

## WHAT SKILLS DO FOREIGN LANGUAGES TEACHERS NEED IN THE 21ST CENTURY? AN INTERCULTURAL CONFIGURATION

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**Abstract:** Reforming the educational institution for accommodating intercultural values, which are permanently in its current programmes and methods, cannot be achieved only through the full and unconditional commitment of the teaching staff as agents of social change. Through their work, teachers fulfill two fundamental responsibilities: transmission of information and the formation of educated individuals. From this point of view, the new profile of the teacher of foreign languages, i.e. in intercultural configuration, does not essentially differ from the portrait of the professional didactics specialist -an open mind to new, ready to experiment with alternative teaching tools that encourage individuals to attain the goals set for learning, able to initiate communication but also concerned with his / her own professional development.

**Key words:** inter-cultural teaching, inter-cultural skills, inter-personal skills, life-long learning

### 1. Introduction

It would seem that in the 20th century in most countries of the world, the educational system was first of all an overview of things. Thus a unifying image was achieved, but the obvious disadvantage was that people could easily become tiny pieces on a much too crowded chess board.

Contemporary Romania witnesses more and more voices claiming the lack of role models for the young generation, which is considered to be a deficiency responsible, at least spiritually, for the nation. State N.A.Pop<sup>i</sup> does not to dispute the fact that, indeed, in the last decades no names of famous pedagogues have become known as it happened in previous centuries, but at the same time he believes in the existence of thousands of anonymous talented professionals in the field of education.

Without a doubt, language teaching has undergone important transformations in Romania during the last 25 years. There is a great opening towards the use of teaching methods and techniques, and a diversification of the teaching materials used. The study of foreign languages in today's Romania involves a thorough research of the English/French cultural space, etc., by means of literature and of the elements of culture and civilization. In the era of the 21st century, it is expected that foreign language teachers should keep up with all these transformations and encourage the young people to become active explorers of a less familiar cultural space.

### 2. Globalization, education, reform, curriculum, teaching staff

Globalization, human mobility, international, intercultural interaction and opening are phenomena characteristic of the current world and they cannot be ignored in the general field of education. Today the cultural diversity, the intrinsic feature of the

contemporary world (Vlăduțescu, 2012: 790) have become a dimension of the educational act. School, as the main educational factor cannot evade the social, economic, political or cultural influences when exercising its own influence on the education and training of individuals.

Reforming the educational institution for accommodating intercultural values, which are permanently in its current programmes and methods, cannot be achieved only through the full and unconditional commitment of the teaching staff as agents of social change. Through their work, teachers fulfill two fundamental responsibilities: transmission of information and the formation of educated individuals.

Given the primarily axiological dimension of the intercultural element, we can say that the modern teacher, even in a mostly homogeneous school environment from a linguistic and cultural point of view (such as the one in our country), has a duty to develop, or better said to update the powers of the intercultural trainer. The teacher guides the transformation of learning individuals, and beyond any scientific and pedagogical skills, the teacher shapes and facilitates inter-personal and intra-cultural relations. Learners are the carriers of different individual cultural background (i.e. different social and family environment, other learning experiences, etc.), even if they speak the same language and belong to the same parent culture.

A nodal point in the trajectory of reforming the system of higher education is the Bologna Declaration of 1999, approved and signed by the Ministers of education in twenty-nine countries, which made important decisions with a view to bringing the training to the labor market requirements. Among the major points of the reform is the internationalization of the curriculum for a broad opening up to European values. This provision requires the integration of the intercultural dimension in the process of teaching and learning. Therefore, the teaching staff has a key role in implementing the change: if the information transmitted and the psycho-pedagogical model are characterized by a low quality, below the standards to which it aspires through reforming the education system, then the learning individuals will not be adequately prepared for the required objectives.

Transition to a global society in the third millennium is marked by the intensification of co-existence of numerous cultural identities, simultaneously demonstrating a tendency toward a certain type of globalized civilization.

The respect for the diversity of cultures understood as systems of beliefs, values, traditions, customs and mentalities, is one of the dominant currents of phenomena and one of the most important achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ethno-civilization implies the disappearance of civilization as an autonomous element and moving away from a civilization we talk about to a civilization that we practice.

The communication therefore appears as deeply related to civilization due to at least two reasons: because it introduces the rules of interaction that change from one culture to another and because attached representations of words are essentially driven by the culture of the interlocutors. As a result foreign language learning must be based on maintaining strong and visible relationships between language-culture-civilization without changing the didactic paradigm, even when looking for a change in the professional practices.

Learning a foreign language does not mean a new label on objects, but getting used to analyzing the subject of linguistic communication.

### **3. The competencies of 21st century professionals in education**

What skills do teachers need in the 21st century? What initial and continuing training do they need? How can the most talented and motivated young people be attracted to the profession of teacher? How can the best teachers be kept in schools that have the greatest need of them? How can professionals in the field of education include systematic reflection on practice and seek to improve education? How can universities cooperate in this respect?

Teachers continue to be the bedrock of any educational system. Indeed, it is a simple matter to make a balance sheet of their essential role, if we remember that they are responsible ultimately for the guidance of children and young people in the process of learning skills that will be essential for them, if they want to become active and participatory citizens engaged in social progress. However, the task of being a teacher has become increasingly more complex. In our globalized world, the functions of the educator are to be redefined in order to be able to cope with the challenges of a knowledge-based economy. Access to compulsory education has reached a progressively wider range of social sectors, which require flexible responses from teachers, in order to cover various educational needs.

However, this complexity faced by teachers was not clearly approached, whether we speak of trainers that should provide innovative ideas, or of the initial training and professional development models which could provide the tools and incentives to address daily work with confidence and make the profession an attractive one. Finally, the degree of responsibility which it has conferred to these professionals does not seem to have been accompanied by a similar degree of social recognition of the profession of teacher, a recognition that would establish the means to attract and keep more high-quality teachers in schools. Therefore, the proper interpretation of what a good professional in education in the 21st century seems to raise an issue which is still in the resolution and, in any case, one that is vital to the provision of quality education as a public service.

### **4. Permanent training and learning**

The teaching career involves a process of continuous training linked to current developments. This process is not a remedy to possible deficiencies in training during the initial teaching career but in a postmodern the meaning it is conceived as a process of long and continuous learning that refine and renew professional practices by updating the initial knowledge. Lifelong learning means "acquiring and updating all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge or skills through activities and practices that require the involvement of educators for their own knowledge, improving skills, analysis and development of professional attitudes".<sup>ii</sup>

Through the concept of continuous learning is thus promoted the development of knowledge and skills necessary for a proper adaptation to the requirements of a company based on cultural and linguistic diversity. From a broad perspective, the objectives of the lifelong personal and professional development of the teacher are: upgrading basic skills and acquiring new skills, the use of new strategies, methods, means of teaching and learning-evaluation, applying educational paradigms in the class, school and encouraging the development of psychosocial behavior, inter-disciplinarity necessary for human resources management and stimulating teaching research for innovation at the individual and team level.

A central place in the continuous training of teachers is occupied by communication skills. They are to be found in both the European profile of the teacher as well as in the national standard for all categories of teaching staff. In the European profile of the effective teacher, the communication competence is described as the ability to initiate discussions with the pupils, to make oneself understood, to select information and action sequences and to connect apparently contradictory positions, to create opportunities for feedback to the students, to operate with non-verbal language and to initiate conscious supportive behaviors, linking them to clear communicative purposes. In a nutshell, it is about the ability to generate a favourable school environment of communication and learning.

The teaching/learning process is a specific process of communication and, as a researcher, remarked, it is to a large extent a profession of communication (Asante, 1992: 28). On the one hand, teaching communication involves both providing information and 'influences'. On the other hand, it has two convergent meanings, a vertical one (teacher - student) and a horizontal one (student - student). Messages sent/received are of a semantic (information, knowledge) and ecto-semantic nature (attitudes, beliefs).

They ensure the communication flow between teacher and student, between the already shaped personality of the tutor and the emergent personality of the student. Bearing in mind that the educational process is a complex structure, the act of teaching requires increased attention paid to the way in which it will introduce concepts, since didactic communication needs to attain certain objectives, to cover a content that shall be accepted and acceptable for learners and, finally, to produce changes in the individuals' personality at a multiple level: cognitive, affective, attitudinal and actional.

The teacher and the pupil/student are locutors and interlocutors which mutually change their original state by the amount of information contained in the message received. They carry out a communication interaction which constitutes the science of finding the way towards each other. Şoitu (1997) embodied in the orientation of the message towards the other, towards understanding each other's needs and obviously, towards mutual understanding. This 'science' involves the synchronization of non-verbal elements (face expression, gestures), the synchronization of language (using the same meanings for words and pictures as the discourse partners) and the synchronization of the system of values (acceptance of the partners' value). These are the very premises of intercultural communication.

Broadly, the principles of open communication that every teacher should take into account are:

- to create a pleasant climate in the classroom and reliable favorable interaction;
- to create opportunities for learners to express their views;
- to stimulate interaction among learners;
- to use convincing arguments in the explanations they offer;
- to listen carefully without interrupting;
- not to correct immediately in order not to inhibit, correction being made through feedback;
- to organize class work formats suitable for teaching tasks;
- to keep seeking elements of attractiveness to stir the interest of learners;
- to use voice qualities (loudness, timbre) to emphasize content items with the highest significance;
- to maintain eye contact with his interlocutors.

## 5. A New Profile for Foreign Language Teachers and Practitioners?

In the case of foreign languages teaching, the specialized literature focuses a high interest to the issues related to academic activity and behaviour pattern. Moskowitz (1978) has sketched a portrait of the ideal practitioner through the following features:

- masters the taught language;
- uses the target language in teaching;
- aims at developing communicative competence formation of the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening;
- teaching is varied;
- reacts promptly, but highly tactfully to the mistakes pupils;
- speaks less than students in order to stimulate free expression;
- creates a relaxed learning climate so that students should integrate easily into the learning community.

These components that define a good language teacher shall be valid today even though the objectives of teaching activity are modified in step with the globalized world, the communicative competence being replaced by intercultural communicative competence. If we were to group and to update the above mentioned features we may obtain three categories that define the teaching of foreign languages: foreign language knowledge, methodology and social behaviour/attitude.

Operating a shift of these categories within the intercultural approach in foreign language teaching and developing them conceptually, we can say that the practitioner must prove:

- own intercultural communicative competence based on knowledge of the theoretical basis of intercultural communication/education and learning theories in didactic transposition. How can one teach if one does not know what must be learned?;
- knowledge of didactic and methodical updated language to include focus on the learner awareness of the teacher's role, techniques, strategies, and methods of teaching and evaluation skills of choosing or developing teaching materials, etc. ;
- a certain optimal level of motivation. Can one motivate others for positive learning without being oneself motivated to learn?;
- affective and behavioral availability. We believe that the approach of intercultural issues calls a certain attitude, a specific behavior, and affective dimensions of the practitioner (empathy, tolerance, cooperation, openness to dialogue).

In a very interesting study dedicated to teaching, career motivation Pânișoară & Pânișoară (2010: 16-18) identify five types of motivations with strong impact on teaching. We choose to present them in a different order than that offered by the authors themselves, but in an order that we personally consider more relevant to the intercultural approach in the teaching of foreign languages:

- *curiosity or need to know*. Curiosity is innate, it is the need of the individual, in the category of intrinsic motivation. This kind of motivation is essential in our opinion because the profession of teaching involves chiefly stimulation, activation and strengthening of such motivation in the learners. At the same time, however, the teacher himself must be animated by such a motivation to be able to transmit and generate it in the others;

- *the need for affiliation* - affiliation is the need to establish and maintain social relationships with others. This kind of motivation is very important: on the one hand, the teacher must have his / her own social skills in order to interact with the learners,

with his / her peers and the school management, constituting a first model of interpersonal relations, personal and professional management. On the other hand, the motivation of membership is a major component of the intercultural openness: no teacher could stimulate this opening to otherness in learners if he/ she him/herself would not possess it;

- *the need for achievement*. The motivation of achievement is intrinsic and expresses the individual's need to achieve the best results. According to Weiner's (apud Pânișoară & Pânișoară 1987, 2010: 15), teachers fall into the category of persons with low achievement motivation of choosing either a smooth, successful career safe (even if the reward is small) or highly difficult tasks relatively to which they cannot be blamed on failure. Of course, the reality does not confirm such a presumption, and things are a lot more tinted, there is a wide range of motivations that may impact on the teacher's activity.

In the current socio-economic conditions, it is possible that the profession of a foreign language teacher may be considered rewarding due to declining prestige and status of the teaching profession. However, from an intercultural point of view, this kind of intrinsic motivation remains an important component in a teacher's profile.

- *the need for social approval* – social respect is one of the fundamental reasons of social behaviour (Harre, apud Pânișoară & Pânișoară 2003: 17). Social approval, from those with whom you are in contact is a very strong motivational leverage which the teachers themselves need to be able to intervene positively in the formation of the personality of those who learn;

- *power motivation* - we would not interpret this motivation of the teacher in the scholastic sense, namely the need to dominate others and to control. Given the focus on learners, we will use the definition of Morris (1990: 428 Pânișoară & Pânișoară, apud 2010: 16), who consider this type of motivation as the need to gain recognition, influence or control over others or on some groups .

## 6. The Foreign Language Teacher in a Pluricultural World

According to M.Bernaus (2007:10), modern societies are „a complex environment, characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity and exchanges between languages and cultures”<sup>iii</sup>. Beacco and Byram (2003) in their *Guide* for language policies state that „all national entities are multilingual, even those that call themselves homogeneous”. That is why, one of the main goals of the teaching activity of the foreign language teacher is to train individuals capable of living together in a pluricultural world. Therefore, in the role of cultural facilitator, the teacher must influence and control (in the sense of conveying) the development of a sensitivity in those who learn a foreign language for the target culture and other cultures, starting with the cultural identity.

Modern language teachers have always had a status and a slightly different status in comparison to other professors.

Communications of information and especially sharing information with learners of modern languages have an obstacle that other subjects do not meet: the language itself. The solution in such cases is that the teacher should find ways of stimulating communication in a foreign language. This involves, on the one hand, new interactive methods and knowledge on the other hand, openness to experimentation. For example, using the method of debate (debates), the teacher will challenge learners with a lower linguistic competence to overcome the language barrier and to engage in

communication, animated by the interest in the topic discussed and the desire to express a personal opinion.

Acceptance and appreciation of the diversity of points of view turns the classroom into an area where multicultural perspectives are interwoven themes against the background of affective-emotional reactions which, if managed wisely, can create values and mentalities in the desired direction.

## 7. Conclusions

The foreign language teacher's duty is to offer the students the opportunity to internalize and practise language behaviors that they would not have if they kept a spectator attitude vis-à-vis foreign languages. The professor, considered in the intercultural approach as an intermediary between one culture and another, needs in turn to have a multi-cultural or lived experience which will enable him / her to successfully overcome the first stage, that is raising the students' awareness of the multicultural approach and be able to solve certain problems of complexity or uncertainty; to have a systemic vision; to mobilize the relevant items to deal with unique situations constituting a "savoir" in and through action.

In the face of the intrinsic difficulties of schools to face diversity, the teacher becomes a creator, a generator of meaning for the information transmitted by school and society. Intercultural pedagogy requires a special way of thinking and rethinking the process of learning a language, a culture. So within the classes of foreign languages the situations of otherness are manifested at many levels: abstract (the other in relationship to me), and specific (in the teacher-class, teacher- student, student – student relationships).

From the perspective of intercultural teaching, we believe that the motivations, interests and emotional complexity of learning are important, and the responsibility of those who teach is obvious and intrinsic.

In conclusion, the new profile of the teacher of foreign languages, i.e. in intercultural configuration, does not essentially differ from the portrait of the professional didactics specialist -an open mind to new, ready to experiment with alternative teaching tools that encourage individuals to attain the goals set for learning, able to initiate communication but also concerned with his / her own professional development.

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