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STUDYING NATIONAL CULTURE – MODALITY TO DEVELOP
INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The students must to be prepared for their integration in a multi-ethnic reality, to work in an inhomogeneous cultural space, which presupposes accepting, relating and collaborating with different people. In this respect, the students have to communicate and work with people who proved by the different cultural spaces. Our study starts from the premise that knowing national culture the students are prepared to understand the other culture and to interact with different people. In this respect, we are presenting some problems liked by the intercultural competences of the students and showing that knowing own culture the students are prepared to understand the other culture and to interact with people from different geographical regions. Additionally, the paper underlines the contribution of teaching-learning strategies in development of the behaviour, attitudes, gestures and values of students. All of examples mentioned in the paper can be used by the students and teachers in the training and teaching activities in the university. The methodological aspects propose in this paper encourage the study of national culture in Higher educational system.

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1. Introduction

Integration is a concept which is more and more used in the theoretical and practical scientific preoccupations. This aspect is really normal if we are thinking about the extraordinary social mobility in nowadays, as a result of the visa liberalisation and the extension of educational mobility programs. Additionally, the technological explosion allows meeting people from different geographical regions, even on the virtual space. This reality had imposed another two concepts, *diversity* and *unity*, which are developed by the *European Union* (in many *Recommendations* documents) from the harmonization of the differences perspective, to diversify the prospects of life and human activity (Tudorică, 2004). The problem of cultural differences and human attitudes towards others occupies a large space of the studies of educational sciences, the researchers developing the *intercultural* concept (Roth, 2001), as a solution for cultural, ethnic, community integration of people. In this respect, the school, as an educational institute, has a great mission, to form and develop the *intercultural competences* of students, often understood as social competences, as ability to communicate, to interact with different people, to learning together.

Unfortunately, in higher Romanian education, the intercultural competences are not really evidenced in the studies programs, except of some disciplines about the universal culture (which are included in the specialized studies programs of the Letter Faculty). If these competences are not formed and developed as one directly intended, higher education will not be able to prepare the students to their really integrate in a socio-professional community. Even if higher education is a final step in own specific professional training (Doncheva, 2016), the student need to be integrated in a cultural space that can be different from ethnic perspective. It is necessary, for them, to communicate with people who proved by the different cultural spaces, to accept and work with different people. In this respect, higher education *curricula* must integrate some subjects or scientific contents referring to national culture and the other culture and civilization, looking for similarities and differences between them, to cultural dialogue and intercultural communication. On the other hand, it is important to use the didactical strategies that encourage the students to communicate, accept and collaborate with the people from the other ethnical communities. For this reason, the study of own culture can be a perfect opportunity (Piller, 2017) to develop the interculturality in higher education.

2. Problem Statement

Generally, the intercultural competences designate the capacities of students to adapt, to relate and act in a different cultural environment. By means of interculturality (Gojkov, 2011), feeling threatened or judged by the others. In this way they can learn how to interact in a specific situation with people pertaining to a different culture.

Broadly defined, the intercultural competences represent a mixture of capacities, knowledge, abilities and values that allow to students to understand the other cultures, to be motivated to work with the other people from the different communities, to relate and communicate with them. The following schema highlights more clearly these aspects. In the *Schema 1* it can notice that the intercultural competences are involved on the three stages: *theoretic* level (a stage of development of the knowledge; that means all information), *practice* level (abilities, capacities, skills), *affective* level (motivation, sentiments).



Figure 01. Structure of intercultural competences

Obviously, it is not simple to develop the intercultural competence, especially in higher educational system. In this case, the intercultural competences have to be in a harmonious relationship with the social and professional competences. For this reason, the intercultural competences are more or less developed by the academic courses. More that, in the academic *curricula* there are no many academic disciplines oriented towards the culture and civilization, as a main topic. And we not founded any academic disciplines that propose to study the many cultures in the same time, like a universally culture and civilization discipline. For example, the Romanian culture and civilization is generally studied including in the other disciplines by the students from higher education. In this case, we have two categories of students, one of them is represented by the students who working on a degree in history, the other category is represented by the foreign students who learn the Romanian language not until signing up for academic classes. First students' category learns about the Romanian culture and civilization, but not as a distinguee discipline, on the historical stages (that means a fragmented perspective studying on the six academic semesters, including in the Romanian history discipline, like antique, middle age, modern, contemporary history stages). Second students' category studies Romanian culture and civilization from perspective of improving linguistic competences in the Romanian language.

3. Research Questions

Generally, to study of the culture national means to have a better knowledge about own ethnical identity. If the students who learn own culture know very well about their own ethnical identity and have an ethnical conscience and conduct, we were wondering the following:

- a good knowledge of the national culture allows understanding the other cultures and communicating with people who belong them?
- how we can learn the students to have an intercultural behavior if they learn about own culture, and, sometime there are many cases of historical conflicts between the different ethnical communities? These moments of conflict are the opponents of the intercultural communication?

- if the students learn about the other culture, not of own culture, it is possible to develop the intercultural competences?

how we can use the study of the national culture for develop the intercultural competences? Is the culture national a good context of learning to have an intercultural thinking? What are the working methods in this case?

4. Purpose of the Study

Starting from premise that both Romanian students' group (next it is named *Group 1*) and foreign students group (next it is named *Group 2*) know very well about their own ethnical identity and have an ethnical conscience and conduct, we were wondering if the study of the culture national can contribute to develop of the intercultural competences. The following approach directions were included in the paper:

- to identify the scientific content units which may contribute more at the development of the intercultural competences;
- to identify the didactical methods and techniques that stimulate and enhance communication and relationship from the intercultural perspectives (we will select those which have proven to have the best results among the experimental intervention);
- to correlate those didactical strategies with the types of learning activities;
- to focus on some recommendations regarding the encouragement of teachers to give more attention developing these competences.

In this respect, we had used a small group of them (on the first year of studying in the university) for the purpose of seeking improved modalities to use the national culture elements for develop the intercultural competences of students. Firstly, we had intended to find out the opinions of those students about this subject. Secondly, we had joted down some noticed referring to educational changes introduced during one academic semester. Additionally, we propose some education modalities which encourage the study of national culture in academic educational system. We underline the contribution of the teaching-learning strategies that form behaviour, attitudes, gestures and values that must be respect by the graduates in all activities of working in an inhomogeneous cultural space.

5. Research Methods

Our paper is based on the notices obtained by the systematically observation method which was applied during the activities with students. Also, we analyse the results of the questionnaire filed by students at the begin of the second academic semester referring to the Romanian culture and civilization, as an academic discipline. In this respect, we will use only a part of the questionnaire, because it is an instrument for another large research; we focus on theoretical and practical aspects aimed at addressing the research results. We need specify that we didn't make a rigorous research because we had interested to determine the students to reflect on what they know, feel and how they have to action in the inhomogeneous space. In this way we think that the students will be more responsible, correct and interested in the human contact with the others who belong to different cultures.

6. Findings

According to their answers about our research questions, we have noticed the followings:

Item: *Do you learn the national culture in the academic program studies? Do you think that it is necessary for your working on? Why?* Response (approximately percent):

Groupe 1: 70 % of them answered *No*. 30 % of them specified that the national culture is included in the History, an obligatory academic discipline.

Group 2: 100 % of them answered *No*. They considered that the national culture is not necessary for their professional preparation.

Item: *If you can choose one discipline from your studies program, do you choose learning the national culture? Why?* Response (approximately percent):

Groupe 1: 85 % of them answered *Yes*. The main cause is referred to the need of any ethnical community to know more and more about own culture, especial in the globalization reality of nowadays. 3 % of them answered *I do not know* (it depends to own life program, to things that they do in the future, to next their professional occupation. The rest of them answered that it is not necessary, because they have sufficient knowledge about own culture and, if they want more information, it can find out from the History discipline.

Groupe 2: 40 % of them answered *Yes*. 60 % of them answered *No*. Their responses are linked by the low interest of his colleagues for knowing about the other culture and by the time needing for studying Romanian language.

Item: *If you can propose a few recommendations of learning – teaching the national culture, what are these?* Response (approximately percent): Both groups have indicated some recommendations relating to the scientific contents of this academic discipline, the most of them referring to the general ethnical elements.

Obviously, the students are not very optimistic about the importance of learning the national culture in their professional development. They believe that this academic discipline is more theoretical one, so it is not really efficient in their learning process. In the same measure, the students' belief is that knowing the national culture is an ethnical duty and, as a result, they need learn more about own culture. They accorded more importance to the knowledge (cognitive dimension of knowledge), than the feelings and gestures, behaviour, interhuman interaction (the affective and practical dimension). Also, it can be noticed a certain difficulty encountered in students 'expressing their own point of view, their tendency being to use the information exactly as it was found in the sources. Additionally, it is interesting to notice that the students did not understand the national culture from an intercultural perspective. It is not mentioned about the need to have more information referring to the others and their cultural space, for a good understanding, for a better relationship and a perfect communication and social and professional integration.

As a result of these findings, during the second academic seminar, we have highlighted the importance of shaping and developing the knowledge of Romanian culture, from an intercultural competences perspective. Therefore, in our education program, we used the strategy to develop critical thinking (Nicu, 2007), collaborative (Bocoş, 2002) and cooperation learning (Messick & Jaques, 2001; Mackie, 1989). In the table below (*Table 1*), it will be noticed our educational intervention and a few recommendations for a better application of it. As it can be noticed, *Table 1* shows that in higher education, the intercultural competences can be developed in a perfect symbiose with professional and social

competences. For this reason, the national culture, like better appropriate context of the intercultural competences must be introduced in the academic curricula. In this respect, the examples of activities and strategies from *Table 1* it can be used by the students and teachers in the training and teaching activities in the university.

Table 01. Levels of the educational intervention

Level and modality of intervention	Scientific contents	Types of learning activities	Intercultural competences
<p><i>Curricula level</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> curricular integration: <p>a. Information integrated in the scientific contents of the different academic discipline;</p> <p>b. Module included in the different discipline.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> national inventions, discovers researches in the field discussed; national aspects of problems analysed; studies of cases in the national spaces; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying and presenting the relevant contributions from the national cultural space; realizing the comparative analysis; stimulating the interest of students for integrate the national cultural components in the universal / continental one; shaping firm convictions by not jumping to conclusions before getting to know and analyze the facts, by not taking for granted the already existent solutions, the ideas without thinking them over and without checking them; placing the student in the concrete, real context. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to support / develop / reject the different points of view by arguing / adding ideas, opinion, examples from national perspective; to make a scientific documentation and to work with the information; to respect the cultural differences which are part of every human activity to comment the events, acts, gestures, cultural products in the multinational perspective.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing curriculum <p>New academic discipline (optional or obligatory discipline)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> national and universal / European culture; national cultural in the universal cultural space; cultural diversity in a Europe united. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> managing a different cultural scenario at an international level (processing information, adopting of the theoretical positions, respecting differences); understanding importance of the ethnical identity in different moments of human activity. developing the communication and relation skills in different scientific and cultural spaces; learning to find the similarities / opposite elements between two or more cultural fields which belong to different geographical spaces; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to have initiative, creativity and responsibility for solve some problems that can be appear at the meeting of cultures; to identify some intercultural elements, analyse and propose examples and solutions for non-discriminatory approaches during professional; to show the ability to listen to other's opinions and ideas, especially from different countries; to promote ethnical values as a modality to be better known develop by the others, and to be able to understand the others; to analyze causes and consequences of every types of decisions from a national and international perspectives.
<p><i>Pedagogic level</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training-teaching strategies: <p><i>Collaborative and cooperation learning;</i></p> <p><i>Critical thinking</i></p>	<p>Debate, Case study, SINELG, Brainstorming, Role play, Dials, Discussion Panel, Prediction method, Discovery learning, Project methods, Sharing and counter-argumentum</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> using the methods and techniques which encourages critical thinking; developing teamwork activities; working tasks with others, formulating of conclusions, analyzing attitude, gestures, actions and emotions from a cultural perspective. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to shape the analytical attitude and the power of synthesis, of the independent thinking; to have ability to work in a group, to collaborate with others, to construct together a discourse to communicate each other the results of the research activity, respecting the cultural particularities to respect personal achievements and of the others.
<p><i>Reflection and self-reflection</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reflexion strategies and motivational situations of learning the activities facilitated by the cyber technologies and virtual space (for reflection and for personal expression). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> applying the exercises for develop the critical reflections; writing and rewriting pieces of information; thinking about learning results, relation developed, interaction with other; focusing on the assimilated knowledge, the representations and the built-up skills and very little on the emotional- volitional feelings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to emphasize the controversies and the different opinions, especially in the cultural fields; to write impressions, information, thoughts and feelings regarding the events, facts which took place in the community; to write about the own ethnical identity or the identity of others, to analyse it in a personal way; to construct and communicate impressions to others as a result of the reflecting activities

Using the national culture for develop the intercultural competences of students is a difficult didactical action: it depends on experiences and motivation of students and their teachers (Mark, 2007). Trying make it easy, we propose in the next section of paper some recommendations in this direction:

- it is important to choose carefully the sources of information, the ideas, opinions, even controversies, and using them in the learning activities; the students need to distinguish between the truthful information, correct intention and national stereotypes, false information, revenge attitudes, discrimination intentions;
- the student must be encouraged to involved some activities;
- the scientific and didactic strategies used ought to develop abilities to trust in own students cognitive and practical skills, to resist on the information that manipulate the thinking, feeling and action of them;
- the educational intervention need to develop students' curiosity and desire to study more and more about own culture and culture of the others;
- through interrogative activities have to develop the self-thinking ability, the interpretation of data in a critical and responsible way, confronting with others and accepting multiple perspectives;
- investigation, as a research method, is more efficient if the students use examples from reality that they know better;
- the emotional reflexivity will have a stronger impact over one's own personality, but especially over others, influencing the social interaction, also the cultural contacts.

Reflection must lean more towards reason than towards feelings because it must lean towards finding solutions and towards thinking the aspects that should later assure the success.

7. Conclusion

Generally, in the higher education the intercultural dialog is not presented as a distinguish task because the accent of educational process is put on specialization knowledge. This aspect can be a big problem for students because they need to work, communicate, interaction with people from different countries, so with many different gestures, attitudes, values and behaviour. On the other hand, the cultural differences will be perceived as means an opportunity to discover and improve one's own person, a positive aspect in one's profession. Therefore, knowing national culture the students are prepared to understand the other culture and to interact with different people; studying the elements of own culture, it is easier to refine the intercultural dialogue. Equally, all these imply the formation of students' abilities: to think for themselves, to interpret information critically and responsibly through debating with the others and through accepting multiple perspectives and cultural differences. After applying the educational intervention, we noticed that the attitudes toward others were improved. The both group of students shown more interesting to know better their working partners. Also, they were proposed and involved, from own intention, the nonformal social and cultural activities. Of course, they had said that it was a great opportunity for them to understand better own culture and to have a great communication with colleagues from other countries. In this respect, they establish new virtual contacts, the number of groups becoming more and more extended. As a conclusion, the students and teacher need to find time for study the national culture like a way to understand and interaction, accepting the others. The real intercultural dialogue is done by the conscious of

ethnic identity that wants to express itself and to reflect it in the other culture. All these observations pinpoint even more the understanding of national culture history as a science of discoveries, reflections, communications and integration.

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