

INSIGHTS INTO MULTICULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: An increasing need for understanding diversity within societies as well as a rapidly growing number of people using a second language has made multicultural education crucial at all levels. The Slovak educators already started to foster their respect for diversity, respond to these changes by exploring current understanding of cultural identities. The aim of the paper is to point out at the elements that contribute to multicultural understanding, training teachers for multicultural education and to stress the relevance for the Slovak education and educators by identifying variables that contribute toward perceived multicultural competence. The authoress strives to explore understanding and implementation of practices of multicultural education in Slovak education. The specifics of multicultural competence reflecting different needs of students are discussed. Key components for multicultural communication competence as well as how this is reflected in the school curriculum and academic programmes are scrutinised.

Key words: multicultural education practices, communication, minorities

Introduction

Multicultural communication competence is becoming more relevant area of study in our increasingly multicultural world. A large amount of research has been conducted and lot of implication derived in this area. Past studies in multicultural communication emphasized different perspectives toward competence and investigated one or two of the competence dimensions (skills, motivation or knowledge). In spite of the fact that the concept of multiculturalism has been discussed and analysed from many different perspectives, its scope and essence have undergone many changes. Diversity within societies and cultures has made nowadays multicultural education crucial at all levels. The emphasis is on integrating a culturally inclusive worldview into our school curriculum. Being aware of differences that exist between cultures, the ability to face multicultural interactions belong to important skills that we have to take into consideration in language learning and teaching.

The Slovak educators already started to foster their respect for diversity, respond to these changes by exploring current understanding of cultural identities as the cultural, ethnic educational content of our schools has become increasingly diverse. The aspects of multicultural competence are specific, reflect different needs of students representing

different cultures, ethnic minorities, and its development is being reflected in the school curriculum and academic programmes. In spite of the existing practices of multicultural education, many people do not understand the real scope of it. No learners are born with attitudes for discriminating others, but the real life influences their view. Educators attempt to approach others without preconceived notions of differences through developing multicultural competence from the early childhood education and then disseminating it at all levels. According to Podhájecká and Guziová (2012: 127): “every child is able to develop own competence by earning information by using various sources from the early childhood - children’s books, etc.”¹

1. Research study

1.1 Our research addresses two areas:

- (1) Significance of multicultural education in Slovakia
- (2) Understanding and implementation of practices of multicultural education in the Slovak education

The study faces one of the significant problems of Slovak education system. The society is basically homogenous and multicultural education has emerged as an important component of the education system after 1989 and little attention has been paid to training teachers with regard to multicultural education by then even though there existed teachers prepared for special needs of learners but not for multicultural and ethnic diversity. Ethnicity was incorporated into the mainstream Slovak culture with the attempts to assimilate them. In recent years implementation of multicultural education requires teachers to examine being able to examine and present own values, knowledge, teaching practices respecting diversity and avoiding biases in education. In sum, in spite of the fact that there exist many studies about multicultural education, there is still a need for the clear focus on teachers’ competencies and practices regarding this education in Slovak education.

¹ Translated by the author of the paper

1.2 Key issues

The aim of this paper is to point out at:

- the elements that contribute to multicultural understanding,
 - training teachers for it and stress the relevance for our education and educators by identifying variables that contribute toward perceived multicultural competence.
 - To stress the importance of incorporating multicultural communication into the entire education. For this reasons it is inevitable to integrate the theoretical backgrounds of social psychology, interpersonal communication, and anthropology to construct a multidimensional understanding of this competence and thus the study has to be viewed from a more complex perspective.
- Our research is a qualitative case study focusing on a complex issue by exploring teachers' experience, their practices in multicultural education and is more dimensional.
 - The data were collected in a qualitative way through our classroom observations and interviews derived from our position as a teacher trainer at Slovak schools in Presov region within 3 years, starting in 2008. Ninety six educators from both elementary and secondary schools in Presov region, as well as teacher trainees at the Institute of British and American studies, Faculty of Arts in Presov reported infused multicultural content into the curriculum, especially in language teaching, providing an opportunity to learners at all levels.
 - Data were obtained via face-to-face interviews with participants representing different, language teachers only, as well as language teacher trainees. Their responses were analyzed using semantic network analysis.
 - From these responses a definition of multicultural communication was derived and knowledge and motivation were identified as very important for multicultural competence.
 - Our search was based on looking for a broad multicultural communicative competence including listening skills, prior cross-cultural experiences, a global outlook as opposed to an ethnocentric one, and other styles of communication. Limitations of the study and implications for future teaching are mentioned.

Regarding theoretical assumptions about the multicultural communicative competence we assume that two dimensions are crucial in this conceptualization: multicultural

communication and competence, which means – skills oriented and outcome oriented competence. The former shows appropriateness in interactions, the later effectiveness in proper cultural adaptations to the situation.

By investigating a value of multicultural education in the Slovak school system we have to point out at the fact that the society has been homogeneous for many decades and mostly since 1989 it is becoming more heterogeneous. Even though the concept of multiculturalism has been analysed from different perspectives for years its scope and essence has undergone many changes. We are aware of differences that exist between cultures and take them into consideration in language learning and teaching. The aspects of multiculturalism are very broad and also specific, reflecting different needs of students representing different cultures which is only slightly incorporated into school curriculum and academic programmes. In Slovakia the Slovak culture is still more dominant in terms of explicitness and in some way partly inhibits perspectives of others whose diversity vary from our own culture. Teachers and educators strive to incorporate cultural aspects of the target language into education, stress the diversity and the relevance of the dominant culture especially at the elementary schools where there is no doubts that culture influences and shapes children's feelings, attitudes and interactions with others. Due to cultural learning students possess certain knowledge, values, beliefs, views and behaviour that are shared with others with the same or different cultural heritage. Thus cultural learning and teaching influences learners' viewing our world, showing what is acceptable and what not, what is right and wrong. Culture teaches us how to interpret everything around us. There is a great diversity in cultural behaviour and each culture has own way of dealing with different situations and interactions. Thus learning about cultural diversity provides students with knowledge and skills for more effective communication in multicultural situations (Kominarecová 2007). According to Samovar and Porter (1999) the first step in being a good multicultural communicator is to know own culture and to know oneself, reflect thoughtfully on how a particular person perceives world around. Secondly, the more people know about different cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes of global neighbours, the better prepared we will be to recognise and to understand the differences in various cultural behaviours. The knowledge of cultural differences and self-knowledge of how is it possible to respond to those differences can make us aware of hidden prejudices and stereotypes which are barriers to tolerance, understanding and good communication. This confirms our

assumptions that knowledge and motivation are the most important components of multicultural competence.

1.3 Research Questions

The central question for interviewing teachers and teacher trainees: How do teachers implement own understanding of multicultural education into classroom practices?

1. How do teachers view multicultural education?
2. How do teacher perceive their role in this process, what are their approaches?
3. What are the most effective practices?
4. Which problems the teachers mostly face?

1.4 Research tools

Participants: Language teachers from Presov region (96)

Elementary schools: (35)

Secondary schools: (28)

Data obtained within 2009-2011

The research subject: a case study in a form of face to face interactions, observations during a teaching practice of trainee teachers in length of 45 min each.

1.5 Data analysis

A brief analysis of the research data regarding multicultural education and competence at all levels of study in Slovak schools proved the importance of developing both knowledge and competence. Participants reported numerous definitions and viewing of multiculturalism and multicultural education. This gave us a theoretical base for this study and confirmed our understanding the core issues examined along with the renowned scholars and researchers. Many statements in the research (68%) support the idea of many authors e.g. also Bennet (2003: 14) who claims that it is “an approach to teaching and learning based upon democratic values and beliefs and that affirms cultural pluralism within culturally diverse societies”. Participants (95%) stress the aspect of critical thinking and overall change of attitude within

the institutions and society, their supportive value as known from Banks (2003) who strongly supports the idea of changing the structure of educational institutions mostly in terms of equal gender academic chances. The results of the interview (95%) indicate that multicultural education is the entire education not only one subject in curriculum. Many responses (60%) add that the overall process of the multicultural education incorporates prejudices reduction as well as the components of equity pedagogy and school. There could be seen another one in the attempts to introduce uniforms, banners and logos at the entire schools in Slovakia (it is not an easy process, as the participants reported (56%) as it is more complex and connected with many aspects of society not only culture (traditions, money, organizations, strong ties to cultural heritage, etc.). Across all interpretations one is leading (91%) – infusing multicultural education into the entire curricula and school programmes. They also state that even within a homogeneous society, the dominant cultural pattern does not necessarily apply to everyone living in that society.

Majority of participants (94%) reported that multicultural education was not only about differences and thus the role of the teachers had considerably shifted towards cultural pluralism requiring thorough knowledge and professional attitude in this way. Most problems arise when facing or being somehow involved (either by observation or personally) in an ethnic conflict among minority groups (especially with Roma people in East Slovakia). Another problem supporting prejudices towards these mentioned groups lies in a positive discrimination at the elementary schools. Many teachers involved report negative feelings about the attitude of the state institutions towards this minority group. No similar barriers or negative feelings were recognized towards other culturally different groups (Hungarian, Ukraine minorities). Based on this, all participants argued that educational excellence in education cannot be achieved without educational equity and support from the state institution and the teachers' work is not sufficient without it. As Banks (2003) claims multiculturalism is a way of thinking and respect and our participants (96%) suggested implementation of multicultural education into the anti-bias curriculum and socio-political involvement of state. Approaches to ways of accomplishing multicultural education in practice in language teaching and learning stem from the following assumptions:

- a) Comprehensive - understanding contributions of different culture
- b) Additive – added to curricula as an additional

- c) Transformational – being influenced by own instruction
- d) Decision making – understand ethnic and cultural values
- e) Raising awareness and respect of differences and decision making
- f) Understanding differences from the viewpoint of own culture and reducing prejudices

Conclusion

From some of these proposed approaches (also see e.g. Banks 1998), participants responded differently. Comprehensive and additive dominated in responses (82%), transformational and decision making was mentioned as not applied in their practice (88%) and stressing differences and prejudice elimination (52%). In sum, educators adopted a traditional way of their instruction in harmony with the official policy, which means teaching content about cultural pluralism. This is the most common approach (88%). This requires the need for the change in cultural behaviour of people from the same country, understand the collective cultural patterns, differences and interrelated cultural orientations, but with the entire support of state institutions. Only few participants (25%) reported process oriented instead of content oriented approach as it requires rapport with students from culturally different backgrounds. Participants with the personal experience from living abroad (32%) reported combination of content and process approach. In practice it means using own experience and applying it within own teaching, encouraging positive attitude to differences.

Human perception of the world does not develop only because of the culture. Many other factors contribute to the development of individual view. As argued by Čajková (1998: 163) a teacher' approach should be based on the belief that:

British culture course should not be only of informative character and the course should offer also the creative space where students have the opportunity to think about their own culture. Consideration of our cultural values in the light of the knowledge about British culture with a possible result in the re-evaluation of some of the values - that is the main aim of teaching about British society. From this perspective it is quite important for the teacher to know what students' attitudes and reactions to the presented issues she can expect and what methods are the most suitable for the work with the class.

Problems the participants reported stem from a wide range of educational policy and are more complex. A need for more global perspectives was claimed (86%). For the effectiveness in multicultural teaching, teachers should be qualified, with good teaching behaviour in terms of disseminating proper values, beliefs, understanding stereotypes and prejudices. Many respondents stated that teaching materials used in their teaching consist mostly about artifacts (outer layer in the culture definition) such as holidays, customs, food, fashion, songs, etc. and do not go further under surface of the entire culture (such as norms, beliefs and core issue). This way, learners only schematically emphasize the knowledge about culture but not relationship. Minority cultures are scarcely integrated in school framework and there is still high dominance of the own culture (ethnic one is quite often considered trivial).

To sum, majority of participants reported focus on offering information instead of forming attitudes. As participants highlighted, most schools provide cultural environment connected with the target language taught. These visual aspects help develop anti-biased viewing but cultural skills development is still not much practiced.

According to Kominarec and Kominarecová (2009: 68) “the teacher’s knowledge, values, behaviour and personal qualities play an important role in integrating multicultural education into the classroom practices”². Many authors stress the term ‘education that is multicultural’ than multicultural education which confirms infusion of multicultural education across the whole curriculum. Successful multicultural education helps better understand own culture and thus be tolerant to differences. Language is a basic element of every culture, provides opportunity for every learner to get insight into other culture. This paper is meant to be a partial contribution to the area of cultural understanding, multicultural education and those aspects which require a special attention in our educational system. Our general findings and suggestions for educators are as follows: higher involvement, to guide rather than boss and criticize, trust and be trustworthy, support and stimulate innovations in educational institution and adapt new ways of approaching multiculturalism.

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