cultures. At the same time, it is stated that this term comes to complement the concept of multiculturalism through the introduction of aspects of mutual understanding and dialogue (Gong, Lai & Gao, 2022). According to Tsatzali & Beazidou (2023) the term interculturalism is considered "particular" in the sense that is constantly divided between cultural universalism and relativism, as well as including both the assimilative view and the separative – multicultural one. However, this term should not be conceptually confused with assimilation but should be treated as a way of managing multiculturalism.

Goodenough (1976) states that the definition of multiculturalism should also take under consideration how ordinary people experience multiculturalism. In intercultural theory, emphasis is given on the contact and interactions experienced by the different parts that make up each society or environment. This approach to intercultural theory is based on certain pillars, which are as follows:
1. Recognition of diversity
2. Social cohesion
3. Equality
4. Justice
Only when these are mastered there could be a complete intercultural approach both in education and communication as well as in society.

However, beyond these elements there are also intercultural skills which are based on the characteristics mentioned above. In this set of skills are also included the creation of a positive attitude towards interculturality, the recognition of the equality of the people who make up the global mosaic, the cultivation of intercultural consciousness as well as the acceptance and compassion for others, not only for foreign students but also refugees or immigrants (Mitropoulou & Anagnostopoulou, 2015).

Intercultural competence has been described according to the following four directions (Koehn & Rosenau, 2002):

1. Analytical competence: understanding of diverse cultural elements and the ability to create strategies for coexistence and healthy cooperation
2. Emotional competence: empathy for the feeling of difference, acceptance, and ability to cultivate emotions that engage constructively with the acceptance process
3. Creative competence: ability to generate, synthesize and execute ideas regarding the resolution of issues of acceptance and mitigation of diversity
4. Behavioral competence: ability to communicate and meaningfully coexist with people of different backgrounds

In addition, all educators should be aware of the importance of intercultural education and being able to understand people from different cultures. Teachers can teach students how to understand people from other cultures, religions, or colors (Salgur, 2013).

Within the framework of the educational process, the teacher must have sensitivities and goals that aim at the seamless coexistence of people with differences. In other words, the teacher must already have realized and internalized his own values about interculturality and identity (Fiegel, 2013).

The practices used to achieve the goals of intercultural education are many in number and vary according to the transmitter, the receiver, the context of communication, the classroom, the object of study, and others (Faas, Hajisoteriou, & Angelides, 2014). However, the most important classification is between courses that are continuous, i.e., fixed, such as language learning, and projects, i.e., special programs aiming at spreading global community, acceptance, social justice, and equality. It is of high importance to acknowledge the fact that mastering the host language is the first stage in achieving interculturality (Organisanti & Bortolini, n.d.).

PERCEPTIONS ABOUT INTERCULTURALITY-FRIENDLY ACTIVITIES: The approach which argues that teachers in modern schools, which are often intercultural, must possess a mixture of intercultural awareness and intercultural disposition is of a particular interest in the literature studied. More specifically, intercultural awareness includes all the knowledge and methods available to the teacher to ensure a high level of education services by providing not only a theoretical framework but also an educational content that will contribute to the promotion of the student to a citizen of respect and acceptance. Intercultural disposition is the set of values, beliefs, experiences, and personal opinions that one teacher should possess. . The human quality, which is often influenced by the individuality of a person and its own background, cannot be removed from the teacher, aiming to be a sterile means of imparting knowledge. It is desirable to connect human sensitivity and emotional nuances with the educational process, as education is not exclusively a method of transmitting acquired human knowledge, but forms a field of socialization, mutual support, and healthy coexistence (Cherng & Davis, 2017).

As a consequence of the above thought, the concept of intercultural competence arises. However, having secured both the background of knowledge and the disposition to accept and transmit anti-racist values would never be enough if a teacher does not have the ability pass them over. Teacher competence and skill include situational awareness, a combination of knowledge and teaching ability, and an intention for continuous improvement and development both as a person and as a teacher. From all the above it is apparent that competence refers to both talent and teacher's culture. The issue of acceptance and balance regarding the differences that can coexist in an educational environment is fertile ground for creating the necessity of lifelong development that the function of the teacher requires (He, 2013).

Intercultural friendly activities should be implemented with great regret and be considered a necessity for the creation of intercultural identity as well as citizenship (Sánchez, de Haro Rodríguez, & Sanz, 2017). Especially students in major foreign language education such as English and French, they tend to communicate not only with people of one culture but in the vast majority of them with people from different countries and cultural background. For that reason, a systematic intercultural training must be secured, which will help students incorporate cultural aspects to all forms of communication and for all purposes – transactional and interactional - (Chlopek, 2008).

Intercultural activities shall include aspects of another culture such as the following:
a. Geography
b. Environment
c. Tangible products such as foods, toys, and clothing
d. Products that derive from and depict the culture such as literature, dances, and arts in general.
e. Cultural practices and customs
f. Worldviews, philosophies, attitudes, and values
g. Relationships between various aspects of culture (Karabinar & Guler, 2012)

Learners will be able to participate in problem-solving activities as a way to mediate between cultures. The aforementioned activities involve dilemmas concerning the culture(s) in question in an attempt to increase awareness and sensitivity to cultural differences while at the same time aims to encourage students to take part in interactions in search of a viable solution (Ho S. T., 2009).

Hughes has stated indicative techniques for teaching cultural awareness, as following:
1. Comparison method
2. Culture assimilators
3. Culture capsule
4. Drama
5. Audio motor unit or Total Physical Response
6. Newspapers
7. Projected media
8. The culture island (a classroom that resembles the environment of the target language using posters, newspapers, and a bulletin board (Hughes, 1986)

Despite the above , there are other activities to teach culture within a foreign language classroom which may include original material such as movies, songs, travel brochures, menus, commercial pamphlets. Surely, , the use of proverbs, decorative pieces or jewelry can provide constructive ground for further research (Tran, 2010). Additionally, exchange students can provide a livid experience as well as share memories from their home place and function as a living – interactive source of information.

There is a variety of activities that promote intercultural awareness, and they all seem to be focused around the four following axes:

- acquisition about cultures
- comparing cultures
- exploring cultures
- finding one's own 'third place' between cultures (Crozet & Liddicoat, 2000)

To sum up, teaching interculturality in the foreign language classroom has profound implications. It cultivates cultural sensitivity and awareness, enabling students to appreciate diverse customs and values. This fosters enhanced communication skills, not only in the target language but also in their native tongue, as they become attuned to cultural subtleties. Moreover, it nurtures a global perspective, instilling a sense of global citizenship and readiness to collaborate across diverse backgrounds. One of its most significant impacts is the reduction of stereotypes and prejudices, promoting empathy and perspective-taking. It also nurtures problem-solving abilities, adaptability, and cultural competence valued in today's global job market. Additionally, it plays a role in preserving cultural heritage, contributes to inclusive school environments, and promotes global understanding and conflict resolution. In essence, teaching interculturality in foreign language classrooms equips learners with essential skills and attitudes for a diverse and interconnected world.

3 DISCUSSION

THE ROLE OF EDUCATOR: It has been noticed that the concept of interculturality is often drawn up with that of education, possibly because educational institutions can perform an educational role but also function as a core of socialization. Every school can become intercultural, , as long as it is oriented to form the personality of the students based on the criteria mentioned earlier: that is equality, justice, cohesion and the equal opportunities (Mikander, Zilliacus, & Holm, 2018).

Nieto (2003) states that all teachers must not conform to racist perceptions and try to create a connection with all students, while the interaction of students from different cultural backgrounds with the environment in which they find themselves is of vital importance. This means that the promotion of intercultural education is important and should be included on the list with the permanent responsibilities of a teacher. Especially during foreign language education where culture is indispensable, the role of educators is even more crucial.

The more racially and culturally homogenous the classroom, the school and the community in which the students live and learn, the more they should be exposed to intercultural education in order to prevent and deal with the stereotypes they learn in their home environment, in schools, the local community and the mass media (Lee, Park, & Watson, 2011). Both teachers and managers of educational units are the guides of students in a direction aimed at understanding and accepting other cultures (Simmons, 2016).

The general leadership literature contains detailed descriptions of the desirable characteristics, qualities, and skills of a leader. As there are always two sides, there are also characteristics that are not desirable for the role of a leader in an intercultural school unit, such as excessive egoism, emotional instability, and even racist perceptions (Lahdenpera, 2002). The same characteristics may apply to the educator, as he is leading the classroom towards educational goals.

Among the characteristics considered vital for leaders are a sense of commitment, compassion, a sense of social responsibility and a genuine concern for fellow human beings. The most important characteristic is the ability to communicate in cross-cultural environments as the leader is called upon to communicate with children from diverse cultures and to effectively manage cultural "bridging" situations. Intercultural communication skills as a cognitive and intellectual ability are considered, perhaps, the most valuable characteristic of the school leader. Practically, the school leader must be aware of the diversity and its effect on everyone's worldview within the school and at the same time to be able to acquire knowledge about the cultures or divergences that exist in the given institution as well as make direct contact with them. Finally, proportional weight must be given to the importance of differences, their extent, symbols, and potential conflicts, while it must be positively disposed towards change of any nature (Boonstra, 2019)

Inside the classroom, the school must accept and promote the diversity of society by ensuring equal opportunities for learning. There are several reasons that make interculturality difficult, if not impossible, to exist. One of them could be considered the role of the teacher who simply might not be able to pursue interculturality. However, it should be taken under consideration that a professional who is part of an educational unit is also part of a larger chain and receives and executes strict guidelines from the Management, while he is required to comply with the detailed syllabus and regulations that apply both in an institution as well as in the country. As a result, it is possible that teachers to have not only reduced expectations but also reduced resources to achieve their work (Miled, 2019). Reduced resources may include funds, available time, assistance from leadership or other teachers, and the training each of them has received. This luck of resources might as well lead for the worker to develop a reservation or even a suspicion towards anything new or different, such as the deployment of art to achieve pedagogical goals., It should be apparent that not only teachers but also every professional must be adequately trained in any subject they are asked to apply or teach. Teachers must be able to express what they want at all times: before, during and after special programs, while often these programs are short-term and fragmented (Androulakis, Kitsiou, Paparoidami, Skourmalla, & Sotiropoulou, 2015). It is also understandable that teachers may have some problems in their classroom when communicating with their students and in these issues may be included the language barrier prejudices, comparisons, stereotypes, and stress (Barna, 1994).

Ultimately, an educator contributes in its own way to the development of critical thinking, to the encouragement of participation in democratic processes and to the limitation of the discrepancy between ideal and reality. The professor

should be taught and practice interculturality himself before attempting to teach it (Bal & Savas, 2022)

The teacher, as a leader of the school class, is called not only to teach intercultural culture to his students, but also to overcome the personal opinions and beliefs that, perhaps, he himself has and to be an example to be imitated through his behavior (Yan, 2021). After all, the teacher has been officially recognized as an institution of intercultural education by Law 2413 (Official Gazette A` 124/14-6-96). This movement was essentially the first organized effort for interculturalism in Greek education policy.

4   CONCLUSION

School environments and classrooms that include students from diverse backgrounds may bring children into contact with diversity, but this does not guarantee acceptance. Family, society, and education, particularly foreign language education, can collaboratively lay the foundations for cultivating not only the mind but also the soul, turning young people into bearers of moral and emotional values (Davis, 2021). Foreign language education, in particular, plays a pivotal role in this cultural exchange, as it provides students with a direct pathway to explore the richness of other cultures through language acquisition.

The multicultural environment, therefore, is not limited in time and space but has clear goals, including fostering cultural understanding and acceptance. Young people need to be made aware of ethnocentric perceptions that demonize anything different and target it with negative attitudes. Foreign language education, by enabling students to engage with the languages and cultures of others, serves as a powerful tool in breaking down these barriers. Through language learning, students gain insights into the nuances of different cultures, leading to a more profound appreciation of diversity.

A direct impact of multicultural education, coupled with foreign language instruction, is the softening of stereotypes and prejudices, as well as the cultivation of socio-political filters for assessing people according to sound value judgment. In learning a foreign language, students often immerse themselves in the culture associated with that language, helping them understand the perspectives and values of another society. This immersion contributes significantly to the reduction of stereotypes and the promotion of empathy and tolerance.

In conclusion, intercultural education, especially when intertwined with foreign language learning, equips students with the ability to accept and embrace diversity. This acceptance is closely linked to the reduction of marginalization and crime rates (Huber, 2012). The role of the educator seems to be crucial in this process, which develops in two segments: the culture-language axis, where foreign language education plays a central role, and the self-global community axis. This holistic approach to education not only promotes cultural awareness but also empowers students to become responsible global citizens.

This expanded perspective on intercultural education and its integration with foreign language learning provides new insights that can guide future efforts to standardize the intercultural education process. As the world continues to become more interconnected, with new intercultural activities occurring every day, it is imperative that educators adapt their methods to prepare students for a diverse and interconnected world.

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