AN INTERCULTURAL TURN IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING.
A PERSPECTIVE ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING.

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ABSTRACT. This paper intended to emphasize the constant need to tailor teaching to today's educational requirements. Language learning in the 21st century must reflect the diversity of languages and cultures that are met in a formal education setting. Likewise, the roles of teachers are expending due to the need to teach effectively diverse learners. The research that has been conducted concluded that pre-service teachers managed to a great extent to incorporate in their teaching cultural perspectives and were able to evaluate and select teaching resources that presented the deeply rooted relationship between culture and language.

Keywords: *foreign language learning, pre-service teacher training, intercultural communicative competence, cultural background, diversity, identity, language knowledge, non-native speaker.*

Introduction

The present paper comprises two parts. The first part provides a theoretical perspective on the constant need to reshape teacher training programmes in order to enable prospective teachers to manage well a changing world. This section acknowledges the fact that all learning is

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placed in a social and a cultural context and that this has multiple implications for education. The second part provides details about a quantitative research that has been conducted by using a questionnaire.

I. Theoretical underpinnings

The redesign of the pre-service teacher training education

Pre-service teacher training programmes are designed to train prospective teachers in order to help them enter the profession. According to Nardon (2017, 4) working in a multicultural world leads one to the awareness that ''intercultural encounters are a pervasive feature of our modern workplaces and affect most of us''. How do pre-service teacher programmes address this demand for culturally responsive teaching? In today's educational system, factors such as globalization, internalization of education and digitization of information increase the demands on teachers. The roles performed by teachers, the knowledge and skills they have to acquire and the attitudes they have to demonstrate are undergoing various changes that acknowledge a reality, i.e. a thorough rethinking of teacher preparation is needed in order to accommodate all these changes and bridge the gap in teachers' mindset.

The European Union and the European Commission, emphasize through various directives and educational policies (*The White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (2008), *Recommendation 2006/962/EC on key competences for lifelong learning* (2006), *The Aims of Language Teaching and Learning* (2010), *Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching. A Practical Introduction for Teachers* (2002)) the need to understand and accept cultural differences that one could encounter in professional, social or educational contexts. In order to be able to handle in an appropriate manner the intercultural contact, some changes are expected to take place both in curricular design and in teacher training programmes (initial and continuous). On the one hand, the curriculum could be infused with an intercultural approach (Cucoş 2000, 265). Likewise, the curriculum does not undergo major changes and the intercultural perspective is added where necessary. On the other hand, teachers

should acquire a certain degree of intercultural communicative competence (i.e. intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes) which according to Byram (1997, 7) constitutes "an individual's ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries." The emergence of the intercultural dimension in the field of foreign language education acknowledges the fact that acquiring the four skills in a foreign language does not represent a guarantee of success in international contexts.

A broad analysis on Romanian literature indicates that, as concerns foreign language teaching, there is a definitely great interest in tackling an intercultural perspective via an infusional approach. Various studies constitute a proof of this constant interest for integrating an intercultural perspective within pre-service teacher training practice and developing students' intercultural communicative competence (Bârlogeanu, L., 2005; Nedelcu, A., 2008; Cozma, T., Butnaru, S., Cucoş, C., 2001; Cosma, M., Cosma, B., 2006; Pop, R. 2015).

Since the ''teaching of English has become one of the fastest growing international professions'' (Diaz-Rico 2000, 71) participants in educational programmes are required ''to build personal knowledge about the interdependence of language, culture and schooling'' (Diaz-Rico 2000, 79). Prospective teachers of English, native speakers or non-native speakers, are encouraged to become more aware and think critically of the connections existing between one's cultural background and the context of learning a foreign language. Because education has a social component attached to it and nowadays it is encouraged to take a more active role in today's multicultural setting, the responsibility for educating preservice teachers has reached a considerable high level in the past two decades.

The development of the *intercultural communicative competence* (Byram 1997), the emergence of a multicultural perspective on teaching (Carl & Grant 1992) and empirical research (Sercu et. al. 2005) convey a coherent message about the need to reshape teacher training for enabling teachers to manage well a changing world. Increasingly, an emphasis is placed on the teachers' knowledge, attitudes and skills to understand the implications of multiculturalism in the formal classroom setting. This redesign is backed up by research that targeted teacher efficiency in Europe after completion of initial training programmes. According to the Eurydice

report, teachers admit having moderate or high levels of needs for Continuing Professional Development in areas such as: teaching in multilingual and multicultural settings (European Commission 2015, 3-4). On the one hand, these findings indicate that teachers still need more training in culturally sensitive teaching and in understanding that the individuality of students might require different instructional strategies. On the other hand, teaching brings into consideration multiple layers and dimensions of this cultural mediation that takes place in foreign language classrooms. For example, the development of intercultural communicative competence is a lifelong process since one is constantly interacting with people belonging to different cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds. Likewise, ''teachers continually construct knowledge and skills in practice throughout their careers rather than acquiring a finite set of knowledge and skills in their totality before entering the classroom'' (Bransford & LaPage 2005, 3).

The multicultural classroom: a resource, not a challenge

Nowadays, most classrooms are comprised of diverse learners who speak different mother tongues, belong to different cultures and come from different social and economic groups. Therefore, teachers ''need to be increasingly effective in enabling a diverse group of students to learn ever more complex material and to develop a wider range of skills'' (Bransford & LePage 2005, 2). This effectiveness is determined both by a teacher's ability to answer questions related to w*hat* and *how* to incorporate students' culture and worldviews into teaching and by the development of an informed opinion regarding the impact of this diversity on the learning process.

According to Snyder & Dillow (2015 in DaSilva-Iddings 2017, 1) culturally and linguistically diverse children make up the fastest-growing student population in the U.S. Research aimed at examining the reasons that led in the past two decades to inferior quality education of these diverse learners pointed out two factors: the lack of a curricular design that builds on the learners' broader social environment and the lack of preparation of preservice teachers (Manyak 2000 & Souto-Manning 2013 in

DaSilva-Iddings 2017, 1). These two factors advocate for a reconceptual-ization of teaching by adopting a curriculum that incorporates a cultural component and a redesign of teacher education that targets a deeper un-derstanding of what teaching to linguistically and culturally diverse learners really means.

In the field of education and particularly in the area of foreign lan-guage teaching, educators ''should be trained to deal with the growing diversity of learners'' (European Commission 2015, 5). Any educational programme, from kindergarten to adult learning, should strive not only to acknowledge and embrace diversity, but also to create the right con-ditions to explore and benefit from it. Linguistically diverse learners rep-resent a resource in the foreign language classroom because languages do not just facilitate communication but ''represent the very fabric of cul-tural expressions, the carriers of identity, values and worldviews'' (UNESCO World Report 2009, 73). It is important to note that the inter-cultural perspective suggests a new direction, namely the recognition of the contribution of the cultural dimension within the foreign language acquisition process. The intercultural perspective intends to bring to the forefront the need to understand self and others through language, whether these are native speakers or foreign language learners. The complex relationship between language and culture is explored and used as a way to promote understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity.

The foreign language teacher's roles and competence

The personal and professional development of a teacher takes place in a socio-cultural context. Golombek acknowledges the salience of this context when she concludes that ''who we are affects how we teach'' (2000, 103). Therefore, teachers of foreign languages need to be able to understand and foresee the interference of the socio-cultural aspects within the foreign language classroom. Moreover, when teaching a for-eign language one should keep in mind the fact that language represents both a linguistic and a social phenomenon. Therefore, communication al-ways occurs in context and this context is relevant for providing an effi-cient decoding of the message.

Villegas and Lucas (2002, 20) propose a framework for preparing culturally responsive teachers and suggest six important qualities that should be attained throughout the teacher education curriculum: teachers (a) are sociocultural conscious, (b) have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, (c) see themselves as responsible for and capable of bringing about change to make schools more equitable, (d) understand how learners construct knowledge and are capable of promoting knowledge construction, (e) know about the lives of their students, and (f) design instruction that builds on what their students already know while stretching them beyond the familiar." These characteristics suggest that knowledge about learners' cultural, social and linguistic diversity should be put to use and transferred into clear pedagogical objectives. In addition, these characteristics imply that teachers should "demonstrate genuine interest in developing knowledge, skills and attitudes that are conducive to multilingual and multicultural understanding" (Pop 2016, 234-235).

Teachers of foreign languages should demonstrate sound content knowledge, valuable pedagogical knowledge and insightful knowledge of how learning is achieved by diverse learners. By applying a cultural lens to teaching a foreign language one articulates better the elements of inclusive and culturally responsive teaching. An intercultural turn in pre-service teacher training education should permeate all the levels: at macro level educational policies and the curriculum should strive to embrace diversity in schools and acknowledge a need for change; at mezzo level school policies should investigate best practices for preparing teachers to tackle learners' diversity and thus cross sociocultural boundaries; at micro level every teacher should become an agent of change and strive to integrate an intercultural sensitive approach in their teaching.

In the foreign language classroom teachers make use of various authentic resources that incorporate a rather good amount of cultural information. These authentic resources written in the target language (e.g. newspapers, blogs, movies, songs, ads, weather forecasts etc.) have not been issued especially for educational purposes but can be integrated in a formal educational setting in order to develop students' intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes. Still, the foreign language teacher needs to understand the pieces of cultural information inferred by these resources so as to be able to mediate between students' culture and the target language

culture. It might not be too far-fetched to assume that in the case of foreign language teaching the teacher has to develop both a personal and a professional relationship with the target culture. Teaching foreign languages entails more than just teaching grammar, vocabulary and the enactment of the four skills. In fact, it constitutes an opportunity to question one's identity in relation to the mother-tongue culture and the target culture (Pop 2016, 235). Therefore, in a multicultural language classroom, teachers act as mediators between different cultures. Expanding on the role of teachers, Iucu (2007, 29) states that teachers' professional development represents a fundamental component in redefining Europe's cultural identity. Thus, a culturally responsive teacher plays a salient role in exploring cultural identity through teaching a foreign language.

But foreign language teaching poses some difficulties to a non-native speaker. Various studies (Medgyes 429-442 in Celce-Murcia 2001; Llurda 2005) raise focus on non-native speaking teachers' quest for identity and legitimacy. Leaving aside the unattainable native-like language knowledge, non-native speaker practitioners are more ''suited to provide students with a pluralistic cultural perspective'' (Kramsch 1998 & Cook 1999 apud. Modiano, 2005, 26). Learning a foreign language enables one, among other things, to interact with a new culture, to show respect towards what is different and to manage effectively various communicative contexts. Therefore, teaching a foreign language is a lot different than teaching another subject matter (Gardner 1985, 146 apud. Regan & Osborn 2002, 64) because it encourages one to express and develop intercultural attitudes.

The Didactics of the English Language

The Didactics of the English language is a course offered to BA students at the Faculty of Letters, Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca within their optional pre-service teacher training programme.

The topics tackled in this course (e.g. teaching grammar and vocabulary, teaching receptive and productive skills, teaching literature etc.) are infused with an intercultural perspective through the use of various authentic resources and literature that focuses on the development of the intercultural

communicative competence. The dialogue between students' mother tongue culture and the foreign language culture aims to enable pre-service teachers to develop their intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes. This intercultural perspective permeates the three areas that prospective teachers should acquire: subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and knowledge about how diverse students learn. During their teaching practice, pre-service teachers are required to teach in formal classroom settings and put to good use the theoretical and the practical knowledge that they have already acquired.

II. Research

The details of the research are listed below:

Location: Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
Span of time: January-February 2018
Respondents: 3rd year students enrolled in the Pre-service teacher training course, specialization: English major
Language knowledge: respondents are multilingual and belong to different cultural backgrounds
Number of respondents: 48
Recruitment: students volunteered to take part in this research after they had been informed about the details of the study.

This is a descriptive research that explores and explains the particularities of a pre-service teaching programme.

Research question

The purpose of this study is to determine to what degree pre-service teachers are able to make use, during their teaching practice, of their intercultural communicative competence in planning activities, in organizing and providing content and in evaluating teaching resources when teaching English in a formal classroom setting.

Research tool

We have adapted the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) (Newby et. al. 2007) and selected only the items that related to the ability to make use of and integrate culture in foreign language teaching. The EPOSTL questionnaire is a self-assessment and reflective tool that enables prospective teachers to track their development in accordance with specific competences for planning and teaching lessons. We have selected 10 items for this questionnaire and provided a Likert scale for self-assessment in order to be able to analyse data in a quantitative manner. The 10 items of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

We have also included an open-ended question referring to didactic challenges and difficulties encountered by pre-service teachers during their teaching practice. This section was intended to be analyzed from a qualitative point of view.

Results

The first two items evaluated pre-service teachers' knowledge and skills to organize learning content in order to respond to diverse students. Results for the two items indicated that 85.42% of the respondents considered that they managed *well* and *very well* (68.75%) during their teaching practice to provide language content in appropriate ways and offer a variety of activities that responded to students' needs. The next three items requested respondents to evaluate how well they were able to relate their foreign language teaching to the target culture or to other international contexts. A considerable percentage of 85.42 of the respondents considered that they managed *well* and *very well* to relate the foreign language to the culture of those who speak it. Still, 14.58% considered that they managed just *fair* or even *poor* to perform this task. Respondents answered in great number that they have good (43.75%) and very good (41.67%) skills to emphasize the interdependence of language and culture. None of the respondents assigned poor knowledge skills to this item.

Item number six required respondents to assess their ability to evaluate a variety of texts that are culturally laden. Respondents answered that they managed *very well* (52.08%) to perform this evaluation while

they performed their teaching practice. As regards the next item, 47.92% of the respondents valued their ability to identify similarities and differences between their own culture and the target culture as *good* and 37.50% of the respondents valued it as *very good*. Still, when it comes to developing learners' socio-cultural competence in the formal educational setting, respondents indicated that they felt that they had *poor* level of knowledge (2.08%), a *fair* level of knowledge (10.42%) or did not provide an answer at all (4.17%). In fact, this is the single question where missing answers were registered. Nevertheless, 22 respondents (45.83%) concluded that they had been able to help foreign language learners to develop their socio-cultural knowledge.

Respondents assessed as *good* (43.75%) and *very good* (31.25%) their ability to select resources that would provide foreign language learners with the possibility to reflect on the concept of 'otherness'. The last item intended to assess respondents' ability to evaluate and select teaching resources that would emphasize the deeply rooted relationship between culture and language. A number of 41 respondents (85.42%) concluded that they are *knowledgeable* (41.67%) or *very knowledgeable* (43.75%) in this respect.

The open-ended question was evaluated in a qualitative manner. The answers given to the open-ended question (*What kind of didactic challenges or difficulties have you encountered during your teaching practice?*) did not make reference to difficulties related to inefficient cultural knowledge, abilities or attitudes. A total number of 11 answers were received. Eight of them referred to classroom management problems, namely lack of experience in organizing and planning teaching activities, learner's disruptive behavior and inability to use efficiently paralinguistic cues and non-verbal communication. Three answers related to an external factor connected to the teaching practice, namely that courses at the faculty overlapped with their teaching in schools.

Discussions

In view of the results obtained, we could claim that respondents were able to incorporate in their teaching cultural aspects and perspectives. They were able to evaluate and select teaching resources that would

emphasize the deeply rooted relationship between culture and language. They managed to teach to diverse students regardless of the boundaries that sometimes language might impose. Moreover, respondents' answers reflect the idea that the formal educational setting can become a successful arena for developing one's intercultural communicative competence. Still, without a doubt, respondents need to further develop their knowledge of how to incorporate culture into their teaching practice.

Conclusions

Today's cultural diversity in schools can provide opportunities to encounter other cultures, to be acquainted with other points of views and to learn to respect diversity. Foreign language teachers can use learners' cultural backgrounds in the teaching process. Likewise, the learning process is more real and engaging. The roles of teachers are expending due to the need to teach effectively to diverse learners and to become cognizant of the social, cultural, economic or political factors that can have an impact on the teaching process.

Apendix A

Source: adapted from European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (2007)

Based on your own preferences, please rate the following statements. Circle your answer:

CONDUCTING A LESSON: CONTENT

Question	Survey scale				
1. I can present language content (new and previously encountered items of language, topics etc.) in ways which are appropriate for individuals and specific groups of learners	Not at all	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good
	1	2	3	4	5

Question	Survey scale				
2. I can vary and balance activities in order to respond to individuals learners' learning styles.	Not at all	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good
	1	2	3	4	5
3. I can relate what I teach to current events in local and international contexts.	Not at all	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good
	1	2	3	4	5
4. I can relate the language I am teaching to the culture of those who speak it.	Not at all	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good
	1	2	3	4	5
5. I can plan activities to emphasize the interdependence of language and culture	Not at all	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good
	1	2	3	4	5
6. I can evaluate and select a variety of texts, source materials and activities which awaken learners' interest in and help them to develop their knowledge and understanding of their own and the other language culture (cultural facts, events, attitudes and identity etc.).	Not at all	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good
	1	2	3	4	5
7. I can evaluate and select a variety of texts, source materials and activities which make learners aware of similarities and differences in sociocultural 'norms of behaviour'.	Not at all	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good
	1	2	3	4	5
8. I can evaluate and select activities (role plays, simulated situations etc.) which help learners to develop their socio-cultural competence.	Not at all	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good
	1	2	3	4	5
9. I can evaluate and select a variety of texts, source material and activities which help learners to reflect on the concept of 'otherness' and understand different value systems.	Not at all	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good
	1	2	3	4	5
10. I can evaluate and select a variety of texts and activities to make learners aware of the interrelationship between culture and language.	Not at all	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good
	1	2	3	4	5
What kind of didactic challenges or difficulties have you encountered during your teaching practice?					

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