CULTURAL MEDIATION AS PART OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR BUSINESS PURPOSES

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Abstract: The topic of this study is mediation and cultural mediation, a new concept in plurilingual and -cultural Europe with the role of handling situations of incomprehension, culture-based misunderstandings in business communication, intolerance or even hatred between the representatives of different nations. A great role in this mediation process can be attributed to foreign language teaching, so language teachers have to take over this new role of mediators between different cultures. As it has turned out during the research work mediation is no activity but a competence to be gained and assessed by means of specific descriptors the development of which is a future task for decision makers on European language policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a plurilingual and -cultural Europe there comes up a new concept called cultural mediation aiming to handle situations of incomprehension, culture-based misunderstandings in business communication for instance, intolerance or even hatred between representatives of different nations. A great role in this mediation process can be attributed to foreign language teaching, so language teachers have to take over this new role of mediators between different cultures.

Speaking about cultural mediation one should not forget about its interdisciplinary character, its interference with social sciences (psycholinguistics, psychosociology, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, cultural anthropology, anthropology of communication, sociology of difference etc.) operating thus with social science concepts such as representation, xenophobia, prejudice, stereotype. Cultural mediation becoming part of foreign language teaching curricula have to refer to these concepts especially when defining, developing and assessing competences.

2. DISCIPLINES INVOLVED IN THE STUDY OF CULTURAL MEDIATION

2.1. Psycholinguistics and psychosociology

Nowadays it is generally known that language, thought and culture interact with each other, even more than this they are strongly related to each other. How we see our world and think about it is influenced by our contacts to others and by our cultural representations including our own culture as well as the culture of others. These representations are established at a young age and they are reinforced at school. Thus xenophile behaviour, openness to others are the results of positive representations while negative ones lead to hostile attitudes towards the Other. The question comes up what kind of role language plays in creating these cultural representations and acquiring the culture of a different language. As words are the reflections of verbal thoughts and they are not chosen by accident but determined by historical and cultural process, by social and political background, one should stop thinking of language just in linguistic terms. It acts in fact as a vehicle of culture and representations of Others and other cultures. As at the base of genuine social relationship stays language, social life accomplishes in verbal communication.

2.2. Sociolinguistics and discourse analysis

These two scientific fileds focus on the study of language use in its sociocultural context. Sociolinguistics is interested in the correlation between the way people use languages and such demographic factors as race, ethnic belonging, social status, gender, age, etc. Differences may appear at different levels: pronunciation, word choice, grammar, language choice in bilingual/multilingual groups. All levels of conversational situations include a certain level of contextualisation, an implicit code system not verbalized or noticed as long as dialogue participants have the same keys of decoding it.

But in cross-cultural communication these code systems and the ways of decoding may be different resulting in misunderstandings, communication breakdown and negative stereotyping. Differences occur in intercultural communication not only at linguistic but also at paralinguistic level regarding the turn-taking, the use and meaning of silences, pauses, overlaps.

Discourse analysis deals with the way social reality is constructed and reproduced through language by analysing patterns, structures in written and spoken texts. Critical discourse analysis, a branch of it, looks for certain ideological patterns (of racism, sexism, etc.) in a text or a collection of related texts using very often the comparative or contrastive approach. Its contribution to the study of cultural mediation lies in the study of cultural representations and aspects of identity with special focus on power and dominance issues.

2.3. Cultural anthropology and the anthropology of communication

Being the science of human diversity and difference cultural anthropology "is interested in understanding the relationships that unite individuals into ethnic or sociocultural groups and in discovering the meaning that exists in an inter-subjective relationship."[1] One of its main domains, the analysis of communicational process, goes deeper in investigating behaviour, situations and objects perceived in a certain way by a given community giving birth to the concept of "anthropology of communication" [Hymes, D., 1967].

2.4. Sociology of difference

Mediation is part of sociology as it is an "alternative means of conflict settlement" [De Briant and Paluau, 1990]. Used in practice since the 1980s initially it was organic part of negociation, extending afterwards to the official administration of social relationships. It is to be found at all levels of social life beginning with the political-administrative sector and ending with the family level where it intervenes in case of family break-up, divorce and parental disputes regarding children's placement. Sociology of difference proclaims openness to the different, respect for the Other by means of acts and attitudes. Being aware of the utopian character of a pacifistic vision of social relationships it recognizes the existence and importance of the relationships of force in a society and focusses on establishing a relationship between different, sometimes opposite and irreconcilable values and points of view. There are cultural differences feeding ideologies and leading to national identities expressed by means of stereotyping or stigmatising otherness.

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[1] Aline Gohard-Radenkovic, Denise Lussier, Hermine Penz, Geneviève Zarate, Reference fields and methodologies, in: Cultural mediation and language learning and teaching, European Centre for Modern Languages, Council of Europe Publishing, 2004, p. 32-33.

3. OUTLINES OF CULTURAL MEDIATION

As already mentioned mediation first appeared in business negociations from where it expanded to other fields of social life. By the XXIst century it has been recognized that a special form of it i.e. cultural mediation should be part of foreign language teaching and learning and this new field has to be taken into consideration in setting up curricula. In order to stress its importance a multicultural team of experts initiated a European research project entitled "Cultural mediation in the teaching and learning of languages" studying this new domain and presenting theoretical and empirical results and conclusions. Having as priorities cultural aspects this project contributes to enlarge and deepen competences regarding language teaching/learning. In order to include even intercultural skills and awareness these competences should be extended from the strictly linguistic field. Thus one of the project's main objectives is to extend and complete the definition of linguistic competences accepted and postulated by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages with the intercultural components. In the above mentioned document mediation is seen as referring to translation and interpretation restricting it thus to a reformulating activity and disregarding the intercultural traps and dysfunctions possibly coming up in communication between interlocutors with different value systems.

Meant at the beginning as a political project with the political objective of creating "peace" it has found an excellent implementation in the educational field, in language teaching and learning in general from where it can be extended to language learning for business purposes as well. As the aim of the Council of Europe is to create a united Europe in peace and harmony despite of/or even through cultural diversity, this project with its concern on cultural mediation could be of great help in bringing together different languages and cultures. The same idea serve measures taken by politicians in order to settle armed and ideological conflicts and consolidate new partnerships by means of reintroducing the study of the language of a "former enemy" country.

Among the expected results of this 3-year project were: the analysis of cultural representations, the way of conveying them in school textbooks, in the media and interaction with foreigners, the description of cultural mediation (attitudes, strategies, practical skills for handling prejudices, stereotypes, xenophobic manifestations), recommendations and conclusions for educational decision makers on language teaching and learning. Thus the following target group becomes outline: teachers, teacher trainers, people in charge of curricula, assessment specialists, textbook writers, educational decision makers.

The project team having a multicultural composition has become its own guinea pig needing itself cultural mediation throughout the working process. As intercultural competence and cultural mediation bring together more disciplines, the research approaches to the project were similarly various. The domination of the linguistic approach to intercultural encounters in schools and out of them, to textbooks and media was broken by a variety of approaches such as the semiological (semio-linguistic) approach to the written, audiovisual and spoken media, to textbooks, the psychological approach (based on social psychology) for studying attitudes in relation with foreigners, the sociological or socio-historical approach to migratory trends and relations between national, ethnic, regional identitites, the biographical approach to language history and the ethnographic approach to situations of multicultural encounters. It is to be mentioned that the concept of cultural mediation, however subject of study in this project, is not already an existing reality but rather a concept to be built up.

4. EMPATHY IN CULTURAL MEDIATION

Generally neglected in language pedagogy research and teaching practices, although it plays a great role in cultural mediation and language teaching/learning. At this point is important to understand what the notion covers and what role it plays in the above mentioned fields. Empathy and intercultural competence go hand in hand as cultural mediators need to understand the background of other people's reactions which can be highly culture-related. Surprisingly however there is almost no concern with empathy in currrent literature on language pedagogy. Not even the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages does mention it when describing mediation activities. This is not the case with sympathy – very often confused with empathy – accepted as an important premise. The reasons for not dealing with it in language pedagogy could be resumed as follows: empathy, as a personal, individual manifestation is considered by many researches too subjective to include it in their scientific research. Still there is a research field tackling the issue of empathy and this is communication studies having come to the conclusion that empathy is vital for communication, in lack of which the latter one would come to stillstand. Cross-cultural communication needs even more empathy as a " high degree of understanding of real cultural differences and patterns."[2] Empathy helps teachers setting up a positive, supportive and effective learning environment. If we go out from the premise that it is learnable, it could be then included according to H.D. Brown to language teaching methods. Furthermore he proposes developing exercises for teachers to manage highly empathy-based language classes.

Different fields of science give different definitions to empathy. In sociology it is seen as self-conscious awareness of others' consciousness, therapists consider it a counselling technique showing sensitivity to other people's feelings, while linguists define it as the speakers identification to various degrees with a person/thing appearing in his/her own message. From the point of view of ethics it is man's ability to care about other people. Cross- and intercultural communication studies see it as an effective capacity, an element of cultural competence. According to Kramsch and Nelson (1996) empahty being an attitude is "an informed openness toward other cultures" promoting "fruitful intercultural relations and the development of an insightful and objective perspective on one's own culture."[3] In their opinion the development of affective qualities such as empathy is not correlated with the acquisition of linguistic skills or cultural knowledge. An open attitude towards Others may appear before the acquisition of simple linguistic patterns and the mastery in language use and cultural knowledge may not be accompanied by empathy at all.

Another researcher sees in empathy in language learning/teaching "the projection of one's own personality into the personality of another in order to understand him or her better." [Brown, 1993][4] With one word there are various views of empathy, some consider it an attitude, others a skill, some speak about it as a product, others see in it a dynamic process but all of them agree at one point, that it is a component of cultural competence.

As already mentioned empathy is very often confused with sympathy, the more that existing definitions prove to be inadequate. Nevertheless the frame of both concepts showing constitutive elements helps us make the difference between them. Stages in the empathy building process are: understanding from a different cultural perspective, concern, compassion, friendliness, affection, devotion, while sympathy is built up of

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[2] Kira Irishkanova, Christoph Röcklingsberg, Olga Ozolina, Ioana Anamaria Zaharia, Empathy as part of cultural mediation, in: Cultural mediation and language learning and teaching, p. 102.
[3] idem, p. 104.
[4] quoted in: idem, p. 105.

following elements: affinity, compassion, understanding, support, agreement. Despite the overlapping concepts (compassion, understanding), where the confusions result from, in these frames there are basic differences concerning understanding for instance. In case of empathy it is about understanding from the perspective of a different culture while with sympathy it is understanding from the point of view of the person's own culture. Thus empahty can be defined as "a set of abilities which are acquired through the process of learning and have the form of communication attitudinal skills and strategic knowledge of communication behaviour proper from a different cultural perspective."[5] Thus in cultural mediation the key role is played by this "understanding from a different cultural perspective."

4.1. Empathy building in language classroom communication

Classroom is a social environment where roles, status and power relationships depend on the framework of this social institution. The actors in this environment are the teachers and students having specific social roles. The role of the teacher is to help students learn transmitted knowledge and to create situations in which students can learn effectively. Having the authority status in class teachers have more power and control than students.

Classroom discourse contains four main discourse planes: content (subject of learning), organisation (school timetable), discipline (rules, control devices, sanctions), discourse (exchange of questions, answers, etc.). In case o f language classes one and the same language is used in all the discourse planes. Looking for empathy building contexts in language classes one may find such typical situations like the teacher encouraging students when encountering difficult tasks. Sentences like "I'm sorry to put you through this boring exercise"[6] or "Now we are going to do a difficult exercise"[7] reveal empathy in the sense that the teacher experiences a shift from his own perspective (understanding from his own point of view: "I'm sorry") to the students' perspective (boring, difficult exercise) showing empathy towards them. This shift of perspective is due to three kinds of changes: the role relationship change, the reaction change and a change regarding another language's cultural norms. A role relationship change occurs when the teacher adopts his/her students' role and looks at teaching process from their perspective accompanied by utterances like: 'I'm sorry to give you such nasty things', or 'this is quite difficult'. In case of reaction change a negative reaction is changed into positive one often verbalized through irony: 'You wanted to read/answer, din't you?' addressed to a student not paying attention to the class. A change linked to another language's cultural norms is the more obvious the greater the differences between outgoing and target language's culture. An English teacher will use in his/her discourse understatements typical of English culture however his/her own culture is more categorical, direct (e.g.: 'Am I clear?' instead of 'Did you get it?', or 'Could I have it again please?' instead of 'Repeat it please!')

Beside verbal mechanisms creating empathy there are also nonverbal mechanisms of empathy building such as: posture, facial expression, body movements, various paralinguistic means. Nonverbal manifestations can be universal, a smile for instance or culture-based such as interpersonal space. Communication studies deal with several types of nonverbal messages among which: physical appearance of the speaker, proxemics (interpersonal space), kinesics (body movements, facial expressions), paralinguistic

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[5] Kira Irishkanova, et. al., Empathy as part of cultural mediation, in: Cultural mediation and language learning and teaching, p. 109.

[6] idem., p. 112.

[7] idem.

means (voice use), tactile behaviour in order to repeat verbal messages, contradict them, substitute, complete or emphasize a part of them and to regulate the flow of conversation [Gudykunst, 1998]. From the perspective of empathy building in a language class four types of nonverbal messages are to be underlined: the conversation distance (proxemics), eye contact and body movement, voice use respectively touching. All of them are culture-based and -related, in this sense observe that there are high respectively low contact cultures. Showing respect to other person's cultural norms regarding these aspects is an example of empathic behaviour. Being a part of language classes the level and quality of empathy building should be assessed somehow in the learning/teaching process that's why it is important to develop a "portfolio approach" with descriptors of achievement according to different levels of language/culture proficiency.

5. USING ADVERTISING DOCUMENTS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES. THE CONCEPT OF OTHERNESS AND CULTURAL MEDIATION

Advertising documents can be introduced to foreign language classes on both linguistic and cultural level. Beside their two concerns: setting up a methodology for the analysis of the reception of advertising texts transmitting an image of otherness and showing the processes of (de)construction of cultural identity based on these documents, the research team also presents an activity of intercultural mediation for foreign language teachers using advertising documents in their classes. Based on a comparative approach researchers analysed how expressions of otherness in advertising are received. This comparative study was conducted with the aim of showing the potentials of a useful tool in foreign language teaching, to bring into light identity as it results from the representation of the Other and to underline the role of the cultural mediator played by teachers using such culture-based documents as foreign language teaching cannot exist without cultural concerns and thus without increasing awareness of otherness. Now let us make some short considerations on culture and otherness.

Some see culture as the multitude of knowledge, beliefs, customs acquired by man as a member of society. (E. Tylor). In the eyes of Lévi-Strauss culture is a "collection of symbolic systems" in case of which an essential role is played by relationing to others in terms of identity or difference, while according to Benveniste culture is a "universe of symbols", a "collection of representations" transmitted by language.

In a psychoanalytical approach otherness is related to change, to the transition from the intrauterine state to the state of a newborn baby and to a child later on and all the frustrations resulting from here. Otherness is thus part of the development of individuality and is used very frequently in advertising which raises a bunch of questions like: What variations do representations of otherness have in different countries? How are people, places perceived by us as different represented, what leads to stereotypes – simplified generalisations of features considered to be identic at the representatives of a culture? What is the role and effect of an advertising showing representations of otherness and the possible consequences?

Representation of otherness satisfies human need for belonging to a group and promotes identity creation as one's identity gets its outlines through the prism of difference and otherness. As Bourdieu puts it "[social representations] define proximities and affinities, distances and incompatibilities" (Bourdieu, P., 1987).[8] Defining identity by means of the

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[8] Christina Gautheron-Boutchatsky, Marie-Christine Kok Escalle, Georges Androulakis, Karl Rieder, Representations of the concept of otherness in advertising and cultural mediation, in: Cultural mediation and language learning and teaching, p. 165.

Other stresses once more the importance of the representations of the Other at one hand and its psychological and psychoanalytical dimension at the other.

The question rises how advertising documents can serve mediation in a language class? Etimologically mediation comes from the Latin 'mediare' meaning at the same time obtaining, procuring and placing between, interposing. According to the psychoanalyst Kaës mediation is a "bridge across discontinuities"[9] and a mediator should create representations serving as a link between unconnected elements. Mediating representations is a complex activity involving knowledge about cultural content to be transmitted and a relational capacity at the same time. These two components build the core of language/culture teaching. Advertising offers a prolific field for the study of this subconscious transmission. Stereotypes very often present in advertising images or texts, though simplifying and sometimes harmful, still contribute to getting to know a culture by showing characteristic features of it and serving as "raw material for understanding a culture."[10] As intercultural mediator it is the task of the teacher to decipher their content and way of functioning. Before going over to intercultural mediation teachers have first to come across the creative strategies advertising is made by as only recognizing them allows extracting cultural fragments from the whole composition.

One of those strategies used by advertising creators is combining the most heterogeneous fragments and lifting up boundaries characteristic for structuring cultural mechanisms. The results are people encountering difficulty in perceiving representations of otherness. Being all the time exposed to a mixture of cultural fragments, to representations deriving from other cultures, these people perceive everything as familiar, wellknown. The rejection of denoting difference or otherness born from young people's fear of racism leads to a general incapacity of thinking in terms of difference, but denying all conflict related to otherness is no equivalent to its inexistence and doesn't prevent it from occuring, only from being transformed through symbolic representation. The contradiction between these two phenomena: the mixture of heterogeneous elements outside all existing cultural systems and suppressing the perception of otherness and even the thought of it confirms for people the idea of an indistinct world without frontiers where "everything is possible".

This mixture of heterogeneous elements although perceived as familiar is to be found in the adds for KRO, a Dutch radio and television network. The boundaries between self and Other are abolished as it is shown by the mixture of different registers: Christianity (the idea of the Virgin Mary) and Buddhism (the clothes of a Buddhist monk), Western and traditional societies (the "ethnic" character of the woman's necklace), the association of concrete, earthly elements (maternity, breastfeeding, baby), spirituality (facial expression, halo) and erotic allusions (mouth, breast). The symbolic system alluded to in this advertising is in fact imaginary, the only reference is the will of its creator. "Each fragment is identifiable and can be related to the cultural universe from which it originates, but the whole does not make sense because it does not fit into an existing frame of reference."[11] Language teachers as cultural mediators should be aware of this to avoid conveying students the idea that advertising images directly supply them with genuine codes and references of the target culture. It is the teachers task to underline general stereotypes used for the culture of the Other and to warn of prejudices rising from the home culture. This attitude contributes to enriching cultural knowledge and through the relativisation of

[9] Christina Gautheron-Boutchatsky, et. al., Representations of the concept of otherness in advertising and cultural mediation, p. 171.
[10] idem, p. 172.
[11] idem, p. 174.

cultural manifestations to a better understanding of the Other and his/her culture. Thus advertising material prove to be adequate for language teaching and cultural mediation as they are simultaneously an object of analysis, an instrument allowing to observe the process behind the construction of cultural identity, a teaching material and a tool for mediation facilitating learning about cultures.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The various subprojects run under the auspices of the main project "Cultural mediation in the teaching and learning of languages" result in some recommendations concerning curricula, learning materials, teacher performance and training, learning process, etc. as follows: teacher training should include direct exposure to target language culture in order that teachers gain a better intercultural competence which they have to transmit in the classroom in a highly empathic way. They should teach students to practice empathy in every day communication for avoiding or solving conflicts. Empathy building and using should also be assessed by means of descriptors for this skill. Students should get in the class efficient instruments for avoiding stereotyping and revealing prejudices with respect to the Other rising from the own home culture.

One recommendation to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages refers to introducing intercultural competence – beside linguistic, sociolinguistic and discursive elements – as essential component in the development of language competence. Initial and ongoing teacher training is expected to be in line with the expectations and prescriptions of the above framework for language teaching and learning.

Furthermore in the "Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe" mediation is seen as follows: "This intercultural competence is crucial in the development of mutual understanding of different groups, and is the role of intercultural mediators of all kinds from travel guides to teachers, to diplomats and so on. Intercultural competence and the capacity of intercultural mediation are thus one of the potential goals of language teaching enabling plurilingual individuals to acquire a capacity for living in the multilingual environment which is contemporary Europe."[12]

During the project mediation has evolved from being considered an activity to the status of a competence included in the language portfolio measurable and assessable needing an adequate scale of descriptors.

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[2] Gohard-Radenkovic A., Lussier D., Penz, H., Zarate, G., Establishing a European research project. In: idem, p. 11-25.
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[12] Cultural mediation and language learning and teaching, Council of Europe Publishing, 2004, p. 229.