

## INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

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### **Abstract**

*Intercultural education is one of the new focuses of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We try to understand what intercultural education is and how it can be integrated into foreign language classes. We are interested in the ways in which teaching methods can be adapted to accomplish intercultural education and what teaching methods can be used to include both foreign language teaching and intercultural education.*

**Keywords:** intercultural education; foreign language teacher; teaching methodology.

### **Introduction**

Globalisation and technological development helped to shape the world into one in which communities from different countries and from different continents are aware of each other and interact with each other. If one of the aims of education was to integrate children in the society of their own country, by teaching them their history, national language, religious customs and political views, nowadays, as children and adults alike have the chance to explore the world beyond their borders, either by travelling or by entering Internet communities and spaces, education gained the new aim of forming “global citizens”, people who understand their own cultural background, but also how similar or different it is from other cultural backgrounds. Moreover, migration from one state to another is a major phenomenon that leads to the need to integrate the immigrants and to teach local people tolerance and how to communicate and cooperate with them. Intercultural education is also a

tool to increase the communication between majority cultures and minority cultures in one state.

The main purpose of this paper is to explain the importance of intercultural education and the role that foreign language teachers have in the spread of multicultural awareness and tolerance. Its aim is also to encourage foreign language teachers to take full advantage of their position to inspire the new generations of students to see themselves as part of a bigger organism which encompasses every culture of the world. The importance of this paper is in the analysis of certain teaching methods which can be used in foreign language classes to implement intercultural education.

This paper is divided into three parts. Part 1 focuses on the importance of intercultural education. Part 2 presents intercultural education in relation to teachers and students of foreign languages. Part 3 describes various teaching methods used in foreign language classes and how they could be used in the context of intercultural education.

## **1. Intercultural Education**

In the series of international conferences on education made by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), The 45<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Education from 1996 and The 46<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Education from 2001 had a big influence in the shaping of educational theories and policies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Various discourses and workshops highlighted the importance of a complex education that offers not only knowledge but also abilities and values in order to create involved members of society, a type of education that “promotes citizenship training” (The 45th International Conference on Education Recommendations, 1996). The study of languages became a significant topic, with the discussions of the 2001 workshops focusing on the benefits of multilingual education: “language learning and teaching strategies are assumed to be central in learning to live together”. The study of languages was linked to cooperation, mutual understanding, tolerance and respect of other cultures, key concepts of intercultural education. Intercultural education was later defined as “the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect”

UNESCO’s *Guidelines on Intercultural Education* was published in 2006. According to these guidelines, intercultural education (learning to live together) goes beyond multicultural education (learning about other cultures), which means that the new focus of

education is to build the bridges between different communities, to create the base for a harmonious future together. New generations will be taught about other cultures, but also about how to interact with them and about possible misunderstandings between them. Teachers should encourage students to think about possible solutions to conflicts and to analyze similarities and differences between their culture and other cultures, in order to find ways of communication. Communication does not simply mean talking to each other, but also being able to understand each other in terms of subtle cultural nuances. Intercultural education has certain aims, such as the decrease of the exclusion of other cultures (for example, minority cultures or immigrant cultures), the integration of other cultures and the respect for cultural diversity. Some of the general tasks of a teacher in the context of intercultural education are to integrate students from non-dominant cultures in the classroom, to encourage tolerance and open-mindedness, to bring awareness to social problems on a national and international scale. Among teachers, foreign language teachers specifically have the opportunity and the challenge to prepare the students for life in a multicultural society and to help them understand the importance of the dialogue between different communities for the evolution of society. Special training programs for teachers are recommended, as they need to be aware of the changes in the world, their role as educators and the significance of intercultural communication.

## **2. Intercultural Education and Foreign Language Teachers**

A research published in 2005 in the form of a book called *Foreign language teachers and intercultural competence* (Sercu, 2005) aimed to showcase foreign language teachers' opinions on the practice of intercultural education during foreign language classes. The results of the study presented two types of teachers: on one hand, those who believed that intercultural education can and should be realised during foreign language classes and, on the other hand, those who believed this task was too big for schools and teachers to accomplish or that it should be integrated to language classes only if there are pupils from ethnic minorities in the class. Teachers who prefer traditional teaching practices find it more difficult to include intercultural education practices into their lessons which are normally focused on the acquisition of communication skills and grammar. Teachers who include the cultural background in their lessons tend to only share knowledge of a certain culture instead of asking students to do their own research, to question certain aspects, to find solutions to cultural

misunderstandings, to form their own attitudes or to empathise, tasks which are key parts of intercultural education. (“We have found few teachers who define culture learning also in terms of the acquisition of intercultural skills, such as the independent exploration of cultures or the ability to mediate successfully in intercultural situations.”) Many teachers who took part in this study considered that the support of teachers of other subjects is needed and that the curriculum and textbooks should be reformed to sustain lessons that develop intercultural competence. And since intercultural competence should be first acquired by the teachers themselves before it could be passed on to the students, teacher training should accommodate to help educators to reach a certain level of understanding of the foreign culture(s) whose language they are teaching and of their role as mediators between students and certain foreign cultures.

The inclusion of intercultural education in foreign language classes can benefit the students and it can lead to the improvement of their skills, because forming their interest for the cultural aspects has a positive impact on their interest for the language. In the book *The Study of Language* (Yule, 1985), it is emphasized that affective factors have an impact on the language acquisition of a foreign language. Some students could have prejudices against certain languages, communities or countries or they could feel disconnected from the foreign culture(s) of the studied language. If there is a “lack of empathy with the other culture (for example, feeling no identification with its speakers or their customs), then the subtle effects of not really wanting to sound like a Russian or a German or an American may strongly inhibit the learning process” (Yule, 1985). One of the aims of intercultural education is to challenge stereotypes and to promote a sense of unity among cultures, while celebrating diversity. The message that a foreign language teacher could get across in this situation is that, through the study of a language, people can connect with each other. If students get emotionally attached to certain aspects ranging from the pop-culture (music, movies, cartoons, celebrities) to the history, traditions and cultural values of a certain country where the target language is spoken, then their motivation to learn the language increases and their willingness to improve their skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing in the foreign language) increases as well. L

Language learning is closely linked to the study of people and communities. A good way to start implementing intercultural education is with discussions about stereotypes and what students already know about a certain culture, and then, after the students’ own research, to discuss how true or false certain opinions or ideas about a country are and what is their origin. “When teaching intercultural competence, teachers could and ought to start from the

ideas which exist amongst their pupils. They should try to enlarge upon ideas which bear a close resemblance to reality, rectify wrong or stereotypical ones, and promote familiarity with important unknown aspects of the foreign culture” (Setcu, 2005). By combining the study of the language with the study of the culture (multicultural education) and the study of how the foreign culture and the local culture can come together and communicate (intercultural education), the teacher creates a different environment in the class and plants the seeds for a more tolerant and cooperative future. The next level of intercultural education is to start, at some point, to incorporate elements of other cultures unrelated to the native language of the students and the language they are studying, with the aims of challenging stereotypes and discussing our world’s diversity.

### **3. Adapting Teaching Methods for Intercultural Education**

What methods could a foreign language teacher use to teach the specific language while integrating elements of intercultural education in the lessons? The first step is choosing the right learning materials, such as articles, stories, songs, movies that showcase traditions, values and history. Mass media can be helpful for intercultural education by providing sources of activities such as reading the newspaper or watching the news in the target language. Students need to realize that, while learning the language, they are stepping into a new world, an experience which the teacher should present as exciting and useful in life, instead of frightening or challenging. The new culture should be presented as equally fascinating and important for the world’s cultural heritage as the local culture, and not as superior or inferior to it.

One of the most used methods in foreign language teaching, the grammar-translation method, can be useful in the context of intercultural education as long as the topics of the texts chosen for the translation are related to the other culture or to concepts such as tolerance, diversity, cooperation. The use of literary texts can also be an option in this case, depending on the aims and interests of the students. This is a traditional, teacher-centered method of teaching languages (Larsen-Freeman, 2000), but can be used as a starting point in a discussion about linguistic relativity (how the language we speak influences the way we see the world or how languages show that the world is sometimes perceived differently by different communities), which can be extended to the concept of cultural relativity.

Discovery learning is a student-centered method of inquiry-based learning which asks students to investigate a certain topic (Westwood, 2008). In the case of intercultural education, teachers ask students to investigate aspects of other cultures, the image a community has in the media, stigmatization, how true or false certain stereotypes are and what their origin is. Teachers can ask them to imagine that they were born in another country and to find out how their life would have been like and what challenges they would have had to overcome. Students present the result of their research to the whole class and they discuss it among each other.

Dramatization is a method in which students play a role; they interpret a character from a given text. The text chosen can feature people from various cultures, maybe even in a situation of misunderstanding each other because of a common mistake. Students develop both their empathy and their communication skills. The text could represent only the first part of an interaction and the students could be left to imagine and to improvise the other half or the ending part. For example, they could act out a misunderstanding caused by a certain tourist or immigrant not knowing a local custom and they are left to improvise the outcome / the solution / the explanation. Or a third student could take the role of the mediator, being the one who understands both cultures and can solve the misunderstanding. An even more practical approach is to have students re-enact conflicts they had between each other or conflicts that they often see around them, to have them write their own script in the target language (in which they can use other names / nicknames for the characters) and then act it out in front of the class, presenting a possible solution or a scene in which they apologize and forgive each other. Starting with such conflicts in the immediate reality of the students can help with their perspective on large-scale conflicts or conflicts that might seem unfamiliar at first.

Special online classes can be organized if there is a partnership with a school from another country (it could be a school with native speakers of the target language or with other learners of the same target language), classes supervised by teachers in which students from the two different countries talk with each other on a given topic (which can be rather simple or complex, depending on their level, ranging from talking about their friends or family members to favourite movies to the meaning of freedom). It is a version of an exchange program, with its advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage is that students do not actually visit another country and they do not live for a period of time in another community, which limits their cultural exchange experience. On the other hand, some students might feel

more at ease to talk in this online environment and the whole class could participate rather than a selected few who had the money for a trip to a foreign country for an exchange program. The important factor here is the interaction with the “other” and sometimes finding out that they are not that different after all (a student could find out that they have the same role model in life as someone from another country or that they share similar views on ecology, leading to a sense of connection).

Suggestopedia involves the use of decoration, furniture and the environment of the classroom as forms of suggestion (Richards and Rodgers, 1986), in order to improve the process of learning. For intercultural education, suggestopedia can be employed by decorating the classroom with images depicting people of different ethnicities smiling next to each other or doing a common activity, objects from different cultures, the class motto / motivational quote written in different languages. Students can be involved in the decoration of the classroom. Being surrounded by all of these, students become more familiar with idea of cultural diversity and cooperation between cultures.

Cooperative learning (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) is a method which involves creating groups of students which learn together and from each other. The groups should include both male and female students, as well as students of different ethnicities, students with special needs, and students from different social and / or financial backgrounds. The group should work together more than once. This method is meant to develop social skills, as well as tolerance, empathy and cooperation. It can be extended to include matters which are important for intercultural education by giving the students tasks such as discussing cultural relativism, teaching each other about traditions from different countries, learning together about various religions. Each member of the group could be assigned as an ambassador of a certain country and they could solve together a task.

Any method can be useful or not in a certain context. The choice of a method depends on various factors, such as the group of students (their age, skills, wants and needs, personality), the target language, the teacher’s personality and experience, and the objectives of the lesson. Teacher should use their knowledge and creativity when selecting and adapting a method and they should not be afraid of experimenting with new ways of teaching.

## Conclusion

Communication is the base of human society. Without it, there would have been no way to share new discoveries, no way to transmit the values and knowledge to the new generations, to create stories that showcase creativity and imagination. The study of foreign languages is a bridge between communities and this is why intercultural education can be included during foreign language classes to reinforce the idea of unity in diversity, of cooperation between various nations.

Teachers should invest time and work in themselves to familiarize themselves as much as possible to the cultural background(s) of the foreign language they teach. More than giving information to students, teachers should invite them to analyse different intercultural situations and conflicts in order to raise their awareness towards the importance of the understanding of the other.

Changes in educational policies, as well as programs and special courses for teachers that prepare them to integrate intercultural education can be extremely helpful. Textbook reforms are also needed. Teachers who understand the significance of intercultural education and want to integrate it in their lessons can choose to adapt their teaching methods in order to prepare their students for life in a multicultural world.

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