

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE NON-DIVERSE CLASSROOM

Lindita Skenderi & Carly Terese Jerome

State University of Tetovo

Article History:

Submitted: 05.06.2015

Accepted: 10.07.2015

Abstract: The aim of the paper is to propose some simple ways of promoting linguistic and cultural diversity in a homogenous classroom made of students brought up in a bi-lingual environment and country. The ideas and suggestions come from the experiences of the authors in different environments and workplaces. The comparing groups are of different ages from compulsory school to a university/college level. The paper will be divided in two parts: on one hand there are suggestions which would be useful in a classroom with a teacher coming from the same place as the students, and on the other hand how would those and other ways work out in promoting a linguistic and cultural diversity in a classroom where the teacher/lecturer comes from another cultural and linguistic background. What has been the meeting point, how this type of cultural and language diversity would affect the critical thinking of the students; why would students benefit from diversity-promoting classes are some of the questions answered in the paper. This is a cross-sectional study which tries to put together some possible forms of promoting diversity in the aspect of a language and culture in the classroom which does not mean that is based on a longitudinal type of research but on personal experiences and views of the authors. Moreover it is based on a questionnaire and displays its results

Keywords: *classroom, culture, language, diversity, teacher, students*

INTRODUCTION

The armed conflict which occurred during 2001 brought the Republic of Macedonia to the brink of civil war. The end of the conflict was marked by the signing the Ohrid Framework Agreement (further on: OFA), under which certain constitutional and legal changes were adopted to reform the organization and functioning of the state.

On the surface, at least, the accord put relations between the Macedonian and Albanian communities on a new footing, especially those reforms which boosted Albanian representation in state institutions and local government¹. Still a lot of work has to be done in Macedonia's quest for a peaceful and democratic society. As one of the changes as a result of the OFA refers to the use of the language of ethnicities, this research would try by exploring the foreign language classroom to promote the culture as a tool to promote diversity in a not very diverse classroom thus becoming a vehicle to a peaceful coexistence in the country.

The area of Tetovo, the schools and the State University of Tetovo could be considered as a micro society out of which lessons could be learned to be implemented into the wider society of Republic of Macedonia and in a foreign language classroom. **The objects of the empirical research are individuals/ teenagers/ students/teachers** of ethnic Albanian and ethnic Macedonian origins who are mutually involved in co-education in the Republic of Macedonia.

The research subject is the promotion of diversity in the classroom. The assumptions have been that not much culture elements are brought into the classroom and there is a need to further raise the awareness among the teachers and the students about the role of the culture in the classroom for getting to know and understand the other better. Although multicultural country, the state schools of the Republic of Macedonia regardless if Albanian or Macedonian have been languages of instruction, do not always provide enough space among the classroom activities for culture to be promoted as a tool to cherish the diversity in the classroom. The belief is that the foreign language classroom could be used as a way to accomplish it. Hence, the representatives of the two or the more cultures would be brought closer. Moreover, by getting to know to each other better they would understand better. That would be a step forward to a better coexistence. Based on these assumptions a questionnaire has been developed. Students (teenagers and college level) both Macedonian and Albanian and teachers also of both nationalities have been interviewed.

Limitations of the research: The number of interviewees is not high enough to give more reliable results. However, I do hope that this research could generate ideas for further studies in the area of the foreign language teaching in my country and would raise the awareness about the role of culture in the foreign language classroom. Further more about it being a vehicle for promoting diversity in the classroom which by itself is not very diverse.

¹ OFA – Framework agreement, 13.08.2001.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this section is to offer a theoretical framework to provide concepts to be applied to the specific case of Macedonia or just to establish the grounds based on which the specific case of Macedonia provided in the research component of the paper has been established. It starts with the issues emerging in the post conflict systems and through the Common *European Framework of Reference for Languages* establishes the idea to promote the culture as a vehicle to promote diversity in a non diverse environment.

One of the particularly problematic issues for post-conflict school systems in multiethnic and multilingual societies is determining which languages will be used to instruct schoolchildren. Although it is important for children of a multilingual country to learn the language (and, by extension, culture) of other main groups of citizens in addition to their own mother tongue, having too many official languages in the schools can promote semi literacy, poor performance, high repetition, and high dropout rates (as seen in many African countries). At the same time, the rising importance of English as a useful language in the global marketplace is increasingly influencing language policies.² Here comes in the role foreign language teaching could play. How might a culturally responsive educator push against human nature's natural aversion to the unknown and help students become more respectful of cultures with different ideas? The best way to combat this tendency is to provide students with ample evidence that people that don't look like them are, at the core, people just like them. Such a viewpoint can be taught by promoting a culture of learning from one another rather than a culture of passing judgment on differences in values and beliefs.³ In addition, all too often, students are exposed to ethnic stereotypes on television and in movies. Providing diverse students with role models who demonstrate exceptional leadership qualities and make social contributions in a non-stereotypical way helps students recognize the limitless ways in which they can have a positive impact on society.⁴ Moreover, if students are taught about the contributions that people of various ethnicities, genders, and creeds have made to a variety of different artistic, scientific, and political fields then they're more likely to respect and value diverse cultural backgrounds as a whole. Such touches will help promote an environment in which students from diverse backgrounds feel more comfortable being themselves and will help insulate students from the cultural and ethnic stereotypes that pervade television and other mass media outlets.⁵ Native American educator Cornel Pewewardy (1993) asserts that one of the reasons Indian children experience difficulty in schools is that educators traditionally have attempted to insert culture into the education, instead of inserting education into the culture. However, culturally relevant

² Unite or Divide, The challenges of teaching history in societies emerging from violent conflicts, Special USIP Report, Elizabeth A. Cole and Judy Barsalou

³ Promoting Respect for Cultural Diversity in the Classroom, Matthew Lynch, Ed.D,
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-lynch-edd/promoting-respect-for-cul_b_1187683.html? (accessed on 25.03.2015)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

teachers utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning.⁶ Despite the recommendations of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001) and the national curricula for language teaching in many countries, the focus of language learning and teacher education is still, to a large extent, the development of grammatical and lexical competence. A good knowledge of grammar rules, a rich vocabulary, a few memorized speech acts and cultural facts will not sufficiently help non-native speakers of a foreign language to socialize, negotiate or make friends in the foreign language. Furthermore, native or near native fluency alone will not necessarily help native or non-native speakers of a language to successfully communicate with people from other cultures either. Unfortunately, there is still very little emphasis placed on the cultural dimension of language learning because very few teacher training institutions include intercultural communication training in their curriculum, and intercultural competence usually does not feature among their graduation criteria. Moreover, when language teachers are asked about what culture means to them, they most frequently answer by listing subjects such as literature, geography and arts. Although these subjects are all extremely important ingredients, it seems that there are other equally significant components of culture that should find their way into second and foreign language classrooms.⁷ In line with the above said the author of the paper conducted a survey. Presented below are the findings of the research which make the case of Macedonia.

2. THE RESEARCH

The first idea has been to conduct the survey with various groups of students starting from a rather lower classroom age up to the highest being at the university. However, as the questionnaire has been developed based on the assumptions that there is a low level of awareness about having culture as part of the language classroom instruction at such a young age and for the purpose of this research it has been realized that it would be more appropriate to target the survey at the higher school level of students, the teenagers who are still “pure” and open to new things. Hence, it has been conducted with two categories of students or more specifically high school students with language of classroom instruction being Albanian, but also with students whose native language is Macedonian. Thus, the Macedonian and the Albanian students would make the two subcategories. The school whose students are interviewed is a High School in Tetovo (a town and area with predominantly Albanian population). The same goes for the College level students. Interviewed students are from the State University of Tetovo (later in the text: SUT) which is a university with teaching instruction in Albanian language but also with

⁶ Ladson-Billings, But That's Just Good Teaching!, THEORY INTO PRACTICE, Volume 34, Number 3, Summer 1995 Copyright 1995 College of Education, The Ohio State University 0040-5841/95\$1.25

⁷ Developing and assessing intercultural communicative competence, *A guide for language teachers and teacher educators*, Ildikó Lázár, Martina Huber-Kriegler, Denise Lussier, Gabriela S. Matei and Christiane Peck, <http://www.ecml.at>.

students whose native language is Macedonian. The common ground for them in a foreign language classroom is the foreign language, in this case the English. On the other hand, the teachers have been classified based on the working experience and not the age. This would mean that among the high school English teachers there would be more experienced teachers and more samples could be obtained regarding the level of awareness about the role of the culture as a tool for promoting diversity in a not very diverse environment in this case being the language classroom.

The questionnaire had nine (9) questions. Six (6) of them were statements and a number from 1 to 5 was to be circled (1 being “agree at least”, 5 “agree the most”). The assumptions have been that these would display respondents’ attitude and feelings, thus providing how homogeneous or various their feeling are upon the issue being asked. The other three were of open type necessitating some narration hoping that the answers the respondents would provide would display their opinions and understanding of the concepts i.e. ideas.

The questionnaire was given to 12 respondents of each category and the expectations were that at least 10 of each category of respondents would respond. As the media of conduct was an electronic communication (the stake of today’s world) the number of respondents varies. However, it is still enough to make some conclusions.

For the purpose of this paper the results are given in tables. Tables 1 - 6 are the results of the teenagers followed by interpretation. Tables 7- 12 are the results of the SUT students followed by interpretation. Tables 13 – 18 are the samples obtained from the teachers followed by interpretation. Although one of the variables is the work experience based on the obtained samples the tables have been sub categorized as Albanian and Macedonian teachers. Reasoning behind Questions 7-9 has been to see how the interviewed samples define and understand the culture. The obtained samples from the teenagers and students do not show high level of awareness about the culture and for them it is mostly the life in general. Consequently for the purpose of the paper the answers of the teachers are provided in the tables related to the Questions 7-9) as they are those that could initiate and implement the changes in the classroom.

Teenagers’ samples (Tables 1-6)

<i>Q;1.Many teachers have little or on training in working with children from diverse cultural and linguistic background</i>										
Teenagers										
	Macedonian					Albanian				
Responses by people	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1										
2										
3										

4											
5											
6											
7											
8						/	/	/	/	/	
TOTAL		1	1	2	2	2	0	0	4	1	2

Q2. Cultural differences have little effect on the way students learn

Teenagers										
Responses by people	Albanian					Macedonian				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1										
2										
3										
4										
5										
6										
7										
8							/	/	/	/
TOTAL	1	0	5	1	1	1	0	1	2	3

Q3. Young children don't really notice differences, so why make a big deal of multicultural education.

Teenagers										
Responses by people	Albanian					Macedonian				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1										
2										
3										
4										
5										
6										

	7	█				█					
	8		█			/	/	/	/	/	
TOTAL		3	0	2	0	3	1	3	2	0	1

Q4. Schools in which there are no minority groups don't need a multicultural perspective

Teenagers										
	Albanian					Macedonian				
Responses by people	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1		█							█	
2		█				█				
3				█			█			
4	█						█			
5	█						█			
6		█				█				
7					█					█
8		█				/	/	/	/	/
TOTAL	2	4	0	1	1	2	3	0	1	1

Q5. Multicultural education is a total curricular and instructional approach

Teenagers										
	Albanian					Macedonian				
Responses by people	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1				█						█
2			█							█
3					█			█		
4			█							█
5			█			█				
6			█							█
7					█	█				
8					█	/	/	/	/	/
TOTAL	0	0	4	1	3	2	0	1	0	4

Q6. Children from minority groups are considered to be weaker students than the majority group students

Teenagers

	Albanian					Macedonian				
Responses by people	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1										
2										
3										
4										
5										
6										
7										
8						/	/	/	/	/
TOTAL	2	1	2	0	3	2	2	3	0	0

According to the responses provided by the teenagers it seems that Albanians are more convinced that *many teachers have little or on training in working with children from diverse cultural and linguistic background*. Macedonian ones feelings seem to vary and they are not sure about it.

About the question whether *cultural differences have little effect on the way students learn both* Macedonians and Albanians feel concentrate something in between presumably meaning they are not very sure or they have not thought about it a lot.

As for the statement that *Young children don't really notice differences, so why make a big deal of multicultural education* Macedonian students mostly least agree while the Albanian feelings are divided. There is almost equal number of those who strongly agree and disagree.

Both Albanians and Macedonians have the same opinion about the statement that *Schools in which there are no minority groups don't need a multicultural perspective*. They least agree about this issue.

It seems that for the both of groups **multicultural education is a total curricular and instructional approach**. An interpretation of this might mean that if it is by the book then it should be part of the class if not they would not feel that they have missed a lot in the class.

Children from minority groups are considered to be weaker students than the majority group students like a question could be interpreted in various ways depending who is considered to be the minority group whether the Macedonians in the predominant Albanian

environment or vice versa so the responses could be a subject of a further interpretation or a research. Regardless of this the provided answers display that Albanian teenagers have various feelings about this. Macedonians are mostly of a same opinion of the issue and their feelings concentrate along 1-3 on a scale from 1-5 where one is least agree and 5 being the most agree.

Students' responses (Tables 7-12)

<i>Q1. Many teachers have little or no training in working with children from diverse cultural and linguistic background</i>										
Students										
	Albanian					Macedonian				
Responses by people	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1			■			■				
2				■					■	
3				■			■			
4	■					■				
5	■								■	
6				■					■	
7					■			■		
8			■				■			
9			■					■		
10	/	/	/	/	/			■		
11	/	/	/	/	/			■		
12	/	/	/	/	/			■		
TOTAL										

<i>Q2 Cultural differences have little effect on the way students learn</i>										
Students										
	Albanian					Macedonian				
Responses by people	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1				■				■		
2					■			■		
3			■					■		
4					■			■		
5			■			■				
6	■							■		
7			■							■
8					■			■		
9			■						■	
10	/	/	/	/	/					■

TOTAL	5	2	0	1	1	5	4	2	1	1
--------------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------

Q5. Multicultural education is a total curricular and instructional approach										
Students										
	Albanian					Macedonian				
Responses by people	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1					■				■	
2					■				■	
3		■								■
4					■				■	
5				■					■	
6					■					■
7	■									■
8		■							■	
9				■					■	
10	/	/	/	/	/			■		
11	/	/	/	/	/			■		
12	/	/	/	/	/					■
TOTAL	1	2	0	2	4	0	0	2	6	4

Q6. Children from minority groups are considered to be weaker students than the majority group students										
Students										
	Albanian					Macedonian				
Responses by people	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1			■							■
2		■					■			
3					■	■				
4	■					■				
5	■							■		
6			■						■	
7					■	■				
8	■					■				
9	■					■				
10	/	/	/	/	/		■			
11	/	/	/	/	/		■			
12	/	/	/	/	/	■				
TOTAL	4	1	2	0	2	6	3	1	1	1

The second category of respondents the students related to the statement that *many teachers have little or no training in working with children from diverse cultural and linguistic background* feel similar. Since the answers of both categories vary on the scale it implies they are not sure if this is true or not,

As or the statement that *Young children don't really notice differences, so why make a big deal of multicultural education* with both groups the feelings vary but are mostly concentrated on the medium level like they are not very sure.

Both groups strongly disagree *that schools in which there are no minority groups don't need a multicultural perspective*. They seem to be getting aware for the need of a multicultural perspective.

Macedonian students mostly feel that **multicultural education is a total curricular and instructional approach**, while Albanians feelings vary upon this issue.

However, their feelings about **children from minority groups being considered to be weaker students than the majority group students** are similar on the line that most of the both groups and mostly disagree.

Teachers' samples (Tables 13-18)

Q1. Many teachers have little or no training in working with children from diverse cultural and linguistic background

Teachers										
Responses by people	Albanian					Macedonian				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1										
2										
3										
4										
5										
6										
7										
8										
TOTAL	0	0	3	2	3	0	2	3	2	2

Q4. Schools in which there are no minority groups don't need a multicultural perspective

Teachers										
Responses by people	Albanian					Macedonian				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1										

2	■					■				
3			■			■				
4	■						■			
5			■			■				
6	■					■				
7				■				■		
8	■								■	
TOTAL	5	0	2	1	0	4	2	1	0	1

Q5. Multicultural education is a total curricular and instructional approach

Teachers

Responses by people	Albanian					Macedonian				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	
1				■				■		
2					■			■		
3				■					■	
4			■				■			
5				■				■		
6			■					■		
7			■				■			
8			■							■
TOTAL	0	0	4	3	1	0	2	4	1	1

Q6. Children from minority groups are considered to be weaker students than the majority group students

Teachers

Responses by people	Albanian					Macedonian				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	
1	■					■				
2	■						■			
3					■		■			
4		■						■		
5			■				■			
6			■						■	
7	■							■		
8	■							■		
TOTAL	4	1	2	0	1	1	3	3	1	0

Teachers both Albanian and Macedonian are more inclined to feel that **many teachers have little or no training in working with children from diverse cultural and linguistic background.**

Both groups are not certain whether **cultural differences have effect on the way students learn.**

However, both groups think even if there are no minority groups in the **schools they need a multicultural perspective.**

As their feelings are in the middle as far as the statement about **multicultural education** being a **total curricular approach** it seems that in the real class they would adhere to the curriculum and if it is out of it they would avoid.

Both groups seem to feel inclined to disagree that children from minority groups are considered to be weaker students than the majority group students, although Albanians are much stronger in this respect.

Questions 7 – 9 have been summarized in the tables below:

Nationality	QUESTION 7. What culture means to you? Try to explain
Albanian answersCulture is a collection of beliefs and values shared by a particular group of people.
	Culture embraces the system of knowledge, beliefs, religion, art, law, social habits, attitudes, and values ... possessions acquired by of a group of people through generations.
	Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, social habits, music and arts.
	Culture means realizing that you belong somewhere, being part of something and sharing your differences with someone.
	Culture for me is the unique characteristic that makes each community different, special. It is what an individual grows up with, how an individual is “carved” in life. It is tradition, religion, it is food, it is clothes, speech, attitude etc.

	Way of living and behaving. Each culture has its own specifics and it is very important if we learn those specifics for the cultures that are surrounding us. In addition, it is said that if you learn a new language, you have learnt a new culture.
	For me culture is way of life, how we learn, eat, behave, feel, think...
	Culture is the way of living, eating, talking, celebrating, cooking ., Culture for me as a teacher is what the students bring with him/her to school, beliefs, values, meanings, religion etc.
Macedonian answers	The beliefs, traditions, attitudes, customs of a particular country or society
	Culture can be seen in different ways. Someone sees it as language, someone as way of living, someone as religion.
	Culture is way of expressing, living, speaking and collection of little things that make us complete
	Culture is the student identity, teaching culture is alpha omega in order to have an good education and society. Culture is the background, the history and the present of a person.
	Culture for me means a way of life and a way of behaving.
	Culture is a wide term in which different aspects of life are included.

Nationality	QUESTION 8. Are enough teaching materials being used in your classes which include different cultures?
AlbanianI try to include lesson materials from various ethnic and religious backgrounds in my classes, such as studying literature written by minority authors or literature that has subject matter relating to minorities' life experiences
	Not really, because I have a non-diversity class of students.
	Yes I try to use different materials teaching culture through music, art, movies

	I must admit that I am lucky enough to work at a private teaching institution, where I possess all the necessary tools and equipment. I feel sorry for my colleagues working within state owned schools.
	Not really. We tend to actually use American culture more than culture in which we life in.
	Not really. We are learning only about one culture, and that is Technology.
	Not enough!
	No there aren't. I would like to use these kind of teaching materials during my classes.
Macedonian	Magazines, articles, stories, songs, videos, literature
	No, we use only books for grammar or vocabulary
	We try to use some magazines or internet sources
	Yes, I mostly make my own materials (combined with textbooks) depending on my group of students.
	There are no enough teaching materials that include different cultures.
	There is not enough materials. It should be invested in materials, programs, hours and tools and training for professionals.

Nationality	QUESTION 9.Do you organize/attend school events to celebrate various religious holidays?
Albanian	No.
	Not really, just some of them like Easter, Eid, New Year...!

	Not really unfortunately
	Occasionally we receive various invitations from other institutions to participate in different religious festivals, which we gladly accept and join them. However, since we live in a multicultural society where we have various religious festivals with regards different religions, we are being extremely careful to respect all of our students' diversity by organizing some celebrations of behalf of the major religious festivals considered as national holidays in R. Macedonia.
	Since I work at university level, I do not usually organize such events. I think they are more appropriate for younger students.
	At our university, we really don't celebrate religious holidays, we mostly celebrate national holidays. Religious holidays are celebrated home with families.
	Unfortunately, I haven't attended at various religious holidays! I have attended only at our religion holidays!
	Our school never organizes or celebrates various religious holidays. "We" enjoy having a day off without knowing the reason. The pleasure that there is no school is higher than the curiosity or respect.
Macedonian	Events such as Halloween, Mother's Day
	We only celebrate national holidays.
	No never
	Yes, again it depends on the groups of students: Christmas, Easter, Eid, New Year etc.
	Yes, our school organizes celebrations for Bajram and Easter.
	No.

CONCLUSIONS

The survey shows that there is some awareness and a need for a multicultural perspective in a foreign language classroom. The feelings of all the interviewed categories seem to be mixed.

In some cases their answers could be misinterpreted. Still, Republic of Macedonia being a multicultural country needs to take care of this issue and the multicultural perspective especially in a non diverse classroom environment regardless if it is dominant Albanian or Macedonian should be promoted. Foreign language teaching (FLT) seems to be the most suitable for it. Having in mind the large number of classroom instruction allocated to FLT not only the English language instruction but other foreign languages classes can be used to introduce cultural element. FL curriculum is mostly topic based and the abundance of topics and the large number of classroom instruction provide many opportunities to cover plenty of cultural elements related not only to the culture of the target language be it English, German or other FL but to the states' one of the Macedonians, Albanians and the languages of the other ethnicities of the country not necessarily present in the given class. By doing so, and getting each other better the ties among the communities would strengthen and this would lead to the real multicultural environment as the State constitutionally is.

References

1. OFA – Framework agreement, 13.08.2001
2. Unite or Divide, The challenges of teaching history in societies emerging from violent conflicts, Special USIP Report, Elizabeth A. Cole and Judy Barsalou
3. Promoting Respect for Cultural Diversity in the Classroom, Matthew Lynch, Ed.D, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-lynch-edd/promoting-respect-for-cul_b_1187683.html? (accessed on 25.03.2015).
4. Ladson-Billings, But That's Just Good Teaching!, THEORY INTO PRACTICE, Volume 34, Number 3, Summer 1995 Copyright 1995 College of Education, The Ohio State University 0040-5841/95\$1.25.
5. Developing and assessing intercultural communicative competence, *A guide for language teachers and teacher educators*, Ildikó Lázár, Martina Huber-Kriegler, Denise Lussier, Gabriela S. Matei and Christiane Peck, <http://www.ecml.at>.