



Incorporating both Language and Culture in the Teaching of Norwegian as a Foreign Language. A Perspective on the BA Norwegian Programme in Cluj-Napoca

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Abstract

The field of foreign language learning has undergone various paradigm shifts in order to accommodate to the constant changes taking place in the social, cultural and educational contexts. This paper intended to justify the role of culture in the context of learning the Norwegian language. The main emphasis was placed on the fact that foreign language learning is both a communicative and an intercultural endeavour.

Keywords: foreign language teaching; (inter)cultural competence; communicative competence; the intercultural turn; the multilingual and multicultural classroom; explicit and implicit culture;

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1. The BA Norwegian Programme in Cluj-Napoca, Romania

The teaching of Norwegian as a foreign language, at university level, has a tradition at Babeş-Bolyai University of more than 24 years. The Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literatures of the Faculty of Letters in Cluj-Napoca provides the only BA of Norwegian Language and Literature which is accredited at national level (both as a major and a minor Norwegian specialization). As a consequence of its uniqueness and of the growing interest of learning Norwegian, the number of students that register for this BA has grown gradually in the last years. The total of students who attend today the BA Norwegian courses amounts approximately to 240 students.

The Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literatures has been cooperating over the years with many institutions from Norway (The Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education, Norwegian Fiction and Non-Fiction Literature Abroad etc.) and has signed various EEA-agreements with academic institutions in Norway (University of Oslo, University of Agder, University of Bergen or University of Stavanger). The latest EEA cooperation agreement was signed with Volda University College, in Norway, after two teachers at The Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literatures in Cluj-Napoca attended in March 2015 the *International Conference for teachers who teach Norwegian at universities abroad* which was held in Volda. This interinstitutional agreement offers exchange mobility programmes to both students and teachers within the field of learning and teaching the Norwegian language.

Nowadays, institutions of higher education need to incorporate an international perspective in order to respond to the requirements of the global education market. Therefore, the main target of the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literatures is its internalization of Norwegian and Scandinavian studies. Thus, the international conference organized by Volda University College provided the participants good opportunities for professional exchange and professional development, engagement in collaborative arrangements, exchange programmes and visibility to the Norwegian studies in Cluj-Napoca.

Taking into consideration the fact that the characteristics of communication between interlocutors have nowadays undergone various changes due to the process of globalization and the rise of the Digital Age, the academic environment begins to be more concerned with the implications that multilingualism plays on teaching in a multicultural classroom. Various researchers both worldwide (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, Modiano, 2009, Gardner, 2012, Banks & Banks McGee, 2010) and in Norway (Selj & Ryen, 2011, Hauge, 2007, Kulbrandstad & Engen, 2004) are preoccupied with the multilayered perspectives of teaching and learning in multicultural classrooms. In Romania the interest for this topic has grown in the past years and many researchers have emphasized the fact that the field of language education has to tackle the place of culture in the foreign language learning context (Petruş, 2011, Petruş & Tomescu-Baciu, 2014, Petruş & Bocoş-Binţinţan, 2013, Păun & Troc, 2006, Cozma, Butnaru & Cucu, 2001, Bârlogeanu, 2007). Babeş-Bolyai University promotes multiculturalism and an intercultural pedagogy through its study programmes that are delivered in three languages: Romanian, German and Hungarian. Thus, the topics concerning cultural exchange, cultural awareness and the understanding of cultural

diversity that were tackled and debated at the conference organized by Volda University College represented salient perspectives for the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literatures.

2. Foreign language learning – both an intercultural and a communicative endeavour

According to Paul Gardner (2012, 77-78) language is a marker of social and cultural identity, is imbued with social signification and is part of the social fabric of a society. Language represents a means of expressing who we are. In our everyday social interaction we choose in a conscious manner the words that we want include in our discourse or the way we pronounce some words. Whether they are sociolects or ethnolects, these language registers signal to the interlocutors important details about our social and cultural identity. Moreover, when communicating, in addition to exchanging information that is regulated by lexical, discourse or syntax rules, one activates one's affective filter in relation to a particular language. Therefore, as concerns foreign language learning, motivation, interest and attitude toward the target language and culture represent according to Lambert (1974 in Abrahamsson, 2009, 199) important factors in achieving effective language learning.

The field of foreign language learning has undergone various paradigm shifts in order to accommodate to the constant changes taking place in the social, cultural and educational contexts. The so-called 'cognitive turn' (McLaughlin et al. 1983) perceived language learning as a cognitive activity, while the 'social turn' (Block, 2003) considered language learning to be in essence a social activity, i.e. not an individual act but a learning process developed in interaction with others. Starting with the 1990s the 'cultural turn' (Byram, 1989) began to emphasize the intertwined relationship between language learning and culture learning. Because language is a socio-cultural code, not a mere system of rules, Byram (1989, 42) suggests that in fact "language learning is culture learning and consequently [...] language teaching is culture teaching."

Kramsch (2009) emphasized the need of a 'subjective turn' in foreign language teaching, namely an approach that would explore in more detail personal and symbolic aspects of language learning and would focus on learners' emotions and perceptions. The emphasis placed on the learner's identity and his/ her holistic language learning experience led to the development of another language learning theory. In today's interconnected multicultural world where interaction with people from different cultures constitutes the norm it was suggested the need of an 'intercultural turn' (Byram, 2007, Sercu, 2005, Lázár, 2000, Risager, 2007) that would enable learners to acquire the ability to understand otherness as well as to be aware of one's own linguistic and cultural values. In this case, foreign language learning should be perceived as an intercultural endeavour since learners encounter in the target language other cultural representations that they have to decode and make use of. In addition, this emphasis on the intercultural perspective on language learning aims to make learners "more aware of their own cultural programming and cultural encodings when interacting with individuals belonging to other cultures" (Pop & Bocoş, 2014, 300).

Another theory that combines several paradigms listed above is the so-called 'multilingual turn' (May, 2014, Conteh & Meier, 2014) according to which "the processes of learning are both cognitive and social, as well as historical, cultural, emotional, kinaesthetic, interpersonal and moral" (Conteh & Meier, 2014, 6). In view of the diverse language learning theories presented above, language learning is perceived to be a complex personal achievement incorporating a holistic touch to it and which is definitely influenced by the socio-cultural and emotional context in which it takes place.

In the past 30 years the focus of foreign language learning has shifted from achieving a mere linguistic competence to developing a communicative competence which is more relevant for the learners' communicative needs. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages:

Learning, Teaching, Assessment (2001), which provides guidelines on the teaching of foreign languages and regulates language assessment across Europe, the communicative competence comprises several components: a linguistic, a sociolinguistic and a pragmatic one (2001, 13). Thus, communicative competence (a term coined by linguist Dell Hymes in 1972) constitutes the ability to use appropriately the lexical and phonological system of the target language, regards the adaptation of one's discourse to a particular social context and requires from learners to be knowledgeable about the way in which language use is subjected to the implicit and explicit culture.

Still, communicative competence was initially intended to target the competence of native speakers and disregarded the linguistic challenges encountered by non-native language learners. Nowadays, the communicative competence of a native speaker is no longer the reference point of a foreign language learner, since it is obvious that this goal is not a realistic one and cannot be achieved entirely by a non-native speaker. In order to emphasize the fact that learners act as mediators between their own culture and the target language culture, Byram M. and Zarate G. (1997) coined a new term, i.e. the 'intercultural speaker'. This term implies that the language learner is able to anticipate communicative misunderstandings and can relate to and accommodate his/her language to different social and cultural contexts. What differentiates even more the intercultural speaker from the native speaker is the 'attitude' which adds to the knowledge and skills component. Thus, according to the intercultural perspective in foreign language learning, the learner has to be willing to engage in intercultural exchange, to exhibit respect and tolerance toward otherness or to demonstrate interest and willingness to relativize one's own values. The intercultural approach in language learnings is "complementary to the communicative competence and does not intend to replace its theoretical basis" (Petruș, 2014, 138). Moreover, this approach implies that foreign language learning can contribute to the intercultural development of learners.

The traditional foreign language pedagogy puts an emphasis on the development of the four skills in the target language classroom, i.e. speaking, writing, reading and listening. Since language is a "social practice" (Kramsch, 2003, 21) and is part of and bears our identity (Skjekkeland, 2012, 69) a cultural perspective to language learning, in view of the arguments presented above, would only add value and make foreign language learning more efficient and meaningful. Claire Kramsch argues that "culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill [...]. It is always in the background right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard won communicative competence, challenging the ability to make sense of the world around them" (1993, 1). Therefore, in order to be efficient communicators it would be beneficial for foreign language learners to be taught language and culture in an integrated manner.

3. The proper role of culture in the context of learning the Norwegian language

The acquisition of a foreign language is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon (Abrahamsson 2009, 11) since within language it is present both the national and the personal identity (Skjekkeland 2012, 32). Norway has managed to preserve this national and personal identity by having two official written forms of Norwegian: Bokmål (literally 'book language') and Nynorsk (literally 'New Norwegian'). One has to keep in mind the fact that Bokmål and Nynorsk provide the standard just for how to write Norwegian and not how to speak the language. Most Norwegians speak their own dialect in various circumstances as to indicate the region they come from. This interplay between language, culture and identity is of paramount importance since according to Skjekkeland (2012, 98) it makes one be more conscious about choosing one's words and having two ways of expressing oneself might provide a double value to the communication. Thus, culture and language are socially constructed and are always situated in a socio-cultural environment.

When it comes to integrating culture into foreign language learning, one has to consider at least two components: the teaching context and the learners' identity (their mother tongue, their motivation to learn the language, their socio-cultural background, their age etc.). Getting to know one's students represents an important stage in choosing the appropriate teaching resources and accommodating one's teaching to learners' learning needs. Even if sometimes there is the tendency to consider the classroom as an artificial environment for learning a foreign language, in today's multicultural and multilingual world the classroom represents a 'micro-cultural context that is comprised of students who have different cultural backgrounds and different mother tongues' (Petruș & Tomescu Baciu 2014, 161).

The BA Norwegian programme offered by the Faculty of Letters in Cluj-Napoca provides to its students an integrated approach to learning the Norwegian language and become familiarized with the Norwegian culture. According to the syllabus, there are a variety of courses that tackle the development of linguistic and communicative competence, as well as cultural competence, i.e. knowledge about literature, arts, social conventions, norms, awareness of dialect differences etc. Likewise, students are offered a comprehensive view of the way in which the Norwegian language functions in different communicative contexts. The integration of the cultural component in the learning of Norwegian adds to the development of an efficient and appropriate communication.

Many students have registered for this BA Norwegian programme mainly because they have had contact with the Norwegian culture through literature, arts, movies or music. This contact motivated them to learn Norwegian in order to understand the Norwegian culture. The resources used to support the teaching of Norwegian in the BA programme comprise a variety of graded textbooks and of authentic resources (literature books, newspaper articles, video clips etc.). The textbooks (for example *Ny i Norge - Manne & Kaurin Nilsen, 2003*; *Bo i Norge - Manne, 2000*; *Her på berget - Ellingsen & Mac Donald, 2008*) enhance students' linguistic, communicative as well as (inter)cultural competence. The term 'inter' implies that students are acting as mediators between their own culture and the target language culture. In addition, within an intercultural exchange students reflect on the differences and challenges they have to overcome in order to achieve an efficient communication that would be appropriate to a certain communicative context in the target language. These textbooks comprise both explicit (literature, arts, holiday customs, music, food habits etc.) and implicit (values, norms, beliefs, non-verbal language, gender roles, attitudes etc.) cultural representations. Likewise, students are provided with a comprehensive view of Norwegian culture. These cultural representations are relevant for the foreign language learner who aims to enhance his/her pragmatic communication, i.e. master sociolinguistic rules in a communicative context (use the language for different purposes, change the language according to the context or the interlocutor's needs, follow the rules of conversation etc.). More details about the students' profiles and their points of view regarding the appropriateness of teaching Norwegian by focusing on both cultural and linguistic elements can be found in Petruș & Tomescu-Baciu 2014.

The National Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion in Norway (2006, 3) places a great emphasis on developing students' cultural competence in a multicultural society, on students' understanding of different representations of culture, on developing in schools and through learning attitudes of tolerance and respect for people belonging to different cultures. This change from a national to an international perspective in teaching was also adopted at university level. Volda University College, for example, offers a course called Norwegian language and civilization for international students (<http://hivolda.studiehandbok.no/eng/content/view/full/32164>) that aims to tackle learning outcomes which focus on developing a linguistic and a communicative competence, as well as an intercultural one:

- speak Norwegian reasonably correctly with correct intonation
- Norwegian phonetics, vocabulary and the grammatical structure in Norwegian language

- read and understand contemporary texts, literary texts, non-fiction, and vocational texts
- adapt to the Norwegian society
- reflect upon aspects of Norwegian mentality and culture

These learning outcomes that are set for students who learn Norwegian as a foreign language reflect the interconnectedness between foreign language learning and (inter)cultural understanding. The *International Conference for teachers who teach Norwegian at universities abroad* has tackled explicitly topics that regard the integration of cultural representations in Norwegian language learning: a) Multilingualism – to learn Norwegian as a foreign language; b) The international students encounter the Norwegian culture and society. The students' struggle to accommodate to Norwegian language and culture at Volda University College has been documented by Reidun Aambø (2008) who provides an insight into how Norwegian culture and patterns of behaviour are perceived by learners who study Norwegian as a foreign language. The book covers topics related to politeness norms, social conventions, dress code and taboos.

The Romanian National Curriculum (<http://www.edu.ro/index.php/articles/curriculum/12782>) also provides similar perspectives on foreign language learning. The emphasis is again placed on having a closer contact between language and culture:

- willingness to accept differences and tolerance by tackling in a critical manner cultural diversity and stereotypes;
- developing interest towards discovering cultural contexts through tackling a variety of texts;
- developing flexibility while exchanging ideas or when working in groups, in different types of communication (2009, 6).

The Romanian Education Law (<http://www.edu.ro/index.php/legaldocs/14847>) stipulates that every student has to acquire eight different types of competences among which two of them tackle explicitly the broad concept of culture: a) Competence on cultural awareness and expression; b) social and civic competences (art. 68, p. 11). Therefore, within the field of foreign language learning, the integration of culture with its variables (multilingual and multicultural) is sustained in the Romanian educational context.

The acknowledgement of the fact that all learning is placed in a social context has multiple implications both in the way teaching and learning sequences are planned. Even if culture is closely related to the processes and contents of education to such a degree that sometimes it is difficult to identify whether the educational system influences culture or it is vice-versa, there are some challenges linked to the integration of culture in the field of foreign language learning. Frederick Erickson (Banks & Banks McGee 2010, 38) indicates four main issues concerning culture's relevance for education:

- the notion of culture as invisible and well as visible;
- the politics of cultural difference in school and society;
- the inherent diversity of cultures and subcultures within human social groups;
- the diversity of cultures within the individual - a perspective on the self as multiculturally constructed.

The first challenge refers to the fact that culture represents a fluid, flexible concept that is characterized by change and adaptation. In this respect, culture can be invisible i.e. implicit or visible i.e. explicit. When accommodating students, in a formal teaching environment, to certain cultural characteristics of the target

language the tendency is to focus on the visible elements of culture since these are easier to identify. The invisible elements of culture are more difficult to explain and accept. Besides being knowledgeable about these invisible elements of culture, the learner needs to develop skills (ability to participate successfully in social interactions, ability to adapt to a variety of individuals and groups that have different cultural backgrounds, interpret successfully non-verbal communication etc.) and attitudes (openness, curiosity and willingness to familiarize with people from various cultures).

The second challenge refers to the way in which the school or the society perceives cultural differences and complies with the regulations issued for example by the Ministry of Education.

Thirdly, the great diversity of cultures and subcultures within social groups makes it difficult for the teacher in the foreign language classroom to tackle thoroughly this subject. Moreover, to acquire intercultural competence does not equal to being knowledgeable about all the cultures or just about one particular culture, since no degrees of comparison can be placed between two different cultures. Therefore, intercultural competence intends to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes that would enable the learner to interact with any culture.

The fourth challenge implies that every person has a subjective view of the world and in addition to this, everyone is multicultural to some degree since one cannot live in isolation. In this case, the challenge to understand and accept cultural differences represents a personal endeavour.

Still, teaching language and culture in an integrated manner implies yet another salient challenge, namely the assessment of the intercultural communicative competence. On the one hand, the assessment of this competence is imbued with subjectivity (Lázár et. al 2007, 29) due to lack of standardized tests. On the other hand, assessment of intercultural communicative competence is highly contextual and can be influenced by the age of the learners, their social status or their cultural background (Petruș 2014, 141).

4. Conclusions

This paper presented an insight into the role of culture in the context of learning the Norwegian language. The acknowledgement of the fact that all learning is placed in a social context has multiple implications in planning teaching and learning sequences. The paper provided a perspective on the way in which the BA Norwegian programme in Cluj-Napoca focuses on developing students' linguistic, communicative and cultural competences. Reference is also made to the Norwegian educational system and the way in which this one tackles the perspective of multicultural learning in a multicultural classroom.

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