

## THE NEED FOR INTRODUCING INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN POLISH SCHOOLS

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*Розширення Європейського Союзу спричинило серйозні дискусії, які стосуються потреби навчання молодих європейців повазі до спільної культурної спадщини, а також толерантності у ставленні до цінностей і вірувань різних націй. Проте в часи, коли латина, яка впродовж багатьох століть єднала Європейську спільноту, втратила свій престиж, мовні відмінності і культурні впливи стали більш помітними у процесі міжособистісної комунікації. Тому люди повинні не лише створити спільний мовний код, а й бути підготовленими до подолання можливих культурних непорозумінь. З огляду на це підготовка вчителів (викладачів) іноземної мови має здійснюватися з оперням на інтеркультурність.*

*Ключові слова: міжкультурна освіта, спільна культурна спадщина, мовні відмінності, толерантність, міжособистісна комунікація, спільний мовний код, можливі культурні непорозуміння.*

### 1. HETEROGENEOUS ANCESTRY OF THE POLISH NATION

The extension of the European Union and the possible access of countries such as the Ukraine or Turkey has initialized serious discussions concerning the need for teaching young European citizens respect towards shared cultural heritage, as well as tolerance towards discrete values and beliefs acknowledged by different nations. The very concept of culture [4] described as “values, attitudes, beliefs, customs, physical and material objects shared by members of a society and transmitted to next generations” implies a sense of people hood, a feeling of belonging to a community which shapes behavior patterns and establishes certain norms.

Poland, becoming a heterogeneous nation through a union with Lithuania, signed in 1385, in Krewo, by king Jagiełło, had started the tradition of developing cultural sensitivity long before it was debated by the European Union’s officials. That historic relation between Poland representing civilized west society, influenced by the Christian religion and Lithuania practicing heathen rituals and eastern customs, taught people to peacefully coexist without losing one’s cultural identity. This in turn, laid foundations for the unique character of the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century which enabled people of different beliefs to freely practice their religion on the territory of Poland.

However, in the times when Latin, which for many centuries unified European civilization, lost its prestige as *lingua franca*, allowing national languages to gradually take over its place, linguistic differences and cultural influences started to be more visible in the process of human communication. From this moment on, in order to achieve a

successful international discourse, people had not only to acquire a common language code, but also be aware of possible cultural misunderstandings.

## 2. THE NEED FOR TEACHING INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY TO YOUNG POLISH GENERATION

The tragedy of World War II , together with the painful experience of Holocaust , both of which affected not only people living at that hard times, but also influenced the life of following generation, destroyed the tradition of intercultural dialogue and resulted in hatred and intolerance spread over the whole continent. Due to that historic event, the Polish nation lost its heterogeneous character and become an almost completely homogeneous country, where ethnocentrism replaced openness and positive attitudes towards other cultures. Today's Poland has come a long way to be fully accepted as a member of the European family. Although elder generation still has to deal with the nightmares of the past and distrust towards neighboring countries as well as ethnic minorities, young citizens have managed to overcome many stereotypes and prejudices against people of different cultural background.

It seems that after the access to the European Union in 2004, young Poles became more aware of the educational and work opportunities that can be fully exploited by them. Furthermore, globalization creates a world in which an increasing number of people migrate between countries for work or studies. Due to this, many future international students will have to face challenges related to their functioning in a new cultural environment, in a country of different values, sociocultural rules and norms of behavior. Knowing that success or effectiveness in intercultural interaction depends to a large extent on the degree of intercultural competence a person possesses, one must have sufficient skills and knowledge to accomplish his job, must be able to adjust properly in a new culture or multicultural environment, and be able to establish interpersonal relations with co-workers and within the culturally differing community. Thus, intercultural competence helps not only to survive, but also to achieve success in an increasingly interdependent global society.

Intercultural communication competence is the ability to engage, learn from and work with people whose cultural identity is different from one's own.

## 3. AIMS OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

Traditionally, international education looked at the world in segments. It stressed gathering information about separate cultures and analysing it in contexts of a particular country. Now, however, the concept of a global society is emerging. Education, either formal schooling, or non-governmental institutions, together with

media, plays a significant role in preparing the Polish society to accept the multicultural ancestry and to facilitate future intercultural contacts which will soon become a common experience. Broadly speaking, the aim of intercultural education is to prepare students to cope with global interdependence and cultural pluralism which involve relationships and events that cannot be contained within old national or cultural boundaries or fit old definitions of how intercultural and ethnic groups relate to each other. School, as an institution of long lasting influence on the youth, is the best place to initiate this kind of interdisciplinary training. The strongest emphasis on implementing cultural contexts in school curricula is put on the teaching of foreign languages. Indeed, the language lessons seem to be an accurate place to initialize the process of developing cultural sensitivity.

Teaching interculturalism during foreign language training has its own specific dimension which arises from a close relation between language and culture.

Culture [6, 21 – 22], as a complex system describing society, influences perception, thinking, and action of every community. Language, on the other hand, is not seen as a separate skill or capacity in human's cognitive system. It is linked to and interacts with culture on many levels. Language communication is constantly immersed in situations defined culturally, in which interlocutors negotiate meanings. Therefore, teaching foreign languages cannot be deprived of its natural sociocultural context.

The concept of culture consist of two dimensions [6, 25]: social and individual. In case of a group of people using the same language code and living in the same cultural zone, the sense of shared identity is so obvious that what really matters in communication are the individual traits distinguishing members of community. However, in relations between people belonging to discrete national groups, the contrast and diversity of certain norms reveals the social dimension of one's identity. Using one language code, is it the English, the French or any other, do not imply losing one's national identity. Everyday people experience many misunderstandings in communication, caused by the lack of cultural awareness.

The most typical problems concerns:

- Literal understanding of questions such as *How are you?*, which do not requires a detailed account of recent misfortunes, as some Poles still tend to think.
- Inaccurate usage of polite forms which might be treated as a lack of respect towards an interlocutor.
- Different concept of punctuality. In Mediterranean European countries and Latin America, it is normal, or at least widely tolerated, to arrive half an hour late for a dinner invitation, whereas in Germany and Switzerland this would be extremely rude.

Intercultural education aims to promote the awareness of different attitudes, opinions, and respect of people representing different values or beliefs. Other aspects of the education concerns:

- elimination of stereotypes and prejudices about culturally distinct population group within a country

Showing different customs in extended cultural context help to understand human mentality and certain national traits. Moreover, it eliminates negative opinions transmitted from one generation to the following one.

- developing sensitivity, empathy and ability to see cultural changes
- emphasising the need for mutual cognition and acceptance between people of various background

That attitude promotes coexistence and cooperation above any distinctions.

- gathering information about foreign reality, building awareness of other's country cultural heritage
- developing the ability to perceive and analyse one's culturally defined behaviour
- developing cultural identity and inclination to preserve motherland's cultural heritage
- developing ability to identify intercultural misunderstandings and deal with them
- acquiring a complex intercultural competence
- developing the ability to describe one's attitude and present subjective points of view, without disrespect towards other's.

## 1. A STUDY SHOWING THE PRESENCE OF CULTURAL CONTEXTS ON LANGUAGE LESSONS IN THE POLISH CONDITIONS.

Having presented the significance of the intercultural training, it is now worth to have an insight into the Polish conditions of leading lessons of a such character. Unfortunately the reality is far from expectations. The situation can be best illustrated by a research [1] conducted in 2004, in Białystok by L. Pędzich- Aleksandrowicz, Ph.D, from the University of Białystok, who examined frequency and character of cultural references on language courses. The study was held on eighty-two classes, led by forty-five teachers of English, Spanish, French, Russian and Italian. None of the lectors was informed about the subject matter of the study, which makes the results more objective and reliable. The criteria of evaluation included cultural contexts mentioned by teachers and sources of those references, whether they were specially chosen by teachers or just included in a course book. Cultural references were categorized into high culture, mass culture, knowledge of the world and customs. Out of the total number of eighty-two observed lessons about one third was dominated by grammar, language skills and vocabulary, but did not convey any meaningful cultural information. In case of English classes, the number of lessons deprived of cultural context was twenty-four out of sixty-five, whereas on other language lessons there were three out of seventeen. On the basis of this research the conclusion to be drawn is that English language teachers tend to either undervalue the importance of the cultural component of language education, or for some reasons avoid incorporating it into the course. There are various reasons which can possibly explain this phenomena. The first one is conditioned by the character of a

language course. In many cases English classes are devoted to preparation for Cambridge Examinations which are completely deprived of any cultural aspects. The general goal is to teach language, however from sociolinguistic point of view this approach seem to be illogical, as language and culture cannot be separated. What is more, teachers of English tend to have lesser intercultural competence. Large geographical surface of the English speaking countries and the variety of cultures existing within, preclude teachers from gaining a complex knowledge of all of them. This results in an inadequate education of teachers whose cultural competence is rather shallow. Awareness of that discourages them from discussing any aspects of culture on language lessons. The cultural competence of the French, or the German language teachers is, on the other hand, systematically gained throughout the whole period of academic education. Cultural training is usually more precise and enables students to fully develop their interest in culture of a particular country.

Another point of the study examined the character of cultural references. The highest number of forty-one references can be classified as mass culture. Within this category the most common topics were: everyday life, customs, film, media and pop music. The choice of these particular aspects of culture is closely related to the widely accepted communicational method of teaching language, which puts emphasis on everyday communication with the usage of rather colloquial language. The most striking thing was the absence of literature. One may claim that there is no point in introducing authentic piece of writing on intermediate level, as they are too difficult for an average teenager, thus discourage learners from an active participation in activities related to a text. However, it can be argued that literature constitutes an important part of language education and it should not be avoided. Moreover, good publishers offer a wide range of the classics in form of simplify readers adjusted to all language levels. There is no need to force reluctant students to read a masterpiece, but every educated person should be at least aware of some literary concepts and contexts that influence a particular culture and language.

Taking into consideration all the mentioned above aspects of language education , it becomes visible that the subject of culture is often treated too generally by the teachers. While other European countries such as France or Germany have already improved their educational policy in the social dimension of schooling, the Polish government still favours conservative approach towards cultural differences. Discipline and schools uniforms are part of a dubious propaganda whose real aim is to reverse the public's concern about the quality of Polish schooling. In other words, the stress is put on surpassing pupils' individuality rather than promoting dialogue between learners and teachers, as well as among peers of different background, religion, sexuality and nationality. Therefore, there is a need for developing educational strategies and working methods to prepare teachers to manage the new situations arising in schools as a result of discrimination, xenophobia, sexism and to resolve problems in a non-violent way. Moreover, schools should support international initiatives and experiments particularly through partnership, youth participation and cooperation with communities as well as

parents. Some of the Polish schools have already established an international relations with other schools, enabling pupils' to take part in short exchanges, during which children are able to meet their peers from another country and observe the other society. However, in order to establish an atmosphere of reciprocal understanding, competent teachers are needed. Universities together with teacher-training colleges are responsible for training students to meet intercultural qualifications.

## 2. STRATEGIES AND METHODS OF INTRODUCING INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

Appropriate teacher training is a core need to ensure the development of intercultural education. Two main areas need to be addressed: first, ensuring that there are sufficient numbers of trained teachers, second, that teachers should promote a positive environment for intercultural education in their classrooms. Obtaining appropriate qualifications, teachers are able to convey meaningful information to children and incorporate innovative activities and projects developing learner's cultural awareness. The type and quality of education provided by them is crucial both in promoting tolerance and mutual understanding among children.

There are two strategies [2] of implementing intercultural training on language lessons. The *overt* one is based on realizing single tasks, sequences of exercises or topic modules, all of which aim to develop intercultural competence. The *concealed* one aims to integrate intercultural training with developing four language skills: listening, writing, reading and speaking, as well as with teaching grammar and lexis. As far as this method is concerned, information about stereotypes, custom differences, non-verbal communication etc. appears mainly in reading or listening activities, nevertheless it may be also included in grammar and lexical exercises. The choice of a particular method is often dependent on the character of a course book used by a teacher. Good examples of language exercises integrated with intercultural training are to be found in course books such as General English or Network, published by Oxford University Press. Different kind of educational games, play roles simulations and discussions, inserted in the course book, are of a great usefulness in developing intercultural competence. Another course book designed to supplement grammar or functional syllabi with culture contexts was written by Barry Tomalin and Susan Stempleski under a title *Cultural Awareness*. The book contains seventy-two exercises divided into seven major categories:

- Identification of cultural symbols
- Work with products of culture
- Study of everyday behavior
- Study of characteristic cultural attitudes
- Study of different styles of communication
- Analysis of values and attitudes
- Analysis and extension of cultural experience

Activities proposed by the authors are described and grouped according to the level of language competence as well as grammatical structures and language skills that they develop. In this case, intercultural training is closely related to language teaching. However, the most effective way of implementing it in school curricula, is conducting separate lessons in form of a cultural module. An exemplary model of a such solution is presented in the book *Social Identity and the European Dimension: Intercultural Competence Through Foreign Language Learning*, by Byram and Tost Planet. The modules proposed by the authors are appropriate for high school students mostly because of the subjects that they concern. Teenagers from European countries discuss the following topics:

- Value systems of young Europeans
- Emotional relationships of young people
- The concept of social identity
- Awareness of European and national identity

The authors advise teachers to use the above mentioned subjects as a starting point for group projects, as it is extremely important to engage students and encourage them to express their opinions, rather than rely on teacher' ones. Individual self-learning habits, critical thinking, cooperative grouping and communicative skills are all stimulated in the context of a project. The effective teaching in this case includes the ability to incorporate students' cultural background and experiences to enhance learning. Therefore the participants of such projects are treated as co-creators of the module. Discussions and brainstorming are also seen as two strategies that encouraged critical thinking. Those are used in small groups or with the whole class altogether.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Official documents regulating foreign language teaching in Europe are placing more and more emphasis on the development of intercultural communication competencies, having in mind the social and professional performance of learners in global and multicultural societies in the 21 st century. However, as far as Polish educational policy is concerned, the government still makes little account of this issue. It seems that politics are not aware of the fact that intercultural competence is needed as the basic ability for any interaction. It is not only necessary to have social skills, but also to improve the sensitivity and understanding for other values, views, ways of living and thinking, as well as being self-conscious in transferring one's own values and views in a clear, but appropriate way. In a successful intercultural communication, people constantly move from their existing cultural knowledge to categorizing and relating new cultural information so that knowledge, ideally speaking, is always challenged, reshaped, and changed. Intercultural education leads to increased understanding of cultures and a desire to extend knowledge about cultural customs and concepts. Thanks to it, the youth has the opportunity to begin the process of developing cultural awareness and strategies on how to communicate in an intercultural setting, which will certainly be of a benefit in their adult life. Moreover, young people learn how to revise or dispel stereotypes in a constructive way. By learning to reflect on the subjectivity of their own

thoughts and language, they also learn to step outside boundaries and develop more critical literacy. They stop taking things for granted and learn to pause, rethink, and let partners talk. In this way, teenagers have the chance to develop:

- Critical thinking
- Awareness of the subjectivity and relativity of culture and thinking
- Cooperation with other people
- Increased competence in using different research methods
- Cultural and language awareness
- Better understanding of representatives of other cultures.
- Self-confidence and the ability of expressing own thoughts and opinions

Therefore, I regard such a training to be extremely important for the young generation, as it is a deep process of discovery that implies personal engagement and constant effort to keep the right balance between challenging ourselves to move further away from our assumptions and respecting our differences as equal elements of the reality.

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