Intercultural communication and semiotic analysis in the materials of a foreign language.

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Abstract

This article briefly describes the framework of teaching material for foreign languages into its new ideological and local environment. Some points connected to the formation, the prospect and the development of foreign language teaching material in the new environment, European and national, and a questioning concerning the concept of intercultural communication and the teaching of culture through the lesson of foreign language are stressed. Semiotics is proposed as a powerful methodological instrument to analyse the structure and the function of the semantic systems of cultural meaning in order to achieve a better understanding of culture on the part of foreign language teachers and students.

0. Introduction

This article will briefly present the frame of creating foreign language teaching material in the new spatial and ideological environment. Particularly, some salient points related to the formation, the potential and the development of the teaching material of a foreign language in its new-formed environment, both European and national, will be highlighted.

1. Linguistic Policy

Tokatlidou (2004: 135-143) indicates that European and national linguistic policies are not compatible. More specifically, as she mentions, Europe wishes to promote a common European policy related to multilingualism, while on a practical level, propagating less popular languages remains the concern of the countries and the people who speak them. The term 'linguistic policy' refers to the stance authority, usually state authority, takes in relation to language issues, as well as its decisions and the respective law frames (Tokatlidou 1997: 341).

In the same spirit, Koiliari (2005: 13) mentions that the massive mobility of people around the world have contributed to the formation of a different reality in almost all countries on the planet, disclosing a continuously increasing demand for multicultural education, which has become a strong pedagogical trend. Western societies are faced with a paradox today or an ideologically contradictory frame; on the one hand, globalisation as a homogenising process and, on the other, multiculturalism as a means of preserving cultural and linguistic diversity.

1.1 European Policy

The new aim, as Psaltou – Joyce mentions (2004: 416-422), is the development of multilinguistic and multicultural communicative skill, as it has been defined by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages,* whose focal point is the individual's ability to use various languages to communicate, to

participate in intercultural events for instance, in other words, the development of a complex competence, deriving from a holistic observation of multilingualism and multiverbal competence.

These ambient conditions and the European data for the support of linguistic cultural diversity have given a new boost to the learning of languages (Koiliari 2005: 9). European policy started to promote language learning in 1990, after the adoption of the program Lingua, whose activities have been incorporated and expanded in the programmes Socrates, Leonardo Da Vinci and in other vertical actions (Comenius, Erasmus, Grundvig, Lingua).

From 1995 onwards member states had to create the conditions for the development of functional multilingualism, as it has been defined by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. In this framework, the individual must combine multiple codes, that is, from the linguistic codes to two-party communication. Such a prospect demands changes in school aims, in the mentality of teachers and in student perception.

Figel (2006), the commissioner of the European Union for education, culture and multilingualism, mentions that the motto of the European Union 'unity in diversity' is not utopian. It is a motto which expresses the dynamic of the European Union, which involves peaceful coexistence, respect for cultural and linguistic differences, but also indirect learning which derives from the observation of other people.

A general aim of the European Union concerning foreign languages is that children be taught at least two languages besides their mother tongue as young as possible. The teaching of foreign languages, which constitutes a salient aim for the European Union, leads to the expansion of knowledge of one people for the other at a linguistic and cultural level, to the enhancement of communication among European citizens, but also between them and the European institutional bodies.

The 'multilingual' European citizen involves two parameters: (a) the educational system in accordance with the linguistic policy for foreign languages as defined by each member state and (b) the language teacher, mediator of knowledge, who must be instructed in a common European core of skills and values in line with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* which defines the language teacher profile.

Based on the above, it becomes obvious that the realisation of multilingualism involves a lot of factors; one, as Figel characteristically mentions, is universities which ensure that teachers are adequately prepared, but also facilitate the research for proper methods and new teaching materials.

Surely, for the preservation and the promotion of European languages, the European Union will continue to invest funds in various actions, such as instruction, mobility of students and teachers, new programs for lifelong learning, as well as programs which will cover multilingualism in various areas, such as technological research, translation technology, social sciences (regarding issues of social exclusion, identity, intercultural understanding etc).

It becomes clear from the above that we find ourselves, as people speaking different languages, in the middle of a big enterprise, or even better of a European experiment which aims at the desired multilingualism at the lowest possible national cost. The terminus in the experiment is that the ideal conditions be found, which will lead to the desired result, that is, the understanding of other people and their cultures.

However, Christidis (2004: 71-75) remarks that:

"very often multilingualism is equaled to democracy.. [E]ven though the respect of linguistic polymorphism is undoubtedly part of a democratic ethos, the identification of multilingualism with the democracy and democratic harmony constitutes a mythic hyperbole. It is not language- either as monolingualism or multilingualism which unites or separates, but ideas"

and gives the example of former Yugoslavia where the identification of language and democracy was undermined. The meaning of 'communication ethos' acquires particular importance, as communication ethos defines a level, that of communication and understanding above and beyond languages. Only at this level do discussions about language policies of the European Union acquire meaning, that is when the level of the European ethos of communication is specified.

The question therefore which arises is how the European citizen will reach this new terminus in communication, that is, interculturalism. The answers provided in formal documents so far by the 27 member states of the European Community are too general.

1.2 National Policy

In Greece, intercultural education began in the 1970s, after the influx of immigrants from less economically developed countries, when a great school failure related to students from minority cultures was recorded. Research showed that the failure of the students was primarily because of the fact that the educators did not take into consideration these students' cultural identity (Markou 1997: 56-60).

The intercultural perspective today in Greece constitutes a basic factor in the educational procedure. Its employment is considered by most to be an open action plan, related to social change, peace oriented education, autonomy, individual differences. It does not concern primarily the context of subjects, but the manner of instruction; almost any topic in any class can take on a intercultural dimension. Intercultural education contributes to lifelong social learning and constitutes a general stance towards other cultures. Its success depends on the stance and the methodology of the educator, who must become acquainted with and adopt this perspective, whose basic principles are the respect towards all humans, irrespective of gender, colour, or nationality, the combating of superstition/bias, and finally the acceptance of each person's different cultural identity (Govaris 2001).

2. Interculturalism

It becomes obvious from the above that the educational interest turns to interculturalism, although the use of this term has created the impression that there is a uniform and generally accepted intercultural theory. But this does not tally with reality, as the systematization of the multiple programs and theoretical stances of intercultural education allows a wide range of diverse socio-philosophical horizons to surface. A basic criterion of differentiating and grouping these new directions is the conceptual use of the term 'culture' which may be seen to involve three basic directions. The first direction starts with the principles of cultural globalisation and aims at highlighting the common cultural elements of the groups. The second starts with the principles of cultural relativism and supports the highlighting of cultural differences, while, finally, a last direction is being formed whose benchmark is questions related to 'Ethics of Justice' and the conditions of equal social participation in intercultural societies (Govaris 2001: 77-80).

In the same vein, Dendrinou (2004: 47-5) mentions that the term intercultural communicative competence has become fashionable in the last ten or fifteen years and is used in various ways, in scientific fields, such as applied linguistics, and the didactics of languages. In fact, as she mentions, she does not support the popular, intercultural approaches' in the didactics of languages, as she regards problematic (a) the theoretical concept of interculturalism based on which several language didactic approaches have been formed, the result being that the aims and the pedagogic practices proposed are problematic and (b) the way in which most of these approaches were implemented in the foreign language classes. But, Dendrinou continues (2004: 53):

"Even though intercultural communicative competence may constitute an important aim of the programs of foreign language teaching, it must not become a means of dismissing the need for multicultural education in a European frame – an education which entails multilinguistic competence of the social subjects".

Based on the above, it would be premature to give a definition for the concept of interculturalism, not only due to article lengths considerations, but also because it involves a process which is not static, it constitutes a continuous development, its aim is never fully materialized and, moreover, the term has not formed in its entirety in its new environment as it should have.

2.1 Teaching Material

However lacking in definite suggestions, over the last years, the European policy, oriented at the dynamic integration of culture, has attempted a revision and re-examination of the educational programs and the teaching materials. With the particularities that this intercultural orientation entails it is reasonable that teaching materials have been influences after the appropriate adaptations to the cause (Bereris 2005: 5-12).

I am adopting Tsopanoglou's simile (1994: 25) that teaching materials of the foreign language constitute a means of transport, which transfers the foreign language and the 'other' culture to the student. I believe that the likening of the

teaching materials as a means of transport remains always current in the frame of multicultural Europe and faithfully renders the creation of the books in this new European environment which is a process full of demands, changes, exchanges and adaptations. The new environment of forming the teaching material and its effectiveness concerning 'intercultural communication', requires the answer to many questions (ideological, national, identity, stereotypes, xenophobia, enemy perception, etc.)

At first, the researcher who is occupied with the process of teaching a foreign language, perceives that, while the conditions impose a harmonization of the teaching material with the European ideal and the formation of a new esoteric textual dynamic with new meanings and axiological judgments, the reasons for the delay are not only various (national, political economic etc) but also vary in each member state of the European Union.

It is known that the teaching materials transfer, consciously or unconsciously, the language and the culture of the other people and constitute a condensed selective profile of the 'other' culture. But the difficulties multiply, if one considers that the teaching material must be invested with the concept of interculturalism, which must in the future be fully incorporated in the teaching material, or constitute a kind of 'filter' for the teaching materials. The books of foreign languages form a structured whole text, where the writer uses two systems of meaning, the linguistic and the iconic with a definite structure and various levels of synthesis for the transfer of language and cultural information (Christodoulou 2003: 23-25).

But the new environment in which foreign languages develop introduces new parameters in education, such as interdisciplinarity, education/literacy, multilingualism, interculturalism. The above parameters influence the writing of new foreign language books for compulsory education with: (a) instructions about the context, the aims and the targets, the student needs, the techno-typograhic characteristics, the basic aesthetic rules, (b) specifications favouring pluriculturalism, multilingualism, equal treatment of the national, social and cultural 'other', gender equality, democratic behaviour, (c) accordance between the educational material and the cognitive and emotional level of development, the cultural experiences of the target group it refers to, both in relation to the cognitive context as well as to its whole conception etc.

The teaching material, written by one or a group of writers, bears cultural information quantitative and qualitative, proportionate and relative to the range of experience and the hierarchy of the rules of the writer or writers. As a cultural product, beyond the transfer of information aiming at presenting reality, it impinges on the student forms, or discloses stances, stereotypes and bias concerning the other people. It also functions as a political means, or even as a kind of 'advertisement' of the 'other' people. It is, therefore, to be expected that the writing of foreign language instruction books by writers of the same or other ethnicity impresses on the books different views. It is, in other words, entirely different when an Italian writes a foreign language instruction book for

Italian, where the writer's views are projected consciously or unconsciously via the language and when a Greek writes a foreign language instruction book for Italian, which is the perception of Greek people of the Italian (writer A writes about people A and writer B writes about people A).

However, a foreign-language-instruction book is always connected with communication. Now, as previously mentioned, it assumes a new role which describes the cultural details, the particular behaviour and the expressive ways of each culture in basic categories of the formal culture (arts and literature/education) and the everyday lifestyle (habit, social mores). This new role of the teaching material, part of the European educational policy, leads research related to books for foreign language instruction to new areas. These books assume an important role, that of transferring culture   from one group of people to the other aiming at effecting better understanding between peoples and cultures.

2.3 Intercultural Communication

Everyone knows that a basic aim of teaching a foreign language is that the student must be able to communicate with the 'other' people, linguistically and culturally, that is, to speak the other people's language and understand their mentality, their needs, their social mores, in short, their culture.

However, a question arises, concerning the ways of development and enhancement of intercultural communication via foreign language instruction books. The question is how to highlight the cultural gaps and promote a substantial solutions which should aim at planning as well as at the development and improvement of cultural competence via the books.

However, all the above would really count if we could define the semantically rich term 'culture.' Surely, it would be impossible for a commonly accepted definition of culture, since culture itself constantly changes. Still, the older trends regarding the definition of culture referred to the entirety of formal culture, that is, arts and literature/education, while over the last years the definition has come to include everyday lifestyle and the values shared by the members of each society or community.

The didactics of languages concerned itself with, besides the teaching of languages, the element of culture, which has a long course in the various methodological approaches. From the grammatic- translational approach with texts of the formal culture (arts and literature), to the audiovisual method, which ascribes importance to the everyday lifestyle (nutrition, free time) and finally to the communicative approach, which developed a new potential for the cultural element, with the introduction of more pictures and colours etc.

It is obvious that the demand for intercultural communication infiltrates all the factors of communication, consequently the teaching material, the result being that the intercultural education, as it is oriented at the mutual understanding and aims at the elimination of ethnocentrism, the pursuit of values, the brushing aside of polemics and the instruction for peace, must turn

to the analysis of books and afterwards to the possible adaptation to new cultural data (Christodoulou 2003: 53-77).

2.4 Didactics of Intercultural Education

The arguments in favour of intercultural didactics ensued as a need for better communication, as the opening to new experiences arises, on the one hand, because the foreign language is what allows two nations to communicate, and on the other, because the student, when in contact with the other culture, experiences a cultural shock, which urges one to 'know' the other culture (Nikolaou 2005: 17-19). Therefore, as intercultural didactics aims at the student's acknowledgment of two diverse lifestyles, his or her own and the foreign one, and at exposing oneself and one's culture to the foreign language, the above need for intercultural didactics influences both the books as well as the necessity for training educators.

Intercultural education, which concerns educators, involves some basic principles. It is true that guidelines about the profile of the foreign language instructor have been given by the European Union, but also by other scientists, Banks (2004: 27, 66-67, 146-156, 184-185) for instance, who proposes a dynamic typology of developing ethnicity for educators in six stages. That is, the training of teachers must reach the sixth point, globalization, a point in which there is a clear definition of national and global identity, but also skills, stances and knowledge so that one can function interculturally within one's own country but also globally (Markou 1997: 238-246). Therefore the training of prospective teachers is considered mandatory at a pre-graduate level but not only then. This training should offer, besides anything else, skills and contact with theoretical tools but also the possibility to produce proper and flexible teaching material, which should facilitate self perception but also perception of the world.

In the course 'didactics of intercultural communication', which is offered at the university of Venice, the instructor of didactics of language, Balboni (1999:109-120): (a) proposes to his students a model of self analysis, which concerns the skill of intercultural communication, and (b)embarks on discussion about the cultural values of space, time, family, hierarchy, respect, the structure of communication events etc, and (c) proposes seminars devoted to the basic thematic cultural categories that concern the whole world. Balboni of course (2002: 72) observes that, given the problematic dimension and the multiple definition of culture, intercultural communicative competence generally cannot be taught. One can only teach how it can be observed and suggest a tool for the observation of intercultural communication from within cultural prototypes.

However, the model of intercultural communication receives criticism and this is reasonable. Sapiridou (2004: 449-453) criticizes intercultural didactics, primarily when it comes to the main element that this approach to the subject of foreign language instruction highlights, that is, cultural difference. She believes that once again the 'strong' languages are favoured. More precisely,

cultural difference, aligned with the principles of comparison, tends to become adopted by the whole educational process, from the theoretical grounding of this procedure to the applied research but also to the education of foreign language instructors and the formation of books. She believes that this approach does not follow the democratic principle of 'reversal' when a dominant and a weaker language come in contact and, based on research performed on foreign language instruction books, concludes that each nation chooses to promote cultural elements either via variety (Anglo-Saxon countries) or by stressing difference (Germany). Intercultural didactics, as it appears at least today, "cannot be considered as a neutral research tool that can be applied in all cases of language contact in the lesson of foreign language instruction, as it introduces – maybe unaware of some parameters but it is the result that counts- multiple standards according the power of languages thus allowing hegemonic practices". Sapiridou also proposes that, if researchers insist on including intercultural learning in the subject of foreign language instruction, this could be done as a catalogue for avoiding 'intercultural mistakes' both as far as teachers are concerned but also the material to be used.

3. Semiotics of Culture

The talk about foreign language instruction and culture is necessary among scientists, who bear the greatest responsibility of the reformation of the European policy into national policy (at least as it has been phrased by the European Union) with planning as well as of implementation programs. So, I agree with what has been mentioned above as far as researchers are concerned. I, therefore, support the integration of intercultural didactics in the subject of foreign language instruction following the principle of equality, not only of people but also languages and their respective cultures. More precisely, the researcher must react to the element of 'difference' not as if it involved a case of hegemony or confrontation among languages and cultures but as an element which ensues from the axiom of equality and equality of rights in particular, which is valid for all languages and cultures. Only under this prism does the kind of difference and the concept of variety in the teaching of culture bear importance and I will shortly explain. Since it is valid that equality of people is an indispensable right, it clearly applies to languages and their respective cultures. And to put this lyrically, foreign languages, in the new environment that is forming, seek equality and equal rights, not to confront each other but to define their cultural identity. If the above is true, then the researcher needs a methodological tool which will help him or her to investigate not the differences and the variety among languages and cultures but the various and different mechanisms (of structuring and reformation) which every culture uses to construct meaning (consciously or unconsciously). Only through this prism would it make sense for the European Union to promote the desired multilingualism. It is oxymoron to speak of peace, human rights, avoidance of violence, gender equality, when it comes to human actions but this principle do not condition the language.

It is known that the context of each text in the foreign language instruction books is the result of the meaning structures. It is also on this totality that culture is structured. Based on all the above, it becomes clear that a metalanguage must be adopted which will analyse and decode or 'translate' the meanings which are hidden or expressed in a non-linguistic form in the books. Language bears in it information which urges us to perceive the world in a certain particular way. Boklund-Lagopoulou(1983: 15-23) mentions that the way in which we perceive the world around us is conditioned by our own language. Wherever there is a human society, there are systems of meaning (religious ceremonies, art, theatre, language etc), and humans perceive their world through these systems of meaning

A powerful tool which is available for the study of the perception of the world is semiotics. The aim of semiotic research is the analysis of the totality of signs, or the analysis of the structure and use of systems of meaning. Semiotics, as a theoretical framework of the study of culture, is attributed precisely to the central position of semiotics as the scientific field that studies and analyses culture as a totality of systems of meaning and communication (Lagopoulos 2004: 7-8, 35-44, 159-165). Only through this prism will we be able to analyse the 'other' culture with a view to understanding it. That is, what the foreign language instructor needs is to be familiarised with and to apply methodological tools of analysis of culture in the foreign language, which will lead him or her to a better understanding of the 'other' civilization (Danesi e Perron 1999: 290-311). It is true, as Danesi and Perron mention (1999: 309) that, we will never be able to answer the question why cultures exist. A more realistic goal would be to study the way this culture produces meanings, the *how*. We cannot explain how the human mind has led human beings to produce meaning, but we can study in a systematic way language, myths, poetry and other products of the culture of *Homo culturalis* which he or she discovered over the centuries to answer the biggest question, the reason for his existence. We will never find out who really *Homo culturalis* is but we candevelop religious philosophies, mythic narrations or scientific theories which will try to explain the nature of human beings since, as C.S. Peirce notes, 'we think only in terms of signs'. This is our nature.

4. Instead of an Epilogue

One is left to wonder then whether the foreign language instruction books or the whole education, as it enters a new era that presupposes didactics of intercultural communication, teacher training, sensitization to new terms (variety in approach, multi-facet education, interdisciplinarity), intercultural oriented activities, lifelong learning, ensuring multilingualism, familiarization with multiculturalism, awareness of the meaning, the difference and similarity of languages and cultures, it must be committed to the principle of equality of languages and cultures, what Banks calls globalization'.

More particularly, as far as the teaching of a foreign language is concerned, Dendrinou (2004: 50-51) focuses her interest on a pedagogic approach

"… a didactic of foreign languages oriented at developing in students the skill to function in the borders between many languages, to pick their way in communicative events using the sociocultural knowledge and skills they have developed as users of language, using to the fullest their communicative strategies, their ability to handle the multiple approaches to texts and the translinguistic and transcultural knowledge".

`It appears then (Alachiotis 2002: 5) that we are moving towards a co-operational and interdisciplinary approach to learning but also to development of critical thinking of the total effort, to creativity and experiential action of the student via relevant activities. Of course, this emergent approach which tends to infiltrate the whole educational system and as a result foreign language instruction, presupposes, beyond ideological concerns, appropriate methodology and new educational material, which will contribute to the socialization of the student and will cater for European demands.

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