CULTURAL ACCOMMODATION IN LEARNING AND TEACHING THE NORWEGIAN LANGUAGE IN CLUJ- NAPOCA

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Abstract:

This paper intends to focus on the role of socio-cultural accommodation and cultural awareness in relation to both learning and teaching the Norwegian language. A research has been conducted in order to investigate the would-be teachers' points of view regarding the appropriateness of teaching Norwegian by focusing on enhancing both cultural and linguistic elements. The would-be teachers enrolled in an initial teacher training program have proven to be aware of the intricate links that exist between language and culture. They have understood that Norwegian cannot be taught without taking into consideration its cultural elements.

Rezumat:

Acest studiu își propune să pună accentul pe relevanța integrării aspectelor socio-culturale și a conștientizării culturale în contextul predării și învățării limbii norvegiene. Cercetarea realizată a avut ca scop identificarea perspectivei pe care studenții care participă la programul de formare inițială și-au format-o cu privire la relevanța predării limbii norvegiene dintr-o perspectivă care susține utilizarea integrată a culturii și a limbii. Studenții care sunt înregistrați în cadrul programului de formare inițială au dovedit faptul că sunt conștienți de conexiunile existente între limbă și cultură. Aceștia au înțeles faptul că limba norvegiană nu poate să fie predată fără a lua în considerare elementele culturale care se regăsesc în limbă.

Keywords: culture, foreign language learning and teaching, cultural accommodation, cultural awareness, intercultural competence

This paper is comprised of two parts. The first part provides details about the intricate relationship existing between culture and foreign language learning. When learning a foreign language one has to accommodate to a new social and cultural environment. This process of acculturation is not a natural one; it takes time, effort and willingness to accept *the other*. The development of the students' intercultural competence within initial teacher training programs is also brought under discussion. The second part of the paper presents details about the research and the results that have been reached.

Culture and foreign language learning

Culture is a concept that is difficult to pin down because it means so many things to so many people. It can comprise the beliefs, way of life, art, and customs that are shared and accepted by people in a particular society.¹ Still, another definition of culture that is more appropriate in the context of foreign language learning is that suggested by Steele: "culture is the invisible component that becomes visible when foreign language learners begin to converse with a native speaker interlocutor and realize that the linguistic code by itself does not guarantee successful communication"².

When learning a language, one's mother tongue or a foreign language, the learner is exposed to various cultural norms and conventions because "language is not a culture-free code"³. In the case of the mother tongue, the child acquires simultaneously both linguistic and cultural knowledge in an unconscious way. On the other hand, the learners who learn a foreign language have to accommodate in a conscious manner to new cultural and linguistic norms.

¹ from the Latin *cultura*: to cultivate, http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/culture_1 (accessed April 7, 2013)

² Ross Steele, 'Developing intercultural competence through foreign-language instruction: Challenges and choices', in *Linguistics, language acquisition, and language variation: current trends and future prospects*. Ed. James E. Alatis et al. (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 72.

³ Claire Kramsch, *Language and Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8.

When interacting and communicating with an interlocutor, the speaker cannot transmit a neutral message since even “through their register (formal, informal), their key or tone of voice (...), their choice of lexical and grammatical structures, the distribution of their silences, participants in verbal exchanges play out various social roles that reveal a great deal about the social persona they represent”⁴. This inseparable bond between language and culture should represent an utmost concern for language teachers who want their students to be proficient in an intercultural dialogue. If in everyday life “culture is communication and communication is culture”⁵ then this pattern should also be applied in the foreign language classroom which is sometimes wrongfully perceived as being an artificial environment. The classroom can be reduced to a micro-cultural level because it is comprised of students who have different cultural backgrounds and different mother tongues. Therefore, it is necessary that foreign language courses address the issue of cultural diversity and intercultural contact since students are going to interact with individuals inside and outside the classroom. Lies Serçu sustains this point of view and states that teachers “have to prepare learners for life in an increasingly multicultural world, in which they have to be fluent in more than one language and interculturally competent”⁶. In addition, foreign language learning should not be reduced to acquiring linguistic competence i.e. lexical, phonological, syntactical knowledge, because successful communication cannot be resumed to this narrow perspective.

In responding to diversity in schools Dunn suggests that “it is important for the field of second language teacher education to continue to look beyond the emphasis given to teaching grammar, vocabulary, and language skills”⁷. Knowledge of grammar and knowledge of culture should be taught in an integrated way since a foreign language environment is challenging for the language learners because “they have to enhance

⁴ Ibid., 32.

⁵ Edward Hall, *The Silent Language* (New York: Anchor Books, 1981), 186.

⁶ Lies Serçu, “Teaching Foreign Languages in an Intercultural World”, in *Foreign Language Teachers and Intercultural Competence. An International Investigation*, ed. Lies Serçu et al. (UK, USA, Canada: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 2005), 163.

⁷ William Dunn, “Working Toward Social Inclusion Through Concept Development in Second language Teacher Education”, in *Research on Second language Teacher Education. A Sociocultural perspective on Professional Development*, ed. Karen Johnson E., Paula Golombek, (New York, UK: Routledge, 2011), 64.

background knowledge and sociocultural competence without direct contact with the target language environment and culture’’⁸. That is why this cultural accommodation can be understood as a process of taking small steps towards adjusting to a new culture that is governed by new rules.

Initial teacher training programs

In 1977 the Council of Europe conducted a training course for those responsible for teaching migrant children and Rey von-Allmen “(...) invited its members to adopt an intercultural approach’’⁹. This was the first time that a program targeted an understanding of the intricate links existing between the mother tongue culture and the target language culture. Later on in 1984 it was “passed a recommendation stating that teacher training should be based on intercultural understanding’’¹⁰. This was a turning point in the methodology of teaching foreign languages. It was acknowledged that teachers would need a different set of skills, abilities and knowledge when teaching in multicultural environments. A great number of documents and recommendations (Profile for Language Teacher Education, The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, The White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, The European Language Portfolio etc.) imply that language and culture should both be integrated into the foreign language classroom.

Dirba implies that “language teachers are rarely specialists in intercultural learning. Therefore, language teacher education programs need to be complemented by courses that help future language teachers to develop intercultural competence (...)’’¹¹. In addition, Smolcic suggests that teacher education programs “need to be concerned with helping teachers to examine their own cultural assumptions and inquire into the backgrounds of their students’’¹². Teachers should help students overcome the problems

⁸ Istvan Kecskes and Tunde Papp, *Foreign Language and Mother Tongue*, (NJ and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 2000), 108.

⁹ Micheline Rey-von Allmen, “The Intercultural Perspective and its Development through Cooperation with the Council of Europe”, in *Intercultural and Multicultural Education. Enhancing Global Interconnectedness*, ed. Carl Grant A., Agostino Portera, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 34.

¹⁰ Ibid., 23.

¹¹ Mara Dirba, “Towards proteophilic competence? Intercultural learning and language education in Latvia”. *Intercultural Education* 18, no. 3 (2007): 193–205.

¹² Elizabeth Smolcic, “Becoming a Cultural Responsive Teacher. Personal Transformation and Shifting Identities during Immersion Experience Abroad”, in *Research on Second Language* 162

they might encounter in relation to being faced with new values, beliefs, and a new conceptual framework that characterizes the foreign language. Because globalization enables people to interact in so many ways and on so many levels "[T]he need to understand the role of culture in interpersonal communication is growing"¹³. In view of the arguments presented above one can draw the conclusion that teacher training programs should accommodate the requirements of today's society and address the diverse teachers' needs.

The Didactics of the Norwegian language

The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union adopted in 2006 the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages¹⁴ that sets out eight key competences for lifelong learning. These eight competences have been included in the Romanian Law on National Education¹⁵ passed in 2011. Every student who graduates the compulsory education in Romania should acquire these competences that provide a cross-curricular perspective on learning. The students who are enrolled in the initial teacher training program at bachelor level are supposed to have already acquired these competences to a certain degree. We suggest that would-be teachers of Norwegian require three key competences in order to develop their intercultural competence: to be able to communicate in Norwegian, to have social and civic competences and to be aware of cultural awareness and cultural expression.

A competence-based curriculum has also been introduced into the Norwegian educational system. The National Law of Education passed in 2006 in Norway¹⁶ focuses on four main competence areas: written resources, spoken resources, multimodal resources and literature and culture. If the first three competence areas intend to improve the students' skills (writing, speaking, listening and reading) and familiarize them with different types of

Teacher Education. A Sociocultural perspective on Professional Development, ed. Karen E. Johnson, Paula Golombe, (New York, UK: Routledge, 2011), 15.

¹³ Myron W. Lustig and Jolene Koester, *Intercultural Competence: Intercultural Competence Across Cultures*, 6th edition (Boston, USA: Pearson Education Inc., 2010), 3.

¹⁴ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32006H0962:EN:NOT>. (accessed April 7, 2013).

¹⁵ <http://www.edu.ro/index.php/legaldocs/14847>, art. 68. (1), 11. (accessed April 7, 2013).

¹⁶ <http://www.norway.gr/PageFiles/372262/Kunnskapsloftet.pdf> (accessed August 8, 2013).

resources, the last area, namely literature and culture focuses on developing students' national and international perspectives. The Norwegian Education Law¹⁷ states that students should be stimulated to develop their identity, their social and cultural competence. The Norwegian language as a school subject focuses on enhancing cultural understanding, on communication and identity development from an international perspective. Because the Norwegian society is becoming more multicultural the international perspective in education has gained a paramount importance in the Norwegian educational law. "These international perspectives can sustain cultural understanding, tolerance and respect for people from other cultures"¹⁸. In this respect the Norwegian cultural heritage comprises a selection of texts that are used for didactic purposes in order to acquire new and unexpected meanings from a globalized perspective.¹⁹

The Didactics of the Norwegian language, an optional course that is offered to the students who are enrolled in an initial teacher training module at Babeș - Bolyai University also focuses on the above mentioned competence areas. The course intends to provide students with guidelines within the teacher professional career. In order to become teachers of Norwegian students should acquire strong subject-matter knowledge, pedagogical skills, and the ability to work with learners belonging to different age groups. The duration of the course is 14 weeks, namely 4 hours each week (two hours of course and two hours of seminar). The course offers five credits (ECTS). The evaluation consists of a written exam and a formative evaluation (presentations, projects, assignments, etc.).

The course aims to familiarize would-be teachers of Norwegian with the theoretical and practical implications that emerge from teaching a foreign language. The academic skills targeted by the course refer to: developing critical thinking, learning autonomy and time management skills, improving intercultural communicative skills, tackling different genres and understanding various registers, providing arguments using connectors, summarizing/analysing a text (video) etc. The course intends to develop several transversal competences such as: learning to learn and lifelong learning skills, social competence, digital literacy, cultural awareness,

¹⁷ Ibid., 5-7.

¹⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

interpersonal skills, self-reflexive attitude, group work, and professional ethics.

The research

The current research aimed to identify the would-be teachers' opinions regarding the appropriateness of teaching Norwegian by enhancing both linguistic and cultural elements. Taking into consideration the research question and the number of respondents we considered that the suitable research method was the qualitative one. The research consisted in a questionnaire that has been applied to the students who are enrolled in the course *The Didactics of the Norwegian language*. The students have also been enquired about their confidence in identifying Norwegian cultural elements in different types of teaching resources.

Location: The Department of Scandinavian languages and literature, The Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca.

Span of time: The research was conducted in the period 25th of March - 8th of April 2013.

Respondents: Currently there are fifty-five students enrolled at the Department of Scandinavian languages and literature in their second year. Their specialization is either Norwegian major or minor. These specializations offered at Babeş-Bolyai University are unique in Romania at Bachelor level. Twelve students have Norwegian as major. Out of these students eight have enrolled in the optional teacher training course. These eight students have responded to the questionnaire.

The percentage of second year Norwegian major students who have enrolled in the initial teacher training program is presented in figure 1 below:

Figure 1.

The percentage of would-be teachers

In terms of gender we can state that all of our respondents were females and no male has enrolled in this teacher training course. The students who have enrolled in the didactics course are not very confident that they would perform in this field of activity. Six of them replied that they are 'not sure' if teaching suits them. When asked what career options they have almost all of the students answered that they would like to work in other domains such as interpreting, translations and public relations. Some of the reasons that sustain their choice refer to the low pecuniary advantages that are gained by teachers, the status of teachers in today's society and the heavy workload they would have to perform in their activity. Moreover, there are many multinational companies in Cluj-Napoca that recruit our students even before their graduation. Genpact, Emerson, Sykes and Bombardier provide outsourcing services for the Scandinavian countries and they are very much interested in collaborating with our students. Therefore, from this point of view, teaching cannot compete with a job that provides higher pecuniary advantages.

Recruitment: the respondents have been recruited from the above mentioned group. The students volunteered to take part in this research and they have been informed about the details of the study.

Assumptions: the findings are based on the assumption that the students' answers reflect their personal opinions.

Research presentation

A questionnaire with closed ended questions has been applied. The first part of the questionnaire gave students the possibility to evaluate their cultural knowledge about Norway. Students could choose answers ranging from 1 to 5 (details are presented in figure 2 below). The students have been asked the following questions:

- Q1: Rate your knowledge of Norwegian culture in the moment when you registered at the Faculty of Letters in Cluj-Napoca.
- Q2: How would you rate your knowledge of Norwegian culture now?
- Q3: Rate your knowledge of visible culture.
- Q4: Rate your knowledge of invisible culture.
- Q5: Rate your knowledge of non-verbal behaviour as concerns the Norwegian culture.

Figure 2 presents the data that have been obtained.

Figure 2. Knowledge of Norwegian culture

The results obtained for the first question indicate that when they enrolled in their first year the students were not so knowledgeable in identifying Norwegian cultural elements. The ratings provide the following details: three students had a very low level of knowledge of Norwegian

culture, three students had a low level and 2 students had an acceptable level. The answers to the second question indicate that students have improved their knowledge of Norwegian culture during their two years of academic studies. Three students have reached an *acceptable* level, four students have reached a *good level* and one student is confident that she has a *very good* command of Norwegian culture. Nevertheless, students tend to find it difficult to identify elements that pertain to the 'invisible' side of the culture. This rating (four students) could be explained by the fact that during the first three semesters students have focused on learning the structure and the vocabulary of the Norwegian language and have dedicated their time to acquiring factual knowledge about culture: holidays, traditions, literature, arts, history, culture and civilization etc. We consider that in order to be able to discuss with the students about the 'invisible' culture the first stage that has to be reached is to acquire knowledge about vocabulary and grammar. Without this knowledge students are not going to be able to decipher the cultural load of connotations. Only after students reach a satisfactory level of proficiency in Norwegian would they be able to work with authentic teaching resources (newspapers, songs, films etc.) in order to grasp the full meaning of the 'invisible' culture.

The students' knowledge of non-verbal behaviour associated with the Norwegian culture ranges at an acceptable level (four students). Students would have to pay more attention to the meaning of personal space, gestures, eye-contact etc. in order to be successful communicators. Still, we are confident that this type of knowledge is going to be attained by the end of the third year because students are involved in many activities that take place at the Scandinavian department (*Julefest* – Christmas holiday, *17. mai* – Constitution day, Norwegian film festivals etc.), they have the chance to attend to lectures delivered by visiting professors from Norway or they have the chance to receive one semester Erasmus scholarships to Norway. All these activities help them to improve their communication and non-verbal skills.

We asked students to rate their confidence in identifying Norwegian cultural elements while using different teaching resources: written form, audio resources and video resources.

Figure 3.

Teaching resources appropriate for identifying cultural elements

The results indicated in figure 3 suggest that students (6 students) are more confident when they work with visual aids. Likewise, they can grasp better the 'invisible' and 'visible'²⁰ parts of the Norwegian culture. Audio resources have both advantages and disadvantages when used in the foreign language classroom. Therefore, in the second year some students might find it difficult to listen to and understand conversations spoken in different dialects and in an informal style. That is why four students rated their knowledge as *acceptable* and three students rated it as *low*.

The second part of the questionnaire contained closed ended questions which targeted the students' opinions regarding the appropriateness of teaching Norwegian from an intercultural perspective, i.e. by focusing on cultural elements when teaching the foreign language. The students had to answer the following questions:

Q1: Do you think that the Norwegian language and the Norwegian culture should be taught separately?

²⁰ According to Guy Rocher, who created the model of the *cultural iceberg*, culture has visible and invisible parts. The invisible parts (values, attitudes, expectations, beliefs etc.) are sometimes difficult to grasp and to accept by an individual who has already been immersed into his/her mother tongue culture. <http://www.international.gc.ca/cfsi-icse/cil-cai/magazine/v02n01/doc3-eng.pdf> (accessed April 7, 2013).

Q2: Teachers should teach Norwegian by integrating cultural knowledge in their lessons.

Q3: Teachers should have at least a basic level of intercultural competence before teaching a foreign language.

Q4: Teachers should be preoccupied with promoting intercultural competence only when in the classroom there are learners having different ethnic backgrounds.

Q5: Intercultural competence can be acquired at school, in a formal setting.

Figure 4 presents the results:

Figure 4. Teaching language and culture in an integrated way

The results indicate that students (five students agree and three students strongly agree) are aware of the fact that language and culture should be taught in an integrated way. They also 'agree' (three students) and 'strongly agree' (four students) that teachers should have at least a basic level of intercultural competence. Still, a large number of students (seven students) stated that a teacher should not be preoccupied with promoting intercultural competence when learners have the same cultural background. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that there are many sub-cultures in every classroom, even though all the students have the same mother tongue. Being self-reflective about one's own culture is an attitude that lays the

foundation for becoming an intercultural competent speaker. The results that have been obtained at question no. 5 indicate that five students are not certain if intercultural competence can be acquired in a formal setting in the school. This result is contradictory because as depicted in figure 5 below, almost all the students consider textbooks and literature studied at university level as the main source of information for becoming familiarized with the Norwegian culture.

The students had to answer to the following question: *Which are your main sources of information for finding out more details about Norway's culture?* Their answers referring to different resources that facilitate the contact with the Norwegian culture could range from *never-seldom-sometimes-often* and *almost always*.

Figure 5. Teaching resources that facilitate the contact with the Norwegian culture

Most of the students consider that the resources which help them to grasp better the Norwegian culture are *literature*, *course books*, *newspapers* and

the Internet. Our students, like most of the teenagers have developed a keen interest in being always "online". They use the Internet not as a learning resource but as a space for socialization. Six students read often course books in order to understand cultural elements and two students consider course books as their main source of information for understanding Norwegian culture and civilization. None of the students (eight students) watches TV with the specific purpose of acquiring cultural elements. In fact the Internet has replaced nowadays the TV. Students can easily find TV programs on the Internet. This might constitute one of the reasons why students prefer other channels of information. All the students responded that they *often* read literature in order to find out cultural details. This last question related to the use of teaching resources indicates that students are already engaged in meaningful non-formal learning activities. Authentic teaching resources, such as newspaper articles, literature, pictures, songs etc. are definitely broadening the students' perspective on the Norwegian cultural heritage.

We hope that the questionnaires have provided an eye-opening experience to our students. In a multicultural society every teacher trainer should be concerned with finding new ways to increase the would-be teacher's interest in teaching language from an intercultural perspective.

Conclusions

This current research brought some perspectives on the way in which would-be teachers in their second year of Norwegian major studies, at Bachelor level at Babeș-Bolyai University, perceive the appropriateness of teaching Norwegian by focusing both on culture and language. Even if at the very start of their Norwegian university studies (keeping in mind the fact that Norwegian is taught at beginner level and students have no previous knowledge of Norwegian) the students' level of knowledge related to the Norwegian cultural heritage was quite low (six students provided this answer), after two years of study five of the students have reached a good or high level of knowledge. At the same time this study allows us to conclude that students have proven to be aware of the intricate links that exist between language and culture. Moreover, all the students agree that the Norwegian language cannot be taught without taking into consideration its cultural elements.

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