HOW TO CELEBRATE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM – SEVERAL STRATEGIES

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Abstract: In my paper I will focus on several strategies for ensuring diversity during the classes of Romanian as a Foreign Language. The groups are composed of twenty students each and a team of other four teachers work intensively (five days a week/ six hours a day/ two semesters) and devise lessons so to cover general Romanian as well as Romanian for Specific Purposes. Students come from all over the world and their interests are extremely varied. At the end of the two semesters, they follow their BSc/MA/doctoral programs.

Keywords: diversity, inclusion, strategies, learning, methods

This is one of the factors which can contribute to ensuring a high level of homogeneity of the intensive courses provided, as the teachers should – and do - have the skills and openness to:

- collaborate closely in designing the course content and structure,
- set up a methodological approach based on modern pedagogical principles, and
- communicate quite closely throughout the study modules in order to adjust/amend course elements with a view to improving its quality.

Setting up the Context

The permanent concern towards the optimization of the RFL course is generated by an effort of DCLM to contribute to an increase of visibility and prestige of the university – and, not less important – to its ranking among the best ones in Europe.

In response to the Romanian legislation for higher education requirements, the course of RFL is now being under full process of being granted recognition by accreditation (after much debate took place at country level on the manner such a process should be organized).

Hence an increased interest of the teaching team and DCLM management to carry out optimization of the RFL course in an appropriate way, by putting together various methods, among which getting feedback from all the actors in the instructional process is one of utmost significance.

- take advantage of our current teaching potential – and even increase efforts by getting the staff members involved in the RFL course design and organization to do research in order to identify best ways of optimizing it, and share such information with fellow teachers – and this is precisely what we are trying to carry out in this study;
- involve the teachers in the process of getting feedback, with a role of adding precious information and of triangulating the other data, of a more quantitative type;
- monitor the students' progress in learning and their way towards attaining professional success quite closely, and even publicly within our organization – and not only, by Testimonials, RFL Graduate Questionnaires and/or Interviews and so on;
- continue to design feedback obtaining ways and means/instruments and applying them periodically in order to optimize the RFL course permanently, as this is a cyclic amendable dynamic process.

Historically speaking, RFL for Anul Pregătitor (Preparatory Year – PY) has got a long tradition with the University POLITEHNICA of Bucharest. The current teaching team consists of four teachers with qualifications in teaching Romanian as a foreign language and a PhD in Philology and/or Education Sciences; they have gained vast experience in teaching RFL. The UPB - PY welcomes foreign students from all over the world, viz. at least 10 different countries and three continents.

Certainly, as pointed out in the literature - and as the case is in our context as well – there is 'a great deal of variability between each student's optimized learning zone'; this is determined of course by the following elements of difference:

- different cultural backgrounds, with potential both linguistic and even cultural barriers,
- different areas of skills – both hard and soft,

and,

- as our students are master and doctoral levels, age can also be an element of differentiation among them, too.

The teaching of such a course as the RFL - PY to a variety of students has raised a range of problematic issues, due to the complexity of the situation.

Some of the factors specific to the context, and that increase the challenge to be faced by the instructors are:

- numerous groups of students,
- variety of educational and cultural backgrounds of the students,
- dates of students' arrivals (due to visa obtaining problems in some cases),
- difference between expectations and factual reality for some,
- difference of mentality ('I am the paying client, so I am the master here!' – as a philosophy of some learners, at least at the beginning of the course),
- logistics and organizational matters, related to the transfer of information and course input, on a daily basis, from one teacher to the next,
- pace of reflection vs change, which is different for each teacher, as they are well-defined personalities, with already formed teaching principles.

The main objectives of the course are to help the students to:

- use the language in both a general and an academic context,
- be able to develop all fours skills (reading, speaking, listening, writing), and
- adopt a positive, intercultural attitude towards the other members of the team.

The level aimed for the students to reach at the end of course is B2 - CEFR. The expectations of the factors involved in ordering the course, namely: the Romanian Ministry of Education, UPB, the students themselves and the teachers of technical disciplines who are going to supervise the master and doctoral candidates dissertations and/or theses, are that by the end of the course the students have attained this level and they would have become independent learners who will be able to continue to study within the Romanian context.

Awareness of the limitations and challenges of the given context is a must. Here are some of the issues to be faced:

- as students never arrive at the same time, we cannot form a single homogenous group, but after the enrolment period has been closed, students are split into two or more groups, based on the time of their arrival and the level attained during the first weeks of tuition;
- groups are usually large, and, considering that students come from very different cultural backgrounds, the integration stage may take long at the beginning;
- the students' low level of English that sometimes can hamper communication in class;

- due to the fact that there are quite few teaching resources for the teaching – evaluation of RFL, teachers always have to adapt materials, design their own course materials and permanently (re)adjust them to the needs of the students;

- teaching multicultural classes comes along with numerous challenges. Teachers need to consequently adapt materials, level their language to the students' level and avoid sensitive topics for discussion in class. It is also of utmost importance for the teacher to be familiar with the cultural background of the students as this will ease the integration process.

The communicative methodologies and materials commonly used in the Romanian as a Foreign Language (RFL) classrooms promote a largely learner-centered and interactive learning environment, in contrast to the more traditional teacher-led methods often used in other subjects. Communicative RFL activities can sometimes highlight communication or social interaction difficulties. At the same time, the multicultural Romanian language classroom is an environment which is particularly suitable for inclusive practices because of the opportunities it provides for promoting cooperation between learners.

We can implement inclusive practices on two levels: at a general level, teachers must provide an accessible learning environment; and at an individual level, teachers must recognize and embrace the individual differences that occur in any group. Inclusive practices acknowledge that every single student has different strengths and that teachers should celebrate diversity.

Nowadays, policies towards learner differences vary from country to country and implementing inclusion in a multicultural context can become even more difficult in this particular case.

Teachers should focus on adapting their methods to suit the learners, rather than expecting students to fit into their way of teaching that might be influenced by the local policies, culture, etc. Educators should be made aware of the importance of identifying and understanding the individual differences of learners and they should consider the interaction between various factors affecting the behaviors and needs of an individual. These factors include students' cognitive capacity, their individual skills and personal and contextual circumstances. The differences in learning might occur from the interaction between individual and environmental factors. No two students react to the environment in the same ways, and the learning experiences will be unique.

An ethos of inclusion is one in which all students are valued and teachers who consider inclusion necessary are aware of the fact that individuals view learning in their own way, and that everyone comes with their own strengths and weaknesses. A sense of equity should be embraced while teaching where education means that every learner is provided with what they need in order to succeed. Equity is essential in inclusive classrooms as it guarantees that each learner is viewed and valued as an individual within the larger group.

There is a considerable difference between integration and inclusion. Integration refers to students' physical access to school and it is a prerequisite to students' inclusion, but an insufficient step.

When the school welcomes international students without a change in the school ethos and practices this might lead to exclusion within a common setting. If students are integrated, but not fully included, teachers can become exhausted and frustrated by trying to fulfil their responsibilities within an inadequate framework. Universities must remain committed to developing their inclusive programs while teachers value learner diversity and support all learners.

Language teachers can also work towards developing a classroom culture and environment that will make the learning experience more accessible. This will lead to a feeling of belonging to a learning community, in which individual differences are seen not as problems to be fixed, but as opportunities for enriching learning.

Students can encounter many barriers that hinder learning, and teachers must identify them in order to develop ideas on how to address their learners' difficulties.

When learning a new language, learners may experience significant challenges and teachers are in the position to observe them and try to address them. Some of these challenges may have several manifestations among which some can be mentioned: daydreaming, disrupting the class routine, nostalgia. It is important that teachers do their best to know their students, remain alert to any change in behavior and monitor the situation. They can develop and adapt activities and materials to work around these challenges.

The case I am taking into consideration is a language class with international students who come from all over the world and have a definite amount of time to learn the language. Their language background is different, and the initial barriers to be identified may be linguistic cultural and emotional.

When the students arrive in the class they may feel frustrated if they have nobody in the class who shares their first language, and little or no proficiency in any other language but their mother tongue.

In addition to these linguistic challenges, the impact on learning dislocation and the possible emotional trauma that a learner is experiencing cannot be ignored. In this case, the learner must adjust to a new physical environment and to a new educational system with different expectations. Teachers should not be surprised if they notice some of these difficulties, instead they should react accordingly.

When students arrive in class, teachers do not know anything about their background and their real intentions. Dislocated learners (migrants, refugees or students who leave their country of origin in order to further their education) may find that, given a safe and predictable environment, they can contribute their experiences to the classroom, helping their peers to understand and value the differences—and common ground—found between languages and cultures.

By noticing and praising learners' strengths, and taking an interest in the things that interest them, teachers reinforce the message that everybody is valued for their individual achievements, individual differences, and positive qualities.

Supporting and celebrating diversity and inclusion in universities provides students with the potential to achieve, and creates an environment where those with additional needs are not segregated and seen as 'other'; they are part of the same community of learners. Inclusion fights against negative cultural attitudes and misconceptions about people.

In the RFL classroom, teachers can use several teaching techniques that include the diverse backgrounds of students, learning styles, and skills of students. These techniques and strategies aim at creating an inclusive learning environment that is safe for the students and that identifies the differences and strengths of each international student. By using inclusive teaching techniques, RFL teachers can build a learning environment that values and gives a voice and a sense of belonging to all students.

In the RFL class the teacher should cater for the students' efforts to get integrated, irrespective of their background. All students must be given a voice in their effort of getting integrated. Having students from all over the world, who come to Romania to learn the language and further their education as their last resort, all walks of life and with different perspectives on life can be very enriching both for the teachers and for the students in the class. This fact can be extremely helpful for students who can thus reflect on their own context while exploring the versatility of contexts around them. Teachers should educate independent learners where they take control of their learning inside and outside classroom and draw conclusions that are relevant to their own life and future.

Working with such a variety of students should make the RFL teacher consider learning from different angles and consider several issues: some types of students are more

involved, to some cultural assumptions can encourage them to explore different worlds, to what extent the whole course is accessible and reaches out to all types of students. In this regard, teachers can consider several inclusive strategies and below I will present some examples that can help teachers celebrate diversity and inclusion in the class of Romanian as a Foreign Language and that can be adapted in any multicultural class.

Creating a bond with students is essential in any type of classroom, but in a multicultural classroom this is of utmost importance.

Building a safe environment where students can feel free to express themselves fosters positive interactions between students.

Inviting various guest students who can share from their own experience may help students expand their awareness on learning.

Including students in the classroom by encouraging them to come with their own feedback, such as group discussions, group work, etc.

Realizing and reflecting on our own attitude towards teaching, towards our biases can help us be more empathetic and understanding with students' needs.

Conclusion

Universities and teachers should make it a priority to provide support to international students who try hard to adjust to their new life in a different country. This recommendation applies to Romanian students as well, international students experience a higher degree of stress during dislocation from their country and moving to a totally new environment. Attention must be paid to the cultural differences between students and to their needs.

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