INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT: BLOCKAGES AND SOLUTIONS

COMUNICARE INTERCULTURALĂ ÎN MEDIUL UNIVERSITAR: BLOCAJE ȘI SOLUȚII

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SUMMARY

The processes of globalization have a significant impact on culture and identity. In this context, we must promote intercultural communication at all levels of the education system. In this article, we propose to define the fundamental concepts of intercultural communication - language and culture, to elucidate their similarity and interference aspects, to identify barriers in intercultural communication and the possibility of gradually overcoming communication blockages.

Keywords: *the globalization process, intercultural communication, identity, globalization, ethnocentrism, stereotype, language and culture.*

REZUMAT

Procesul de globalizare, care inițial a dominat doar sfera economică, ulterior a determinat profunde transformări sociale, politice și culturale, având un impact semnificativ asupra culturii și identității, influențând relațiile interetnice și interconfesionale în medii pluriculturale și plurilingve. În plan cultural, globalizarea își face simțite efectele prin tendința de subminare a culturilor minoritare, omogenizare culturală, schimbarea modelului valoric național și apariția formelor culturale hibride. În contextul noilor realități culturale este evidentă necesitatea conștientizării și promovării comunicării interculturale la toate nivelurile sistemului de învățământ, semnalarea obstacolelor și provocărilor majore, cu care se confruntă tinerii, ce aparțin unor medii culturale diferite, în procesul de comunicare.

Cuvinte-cheie: *comunicare interculturală, identitate, globalizare, etnocentrism, stereotip, prejudecată.*

The globalization process, which originally dominated only the economic sphere, subsequently led to profound social, political and cultural transformations, having a significant impact on culture and identity and influencing inter-ethnic and inter-confessional relations in multicultural and multilingual environments. Culturally, globalization makes its effects felt by the tendency to undermine minority cultures through cultural homogenization, change of the national value model and the emergence of hybrid cultural forms. More and more frequently, the consequences of cultural globalization are discussed contradictorily. They are materialized in a „specific set of values and beliefs, widely shared throughout the globe."

In the context of new cultural realities, the need to raise awareness and promote intercultural communication at all levels of the education system, highlighting the obstacles and the major challenges faced by young people belonging to different cultural backgrounds in the communication process, is evident.

In line with the above, we propose to define the fundamental concepts of intercultural communication - *language and culture,* to elucidate their similarity and interference aspects, to identify barriers in intercultural communication and the possibility of gradually overcoming communication blockages.

The culture - language relation. The concept of *intercultural communication* involves two distinct entities in a close relationship of interdependence - *culture and language*:

– *language* sums up a system of linguistic means that contribute to the realization of the inter-human *communication*, defined by Tim O'Sullivan as a process in which the messages, the culturally distinguished persons and the reality interact in such a way as to help the meaning to be produced and the understanding to appear [4, p. 10];

– *culture* is a system of signs, meaningful practices, through which man codifies his experience and communicates it [2, p. 83].

Broadly speaking, *language and culture* are products of the spirit and cooperate in building up the set of ideas and feelings that characterize the community [3, p. 178]. Having an active role in social construction, language gives the culture the opportunity to survive and evolve, influencing the way modern humans understand and interpret cultural phenomena. The vivid image of a people's culture - including its ethnonym and ethnicity - is reflected in the *spoken language*, which becomes a *cultural code*.

Therefore, culture owes its existence to language, being integrated into a communication process.

The culture – communication relation. *Culture* is a component that directly influences *communication*. Referring to the culture-communication relation, aesthetician Jean Caune argues „culture and communication form a weird couple. None can be explained without the other. The two phenomena are not perfectly sealed, they are not contained and cannot be placed in the plane of parallel reflections by analogical correspondence."

Communication is a constitutive factor of culture, a defining and structural element, without which we cannot understand any form of culture. It means a permanent exchange of information, messages and meanings between individuals and groups, which gives consistency and richness to the cultural phenomenon. It is the essence of man's social life, as sharing life, storing information, and transmitting social inheritance to new generations would not be possible without the existence of multiple forms of signification and communication.

According to A. Tanase, communication is another dimension of cultural facts. All man's cultural actions take place in the process of social activity, are determined by society, have a finality in a social-human function, which is realized through communication. Culture, through its communication side, is a social phenomenon. It is not possible, in all its dynamics, outside of society. Culture, through its genesis and purpose, is a social phenomenon, inherited, acquired and learned through social mechanisms. It leads the individual to humanity, to its supreme values. The communicative factor is not outside of culture, but it is related to its meaning and purpose [6, p. 93].

Communication is a person's organic

need, springing from his nature, who cannot be, either ontic or axiological, alone. This need, on the same ground, goes on to his cultural creations. For, ultimately, the purpose of the creators is communication; being created the cultural values are shared with others. The creator always addresses his peers, closer or more distant in time, to contemporaneity and posterity. As a consequence, the cultural values are achieved, expand their sphere and enrich their content, amplify and get perfect through communication [5, p. 165].

In the context of cultural interference, communication is the most effective means of expressing one's own cultural identity. E. Goffman remarks that "people communicate to have the desired identity in the communication situation they are in." So, we communicate to be accepted, admitted or recognized.

Thus, *culture* cannot exist or progress outside *language*, the latter being called "the cultural code of the nation" materialized in the *communication* process. The *Intercultural Communication* discipline was born at the interference of *language and culture concepts.*

Intercultural communication in the support of diversity. The first studies on intercultural communication belong to US researchers. Edward T. Hall, together with some of his associates in intercultural research, anthropologists such as Ray Birdwhistell, George Trager, have laid the foundation for the discipline „Intercultural Communication." With the appearance of E. Hall's publication „The silent language" (1959), followed by „The Hidden Dimension" (1969), the research into intercultural communication gains analysis, which becomes classic. E. Hall pleads for an understanding of the cultural process, insisting that we need „more knowledge of ourselves as participants in culture" [1, p. 67].

If, initially, US researchers have explored the research object of the discipline, in particular, over the past decades, the investigation of intercultural communication has raised interest in the academic circles in Europe. Remarkable are the scientific contributions of Georges Michaud, J. R. Ladmiral, E. M. Lipinski and others. This field is currently pursuing a dual trajectory: a theoretical one (research) and an applied one (designed to prepare intercultural communication practices), investigating those elements of culture that have the greatest influence on the interaction between the members of two or more cultures, when the individuals are in communication situations. As a special situation of interpersonal communication, the intercultural one brings with itself the elements of what, in a broad acceptance and from anthropological perspective, is called culture.

Obstacles to achieving effective communication in the academic environment. In the context of cultural interconnections, the major obstacles and challenges, faced by young people, who belong to different cultural backgrounds, in communication are of interest.

In order to get truthful information about the factors that may disrupt communication, we conducted an opinion poll based on a questionnaire among 20 - 25-year-old youth. The respondents were students belonging to different ethnic groups from six universities and young people who participated in mobility projects.

According to the results of the survey, disturbances of effective communication are caused by the shock of the awareness of the existence of a different world, of the linguistic differences, the misinterpretation of nonverbal and paraverbal language, the type of ethnocentric communication, religious pluralism, stereotypes and prejudices, etc.

- The radical encounter with what is di-

fferent creates irritability and nervousness. In this first stage, there is a certain shock to the awareness of the Other, otherness, of a different way of seeing/imagining the world. It is difficult for young people to overcome this state. They display speech disorders, expression and behavioral errors.

- Linguistic differences are another barrier to youth' effective communication. Being in an intercultural context, they are aware of the need to know the language of the major population for deciphering their ethnonym and the achievement of the proposed objectives. As a rule, young people easily agree to communicate in the language of the major population or in one of the languages of international circulation. Unlike mature adults and the elderly, young people have a positive and open attitude towards acquiring a foreign language.

- Wrong interpretation of nonverbal or paraverbal language can become another obstacle to effective communication. In the view of Thomas Scheidel, nonverbal communication is an accumulation of messages that are not expressed in words and can be decoded creating meaning. These signals can repeat, contradict, replace, complete or accentuate the message transmitted by words. On a comparative scale, both forms of communication, verbal and non-verbal, contribute to the creation of a unitary cultural space in which the communion of ideas, feelings and values will dominate.

- The type of ethnocentric communication of young people is another obstacle to effective communication. The very term ethnocentrism, created by the American sociologist William G. Summer and first applied in 1906 in *Folkways*, is associated with the attitude of overestimating the own culture, the other ways of life (cultures) being valid and legitimate, but not preferred.

- The opposite of the ethnocentric is the xenocentric behavior, which implies the acceptance of everything that is foreign (products, norms, ideas, etc.). Xenocentrism typically characterizes young people tempted to go abroad for a better life.

- Relativism is a new vision of cultural diversity, shared by young people and being associated with the mood to value cultural differences positively, being considered legitimate and natural.

- Religious pluralism characterizes contemporary realities and can become a barrier to communication. Religions are forms of spiritual manifestation of a transnational character. The presence of new religious and pseudo-religious movements in the Republic of Moldova is due to the influence of the globalization process. Yet, we observe a low level of religiosity among young people, being more open and tolerant of other religious traditions.

- Stereotypes and prejudices create barriers to effective communication. According to US analyst U. Lipman, *the stereotype* is the orderly determination of the cultural image of the world in the mind of the individual, first of all saving efforts in the process of understanding complex social objects, and secondly, protecting his values, positions and rights. As defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, *prejudices* are „an unfair and unreasonable opinion or feeling, formed without much thought or knowledge." In other words, stereotypes are preconceived ideas, clichés, while prejudices are irrational feelings of fear and displeasure. Education for diversity can help overcome these previously formed opinions or attitudes.

So, the events that have taken place over the past decades have changed man's perception of traditional values, have caused changes in the way of thinking and acting. We owe them the opportunity to be familiarized with new values and cultural

behaviors, new forms of inter- ulturality. In order to overcome the blockages in intercultural communication and dialogical awakening, we propose:

– acquiring foreign languages in order to develop communication skills with people from other cultural and linguistic areas;

– introducing in the curriculum the disciplines that would familiarize young people with the differences between cultures and the challenges of the contemporary world;

– the formation of intercultural communication competence, which involves intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural behavior through the disciplines Intercultural Communication and Intercultural Education;

– organizing cultural and scientific events that would facilitate the communication between young people of different cultures;

– promoting and monitoring the mobility of young people in the academic/educational field, encouraging students to apply to mobility projects.

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