



ON THE ISSUE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AT SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

THE PURPOSE is to emphasize the opportunities for Bulgarian young people to participate in intercultural communication. THE METHODOLOGY used is part of an international study related to developing students' civic culture in the process of education. Based on RESULTS from a survey of the opinions of students from the second stage of Bulgarian high schools, some specifics of intercultural communication at the secondary school level are analyzed, problems are highlighted, and solutions are sought. CONCLUSIONS are drawn about the need to take the necessary actions for the full participation of young people in the process of intercultural communication, to apply innovative approaches and activities in the context of sociocultural challenges.

Keywords: intercultural communication, civic culture, Bulgarian secondary education

INTRODUCTION

In today's multilingual and multicultural societies, it is especially important for young people to develop their intercultural competence as early as secondary school. Proficiency in several languages is a necessity and a guarantee for meaningful social contacts, for realization in society. Language education has a leading role in the overall educational process in connection with forging an interest in language, developing communicative competences, building language culture and forming a scientific notion of language as a means of communication.

Within the framework of language education (Bulgarian language and foreign languages), Bulgarian plays the role of a unifying link (1). More and more often, Bulgarian is not the first language that a child learns in its family environment (for example, when one parent is not Bulgarian). In addition, being the official state language, it is of priority importance, as it offers great opportunities for the individual to be "embedded" into social structures, for their inclusion in the culture of the country in which they live.

In contemporary socio-economic conditions, when migration processes take place, students

from foreign educational systems are enrolled in Bulgarian schools. They continue their education in the Bulgarian language in different classes, without having any preparation in Bulgarian, i.e. without mastering the language of instruction. Their natural communicative need is to study Bulgarian and to master Bulgarian culture. That is why the educational policy of Bulgaria and the activities of the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) are oriented towards timely solving the communicative problems of migrant students of compulsory school age, by encouraging additional training in Bulgarian as a second language for the children of migrants in the country.

At all stages (primary, lower secondary, upper secondary) students from migrant families communicate with their Bulgarian peers, as well as with pedagogical specialists. Intercultural communication functions at an interpersonal level in formal and informal settings. The effectiveness of this communication depends largely on the attitudes and abilities of the participants in it (students and teachers) to perceive the other culture. Thus, issues of intercultural communication expand their scope in the educational environment, affecting teaching in all academic disciplines.

The current paper presents part of a study related to intercultural communication, carried out in the conditions of the modern Bulgarian school. The study focuses on the opinion of

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students from the second stage of high school (upper-secondary, 11th -12th grade) on these current issues, on their attitudes and opportunities for full participation in the process of intercultural communication. The methodology used is part of an international study of the attitude of secondary and university students towards the development of civic culture and the formation of values in young people.

1. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AS A PHENOMENON OF MODERN SOCIETIES

In modern socio-economic conditions, a unique form of communicative interaction is identified, in which the role of culture is of significant importance to communication. Situations are now common when messages created in one culture must be perceived in another. Considering the role of culture in the communication process, some authors point out intercultural communication as a form of communicative interaction that can be acquired (2).

Communication is carried out through various codes – linguistic, figurative, gestural, etc. The modern understanding of language proficiency is associated with considering it as a means “through which culture manifests itself” (3). The different cultures that interact today at Bulgarian secondary schools influence the communication process. For example, students of a migrant background in most cases observe the behaviour of the bearers of the other culture. In the case of students whose one parent is not Bulgarian, the assessment of a given behaviour can be “attributed” inappropriately and it can often be the basis for unsuccessful intercultural communication. When educating students who are not native speakers of Bulgarian, the issue of developing intercultural communicative competence, which can be achieved through intercultural learning, is particularly important. The acquisition of Bulgarian culture in parallel with language acquisition requires targeted and teacher-led preparation. In order to support communication and interaction, it is necessary to integrate linguistic and cultural learning.

The model of intercultural communicative competence, proposed by Michael Byrum, involves a systematic presentation of ideas, concepts, facts and materials from and about a given culture, and recommends the use of the so-called keyword technique, with the help of

which the language learner can understand the similarities and differences between cultures. This model can be viewed as a unity of: intercultural relations (curiosity and openness to the target culture, as well as knowledge about the respective country from which students from migrant families come); skills to interpret a document or an event from the host culture and to connect/compare it with a document or an event from the home one; skills for discovery and interaction, which refer to the ability to acquire new knowledge about a given culture, as well as to operate with this knowledge, skills and relations in the conditions of real communication; critical cultural awareness, which includes the ability to evaluate perspectives, practices and products in both cultures. It is much more important to speak the language “interculturally”, i.e. having intercultural communicative competence (4-5). This process concerns not only Bulgarian language teachers, but also all teachers at the school where students who do not speak or have a weak command of Bulgarian study. The best teacher is the one who “can help students establish connections between their own and other cultures, can contribute to awakening their interest and curiosity towards “otherness”, as well as self-awareness and awareness of their own culture, refracted through other people’s perspectives”. (6).

Some researchers emphasize the need for successful adaptation to another culture, identifying a combination of four factors:

- good personal adjustment, marked by feelings of contentment and well-being;
- developing and maintaining good interpersonal relationships with hosts, marked by respect for members of the other culture;
- effectiveness of the task performed or the completion of tasks in the other country or culture, which differ in each different context;
- stress or culture shock (7).

Various problems related to intercultural communication are raised in theoretical and practical terms:

- *experiences* that would lead to intense feelings and emotional engagement – anxiety, unconfirmed expectations, belonging, ambiguity, clashing with one’s own prejudices;
- *areas of knowledge* that, through the process of socialization to a given culture, are realized as correct or appropriate, but may include differences due to differences in cultures that are difficult to understand – temporal and

spatial orientation, communication and language use, roles, rituals, hierarchy, values; - *foundations of cultural differences*, especially those relating to the way people think or process information – categorization, differentiation, learning styles, meaning attribution (8).

The problems highlighted above affect not only students, but also the teachers who prepare them in a multilingual environment. For example, *anxiety* in students arises when the student encounters other speech behaviour models that he/she does not know, or with unfamiliar requirements that sometime he/she may define as “strange” or “overwhelming” and which begin to worry him/her.

Students, familiar primarily with the culture of the country in which they were born, may sometimes begin to feel anxious not because of the specific circumstances, but because of *unconfirmed expectations* - expectations regarding Bulgarian culture. Even if they are not in a negative direction, the difference from what is expected can cause anxiety.

Everyone feels the need to *belong to a group* and wants to feel accepted by it, but this often does not happen when intercultural communication is at play, if they have the status of an outsider. For students of a migrant background, for example, at school, it is very important to be accepted by their classmates, and not to feel like outsiders.

People who communicate successfully interculturally display high tolerance for the *ambiguity* of the right decisions in a certain social context. A teacher's tolerance towards the other and their culture is of the utmost importance, because even the slightest gesture of neglect has an extremely negative impact on students and the entire learning process. That is why the attitude of teachers of all subjects is also important. The method of the “ideal adaptive response” is recommended, which treats cultural conflict openly by applying a comparative intercultural approach, and also offers more reflection on the culture neglected to one degree or another in communicative practice (9).

It is known that the process of socialization to a given culture is related to treating others with reserve. Sometimes, in the effort to preserve the Bulgarian language and culture, a *clash may occur between a student and parents* (rather “between their prejudices”). In the process of communicating with other cultures, it may turn

out that such “reserved” attitudes and ideas are not accurate or useful.

Verbal and non-verbal communication are the most visible areas leading to problems in intercultural communication. According to the roles that people have in different situations, there are different models of behavior. In some cultures, very large differences are observed in terms of social roles, as well as by whom and how they are performed. That is why the development of students' speech behavior is an extremely important task of secondary school education.

2. RESULTS OF A SURVEY OF THE OPINIONS OF STUDENTS FROM THE SECOND STAGE OF BULGARIAN HIGH SCHOOL

In order to study the attitudes and opportunities for participation in intercultural communication, 266 students from the second stage of high schools in Bulgaria were surveyed. Although the respondents came from different types of schools and from different types of settlements (big city, small town, village), the study does not claim to be representative. It is carried out through an electronic questionnaire; it is limited and cannot give a definitive answer to the questions posed, however, it allows some important conclusions to be drawn about areas for further development of this issue in order to respond to the need for the full participation of young people in the process of intercultural communication.

The questions we focus on in the current paper are part of a bigger international comparative study - the VASCAPE – Values, Attitudes, Skills (Values, Attitudes, Skills, Civic and Political Engagement) Survey. The survey questions were based on measures already used in large-scale international studies such as Schwartz Value Scales – 2021 (10), the OECD PISA Global Competence test questions (11) and the ICCS 2016 International Report (12).

Students have to rate 12 statements on a 5-point scale, determining how well each statement describes them (in view of a certain behavior, attitude, opinion) or how much they agree with a given statement. These statements fall into three groups, which facilitates the analysis of the answers given by the respondents.

The first group of statements includes statements related to the interest that students show in other countries, religions and cultures around the world.

The second group of statements can be used to establish the attitude towards people from other cultures, their opinions and values.

The third group of statements aims to reveal the self-assessment of the respondents in terms of communication and adaptation to another culture.

The students' answers related to the first group of statements (**Table 1**) show that a large part of

them (39.5%) are interested in life in other countries of the world, they want to learn more about the people there. There are also those who are only somewhat interested (21.8%). However, considering that the percentage of students who are not interested in these questions at all is relatively low, it can be emphasized that the surveyed high school students are open to learning about other cultures.

Table 1. *Students' interest in other countries, religions and cultures*

Statement	Very much like me	Mostly like me	Somewhat like me	Not much like me	Not at all like me
1. I want to learn how people live in different countries.	39,5%	25,6%	21,8%	8,6%	4,5%
2. I want to learn more about the religions of the world.	20,8%	15,5%	33,6%	21,1%	9,1%
3. I am interested in how people from various cultures see the world	35,8%	27,9%	19,2%	10,9%	6,0%
4. I am interested in finding out about the traditions of other cultures.	33,8%	25,9%	22,2%	12,4%	5,6%

This positive fact is not so strongly supported by the desire of high school students to learn more about world religions. Only 1/5 (one-fifth) of those surveyed are categorical on this issue, and negative answers are approximately 1/3 (one-third).

An increase in the values (35.8%) is observed when the statement is associated with a manifestation of interest in the worldviews of people from different cultures. Here, the data for respondents who are not at all interested in these questions are also lower.

The indicated results are also confirmed by the next statement, which shows that 33.8% of students are interested in the traditions of other cultures. This percentage increases, taking into account the students whose answers are associated with the second positive degree. There is some overlap of the results with the previous statement with low levels of interest in the people and traditions of other cultures.

It can be concluded from the results of the first group of statements that a large part of high school students understand the need to know

about the lives of people from other cultures, their views on the world, and their cultural traditions. The weaker interest shown in world religions provokes the need for a more specific study of the reasons for this, the problems and prospects of pedagogical activity in this direction.

The picture can be enriched with the results of the responses to the second group of statements (**Table 2**). The respondents (54.9% and 30.1% for the two higher grades) declare that they respect people from other cultures as equal human beings. It is striking, however, that there are students, albeit few (the total percentage for the two lower grades is 4.1), who do not share such a statement.

These results are also close to the data for the next statement, which reveals the percentage of students who treat all people with respect, regardless of their cultural background. Here, again, it should be noted that although they are few (4.5% in total for the two lower grades), there are students who do not express a positive attitude on this issue.

Table 2. *Students' attitudes towards people from other cultures, their opinions and values*

Statement	Very much like me	Mostly like me	Somewhat like me	Not much like me	Not at all like me
1. I respect people from other cultures as equal human beings	54,9%	30,1%	10,9%	2,6%	1,5%
2. I treat all people with respect regardless of their cultural background	54%	32,8%	8,7%	2,6%	1,9%
3. I give space to people from other cultures to express themselves.	51,7%	32,5%	10,2%	4,5%	1,1%
4. I respect the values of people from different cultures.	51,5%	27,4%	16,2%	3,4%	1,5%
5. I value the opinions of people from different cultures	49,2%	30,1%	13,2%	5,3%	2,3%

For the next statement, the data at the two high levels decrease, and at the low levels increase. About half of the students (51.7%) give people from other cultures the opportunity to express themselves, but there are also those (5.6% in total for the two low levels) who do not give such an opportunity. Of course, it can be assumed here that the negative answers are the result of a lack of direct contact with people from other cultures.

The data from the last two statements in this group show that the trend of a slight decrease in the high grades and a corresponding increase in the low grades is maintained. More than half (51.5%) are categorical that they respect the values of people from different cultures, and this positive attitude is also supported by the data for the other positive grade (27.4%). Students (49.2% and 30.1% for the two high grades) value the opinions of people from different cultures. It cannot be ignored that some of the respondents (nearly five percent) admit that they do not respect the values of people from different cultures, and 7.5% do not value the opinions of people from different cultures.

The data for the second group of statements give reason to summarize that the surveyed students express a positive attitude towards people from different cultures, and that they are able to value their opinion. The negative attitude expressed by some students may be a sign that more targeted work is needed at Bulgarian secondary schools in relation to understanding and accepting people from other cultures.

The answers to the third group of statements reveal the respondents' self-assessment of their ability to communicate and adapt to another culture (**Table 3**).

Most of the students positively assess their own abilities to adapt to a new culture - 35.6% are categorical that they do it easily. A quarter of the respondents also think so, although without such firmness. 27.2% assume that they can only somewhat succeed in adapting, but for 12.4% it is almost or completely impossible.

When assessing their actions in difficult situations with other people, 17.9% of the surveyed teachers state with certainty that they can think of a way to resolve the situation, and 28.3% also give a positive answer, although not so categorically. Almost a third of the students assume that they will be able to cope to some extent. However, the percentage of students who do not believe that they can cope remains large (21.1% in total for the two lower grades). The data obtained about the statement that follows show greater certainty on the part of the respondents regarding their abilities to overcome difficulties in communicating with people from other cultures. When comparing with the results from the previous statement, an increase in the values for positive degrees and a decrease in the values for negative degrees are noticeable. The conclusion is that although they positively assess their abilities to adapt to a new culture, they experience difficulties when they have to find a way out of a difficult situation. However, they are more confident in finding solutions in communicative situations

Table 3. Students' self-assessment of own ability to communicate in and adaptation to another culture

Statement	Very much like me	Mostly like me	Somewhat like me	Not much like me	Not at all like me
1. I can adapt easily to a new culture.	35,6%	24,8%	27,2%	8,4%	4,0%
2. When encountering difficult situations with other people, I can think of a way to resolve the situation.	17,9%	28,3%	32,7%	14,3%	6,8%
3. I am capable of overcoming my difficulties in interacting with people from other cultures.	31,7%	34,5%	26,6%	4,4%	2,8%

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the responses of the surveyed students reveal some positive tendencies of Bulgarian school leavers' showing respect for otherness and openness towards other cultures, traditions and ways. However, when it comes to their adaptability and flexibility in circumstances involving intercultural communication, they are not so confident in their own skills. Hence, the results can be interpreted as demonstrating a need for a more focused and sustained education relying on active learning techniques and interactive lessons and extra-curricular activities which will allow for more room for students to experiment and try out in the safety of their own classroom the skills which they can then apply to real-world intercultural communication.

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