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INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE. HOW AND WHY WE DEVELOP IT

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ABSTRACT:

THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES, WITH A SPECIFIC FOCUS ON ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE. WHILE THE PAPER IS LARGELY THEORETICAL, IT PRESENTS KEY THEORIES ON CULTURE SHOCK AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE. THE LATTER PART OF THE ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES USED IN ROMANIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE (RLS) CLASSES. THESE ACTIVITIES CAN BE IMPLEMENTED ACROSS VARIOUS PROFICIENCY LEVELS, WITH AN EMPHASIS ON CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING AND, SECONDARILY, ON DEVELOPING OTHER SKILLS SUCH AS COMMUNICATION. THE ARTICLE AIMS TO UNDERSCORE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AND PROPOSE EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR ITS DEVELOPMENT.

KEY WORDS: INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE, CULTURE SHOCK, ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE, INTERCULTURALITY, COMMUNICATION.

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to discuss intercultural competence and to present some activities that can be implemented in the classroom. The article is based on two key premises. First, when learning a foreign language, it is essential to also understand its cultural context. In other words, as teachers, we do not believe that language can be fully acquired without incorporating its cultural elements. Secondly, understanding the culture helps foreign students adapt more easily to the new country and better navigate the inevitable cultural differences they encounter.

The article is structured in three parts. In the first part, I will review several theories on intercultural competence, drawing on authors such as C. Cucoş [2], Rima Bezede [3], and Olga Duhlicher [4], beginning with the CEFR [1]. In the second part, I will discuss culture shock, an essential stage—often not a positive one—in the process of adapting to and learning a language in a foreign country. Finally, in the third part, I will propose a selection of activities that we consider useful in this process, based on the theories of Kalervo Oberg [5], Ming-Mu Kuo [6], and Stela Spînu [7].

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2. THE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

As noted in the previous sections, the first part of this article is dedicated to intercultural competence, aiming to establish a basic theoretical framework that synthesizes the key concepts necessary to understand the importance of developing this competence. Below, we highlight a selection of theories that define intercultural competence and explain its relevance and significance.

In recent years, specialized didactics have developed theories that emphasize the need to integrate various competences into language teaching, including intercultural competence. In our view, this is closely linked to the concept of culture shock—a long-standing and common phenomenon experienced by immigrants who struggle to adapt to a new culture.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) states that "knowledge, awareness, and understanding of the relationships (distinctive similarities and differences) between the 'world you come from' and the 'world of the target community' is at the root of intercultural awareness" [1]. Furthermore, second language (L2) teaching should integrate cultural elements that help learners accept and understand the country of the language they are studying. Strong intercultural competence can facilitate optimal acquisition of the target language by engaging the emotional aspect: when learners are able to recognize small cultural elements and understand specific human behaviors, they can both learn the language more effectively and appreciate its cultural context.

Intercultural competence involves not only a thorough understanding of specific cultures but also general knowledge of potential challenges that may arise when individuals from different cultural backgrounds interact. According to Cucoş [2], intercultural competence is the relational ability to connect with people from other cultures, demonstrating openness, respect, and an understanding of diverse cultural meanings. In other words, it signifies the capacity to move beyond stereotypes and accept individuals whose beliefs and customs may differ significantly from one's own.

In the same work (2000: 43), the author proposes an approach to intercultural competence, outlining the following constitutive elements:

- Knowledge: Understanding the axiological context of one's own culture and foreign cultures in order to avoid discriminatory behavior.
- Skills: Including the ability to analyze how stereotypes are manifested, evaluate personal conduct, and engage in intercultural communication.
- Attitudes: Adopting a firm stance against discrimination and promoting tolerance.

The concept of interculturality primarily refers to a dynamic process of influence, dialogue, collaboration, and reciprocity between cultural groups. The existence and, at times, overlap of different cultures is a valuable resource, provided that interculturality is viewed as an opportunity for mutual enrichment, regardless of the culture one represents [3].

Another definition of intercultural competence, offered by Olga Duhlicher in her study *Intercultural Competence from a Pragmatic Perspective*, describes it as "the ability to communicate appropriately and act effectively in relation to a person of a different ethnicity or religion. It implies understanding the value system of the 'foreigner', empathizing with them, and knowing not only their language but also the meaning of gestures, facial expressions, intonation, and the essential symbols of their culture" [4]. In this sense, intercultural competence comprises both a cognitive dimension, involving the acquisition of knowledge, and an affective dimension, with both being equally important.

In the same article, the author quotes Byram M. and Zarate G., who identify five key categories that form intercultural competence:

- Attitudes: Curiosity and openness to challenge stereotypical beliefs about other groups and one's own group.
- Knowledge: Understanding social groups, their "products," and experiences, whether derived from one's own culture or acquired from others, aimed at enhancing general processes of social interaction at both macro- and micro-levels.
- Interpretation and interpersonal skills: The ability to analyze a document or event generated by a particular culture, elucidating and correctly relating it to events in one's own culture.
- Interaction and discovery skills: The ability to receive and acquire new ideas and experiences from other cultures, as well as to convey knowledge, attitudes, and skills in the often-limited conditions of communication and real-world interactions.
- Reflection and critical evaluation skills: The ability to assess experiences, perspectives, and "products" from both one's own culture and other cultures, using criteria to evaluate their significance [4].

According to these authors, intercultural competence encompasses a range of elements that lead to behaviors encouraging the acceptance of other cultures rather than marginalizing them. In this context, differences are seen as an asset, an opportunity for enrichment, rather than a reason for discrimination.

Duhlicher reiterates the AUM (Anxiety/Uncertainty/Management) model to present the three components of intercultural competence [4]:

- Affective factors (motivation): Refers to the desire to communicate appropriately and effectively with others, particularly when engaging with strangers in intercultural relations.
- Cognitive factors (cognition): Involves awareness and understanding of what needs to be done in order to relate appropriately and effectively.
- Behavioral factors: Refers to the skills we must activate in our behavior to relate effectively with others.

Continuing her article, the author also reviews the BASIC (Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence) model, which is based on the idea that "intercultural competence is assessed more by what the person does at a given moment than by their inner attitudes or what they imagine they could have done" [4]. This model includes elements such as: demonstrating respect, a focus on knowledge, empathy, interaction management, task performance, relational behavior, tolerance for ambiguity, and one's stance in interaction. Practically speaking, the BASIC model complements the AUM model by presenting a range of cognitive and affective factors.

Intercultural competence can be developed in foreign language classes, starting from level A1, to reduce cultural impact and help students adapt more easily to their new country. Its importance centers around societal behavior and, primarily, the understanding of religious differences that influence certain behaviors.

3. CULTURE SHOCK

As mentioned earlier, the phenomenon of culture shock is well-known and very common among individuals moving to a new country, particularly for those coming from cultures with significant differences. Although it can be an overwhelming stage, culture shock can be overcome by understanding and accepting the new environment, viewing differences as a positive rather than a negative aspect. It is important, therefore, to recognize both the

symptoms of culture shock and the times when they occur. In the following lines, I will review some key theories on culture shock.

Most foreign students experience culture shock, which may lead some to interrupt their studies and return to their home country. By developing intercultural competence, they are brought closer to the new culture, making it easier for them to accept it. Understanding the culture can make them feel more connected to it. Clearly, cultural barriers can have a strong impact, but this does not mean they cannot be overcome.

We will not go into great detail on the theories of culture shock but will revisit its stages as defined by Kalervo Oberg [5]:

- The first stage is known as the "honeymoon" phase, where the differences between one's own culture and the new one are seen with admiration. For instance, the new dishes are appreciated, the person is eager to visit as many new places as possible, makes new friends, and everything seems close to perfection. This phase tends to fade quickly.
- The second stage, known as "bargaining," typically occurs after about three months and marks a shift from elation to anxiety. A key factor here is often the language barrier, which can cause communication problems. The individual may feel lonely, which can lead to frustration.
- The third stage, "adjustment," takes place between 6 and 12 months. During this phase, the individual is able to settle into the new culture, develop routines, and begin to feel more comfortable. The language barrier starts to diminish, reducing feelings of loneliness. Becoming accustomed to daily routines and accepting cultural differences helps eliminate frustration, encouraging more communication and interaction with others.
- The final stage is "adaptation," where the individual feels integrated into the new culture and accepts it. This stage may also be referred to as the "bicultural" phase, as individuals often maintain elements of both cultures.

It should be noted that culture shock is not an instantaneous phenomenon, and the transition from one stage to another is gradual, meaning that there may be intermediate stages. Additionally, the time frames identified by Oberg may vary from individual to individual, and some stages may overlap.

Building on Oberg's study, Ming-Mu Kuo and Cheng-Chieh Lai [6] emphasize the importance of integrating cultural aspects into language teaching. They highlight the National Standards for Foreign Language Education project, which underscores that achieving a high level of proficiency in a foreign language is not possible without an understanding of its corresponding culture. Kuo argues that language and cultural understanding are acquired in parallel, just as a child learns their native language and culture step by step. Kuo also presents strategies for integrating culture-centered activities into language classes. One such strategy is presenting representative cultural aspects, such as movies, notable figures, TV shows, or music. Another approach is to introduce proverbs in Romanian and ask students to find equivalents in their own language. The advantage of this activity, we believe, is that it is easier for students to accept a new culture that shares similarities with their own, rather than one where there are more differences than similarities.

Culture shock can be difficult to detect initially, but it often manifests through specific symptoms, including:

- Boredom

- Isolation (e.g., avoiding contact with host country nationals, difficulty or unwillingness to form friendships)
- Oversleeping or mild fatigue
- Irritation due to delays or minor frustrations
- Bodily aches and pains
- A strong desire to return home
- Unwarranted criticism of local customs or ways of doing things
- Excessive self-criticism

All these symptoms develop gradually, and their source can easily be confused with other causes. For instance, fatigue caused by culture shock may be attributed to changes in time zones, schedules, and daily habits.

There are many causes of culture shock, one of which is stereotyping—whether it originates from the incoming student or from the people of the host country about the student’s country of origin.

Stela Spînu, in her article *Cultural Shock: The Result of the Persistence of Ethnic Stereotypes* [7], defines stereotyping as "the mechanical repetition of a form, due to a lack of creativity, which petrifies expression, and as the assumption of an idea, considered valuable, without its own interpretation. Broadly speaking, stereotyping refers to anything that repeats, adopts, or multiplies a particular pattern, resulting in objects or processes with common features due to repetition" [7].

The emergence of stereotypes has many causes. When members of a community encounter representatives from other cultural backgrounds, they interpret their behavior, thinking, and actions through the lens of their own culture, trying to generalize, simplify, and categorize them (whether positive, negative, or neutral). "Individuals do not have an objective attitude, but a subjective one, neglecting what is essential, focusing only on similarities, and ignoring differences. In such circumstances, stereotypes are created and maintained" [7]. Among the most common causes of stereotyping are:

- The association of things that are either unrelated or not as closely related as we think;
- Categorization, which inevitably emphasizes differences between human groups.
- Once ingrained in a culture, stereotyping is artificially sustained through three processes:
- Selective perception: The observer retains only those aspects of reality that conform to the stereotype, ignoring other aspects.
- Selective interpretation: Data is interpreted in ways that align with the stereotype.
- Rule maintenance through exceptions: Exceptions are often ignored to preserve the stereotype [7].

Stereotypes are essentially artificially created barriers that prevent individuals from being seen as unique. Instead, they are associated with the traits of the larger community or country they come from, often leading to marginalization. In other words, the individual's personal traits are overshadowed by those of the entire group, reinforcing negative assumptions.

Another major cause of culture shock is prejudice, which arises from the generalization of certain negative behaviors.

According to Stela Spînu [7], prejudice is:

- A form of thinking that is present in all individuals and often used, but not based on objective data or direct experience. It results in the generalization of content based on emotional evaluations.
- Value judgments about members of other groups, made without valid experience or rational arguments, are often emotionally charged and highly resistant to change or individual differences.

Prejudices exist in all cultures and are caused by differences in perception. They persist even when they no longer correspond to new realities, remaining dominant despite being outdated. Community members often refuse to acknowledge the falsity of these prejudices because they do not fit their own standards.

Regarding the relationship between stereotypes and prejudice, we note that stereotypes are declarative contents or hasty conclusions that lead to prejudice. They are no more than clichés that reflect the traits of all members of a collective, whether those traits are positive, negative, or neutral. Prejudices, on the other hand, are emotional engravings based on irrational feelings of fear and dislike towards an entire community—often an ethnic or racial minority—that has a different lifestyle or value system [7].

In my point of view, cultural competence should be developed starting in secondary school through foreign language classes, to promote inclusion and acceptance of all individuals, regardless of their background. Intercultural competence can reduce racism, as students grow into adults who understand that cultural differences are not negative but are instead valuable opportunities for learning. Prejudices, however, are simply barriers to socio-cultural development. We believe that both prejudices and negative stereotypes must be actively countered.

4. DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

The section dedicated to classroom activities is primarily practical, aiming to offer useful tools to support foreign language teachers. The goal of these activities is to gradually develop intercultural competence and create an optimal environment for foreign language learning. It is important to keep in mind that intercultural competence does not develop in isolation but is closely connected to other competencies, such as pragmatic and communicative competence. Each activity we propose can be integrated into the course and intertwined with the reception of oral and written texts, as well as oral and written communication.

Intercultural competence can be nurtured from the beginner level by incorporating activities that use simple, clear, and accessible vocabulary. Below, we will present some activities suitable for Romanian as a foreign language classes. These activities can, of course, be adapted and applied to other foreign language courses as well.

1. Cultural-Historical Presentation

The first activity we recommend is a basic presentation of cultural and historical aspects, such as traditions, customs, and discussions about typical foods and drinks. This activity requires minimal resources—just a PowerPoint presentation or some handouts with relevant information. The teacher can also ask students to choose topics they would like to explore, such as the history of communism in Romania, or key historical figures like inventors, writers, or political leaders.

Additionally, the teacher can offer a themed presentation when significant cultural holidays or events are approaching, such as National Day or St. Nicholas' Day. At the end of

the presentation, the teacher can ask students questions about the vocabulary used to ensure they understood both the language and the content.

This activity is suitable even for A1 level, as it can incorporate visual aids and simple language. For example, a gastronomic presentation is useful because it helps foreign students understand what food they might encounter in the canteen or supermarket. It's also a great opportunity to encourage them to try local dishes, as long as the ingredients are not forbidden to them (e.g., pork or beef).

2. Multicultural Course: Student Presentations

The next activity involves a multicultural course where the students take the lead in creating presentations about cultural aspects of their own country. The goal is for students to learn more about each other and build connections, which fosters group cohesion. Each student can choose a topic to present to the class, such as a cultural tradition, an important holiday, or a famous figure from their country. After the presentation, peers are encouraged to ask questions, which helps to uncover similarities and commonalities between cultures. This can reduce any perceived boundaries and enhance cultural understanding.

3. The Question Hat

The third activity is the *Question Hat*, which can be done spontaneously with no prior preparation. In this activity, students anonymously write a question on a slip of paper, fold it so the question isn't visible, and place it in a "question hat" (a bowl, basket, or bag). The teacher then draws one question at a time and answers it. The activity typically takes around 20–30 minutes, depending on the complexity of the questions, and can be repeated weekly or bi-weekly.

Like the first activity, the *Question Hat* can be conducted at A1 level. The focus is more on cultural exploration than linguistic complexity, making it ideal for students to practice the contact language in a low-pressure environment.

4. Cinematography Lesson

The fourth activity involves a class dedicated to cinematography, where the teacher shows a Romanian film (with or without English subtitles) for the students to watch. The movie should not be too linguistically complex or have a heavy subject matter. Ideally, it should be a light, entertaining film—perhaps a comedy—that captures the Romanian cultural spirit. If the students' level allows, stand-up comedy shows that avoid vulgar language could be a good option. These shows often highlight Romanian cultural stereotypes, such as the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship, in a humorous way.

This activity can be introduced at A2 level and beyond. After watching the film, students can take a short quiz on specific details, or they can write a brief text, either summarizing the plot or expressing their opinions about the movie's themes. This combines the development of cultural competence with the improvement of written communication skills, which benefits students in multiple ways.

In addition to fostering communicative competence through cultural fragments, we can also enhance listening comprehension by incorporating music into language lessons. This activity involves using music instead of traditional listening exercises, allowing teachers to combine it with teaching various aspects of grammar (such as adjectives, imperatives, etc.). The teacher selects a Romanian song, takes the lyrics from the internet, and replaces certain words with blanks for students to fill in after listening to the song. Since this is primarily a

cultural activity, students will first hear just a verse and the chorus, and then listen to the entire song.

Afterwards, the activity could be followed up with an oral communication task where students share whether they like the genre of music, discuss their preferences, and compare it with what is most popular in their own country. This approach makes the activity both culturally enriching and relevant to language practice.

5. Literary Texts for Advanced Learners

For higher-level students, a useful activity that integrates cultural elements with the reception of written text involves using excerpts from significant works of Romanian literature. In this activity, the teacher selects key passages from Romanian literary texts and uses them as support materials for reading and communication activities. If the text contains slang or regional expressions, it is recommended that these be explained or supplemented with synonyms below the text. The inclusion of such elements is crucial because they are an essential part of everyday Romanian spoken in the streets, and understanding them will help students feel more integrated into the culture.

Furthermore, the teacher can encourage students to provide equivalents or similar expressions from their own languages. This can enrich the cultural exchange and deepen students' understanding of how language works in different social contexts.

6. Exploring Idiomatic Expressions

The final activity focuses on idiomatic or colloquial expressions, such as "a freca menta" ("to rub mint", which means "to be lazy"). This activity revolves around presenting expressions alongside their origins. Many idioms have surprising and interesting backgrounds that can spark curiosity and make them fun to learn. Teachers can use the internet, particularly YouTube, to find videos explaining commonly used expressions, or they can create their own inventory of idioms and research their origins to present to the students.

To ensure comprehension, the teacher can ask follow-up questions to check students' understanding of the expressions. At the end of the lesson, students can be asked to provide the equivalent expressions in their own languages. This is also an excellent opportunity to discuss superstitions—teachers can introduce some common Romanian superstitions and ask students to share the equivalents in their own cultures.

CONCLUSION

All of these activities serve as small cultural "pills" that help students gain a deeper understanding of the culture of the language they are learning, making it easier for them to adapt to life in Romania. By presenting linguistic elements and connecting them to students' native languages, we highlight similarities that can ease the acceptance of inevitable cultural differences. Especially in the early stages of language learning, it's important to show students that, although languages may differ, they often share a common root, helping to bridge the gap between cultures and fostering a sense of connection.

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