

Conference Paper

Multilingualism and Multimodality As Key Competences in the Development of Intercultural Dialogue and International Cooperation. Based on the Erasmus + Program

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Abstract

In the times of globalization and intense migration of people, the possibility of communicating with persons representing other cultural, ethnic or national background and using different languages and cultural codes becomes a crucial task for gaining education and developing professional skills, especially among today's young adults and young professionals. Referring to key categories - multilingualism and multimodality as key competences in the development of intercultural dialogue and international cooperation - we will outline the results of the study conducted among students participating in the Erasmus+ program. The research was carried out among students studying at one of Polish pedagogical universities between 2017 and 2019. The results reflect the experiences of students related to their participation in the program on its various stages, as well as the benefits which they observed from participating in the program and which are connected with multilingualism and multimodality as key competences in the development of intercultural dialogue and international cooperation.

Keywords: multilingualism, multimodality, key competences, intercultural dialogue, Erasmus + program

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1. Introduction

In the era of globalisation and increased migration of populations originating from various parts of the world, being part of various cultures and using various languages, there are increasing efforts to search for methods of effective communication. Greater effort is also put into identifying intercultural similarities and differences that can impact communication. In many countries of the Global North, intercultural content and subjects are incorporated into teaching curricula on various stages of education. Virtually

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everywhere we deal with multicultural societies, and the high value is placed on learning foreign languages and building the skill of effective functioning in a culturally diverse group.

The perception of a common language as an integrating factor enabling an effective functioning of the society, allowing its members to construct their wellbeing and a sense of safety, is not a new concept. One of the first fragments of books forming the fundamentals of Judaeo-Christian tradition, the Torah (the Pentateuch -- Five Books of Moses) and the Old Testament, describe the world in which people live in harmony and cooperate to achieve a collectively set, with the higher goal -- the construction of the symbolic Tower of Babel [1]:

"Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. (Gen. 11:1) [...] If as one people speaking the same language, they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. (Gen. 11:6)".

As the fragment cited above implies, this task and the successes achieved in the course of its realization are based on the use of one language enabling effective communication between the members of the people described. The language gives them a sense of confidence, self-efficacy and a conviction that they can accomplish any goal. The means by which their apparent idyll can be destroyed, is to deprive them of what used to be their strength: the instrument of communication -- a common language. According to Scripture, confusing people's languages (and consequently considerably inhibiting their communication) resulted in the discontinuation of the construction of the tower and a dispersion of the population around the globe (Gen. 11: 7-9).

Also, today the implementation of projects encompassing large groups of people functioning in various cultural contexts and using many languages demands the development of a communally accepted and understandable model of communication: the more universal it is, the more effective the realization of intended goals will be. It is even more important considering the fact that an increasing number of state institutions and private companies engage in international initiatives, whose success is based and depends on cooperation. This is why today the search for a common language is an important element of the development of many modern societies. In this process, particular attention is drawn to the aspects of multilingualism and multimodality as well as intercultural competences [2] as key elements of building and developing an intercultural dialogue based on mutual understanding.

The aim of this article is to draw attention to the effectiveness of the initiatives implemented in this field, particularly one of the European Union programs intended for universities - the Erasmus+ program.

2. Methods and Equipment

The study focuses on one of the flagship projects implemented by the European Union, currently known as Erasmus+. The research material was collected during interviews conducted among the students of psychology and pedagogy participating in a one-term academic exchange within the program in the years 2017-2019. The study encompasses 39 students from Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Slovenia, Germany and Czech Republic. The present article discusses the respondents' statements referring to their experiences of participating in the project on its various stages, as well as the benefits which they observed from participating in the program.

The EU Erasmus+ education and training program [3] offers a range of possibilities directed both at schools, universities and non-governmental organizations. It aims at enabling young people to enhance their linguistic competences, gain experience of working in a culturally heterogeneous group, make new acquaintances and meet people from other cultural circles, as well as to gain new perspectives and opportunities to acquire professional experience in foreign companies and organizations.

On the other hand, the participation of teachers and academic teachers as well as specialists in other areas in the Erasmus+ program offers them an opportunity to enhance their professional qualifications, exchange best practices with foreign organizations and expand the perspectives of their professional development. The research conducted among the program participants indicates a positive impact of carrying part of one's studies abroad on employment opportunities and career in the future, albeit the effect is stronger among the citizens of the Eastern European countries [4]. The implementation of the program also contributes to the development of internationalization in the functioning of higher education institutions [5], which provides an opportunity for their development, aids the pursuit of providing high quality education and effectiveness in applying for research grants, which further enhances the prestige of the university and the qualifications of its staff.

3. Results

For all the groups mentioned, the participation in the program is a vital means of developing linguistic competences, recognized by the European Parliament in 2006 as one of eight key competences that, along with cognitive competences, constitute two pillars of lifelong learning. Classically, multilingualism was considered in the context of the fluency in using a language, defined by the European Commission as "the ability

of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives." [5, 6]. As social transformations were taking place, the approach to using foreign language was also modified, taking the form of multimodality, which assumes that "a competent speaker preserves his or her individual way of using words and the language, at the same time incorporating certain unique linguistic patterns characteristic for the listeners into his or her performance -- researchers refer to this technique as switching to a different code" [7, 604]. It is particularly important in situations when effective communication demands not only a familiarity with grammar or vocabulary, but also the culture and customs of the interlocutor.

4. Discussion

A number of scholars dealing with the study of language, intercultural communication or culture studies have formulated hypotheses whose main presumption was that human cognition and perception of the world is defined and limited by the language one speaks. One illustration is Wittgenstein's argument that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world" [8, 64], or Sapir-Whorf hypotheses (developed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf), which assume that "the structure of language conditions, people's perception, classification and ways of viewing the reality, influences their state of consciousness and the features of thinking about reality. Consequently, to a certain degree, the image of the world is comprised in the language" [9, 58]. This is why it is believed that the essence of learning a foreign language lies in the knowledge about the culture and customs characteristic for the inhabitants of the country or region where the language is spoken; the familiarity with the structures of the language does not have to be synonymous with the ability to communicate effectively with its users [10].

The students deciding to participate in academic exchange programs have different intercultural experience and varying expectations as to the results that a stay in another country and different culture could bring. The desire to broaden one's knowledge and acquire new skills and professional experience, to develop one's linguistic competences in the area of using foreign languages and an interest in getting to know a foreign country are among primary expectations [3]. The motivation to participate in student exchange programs also comes from positive experiences of other participants. The students are usually optimistic and enthusiastic about the exchange, perceiving it as an opportunity to experience an adventure of a lifetime, which is illustrated in the following statement: "From many people that already participated in the Erasmus program and they returned

back when it finished I had heard only that this time was great, unforgettable, the time is passing so fast (incredibly fast I can say) and can happen once in a lifetime!" [SEF7]

Despite the excitement felt before leaving home, the initial period spent in the new country with a different culture, distinct patterns of behaviour and methods of communication, can certainly be experienced as a culture shock evoking a sense of uncertainty and anxiety [11]. The interviews conducted within the study allowed us to analyse, inter alia, aspects relating to the process of cultural adaptation to a new place, culture and social relations. As one student explained, "My first impression of Poland was not satisfying.... not satisfying at all! A huge city with skyscrapers from glass that looked extremely threatening at first with a language so different from what I was used to, and cold.... lots of cold! Everything was so strange, so different from what I knew and what I had seen so far. At some points, I found myself wondering what was I doing here and whether I was ready for this experience. But that was just the first experience, for after the first week, things changed radically. I actually started liking Poland, getting used to the cold, making new friends attending new classes at the university and seeing something new every day. And day by day I found myself more and more in love with this city even though it was still very different from Greece." [SEF19]

During subsequent weeks and months of their stay in Poland (according to the research assumptions of the project), the foreign students had an opportunity to deepen their contact with Polish students as well as secondary and primary school pupils, inter alia through the intercultural and linguistic activities they conducted. The common aim is indicated already in the classic contact theory by Allport [12], [13] as one of the criteria of the effectiveness of contact for the reduction of mutual prejudice and stereotypes between groups. In this case, it consisted in the realization of activities according to the syllabus. It allowed the participants to engage in closer relations, get to know each other and gradually achieve mutual understanding, which was supported by the interest in the subjects addressed, their topicality and relevance for both sides of the interaction: "In this place [high school], I think it was very important that the students choose freely to attend or not to the class given by us, because the fact that the students were there of free will provided everyone the creation of a better relationship and exchange of knowledge. They really wanted to know more about our countries, our cultures, our history [...] And they also wanted to know more about the experience we are living here, how it is on Erasmus, what are the biggest obstacles that we feel in Poland, etc." [SEF4]

The perception of mutual contact as a potential source of benefits in the form of knowledge and new competences motivated both sides to approach their participation with great engagement. The desire to derive maximum advantage also generated a

higher motivation to use foreign languages, body language and develop one's competences in this area. In some cases, it also constituted an impetus to overcome one's fears and uncertainties characteristic for the participation in encounters with representatives of other cultural circles, particularly when the participants are not confident about their competences and they want to leave a good impression. It can be observed in the following statement: "The level of English of these teenagers was amazing and their willingness to study outside the country as well. The most interesting and fundamental was that both sides learned something, the issues were not just addressed to us Erasmus students, we also addressed issues to them. We can see why people in Poland sometimes fear foreigners. I had the opportunity to know which places I should visit in Warsaw due to their indications." [SEF8]

After the initial stage of uncertainty and becoming accustomed to functioning in the new cultural context, the students began to feel safe, comfortable and competent in the new reality. This allowed them to appreciate the value of the experience gained, the knowledge they have acquired and the friendships they have developed, which was reflected in their accounts: "During my stay in Warsaw I had many opportunities to participate in activities related to Warsaw's community and generally speaking to meet many new people that each of them taught me something different." [SEF3]

The positive reception of the experience as a whole did not cloud their judgement of the fact that it consisted of both positive and challenging situations. However, even the challenges can be perceived through the context of developing and building their skill of coping with adversities. Becoming independent as opposed to relying on caregivers and the consequent sense of competence and agency (particularly for those students who still live with families in their home countries) also becomes of great value: "My experience in Poland is over in a few days. It was an experience I will never forget in my life. I spent very nice days but also ugly. [...] I met many new people, exchanged many experiences, and learned a lot from everyone. I did not regret the choice of the country, I traveled a lot, saw new places and managed to cope with a lot of things away from my parents." [SEF12]

However, the key aspect of participating in various types of international meetings and exchanges comes as the opportunity to meet the "other" -- other countries, cultures and people who function in this different cultural context. This allows one to gain personal experience and understanding enabling the acquisition of intercultural competences and the transformation of theoretical knowledge into practical competences.

5. Conclusion

Human history has witnessed a range of attempts to unite various regions of the world through the introduction of unified legislation, tighter cooperation between national, ethnic or religious groups, inhabiting the regions, and an effort to develop cohesive patterns of behavior and communication. In the era of globalization and development of international cooperation with other countries and cultures, multilingualism, multi-modality and broadly understood intercultural competences are becoming a necessary basis of social functioning.

A range of initiatives aiming to popularize both the research on communication between cultures and projects indicating the value of interculturality in the development of societies can be observed particularly in the countries of the Global North and within the European Union. With regard to more common possibilities of establishing contact between representatives of various cultures, international functioning of companies and support for the mobility of EU citizens (particularly within the acquisition of education or searching for employment), efforts are undertaken to enable all citizens to acquire the knowledge of at least two foreign languages. The purpose of learning foreign languages lies not only in the acquisition of the skill to communicate in a particular language, but also to develop curiosity and an attitude of tolerance and openness towards representatives of other cultures. Erasmus+, which allows young adults and young professionals to acquire international education and professional experience, is one of the EU initiatives supporting the development of linguistic competences among EU citizens and enabling the exposure to other cultures.

In addition to the impact the Erasmus+ program has on the participating students, it is also worth drawing attention to the benefits it brings to host societies. Thanks to cooperation with universities, local communities can engage the visiting students e.g. in intercultural education projects, language classes or activities in the area of intercultural communication. As the authors' didactic experience and the research conducted [14] shows, the potential benefits for the university and school environments include the involvement of pupils in intercultural activities, inspiration for teachers, learning to think creatively, looking for unusual solutions, breaking the routine, encouragement to learn foreign languages, becoming familiar with other cultures and, last but not least, breaking stereotypes and prejudices.

To conclude, the words of one student participating in the program are worth citing, "The main aim, I think, of doing the Erasmus experience, is something that sounds like: ENJOY THE DIFFERENCE!" [SEF6]

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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