

THE DIDACTIC APPROACH TO THE INTERCULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS*

Elena-Cristina ANDREI¹, Oprea-Valentin BUȘU²

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Abstract

Intercultural education is a relatively new concept in Romania and complex that encompasses a series of psychological, anthropological, linguistic, geopolitical, religious aspects. Also, carrying out the pedagogical activity in a multicultural setting requires special rigor in terms of respecting some principles and values: respecting human rights, the absence of discriminatory phenomena (all students are treated and respected equally regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, social class, religion, etc.), encouraging the expression of points of view, respect for different cultural values, capitalizing on cultural empathy.

Intercultural psychology is the basis of understanding the way of action of an individual according to the influence on him of culture, customs, traditions. The heterogeneity of the student group requires a special approach from the teaching staff. He must have at least basic, usual information about ethnic and national diversities, elementary notions of the anthropology of peoples. In the absence of these notions, a difficulty can be noted in the implementation of the study discipline with everything it includes, the transmission of information, the evaluation of the accumulated knowledge, and the obtaining of feedback.

Key words: *Intercultural education; Psychology; Intercultural pedagogy; Cultural diversity; Communication.*

1. Introduction

Intercultural education aims at the smooth development of teaching activities in a group of students or even teachers of different nationalities. In this situation, it is mainly called for tolerance, understanding towards the individuals with whom you collaborate, with whom you study or work. Every people is unique in its culture, traditions and customs, and these peculiarities require respect and tolerance

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¹ PhD, University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Craiova, Faculty of Dentistry, Romania, e-mail address: andreicristina2201@gmail.com

² Senior Lecturer, PhD, University of Craiova, Teacher Training Department, Romania, e-mail address: valentin_busu@yahoo.com, corresponding author

especially in the academic environment. Cultural diversity has the role of enriching the educational sector through the knowledge of different notions related to culture, folklore, technological progress (Dasen, 1999).

Cooperation between members of different nations intensified in Romania with the accession of our country to the European Union (2007). The educational sector has proven to be a promoter of multiculturalism through active involvement over time in experience exchange programs such as Erasmus (Strungă, 2022). It is particularly important for a teacher to have the ability to interact with other colleagues from other partner countries in educational projects, to be good at foreign languages and to be open to traveling for the purpose of exchanging experience in the educational field (*Ibidem*).

A teacher who practices intercultural pedagogy will be excited by the presence of pupils/students from other cultural backgrounds, because it gives him the opportunity to engage other students in valuing his own culture, but also to educate them in order to avoid stereotypes, prejudices (Dasen, 1999). The mobility of the teaching staff is imperative in order to accumulate a substantial supply of both theoretical and practical knowledge in the educational sphere. The possibility of accessing the intercultural exchange program gives the teacher the chance to know how other educational institutions function, to know other types of school curricula, ways of conducting study hours, but also of extracurricular activities, analyzing the interrelationship between the degree of economic development and the efficiency of the academic environment (Erasmus).

The Erasmus program was founded 36 years ago with the aim of giving students and teachers the opportunity to study, but also to live in another country on the European continent (Erasmus). This chance to be able to carry out your teaching activity in a state has a number of advantages: access to new information regarding the way of organizing the educational sphere of other civilizations, knowledge of the socio-cultural and economic level in other countries and the way in which it exerts influence on the national educational system, improving the ability to relate to other teaching staff and students. We observe that the majority of students and teachers who apply for the Erasmus program are from the field of economics and business, followed by those from engineering and architecture, literature, medicine and psychology, sciences, education/pedagogy, arts, communication, agriculture and veterinary medicine, tourism (Erasmus).

Intercultural didactic communication is a subject of great interest. We make this statement because intercultural communication is a difficult process that requires knowledge regarding the use of a foreign language, preferably an international circuit language such as English. Also, the interlocutors do not have the same cultural references and obstacles may arise that make communication and interrelationship difficult. Good communication between two or more parties of different nationalities may be possible under the following circumstances: similar or close professional status, knowledge of an international language on both sides, degree of involvement in joint activities, motivation, adaptability of individuals (Cozma, 2001).

Intercultural education is still, in Romania, a new concept, insufficiently addressed and facing a series of gaps. In order to obtain some basic principles of this type of education (Banks, 1997) proposes the following perspectives:

- education should be based on the anti-racial principle, any pupil/student regardless of race, sex, ethnicity, religion, etc. to be able to benefit equally and fairly from the opportunity for education;
- the introduction of some annexes or amendments into the education law in which the right of pupils/students to equal opportunities for education is clearly stated;
- stimulating equity and encouraging school performance.

2. The adaptation of mental processes in the context of the teaching-learning act in a foreign language

Memory

Memory is defined as a mental process that takes place at the level of the cerebral cortex with the objective of creating nerve connections. Also, also at the level of the cerebral cortex, the previously accumulated information is stabilized, to be processed cognitively. Memory is a higher cognitive process that can be influenced by a number of factors. Factors that produce changes in memory can be subjective or objective (Gherguț, 2016).

The subjective factors are those that strictly relate to the attitude of the subject, the degree of his involvement in the activity he wants to carry out, his purpose, previous experiences and their effects on a psychic level. Changes in the state of health that interfere with the normal performance of daily activities are also included in the category of subjective factors. Currently, there is a significant increase in burn-out cases in most fields, especially in the medical and health sector, IT, but also educational. The phenomenon of burn-out is characterized by exhaustion on both a mental and physical level, thus affecting the individual's memory to a greater or lesser extent depending on the stage of exhaustion (Bauer *et al.*, 2003).

The objective factors that can produce memory disturbances are represented by the mode/atmosphere in which the activity is carried out, the degree of difficulty of the activity, the way in which the matter is organized, the volume is often an important obstacle for many individuals (Gherguț, 2016).

The efficiency of the memory can be diminished during the course hours due to errors in pedagogical practice such as: asking the teaching staff to the students to reproduce certain notions strictly mechanically, being a frequent mistake that leads in most cases to the assimilation of information for a short period of time. Information must be analyzed and understood if we want it to stick for a significant length of time. Another mistake is represented by the transmission of knowledge in an alert manner, without proper systematization and without resorting to the notion of feedback from the student.

Feedback still remains a poorly understood notion in the Romanian pedagogical sphere. By means of the feedback, the teaching staff manages to evaluate the efficiency of the transmission and acquisition of the concepts taught.

Thus, the teacher becomes aware of the quality of the supported educational act, being at the same time a guarantor of the expression of the opinion regarding the way of carrying out the didactic activities. Feedback has the great advantage of guiding the teacher in terms of the continuity of a certain teaching style or, on the contrary, its modification in order to achieve the expected results.

Attention

Attention is a higher mental process that has the role of optimizing the development of cognitive processes, but also of other processes that aim to achieve a goal. Both memory and attention increase their efficiency through exercise. Following numerous training exercises, attention has the potential to become a skill. Regarding the classification of attention, it can be according to the nature of the regulation voluntary or involuntary. Voluntary attention requires making an effort, as well as maintaining it throughout the activity (Gherguț, 2016).

Voluntary attention is strongly influenced by the motivation of the individual, by his aspirations. The disadvantage of this type of attention is represented mainly by the installation of the state of fatigue, which leads to deconcentration and the progressive reduction of the state of attention (Gherguț, 2016; Maslow, 2007).

Involuntary attention is also known as spontaneous attention and is characterized by focusing attention unintentionally and without requiring effort. It is initiated by stimuli from the external environment or internal stimuli. Not every stimulus can trigger involuntary attention. These stimuli require a series of characteristics such as: intensity, complexity, degree of innovation, rhythm of appearance (stimuli that appear suddenly, spontaneously often capture attention) (Gherguț, 2016; Maslow, 2007).

At the same time, we emphasize the fact that both types of attention are interconnected, sometimes one can notice the transition from one type of attention to another in a very short time interval or this transition can be done so quickly that it is imperceptible (Gherguț, 2016).

Another type of attention is postvoluntary attention. This form of attention is strengthened over time and requires numerous exercises of voluntary attention. Through repeated exercises, postvoluntary attention comes to be established by itself in certain individuals (*Ibidem*).

Keeping students' attention throughout the lesson is often a challenge for teachers. In most situations, attention is captured at the beginning of the lesson, the students being even more rested, and gradually decreases towards the end of the lesson. One of the most effective methods of maintaining attention is the active involvement of students during the course. Their involvement can be achieved through reflection topics, argumentative discussions based on the choice of a topic, developing a case study, carrying out various tasks with the help of student groups, encouraging students to express their point of view, making a PowerPoint presentation on a certain theme.

Imagination and creativity

From a psychological point of view, imagination represents a superior cognitive process that, through the associations and connections of mental images with reality, new plans can be formed. The main functions of imagination are:

- the ability to plan future actions, to design plans;
- transforming the verbal description into dynamic, lively mental scenes;
- contributes to the development of the game, especially during childhood;
- stimulation of empathy (we imagine that we are in the place of another individual and we think about how he feels or how we would act if we were in his situation) (Comrie, 2022).

Types of Imagination (Ibidem):

a. *Productive imagination* – it is complex and involves the mental creation of an innovative object/event. Examples are the student's elaboration of a story/fairy tale, the mental design of an innovative device that brings many benefits.

b. *Reproductive imagination* – requires the existence of previous descriptions, both verbal and visual, which merge and lead to the conception of a new product in an imaginary plane. The most eloquent example is that of the literary approach. When a student reads a text, he has the ability to imagine the picture described in words.

Creativity

Creativity and intelligence are two mental processes whose interdependence cannot be neglected regardless of context. Creativity represents a fundamental psychic construction without which the human species would be much poorer in many ways through the difficulties of the evolutionary process that affect all fields from art to exact sciences (Corraza, Lubart, 2020).

Although most authors in the psychological field support the strong interdependence between the two processes, there are also authors who believe that intelligence is necessary for the creative process, but not sufficient (Karwowski *et al.*, 2016). Creativity develops and evolves due to the presence of the following factors: openness and flexibility in thinking, the allocation of the time necessary to be involved in a certain creative activity, human and material resources that support improvement and the possibility of knowing new opportunities for the development of creativity, the existence an environment that allows for creative evolution. Also, there are authors who state that not every new idea or object can be defined as a product of creativity. They claim that an innovative object is one that, in addition to the element of novelty, possesses the ability to be applicable and to make the field in which it is launched more efficient (*Ibidem*).

The measurement of creative ability is best achieved by applying creativity tests. This type of test focuses on divergent thinking. The disadvantage of these tests is that they do not assess deductive and inductive thinking, which are an integral part of creative ability (Barton, 1997). Another particularly important element and again not evaluated by this type of tests is represented by the pupil/student's ability to propose innovative solutions to solve problems, as well as the development of new strategies (Finke, Ward, Smith, 1992).

Cognitive and metacognitive ability

The fast-paced evolution of the entire society has made the change in the educational plan indispensable both in the pre-university and in the university. If during the communist period the authoritarian style of the teaching staff prevailed, and the conduct of classes required a certain rigid, inflexible conduct that did not offer the pupil/student the freedom to fully express their opinions, we notice that in the post-December era an atmosphere was established friendlier, more understanding of the student's needs and allowing the free expression of opinions.

One of the essential cognitive skills for a good educational act is represented by critical thinking. The concept of critical thinking entered the pedagogical sphere in Romania rather late, and even today it is not fully understood (Ștefan, 2014). Critical thinking is not about making accusations about people or facts. According to Bernat (2003), "Critical thinking is thinking that has the ability to self-analyze while elaborating reasonings starting from the evaluation of alternatives, in order to issue justifiable opinions and act.". Thus, through critical thinking, the student learns to form an opinion about a certain debated topic and to support it with appropriate arguments.

A teacher engaged in the performance of his students promotes the stimulation of critical thinking and helps to implement it by:

- creating contextual situations that allow practicing critical thinking;
- supporting the affirmation of ideas, opinions during class hours;
- active involvement of students during class hours; the passive style discourages critical thinking, because in this case the receiver (the student) takes the information transmitted by the transmitter (the teacher) without passing it through an own filter of thought, without being subjected to a judgment; strict mechanical memorization reduces the value of accumulated information;
- students are instructed to respect the opinions of other colleagues even if they are not consistent with theirs;
- also, the student must be constantly encouraged to have confidence in his own strength;
- it is particularly important for the student to understand that the opinions expressed must be argued, and the arguments used must be chosen with great care, having a scientific, objective basis (Ștefan, 2014).

Critical thinking is not only addressed to students, but also to teachers (Ștefan, 2014). Each teacher is obliged to ask questions about the quality of the educational act provided. Probably most teachers have asked themselves questions like: "How useful is this information" "Is this idea/concept worth exploiting?" "How does this activity help me?". As characteristics of critical thinking, we mention: it helps the individual to acquire autonomy, encourages the issuing of own judgments, but at the same time makes the student responsible for using arguments correctly adapted to the situation presented, encourages students to develop skills (Ștefan, 2014).

The concept of metacognition is indispensable to the educational act. Through metacognition the pupil/student "learns how to learn". Joița (2002) defines the metacognitive process as a "tutor" of learning (Joița, 2002). Through this mental

process, the student engages all his intellectual resources in order to achieve school performance. The transition from high school to university academia is often very difficult, as new students are forced to accumulate a large amount of information in a relatively short time. Thus, the student will make an effort to establish the learning style that characterizes him (visual, auditory, kinetic style), he will constantly monitor his activity and note his strengths and weaknesses, he educates himself in terms of capitalizing on the time given to individual study, he will want to improve himself in the field studied, to study a certain topic in depth. Also, the student periodically self-evaluates and tries to understand where he went wrong and how to correct (Ștefan, 2014).

Effective metacognitive strategies that can be applied by students:

- establishing clear objectives;
- self-monitoring of learning;
- periodic self-assessment and self-adjustment of errors/obstacles;
- the need to get constant feedback;
- the use of an agenda in which the progress made is noted;
- time management given to individual study (Ștefan, 2014).

3. Intercultural education – comparative study

Australia

Australia has been known since ancient times as a society where multiculturalism prevails, being recognized as a preferred area for many emigrants. Australians have always emphasized both assimilation and effective integration of emigrants. A characteristic element of Australian society is its ability to maintain its democracy despite the overwhelming cultural diversity that can lead to the outbreak of numerous conflicts (Nedelcu, 2008).

The integration of multiculturalism in the educational field was achieved by the introduction in various school subjects, especially in literature, history and religion, of some authors, events and facts of major interest of some outstanding international personalities who managed to change the course of society. However, this attitude promoting ethnic and cultural diversity in the Australian educational sphere took shape only in the early 1980s, until then there was an affinity towards the British sphere of influence (Cushner, 1998).

Another problem was that of minorities. Teaching in a minority language gave rise to heated discussions and required an approach that requires a lot of tolerance, respect, but also the implementation of strategies that can make this teaching possible in a legal way and without affecting the majority. Thus, on the Australian territory there are well-defined communities that benefit from studies in the mother tongue (minority), but which also manage to be integrated in the national and international context by cultivating the notions of general culture, history of peoples, history of religions (Nedelcu, 2008).

United Kingdom

Following the accelerated development of the European continent, Great Britain also faced an explosion of emigrants. If at the beginning, most emigrants came from Indians and Africans, after the Second World War, emigrants from Turkey, Greece, Italy, but also other Eastern European countries appeared (Nedelcu, 2008).

The first reactions vis a vis minorities in the British educational environment were tense, marked by conflicts and protests. We remember the protest of the majority of parents in 1963 when they chanted against the possibility of immigrants learning in the same schools as their children. The first step taken following this protest was the implementation of the English Language for Immigrants project by the Ministry of Education. However, in the documents related to the project, the Ministry of Education tends to characterize immigrants as a problem for the British education system, a fact that increases the feeling of dissatisfaction on the part of immigrants (*Ibidem*).

Acts of discrimination continued after the 1980s when the Home Office report sounded the alarm about the significantly increased risk of stigmatization of pupils of Asian origin, stigmatization becoming more pronounced even compared to those of African origin. In the year 1986, the hatred directed against Asian students reached its highest level and resulted in a deeply unfortunate event, more precisely the death of an Asian male child. Even in the 1990s there was an extremely serious event that resulted in the death of six young men (of Asian and black descent). This event was produced following the escalation of interracial conflicts that also led to an increase in acts of violence in society (Gillborn, Gipps, 1996).

Although the education reform law of 1988 focuses on the promotion of multiculturalism and evokes anti-racial, non-discriminatory principles, their implementation proved to be extremely difficult and required a long time to be understood by the majority of citizens. This law registered a number of benefits:

- promoting the concept of learning through cooperation, an extended concept for teachers as well, not just for pupils and students;
- modification of the school curriculum in order to actively involve ethnic groups marginalized in the past;
- religious discipline to provide for the transmission of correct, unbiased information about several religious cults and not to promote discrimination based on religious orientation;
- the creation of a guide in which the sanctions are provided for those who commit acts of discrimination;
- the introduction of minority languages into the educational curriculum as distinct subjects and intended for certain communities (Nedelcu, 2008).

Canada

Like Great Britain, Canada is recognized for its ethnic, cultural, linguistic diversity. A particularly important aspect of the Canadian state is that the issue of immigrants falls to the central structures of the state, and the educational sector is

placed in the care of the provinces. Therefore, Canada does not benefit from a Ministry of Education, but only has a Council of Ministers of Education in the territory (Nedelcu, 2008).

In Canada there are several terms denoting different categories of national minorities:

Official minorities made up of citizens of Quebec, as well as other citizens of French nationality from other provinces. The main problem of these groups is represented by the language of teaching in schools. There are areas like New Brunswick where both English and French are accepted, but in most provinces the language of instruction is determined by the majority of students who speak that language (*Ibidem*).

The unofficial minorities made up mainly of citizens of Ukrainian, Croatian, German origin pose great difficulties to the educational system and more, due to the fact that they do not speak English or French. The first reactions consisted in the adoption of the assimilationist model. Then, a series of reactions followed, especially during periods of economic crisis, which promoted nativism. After the end of the socio-economic crises, the federal law banned nativism and provided the opportunity for immigrants to study and develop in the Canadian state (*Ibidem*).

The native population is characterized by the small number of members in contradiction with the cultural and linguistic diversity. Within this population there are many customs and traditions, as well as a multitude of dialects, which makes it difficult to implement an educational curriculum (Nedelcu, 2008).

4. Pedagogical communication

The social behavior of students is closely related to the cultural dimension of their origin. There are highly dependent (collectivist) societies and weakly dependent (individualistic) societies. Collectivist societies are characterized by the desire to join a social group, thus reducing the importance of the self in psycho-social development. Belonging to a group develops the interdependent self that leads the individual to value the opinions of those around him, sometimes even to his disadvantage, to relate to other members much of the time, while emphasizing collective ownership.

In the case of weakly dependent societies, a strong inclination towards individualism is observed. Individuals in this type of society promote self-cultivation, focus on individual motivations and aspirations, encourage autonomy, and emphasize private property.

There are studies that support the fact that societies where individualism prevails are more economically developed. Also, the idea emerges that the improvement of the quality of life is directly proportional to the emphasis of individualism. Practically, the individual has easy access to numerous resources, a fact that causes him to be more independent and to focus on his own person (Gavreliuc, 2011).

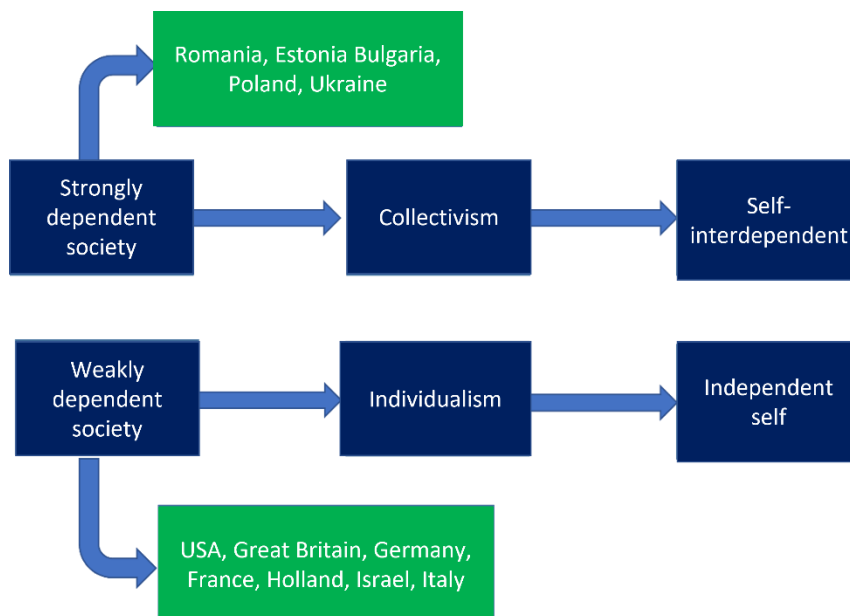


Figure 1. Differences between highly dependent and weakly dependent states

Social influence is present in all areas of activity, a fact for which the educational sphere is not omitted either. The communication process carried out in the educational environment is of particular importance, because it requires well-developed communication skills, intelligible and assertive communication. However, the social behavior of both teachers and students can be influenced by a number of factors such as:

- previous experience;
- the degree of training and professional training;
- personal motivations, aspirations;
- the influence of the external environment (Dumitru, 1998).

Effective didactic communication involves the ability to convince the interlocutor, to make him reflect on the topic you are addressing, to convey the information clearly without leaving room for erroneous interpretations, to arouse his interest, curiosity and to make him research the topic addressed (*Ibidem*). Communication within a classroom brings about changes in thinking for both the student and the teacher. The exchange of ideas is beneficial, having as its objective the stimulation of creativity, the improvement of harmful behaviors, the co-sharing of new information. Didactic communication can be of several types: group communication when the teacher addresses the entire class/group of students, interpersonal communication that takes place between the teacher and a nominated student, and intrapersonal communication defined by self-questioning (the teacher asks himself if the students understood what he taught them or if there are students who did not pay attention to the explanations) (Cosmovici, Iacob, 2008).

The psychopedagogical implications of didactic communication:

- recent studies emphasize the fact that the effectiveness of didactic communication is not limited to the ability to master verbal communication, but requires a good knowledge of non-verbal and para-verbal communication (*Ibidem*);
- non-verbal communication within a group of students requires the ability of the teaching staff to decode certain messages by interpreting the gestures and facial expressions of the students. This ability brings the teacher a number of advantages: the possibility of identifying students who seem to have lost interest in the course topic, identifying emotional students who hesitate to express their point of view in relation to a certain topic addressed (Jar, 2022).

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