Affective reflection as a learning strategy for cultural and linguistic integration

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Abstract

This study starts from the premise that having linguistic competences is not enough for students to communicate with people who are from different cultural spaces. This paper is a theoretical approach to the students' problem who choose to learn in a foreign country, as is their cultural and linguistic integration. The emotional expression is one of the very good modalities to develop communication between people from different cultural spaces. This study, by proposing some learning strategies to develop the communication in a non-native language, especially from a social and cultural perspective, contributes to developing the positive students' interaction and social collaboration to know and work with others from a different cultural space, and to appreciate others. By using them, the students are encouraged to correctly express their feelings and knowledge by adapting to the cultural particularities of the different countries.

Keywords: Education, competences, learning, cultural integration.

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1. Introduction

One of the major effects of globalisation is the amazing human mobility; nowadays, it is easier for people to go abroad to study, to work and to spend enjoyable moments in different countries. This effect is amplified by excessive development of techniques and technologies as well as the informational explosion. Having more knowledge people need to use them in own life. For human beings, knowledge means experience and very often action and 'public acknowledgement'. That is why the 'border' concept changes over time. It seems to be a relative term that encourages more 'boundless contact' than limits between people, cultures and countries. This is closely related to changing of the 'education' concept as well. In the education process, training of students was an important task for integrating them in a different and inhomogeneous social and professional community.

Having feelings is a human component; emotion has a quite short-life and is intense, which can influence human decisions, relationship and behaviours. Generally, feelings are implied in every human being's activity. Particular attention needs to be paid to students who learn a foreign language for studying and working abroad.

Choosing to study in abroad means to have integration abilities and to use own linguistic and cultural knowledge for the same. Integration does not mean only knowledge it means to have the desire to do the best and, by expansion, to have positive feelings. For this reason, communication and relationship competences occupy an essential place in preparing young people for life and a professional career. The students have the capacities and abilities to accept and work with people from different cultural spaces, and to adapt and integrate themselves in a foreign cultural space.

There are many studies and articles which propose a lot of foreign language learning strategies which can help students to understand, speak and write in a non-maternal language (Cerghit, 2008; Doncheva, 2015; Lehmann, 2007; Siebert, 2001). In this paper, it is not useful for us to mention them. However, all of them have the same interest: helping the students to be able to express themselves in an appropriate communicational context, to know what and how is correct to say in a different situation. Or, only this situation changes rapidly and sometimes too much in substance. As a consequence, people must be trained for what, when and how they might adapt their knowledge and attitudes. And this is only possible if the cognitive experience was interiorised by each student. That is why pedagogical and scientific preoccupations must be focused not only on learning a foreign language but also on developing strategies that allow students to understand, use and control their emotions. Feelings always accompany knowledge even if it is more or less realised.

2. Hypothesis, objectives, observations and discussions

This paper starts from the premise that, reflecting on own emotions, the students who chose to study abroad can be more responsible and interested for improvement of linguistic competences needed for better communication and integration in a foreign cultural space. Implicitly, they can improve their own communication competences and resistance to cultural stereotypes and clichés. We consider that emotions accompany the communication and influence the attitudes and comportments.

The following approach directions were included in the paper:

- identifying the learning progress problems of the students from the affective perspective in higher education;
- insisting over the aspects that prove the importance of reflexivity in foreign language learning process;
- analysing the contribution of affective reflection to develop the student's communication competences;
- offering and presenting some didactical methods and techniques which encourage students, using the affective reflection, for the improvement of linguistic and cultural integration.

Our paper is a theoretical research that respects specific research strategies. Intending to develop the above-mentioned proposal's approach, we used both the researchers' opinions and our observations made during the seminary activities with foreign students (incoming Erasmus students) registered at University of Galati. The students agreed to participate in this study since their anonymity and the data to be collected, analysed and interpreted were protected. The participants (37) were aged 19–27 years and were studying at the University of Galati for 5–12 months. They had chosen to learn the Romanian language as a foreign language. Our observations are focused on the following issues.

2.1. Importance of affective reflection in student activity learning, especial to foreign language learning

It is well known that the university programs train students for a specific professional field or job. For this reason, the learning activities are less focused on accepting and collaborating with others who are different (from a social, ethnic or human perspective). In general, this educational direction is available for local students as well as foreign students because the affectivity seems to be included in the cognitive experience. As a consequence, the learning activities are not a task of expressing own emotions.

But, looking into the list of *European Key Competences* (namely, transversal competences) which was proposed and described by the Council of Europe (2000), it can be noticed that some of them are supposed to include knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that have subsumed to positive emotions. For example, linguistic *competences to communicate in a foreign language* can be better developed if it is encouraged personally through good social interaction with other people; these capacities should be useful to students, in an interactional manner, for understanding and accepting the cultural differences. Others examples are *social and civic competences* and *cultural sensibility competences*. First, the students have to include all capacities, conduits and attitudes of a good and responsible citizen. The second one is focused on artistic skills, abilities and capacities to identify and express the beauty. In this way, the students can be more interested in different cultural spaces, to know and appreciate them. As a consequence, student's learning competences must be correlated with volitional and affective educational components. Despite this, as we know, until now, there is no working subject in the didactical literature that addresses this. Only the behavioural sciences propose new research directions more interested in the human emotion field. In this view, some scientific theories have been drawn up in accordance with the learning process (Goleman, 2001; Guntersdorfer & Golubeva, 2018; Lyusin, 2004; Wiemann & Backlund, 1980). A possible correlation of emotional expressions and new psychologic–educational theories can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Emotions and learning process—*n*ew theories

As shown in Figure 1, the new behavioural and educational sciences theories request values and attitudes which belong to the affective domain and that can be developed by human interaction. All of them are useful for developing linguistic competences: expressing feelings and reflecting upon own emotions help people to find the right words to express what it means. Some of these constructive emotions are analysed by the above-mentioned theories, like self-discipline, empathy and consciousness of own persona. In addition, these actual theories argue the importance of control and expression of emotions for personal and professional development of students, and the importance of collaboration with the inside affective life for a better linguistic interaction with others and social, cultural and professional integration (Mackie, 1989; McDonald Connor & Morrison, 2016).

From a didactical perspective, expressing own emotions seems to be not a priority of learning strategies. It was not proposed by techniques and methods referring to this task, but there are enough stages of their applications which encourage speaking and writing about own feelings (Hymes, 1972; Scharfe, 2000). We think this situation is a normal one because expressing feelings is the product of individual subjectivity and uniqueness. For this reason, it is very difficult to evaluate what the students feel, whether it is good or bad, correct or incorrect, necessary or unnecessary and expected or undesirable; feelings cannot be anticipated. Moreover, it does not allow pressuring them so that students feel the obligation to express their effects.

In our opinion, expressing and controlling emotions contribute to the development of student experience at two levels:

a. cognitive level: realising and using own affects, students can improve knowledge about their or others' cultural identity, abilities and capacities to understand and accept the cultural differences, so as to limit the cultural stereotypes and to encourage knowing each other, to find the common cultural aspects which help to integrate them in a different cultural space;
b. behaviour level: understanding own as well as others' feelings, students can pay more attention to gestures, attitudes and conduits for realising better interaction and good relationship with others and, thus, better cultural integration.

As can be noticed, emotions encourage or discourage human contact, communication and (non) desire to do these. Thinking about what, why and how others feel is a good way to improve verbal communication in a foreign language, and by extension, the non-verbal one, according to 'cultural etiquette'.

In a particular case, for students participating in this study, expressing own emotions means:

- an interesting way to have more information about themselves and to think, write and speak about what and why people feel so as to know themselves better;
- an opportunity to understand others, if they speak about their feelings;
- a funny modality to interact with each other;
- a possibility to know and understand each other;
- a key for controlling own reaction.

It can be noticed that the students must have a positive reaction if they need to express their own feelings and to accept others' feelings.

Asking about how to use and express their emotions in a learning activity, all of them consider that it is not easy to express because the students feel embarrassed while speaking about their own emotions. On the other hand, until now, they were not encouraged to meditate on their own effects and not taught to understand and control them.

For this reason, we consider that students need to be trained and encouraged to express their feelings and discuss more about it. Performing this in a foreign language means to feel and think like the people who speak this language. If they are able to express own affects, according to the cultural etiquette of the foreign society, it means their linguistic and cultural integration is completed. A good way to make it is to reflect and self-reflect.

2.2. Develop reflective competences to a cultural and linguistic integration

Generally, reflexivity covers a larger field, and most of them are in connection with 'looking back' action which allows students to understand their own emotional state (Buck, 1991; Dewey, 1933). They can understand their living experience by comparing their own reactions with emotions which were generated in other situations, or with emotions expressed by other people (Saarni, 1999).

In Romanian educational system, reflexivity is always linked to the moments of diagnosis on what concerns the activity that has just ended or to the prognosis, in the case of the activities that are to be done.

As a way to improve the linguistic and cultural integration, the students who participated in this study were asked about the reflections made upon their own feelings and that of the others. We have the following answers:

- the social rank is dictated by the immediate results, and there is not enough time to reflect in an organised way at one's own feelings, efforts and at the emotional changes;
- if the reflections are made in the wrong way, their results can discourage social and interpersonal interactions;
- the appreciation of others must not be dependent only on personal reflections; there is a possibility to be wrong;
- there is a good opportunity for understanding others and ourselves, to know better what is the correct attitude and comportment which must be made in a cultural space or any other place;
- meditating more about own feelings and trying to express them in an appropriate modality is the key to real social integration;
- for improving the interpersonal contacts with people from different countries, it is very important to know how one's feelings can be expressed and understand the feelings of others.
- it is a funny way to interact with people from a different space, but it is a responsible act.

As a result, it can be seen that the students have a positive attitude related to the reflexive learning activity, but they have to be trained in an appropriate form about the cultural differences.

Limiting to the foreign language learning process, reflexivity is attributed to two components:

a. Personal experience	b. Methodological approach
• the capacity to recognise own feelings and that of the others; • the competence to express and understand feelings from the cultural difference perspective • the capacity to meditate over one's own affects; • the capacity to understand the feelings expressed by the others from a different country; • the linguistic competences to express feelings in a foreign language	• the strategy which favours the critical analysis of learning activities; • collaborative and cooperative learning activity • didactical reflexive technique;

For having better educational results, both of them need to be connected; students ought to be implied in various reflexive activities, and, in this respect, they will be able to use many reflexive techniques and methods which will help them to develop their personal experience.

2.3. Feelings and their learning finalities

Expressing feelings may be oriented towards the learning finalities; in this way, it can be accepted as a learning strategy which is helpful to students for maintaining integration in a different cultural space. As a strategy, the emotions can be self-realised and self-controlled using various techniques and contexts (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). For developing linguistic and cultural knowledge, we propose the following didactical modalities:
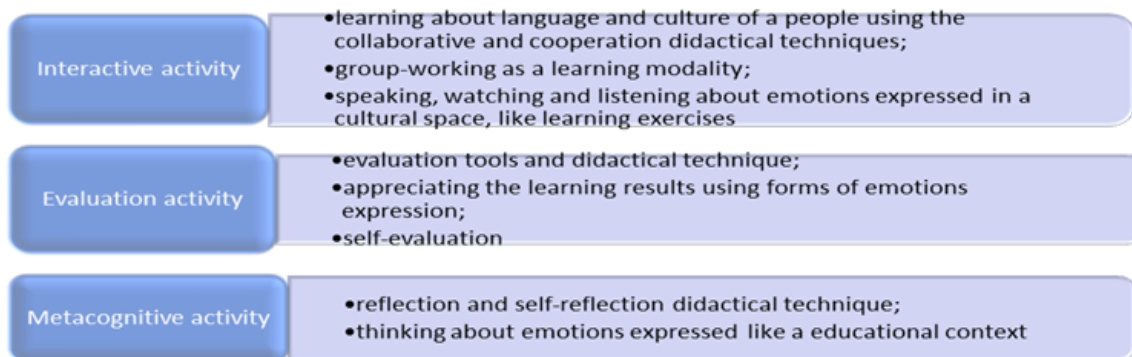

Interactive activity
• learning about language and culture of a people using the collaborative and cooperation didactical techniques;
• group-working as a learning modality;
• speaking, watching and listening about emotions expressed in a cultural space, like learning exercises

Evaluation activity
• evaluation tools and didactical technique;
• appreciating the learning results using forms of emotions expression;
• self-evaluation

Metacognitive activity
• reflection and self-reflection didactical technique;
• thinking about emotions expressed like a educational context

Figure 2. Feelings expressed and learning finalities

If the first activity is well known, the last one will be often neglected in the educational process. One explanation is that metacognitive activity is understood very often as a part of the self-evaluation process, especially for judging the marks or qualitative assessments obtained after learning activities. Usually, the reflections, as a metacognitive activity, are correlated with the ending of an activity (Nagata, 2006; Stanciu & Ignat , 2006). But this turning back on itself of 'the critical look' can precede or accompany it.

2.4. Reflexive strategies as a modality to express the feelings

It is really important for students to identify their own emotion and express them in an appropriate modality (Alexandrache, 2014). If students understand their own feelings, they can have self-control for achieving social, professional or cultural integration.

A possible graphical representation of the relation between the feelings, reflection and learning process is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Affective reflection and learning strategies

Stage of affective reflection	Reflexive activity	Learning implications. Recommendations
Sensorial information. Perceptions and their basic expressions	• elementary affective reaction (universally expressed in all cultures): - facial expressions (mimics); - body language (posture, physical reaction); - gestures (approving or non-approving, accepting or non-accepting). • satisfaction emotions (related to colleague's participation, results accomplished, efforts done.	• focus on the cultural and civilisational elements, cultural difference and empathy; • depend on the level of education degree, cognitive experience, correct self-knowing, desires, personal intentions and temperamental components; • develop social experience, own personality; • very carefully prepare the learning context and space of interpersonal contact; • more attention to psychological components of students
Interiorise own emotions of others.	• interpret the emotional expressed (using linguistic constructs) • comparing own emotional experience with of the others; • including affects in an emotional category; • analysing feelings from the cultural, national stereotypies perspective; • comparing own feelings and of the others with cultural stereotypes	• reflections about impressions, emotions, experienced (the type of affects, the cause, acceptance or non-acceptance) • learning activities which encourage the verbal expression of feelings, talking about own feelings and the feelings of others and what are the causes of that; • focus on the exercises on the cultural differences as a main cause of some feelings
Reactions as a response to the emotions experienced	• combining emotions to create new ones; • affective actions (attitudes, gestures, comportments); • associating emotions and feelings with gestures, attitudes, behaviours; • identifying the impact of feelings expressed on the cultural, social and professional integration	• encourage writing down own impressions, thoughts and feelings like the personal diary, team diary, "the logbook", "the double entrance journal", the essay of five minutes; • reflecting upon the possibility to change the cultural, ethnical stereotypes
Behavioural changes as a result of the elaborate reflexivity	• complete understanding of the actions, behaviours which were influenced by feelings; • creating new and different motivational situations	• realise the reflections over both the positive or negative social and cultural experiences, and their the causes and implications; • every experience is gained by acting and reflecting over the modifications suffered; • reflecting on the norms and values which need to be respected for a real integration

It can be seen that combining reflexivity with affective expressions will help to identify and apply inter-knowing and adapting strategies for maintaining cultural harmony.

3. Conclusion

All emotional reactions have a stronger impact over one's own personality, as well as over others, thus influencing 'the interpersonal dialogue'. If this dialogue has a cultural dimension, the role of emotions becomes more important. For this reason, the learning activities have to encourage expressing and understanding of emotional reactions regarding interactions with the others who belong to different cultural backgrounds. Reflection about own feelings related to foreign language learning process is a great solution for increasing efficiency and quality of communication and interaction of students. It is essential to organise the context of the learning process: for this, the affective reflections must have a cultural dimension. In this way, the emotions expressed can help students to integrate themselves in a different cultural space. Certainly, linguistic competences are an indispensable instrument of student integration in a cultural, social and professional space. But for efficient development, it is recommended to think about what, how, why and when to express emotions related to the cultural differences, especially related to cultural etiquettes, stereotypes, clichés and prejudices.

In order to build-up a cultural behaviour adequately, it is necessary to gain a set of values and attitudes which depend on using and controlling of one's own feelings and contribute to the development of the individual's personality in the context of the cultural expectations; the simplest method is to think upon the values of one's intentions and actions and upon the effects the gestures have.

Consequently, reflexivity creates motivational situations for students and it uses their results in order to prepare some new activities. Reflecting upon what one has felt or on what one could have a feeling increases the trust in one's own strengths and increases the desire to go on with getting to know and to build-up one's personality, a thing which develops the intrinsic motivation (Mark, 2007).

Realising and understanding the emotions, meditating upon them, students, especially the foreign students, will improve their capacities, abilities and attitudes to integrate themselves in a cultural space. They will learn how to do critical thinking, to be more autonomous and to know more about their personality. In addition, affective reflection contributes to equilibrate the self-imagination with the imagination which each person wants to be seen by others. In this respect, it self-suggestion is stimulated to improve social, professional and cultural connexons. All of them contribute to better collaboration and cooperation with the people who are from different countries.

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