

# THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT BETWEEN HOMOGENEITY AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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**Abstract:** *Learning foreign languages has a special situation when it comes to the formation of a modern individuality whose existence is always confronted with diversity and differences. When acquiring a foreign language, there is the permanent contact with a new culture, more or less different than one's own. Thus, learning and teaching foreign languages must take into consideration two coordinates: linguistic competencies and cultural competencies. Such knowledge is applicable when interacting, when the two parts involve act together that is when they communicate. The process of learning and teaching foreign languages represents an intercultural dialogue in which people achieve the ability to cope with the existence through diversity. The present article presents, after analyzing the data that have been obtained empirically, the way in which intercultural dimension is perceived by the subjects involved in the process of learning and teaching foreign languages.*

**Keywords:** *diversity, education, foreign languages, cross-cultural dialogue, intercultural communication competence.*

## 1. Foreign languages and intercultural dialogue

The present European context, marked, on the one hand, by the effacement of national boundaries and, on the other hand, by the same multilinguism and multiculturalism that have always existed so far, only that diversity, differences have ceased to be ways of differentiating and separating individuals and have become ways of enriching human existence, goes through social and economic changes which impose their own alterations in education. Thus, foreign languages which, not long ago, were considered a non-compulsory, static, closed, even elitist subject have now become one of the main points of the educational system. Knowing foreign languages guarantees that the individual has full access to social life and success in his professional life. Success does not depend only on

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linguistic competence in the target language but also on a collection of communication and socio-cultural competencies which permits not only the approach, perception, interpretation and understanding of the target foreign environment but also intercultural dialogue.

It has to be noticed the fact that people's migration in the last decades can be considered a first step in researching the process of learning and teaching foreign languages from an intercultural perspective. These studies are mainly focused on *bilingualism* and promotion of native languages and cultures, especially in the organized and formal system of schools. As a consequence, a new direction of research has arisen especially in Western Europe, in countries like France, Germany, England, Austria, Switzerland and more recently, Italy and Spain and also in North America. A second impulse was given by people's mobility due to a professional or touristic interest. This fact caused an overuse of communication. Two main research directions have appeared: *foreign languages as a compulsory subject*, together with all its implications- teaching, learning, contents, didactics, methodology, assessment<sup>1</sup>- and *early learning of foreign languages*. A less studied aspect is that of **teaching/ learning foreign languages from an intercultural perspective in more or less ethnically, culturally and linguistically homogenous contexts**, as is the case of most educational institutions in Romania, without taking into consideration the existent minorities.

Homogeneity ensures, in principle, a climate of trust without which human interaction has been and it will always be inconceivable. But the present economic globalization cannot provide such stability. Movement between different cultural spaces and the confrontation with different values make cultural homogeneity difficult to be attained. By integrating people into different actional contexts, in most cases in varied geographical spaces, the individual is "*submitted*" to develop multiple identities, to a process of hybridization<sup>2</sup>. This blend is very well described by Salman Rushdie in his "*Satanic Verses*": "*Satanic verses celebrate the mixture, impurity and the result of new, unusual relationships between people, cultures, ideas, politics, firms and songs. The book enjoys hybridization and hates making purity absolute. Mixture, a little of this, a little of that, is the path which leads to the appearance of the new in this world.*"

Accepting the transformations, firstly the cultural ones, and adjusting to a new existential context, *the intercultural one*, presuppose three main

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<sup>1</sup> See: *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* Strassburg, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> See also Hannerz, U. (1996): *Transnational Connections*. Londra.

aspects: an open way of thinking by confronting everything that is foreign, diverse, different with what is known, identical, the same, and thus respecting the alterity and the multiple identity, a relativization, as Bourdieu states, of "*one's own cultural field*"<sup>3</sup>, which means the interrogation and negotiation of the common knowledge fund and also a communicative competence which has to exceed the limits of interpersonal, intracultural communication.

Knowledge of another cultural context has always been initiated by the process of learning the language that is used in that space, that is a foreign language. The process of teaching and learning a foreign language, which can be categorized as *intercultural*, has a double function: on the one hand to maintain one's identity by being aware of one's mother tongue and national culture, on the other hand, to develop actional fields by forming an intercultural communication competence.

## **2. The pedagogy of socio-cultural diversity**

The Pedagogy of socio-cultural diversity, a concept of post modernism, "*generally refers to a plurality of response reactions and strategies to manage plurality in an educational context*" (Nedelcu, 2005:105). School as social institution is naturally marked by difference and diversity, even in culturally, ethnically and linguistically homogenous environments, but in most European and extra European countries, until not long ago, was a tendency to uniformity, to an educational process based on rules and norms without paying attention and especially without making use of alterity. This is much more visible and it has other connotations when it comes to difference of cultural and linguistic identity. The promotion of socio-cultural diversity means tolerance, non-discrimination on the basis of racial, religious, ethnic, political, sexual criteria, in other words the affirmation of multiculturalism.

The problem of cultural and linguistic diversity, in the social and educational space, has known, in Western Europe, starting ever since the middle of the last century, once the migration tendency appeared due to economic and political aspects, several approaches beginning with the *assimilation approach* (1960-1980) based on a *compensatory pedagogy* (Ausländerpädagogik) and on a *model of deficiency*, going through *multicultural approach* (1980-1990) and *the universal one*, which correspond

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<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu, P. (1983): *Ökonomisches Kapital – Kulturelles Kapital – Soziales Kapital*. In: Kreckel, R. (ed.): *Soziale Ungleichheit. Soziale Welt, volum special nr.2*, 183-198.

to *intercultural pedagogy*, centred on the *model of difference* and ending with the *pluralistic approach* (1995) which brings the *pedagogy of socio-cultural diversity* into the centre of attention and being based on a *model of plurality*.

This pedagogical approach and also its respective pattern considers that linguistic, social, cultural, economic and historic diversity is no longer “*a monopoly of minorities*” but it is a characteristic of contemporary society as a whole. Social conflict can be discussed openly and thus, students learn that existential forms can be subject to modification any time. Plurilinguism is something normal and even a necessity, the pluricultural attitude is becoming more obvious and it promotes communication between cultures and a tolerant environment and mutual respect. *Intercultural communication competence* is becoming a basic component in forming individual personality and in intercultural dialogue.

In the development of the idea of interculturality in teaching and learning foreign languages, in both heterogeneous and homogenous contexts, four important aspects, taking into consideration the above mentioned approaches, can be identified:

1. Movement from the pedagogy of interculturality to the pedagogy of social-cultural diversity, in which diversity is neither denied nor marginalized.

2. Movement, in the educational field, from the simple reaction of the migratory trend to the development of a comprehensive concept of intercultural learning.

3. Movement from the simple preoccupation with immigrants' languages to the promotion of natural plurilinguism and of studying at least two foreign languages, apart from one's own mother tongue. This interlinguistic context is the first step in adjusting to diversity.

4. Movement from a strictly linguistic acquisition of foreign languages to a complex approach taking into consideration cultural, sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects, the fundamental objective being the developing of intercultural communication competence.

The actual tendency consists in a movement from intercultural pedagogy to the one of socio-cultural diversity where different cultures are no longer denied, dialogue and understanding being possible. This kind of pedagogy “*is part of a search for a logic of peace, which desires to be one of the active links in education. It claims to participate in school, in the collective creation of a cultural space that accepts, inserts, and rebuilds cultural significances of the members of the different communities that get into contact*” (Perregaux, 1999:123). The dominant perspective of the pedagogy of socio-

cultural diversity is the one of a pluricultural society which is based on three principles: equality, recognition and comprehension.

Intercultural education and consequently the pedagogy of socio-cultural diversity bring to the centre of attention the subjective and relational dimension, common action and dialogue, concentrating on individual experience and on the individual's personality as a whole. By taking into consideration this dimension, attention is focused on the following aspects: understanding, respect, decentralization, relativization, adaptation, negotiation, intercultural dialogue, self-knowledge, self-autonomy. By accepting cultural diversity, there is also a preoccupation more or less intense with foreign languages, from more common ones to less common, minority, regional ones and even dialects, thus natural plurilinguism is stimulated as a way of learning tolerant behaviour towards diversity.

### **3. Empiric study**

Taking into consideration the above mentioned points a research strategy has been developed and its coordinate is the way of perceiving the intercultural dimension in teaching and learning foreign languages in linguistically and culturally homogenous educational contexts<sup>4</sup>.

The research instrument chosen was the questionnaire and in order to obtain conclusive results we selected a heterogeneous sample of individuals considering their education, age and occupation. However, the main preoccupation was having a slight degree of variation regarding the field of activity and the idea was to obtain this by a direct involvement of all respondents in the process of teaching and learning foreign languages, people who are part of mainly homogenous school environments. This target has allowed us to identify the existence of different perceptions of intercultural dimension and how much the development of an intercultural communication competence represents a need of both the executants and the beneficiaries of the process of teaching and learning foreign languages.

The research group includes a number of 650 people and the category distribution of subjects being as follows: 50 professors in the field of philology, 200 foreign language teachers, 200 students of foreign languages, possible teachers, and 200 pupils. Thus, all the four links involved in the educational process have been taken into consideration.

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<sup>4</sup> *This study is more extensive, here there are only the results referring to the perceiving of the intercultural dimension in teaching and learning foreign languages.*

**The checked hypotheses are:**

1. If the process of teaching and learning a foreign language involves an intercultural dimension, then this is present regardless of the homogeneity degree of the cultural and linguistic educational environment.

2. If learning a foreign language means knowing and understanding both the target language and culture and also the self-knowledge and the reflection of one’s knowledge background, then this process implies an intercultural dialogue which is based on a specific competence that being the intercultural communication competence.

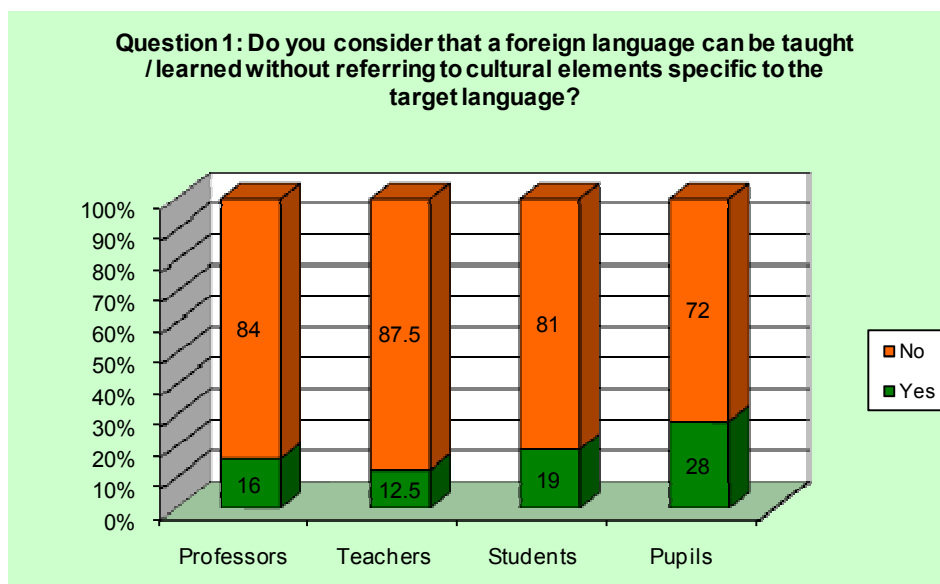
**4. Presentation and interpretation of research results**

**Question 1:** *“Do you consider that a foreign language can be taught/learned without referring to cultural and civilisation elements specific to the target language?”*

By using the respondents’ categories professors, teachers, students and pupils according to the above question, the following distribution patterns have been obtained, on the basis of which the relative structural dimensions have been calculated (table 1).

Variant	Number of Persons				Structure %			
	Prof.	Teachers	Stud.	Pupils	Prof.	Teachers	Stud.	Pupils
Yes	8	25	38	56	16.0	12.5	19.0	28.0
No	42	175	162	144	84.0	87.5	81.0	72.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 1: The distribution of frequency and percentage for the four samples of respondents**



**Figure 1**

At first glance of the graph (fig.1), there are two structures that can be distinguished: a group of professors and (high)-school teachers of foreign languages and a second group of students and pupils. The structure of this question is different for the two interviewed categories.

In the subgroup of teachers, the majority have answered “No” to the question in the case of university professors 84% and 87,5% of (high)-school teachers, while in the group of students and pupils the percentage is 81% for students and 72% for pupils. This situation is due to the way “*elements of culture and civilization*” in teaching / learning foreign languages are perceived. By comparing the structure of the “No” variant of the teachers with the one of pupils there can be noticed an approximate difference of 10 points. This reveals the fact that professors’ and students’ opinions are more homogenous than the ones of foreign language teachers and pupils.

Likewise, the highest percentage for “Yes” variant (28%) for pupils can have various explanations:

1. Concentration mainly on forming linguistic competences in the target language not paying attention to cultural contextualizing of the studied language, although, as the graph shows, school teachers (87,5%)

consider that the elements of culture and civilization can be of utmost importance in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language;

2. The slight presence of cultural and civilization elements in the teaching materials used in the process;

3. Lack of attractivity in the presentation of the target cultural context which has a more artificial character that does not correspond to the authenticity expectations of students/ pupils;

4. Didactic tendency of not approaching the native language / culture and the target one comparatively, a fact which could stimulate students' socio-cultural and linguistic reflection and at the same time, make him / her conscious of the interdependence between language and culture.

On the whole, it has to be noticed the fact that *both teaching and learning a foreign language cannot be accomplished by ignoring the cultural and civilization elements specific to the target language* and also has to consider the fact that the didactic process supposes the inclusion of cultural dimension.

The inclusion of the elements of culture and civilization specific to the target language in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language, is relevant to a percentage of more than 95% of respondents, although for a relatively high percentage of students and pupils (making the correlation with the previous question the average of the variant "Yes" is 23, 5%) the acquiring of the target language doesn't mean automatic learning of cultural elements specific to the target culture. From the point of view of the beneficiaries of the didactic activity it might be said that the process of learning a foreign language can take place without learning about the culture of the target language. A relatively equal opinion of the two categories of teachers can be noticed and this refers to the fact that *the presence of cultural and civilization elements is necessary when learning / teaching a foreign language*.

Although the relationship between language and culture is perfectly justified, if we consider only the fact that the cultural phenomenon manifests highly in the language itself, teachers have lost sight of "*the intermediate function of language in the social construction of culture*" (Kramsch, 1996:5). A cause of this approach in teaching foreign languages is the strict separation, especially in the specialized university education, of studies - language/linguistics, literature, and cultural studies - a fact that inevitably led to taking into consideration the cultural competence as a distinct component and not as a constant and necessary component of linguistic skills such as: listening, reading, writing and speaking. The fact that the respondents belonging to the four samples appreciate in a highly



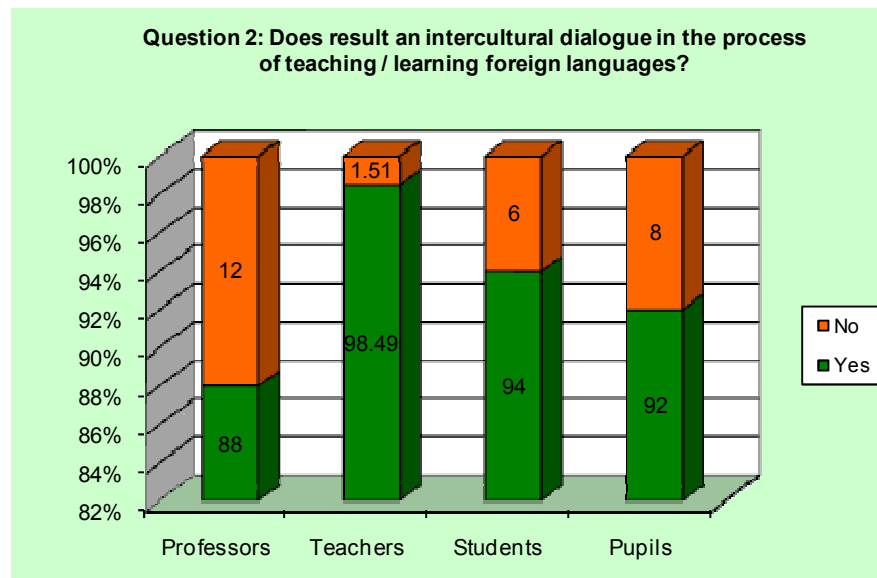
percentage (pupils/students) and in a very highly percentage (professors/teachers) that the cultural dimension is a necessary component in the process of learning/teaching foreign languages, shows that they are good managers of their social lives.

**Question 2:** *“Does result an intercultural communication in the process of teaching / learning foreign languages?”*

Variant	Number of Persons				Structure %			
	Prof.	Teachers	Stud.	Pupils	Prof.	Teachers	Stud.	Pupils
Yes	44	196	188	184	88.0	98.49	94.0	92.0
No	6	3	12	16	12.0	1.51	6.0	8.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 2: The distribution of frequency and percentage for the four samples of respondents**

Although in the present study the dialogue between the foreign language teacher and his / her students, at any level and age the later might be, it refers to the one between representatives of the same culture and speakers of the same native language, more than 90% of the interviewers consider that an intercultural communication takes place in the process of learning and teaching a foreign language. This fact proves that the foreign language teacher is perceived by his whole socio-professional class and by the beneficiaries of the teaching act, as a cross-cultural person. The role of cultural intermediating agent allows the teacher to get some attributes that are specific to the target culture; he makes possible the direct contact with the target cultural context. The ones that are mostly convinced of this, according to figure 2, are the foreign language teachers in schools and (high)-schools (96,5%), who are conscious of the fact that in the school community they are the target culture, and students (94%) who, where studying foreign language deeply they start to assume not only the role of linguistic intermediary but also the one of cultural intermediary (table 2). Thus, *in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language there is an encounter between the native culture and the target culture, so an intercultural dialogue results even in a culturally and linguistically homogenous context.*



**Figure 2**

This form of interaction tries to establish the role of the cultural component in the process of teaching/learning a foreign language, especially when between interlocutors' hypotheses and expectations there appear gaps, in other words when differences can be noticed. In the interaction between the foreign language teacher and student/pupil, as in the case of an intercultural encounter, a new hybrid context appears as a result of different cultural elements, what Bhabha<sup>5</sup> names "a third space which must not only revise or reverse dualities, but must also re-asses the ideological bases of separation and difference". This space is the one of intercultural dialogue.

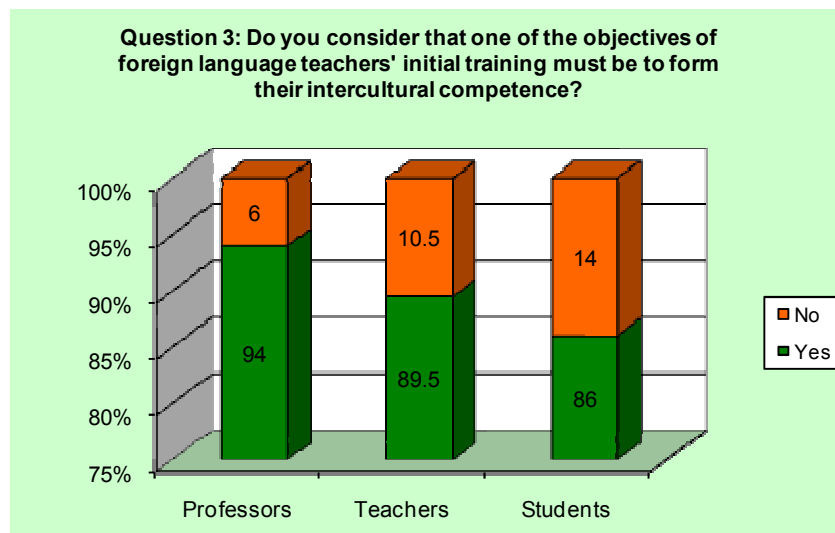
**Question 3:** "Do you consider that one of the objectives of foreign language teachers' initial training must be to form their intercultural competence?"

Variant	Number of Persons			Structure %		
	Prof.	Teachers	Stud.	Prof.	Teachers	Stud.
Yes	47	179	172	94,0	89,5	86,0
No	3	21	28	6,0	10,5	14,0
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>100,0</b>

**Table 3: The distribution of the frequency and percentage for the samples of respondents represented by: professors, (high)-school teachers and students.**

<sup>5</sup> Bhabha (1992): *Post-colonial authority and post-modern guilt*. In: L. Grossberg / P. Nelson / P. Treichler (coord.): *Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, 56-66.

The formation of intercultural competence is for 90% of interviewees a primary goal of foreign language teachers' initial training (table 3). This conviction is present in different degrees, according to the respondents' level and education. 94% professors consider the presence of this objective necessary in the foreign language teachers' initial training. Obviously, the higher and more diverse direct experiences are in multicultural spaces, the higher the need to develop an intercultural competence.



**Figure 3**

## 5. Conclusions

Considering the perspective of this analysis when it comes to the way of perceiving the intercultural dimension in the process of teaching and learning foreign languages, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Learning a foreign language means both knowledge and understanding of the target language and culture (cognitive dimension), since they are considered main objectives of the didactic process.
- In the process of teaching and learning foreign languages there is an intercultural dialogue whose achievement depends on the behaviour towards the target culture (emotional dimension) and the communication competence (pragmatic dimension) and not on the degree of culturally and linguistically homogeneity.
- The intercultural communication competence is essential in the formation of the intercultural speaker.
- The intercultural communication competence has a significant role both in social and professional life.

- Foreign language classes and teachers are key factors in the formation of intercultural communication competence
- The foreign language teacher, formed for an educational context which can be linguistically and culturally homogenous or heterogeneous, has a professional profile that is defined by a plurality of competences among which we can name didactic and pedagogical, methodical ones such as: the intercultural communication competence, the interaction competence, the ability to adjust to different teaching styles from a cultural point of view, the competence of transposing theories in intercultural didactics.

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