

Modern Trends in Education and National Cultures

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Abstract

The article focuses on some important issues concerning the interrelation between some newly introduced didactic approaches in the sphere of foreign language teaching (FLT) worldwide and the specifics of national cultures. The main aim is to delineate some possible shortcomings in the process of adapting multicultural and pluralistic approaches in education stemming from the specifics of a given national culture. Basic methodological and didactic notions such as learner autonomy, motivation, learner-centered as opposed to teacher-centered approach are discussed in general, and analyzed in detail in the particular Bulgarian cultural setting. National culture is commented within Hofstede's theory of organizations and cultures. The author bases her claim on the understanding that the roles of the teacher and the student present a classic scenario of social behaviour which is culturally biased. As a result of the analysis the widespread belief in the positive outcomes of the introduction of pluralistic approaches and multicultural learning in foreign culture contexts on a global scale is questioned and some conclusions are drawn concerning the intrinsic relation between national cultures and global trends in education.

Keywords

education, cultural indices, multiculturalism, autonomy, motivation.

1. Introduction

Among the most important modern developments within the EU as a community of member states sharing one and the same goals in the sphere of education are the introduction of multilingualism and pluralistic approaches in general, and their adoption in the learning process on all educational levels, in particular.

It has to be noted that foreign language teaching (FLT) somewhat naturally was the sphere of education that first brought to the fore the issues of multiculturalism starting in the 1970s and 1980s with Krashen's monitor model, and more specifically with the so-called affective filter hypothesis, where motivation and learner autonomy played an essential role for the learner's participation in the teaching-learning process in second language acquisition (Krashen 1977; 1985).

In the first decade of the twenty-first century multiculturalism became the basis for the development of pluralistic approaches. These have recently become buzz expressions used widely in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and a basic concern of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), the latter being the basic European institution providing directives

concerning the global policies in the educational spheres of the EU member countries.

However, observations on how these new concepts and practices are accepted and implemented in the different member countries show that despite the advantages they claim to bring to the educational process as a whole, FLT practitioners in some countries seem to face difficulties in the process of their practical implementation in the language classroom. The clash between the official announcements of the public educational authorities declaring a successful adoption of pluralistic and multicultural approaches in education and the reality of the classroom in Bulgaria in particular instigated my scholarly attempts to find out what the underlying reasons for this state of affairs are. This requires a deeper understanding of the notions multiculturalism and pluralistic approaches and their relations with national cultures.

2. Multicultural education, motivation and learner autonomy

Multicultural education, which, as already mentioned, is the progenitor of the pluralistic approaches nowadays, is not a European creation. The idea was born in the USA in relation with the Civil Rights Movement and the needs of the public education in a situation of growing migration to the country (Banks & Banks, 2013: 4). The idea of multiculturalism “as a systematic and comprehensive response to cultural and ethnic diversity, with educational, linguistic, economic and social components and specific institutional mechanisms” (Inglis 1995) was promoted by the liberal educationists. It started gaining popularity and has been adopted by a few countries in the Western world. What is more, multiculturalism has become official policy in several Western nations since the 1970s, for reasons that varied from country to country (ibid.). Consequently, it grew to eventually include “... diverse courses, programs, and practices that education institutions decided to respond to the demands, needs, and aspirations of the various groups.” (Banks & Banks, 2013: 5).

With the growing globalization and especially after the establishment of the European Union (EU), the free movement of people in the EU member countries brought to the fore the crucial problem of tolerance to other cultures, religions and languages. Multicultural competence has become of great concern for the governments especially in Western Europe, and as far as languages were concerned, it was institutionalized by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages with the European Union. According to CEFR the term “pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures” refers to various didactic approaches which use teaching / learning activities that involve more than one variety of languages or cultures and are based on activities that include several linguistic and cultural varieties. The global language policies in the EU are designed through the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) based in Graz, Austria. ECML collaborates with the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe and has been working on promoting innovative approaches in language education since 1995. It plays a significant role in the dissemination of the EC directives for language policies and innovative educational practices in the

member states. It also assists their implementation in the different member countries by funding various international projects. As Candlier (2007: 2) states:

Inspired by the fundamental values of the Council of Europe, the ECML promotes linguistic and cultural diversity and fosters plurilingualism and pluriculturalism among the citizens living in Europe. Its activities are complementary to those of the Language Policy Division, the Council of Europe unit responsible for the development of policies and planning tools in the field of language education.

The close relation between multiculturalism, pluralistic approaches and foreign language teaching is undeniable. FLT inherently involves learning a foreign language to be used by individuals either for multicultural communication or in the corresponding native foreign culture. However, general practice shows that foreign languages are mostly taught in the cultural environment of the mother tongue, and thus the FLT classroom itself presents an example of a multicultural (or at least bicultural) scenario.

Multiculturalism and pluralistic approaches in FLT support the idea that students and their backgrounds and experiences should be in the center of their education. This, in turn, is claimed to be essential for building learner's autonomy where the student should develop the ability 'to take charge of own's learning' (Holec 1981: 3). Autonomy implies that teachers and learners should participate equally in the process of learning a foreign language. The concept of shared responsibility serves as a prerequisite for the building up the learner autonomy. In this way it is a relatively new concept in FLT methodology supported by some recent FLT theories, namely the communicative approach and the recent constructivism. It triggered the shift from the traditional teacher-centered to the new learner-centered approach in the FLT classroom. As a result the teacher's role has changed from the one of a supplier of knowledge into the one of a facilitator of learning, while the learner is expected autonomously to decide what knowledge they need and how to acquire it.

Learner autonomy is closely related to another crucial concept in FLT methodology, namely – learner motivation. It is expected that if autonomy is done correctly, then it will help students develop a positive perception of their selves by demonstrating knowledge about their culture, history, and contributions of diverse groups, which will enhance their motivation in the learning process. Motivation is generally defined as 'effort plus desire to achieve, plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language' (Gardner 1983; 1991; 2004). In this way autonomy and motivation in the ideal teaching/learning environment present two sides of one coin where autonomy is the vehicle for increasing motivation and increased motivation contributes to the further development of autonomy. However, it needs mentioning that autonomy as 'freedom of choices' might (in some cases) block motivation due to the Paradox of Choice referring to a situation when the availability of too many choices may lead to paralysis due to low self-esteem and fear of failure (Schwartz 2004). This, of course, is a special case that needs further exploration and will not be further addressed here.

3. Hypothesis

Having in mind the above said and the close observations I have of what the practices in the ELT classroom in Bulgaria are, brought to the fore the question how much a national culture allows the effective implementation of the recent trends in modern education related to multiculturalism and pluralistic approaches. It is assumed that globalization in education and the introduction of new ideas uniformly for all European Union member countries disregarding their national culture specifics may lead to a chain of failures in the educational process in particular countries. What the reasons for such failures are is subject of the following discussion.

4. Discussion

The teacher and the student are an archetypal role pair in virtually any society and the classroom itself can be seen as mini-example of a typical societal behaviour reflecting the social roles characteristic of the cultural attitudes on a national scale. The actual behaviour of both teachers and students depends exclusively on the established patterns of social interaction on the one hand, and on the historically established educational system which is part of a relatively rigid cultural model, on the other. As Fullinwider (2003) points out the trivial act of the interaction between the teacher and the learner in the language classroom presents a socially established and expected model necessarily reflecting much deeper values and ideas behind the visible cultural customs.

This fact is particularly important when it comes to foreign language teaching. Complexities can arise both when the teacher and the student come from different cultures (a native-speaker teacher working abroad) and when the teacher and student belong to one culture but teach/learn a foreign language. In addition, FLT by default promotes an outer culture in terms of how language works in high and low context cultures on the one hand, and the teaching materials used in the FLT classroom that are normally imported from the corresponding foreign culture, on the other.

In order to reach deeper into the unfathomable values and attitudes that constitute the Bulgarian culture in general, and the behavioral patterns in the sphere of education, a reliable theory of culture is needed. So as to describe the Bulgarian cultural attitudes Geert Hofstede's theoretical framework of cultures and organizations is used as it is based on an large scale international research, statistical data and quantity and quality analysis, which makes it reliable for the purpose of the present analysis.

According to G. Hofstede's definition culture is "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another." (Hofstede 2009: 24). Hofstede's theory of organizations and cultures (2010) identifies six major cultural dimensions along which the different native cultures are scored from 0 to 100. The data for Bulgaria are quoted after Hofstede's official web-site <http://www.geert-hofstede.com>.

Individualism is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. Societies are divided into two opposing types – individualist and collectivist. In collectivist societies people belong to ‘in-groups’ that take care of each member in exchange for loyalty. The non-members of the group are recognized automatically as foreigners. Bulgaria is a typical collectivist society with a score of 30.

Power distance is defined as the extent to which the less powerful accept and expect that power is distributed unequally and expresses the attitude of the culture towards the social inequalities. Cultures are divided into a high and a low power distance ones. In high power distance cultures centralization is undisputable; subordinates expect to be told what to do; the ideal boss is a benevolent autocrat and his/her decisions cannot be refuted. This distinction brings to another terminological opposition: democratic (or consultative) societies as opposed to autocratic (or paternalistic) ones. Bulgaria with a score of 70 is a typical paternalistic culture.

Uncertainty avoidance (UA) refers to the way in which a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known. This ambiguity brings with it anxiety and the dimension measures the extent to which people try to minimize uncertainty in order to avoid anxiety. It reflects the society’s general tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. Cultures are divided into two basic types: such with a low UA and others with a high UA. In cultures that preform high degree of UA there are rigid codes of belief and behaviour. In these cultures there is an emotional need for rules even if the rules never seem to work. As security is the basis of individual motivation, unorthodox behaviour and ideas are not tolerated and innovation is generally resisted. Bulgaria scores 85 placing itself among the cultures with high uncertainty avoidance.

Masculinity (MAS) refers strictly to the distribution of emotional roles between genders and more precisely to the factors that motivate people in their daily and professional activities. The score of 40 places Bulgaria among the feminine cultures where the quality of life is more important and the sign of success which is unrelated to the actual standard of living. The focus is on “working in order to live” where free time and flexibility are dominant in people’s choice making. The general social view is that standing out from the crowd invokes public disapproval.

Long term orientation (LTO) refers to how a society maintains the links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future. Cultures are divided into such characterized by low LTO and such that display a high LTO, respectively. Bulgaria scores 69 and is defined as a short-term oriented, or pragmatic culture where the future dominates the past.

Indulgence is a newly introduced index proposed by the Bulgarian sociologist M. Minkov in 2010. It relates to the extent to which people of a given society value enjoying life and having fun. Indulgence reflects the degree to which people try to control their intuitive desires and impulses. Cultures are divided into indulgent and restrained ones. With a score of 16 Bulgaria is a typically restrained society. As a result of the strict social norms and the strong control over behaviour restrained cultures feel inability to change their life as they see destiny as

predetermined by social conditions. Thus the people belonging to restraint cultures show a tendency to cynicism and pessimism.

To sum up, Bulgaria is a typical collective country, where the in-group relations are dominant and predetermine members' behaviour. The outsiders are seen as foreigners and thus are treated as potential threats. The power distance is high and this results in strict hierarchy where leadership is taken for granted and although power may be questioned, the society generally believes that attempts to change the existing status quo are unreasonable. These two dimensions are combined with high uncertainty avoidance where keeping to the established patterns is seen as the safest behavior, and which indices intolerance to innovations. Bulgaria is also a feminine culture where quality of life is more important than standard of living, which prevents efforts to stand out of the average. It is also a short-term oriented society where immediate success is important and investments in the future seem to be unreliable. Bulgaria belongs to the restricted societies, where indulgence is evaluated as a wrong social behavior.

The mini-society of the Bulgarian classroom analyzed from the perspective of Hofstede's cultural dimensions shows the following picture: The strongly collectivist Bulgarian society places the teacher and the learner in two different groups, where the learners consider teachers as outsiders and vice versa. There is little or no chance of change of the group belonging, which prevents or limits co-working. In-group relationship prevails over task. In essence the concept of multiculturalism goes against the in-group type of thinking as any other culture is judged as foreign and thus threatening and cooperation between the two groups – the one of the teachers and the other – of the learners, are handicapped.

Collectivism combined with the high power distance prevents the idea of equal participation and shared responsibilities between teachers and learners in the teaching/learning process. The students are expected to show respect and obedience and choose only among the options given by the teacher who is seen as the leader in the educational environment. Naturally, this goes counter autonomy and maintains in essence a teacher-centered education. Also, the high power distance reflects the general belief that there is somebody up there to make decisions and tell the group members what to do. As a result learners expect to be given tasks and the teacher is expected to direct the learner's actions. The failures on the part of the subordinates are evaluated as their own failures, while the success is most often ascribed to the leader.

The high uncertainty avoidance in general prevents the implementation of innovations on the part of both teachers and students. The general learners' belief is that the teacher has all answers. The high uncertainty avoidance combined with the collectivistic social consciousness and the high power distance creates a common negative attitude to everything foreign on the basis that what is felt foreign is different, and what is different is dangerous. The combination of these three dimensions can easily block creativity and the implementation of innovations which explains the traditional teacher-centered approach which is still dominant in the Bulgarian classroom in particular, as well as the intuitive resistance to the ideas of multiculturalism and autonomy, in general.

The feminine type of the Bulgarian culture promotes keeping low-profile in-group behaviour. Femininity as an attitude to the values of life requires modesty, status is unimportant, 'popular' students are an exception and leisure is a measure of success. Femininity combined with short-term orientation makes students attribute success and failure to sheer luck where for the majority of them *Carpe diem* has become a leading principle and which explains the lack of motivation in the majority of the students on almost all educational levels.

Indulgence places Bulgaria among the strongly restrained cultures. Students are raised to control their actions according to the established social norms and to feel that indulging themselves is evaluated as an inappropriate behaviour. Restrain can add to the explanation of the general lack of motivation on the part of the students, the lack of effort on the part of the teachers, and, last but not least, the attempts of the national educational officials and institutions to implement the European directives in education at any cost.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the following can be summarized. Becoming a global citizen is a goal for every individual in the European Union member-states. This goal is especially important for the young people, particularly for those who intend to find a position on the common European labour market and those who want to continue their studies on the next higher level of education. In order to achieve this goal the development of intercultural competence becomes a crucial task for both the learners as receivers and the teachers as providers of knowledge. This task is also of major importance for the educational institutions and language policy makers on national level in all member-states. It can be agreed that the only structured and institutionalized way to prepare the young people for the challenge of globalized Europe is via multicultural education.

However, it should be constantly borne in mind that the original idea of multicultural education emerged in a purely individualistic society, with low power distance and low uncertainty avoidance factors at a time when a decision was sought to solve particular social and educational problems of the particular society. The idea spread and was embraced easily by the culturally similar societies of Western Europe. However, its implementation in the collectivist societies, with high power distance and uncertainty avoidance indices characterizing most of the newly joined countries of Central and Eastern Europe seem to invoke a lot of intuitive resistance on the part of both teachers and learners due to reasons rooted deeply in their specific native cultures. The reality is that the Bulgarian educational system still keeps to the traditional educational practices in the real classroom which are rooted in the historically established educational models as part of the national culture. Along with that, it is officially reported on various hierarchical levels ranging from primary school teachers to official state reports that the implementation of innovations such as multicultural and pluralistic approaches, is on its way. However, in Bulgaria where innovations are generally thought as a threat to the established national cultural patterns, the directives of the EC imposed in the field of education are often evaluated as foreign and thus dangerous and they seem to be subconsciously affronted, leaving the attempts to adopt the novelties in

the educational practices unstructured and random. One way (among many) to improve the situation is to train the teachers to become aware of their own culture by developing critical thinking in order to help them become ready to change their own traditional attitudes to their role in the classroom practice.

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