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MARIA DOŁINA

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\* Referat während des Internationalen Deutschlehre – Kongresses August 1993, Leipzig.

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## I. ARTICLES

### DEVELOPING YOUNG CHILDRENS' MULTILINUGALISM AND PLURICULTURALISM

RENZO TITONE

*Universities of Rome and Toronto*

**ABSTRACT.** 0. Multilingual and pluricultural education are strictly tied together. A definition of the basic ideas concerning both processes implies the clarification of several issues:

1. The study of foreign culture within language; 2. The understanding of divergent cultural patterns; 3. Cultural differences in nonverbal communication; 4. Understanding art of a different culture; 5. The training of teachers for intercultural and interlinguistic education.

The final word of success rests in well-planned experimental projects, i.e. long range research on an international basis.

0. That the main path to international peace consists in building multilingual education and intercultural understanding has become a widely acknowledged truism. That intercultural understanding is an easier task if undertaken at a very early age, namely before primary schooling, is a second truism. What remains open as a crucial issue is defining the best way to achieve such goals.

One can safely state that there are two main routes to attain intercultural understanding through institutional education: one is direct, and it works through immersion in the foreign environment prepared by apt introduction to the foreign life and thought patterns; the other is indirect, and it works through immersion in the foreign language in its connection with its background culture and civilization.

But the aspects of the problem are far from simple and unified. The first step in programming such an educational enterprise consists in clarifying the basic ideas underlying multilingualism and intercultural attitudes. The second step will test the validity of the program through "action-research" as an adequate procedure of scientific testing.

The object of my exposé will be offering a body of thoughts and suggestions to the effect of ensuring adequate development of both stages of the program.

## 1. THE STUDY OF FOREIGN CULTURE WITHIN LANGUAGE

Most of my considerations are the result of a seminar held at the European Center for Education, at Frascati (Rome), in 1987 (Calasso, 1987).

It is ever more stressed by language teaching methodologists that foreign languages should be studied in strict connection with their background cultures. Languages without their social contents appear like empty shells. The semantic and pragmatic components of each language system are inseparable from the forms of language.

Teaching cultural diversity, as indicated by anthropology, shows a conflicting tendency: on one side the tendency toward universalizing values, codes, goods, meanings; on the other, the tendency toward segmenting, excluding, reserving, separating. For instance, in many countries there is clear tendency to teach a second language from a very early age for the purpose of international communication. But at the same time in these or in other countries, there is an emerging tendency to reviving local or autochthonous dialects and languages with their traditional cultures.

Now the problem is: can very young children be taught both the foreign language and – above all – its corresponding culture? Are they capable of understanding and accepting differences which are alien to their own environment?

A research conducted at the University of Rome with young children studying English has proved that they can not only understand cultural differences but also appreciate and enjoy them. It depends on the teacher's attitude and methods.

## 2. THE UNDERSTANDING OF DIVERGENT CULTURAL PATTERNS

Here there are two basic questions that need asking: (a) what does it mean understanding another culture? (b) what does it imply fitting educational strategies to cultural differences?

2.1. Understanding in the sense of empathic identification requires the use of effective methods of differential analysis of the reality as object of psychological focus. Contrastive cultural analysis has been formulated by Robert Lado (1957) in terms of structural comparison. Culture is a system of patterns. In other words, each culture is made up of constant and recurrent units of behaviour and thought. Such units characterized by a form, a meaning,

and an appropriate distribution. These three characteristics are essential in determining the significance of cultural behaviour.

Difficulties in understanding cultural patterns of a different community may be due to the fact that in two cultures form may be identical but its meaning different, like the wearing of black or white in funerals, or on the other side hand clapping at shows. Other cases may imply the recurrence of identical form, identical meaning, but different distribution. And alike.

Contrastive analysis should be taught to teachers and applied practically to young learners. There is no doubt that even very young children can be led to perceive and appreciate differences first through immersion in the foreign environment and then by pointing out the meanings of such differences in classroom sessions, but more effectively on the occasion of international student exchanges or visits to foreign countries. If this is not possible, audio-visual aids may do effectively to that purpose.

2.2. Educational strategies suitable to this end have proven to be such methods as the ethnographic study of communication in the classroom and full immersion in the foreign culture.

First of all, ethnography applied to classroom activities can be used to point out the varying origins and behaviors of the pupils insofar as they come from different social levels and communities. Especially, in countries where immigration has reached high levels of presence, children of foreign extraction can afford numerous opportunities of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural understanding. The best assistant-teachers can become the immigrant children themselves.

In the second place, I think that cross-cultural understanding can become the source of educational factors enriching metalinguistic awareness. As a matter of fact, analyzing the diversities of cultural patterns makes for deeper consciousness of the linguistic forms embodying such life patterns. This is certainly one more reason for considering intercultural education as a powerful factor for personality development.

### 3. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

It has been pointed out by communication researchers that many aspects of connotation, but also of denotation, in communication are carried by non-verbal signs. Certainly, self-expression is mainly suggested by non-verbal clues (like gestures, grimaces, body movements, gaze, posture, etc.). Emotions are generally conveyed through the same signs in all cultures. But there are a number of signs that differ from culture to culture, like smiling, nodding, gesturing, and alike. Gestures, especially, as testified by kinesic studies, tend to

differ even within subclasses of the same culture (see the gestures of the Neapolitan speaker).

Teaching the meaning of some non-verbal signs may be useful if not at a very young age at least with children of primary school age. It has been found to be useful teaching American individuals the meaning and use of certain forms of Arabic behaviour; or developing training programs in order to facilitate communication among English school pupils and differing racial groups of immigrant children (McPhail 1972).

#### 4. UNDERSTANDING ART OF A DIFFERENT CULTURE

No doubt figurative art is culturally determined. Certainly, African or Eastern art forms are clearly distinguished from Western art. Art decoding needs therefore appropriate training. Most likely this is not easy to do with very young children. Although it could be the object of specific experimentation since kindergarten age. Why not try new experiences of early art interpretation?

Understanding art forms implies acknowledging different ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. If children – as has been proven – are able to understand different forms of behaviour, why should they not be able to recognize the symbols pertaining to these differences?

#### 5. THE TRAINING OF TEACHERS AND COORDINATORS FOR INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

This is the crucial problem. As for all the school systems where a foreign language has been inserted as part of the basic curriculum, the big question remains: how to recruit and train capable teachers?

In such institutions as the European Youth Center one of the problems to be faced is the training of intercultural social workers endowed with a sufficient knowledge of different cultures. Simulation games are frequently used in the context of role plays. If it is important to train social workers and tutors for international exchange activities equally important it is to add this component to the package of teacher training programs.

Teachers must not only know the foreign language but be able to understand the cultural diversities and identify themselves as "valued members of the foreign community" (Lambert).

The work lying ahead is enormous. It is a question of not only giving a working knowledge of the foreign language for practical as well as scientific or intellectual purposes but authentic self-identification with the foreign ways of life, thinking, feeling, and behaving.

I think that no university academic program will be able to achieve this purpose. It requires a "full immersion" program in the foreign culture by living abroad and allowing oneself to be imbued with the colors and tastes of a different way of living. To this effect it is highly recommended that the Council of Europe afford opportunities for frequent and well-guided exchange on an international basis.

#### 6. LONG-RANGE RESEARCH NEEDED ON AN INTERNATIONAL BASIS

During the Frascati Seminar (1987) a number of questions were posed to the effect of tracing lines for future research. May I reproduce them here.

1. What contents can make international exchange programs productive?
2. What are the significant traits of a culture that need to be emphasized?
3. How should immersion in another culture be programmed and guided?
4. How should conflicts be utilized in order to better know our cultural frontiers and the other peoples'?
5. How could we utilize art in order to reach an understanding of cultural differences?
6. How can communication between alien-language groups be achieved?
7. Should classes of students be selected and how?
8. How is the exchange program to be prepared?
9. How can homes be involved?
10. How can the results of such experiences be evaluated?

I think that all these questions are significant. But what should the research procedures be with the purpose of ensuring the best type of evaluation of such intercultural education programs?

Today's trends all point to the suitable use of that type of longitudinal investigation called "action-research".

"Action-research" involves a continued testing of results not through the use of mere objective tests but by participant observation of all agents responsible for the attainment of the stated goals.

Teachers, intercultural social workers, programmers, children, parents, and all cultural agents should take part in the enterprise as actors and receivers of the effects of the program.

In considering some of the most significant bilingual education projects in Europe it is easy to detect the at times latent presence of the cultural component.

The Italian experience centered upon FL teaching in both primary schools and kindergartens (see Titone, unpublished IEDPE Seminar report); the Spanish Catalan projects (see Siguan, unpublished IEDPE Seminar report); the Irish experience (see ÓMurchú & Murchú, 1987); studies of early childhood

bilingualism in the mixed-lingual family (Arnberg, 1981); the study of the effects of bilingualism on development during early childhood (Arnberg, 1981a); case studies of bilingual children in the home setting (Arnberg 1981b); studies of language strategies in mixed nationality families (Arnberg, 1979); analyses of language problems in bilingual communities like Wales (Baker, 1985), and other studies not yet brought to publicity, all conceal interesting implications for the connection of pluriculturalism with multilingualism.

Hopefully all these experiences will contribute to a clear understanding of such deep connections, but above all it is to be desired that new lines of research will be started out in various European countries with a view to defining the possibility and the effects of early multilingual/multicultural education in preschool settings.

The present Paris IEDPE seminar is but the starting point of future, promising work. It is important to join efforts and exchange experiences in order to achieve more significant results to be widely shared by all educational communities.

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