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Multipolar Intercultural Awareness and Teacher Education and Training

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Introduction

Developing foreign language (FL) teachers' intercultural awareness is considered an asset in teacher education and training since, in present day world, the intercultural perspective is highly esteemed (cf. Byram & Flemming (eds), 1998). In my opinion, however, there are two important questions that we need to explore further concerning this issue:

- 1) What do we really mean by intercultural awareness in FL learning in general and teacher education and training in particular?
- 2) How easy is it to develop FL teachers' intercultural awareness if we train teachers in monolinguistic and monocultural contexts, as is the case with most FL teacher education and training programmes?

In my paper, I will try to explore these two queries in the light of the reflective approach to teacher education and training. Second, I will point out that the current definition of intercultural awareness does not really reflect present day realities any more. Next, I will briefly describe the contexts in which, in principle, we train teachers of foreign languages pointing out how limited these contexts usually are in terms of interculturality. Then, I will argue how we can expand these contexts making use of institutional collaboration between universities and colleges across countries as well as exploring and exploiting present-day technology and the Internet as new learning contexts in teacher education and training. I will conclude my argument making reference to the benefits that an expansion of contexts may have for developing FL teachers' multipolar intercultural awareness.

1. The reflective approach in foreign language teacher education and training

In the argument to be put forth and the framework for teacher education and training to be suggested in this paper, I believe that the reflective approach best suits the needs of FL teacher education and training. Arguing along similar lines with Richards & Lockhart (1994), I maintain that the reflective approach in teacher education and training can be FL teacher initiated and directed. It involves FL teachers critically observing others and themselves, collecting data about the participant classrooms – either in situ or videotaped ones – in order to explore FL teachers' and learners' roles

within them. These data can constitute the basis for self-evaluation and professional development in FL teacher education and training.

Let us now briefly consider the basic principles that characterise this approach and briefly pinpoint to their contribution to FL teacher education and training (cf. Wallace, 1991). First, FL teachers are to be exposed to interdisciplinary theories, research and practices concerning teaching/learning foreign languages. In this context, issues to be dealt with concern FL learning, language and culture, FL classroom discourse and communication, the influence of the macro-societal environment on the micro-societal environment of the classroom, methods and techniques for FL learning, assessment and certification in FL, namely, theory and practice. 2 In such a view of FL teacher education and training, language learners' age, needs, interests and level of language, among others, are always to be taken into consideration. In my opinion, this aspect of teacher education and training aims at further developing FL teachers' knowledge and experience about the FL language and culture, their professional environment as well as how to set up learning environments for language learners. It also aims at refining FL teachers' language skills and abilities pertinent to the profession such as flexible and proficient use of the foreign language, of language and interlanguage awareness, of cultural and intercultural awareness, etc. to name but a few.

Second, FL teachers are expected to indulge in classroom observation or video observation to develop or refresh teach/learn experiences as observers before they venture into teaching themselves.

Third, FL teachers are expected to develop the ability to reflect critically on their experiences of the teach/learn process aiming at improving things for the benefit of the learners and of themselves. In this way, I would add here, they are to be expected to become able to discuss educational, administrative and professional issues and perspectives with colleagues, at home and abroad, sharing with others the 'good practice' in teaching/learning. This is not as yet widely practised in FL teacher education and training, for as Sercu (1998:257) points out: "(INSET teachers) have a hard time reflecting on their own teaching practices, partly because they have not acquired the necessary professional terminology to discuss and reflect upon theories and proposals for practical applications.'

In conclusion, I maintain that the reflective approach can provide us with a flexible framework for FL teacher education and training since it 'goes hand-in-hand with critical self-evaluation and reflection as a basis for decision making, planning and action' (Richards & Lockhard, 1994:ix).

2. Interculturality and Awareness

In recent years the native speaker model has given way to the intercultural speaker model (cf. Kramsch, 1998). Besides the global spread and use of English has given rise to debates "about cultural, ecological, socio-political and psychological questions", as Seidlhofer (2001:43) very rightly states, thus disclaiming the rights of native speakers to have custody of what happens to English as an international language anymore (cf. Widdowson, 1994:385). As I have argued in Papaefthymiou-Lytra,

(forthc.a), this changing context calls forth for a redefinition of intercultural competence and I maintain that FL users should aim to develop multipolar intercultural competence. Multipolar intercultural competence is taken to mean an interlocutor's ability to perceive conflicting/contrasting sets of rules, values and behaviours, etc. in multicultural social encounters and be on the look out to solve misunderstandings and potential conflicts through appropriate language behaviours.

Along with intercultural competence, however, I will argue here that we need to redefine intercultural awareness. This concept is usually defined as language learners/users' conscious ability to handle the target culture successfully along with their own. However, if it were for FL users to interact with users of the target language only, then this limited - in my opinion - definition of intercultural awareness, rooted on the bipolar relationship of native - non-native speaker communication, may suffice. After all, quite a lot of research has been carried out in relation to language learning and native-non-native communication (cf. Dulay & Burt, 1974; Krashen, 1977; Faerch, C. & G. Kasper (eds.) 1983.) But if I were to take English as an example, or any other language for that purpose³, FL users do not interact with native speakers only.4 They also, or shall I say mainly, interact with other FL users thus often establishing a multipolar relationship with interlocutors of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds using English as the medium of communication. After all, English, in particular has developed as an international language or, in some cases, the lingua franca of our times.

In native - non-native communication native speakers are usually confined to their own culture and non-native speakers understand interculturality as the interchange or space between their own culture and the target culture. But whenever the interlocutors are non-native speakers of various cultural and language backgrounds, then the culture game is played between three or more cultures. Thus the interculturality space becomes enlarged and more complicated rendering it more difficult to define and handle. In this case, a definition of interculturality and its content should partly rest on the cultures of the communicating participants, on the target culture and on the mediated culture product of the communication processes currently in action. Still experience and research show that FL interlocutors manage to cope even under difficult circumstances of this nature (cf. Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 1981/1987; Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wenden, 1991). For as Young (1996:39) very rightly argues 'speakers are not simply followers of cultural rules.' Speakers may break cultural rules as they may break language rules for various reasons. They are also aware of the interdependency between experience and language, which results in language change over time. It is on this tacit awareness that languages users can build what I have called multipolar intercultural awareness when 'they reach out to the culturally other'. Multipolar intercultural awareness is taken to mean FL speakers' sensitivity to consciously and purposefully handle the interculturality space in the communication process when more than two participant cultures converge. The cultures of the participants, the target culture and the mediated culture product of the communication process currently in action feed this interculturality space (cf. Papaefthymiou-Lytra, forthc. a).

In the light of this argument, then FL teachers' intercultural awareness should not be merely considered as (knowledge of and) ability to handle the foreign culture successfully in communities of practice. Instead, FL teachers' intercultural awareness should reflect their ability to handle multipolar intercultural space successfully in the process of communicating with an increased number of native and non-native speakers of various language and cultural backgrounds.

3. FL teacher training contexts: Old realities and new possibilities

However, if we carefully consider the FL contexts in which we usually train FL teachers we can easily conclude that they are very limited in terms of interculturality experiences. Usually monocultural and monolingual trainers and FL teachers, with a good to excellent command of the target language and culture, work together. Interculturality and intercultural awareness is often something to read about or talk about but it is not often experienced at first hand.

To compensate for this limitation, the European Union, for instance, set up the Socrates-Erasmus programme. The programme has aimed to help FL teachers to spend some time in the target language country so as to enhance their language skills as well as their language and culture knowledge, abilities, awareness and appreciation of otherness. However, as experience indicates, it is too difficult to cater for all FL teachers via programmes and visits of this kind. Besides in this context, the long established bipolar relationship of native culture – non-native culture still holds.

To break away from old traditions and try to cater for all FL teachers' multipolar intercultural awareness, I suggest that we make use of present-day information technology and communication networks such as the Internet as well as institutional collaboration between universities and teacher training colleges across countries. In doing so it is imperative that we adopt *distance learning education principles and practices* in our programmes⁵. In this way, we shall try to expand the contexts in which we train FL teachers. This is not too difficult to be achieved. Through collaboration interested institutions across countries can develop common programmes with specific aims and objectives, primarily aiming at helping FL teachers to learn from each other's cultural understanding of the target culture. A secondary but equally important aim is to help FL teachers to learn about each other's culture using the 'locus' of the FL classroom across countries as one example of a 'small culture'.

3.1 Opening-up in teacher education and training: Crossing borders

As stated, the reflective approach to teacher education and training considers the following three parameters among others as being very important in FL teacher education and training:

- a. FL teachers are to be exposed to interdisciplinary theories, research and practices concerning teaching/learning FLs.
- b. FL teachers are expected to indulge in classroom or video observation before they venture into teaching themselves.
- c. FL teachers are expected to develop the ability to reflect critically on their classroom experiences.

To cater for the *first parameter* in the suggested framework, collaborating institutions will prepare short talks or debates by experts or practising teachers on issues of common interest. Grammar and lexicon aquisition, developing the four skills in an integrated way, speech events, communities of practices and their structure, social semiosis (social reality is now seen to be socially constructed through semiosis), rationality, ideology and culture, etc. may constitute issues of comon interest. They can be presented in the light of interlanguage development⁷ or of differences and similarities between the target language and culture and the native language(s) and culture(s) of the collaborating institutions.⁸

These talks and debates could be on videotapes, interactional multi-media or on the Internet. They will be accompanied with relevant problem-posing questionnaires, awareness raising questionnaires as well as critical self-assessment questions. Besides FL teachers can be asked to complete reports, diaries, etc. They will aim at developing FL teachers' critical thinking and multipolar intercultural awareness through sharing, questioning, discussing, debating, taking decisions and reaching conclusions. 9

To cater for the *second parameter* in the context of the suggested framework, there should be prepared videotapes for classroom observation where the target foreign language is taught in various age, needs and level situations in the countries of the collaborating institutions. The videotapes, whether on interactional multi-media format or on the Internet, will be used for classroom observation purposes by all FL teachers of the participating institutions. Classroom observation of this kind aims to develop FL teachers' teach/learn multicultural experiences as observers whether they will be eventually teaching in a multicultural environment or not. Multi-media or via the Internet disseminated classroom observation will be accompanied with relevant problem-posing questionnaires, awareness raising questionnaires, self-assessment questions, reports and diaries to develop FL teachers' critical thinking and multipolar intercultural awareness.

To cater for the *third parameter*, live face-to-face discussions and *e-mail* or *chat room* discussions across institutions can have an important role to play. They aim to develop the FL teachers' ability to reflect critically on their experiences of the teach/learn process and to discuss educational, administrative and professional issues and perspectives with colleagues at home and abroad and to share with others good practice in learning/teaching. Particularly, *e-mail* or *chat room* discussions across countries, languages, cultures and institutions may be instrumental for the development of multipolar intercultural awareness.

These collaborative practices aim to develop a) FL teachers' knowledge and experience about the FL language and culture in culturally diverse educational environments and b) the skills and abilities pertinent to the profession, such as flexible and proficient use of all FL language, language awareness and multipolar intercultural awareness, among others. In other words, FL teachers will better understand the principles, the processes and the factors involved in the process of teach/learn, they will critically reflect on and discuss their views and suggestions with an international group using the FL as a medium for online communication.

3.2 New contexts and content: Sharing and Caring

Problem-posing questionnaires, awareness raising questionnaires, critical self-assessment questions as well as reflection reports and diaries for developing multipolar intercultural awareness may address a sufficiently complete account of such cross-linguistic, cross-cultural and inter-cultural issues as:

- b. The **cultures** (involved) and their popular themes and issues of general and particular interest as reflected in the micro-cosme of the classroom and beyond, which will inevitably raise questions of ideologies, identity and values of difference (Roberts, 1998).
- c. Cultural membership, as is differentiated in the discourses of the participants (students-teachers) concerning questions of 'truth', power, personal feelings, identities and beyond (Young, 1996; Roberts, 1998).
- d. Target language, individual L1 languages and learners' interlanguage characteristics and their contrastive features (Michael Swan & Bernard Smith (eds.) 2001).
- Communication structure and process in the FL classroom in order to investigate differences and/or similarities in beliefs, attitudes, authority and power relationships within a relatively coherent communicative context. One may assume that general communicative expectations across countries and cultures can be shared, e.g. that communicators would ask questions, advance arguments, try to understand new knowledge, etc. It goes without saying that differentiated behaviours and practices are to be expected, too. However, these assumptions may bluntly fail us -- and this possibility will always be with us as long as there are differences of personal experiences and interests as well as of differentiated national educational goals and aims across countries and cultures. In short, when a problem of that kind arises the way to solve it is through more communication but of a reflective kind. Only this time emphasis will be placed on written communication and consequently problem-solving practices online (cf. Cherny, 1999.)
- f. Meaning and interpretation as a process of learning and communicating, where communicators can be involved in creating mutual understanding through 'give and take, trial and error, given trust and a perception of goodwill' (Young 1996:126). In this way, I maintain that a multipolar interchange can be created where we can firmly ground multipolar intercultural awareness. And, this ground is neither of our own culture nor of the target language culture, nor that of the culturally others involved in the communication process, but it is the conflated interchange of them all (cf. Seidlhofer, 2001; Granger, 1998; Papaefthymiou-Lytra, forthc. a)
- g. Last but not least, collaborating institutions can provide working guidance for more effective communication through understanding relationships, interdependencies and influences across languages and cultures beyond the target language. Participants, for instance, can critically discuss the influence of English on their language(s) and culture(s) and the kinds of 'resistance' applied, i.e. whether this influence has become accepted, whether it has been transformed or not and so on (cf. Phillipson, 1992). It is in the logic of the proposed framework for the development of multipolar cultural awareness that FL teachers also become sensitive to how their own languages and cultures may have influenced each other's.

4. Expanding FL teacher training contexts: A discussion

The aims of such an expansion of FL teacher training contexts are both *convergent* and *divergent* in nature. *Convergence* aims at transferring and sharing knowledge about culture(s) and an observer's experience about the teach/learn processes across borders; *divergence* aims at developing FL teachers' critical thinking, multipolar intercultural awareness and a practitioner's experience about the teach/learn processes in the FL classroom.

In the context of the suggested framework, therefore, FL teachers are expected to become aware that the teach/learn *process* may be similar regardless of the L1 language(s) and culture(s) involved. Besides they may realise that successful, flexible solutions may be reached through reflective co-operation of FL teachers who may work in different cultural and educational environments. Moreover, FL teachers develop *cultural awareness* not only about the target culture but also about the cultures of the other participants of the online group.

Thus, the suggested framework can become the firm ground on which FL teachers can build their multipolar intercultural awareness. This proposition is strongly supported by Wierzbicka (1991:10) who very persuasively argues "Every language is a self-contained system and, in a sense, no words or constructions in one language can have absolute equivalents in another (...) however, as soon as we abandon the notion of absolute equivalents and absolute universals, we are free to investigate the idea of partial equivalents and partial universals; and if the former notion is sterile and useless, the latter idea is fruitful and necessary." FL teachers will eventually learn to understand each other's discourses in the L2, their educational reality, behaviours, professional and social perspectives, prevailing ideologies, etc., which will further enhance FL teachers' reflective critical thinking and multipolar intercultural awareness. After all, the majority of the participants will be non-native users of the target language who are trained to do a similar profession presumably in their own monolingual and monocultural contexts. 12

It goes without saying that such an approach also aims at getting to know each other In this way, practices of this kind may also subdue the development of 'othering' (Johnson, 1999) or of 'otherisation processes' (Holliday, 1999) among the FL teachers of such working groups. 13 At the same time through observation and email communication FL teachers come to understand how others think of the target language and culture, of their own as well as of each other's and why they do so. Such an approach puts into practice Pennycook's views on cultural politics and pedagogy. In other words, it becomes the vehicle FL teachers can represent themselves to each other thus allowing for stereotypical representations to be changed (Pennycook 1994:308). Eventually, participants come to recognize difference as cultural wealth for our 'global village' thus developing their multipolar intercultural awareness and learning to cope with it in a world of peace and mutual respect for cultural 'otherness'. For as Young (1996:77) maintains 'the case for a set of semantic near universals is strong' as a common ground among human languages. In practice, 'partial equivalents and partial universals' (Wierzbicka 1991:10) or 'semantic near universals' (Young, 1996:77) -- name it as you like, after all, all human beings feel love, hanger, fear, lack

of empowerment, to name but a few -- can become the springboard to further the development of multipolar intercultural awareness.

Besides expanding the FL teachers' cultural contexts, this approach will also contribute towards developing language teachers' writing skills as well as general language and metalinguistic skills among other things via e-mail communication and beyond. In particular, they will be using the target language to arrive at and discuss their awareness of language(s) and culture(s), of their educational and professional practices, behaviours and perspectives sharing with others the good practice in FL learning and teaching.

I am fully aware that the suggested framework to cross borders in FL teacher education and training may raise more questions than it has managed to address. Questions of the sort: What kind of a curriculum do we need? What should be the philosophical and ethical orientation of the issues and the problem-posing questions to be raised? What is or should be the relationship of academic rhetoric and actual practices in the FL classroom? How can this multipolar intercultural awareness acquired by FL teachers enhance FL classroom processes? These are just a few of the questions that may be randomly raised. I will argue, therefore, that questions of this sort will be welcome since they will eventually help us to redefine FL learning and teaching and allow us to position it from a *periphery* perspective to a *centre* perspective of its own right. Thus we will eventually be able to make explicit connections between abstract philosophical and theoretical positions and what goes on in actual classroom learning across countries and cultures in order to cope with the new realities and challenges of our time.

Conclusion

In my paper, I have tried to briefly define and discuss FL teachers' multipolar intercultural awareness in the context of FL teacher education and training and in the framework of the reflective approach.

More precisely, I have tried to briefly describe the contexts in which, in principle, we train teachers of foreign languages and I have pointed out how limited these contexts usually are in terms of interculturality and intercultural space for the development of FL teachers' intercultural awareness in relation to real life uses of the target language, in our case English. Next, I have argued how we can expand these contexts making use of institutional collaboration between universities and colleges across countries as well as exploring and exploiting present-day multi-media technology and the Internet as new contexts in teacher education and training. I have concluded my argument making detailed reference to the benefits that an expansion of contexts may have for developing FL teachers' multipolar intercultural awareness, which aims not at bearing judgement on other cultures but at learning to understand and interpret them. Besides, expanded contexts also contribute towards developing FL teachers' reflective critical thinking, their writing skills as well as their language and metalinguistic skills in the foreign language.

On a final note, however, I maintain that an approach for crossing borders and increasing teacher education and training contexts presupposes a very close collaboration between the teaching staff of the collaborating institutions in a world of mutual respect and peace.

NOTES

- In this paper, I deal with foreign language learning and foreign language teacher education and training. In my opinion, it is important to make the distinction between FL and SL because the parameters involved are not the same in both situations. As a mater of fact, in a SL situation learners are constantly exposed to a variety of communicative situations either as participants or as observers in communities of practice. They constantly receive social, cultural and linguistic input from the social environment they operate in since they use the L2 to accomplish social actions in the act of real communication. However, the social and cultural reality, the sociolinguistic and the linguistic factors that characterise SL learning are absent from FL learning. Consequently, a FL situation can be better defined as the situation where the L2 is a three-to-four-hour-a-week classroom language. In this context, FL learning is usually facilitated by teachers who share the same language and culture with their learners (cf. Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 1987.)
- 2. Pennycook (1999:436) suggests that we should adopt the term 'PRAXIS' after Habermas (1972) to denote the combined concept of theory and practice.
- 3. According to a UNESCO report among the most widely used languages in the world are English, French, Spanish, Russian and Chinese.
- **4.** And, in the case of English, which native speakers of English if I may ask, of British, American or Australian English, not to mention the other indigenous varieties of English?
- 5. It is beyond of the scope of the present paper to deal in-depth with principles and practices of distance learning education in FL teacher education and training programmes. For an overview of ODL and the current situation in Greece see Κόκκος κ.ά. 1998; Λιοναράκης, (εκδ.) 2001; Παπαευθυμίου-Λύτρα, 2001; Ραραefthymiou-Lytra, (forthc. b).
- 6. Holliday (1999) defines small cultures as follows: "Small culture is (...) a dynamic, ongoing group process which operates in changing circumstances to enable group members to make sense of and operate meaningfully within those circumstances. (...) Small culture is thus the sum total of all processes, happenings, or activities on which a given set of people habitually engage. (...) A good example of this is the classroom group where a small culture will form from scratch when the group first comes together, each member using her or his culture -making ability to form rules and meanings in collaboration with others." (p. 248).
- 7. A good example of such an approach to FL learning issues across languages with particular reference to ELT, is the publication: 'Learner English: A Teacher's Guide to Interference and Other Problems' by M. Swan & B. Smith (eds.) 2nd ed. 2001, London: CUP. In the second edition, in particular, there is included a cd.rom where the reader could also 'hear the interlanguage' of the FL users of English represented in the individual chapters of book rather than simply read about it. In this publication I have contributed the chapter about Greek learners' English. See also Granger (ed.) 1998; Seidlhofer, 2001,
- 8. Good examples to familiarize FL teachers with the target culture as well as with other languages and cultures are the following publications: a) Sifianou M. 1992. Politeness Phenomena in England and Greece: A Cross-cultural Perspective.

- Oxford: Clarendon Press; b) Bayraktaroglu A & M. Sifianou, (eds.) 2001. Linguistic Politeness Across Boundaries: The Case of Turkish and Greek. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. Besides the scientific and practical work undertaken by the members of ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe) on language testing and certification constitutes another important cross-cultural development. For more information see www.alte.org.
- 9. For an example of a somehow similar approach to the one I am suggesting here but within one specific institution and for specific ESL teachers, see Kamhi-Stein's paper in *TESOL Quarterly* (34, 3/423-455, 2000).
- 10. It is well known that there is an extensive literature on problem solving interaction in N/NN as well as NN-NN discourse primarily based on oral communication, i.e. Long, 1983; Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 1981/1987. Speakers make use of such strategies as simplification, tactful overlooking of errors, special ways of correcting error, register simplification, increased levels of redundancy and the like whereby they cope with cultural difference and related linguistic shortcomings. Concerning cross-cultural differencies on literacy issues see, for instance, Lee McKay, 1996.
- 11. There is already a small body of literature and research published on these issues, see for instance Cherny, 1999 and Lock's (2001) critical review of the book. However, more research is needed in understanding on line communication in general and online communication breakdowns, in particular.
- 12. Due to the influx of immigrants things have recently started changing in many FL classrooms in Europe. Consequently, multipolar cultural awareness will also assist FL teachers working with such classes to understand the diversity of their students' cultural orientation better and cope with the new classroom situations.
- 13. Otherisation can be defined as "the process whereby the 'foreign' is reduced to a simplistic, easily digestible, exotic or degrading stereotype" (Holliday, 1999:245). Othering, therefore, is taken to mean the development and maintenance of stereotypical views, usually negative in nature, about others.
- 14. For a long time, it has been tacitly assumed that things may not be different in an EFL situation from an ESL situation. As a result, ESL and EFL perspectives have been conflated sharing a hand and glove relationship for too long. See also Note 1.

Word count: 4.732

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