

MODERN APPROACHES TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract. This article discusses creativity, innovations and interculturalism as key trends in modern Foreign Language Teaching. It argues that in a learning environment strongly dependant on digital technology and extensive communication participatory learning and achievements of high results do not seem visible if the above-mentioned trends are not taken into serious consideration.

Keywords: foreign language teaching; education; innovations

Foreign language learning is an integral part of the Common European Qualificational Framework, which aims at synchronizing education in all EU member states. However, in the current conditions of rapid technological development and dynamic social changes observed over the last ten years, the success of language acquisition presupposes the modernization of education and its adaptation to the requirements of the present and the future.

Such a modernization obviously requires a reconsideration of the whole educational paradigm and calls for new approaches to both teaching and learning. This new paradigm would ceratinly be strongly anthropological and personally-oriented, and based upon tendencies such as *innovation*, *creativity* and *inturculturalism*.

Innovation is certainly related to the freedom to choose untested directions and approaches, to a non-fading curiosity about the new and unexperienced, to the constant drive to search and understand the unknown. And is based on a high degree of precision, high quality standards, meaningfulness and practical application of the things created.

Creativity signifies the ability to go beyond the commonly shared ideas and meanings, to break the general framework, to always use imagination in a way that allows independent search aimed at finding working solutions which no one so far has come up with, and which the other people find successful and valuable. Imagination is the core of creativity, it pushes people constantly to think about issues, which their senses seem unable to catch; it gives birth to skills that allow the

mind to work non-stop finding unknown dimensions which creative people make the others familiar with.

As for *interculturalism*, it is based on the idea to recognize and value differences, to acknowledge similarities and consider otherness as a great source of opportunities. Interculturalism is a concept that requires new approach to upbringing, socialization and education and is based on the principles of empathy, understanding and intercultural communication.

These three new trends are certainly applicable in the field of foreign language learning and teaching. Language, as the main form of communication, presupposes the application of practical activities, actively involving all the senses in the process of perception. Knowledge reaches those who assimilate it through various channels. This is why experiential learning allows for a fast and accurate way for learners to achieve their learning goals. Application of the three tendencies discussed here increases motivation in learning, and brings about higher efficiency in skills' formation as visuality of the subsequent narrative affects positively the language acquisition even more strongly than the spoken language itself.

Application of these trends make learning results particularly encouraging, especially when they are implemented through innovative approaches such as gamification and flipped classroom, both capable of motivating students to learn with increased engagement and higher degree of content due to the fact that learning occurs through experience. The use of games in foreign language learning as a tool for teaching and learning is quite promising approach due to their ability to transfer and consolidate not only knowledge but also important skills – especially for communication, problem solving and cooperation.

Gamification decreases the negative effect of learning, often related to the natural resistance to encountered difficulties, as it dissolves them in a composition of a variety of positive feelings, such as curiosity, entertainment, and desire to win; it answers the basic natural necessity of all humans to have fun. And the flipped classroom changes successfully not only the traditional order of learning activities but also the learning roles in education. Moreover, it alters its very focus placing in the center learners and not teachers.

The interaction of the teacher with the students in the flipped classroom can be more personalized and less didactic, as the students actively participate in the acquisition and building of knowledge, and at the same time evaluate their participation. That is why various authors (Honeycutt & Garrett, 2014) consider the „flipped classroom“ as a way to include students' own experience in the implementation and analysis of the learning process. The use of this approach, however, requires the application of the following principles:

1. Relevance of teaching and learning to learners' needs;
2. Implementation of learning and teaching in an entertaining, interesting, attractive and participatory educational environment;

3. High degree of applicability and usefulness of learning results.

Creativity as a trend in foreign language learning is an expression of the desire to go beyond the traditional, to use imagination for finding new solutions that no one has come up with so far, and hence offers greater learning opportunities. Its practical application requires the recognition of the fact that creativity is inherent to all learners, moreover when they are children it is a crucial need of their being (Robinson, 2013).

Creativity relies on the necessity to stimulate effectively the individuality of each learner in such a way so that s/he is able of activating her/his own imagination, projecting it over own personal experience, and thus to find the sought solutions. The Bulgarian educational practice offers various concrete examples based on good practices of usage of creativity. Various schools in the country for years now have been applying well-established methodologies that are not based on the classical approach to foreign language teaching – textbook usage, grammar acquisition, reading and translation, etc. – but even go beyond the newer and often used communicative method, based on learning through constant communication in a foreign language.

The first non-standard methodology, which certainly fits into the requirements for creativity – as it puts art at its center – is suggestopedia. This is a pedagogical system based on the principles of suggestology (Shopov, 2012). The methodology, created and developed by the medical doctor and professor Georgi Lozanov, relies on the following principles.

1. Love (teacher loves students)
2. Freedom (there is no „you have to“, but „would you like to ...?“)
3. Conviction (the teacher believes in success and validity of the learning processes applied)
4. Large volume of educational content (far exceeding the standards of the textbooks used in the Bulgarian school)
5. Part-whole, whole-part relationship (holistic approach)
6. Golden section (measure and harmony)
7. Aesthetics of beauty („beauty will save the world“)

The schools in Bulgaria that are currently running their education process on the basis of suggestopedia are the private school „Artis“ and „Progressive School“, along with various courses for children and adults, offered in a number of suggestopedic centers in several cities in the country.

Among the other creative methodologies applied in the Bulgarian foreign language teaching practice, a special mention deserves the following:

- The Helen Doron method (named after the linguist Helen Doron) aimed at learning English in parallel with the mother tongue from infancy or early childhood through games, fairy tales, flash cards, exercise books, singing songs and using recorded music;

– The Hocus-Lotus method: created by Professor Traute Teschner, based on the narrative format. Like Helen Doron, the idea here is for very early foreign language learning, so that the foreign language is learned naturally (as the mother tongue) through repetitive exercises, fairy tales and drama.

The Hokus-Lotus methodology is recommended for application from infancy, and in some countries, it is used in kindergartens to integrate immigrants – for example, in Germany, children of foreign origin learn German from the age of 3 years. The methodology could be applied to children in primary school, but with an appropriate adaptation – depending on the age.

These non-standard practices, which emphasize mainly the student's personality, types of intelligence and opportunities for development and use of creativity in learning, confirm the thesis of their central place in modern education – on the one hand, as a trend relying on heuristics and creativity, making learners constantly express curiosity and desire to learn, to do and share; and on the other – as a key human individual characteristic, allowing the adaptation of learning and teaching to the specific needs and interests of each individual.

Interculturalism as a trend in education contributes to a better understanding of different peoples and cultures, based on training that accepts and respects diversity in all areas of life – a condition that is considered normal. It creates attitudes among learners that they are different and develop in a different and individual way. It explores and analyzes challenges against this type of understanding of the world, opposing all kinds of extreme forms such as nationalism, xenophobia and inequality, and defending the idea of equal opportunity for all.

Interculturalism helps people accept and understand the world around them, making diversity a supreme value. Among its main goals are to expand the scope of intercultural relations, increase the degree of tolerance and accept differences as a means of regulating and managing contradictions and conflicts. It provides knowledge about different cultures and forms of communication, about the habits, practices and traditions that characterize them, thus becoming a key element of foreign language learning.

Knowledge of the diversity of the world forms skills for effective communication in the widest variety of contexts, creates a specific holistic (including educational) environment in which diversity and pluralism are the norm. And it is quite natural that such an environment presupposes the formation of positive attitudes and understanding of differences, as well as an increased desire to learn a foreign language. And last but not least – a more successful chance to participate in social interactions in understanding the otherness arising from the foreign language, while preserving one's own identity.

Interculturalism as an educational trend leads to the formation of intercultural competence, including skills that facilitate the effective action and interaction of individuals and societies in a world characterized by cultural and linguistic

diversity; helps to communicate effectively; creates space and conditions for harmonious coexistence.

In order to effectively create and implement open forms of effective communication that requires dynamics in terms of cultural interactions and the corresponding intercultural competence, the sociologist Dominique Boucher (Bouchet, 1995). formulates five basic principles that can be useful – due to their theoretical and practical approach – regarding the correct understanding of intercultural competence. According to Boucher:

1. No individual is a „typical“ member of the culture s/he represents.
2. There is no culture in „closed“ and „homogeneous“ form.
3. No one is a member of only one „isolated“ group and his/her personal identity is determined in relation to members belonging to other groups.
4. Every culture is a form of translation of certain values and models that can be subjected to new transformations;

The above-mentioned principles applicable to the formulation of intercultural competence are also explained by Boucher through the prism of the epistemological perspective. According to him acquisition of any foreign culture is a two-way process where different cultural groups interact, and their communication brings about a type of exchange characterized by readiness to react and always consider the presence of ‘the other’. (Bouchet, 1995, 77 – 79).

The desire for interculturalism in education is expressed in many countries around the world, including Bulgaria, where it is reflected in a number of projects – „Schools without discrimination, 2008“, as well as in a number of academic publications (Koleva, 2017, Danov, 2020). In general, however, this aspiration has not yet been reflected in a real public awareness of interculturalism; its ideas find it difficult to make their way among centuries-old negative attitudes toward otherness. And that is precisely why the European Union sees intercultural education as a chance for the unification of nations, and intercultural dialogue as a key factor in communication, especially in regard to foreign language teaching and learning. The EU adopts the following principles as leading in the development of interculturalism:

Learning should help to critically perceive reality, to teach learners how to distance themselves from the generally accepted opinions operating in a dominant culture, to respect other cultures and to analyze different legal aspects;

– Development of dialogue, without obligatory identification, should help teachers and students to realize that each view of reality is subjective, distorted by a certain cultural perspective, and that each culture in a sense is dependent and borrowing elements from other cultures.

– Education should lead to the pursuit of the establishment and development of dialogue, without mandatory identification with a dominant culture and without requiring the forcible consolidation of certain cultural identities.

In a nutshell, intercultural education can and should be integrated into foreign language learning, as it leads to the development of *communicative competence*. This competence encourages and promotes normal communication (Angelov, 2007) and – according to the American sociologist Del Hymes (Hymes, 1983) - manifests itself on four separate levels, namely:

- a) Feasibility – whether and to what extent communication is possible at all
- b) Applicability – whether and to what extent communication is possible in terms of means of implementation
- c) Relevance – whether and to what extent communication is acceptable (adequate) and in relation to the context in which it is used and evaluated
- d) Applicability and effect – whether and to what extent such communication is practically applicable and what follows from it.

This raises the question of how exactly this competence can be measured when it comes to communication in intercultural conditions, which in practice is any foreign language learning. According to Deardorff (2006), the criteria should be outside the competence of the entity in question. It is not normal for each participant in the process of foreign language communication to indicate the extent to which s/he was effective in a given intercultural environment, but only another (and independent of the first) participant in such communication can determine the appropriateness of the first.

There is hardly any universal recipe for such an assessment, but it should certainly address the question of 'whose exact point of view is being assessed'. It is possible that the complex specifics of intercultural competence may turn it into a function of goals and interests of the parties in communication and their affiliation and connection with various organizations, institutions, communities, countries, etc.

It is this diversity that implies differences in assessments if the goals of the participants in the communication diverge. Therefore, it is important that the assessment of intercultural communicative competence, as part of the training, combines a set of direct and indirect evidence representing the behavior of each party involved in the communication process. A direct proof in this case would be a plan that includes the goals set, related to the values of intercultural competence, which we have already talked about.

In this sense, students should agree with their teacher the specific things they intend to learn about interculturalism, as a form of expression within the foreign language they learn, as well as to formulate expected results. We are talking about combining interculturalism with other trends in the development of education such as creativity, the interpretative application of different approaches and innovations.

As particularly suitable for this purpose, we consider the different varieties of the portfolio, which contains direct evidence of the entire path traveled in the research of the field and its relationship with interculturalism. Many programs support the

development of an e-portfolio and track specific learning outcomes. Therefore, it is good if the prepared portfolio also contains a part (rubric) related to the achievements on the development of interculturalism as part of the foreign language acquisition. Such forms are successfully used in many educational institutions in the United States and in some countries of Western Europe – Finland, Germany, Britain, France, etc.

Reflection can also be a successful tool in assessing the development of learners' intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). Personal diaries, blogs, postings on social networks - are an excellent opportunity to collect data that can show the development of a learner in the field of intercultural communicative competence.

Another form of assessment is circumstantial testimonials, in which evidence of the development of intercultural communicative competence is collected through surveys or through assessments of behavior through the prism of others who know it, such as colleagues (classmates) and/or friends on social networks. In addition to giving a direct expression to the practice of the language being studied, the use of such indirect means necessarily requires clarity about what exactly they are measuring.

In conclusion, we will add that the assessment of intercultural competence as a result of foreign language learning is not only possible, but most of all necessary, as it provides lessons of experience. It is important for educators and methodologists to understand the importance of this trend in the development of modern foreign language learning in order to distance and avoid elements of subjectivism due to their own deficits vis-à-vis interculturalism.

Such abstraction is possible only if, before the concrete application of any tool, it is projected on the purposes for which it will be used and its analysis shows that it can lead to measurability of the results. And most importantly – the subjects of education to have an awareness and attitude that the development of intercultural communicative competence is just as important as the achievement of all the goals set within the language they teach/study.

We can summarize that the proposed article presented several key ideas related to the implementation of working educational practices that have emerged as trends over the past ten years in different countries around the world. All of them successfully contribute to the formation of skills and competencies of a new type, such as modern societies need. The ideas and practices we have considered lead directly to positive changes at four different levels, all of which contribute to the sustainable development of education – individually, professionally, institutionally and socially.

Referred to the individual level of the learners, the tendencies for creativity, innovation and interculturalism contribute to their inclusion in multilingual education in ways corresponding to learners' own individuality, needs and interests. Creativity allows for the full use of the imagination, through which learners can find

new dimensions in the problems they study and offer non-standard and workable solutions.

Innovation allows the application of a wide range of tools that turn the acquisition of language and the world through knowledge into a heuristic process in which – through learning by doing – learners are constantly gaining new experience, internalizing knowledge, skills and positive attitudes – in the direction of upward personal development, determined mostly by their own gifts and talents. And interculturalism helps them understand the infinite diversity of the world, which opens the door to tolerance, cooperation, a constant desire to communicate, discover the „other“ and the ability to accept differences as part of normality of life.

With regard to the changes that occur on a personal level among teachers, the trends we consider here help them overcome the conservatism, which often results from the experience gained over the years; to break the pattern of routine and traditionalism, making learning for many students uninteresting, meaningless and practically inapplicable; to get out of reality, aimed at applying practices belonging to the past. These trends are also a useful tool successfully tackling subjectivism, prejudices and stereotypes that often block teachers' ability to understand, help and support some of the learners – and hence – sometimes prevents the identification of talents and crashes down the realization of students' dreams.

At a professional level, the trends analyzed in this article qualitatively change the status of the teachers, turning them into far more creative figures, adequate to both the progress in teaching a particular language, and to the opportunities that this language opens up for the future of their learners.

Creativity, innovation and interculturalism allow teachers to move away from the traditional role of „sages on stage“ and instead – to go along with learners in the world of knowledge by constantly monitoring all elements of the educational environment; helps them turn into factors facilitating the achievement of the goals set, because of the clarity about their true meaning and benefit.

At the institutional level, the proposed ideas for change lead to a continuous optimization of the educational environment in schools and universities, helping to overcome the decades-old negative attitudes towards education as an area unable to respond adequately to the needs of life.

The ideas proposed here are provoked by our impressions gathered in the immediate professional everyday life, which raises with equal force both the question of the future of foreign language teaching and its current state, and the ways in which the transition between the two can happen faster, more painless and more effective.

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