

## PERSPECTIVES ON MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCES IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES

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**Abstract.** *The paper analyses the emergence of a new competence in academic environments. The unstable framework of modern society requires new skills, more appropriate for the integration of knowledge. Making a priority of the linguistic element is no longer an option as students present heterogeneous profiles and needs. Including a multicultural dimension into the foreign language class should become a compulsory characteristic of the educational process and curricula. The present study also proposes several modalities of raising awareness among students regarding the prerequisite of being culturally competent. Furthermore, multicultural skills have become one of the most important requirements on the job market. As far as educators are concerned, culturally-based adaptive education has been increasingly present in teachers' preoccupations, as they have recently become more involved in online learning environments. Both students and teachers are advised to cooperate in negotiating multicultural skills and their comprehension in the academic environment.*

**Keywords:** *multicultural competence, adaptive learning, cultural identity, ESP*

### INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism, tolerant practices, accepting and integrating diversity have become core competences in present-day academic environment. The impact of globalisation on everyday life and on language learners' careers can no longer be considered insignificant. Researchers talk about a "rise of intersections" (JOHANSSON, 2006:21) due to the increase of the mobility of people, in general, and of students, in our particular case.

In defining the "multicultural competence", authors make reference to the indispensable "ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures" (MARTIN & VAUGHN 2007: 31). It is equally important to keep in mind previous studies focusing on the concept of *transculturality* which relies heavily on interaction, while putting forth "a different picture of the relation between cultures; not one of isolation and of conflict, but one of entanglement, intermixing and commonness. It promotes not separation, but exchange and interaction." (WELSCH, 1999:205).

Current social issues, such as immigration, the evolution of the European Union or Brexit, are further evidence that cultures in interaction can no longer remain merely a course at the university but a living reality with a wide-ranging impact. The aim of this paper is to discuss some broader aspects and to describe some observations pertaining to this highly valuable emerging competence in the academic environment.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

The observations and analyses of the present study have been carried out on three groups of fourth year students from the Faculty of Agriculture at the Banat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine in Timișoara, Romania. As far as the foreign language curriculum is concerned, students can choose between English, French and German (the respective language they had already studied during high school). In their last year, they are supposed to acquire specialized terminology and further applied knowledge typical of L2 for specific purposes.

During the first semester of the academic year 2016-2017, 50 students have accepted to participate in an exploratory research of what multicultural competence means to them. The qualitative aspect has been targeted during this introductory study. The first part of the research aims at revealing, based on interviews with the students, their representations of what culture represents from their perspective and what the concept of "multicultural" competence may imply. Requiring students to undergo a reflexive process and thereupon provide feed-back on their relationship with a new competence has definitely proven to be a challenge for the academic environment.

We have inventoried a corpus of data comprising the answers given by students during interviews. The method used is an experimental one drawing on the ecological approach of language learning proposed by authors like VAN LIER (2004) and KRAMSCH (2002).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### *What is "culture" for a student?*

"Culture" is a vague, shorthand word to name the complex modalities in which people forming a "community" interact with each other in different contexts and situations. Cultures tend to form around specific identities, geographies, beliefs and their expression, as well as daily practices. Besides, our ethnicity, race, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, physical abilities, work, and family history influence the cultures we are a part of and our roles and experiences within them. All members of the community are to become competent in communicating with each other in order to facilitate an effective multicultural process. Does the term "multicultural" require a personal approach of this issue, depending on the unique social and cultural profile of each individual?

The notion "multicultural competence" has also been defined as "a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together as a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (CROSS & ALL, 1989:13). Living in a challenging city from a multicultural perspective, namely Timișoara, it can be highly beneficial for students to interact with people from different cultural groups. Moreover, our language classes have become more multicultural in recent years, as students from many countries have joined the Erasmus programme provided by our university. The students' answers in the experimental interviews have pointed out the reduced level of interactions with this category of residents and class peers. Among other causes, the main reasons invoked by students were the age gap in the case of co-citizens, respectively the cultural gap in the second case.

This definition applies more accurately to our study case as we have identified a number of elements of the multicultural competence and the emergence of various aspects which are oriented towards achieving this new skill. We suggest constant interaction with people of other languages and cultures may facilitate the building and shaping of the "cultural

competence continuum” (CROSS, 1989) leading to cultural proficiency, according to the Cultural Competence Framework.

*Components of the multicultural competence*

Researchers have tried to identify the core elements that contribute to the development of the multicultural competence, the most important one being *awareness, knowledge, and skills* (PEDERSEN, 2007:10). Encouraging *attitude* is however one new aspect mentioned by more recent studies.

1. *Awareness* reflects the individual’s position in a particular community or communities and also his/her impact on other individuals from different cultures. The academic community represents an opportunity for students in agriculture as they can be in contact with cultural aspects during their English course and practice by meeting peers from other countries. In this respect, awareness can be defined as the ability to understand difference, to perceive it around us and to shape our behaviour according to this raised awareness of the “other”.
2. The *knowledge* element consists of a given learning activity meant to put students in contact with specific information about their cultures and other cultures, about the self and individuals who are different from the self. ESP classes contain data about British culture as an integrative culture due to the global coverage of the language. English is commonly defined as “globish” in order to emphasize the idea of a “speaking-English” community around the world which goes beyond geographical borders.
3. An extremely important dimension is represented by *skill* acquisition. Communication is not limited to verbal skills, as the non-verbal component is of equally high importance. Interacting with people from other cultures requires knowledge on different linguistic codes, as well as pragmatics supported by the non-verbal implicit dimension. Students in the 4<sup>th</sup> year should be able to fully access their linguistic resources in order to communicate with their foreign peers. According to their answers, they tend to have limited cultural knowledge about other cultures. However, proximity cultures, such as Hungarian, Serbian or German, are better represented in the students’ cultural portfolio, whereas more distant cultures like Asian or African remain out of the students’ scope from a cognitive perspective.

Finally, *attitude* functions as a connecting web between the three elements mentioned above, as it represents an instantiation of the cognitive segment and action in real life contexts. 60% of the interviewed students stated that although they are aware of cultural difference, they still remain reluctant to behave as such. We have made the conjecture that students make a notable difference between their conceptual background and their behaviour in daily situations. Therefore, the development of their multicultural competence ought to lay more stress on training for communicating with peers and reconsider behaviours related to difference.

*Can the multicultural competence be achieved in the academic environment?*

Mastering cultural competence is not an asset we are born with. It is a process of learning about and becoming friends with people from other cultures, thereby broadening our understanding and ability to participate in the multicultural process. In another words, it is mainly a process of inter-relating and thereby co-constructing behaviour with others from different cultures.

Learning English is not only an activity that can be reduced to the requirement of getting a grade, but an opportunity to become familiar with other cultures as they are represented by various individuals. Thus, students may be engaged in activities, during the English class or their extra-curricular time, which should encourage them to recognize misconceptions and manage commonly held beliefs, in order to become culturally competent. Creating and living experiences for this purpose represent authentic instances of practicing abstract concepts. English as a widespread foreign language offers numerous possibilities for engaging students in discussions on diverse cultural issues and reflecting on cultural practices and their impact in a globalized society.

An important step towards the achievement of the multicultural competence is the access to knowledge and its unbiased appropriation. Cultivating critical thinking, the expression of one's point of view, tolerance and acceptance of the other should be the main objectives when developing the multicultural competence.

In a nutshell, the goals for achieving the multicultural competency include increased understanding, respectful communication, and fair inclusion of all people in an unbiased manner. We are striving to achieve a more widespread sense of democratic, anti-racist multiculturalism in which all people are part of the decision-making process. In order to be able to participate effectively in this process, we need at least a minimum level of common understanding (which is provided by English from a linguistic point of view), cultural competency (sharing our cultures), and genuine openness to learning from other people's cultures. The academic environment should take part in designing this welcoming environment where multicultural exercise becomes common practice.

*A manifesto for the introduction of the multicultural competence in the curriculum*

Integrating such a revolutionary skill in the academic curricula is not an easy endeavour in as much as the present educational system is not sufficiently open to such structural transformations. However, the demands of society cannot wait for later restructuring as the global job market has been changing continuously and keeps requiring new skills revolving around linguistic and (inter)cultural competences.

Academics are somewhat obliged to integrate these newly required competences in the university curricula due to the fact that students in Agriculture or other fields are more likely to work with international corporations or foreign investors with different cultural backgrounds. That is the main reason we have designed communication courses meant to offer students the opportunity to discuss a variety of issues that have positive impact on their attitude towards different cultures. These issues include race, gender, age, language, ability and disability, social and economic status, religion or national/ethnic origin.

Training culturally competent individuals means changing the way students think about other cultures, how they communicate and how they operate. It means that the structure, leadership, and activities of a working community must reflect many values, perspectives, styles, and priorities. A culturally competent group of professionals also emphasizes the advantages of cultural diversity, celebrates the contributions of each culture, encourages the positive outcomes of interacting with many cultures, and supports the sharing of power among people from different cultures. As a case in point, our ESP classes are committed to continuing devising programmes and creating a learning environment that is inclusive of all cultures and celebrates diversity.

As teachers, we wish to decrease the number of situations where students tend to refuse to be more culturally sensitive or fail to actually understand the meaning of it. Therefore,

in order to become more mindful of these realities and act accordingly, we are in a position to propose some instructive discussion groups regarding the multicultural issue in an unthreatening way.

- Develop support for change (Who wants to understand this new competence?)
- Identify barriers in the acquisition of this competence (What is currently not working? Why do you feel reluctant towards multicultural competences?)
- Assess your current level of multicultural competence (What knowledge, skills and resources can be built on?)
- Identify the resources you need in order to develop this competence (Where can you find them?)
- Involve actively in the on-going multicultural process and be willing to respond to global change.

### CONCLUSIONS

The multicultural competence and its acquisition remains highly debatable and a continuous process. Nevertheless, identifying some main components - awareness, knowledge, skills and attitude – represents an expedient foundation we can rely on. Working in a multicultural environment requires developing special skills and being able to communicate with individuals from other cultures is becoming an ever more significant asset.

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