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INTERCULTURAL APPROACHES TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

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### Introduction

Since the knowledge of a language has moved from the simple knowledge of grammatical forms to *communicative competence*, the spectre of what should be involved in language teaching and learning has expanded largely. Research and development in FLD have extended to include not only the four components of communicative competence, (grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence) but also an examination of social and cultural interaction and have led from communicative competence to *intercultural communicative competence* and from linguistic competence to *interlinguistic competence* and to the introduction of new approaches to language teaching some of which like the *multicultural approach* and *the transcultural approach* are of special importance. Much attention is given to the fact that during the learning of a foreign or a second language the learner unavoidably contacts, experiences, and necessarily learns some facts and elements of other societies and cultures. With this paper an attempt is made to highlight some aspects of this new situation on foreign language teaching. It can be divided in two parts, where in the first the relationship of language and culture is discussed and in the second attention is given on intercultural communication, including presentations of some current approaches based on the nature of the diverse and multicultural modern society and its needs. These new approaches are extremely important and are gaining ground as the “cross-national entanglement” as Risager describes it increases to all levels of human interaction including economic, political and linguistic and in a sense mixes national borders.

The whole debate over language, culture, the above approaches and situations has been based on the conception that language and culture are strongly interrelated and from this concept as a starting point this essay will be organized.

### Language and culture

#### Cultural context shapes language and language shapes culture

Language is the means for people to express themselves, to express their experiences and communicate with others. This expression is the externalization of a person’s understanding of the word and the environment around him/her. The words that will be used will carry a special meaning, a special cultural value unique for that person. If the others understand the message, it means that they share the same meanings and social values with that person and therefore that they form a social group with common beliefs, attitudes and ways of understanding of the world. Very important for a social group to communicate is also the channel of contact. Only if the means of communication i.e. the style of discourse, the register, the medium of communication are accepted and understood by a specific group will communication be successful. Kramsch has

described it claiming that “language expresses cultural reality” and that “language embodies cultural reality”. She also argues that cultural reality is in fact symbolized by language since language too often is interwoven with social identity. The culture of a group shapes its language since culture is what gives to people the opportunity to share common assumptions and expectations. It forms their historical and ideological background and unites them with a special shared code making them a community. Without culture to impose special connotative meanings on words communication would be impossible. More importantly cultural conventions sanction people’s behaviour, text genres and their content so culture imposes indirectly a system and an order on peoples language use. (Kramersch 1998).

Apart from this role of culture as “the conductor” of language users another way of considering things is evident. In an attempt to define the factors that affect culture it can be argued that culture is a person’s interpretation of the various dynamics that generate his/her environment such as religion, behaviour, art, education history etc. This understanding is based on the way a person thinks and consequently on the factors that determine his way of thinking.

Additionally, following the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis* and the notion of *linguistic relativity* it can be claimed that language and thought are mutually dependent. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as can be found in Kramersch (1998) states that the structure of language one habitually uses influences the manner in which one thinks and behaves. In other words different languages offer different options through which the environment can be understood and as a result people think and speak differently. Whorf was claiming that different languages force people to act differently because people tend to receive and analyze their experiences according to their language. (Kramersch 1998).

From the above the importance of cultural knowledge and cultural competence becomes clear. When two speakers of different cultural groups are trying to communicate, even though it is perfectly possible to transfer or translate the form and the content of a piece of discourse from one language to another, mutual understanding depends upon shared cultural values or common conceptual systems.

This is one of the reasons which have led to language teaching approaches that include necessarily insights on the cultural practices of the target language and even to some methods and language programmes that focus explicitly or on a great extent on the teaching of culture.

### **Teaching of language and culture**

The inseparability of culture and language has been described by Attinasi and Friedrich (1998) as *linguaculture* a view which puts the examination of language and culture in one field and sees them in combinations such as language as culture, language in culture etc. (Kramersch 1991) Researchers had started to develop programmes that aimed at cultural competence and at the

teaching of culture. Discourse and conversation in these programmes are examined under a cultural aspect. Attempts are made to present the learner with various aspects of the target culture and to develop cultural competence in the learner while identification and analysis of both source and target cultural samples and models is of paramount importance both for the learner and the teacher.(Kramsch 1991) The fact that the teaching of language is linked to the teaching of culture can be facilitated by the help of modern technologies(such as the internet) that will enable the teacher find more authentic material, examine more cultural sources and “open” his class to the real outer world. Kramsch mentions that following this trend of teaching of culture a cultural proficiency has been introduced by the American Association of Teachers of French to the ACTFL guidelines.

Teaching of culture while language learning, is a logical part of FL teaching since it is a paradox for somebody to learn a foreign language without learning about the attitudes and policies of the social group that speaks it but whether teaching of culture should be considered as a fifth communicative skill along with reading, listening, writing and speaking of a language is questioned. Another issue of discussion is what kind of culture should be taught in the language class. Kramsch (1991) suggests except of literature various types of discourse such as every day conversation, scientific, technical and political. Language study as she points out “should expose learners to a variety of discourse forms that co-exist in a given culture” and not to stick on just presenting information lists with cultural facts. Culture must be seen as a word view expressed through language and should be presented as such.

Culture is divided in two categories capital C and small c. Capital C encompasses classical literature and works of art and small c contains the little expressions of everyday life or the four Fs: Food, Fairs, Folklores and statistical Facts. C culture is what has traditionally been the background in foreign language teaching but the modern perspectives nowadays ask for effective interaction and this is not ensured without the ability of the interlocutors to share the same referential meanings for the words they use. For this task to be completed successfully knowledge of the c culture is crucial (Kramsch /Aspects of ELT 2004).

A lot of educational materials have been published aiming at the teaching of language and culture and of language as culture. Under any way of analysis of language and culture the main focus of research should be given on the interrelationship of the language users, on their *intercultural communication*.

## **Intercultural communication**

### **Lingucism vs linguistic diversity**

Intercultural communication has its basis on the problems that are created when people of different cultures, usually also speaking a different language, and having different word views are

trying to communicate. Attempting to bridge their gap methods of teaching language and cultures have been developed as it is referred above but the practicing and teaching of intercultural communication was for many years based on an incorrect stance.

This stance was that culture on which all attention was given in a TESOL class was that of English speaking countries and the learners were trained to adopt the cultural policies and behaviour of English speakers. This explicit focus on English culture could have a serious impact on the learner's identity.

Each culture contains its own traditions, ideas, values and ways of conduct. Its people often make judgements based only on these standards to define something as right or wrong. This means that actions should be judged only when the cultural setting is being taken into account and each time differently. This state is defined by Diaz and Weed (2002) as *cultural relativism*. When efforts are being made to impose "international standards" on different cultural groups problems will rise.

Some theorists have tried to explain the spread of English and the promotion of the culture of English speaking countries with arguments such as the complex historical situations in which the British were involved worldwide, the technological and economical advance in the USA and the UK, the globalisation of economy, worldwide immigration and the policies of certain cultural agencies like the British Council. The spread of English language and culture over other cultures is alarming. Its constant promotion within the spectre of the consumerism culture and with the help of globalisation policies might and is very likely to disorder or reduce local cultures and languages creating instead of bridges of communication barriers and a gap between cultures even greater. This gap according to Kramsch shall be a gap between the modern "mobile" elite culture and the "geographically rooted" old one. (Kramsch /Aspects of ELT 2004)

The situation becomes more complex within the diversity of the European Union and the notion of European integration. Within the Union languages which are less widely spoken like Greek face a serious threat.

The challenge for these languages is to present a resistance against a double domination of culture and language. The problem in Greece is crucial and researchers like B.Dendrinos call for "the need to protect our linguistics and cultural rights in the European Union.(2001) and seek to promote a "linguistic diversity in Europe". Dendrinos states that the situation is also empowered by policies of promotion of certain languages that serve as lingua francas or are widely taught and promoted within the European Union by the very nations that face the threat. She remarks that by considering less widely spread languages of little value actually results in them being eventually devaluated. This in fact is a linguoracist ideology and instead of promoting and empowering such languages, the few languages that are promoted are leading to a linguistic imperialism. Since language is very tightly linked with culture the consequence is a cultural imperialism as well that

will realise the threat described above. Continual preference over some languages will gradually lead to a situation that will appear normal and no one will even think of questioning, as certain languages will be becoming even more favoured and bring even more money through publications, exams etc., others will be becoming even more discriminated.

The way English, along with some other languages, such as German and French is hegemonically spread in the world has created the need for *linguistic rights*. They represent a person's right to use his mother tongue to express his ideas, beliefs, religion or in other words his culture and not to succumb to conditions of linguistic imperialism. Linguistic rights are part of the essential human rights -officially proclaimed in the Universal declaration of Linguistic Rights in Barcelona in 1996-and oppose to what is known as *linguicism*. Linguicism in a few words is the promotion of a single, specific global ideology through the expansion and teaching linguistically and culturally of one specific language. It is the theory that supports the unequal division of power and resources between linguistically defined groups. Under this sense linguistic imperialism as described above is nothing else but an aspect of linguicism. (Kramsch 1998)

The EU that is against such practices, promotes and protects plurilingualism and is helping in this way the evolution of each language and each culture in the Union evenly. The adoption of a lingua franca is not favoured in the EU because a special group of citizens-the native speakers of that language- will be promoted against the citizens of other nations. This situation would endanger the balance of the EU and some would argue that it could even lead to the beginning of its division. The EU moves towards integration on many levels such as legislation, economy, diplomacy, military organisation and education but at the same time recognises the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity since, as mentioned above, language is an important characteristic of identity both national and individual. An example of this procedure is the fact that all member states of the EU have changed their educational policies to include three foreign languages.

As Europe and the EU are multilingual, the citizen of The EU who wants to be totally functional as a member -and that means to travel, work, study and live in any other member state- has to be able to use a variety of European (and not only) languages. This does not mean that a learner must acquire the linguistic and cultural competence of a native speaker. The type of competence that must be acquired is a new type of competence, the *interlinguistic communicative competence*.

### **Interlinguistic competence –Intercultural competence**

As stated above a learner must not try to acquire high levels of competence in a foreign language in the way a native speaker does. This ideal was pursued in the past, where learners of a language were trying to obtain linguistic competence and adopt or copy patterns of social behaviour and culture of the target language. This apart from the identity problems that creates and the cultural imperialism it promotes, causes actual communication problems. For example let's imagine two

persons belonging to different countries such as Greece and Finland trying to communicate in an intermediate language like English and behaving like Englishmen at the same time. By doing so they reject their own cultural behavioural codes and each disregards the culture of the other. They may exchange some information but actual communication will not have taken place. It is a utopia trying to achieve levels of language awareness equal to those of the native speaker because of the situation described above. In other words because native speakers embody a unique cultural context that represents them and it cannot and shouldn't be imitated. The native speaker as Kramsch (1998) defines him/her is "a monolingual, monocultural abstraction; he/she is one who speaks only his/her native language and lives by one standardized culture".

Instead of the ideal of the native like speaker the concept that is currently proposed is that of the intercultural speaker. This speaker will be a person with the ability to comprehend and value the culture and the language of another group of speakers retaining at the same time his own. The demands of modern societies expect the speaker to be a contactor of his culture and his language to others and also to be a mediator across cultures. The aim of language teaching is transferred therefore closer to the suggestion of Byram and Fleming, that it should lead to the examination and understanding of one's own culture and society, then also of the society and culture of the speakers of foreign languages and also of the interrelationship between all these cultures, identities and languages. (Byram and Fleming 1998) The term identities includes the kinds of the various social identities a person has, one of which is the ethnic. According to the various contexts of interaction these various identities are expressed but the ethnic identity is always present and is expressed through the national language. Once again the same conclusion is met, that language, since it conveys the national identity and incorporates culture often represents the main identity of a speaker. This may lead to the formation of stereotypes based on special national characteristics during an international-intercultural interaction. To avoid this from happening language teaching highlights national cultures and the mutual perceptions of national groups. Byram and Fleming give a definition to intercultural speaker based on this theory as "someone who has knowledge of one or, preferably, more cultures and social identities and has a capacity to discover and relate to new people from other contexts for which they have not been prepared directly."(Byram and Fleming 1998)

Interlinguistic competence is the new kind of competence this new kind of speaker is called to develop. It is the competence which allows the speakers to use the language they acquire as "contact language" to improve the quality and quantity of communication with speakers of other languages. Dendrinos defines it as the competence that will enable the speakers to function within many different languages and to develop sociocultural knowledge and skills that will enable them to face various types of cultural contact and communicate successfully through any communicative event. (Dendrinos 2001)

Closely related to interlinguistic competence is the notion of *intercultural competence*. It is based on the logical claim that “real communication” can be achieved only when the interlocutors understand each other’s culture. English or any other language cannot be used as an intercultural, contact language if the learners are made to behave like the British. Intercultural competence is a state that is reached when the teaching and the learner are open to otherness and are ready to show it respect and abandon stereotypes, prejudice and hostility. Intercultural competence is achieved when a special sensitivity is developed and the teaching process goes beyond the “just becoming familiar with the target language culture” state. Respect and tolerance for cultural diversity must be developed in the learners who must be aware that no culture is superior to any and that people from different cultural backgrounds will not behave the same. Their cultural differences must be negotiated during communication.

An intercultural competent learner must be able to define, explain and negotiate differences between cultures; his own and of other cultural groups. A very important feature of intercultural competence is that the learner must be aware of his/her own culture in order to be able to explain these differences and also to be sensitive to the way others see him/her and his/her culture. This contact with the other cultures was named by Byram and Doye ‘tertiary socialisation’ (Byram and Fleming 1998) and it involves as they describe it “an implicit, and sometimes explicit questioning of learners’ assumptions and values.” This questioning of culture which takes away what is been held for granted leads to an even deeper type of intercultural competence, a *critical cultural awareness*. Dendrinos describes interculturally competent communicators as “social subjects in progress” because they are constantly moving between cultures and languages and are always exposed to direct or indirect social experience. She claims that by doing this and by “learning languages emersed in cultures” they are creating a new social reality and obtain the ability to “redefine boundaries between the Self and the Other”.

European and global integration, pupil exchanges as well as information exchange through new technologies and the demands that interlinguistic and intercultural approaches set have brought a great change in foreign language didactics and have led to the creation and development of quite a few new approaches in foreign language teaching, some are described below.

### **Culturally based approaches to foreign language teaching**

Below there is a presentation of some relatively modern approaches to foreign language teaching that are based on issues of culture and language education seen under different perspectives.

Karen Risager has presented them in her article “***Language Teaching and the Process of European Integration***” as found in Byram and Fleming’s book *Language Learning in Intercultural Perspective*.



### **The foreign-cultural approach**

This is the oldest approach of all. It is based on the single culture concept related with a specific language in a specific territory. It focuses only on the culture of the target language and disregards the learner's culture or cultural interrelations. Attitudes as such support linguisticism and may lead to extreme admiration of the target culture or as Risager describes it "secondary ethnocentrism". Because it excludes intercultural contact and aims at the impossible native speaker's linguistic competence it is strongly questioned today but it was favoured from the last century until the 1980s.

### **The intercultural approach**

In his book "Εισαγωγή στη Διαπολιτισμική Εκπαίδευση" (1997-Introduction to Intercultural Education) Markou defines intercultural approach as *a dialectic relationship and a dynamic procedure of interaction and mutual acceptance and co-operation among people of different nationalities or immigrant groups* (my translation). Risager takes this fact into account when she describes the intercultural approach. She asserts that intercultural approach includes the interaction of cultures attempting to understand and recognise each other. The focus is again on the culture of the target language but this time teaching deals with the culture of the learner as well and considers furthermore the culture of other languages that may hold relationships with the source or the target country (i.e. relationships of dominance). It stresses national identity and assigns the learner with the role of mediator between two cultures. He becomes able to use the language he is learning as a contact language with people who use it as a mother tongue. Intercultural approach takes for granted the false assumption that each culture is a homogenous entity and ignores the fact that almost every country is multicultural and multilingual nowadays, nevertheless it is the dominant approach these days.

### **The multicultural approach**

The multicultural approach has obtained a great significance from the Council of Europe<sup>1</sup> that accepts and promotes it since it accepts,

- *that modern societies are multicultural*
- *that every culture has its own special elements that have to be accepted and respected*
- *that this multicultural state is a privilege*

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<sup>1</sup> Council of Europe, The CDCC's Project No 7: The Education and Cultural Development of Migrants. (Final report), Strasbourg 1986

- *and that to make the most of that privilege interaction among cultures must be secured without endangering the unique identity of none.*(Markou 1997 my translation)

As it is stated above the multicultural approach accepts the concept that several cultures can be found together within the same state or country. It deals with

1. the diversity within the target country
2. the diversity within the learner's own country
3. the relations between the target country and the learner's
4. other countries including migratory relations.

Greece has started to become multicultural since it has started to accept quite large numbers of immigrants last years. According to statistics found in Markou, demographic facts show the steadily increasing number of people of foreign citizenship who come to live and work in Greece.180.000 was their number according to the 1981 census excluding of course the number of illegal immigrants which is impossible to control. These people come from very different cultural and social backgrounds and nations such as the EU, Asian and African countries and also the Balkans, they can be not only immigrants but refugees as well. The Muslim minority in Thrace and the groups of gipsies add up to the new multicultural identity of Greece as he presents it.

The teaching in multicultural approach helps the learners to develop a balanced, anti-racist view of cultures and a reflective attitude for their culture and others. This approach has potential of becoming popular as societies become more and more multicultural and pupil exchanges rise. Multicultural approach leaves out one more thing, that internationalization suggests a further blurring of national and ethnic borders and in fact creates a net of interwoven cultures worldwide. This is the starting point of the transcultural approach.

### **The transcultural approach**

The transcultural approach reflects the extremely interrelated nature of the global society in our age. It takes into serious account the numerous factors that create this cultural and linguistic complexity. Risager mentions but a few such as migration, tourism, economic interdependence, word wide communication systems, numerous lingua francas etc. The transcultural approach makes the learner aware of the multiculturalism in his/her environment, aware that other languages are used any moment around him/her in real –life. The teaching centres on complex or maybe third identities apart from the target and the source national identity. Risager explains very clearly that teaching treats the language both as first, second and international. This approach is very important and with many direct applications in our

life. For example it enables cross-cultural communication between people especially when the target language is a *lingua franca* at the same time.

### **The language awareness approach**

This approach is widely discussed and analyzed by Tulasiewicz and Adams (1998) and is a fresh and rather controversial as they argue, approach in teaching a language syllabus. According to them it has started to be introduced in the school curricula of a number of countries as an alternative to grammar teaching. Language awareness “uncovers elements which diverse mother tongues share”. In line with their findings language awareness examines the different components that make up language and this includes recognition of differences between user’s own languages and those of other people. This helps the development of language tolerance and linguistic sensitivity. Language awareness as stated by Tulasiewicz uses the cultural, social and linguistic aspects of language in combination with the devices of mother tongue and foreign language teaching and can lead learners to understand the way they and others use language and help them analyse and understand society through language. It promotes a language teaching that presents language as a sociocultural phenomenon and a system as well. In the context of multicultural Europe Language Awareness assists learners to understand each others language and culture and enable them to communicate and work together.

### **Conclusions**

All these approaches, situations and theories have a significant importance in foreign language teaching. They present to theorists solutions, sometimes encapsulate controversy and offer new challenges to the field of research in FLD. Their application however lies on the ability of the teacher who is their main recipient and the only responsible to transfer them to the learner, the common point of reference both for theorists and teachers.

It is on the teachers’ responsibility to develop first the new abilities that these approaches require and the success of their implementation is ‘on their shoulders’. In order for the intercultural speaker to exist there is unavoidably the need for the existence of a competent intercultural teacher. This is not as simple as it may sound. Some teachers, especially of an elder age will not replace the teaching practices they have developed over age with the new ones. Some other teachers will never learn about these approaches since many do not follow scientific progress.

The task of the teacher in the class room has changed. He is not only the facilitator of language learning. His new responsibilities expand beyond the need to help learners develop communicative competence. In order to create intercultural and interlinguistic competence in

the learners the teacher must develop his/her awareness of intercultural interaction and must function as a mediator of culture before he/she enables his/her students to become such. This must be a life long procedure since language and culture are continuously changing. It is up to a competent teacher to make the most of what is offered to him/her and help his learner group successfully as long as he/she is open to new ideas, approaches and practices.

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