THE 9TH EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
EUROPEAN INTEGRATION
REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

Constructivist Pedagogy and Alternative Teaching Methods for Intercultural Education

Ramona Lupu[1], Alina Anghel[2], Marian Vîlciu[3]

Abstract: Our research proposes to underline the role of the constructivist pedagogy in the formative accomplishing of the intercultural education objectives, starting from the premise that the intuitive learning and the use of active-participative teaching-learning methods cover in a greater measure this discipline's cognitive, affective and psychomotor dimensions. The research design is made up of: 2 homogenous lots of intentionality composed of 70 and 60 students. There were used quantitative and qualitative research methods: structured questionnaire, semi-structured interview, focus-group method, evaluative techniques and statistics applied on a 2 years period. The discovery theory applied in teaching and learning increases the acknowledgement degree regarding the existence of ethnic groups and possible discriminatory actions; the mediator role assumed by the professor stimulates the formation and sedimentation of attitudes envisaged by the intercultural education, respecting with great fidelity the principle of conscious appropriation of knowledge; the use of alternative evaluative methods illustrate an increase of the students' school efficaciousness at this discipline and in the same time of their enthusiasm; the principles underlined by the constructivist pedagogy apply with great success in intercultural education.

Keywords: intercultural education; constructivist pedagogy; intuitive learning; discovery learning theory; formative evaluation

1. Constructivist Pedagogy and its Importance for Intercultural Education

By constructivist pedagogy we understand a theory of scientific knowledge that can be applied at the problems of learning and which focuses especially on pupils' learning and not on teaching. This theory underlines the importance of individual knowledge, of intuitive acknowledgement of facts, which afterwards are to be discussed, negotiated, generalized, build in a personal frame of understanding, under the teacher's close guidance. The understanding, in this process, demands time, research, exploration, collaboration, comparisons of ideas, the obtaining of ideas consensus and, eventually, generalization and synthesis. It is a continuous process, at first subjective and socio-culturally influenced, and understanding is experiential, inductive, intuitive, based on multiple representation and directed towards exploration, in a real context (Joiţa et all, 2007, pp. 7-8).

In the modern mentality the dialogue, the social interactions, the need to communicate and exchange ideas are key values which also reflect in modern school – we are not referring only to the dialogue between the professor and the students and between students, the class being, after all, a place of human encounter, but also to the dialogue in teaching and learning. Disciplines like Intercultural Education are transforming students not only on cognitive level, but also, and especially on affective

---

[1] Assistant Professor, PhD, Valahia University of Târgovişte, Address: Carol I Bd, No. 2, Târgovişte, Romania, Tel.: +40 0245 206101/ fax + 40 0245 217 692. Corresponding author: ramih78@yahoo.com.

[2] Senior Lecturer, PhD, Valahia University of Târgovişte, Romania, Address: Carol I Bd, No. 2, Târgovişte, Romania, Tel.: +40 0245 206101/ fax + 40 0245 217 692. E-mail: anghelalina2002@yahoo.com.

[3] Professor, PhD, Valahia University of Târgovişte, Romania, Address: Carol I Bd, No. 2, Târgovişte, Romania, Tel.: +40 0245 206101/ fax + 40 0245 217 692. E-mail: m.vilciu@yahoo.com.

and attitudinal level, the human encounters engaging the trainees and the professors' personalities on a more profound dimension. For a discipline like this the didactics cannot limit itself at the analysis of communication as an intellectual exchange. The dialogue must be authentic, each personality should express with sincerity the emotions, ideas, experiences, feelings, thus fulfilling the need to understand, to construct attitudes and intentions, to cooperate with others in a common search (Leroy, 1974, pp. 7-8).

2. Intercultural Education

Intercultural Education is a discipline which has a strong psychosocial dimension, the interpersonal relations having thus an important role in the educational action. The problematic of interculturality appeared in the last decades as an educational response to the increasing phenomenon of globalization. It is not a new discipline, nor a new science, but it is a methodology which seeks to integrate data from psychology, anthropology, sociology, culture, history etc. Its aim is to accomplish an education for all, in the spirit of recognizing the differences which exist inside the same society, and it seeks to prepare students to perceive, accept and respect alterity (Cucoş, 2000).

2.1. Competences and Objectives

For the students at Educational Sciences, Intercultural Education is a discipline taught in the third year of study, thus having a particularized curriculum, adapted for the professional educational career they follow. Giving the professionalization in education, intercultural education occupies an important place in the students' curricula. The specific competences follow two dimensions - professional and transversal. The professional competences refer to the harmonious combining and utilization of knowledge, skills and attitudes in order to accomplish the expectations at the work site. Thus in the students' curricula were underlined the understanding of the theoretical approaches which explain the role of intercultural education in the social development and self-knowledge and the development of the group communication ability. The transversal competences are those skills, attitudinal and affective, which transcend a certain domain or study program, having a transdisciplinary dimension, their evaluation being mainly a qualitative one. For intercultural education: the development of a pro-active attitude, of facilitation of a person's adaptation to the social environment; the acknowledgement and respect for man's fundamental rights in different periods and conjectures of their existence. Starting from these necessary skills were formulated

- the general objective: the assimilation of the basic notions in the educational field for diversity, tolerance, active participation;
- specific objectives: the optimization of the interactions between students belonging to different ethnic, cultural, racial or religious communities; the optimal solving of eventual conflicts generated by the preconceptions referring to the affiliation to different ethnical, racial or religious communities.

2.2. Contents

In order to acquire the competences and to achieve the objectives, the contents and applications were chosen in an efficient and compact manner, treating themes and activities like education in the context of globalization, cultural diversity and national identity; multiculturalism and interculturality, civil

identity; interethnic stereotypes and identity models; racial stereotypes, gender stereotypes in education; discrimination; intercultural education – principles and finalities; strategies of accomplishing intercultural education of school type; identification of mechanisms which lead to the apparition of preconceptions and comparative analyze of auto and hetero stereotype; the advantages of the promotion of cultural diversity. We can see that the accent does not fall on the cognitive dimension of knowledge, but rather on the affective, attitudinal and action ones.

2.3. Teaching, Learning and Evaluation Methods

The specific skills and general and specific objectives of intercultural education show us that when formulating the operational objectives the affective, motivational and action dimensions have a more important role. There is a close relation between the didactic strategies and the educational contents and for our discipline the most efficient teaching and learning methods proved to be the active-participative ones. The intercultural concepts cannot be taught directly, but the professor must help the students build their own concepts. Learning, in this case, is the activity projected by the professor in order to determinate changes at the personality level by valorizing the individuals' capacity to acquire knowledge, skills, strategies and attitudes. The motivational faze which allows the students to envisage what learning will enable them to do must be shown a special attention – it is necessary to capture attention, to provoke curiosity, an attitude of openness by presenting the intercultural learning objectives in a significant context for the student, problems from the students' activity or from the life of the community. The principles of the constructivist learning theory and of social learning theory apply with maximum of efficiency at intercultural education. The student reconstructs mentally the reality, he constructs his own cognitive structures in the same time with the knowledge acquisition. Action stands at the base of learning which cannot be "forced" – the professor mustn't disturb the development processes, he has to adapt permanently to the student's needs. The learning succession: there is an initial equilibrium, represented by the experiences and knowledge the students acquired up to that point; a new situation is described; a disequilibrium appears in the student's cognitive and affective structure; the old structure is modified (assimilation) or a new structure appears (accommodation); a new, superior equilibrium appears, allowing a better understanding and adaptation (Cocoradă, 2010).

Intuitive learning and the gradated development of thinking are fundamental for accomplishing the intercultural education competences. To these we must add the social influence and discovery learning: the students are asked to refer to experiences, to induce conclusions, to analyze situations; they make generalizations of the conclusions inferred by action, they establish principles which refer also to other situations than the ones studied initially; eventually the students are able to apply the general principles to new cases, to apply rules in different contexts (Cozma, 2001). Even if such a didactic demarche takes more time than the traditional expositional methods, it helps students construct appropriate attitudes and conceptions and to better understand the diverse world they live in.

Learning intercultural education finds a strong foundation on social observation and influence, starting from the principle that human learning is based on observation and imitation of other people's behavior. Students will do not only what they are told that it is right, but also what they see at others. Thus, by observation, they can acquire new reaction, they can consolidate the existing positive reactions, or eliminate the negative ones, such as discriminative thoughts, attitudes or actions. By modeling they can learn social behaviors, attitudes or values (Cocoradă, 2010).

We applied these learning theories in a series of active-participative teaching, learning and evaluation methods which allowed us to better accomplish the intercultural education objectives in a formative manner. The main constructivist question we put accent on was "how" we learn, and not "what" we learn, using thus interactive didactic strategies based on collaboration and cooperation, interactive group teaching and learning techniques (reciprocal teaching/learning, causes and effects diagram) and especially problems solving methods based on creativity stimulation (problematization, brainstorming, synectics, case study). The use of interactive teaching/learning strategies allowed us to successfully apply interactive evaluative strategies (portfolio, investigation, project etc.) which increased the student's interest in this discipline and had a very favorable feedback, both on cognitive and affective-action dimensions. They are methods which allow surprising and unusual knowledge and observations, which stimulate a change of perspective and open new and wider horizons (Oprea, 2006, p. 96).

3. Research Problematics

Research design: our research, qualitative and quantitative standard type, developed along a two years period - the university years 2012-2013 and 2013-2014. We worked with two homogenous intentionality structured experimental groups, one of 70 students and another of 60. The target groups were represented by the third year students at the Education Sciences Specialization, who studied Intercultural Education as an obligatory discipline in the first semester, 1 hour course and 1 hour seminary each week, in amount a total of 28 hours per group. The students were aware about our experiment and they agreed to take part at it. For the evaluation moment in January 2014 we organized them into five groups, each representing a specific (for our geographic area or for the areas the students come from) ethnic group: Romani, Greeks, Romanians, Bulgarians and Lipovans. Each group made a portfolio with various ethnic information, about traditions, history, traditional food, social and political problems encountered in time. At evaluation, they dressed up in traditional costumes, prepared (at their own initiative) specific dishes, and presented their case to the other ethnies, trying to convince them about how beautiful their traditions and history are, how complex the cuisine, how their ethnicity influenced, in a positive or negative way, their inclusion in the social life. The novelty of this evaluation method consisted in that it allowed the students to follow the professor's instruction but to express themselves freely, to make a case and to discover on their own the beauty and complexity of different social groups among which they lived.

The research is relevant in that it identifies "best practices" used in intercultural education at students and was born out of the need of having a real feedback regarding the teaching activity and the students' attitude to this discipline. We started from the assumption that the more the didactic strategy is based in a constructivist manner on interactive and participative activities, the more it increases the acknowledgement degree of the theoretic and practice-applicative competences and objectives specific for intercultural education. Moreover the learning process is accomplished at a more profound and formative level. In the first semester of the school years 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 we applied at courses and seminars the methods mentioned above and collected the results of our observations.

As research methods we used the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview (the peer-group discussions). The questionnaires were applied to students at the end of the course and seminar activities and were meant to measure de satisfaction degree. In the same time they contained semi-objective items where students could freely express their opinions on issues that could be changed or improved. The questionnaires also offered permanent feedback regarding the formative

accomplishment of the cognitive, affective and attitudinal objectives proposed by intercultural education. The interviews were conducted: 1. at mid-term when it focused on analyzing the students' perception on the effectiveness and strategies used 2. at the end of the semester, after administrating the alternative methods in evaluation, and this time it focused on analyzing the students' attitudes and feelings both on the contents of the intercultural education and on the alternative teaching/learning/evaluating methods.

The respondents were informed regarding the purpose of our study, the manner in which we will use the obtained information, accentuating the necessity of a unity between the intercultural education curriculum, the needs of the students who learn and the real benefits for the members of the group. Regarding the students' satisfaction degree, we observed three main dimensions – the communication and interaction professor – student; the intercultural education content presented with alternative methods (objectives, information, developed skills, values and attitudes); general attitude about the entire teaching process.

The questionnaire items were formulated so that to cover the quantitative and qualitative dimensions, and the appreciations were structured on a five steps scale, from 1 = *none* to 5 = *in great measure*. At the first item - *the communication and interaction professor – student,* we obtained the following answers:

- in great measure – 81%;
- in large measure – 19%;
- satisfactory– 0%;
- in small measure – 0%;
- none – 0%, thus most of the students considering that the professor-students communication improved due to the novelty and the interactive character of these methods.

The second item, *the intercultural education content presented with alternative methods (objectives, information, developed skills, values and attitudes)* had the following answers:

- in great measure – 89,6%;
- in large measure – 10,4%;
- satisfactory – %;
- in small measure - 0%;
- none – 0%.

The respondents consider, in a proportion of 89,6%, that, in the actual form, the curriculum is adequate, the teaching and evaluation methods very interesting and efficient, the feedback from our students being more than convincing: "We wish more professors were using interactive methods like these"

Regarding the *general attitude about the entire teaching process*, the answers were:

in great measure – 97,6%;

- in large measure – 2,4%;
- satisfactory – %;
- in small measure - 0%;
- none – 0%.

The majority of favorable answers convinced us of the fact that active participative methods attract in higher degrees students, more than the traditional ones. "This is one of the most interesting courses I

graduated in college and I am happy I could take active part at it"; "It is a discipline I will never forget, I congratulate our teachers for the courage of organizing it like this!" "I really learned something during this semester and not because I feared evaluation, but because I really understood the problems raised by the intercultural education in our society".

4. Results and Conclusions

The results showed that the students manifest a greater availability when they are implicated in their own training and are all the more enthusiastic to take part at the teaching/learning process. The professional and transversal competences of intercultural education are reached at a more profound level, the students manifesting behavioral and attitudinal changes when facing problems of the multicultural society we activate in. For intercultural education the learning ability cannot be taught, but rather it can be acquired in situations which can be organized from instructive-educative perspective, the constructivist pedagogy allowing a change of perspective in the didactic projection. For a formative accomplishing of the specific competences at intercultural education, the accent must fall on the participation with interest of the students at all the activities and their supporting for the building of cognitive networks. The students study with greater pleasure when they are actively implicated and take part at their own knowledge acquiring and instruction and evaluation have better results when they concentrate on thinking, understanding, active learning and not on memorizing. The metacognitive strategies and the effective and attitudinal objectives increase the quality of learning and the students' interest for intercultural education and for the diverse world they live in.

5. References

Cocoradă, E. (2010). *Psihologia învăţării/The Psychology of Learning*. Brasov: Ed. Universităţii "Transilvania".

Cozma, T. (2001). *O nouă provocare pentru educaţie: interculturalitatea/A New Challenge for Education: interculturality.* Iasi*:* Polirom.

Cucos, C. (2000). *Educaţia-dimensiuni culturale* si *interculturale/ Education-cultural and intercultural dimensions*. Iasi: Polirom.

Joiţa, E. et all (2007). *Profesorul şi alternativa constructivistă a instruirii/ Teacher and constructivist alternative of training*. Bucharest.

Leroy, G. (1974). *Dialogul în educaţie/The Dialogue in Education*. Bucharest: Didactică şi Pedagogică.

Oprea, C.-L. (2006). *Strategii didactice interactive/ Interactive teaching strategies*. Bucharest: Didactică şi Pedagogică.