

INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN NORTH MACEDONIA: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyze the curricula of teaching English as a foreign language with emphasis on the intercultural content. The analysis will confirm that, the foreign language methodology in the Republic of North Macedonia is still traditional and very often oriented towards the teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation method and puts emphasis only on language knowledge and not towards the trend of intercultural communication competence. One of the aims of any methodology in foreign language teaching is to improve the foreign language ability of the student and this can be achieved by the intercultural communication competence. This means that the aim of the modern way of teaching and learning a foreign language is the ability to communicate with people from the foreign countries in order to get the opportunity to perceive the world from another point of view i.e. to learn and discover new cultures and their ways of life. Intercultural communication is becoming an essential part of the education system nowadays because of globalization, immigration and the multicultural work environments. The need for training, knowledge and research in this field is increasing because of the recent trends in education. Thus, teachers need support and professional development related to intercultural communication especially training connected to ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism. When people have mutual experiences this leads to deeper understandings of the group. It is not surprising that the idioms, proverbs and non-verbal gestures are very often misunderstood by people who are outside the group i.e. from a different culture. In order to communicate, if people are from a different culture, they do not just need a mutual language, but they should also make an effort to understand the culture. No matter the fact that English language has become a global language, its use as a means of communication cannot remove the need for cultural understanding between people from different cultures. Communication, as an element of culture is a symbolic process by which people pass the information to each other and create shared meanings. Intercultural competence is essential when learning a foreign language and it cannot be denied that by learning a language one can only become interculturally competent. Moreover, learning a foreign language is the most effective way to understand and learn more about how the language shapes the worldview of the other and this comes to be the central aim of intercultural competence. Finally, it can be concluded that teaching a foreign language is much more than improving the knowledge without learning the culture explicitly.

Keywords: Education, intercultural competence, communication, English language.

1. INTRODUCTION

English language teaching has inevitably oriented towards intercultural communication because it has become a language for international communication due to globalization, immigration and the diverse societies. The *UNESCO World Report* in the field of cultural diversity, defines this notion as a mere fact: there exists a wide range of distinct cultures, which can be readily distinguished on the basis of ethnographic observation, even if the contours delimiting a particular culture prove more difficult to establish than might at first sight appear ¹. Thus, the increased contacts of different cultures give another dimension of the cultural diversity along with the linguistic practices because of the technological developments. Nowadays, people live in a digital era and contact more and more as a result of the emergence of the Internet. The Internet enabled people to communicate with other people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Communication is achieved because of different reasons: business, cooperation, science, education, mass media, entertainment, tourism but also because immigration brought about by labor shortage or political conflicts. Hence, the idea of intercultural communication is to break down the barriers among people of different cultures by learning and appreciating each culture, avoid stereotypes and accept every culture as it is.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The role of language in human life has been of great importance since ancient times to this day. In a rapidly developing multicultural world, it occupies an increasingly important place, and research in this area leads to awareness and emphasis on the important position that language has in human beings. Within language learning, language is perceived as a system of different rules and rarely draws attention to its particular link to intercultural

¹UNESCO World report in cultural diversity (2009). *Investing in cultural diversity and Intercultural dialogue*. Paris.

communication. If we look at the language from a traditional point of view, we will find some well-known and widely discussed functions that it exercises: communication, creative interpretation, communication, expressing opinions, etc. However, it often appears as a mediator or bridge between different cultures. Research on language functions also reveals the diversity that exists in different languages and cultures. In language learning, diversity often exists on the one hand between learners themselves and on the other hand between learners and the teacher. There is always a great deal of creativity in this process, as each of them is studying the language and culture of the other, often interprets them, understands and uses them in their own individual way. There are different approaches to intercultural learning. In some, language is represented as an essential part, and in others it is neglected. Linguistic and intercultural competences do not exist in parallel and are not interchangeable. In some cases there is a high level of foreign language communicative competence, but not very well developed intercultural competence. However, in order to achieve successful intercultural communication and to use intercultural competence, it is very important that linguistic competence exists. This is especially true when there are problematic situations in intercultural interaction. It is then that linguistic competence becomes essential. Knowledge about foreign culture is not negligible, though it will hardly be sufficient without the necessary linguistic knowledge. Of course, it can be argued that the linguistic competence is good to overtake the intercultural competence in a way or acquire it in parallel with it.

Cultural awareness is very important when it comes to communication with people from different cultures. The reason is that people observe, assess and interpret things in another manner. Sometimes, cultural misunderstandings make the business harder to expand, develop or even make it impossible. It is by every mean essential to increase cultural awareness and knowledge of intercultural communication because of the different aspects of people's lives and this can help people further increase the awareness of their own culture. However, other important aspects of life are important when dealing with intercultural communication. According to Martin and Nakayama (2010), there are six imperatives for studying intercultural communication. The self-awareness imperative is about increasing understanding of one's own location in terms of political, social and historical context. The demographic imperative focuses on the changing migration whereas diversity raises questions about class and religion. The economic imperative is about the issue of globalization and the need for intercultural understanding in order to reach the global market. Technology gives more and more information and increased contact with different people from all around the world. The peace imperative is about colonialism, economic disparities, racial, ethnic and religious differences. This issue asks the question "Can individuals of different genders, ages, ethnicities, races, languages, and religions peacefully coexist on the planet?". According to McLean "the peace imperative, or the consideration of conflict and how we resolve it, is an important aspect of intercultural communication" (McLean, 2015, p.250). The conflict as an element of communication is not absent in communication but it is actually a state in which conflicts are resolved through negotiation and understanding. Finally the ethical imperative strives to increase the understanding of the universalist, relativist and dialogic approach to ethical issues. When all these imperatives are taken into account, one develops self-reflexivity, a sense of social justice and responsibility and a greater curiosity and need to learn more about others and their cultures.

Intercultural communication has been an important issue since 1959, when Edward T. Hall introduced this term in his book *The Silent Language*. This book is sometimes called "the field's founding document". He was one of the first researchers to differentiate cultures on the basis of how communications are sent and received and managed to define intercultural communication as communication between persons of different cultures. Within the books of this field, intercultural communication competence is almost synonymous with communicative competence but gives emphasis of the cultural context (Chen & Starosta, 1996). Today's immigration around the world, and the challenges that it brings in terms of multicultural and intercultural policies, is another reason to study and implement intercultural communication in everyday teaching and learning. According to Friske, communication involves interaction and it can be defined as "social interaction through messages" (Friske, 1990). So, communication as a dynamic and systematic process always occurs in a certain context and depends on contextual rules of a certain culture. Gibson (2002) states that "communication is defined as the exchange of meaning". It involves sending and receiving information between a sender and receiver. Intercultural communication takes place when the sender and the receiver are from different cultures. Hall states that if we are freed from ignorance and negative attributions, we will be able to build better relationships with a wide variety of people (Gibson, 2002 p.26).

The biggest benefit of studying intercultural communication is to help people appreciate cultural differences by seeing the value in the different worldviews and the way other people live. "Intercultural competence is a powerful tool in the fight against intolerance, xenophobia and ethnocentrism" (Mrnjaus, p.11). When people from different cultural backgrounds start a conversation and see themselves as representatives of their own country, cultural barriers to communication are likely to happen due to the differences in their patterns of life, social style, customs, world view, religion, and philosophy. From one hand this accent of national identity leaves a possibility for them to

rely on stereotypes and thus decrease the person to be taken as a representative stereotypical example of their country and culture. On the other hand, there are arguments that very often when students are taught a foreign language they are not introduced with the cultural dimension. Bennett (2004) claims that people often tend to overestimate their intercultural sensitivity and people do this “more than others, which means that they rate themselves relatively high in ethnorelativism while still having a high profile in ethnocentrism” (p.7). Finally, learning the language without the cultural dimension takes certain risks such as relying on stereotypes. It has been widely recognized in the language teaching profession that learners need not just knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways. (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002).

In order to incorporate intercultural communication in the English language classroom these three things should be considered:

1. If students enter an intercultural classroom, the teachers must guide them and describe the environment and when this happens than the learning is learner-centered, engaging, interactive, participatory and cooperative.
2. A language course concerned with culture broadens its scope from a focus of improving the four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking in order to acquire *cultural skills* – the intercultural learner serves as a mediator b/n different social groups that use different languages and varieties (Corbett, 2003, p 11).
3. If teachers become aware that language skills and knowledge need to be connected to the intercultural competence, students will feel that energy also and will show much better results.

That is the reason why the intercultural competence is essential in achieving goals on an international level.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULA OF THE STATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Since this paper is oriented towards measuring the intercultural communication competence among teachers and students from the state secondary schools in Strumica, analysis of the curriculum of the state secondary and vocational schools is needed in order to justify the situation in the Republic of Macedonia i.e. in Strumica. If one takes a glance at the prescribed curriculum for state vocational schools and gymnasium for the first and second year it can be seen that there is one component which is present in the curriculum named as culture and the primary aims for I and II grade are the following:

- to get to know the socio-cultural characteristics of other countries for developing positive attitude towards their own cultural identity and respect for other cultures
- to develop curiosity and interest for other cultures and to understand the complexity of the significance of culture and studying culture as well as the challenges that arise from the multi-ethnic surrounding
- to develop skills for perceiving culture similarities and differences, critical thinking of cultural stereotypes as basis for developing cultural understanding and tolerance. ²

More precisely in the curriculum for third year vocational school the culture component is understood within the following context: "the student should acquire knowledge and understanding of socio-cultural, economic and political characteristics of other countries through the vocabulary and communicative models in order to develop positive attitude towards their own and other's cultures for better mutual understanding and cooperation as well as respecting the differences between them. "

Speaking about the fourth grade of vocational education, in the process of studying English language, the cultural component has the following aim: "the student should acquire knowledge and understanding of some cultural characteristics between personal, social and economic attitudes in other countries for building positive attitude towards our personal and other cultures for better mutual understanding and cooperation as well as respecting the differences between them."

It can be stated that the prescribed aim is very similar with the aims mentioned above for the I, II, and III year whereas from year to year there is a little change of the given aim i.e. that in the final two years the students should develop the cultural awareness and respect the differences between cultures which means that they should become aware that there are other cultures which exist beside their own.

The curriculum for the gymnasium education states that the culture component for first and second year is the same as the one in the state vocational education and the only change are some added topics. In the second year of

² "Official gazette of Republic of Macedonia" No 44/1995; 24/1996; 34/1996; 35/1997; 82/1999; 29/2002; 40/2003; 42/2003; 67/2004; 55/2005; 113/2005; 35/2006; 30/2007; 49/2007; 81/2008; 92/2008; 33/2010;116/2010; 156/2010; 18/2011; 42/2011; 51/2011; 6/2012; 100/2012, 24/2013, 41/2014, 116/2014 и 135/2014)the Minister for education has approved the curricula for the subject English as a first foreign language for the secondary (gymnasium, vocational, art, sports academy) education.

studying English in the gymnasium education, it is explained that the culture component says will be upgraded in the third year. Finally, in the fourth year of gymnasium education, the cultural component is enriched with the following topics: Social History, Music, Film, Fashion, important persons and events from science, technique, literature, arts and media.

Based on the above given information taken from the officially prescribed curriculum from the Ministry of Education in the Republic of Macedonia it can be concluded that all the listed aims in the component named culture are almost the same for the I,II,III and IVth grade where English language as a first foreign language is obligatory in the curriculum. The content and examples for implementation of these components are not the same throughout the four years and the teacher is expected to fulfill the aims in any way he or she considers possible. According to Dervin and Gross (2016) "the concept of IC can be polysemic and empty in education: it either means too much or too little. Researchers, practitioners but also decision makers use it almost automatically without always worrying about the meanings, the impact it has on those who are embedded in its discussions and the injustices it can lead to (p.19)." In times where the other is usually stereotyped, rejected and even abused, it is urgent to find the right approaches to deal with the issue of interculturality. In the area which is the subject of this research, there is an attempt to start implementing lessons with multi-ethnic integration because the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), have ran a project but not all schools had the chance to participate in it. The intention of this research is to point out to the necessity of introducing a multicultural curricula and developing the intercultural competences among both students and teachers in the Republic of Macedonia. Working on these segments would not only be beneficial in the treatment of students belonging to the smaller ethnic groups in the country, but would potentially influence the mind set and world view of all the students regardless of their ethnic background. Taylor (1997) points out that the prime aim of intercultural education is to raise awareness of certain key issues: belonging to a culture and the existence of different cultures and all of this geared toward learning to respect and appreciate diversity. If students and teachers are acquainted with the intercultural competence they will learn that a foreign language means also learning about the certain culture which is essential for successful intercultural communication. Hence, developing intercultural competence among teachers is essential in achieving goals on an international level and more precisely by implementing intercultural competence in education a bigger cultural awareness can be attained.

According to Deardorff (2006) the assessment of intercultural competence is an outcome of internationalization efforts. She defines internationalization as "a process of integrating an international perspective into teaching, research, and service aspects of higher education that incorporates an ongoing, future-oriented, interdisciplinary, leadership-driven vision" (p.5). It must be understood that not only knowledge of other cultures is enough to develop intercultural competence. Other skills and attitudes are needed for successful interaction with people from different backgrounds. Chen and Starosta (1996) identified that the intercultural person is one who respects other cultures and has tolerance for differences and identified four skill areas: personality strength, communication skills, psychological adjustment and cultural awareness. In order to achieve successful communication, the interlocutors should know themselves first. Their self-awareness should express friendly personality if they want to be competent in the intercultural communication. Furthermore, individuals should possess skills for effective communication such as message skills, behavioral flexibility and interaction management. Social skills such as empathy and identity are essential as well. The ability to put yourself in the shoes of the other i.e. to experience the same emotions as the other and being able to deal with diverse people in different situations makes a competent intercultural communicator (Chodzkiene, 2014).

Deardorff (2006) points out that a variety of methods can be used to assess intercultural competence, such as observation, portfolio, and interviews(p.73). The most cited model of Bennett (1993) known as Bennett's Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) will be used in this study along with interviews and observation of lessons and is to be discussed in details in the literature review.

Up to now, the foreign language methodology in the Republic of Macedonia is still traditional and very often oriented towards the teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation method and puts emphasis only on language knowledge and not towards the trend of intercultural communication competence. According to Boumová (2008), one of the aims of any methodology in foreign language teaching is to improve the foreign language ability of the student and this can be achieved by the intercultural communication competence. This means that the aim of the modern way of teaching and learning a foreign language is the ability to communicate with people from the foreign countries in order to get the opportunity to perceive the world from another point of view i.e. to learn and discover new cultures and their ways of life.

4. CONCLUSION

Taking the analysis of the curricula into account it can be stated that the cultural component included in these books needs to be upgraded with deeper knowledge and topics that will attract the students to become more interested in cultural matters. My impression is that there is an attempt to include the cultural component but in an artificial way. The reason for that is the fact that the intercultural pedagogical method develops cultural awareness and attitude of students which enable them to acquire greater responsibility for oneself, but also for others, with a transition from ethnocentric to the ethno-relative vision. As Byram emphasizes: "the significance of students learning about a certain culture within foreign language learning and changing the focus in foreign language from merely transferring messages into the cultural meaning behind even the simplest of messages will help contribute to the general education of all learners within an international community" (1990, p.5). Byram also suggests that teachers implement authentic materials such as documents, field work, audio and video recordings (1990); all of which can be found through the Internet which contains thousands of authentic websites, videos, and materials which educators can bring into the classroom to give students a more authentic experience regarding the culture of the target language. If teachers want to prepare their students, they should have developed intercultural communication competence. "When intercultural communication competence is an integral part of the language classroom, learners experience how to appropriately use language in order to build understandings and relationships with members from other cultures" (Moeller, Nugent, 2014, p.14). With the recent methodology of ELT, teachers are now the facilitators in learning the foreign language and students are more autonomous and are involved in the process of learning by setting their own goals, do their tasks and self-check their progress and at the same time acquiring the cultural awareness by interacting with students from different ethnic backgrounds. Galante (2015) confirms that the recent pedagogy entails the use of foreign language in order to criticize worldviews and to construct and reconstruct knowledge through social relations of cultures, race, ethnicity, gender, and identities. In connection to this, Foncha (2014) concludes that during social interaction, students work collaborate between each other and develop critical thinking skills by observing, analyzing and evaluating information.

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