

Teaching in multicultural classes of Hungarian as a foreign language

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1. Introduction

In the present paper I attempt to discuss a few challenges that teachers of Hungarian as a foreign language (HFL) have to face in a multicultural classroom. The situation triggers both pedagogical and language pedagogical issues, since – compared to a monocultural group – students arrive with very different value preferences and expectations towards education, including teacher and student roles, the teacher-student relationship and the organization of a language class, to mention just a few. Furthermore, students coming from various language communities possess different linguistic behaviours that could also lead to misunderstandings when speaking Hungarian as a lingua franca. Thus, the role of the language teacher in a multicultural classroom is complex: he or she has to explicitly uncover the differences, harmonize the needs of the students as far as possible and foster an understanding and safe classroom atmosphere, so that the students will be able to work, communicate and collaborate effectively, not only with the teacher but with each other as well. The motivation of the students and their diverse learning styles are not discussed in this paper, since these factors are equally challenging in monocultural groups.

Multicultural education has been an established field of research since the 1960s in the United States, Australia and Western Europe and has gained popularity in many other countries recently.¹ The studies mainly focus on how socially diverse groups should be treated in schools in general and often concentrate on the integration of

¹ Banks 1993, Byram/Zarate 1997, Czachesz, 1998, 2014, Kramsch 1998, 2006.

immigrants. According to the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME),² the goals of multicultural education include:

- creating a safe, accepting and successful learning environment for all
- increasing awareness of global issues
- strengthening cultural consciousness
- strengthening intercultural awareness
- teaching students that there are multiple historical perspectives
- encouraging critical thinking
- preventing prejudice and discrimination

These general goals are applicable to all school subjects; however, the actual operationalization of these points can be challenging in HFL classes and needs special attention from teachers, since language learners, especially at a lower level, lack the language skill to formulate their opinion and reflect on their own or someone else's culture in Hungarian in a complex way. Insufficient representation of ideas can lead to misunderstandings and simplification; thus it is the teacher's task to monitor students' reactions and prevent intercultural communication clashes. On the positive side, we can mention that in language classes, teachers have the freedom to develop task sheets on their own and use exercises which foster the achievement of the above mentioned goals.

As far as multicultural HFL classes are concerned, the educational settings vary in Hungary. The most common learners' group consists primarily of college students who spend from a few weeks to one or more semesters at a Hungarian university. Other groups include businessmen or residents who start learning Hungarian for work or for their interests, and also, a growing number of immigrants for whom language classes are offered by the state. In the following sections, the potential problem areas of multicultural HFL classes will be discussed and some suggestions are offered as well.

² National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME); <http://www.nameorg.org>.

2. Language use in the multicultural HFL classroom

The overall aim of language teaching is to empower the students with all the grammatical and pragmatic knowledge, so they will be able to formulate native-like, sociopragmatically appropriate utterances in Hungarian. When students start to communicate and construct dialogues, their first language behaviour filters through and may cause potential failures in speech-act usage and situation-bound utterances.³

In a monocultural learners' group, if the teacher speaks the native language of the students and knows the culture, he or she can apply some insights from contrastive linguistic research studies to facilitate this goal.⁴ First, positive transfers and similarities (e.g. cognates) can be exploited,⁵ making the learning faster. Second, instructors can design class materials that focus on differences between the students' native language and Hungarian in the fields of grammar, syntax, discourse structure and speaking, which involves the thorough analysis of politeness strategies, turn-talking strategies and non-verbal communication, etc. If only the learners' native language and Hungarian are present during the class, the direct comparison of language use is relatively easy. Uncovering the underlying causes of the linguistic differences can raise the consciousness of cultural differences as well. For example, students may not perceive direct refusals in Hungarian without mitigation as impolite unless their language shares similar politeness rules.

In a multicultural HFL class, the possibility for directly targeting linguistic contrasts is greatly reduced due to time and instructional constraints, even if the instructor were to know all the languages and cultures involved. However, the more opportunity learners are given to access authentic Hungarian spoken and written discourses, the more likely they can perform correctly. Several suitable options should be demonstrated to students to develop their repertoire what to say in a situation. When there is no lingua franca in the classroom and the Hungarian teacher uses only Hungarian during the language

³ Kecskés 2014.

⁴ Szűcs 2006.

⁵ Schmidt 2010, Berényi-Nagy 2015.

class, the students are exposed to the maximum amount of native input, which is challenging at the beginning but beneficial in the long run.

3. Students with different cultural backgrounds

Before discussing the nature of the multicultural classroom dynamic, it is important to keep in mind that monocultural classrooms can often reflect diversity concerning age, intellectual ability, religion or value-preference; however, the diversity is likely to be smaller than in multicultural classes. The differences become apparent both in the field of learners' behaviour and communication style. Certainly there are individual differences among students from the same culture; nevertheless, instructors can prepare for teaching multicultural groups by reviewing their individual experiences as well as the relevant literature.

Several social psychological models are available that outline and categorize cultural differences.⁶ One of the most widespread and easily applicable models was worked out by the Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede and his colleagues. They identified six cultural dimensions that have several relevant points for educators regarding teaching and learning styles and expected teacher roles. In the following, three dimensions will be discussed that help us understand the differences.

The expected teacher role is shaped by the first cultural dimension, called *power distance*, which describes how people belonging to a specific culture view superior or inferior power relationships; in other words, it refers to "the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally".⁷ Learners coming from cultures with a large power distance (e.g. the Philippines, China, India) get accustomed to teacher-centered education where teachers are expected to tell students what to do, how to do it and when

⁶ For example: Hall 1976, Inkeles/Levinson 1969, Kluckhorn/Strodtbeck 1961, Trompenaars 1995.

⁷ Hofstede & Hofstede 2004, Hofstede 2011, 9.

to speak. Teachers are respected and viewed as the ultimate source of knowledge; students would never question their teacher's words, since they depend on him or her. In contrast with this, small power distance cultures (e.g. Denmark, Germany, New Zealand) prefer student-centered education: student-initiated conversations are appreciated and expected, students can ask questions at any time and they are expected to be self-reliant and responsible for their intellectual development. Obviously, these two sets of expectations clash; the instructor cannot meet both of them within one class. A possible solution could be to explicitly discuss these issues with the students at the beginning of the course and work out a model that serves as a starting point for common work. It is the instructor's choice and responsibility to make a manageable compromise; nevertheless, he or she still has to keep in mind these differences and foster students by, for example, encouraging them to ask questions.

The second cultural dimension which plays a crucial role in the behaviour of learners in the classroom is *individualism-collectivism*. It refers to the extent to which people are expected to stand up for themselves or act predominantly as a member of the group or organisation. Individualistic cultures (e.g. Australia, England, New Zealand, Ireland, Sweden) appreciate self-expression and creativity, debating, independent thinking and active participation in knowledge acquisition during the class; learners tend to be autonomous and their behavior focuses on their personal goals and choices.⁸ Collectivist cultures, on the other hand, are built on tightly-integrated relationships; group members support each other when a conflict arises with another in-group. These cultures prefer the group interest and group consensus; the personal goals are valued below the group agenda. Students from collective cultures are rather quiet, less likely to contradict with opinions and they follow the teacher as a model⁹.

To harmonize these fundamental and crucial differences in students' behaviour, collaborative learning (e.g. groupwork) can be offered as a useful option, since it helps individualistic students to gain practice in sharing knowledge and information; furthermore, it

⁸ Staub/Stern 2002.

⁹ Faitar 2006.

also encourages silent students to speak up in smaller groups.¹⁰ Articulating one's opinion in front of the other students in the classroom is especially stressful for those who have never practiced it in their home country, not to mention language learners' frequently inhibited performance due to their lack of fluency. The role of the teacher in monitoring each student's talking time is crucial, because the shy ones are not willing to talk, which leads to their marginalization; thus the teacher should intervene to make them talk.

The third relevant cultural dimension, labelled as *uncertainty avoidance*, reflects the extent to which a society attempts to manage uncertainty and ambiguity. Cultures that score high in uncertainty avoidance prefer rules that reduce stress in people. The context of a language course requires rule setting and provision of information right from the beginning: hence the course description should contain the topics to be covered, the coursebooks, the time of the test, the grading policy and the type of the assessment. The more detailed the course description is, the safer the students can feel about their class, which reduces stress in them.

The above mentioned cultural differences among language learners may ultimately clash with the teacher's own beliefs about teaching and learning; however, it is the teacher's responsibility to create a healthy balance in which both the students and the teacher can cooperate. Such flexibility is possible if we consider teaching as a metacognitive activity¹¹ where a teacher is actively reconstructing "teaching strategies on the basis of his/her belief that are driven from social and cultural interaction, traditions, values, experiences and professional development, and scholarly literature".¹²

¹⁰ Kaur/Noman 2015.

¹¹ Lin/Schwartz/Hatano 2005.

¹² Kaur/Noman 2015, 1796.

4. Cultural sensitization in the language class

In order to accomplish a supportive classroom environment that fosters effective learning for all students and encourages them to interact with each other without fear and bias, the teacher has to demonstrate acceptance towards every learner and every culture, and outline the rules of the class so that distasteful remarks are not tolerated. However, a similarly tolerant attitude should be developed by the students as well to become culturally sensitive. Bennett¹³ outlined a model which explains the steps of moving from an ethnocentric attitude to an ethnorelative stage and also discusses how people react to cultural differences. The major stages include 1. denial of the differences, 2. defense, meaning the denigration of differences, 3. minimalization of the differences, 4. acceptance, 5. adaptation and 6. integration. Being culturally sensitive in this model means that a person reaches stage 4 to 6, i.e. will accept the cultural differences, but can move further to take another culture's perspective, act in alternative ways or even develop a multicultural identity by integration. The path is especially challenging for learners who have not previously taken part in any intercultural encounter. They arrive with value preferences, biases and assumptions about other cultures which they learned in their first culture environment from their families and at school. Understandably, it is difficult to step out of their own perspective to understand how others experience life and the world.

During HFL classes, learning Hungarian language is usually embedded in learning about Hungarian culture and identifying cultural differences. This paves the way for gaining practice in accepting every culture presented in the multicultural classroom. When cultural comparisons between the students' culture and Hungarian culture are made, the teacher, being an insider and an authority to a certain extent, may safely elicit the students' feelings and attitudes towards even culturally jarring phenomena. For example, some students are very much surprised when they learn that one of the Hungarian formal greetings *Csókolom!* actually means 'I kiss you'. By providing

¹³ Bennett 1986.

cultural context, an explanation of the utterance and creating a friendly atmosphere for expressing feelings, the teacher can set an example of how differences can be treated in an ethnorelative way.

Another way of developing cultural sensitivity is to apply cooperative learning activities, as they actively and effectively broaden student's perspectives on other cultures' values. The more direct contact is created among the group members, the less prejudices are likely to develop.¹⁴ When students talk about their culture's holidays, eating habits, etc., they all share their views and cultural practices and slowly learn to accept and respect that each culture has its own cultural practice.

At this point it can be concluded that developing cultural sensitivity during the language class supports the ethnographic approach to language learning,¹⁵ which emphasizes that in contrast with previous thinking that regarded language development as a 'private and individual achievement', language learning can be seen as a social endeavour. Language learning in multicultural classrooms can help self-development, and even redefine oneself publicly, socially and personally.¹⁶

In sum, managing a multicultural classroom requires careful preparation, intensive monitoring of the students and conflict handling skills from the instructor. Clashing expectations of the students regarding teaching and learning-styles can be harmonized by the explicit discussion of these pedagogical issues. Furthermore, if cultural sensitization is incorporated into multicultural HFL classes from the beginning, a successful cooperation among the students is likely to develop gradually.

¹⁴ Pettigrew/Tropp 2005.

¹⁵ Roberts 2001, Byram 1997, Barro, Jordan/Street 2001, 9.

¹⁶ Cook 2002, 329; Pellegrino 2005, 7.

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