

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN ACHIEVING AN INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

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The most important human feature is the need for knowledge. Man has always wanted to go beyond his, confined, native space. The motivation for such an action was the desire to expand his/her cultural universe. Thus, man craved for learning about the way of life of others like him, yet different. Cultures came into contact influencing and enriching each other. Interculturality is thus the process of mixing cultures, and intercultural exchanges bring about a whole. Every nation has its own culture, but a cultural exchange implies universality, a combining of all cultures that work together to bring out the best in humanity.

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The transformations dynamic of the economical and social environment imposes a permanent process of reconsidering the individual knowledge and habits according to the increasing requests, more and more complex, of everyday life, in order to maintain a certain level of competition.

Knowledge seems to be the only power which guaranties the social, economical and democratic progress, which is a proof of a new approach and the essence of a society of information. We witness a complexity of phenomena of the scientific and technical development, socio-economical or cultural which need more than ever a great flexibility in our way of communication, think, or wish to learn more (Cotterall, 2000:109-117).

The intercultural dimensions of English language learning

The formation of the individual can't be limited only to transferring, at a certain age, of knowledge in different domains. A good education of the individual is the response to his necessities and interests and also to the specific exigencies of the labor market.

'Higher education' means programs of study, training or training for research at the post-secondary level provided by universities or other educational establishments that are approved as institutions of higher education by the competent state authorities, and/or through recognized accreditation systems' (Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel UNESCO Conference, Paris, 1997).

According to the requirements of the European Union the Romanian academic authorities created programs of study and training for the pre-service

preschool, primary and secondary teachers so that the Romanian children can start learning English from an early age.

Our country is now part of the European Union and, just as all the other countries have done, in Romania we took steps forward in promoting English as the language of science. For Romanians, English language has become one of the most important ways of communication with other European people or people throughout the world, especially after 1989 (i.e. after the Romanian revolution, when Communism was replaced by a modern democracy). The importance of English language in getting good jobs or in attending good Romanian/European universities has increased a lot after the communist period, diminishing not only the importance, but also the learning and use of Russian and French languages. The development of IT in Romania (which encountered a great leap in the late 18 years) requires at least a basic knowledge of English, too. English is also heard more and more in young people's slang, or in technical language. Therefore, a possible conclusion is that, at least for the coming years, English will represent a very useful and very much needed communication, academic and/or professional tool. Most Romanians are west-oriented, since it is the West, where the mobility and opportunities come from, and where the knowledge of English language is a general requirement.

"Those who speak English alongside other languages will outnumber first language speakers and, increasingly, will decide the global future of the language." (Graddol, 2006:10)

The shortcomings of the Romanian educational system, caused by the general crisis and inefficiency of our economical, social and political system, impose profound changes of the entire educational process. In this respect, the system's general objectives, the way it is organized and led, as well as its material resources are considered functional elements, defined in a close relation with the other components, such as educational content, teaching strategies, teachers, students, and so on.

The study of foreign languages has developed so much that nowadays it represents a vital dimension of modern civilization, a valuable means of human knowledge in different fields of activity. Consequently, a foreign language, especially English, is viewed as a human right, as a part of the long term education, since it seems to be a continuous priority in education, being studied starting before primary school and going on even after higher school. From a global perspective it has been rightly said: *The higher the profit to be achieved through knowledge of a particular language, the more it will be viewed as worthy of acquisition* (Nettle & Romaine 2000:30).

The principles of the educational policy are:

- ◆ *The principle of decentralization and flexibility* – characterized by the orientation of the curricula so that the formation of the individual responds to the requests, to the specific needs of the labor market from each region.
- ◆ *The principle of efficiency which requests a better use of the human resources and their knowledge and a material support in order to get a better job.*
- ◆ *The principle of compatibility of the Romanian educational system and the European norms.*

Under the circumstances provided by globalization and people's ever increasing mobility, foreign language knowledge, be it only partial, becomes a necessity. This paper intends to give a general view on the foreign language teaching process from the intercultural learning perspective, which is quite different from the traditional educational approaches to language learning. From this point of view, language teaching goes hand in hand with

the discovery of the social, political, economical and cultural environment of the country where the language learning process takes place (Graddol, 1997:76).

Language learning programs centering on intercultural learning imply the development of a certain teaching-learning ideal which encourages an atmosphere of understanding and respect both for other cultures and for the foreign languages to be learned. Traditionally, learning a foreign language was considered to be a challenging educational experience, with which most people came across at least once in their life, during the years of their formal education. The methodology of teaching foreign languages has a lot to offer nowadays. Teachers can choose from a variety of approaches, strategies and methods which are aimed at helping them to inculcate the learners with a desire to acquire a foreign language.

A common educational curricula for teaching a foreign language focuses on the theoretical approach to grammar, to language structure and patterns, meant to be used in different situations, while the practical approach refers to different types of exercises such as: multiple choice, fill in or translation of texts. On the other hand, the extracurricular education provides a more suitable framework for experimentations and innovations and, consequently, it leads to a new way of thinking and conceiving a foreign language learning process, i.e. a process of intercultural learning which uses methods based on the learner's autonomy (Cotterall, 2000:109-117) and full participation via survey and project work. This means that the participants in this process are the protagonists of their own language learning experience, who must make choices and clarify their needs, and whose motivation matters more than their levels of linguistic proficiency. Teachers and learners welcome this initiative with various amounts of enthusiasm, the former anticipating obstacles of both practical and epistemological kinds, since most of them find it difficult to alter existing patterns of cognitive behavior or revise their current knowledge (Benson & Voller, 1997:79-92).

Consequently, teachers may show resistance to any process that questions their methods. They prefer to have tight control of the instruction and seldom doubt their teaching methods. However, those teachers who uphold a traditional teaching philosophy and believe that their role is only to transmit a rigid curriculum through highly controlled pedagogy became more and more aware of the existence of the constructivist learning principles and tried to adapt themselves to the new tendencies in teaching a foreign language. Therefore, although at first, these new perspectives on teaching-learning a foreign language which focused on intercultural and information-communication learning, were not considered successful, lately, after many approaches of the kind, it has become obvious that they are essential conditions for the success of both informative-communicative language learning and intercultural learning.

In Europe, in the past ten years, language course programs have been organized by the well-known Council of Europe, through its European Youth Centers, focusing on the needs and interests of learners, including cultural activities, and requiring each participant to develop a project. The aim of this foreign language approach is to make participants/learners more active, give them ideas and provide them with resources which can easily be put into practice. Part of the educational ethos of such a method is to foster an attitude towards lifelong learning, and the aim is to equip participants with the skills to carry on the learning process. It is also expected that the foreign language learners will serve as multipliers, taking with them the knowledge of both language and cultural awareness that they have acquired during the learning process.

The material aspect of the English learning process

English has definitely got farther than any other language has and the interest concerning this language is a major preoccupation of our days, and why not a legitimate one. But since the present speaks for itself and the past is sealed in so many historical reviews, I chose to turn to a different direction, that is to look farther into the future of English language and to bring into discussion the prospects this mighty language has (Miletto et al., 2000:14-29).

I want to mention from the very beginning that concepts such as *global language*, *world language*, *lingua franca*, *international language*, and so on, will only have as aim the pointing of the importance and greatness of the English language, and not with the literal meaning that in some cases implies official international status. Issues such as the possibility of English becoming the official language used world wide will not be stressed on in this paper

On the whole, English has reached the status of *de facto* whenever two countries that speak different languages are involved, whenever two people in the same situation want to communicate or when safety requires co-operation among people speaking a wide diversity of languages, as it is with the international aircraft control, where English was adopted as the official language.

Before emerging into the subject we will further elaborate on the implications a language has in the world of business. It is not only economy that marks the usage of a language but also political trends, military or cultural issues. The stress is on the economical side of the intercultural exchange. We have seen how the British colonization enforced the use of English into the colonies because of the need of communication with the natives. Today, something similar is happening: the world is engaged in business, to a greater or lesser degree, imports and exports are being made, international and multinational companies function worldwide and all of these ask for a common means of communication: that is most of the times expressed through language (Crystal, 2003:59).

There is a general rule in the world of international trading, which says that the selling must be made in the customer's language. The linguistic consequence of this would be that the language popularity will follow the market, the customer dictating the process. But today we have a much wider and complex process in business transactions as David Graddol (1997:29) says: "*goods are taken from one country, refined or given added value by a second, sold to a third, repackaged, resold and so on.*" This brings with it a great reliance on the lingua franca. English has proved to be that lingua franca so far, as business people use it as a means to an end. Further on, the same author makes the connection between economy and language in his book, *The Future of English*:

"The shift in economic relations will have a profound, yet poorly understood effect on the popularity and use of different languages. It is clear that a language which is spoken by rich countries is more attractive to learners than one which provides no access to personal betterment or lucrative markets" (Graddol 1997:28).

As we have mentioned, English has come to be the word of the business man all across the world. But we do not know which the implications of a changing world are. What will the effects of the shift of economies and new

rising economical powers be upon the language? The world's economical and technological trends have a something to say about the way that English language is perceived or, in other words: English had something to say in the world of business. The colonization of the world and the British Empire helped the English language spread, as a necessity of communication between the colonizers and the natives. The population growth implied an increase of the number of English speakers and not that of the natives. We cannot talk nowadays about any other major geographical expansions, except the minor number of emigrants and immigrants, or about a high rise in population, which in the past culminated with the colonization and the industrial revolution. The thing that influences English language today is the world of economy and technology that is permanently changing and developing, bringing up new inventions, in the latter case.

Centering foreign language learning programs on intercultural learning implies the development of certain ideals, which do not refer to power, economy or business, but to the dynamic process of exchange and openness towards other cultural environments in multicultural societies and a more complex world. This is the globalised world of our times, in which the need to develop quickly certain language skills is increasing. In this context, besides conveying linguistic, cultural and social information on the country in which the respective language is spoken, the foreign language teacher's duty is to develop the learners' ability of learning in order to become independent and responsible, thus opening new gates for plurilinguism. In this respect, the information and communication technologies have an evident role in developing autonomy, offering the learners an inexhaustible source of information, authentic documents, room for expression and interaction, as well as the possibility of building up one's own way. Learning "in a different manner" is the challenge that the information and communication technologies launch, a challenge that foreign language teachers cannot ignore (Holec, 1988:12). Nevertheless, it is obvious that, focusing the foreign language learning process on intercultural learning also implies making changes in methodology and pedagogy, as well as the teacher's assuming a new role, i.e. the teacher ceases to be the only source in language learning, becoming the learner's guide and companion, and their relationship is turned into one of complicity, and the classroom is turned into a place where things happen very much like in real life. Moreover, learning a foreign language in an intercultural setting, equips the learner with more than a language skill, with the ability to interact with the respective society based on cultural awareness and respect.

There is more to intercultural exchange than the economical or material aspect. If the economical aspect refers solely to more easily finding employment, a better job, better working conditions, aspects that go hand in hand with the social benefits, one should take into consideration other aspects as well. We can talk here about linguistic, cognitive and educational benefits.

Linguistic benefits refer to the advantages that people who speak more than one language have when trying to convey and comprehend feelings and ideas into an environment other than their native one.

Cognitive benefits refer to an increased linguistic awareness of those who speak one or more foreign languages.

The most important of all, the social benefits refer to the possibility that plurilingual people have when talking about literacy, the study of further foreign languages and on expanding their cultural horizon.

Conclusion

There is nothing new about the fact that English is The Language of the world today, and nothing new or outstanding could have been said about the historical course this language has undergone so far. Numerous books that focus on presenting the history of the mother land of English language, and of English language itself, have been written, and these helped me in putting together all the information I needed about this language. Also, nothing new was probably said while presenting the extent to which English spread on the globe, and the process of this expansion.

It is a known fact that intercultural mobility takes place at different levels starting from general to particular and it implies a mixture of different systems of beliefs, values and attitudes. Interculturality can be achieved in two ways: consciously and unconsciously.

The unconscious way of achieving interculturality is for an individual to move to different cultural spaces without fully being aware of it. In this manner the individual can benefit from this exchange but not at its full potential.

The conscious way of achieving interculturality is to scholarly approach any intercultural exchange and make the most of its benefits. This can be achieved through formal encounters, social participation, etc.

Regardless of the way one achieves an intercultural exchange what is important is the mutual benefits of the parties involved.

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