New Trends in the Teaching of the Intercultural Competence as Part of the Process of Teaching Foreign Languages in the Context of Higher Education in Spain.

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Abstract

Today we live in the era of globalization. We define our world by the coexistence of various different cultures. The present article seeks to clarify the concept of intercultural competence when teaching foreign languages and the new trends in the context of Higher Education in Spain. We will start with a short introduction on the various studies and research on the relationships between language and culture However, the main aim in this article will be to point out the new roles played by teacher and learners in the process, the creation of new materials to support the intercultural dimension and the new types of activities that could be done inside and outside the classroom, such as the use of tele-collaboration, social networks and others. In other words, the elements that make up and give meaning to a new methodology for language teaching and learning and that help language teaching to be an open window towards other cultures and to develop a new and open-minded attitude towards diversity. Therefore, we will try to study some of the main current methodological approaches, stereotypes and contents linked to that intercultural competence.

Keywords: Interculturality - language learning and teaching - teacher training/development – new roles for teachers and learners

1. Introduction

Globalization is nowadays and more than ever a reality and the educational environment is no exception to this. With the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) initiated in the context of the European Union as early as 1999 with the so-called Bologna Process, many countries agreed on their joint educational efforts and policies. The main aim was then harmonise the very different education systems in the different nations in Europe and to generate more effective and efficient educational systems. Politicians and experts agreed then that the new system of Higher Education in Europe would be much more flexible than the previous one. In other words, they would try to create a new and modern educational system, which would offer university students greater opportunities for training and employment by recognising the various degrees and postgraduate degrees obtained in the different countries.

The beginning of the implementation of the EHEA was not too easy at all, and the truth is that the old and somewhat rigid and conservative models of the previous Bachelor degrees and Diplomas had to coexist with the new Bachelor, Masters and Doctorate degrees in the educational space of Higher Education for years.

As far as Higher Education in Spain is concerned, the situation required the establishment of an own schedule or plan for adaptation to the EHEA. The traditional studies such as Philology, Translation and Interpreting Studies and others coexisted for a short while with the new degrees implemented in Europe. It was only after multiple and consecutive educational reforms, when the country could finally make the final commitment that by 2010 all university courses in Spain would already be definitively adapted to the new European educational system.

That also led to significant changes in the academic and educational management of students within the different Spanish universities. In the 40's, language teaching was merely based on grammar, syntax, translation and acquisition of vocabulary without paying much attention to the concept of "culture" itself. In the 50's, experts used to link that concept of "culture" to the one of "civilisation" and it dealt with different aspects related to the history, literature, religion, geography, and many other cultural aspects of a country. It was only in the 60's when we had the first relevant changes in the methodology concerning language teaching happened, and in the 70's, an authentic revolution in the traditional methodology of language teaching took place. Traditional methods based on grammar and linguistics became less relevant, and the relationship between language and a social context became the real protagonist of language teaching and language learning. Experts

realised then that it was impossible to learn a foreign language without keeping an eye on the foreign culture. Moreover, they also realised how important it was to keep both the culture of origin and the foreign culture(s) and language(s) connected during the whole process of learning. Applied Linguistics and the modern approach to languages with an outstanding focus on the communicative function of languages also played an important role in the whole process. Languages were no further understood as abstract disciplines; language teachers tended to link them to cultures in all different aspects. Experts though about them as tools for communication but also as tools for the required social interaction with others at all different levels (i.e. familiar, professional, social, political, economic, etc.) (Byram and Morgan, 1993). Because of that, language teaching and language learning started to change in the educational panorama in Spain. Teachers integrated then both language and culture closely to each other (Buttjes and Byram, 1991; Byram, 1997; Byram and Risager, 1999; Byram and Fleming, 2001; Kramsch, 1993). The main goals of language teaching and learning were no longer focused on languages themselves, but also in the processes of learning how-to live and coexist with different life styles and traditions or values representative of other foreign countries. That would not only enrich the linguistic competence of students or prepare them to pass any of the traditional certificates based on language competences, which were traditionally issued by the institutes of culture or by universities. It could enrich the students' intercultural and social competence and would enable them to live in a globalised society and in a much more tolerant world.

European academic institutions and authorities also played a very relevant role in that new challenge of acquiring that intercultural competence in the language courses. They focused many of their academic regulations and programmes such as the ones done by the European Council or the European Union on the promotion of the cultural diversity and on the development of a new intercultural and multicultural generation. An example of this can already be found in the article 126 of the Maastricht Treaty, later adapted in the article 149 of the Union Treaty of the European Commission. We can read in that article that the main aim of education is then to "develop the European dimension of education, especially through the learning and dissemination of the languages of the Member States, promoting community actions - and specific ones - in the field of education".

That same idea was presented and defended in the so-called "European Commission White Paper on Governance" approved by the Commission in 1995. The emphasis was then set on the acquisition and learning of at least two foreign languages and on the linguistic diversity as one of the main challenges for future education. The aim was to improve the economical and professional opportunities for future learners as well as to try to develop the consciousness of identity versus alterity and to improve the education of the future European citizens.

In addition to that, the globalisation of the academic university programmes also implied an increasing importance of the various international exchange programmes such as the ERASMUS+ programme among universities. This also had a very high and interesting impact on the academic design of many degrees linked to foreign languages such as the Degree in Modern Foreign Languages, Culture and Communication, the Degree of Translation and Interpreting or the Degree in English Studies, etc.

University teachers and professors also had to make a considerable effort teachers to strengthen the language training in foreign languages, and they also had to work hard on the design of a new curriculum of all the different subjects, and not only in the ones concerning language teaching or language learning. At the same time, teacher also combined that effort with the urgent need to investigate and to innovate in new methodological approaches that could have an impact on the implementation of new and much more practical learning models. In comparison to the previous and more traditional educational approaches linked to the teaching of foreign languages in Higher Education, the emphasis was now set in the introduction of other educational approaches. Those would be approaches much more focused on the acquisition of the so-called 'fifth competence', that is, the 'intercultural competence´ that would facilitate a better and greater immersion – not only linguistic, but also cultural – in a different country.

2. Trends in the teaching of the intercultural competence when teaching foreign languages. New roles for language teachers and language learners.

After the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) initiated in the European Union in 1999 and with the gradual adaptation of Bachelor and Masters Programmes at Spanish universities to the EHEA, teaching foreign languages started to change too. The scene in Europe was drastically different; students had to face different needs and to confront a new globalised world, which demanded them to be critical and tolerant towards diversity. Language teachers and professors also had to face that challenge and to educate their students on intercultural and social aspects and not only linguistic or grammatical skills. Classrooms were no longer the only places where teachers could develop their

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teaching activities; a new type virtual scenario also became present and necessary in order to have a deeper contact with the foreign culture and the foreign language. Teachers and specialists started replacing the traditional manuals and materials by communicative activities and digital resources, which enabled students and teachers a deeper contact with cultural diversity, etc.

One of the most significant changes within language teaching and language learning in the actual context of Higher Education after the implementation of the Bologna process - not only in Spain but also in all the other different countries abroad - was the change of the roles traditionally played by teachers and learners in the classroom. Some of the contents in the language programmes might still be the same, but language teachers started emphasizing their own intercultural teaching and also the learning of the intercultural and social competence, as well as all the other competences concerning a language (i.e. grammatical competence and others) that had been taught in the past. That new approach to teaching and learning seriously affected the work done by the two main agents involved in the process, that is to say, the teachers and the learners.

We will start now by focusing on the new role played by language teachers, paying a close attention to their performance inside and outside the classroom, being not only the instructor but also the evaluator of the whole process, and somehow also the designer of his/her own teaching programme. As far as the Spanish Higher Education is concerned, the teacher's role has changed drastically in the last three or four decades. It was not that long ago when language teaching at university or even at high school was extremely traditional. Most teachers entered their classrooms, placed themselves in front of a very large group of students and started teaching in a very traditional and frontal way. They used the conventional language methods at the time, methods in which they mainly focused on the acquisition of grammatical structures. They tried to improve all the different skills that one was supposed to have when learning a foreign language, that is to say, the writing, listening, speaking and reading skills. They offered their language students lots and many exercises, drills and huge lists of vocabulary, so that they could try to master the foreign language and probably use it in a near professional future. They came in the classroom and left it without having that much interpersonal contact with their students. In fact, they were merely instructors in charge of evaluating their students' progress and giving them a note at the end of the semester or the year.

The implementation of a new system in Higher Education and the adaptation of our universities and institutions to the new education space represented by the EEES and the Bologna Process, made things change very quickly. A new emphasis was then placed on the education of global citizens who could then live immersed in a new Europe and become citizens of the world. Foreign languages would of course be the necessary tools to communicate in that new world and with all sorts of people from all over the world, but the approach to them in the classroom and also within the educational context in general would have to be drastically different. They did no longer put the emphasis on teaching the language itself, but on teaching the so-called '*cultural awareness*'. Students would then have to become aware not only of the specificities of their own culture and to see it with critical eyes. They should also become aware of other cultures around them. How could they face that new challenge? How could language teachers facilitate them that new type of learning?

This became then the challenge for them and this is how language teachers started playing a crucial role in the education of students immersed in the new globalised world. They were not only in charge of facilitating them the necessary linguistic tools to communicate with people from other cultures and countries, but they were also responsible for growing up students ready to face a new educational and professional challenge, that is to say, the challenge of dealing with others and learning how to be tolerant towards diversity. Many specialists and researchers have already written much on that new role played by language teachers within the current framework of Higher Education. The main aim was then:

"[…] to introduce the students to multiple perspectives (such as the internal variety existing within their own culture and the foreign culture), in order to promote a dynamic vision of both cultures and to help them to understand how all cultures are continually influenced by other cultures and cannot be considered in a 'territorialized' way, as being linked to a particular geographical part of the world or as enclosed within the boundaries of a nation" (Sercu, 2002: 69).

However, how are language teachers supposed to face that challenge? Are they really prepared for that? I would like to say that institutions such as universities or culture institutes, as well as the Ministry itself or even the national and regional governments have already made a big effort to help them with the fulfilment of that hard task. A very big investment has been made on language policies within education in the last few years. Most high schools in Spain are nowadays promoting very good exchange programmes for students as well as cooperating with foreign institutions in order to offer their language students the possibility of learning with native teaching assistants or learning with other international students abroad with

the aid of ICTS and e-learning programmes. The situation has also been continuously improving at universities since the Bologna process started back in the year 2010. International mobility programmes such as Erasmus +, Swiss European Mobility Programmes, CEAL and others are increasing and most language teachers and institutional coordinators at Spanish universities are working hard on the promotion of a bigger participation of Bachelor and Masters Students in those programmes. For those who still cannot afford to spend an academic year or even a semester abroad, institutions are trying to create other immersion programmes. They could offer them an alternative way or a sort of internationalisation at home; incoming international students are getting immersed in regular classes of all disciplines, students associations such as the Erasmus Student Network are being promoted, mentoring and tutoring programmes are being developed, lots of intercultural workshops are being organised by professors and students on a daily basis, etc. All those activities are mere examples on how institutions – and mainly language teachers and language learners are nowadays facing that new internationalised challenge.

This is not only a challenge that affects language students or the teaching staff in BA Programmes such as English, German or French Studies, Translation and Interpreting or others. Most BA and MA Programmes are affected by that, since the mobility programmes are being implemented and highly advised for students of very different disciplines.

The thing is that we do not only have to struggle and fight to improve and implement the foreign language teaching. Language competence is necessary, of course, and it is still the main tool to communicate with people from other cultures. Nevertheless, language competence is not enough in this modern world. One may prove his/her language competence by presenting an official certificate of one of the main examination centres all over the world, but it does not necessarily mean that one is competent enough to live immersed in a global world. We all – that is to say, teachers and learners – need to be competent in an intercultural and social way. We all need to achieve a new goal, the goal to be able to establish relationships between different cultures, between our own culture and the cultures abroad. We need to learn how to be critical towards our own culture, how to get away from the very frequent stereotypes which are usually associated with all diverse cultures. It is in this sense that the traditional language teacher's role has had to be revised and modified. Language teachers are no longer only supposed to make students familiar with the linguistic structures of the foreign language. Language is not only the tool to communicate with others; it goes far beyond that. It is also a tool to teach the ability on how to establish the relationship between different cultures and lifestyles. Students should not only learn more about the language but also about cultures, that is to say, their own culture but also the cultures of others. They will then act as mediators between cultures and should be able to wake up the students' motivation and curiosity towards different realities. Their new approach to teaching should then be based on not only the linguistic competence and the communicative skills; they should work on the education of new citizens, of learners willing to confront different realities and trying to be enriched by that contact and contrast. Learners should be familiarised with intercultural contexts that show different sides or perspectives of a same reality, being critical not only towards their own culture but also towards the culture of others. In order to do so, it is also important to mention that educational authorities – not only in Spain but also in the complete European context – are nowadays implementing teacher training with many different actions and programmes. If language teachers play the key role of mediators between different cultures, it is extremely important for them to have an updated knowledge about them. The contact between them and representatives of the foreign culture is essential. Some institutions have therefore reinforced the exchange programmes for students and teachers, whereas others have bet on the internationalisation at home and have changed most of their daily routines and activities in the classroom. Language teachers have then become counsellors and guides in the whole process of language teaching trying to focus on new methods and approaches. Apart from teaching the required language skills, they face the challenge of implementing a critical awareness and a comparative approach to all the different cultures and languages in the world. Most language teachers have nowadays replaced individual housework and activities by other tasks in which social debates and group work are essential. Students have therefore acquired a much more active role; students are getting used to being the real protagonists of the whole teaching and learning process. Their participation in debates on intercultural situations opens up their minds and makes them grow up and become tolerant and open-minded citizens, they grow up thinking that the world around them is a good example of the cooperation and coexistence of many different life styles, ideologies, languages and cultures. There have been enormous changes in methodology, objectives and evaluation in the traditional language courses for about three or four decades. Language teaching is much less strict or traditional than it used to be, but it has enhanced a much more active and critical participation of teachers and learners. Not only the knowledge of other cultures has to be continuously updated with the attendance to courses abroad and in land on language teaching and interculturality; the permanent contact to the foreign culture is also a 'must' for teachers and learners, and so is the implementation of the use of ICTs Tools. Those tools are nowadays a very motivating learning strategy for learners of different ages and cultures and

they enable students of different nationalities, languages and cultures to get in touch with each other without having to travel abroad and even without having to spend any additional funds on learning. Social networks and applications such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and others are nowadays part of the learners' daily routine, and it is easy for them to focus on intercultural aspects as it certainly was just a few years ago.

La comunicación apela al ser humano en su totalidad… Como agente social, cada individuo establece relaciones con un amplio conjunto de grupos sociales, superpuestos que unidos definen la identidad. En un enfoque intercultural, uno de los objetivos fundamentales de la educación en la lengua es el impulso del desarrollo favorable de la personalidad del alumno y su sentimiento de identidad, como respuesta a la enriquecedora experiencia que supone enfrentarse a lo diferente en los ámbitos de la lengua y de la cultura. (Instituto Cervantes, 2002: 12)[1]

It was not only the teacher's nor the learners' roles that had to be changed and adapted to this new model of education concerning foreign languages. Most activities inside and outside the classroom were modified too and the teaching programmes and guidelines for evaluation had to be adapted too. Traditional approaches to education such as the frontal class structure where the teachers played the leading role and presented the theoretical concepts of their subjects were then partially abandoned and general tuition moved forward to a new much more communicative model in which the continuous interaction between teacher and classmates played a very significant role. That does not mean that the grammar contents within the teaching programmes was abandoned, but it was simply presented in a completely different way. When we come to think about language courses, grammar contents started to be presented and implemented through context. Often the language learners had to deduce the use of language and its most relevant aspects on grammar basing themselves on given texts, communicative activities or simulations. They did not get the grammatical input directly from their language teachers, but they also had to learn to be critical towards a foreign language and its structure and to be able to find out the similarities and differences between the use of their mother tongue and of the language learnt.

The increasing and necessary presence of the intercultural elements in language learning also had a deep impact in the types of different materials, which were daily used in the classrooms. Lots of different teaching and learning materials of all sorts soon replaced traditional methods and manuals. Publishers started working hard on that, so that they could offer language teachers new very attractive and motivating materials where interculturality played a very significant role. On the one hand, most manuals included a large amount of authentic texts from very different and actual sources such as websites, media, literature, etc. trying to sort them out into the different levels of language acquisition without missing their authenticity and intercultural character. They also cared for the presentation of an updated information on all sorts of cultural aspects of the foreign country. At the same time, publishers and editors – together with specialised teams of language teachers and trainers – worked on the development of new activities and tests so that the language learners could then acquire the required *cultural awareness* and learned how to be critical not only towards other cultures but also towards the own culture. From the very first levels within the language learning process, students were faced to real face-to-face situations where they had to play different roles and try to solve problems concerning intercultural situations, like for example, how to introduce themselves or how to talk to others in the most appropriate way. Their role became much more active than in the previous language teaching models, and the teacher's role changed. Teachers left their frontal position as the only authority in front of the classroom, and somehow they became mediators of the new communicative space created among the students.

The implementation of a large number of very creative and motivating materials has been relevant within those new trends in the teaching of the intercultural competence in the foreign language classroom. Nowadays, it is relatively easy to find materials in all sorts of formats – i.e. texts, videos, games, apps, blogs… -, and language teachers are gradually leaving behind the traditional materials for language learning. The presence of the new technologies and ICTS tools is also growing fast, and tele-collaboration projects between institutions is improving and helping to develop a much bigger language and intercultural competence not only among language learners but also among language teachers and institutions.

When thinking about the actual context of Higher Education in Spain in general and about language teaching in particular, we would then affirm that collaborative learning is getting more and more important and it is somehow replacing the previous methodology concerning language learning and teaching. That does not mean that the student's individual work or tasks

[1] Communication appeals to the human being as a whole... As a social agent, each individual establishes relationships with a broad set of social groups that together define identity. In an intercultural approach, one of the fundamental aims of education in the language is the impulse of the favorable development of the personality of the student and of his sense of identity, as a response to the enriching experience that confronts the different in the fields of language and culture".[]

European Journal of
Language and Literature Studies

have to disappear completely. They are and will always be important within the process of learning; working with grammatical drills, writing essays, making oral presentations in class will of course continue in the future methods of language learning and they will help us (teachers) to evaluate the individual progress on learning. However, we still need to implement and reinforce all those individual tasks by the use of other much more collaborative tasks and with interactive projects dealing with social abilities and group work. Negotiating with other students, not only from the own country but also from the foreign country, will help them to become critical and open-minded citizens in this new globalised world.

Language teachers are now implementing all sorts of new activities in their language lessons trying to focus in the acquisition of that required intercultural competence and on the internationalisation of their students. Many institutions have reinforced their international exchange programmes with schools in/or universities abroad and they are also enhancing the mobility of their students. For those who still cannot travel abroad, they are also working on a new type of what they usually call '*internationalisation at home*'. In other words, they are implementing methods and activities that facilitate the contact of their language learners at their home universities or institutions with the culture abroad. In that sense, we could mention many different actions such as the following examples: the cooperation with language assistants and lecturers within the regular courses, the integration of incoming international students in the lessons or the creation of social networks and tandem programmes to facilitate the communication and intercultural exchange between native speakers and international students. Besides, we could also mention here the organisation of a huge amount of workshops and activities dealing with intercultural aspects (such as workshops on traditions, cinema, music, gastronomy, tourism and many others), the creation of extracurricular courses or activities to prepare students for an hypothetical Year Abroad experience lived within the mobility programmes such as the ones offered in the framework ERASMUS+ or others.

Il est possible d'inscrire toutes les nuances de cet objetctif général dans un continuum encadré d'une part par l'idée de curiosité et d'ouverture d'esprit et d'autre part par celui d'empathie pour l'autre. Entre ces deux extrêmes, il y a des invitations à une plus grand tolérance, à une plus grande ouverture aux valeurs d'autres, au dépassement des stéréotypes, à l'acceptation de l'autre dans leurs differences. L'acquisition de valeurs tells que la solidarité ou même l'adoption d'attitudes positivs à l'égard des valeurs européenes est également presente dans certains programmes. (Eurydice, 2001: 167)

3. Conclusions

To conclude, and after having analysed some of the new and more outstanding trends in language teaching nowadays, we would like to highlight in this article that the intercultural approach and the intercultural competence linked to the current teaching and learning processes has to be an essential part of the new linguistic curriculum at every single level of education. That intercultural competence and the development of a cultural awareness should then be included in the main educational policies not only in Spain but also in the other member countries of the European Union. Living in a dynamic and changing world where borders are blurred and do not seem to exist any longer, or at least where they are not as rigid and insurmountable as they used to be, we – language teachers, but also language learners – have to focus our tuition on the real needs of others. We need to mediate in conflicts arising from rigid and false stereotypes about different cultures, and we have to deal with new ways, methods and approaches concerning about our own personal ways of teaching.

Language teaching and acquiring an excellent and outstanding linguistic competence should not be then our last aim or goal. We should use the foreign language or languages mainly as tools to communicate with people from other cultures. Mediating between identity and alterity, which is between the definitions of our own culture and of the characteristics and definition of other lifestyles and other traditions, will only help us and our language learners to be more tolerant and respectful in the future. It will also prepare us – citizens of a new global world – to care for others and to act in a responsible way. Our language learners have now become or are trying to become "intercultural speakers"; in other words, they are working hard on achieving the ability to understand and interact with people from other cultures and to accept the alterity and confront it to their own experience and culture (Byram, Nichols and Stevens, 2001). After a few years of hard work and of a very big effort on the teacher's side, but also on the educational policies and on the students' attitude towards the learning processes, we can now finally affirm that the intercultural approach is a relevant and decisive element in the current language teaching. It allows both teachers and learners to reflect upon themselves, their own culture, and their personal lifestyles and upon other cultures and diversity.

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