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Promoting Social Inclusion through the Development of Intercultural Competence in Foreign Language Education

Kształtowanie kompetencji międzykulturowych
na rzecz włączenia społecznego
poprzez uczenie się języków obcych

Abstract: The following report aims to provide results from the analysis of the present, the new and the draft programs for foreign language education in the primary level of the Bulgarian education system, with a view to promoting social inclusion and enhancing the development of intercultural competence in a school setting. Bulgarian, as well as European schools as major agents of socialization are presented with the great challenge of realizing one of the main aims of European educational legislation – that of social inclusion. This could be achieved by enhancing intercultural competence, because when students understand each other's differences and are tolerant towards others, they could accept 'different' people as equal and as an integral part of society.

Keywords: *intercultural competence, foreign language education, inclusive education, social inclusion, curriculum, Ministry of Education and Science*

Streszczenie: Niniejszy raport ma na celu przedstawienie wyników analizy istniejących i nowych programów i projektów programów na ten temat „obcego” dla bułgarskiej szkoły podstawowej z punktu widzenia ich potencjału do realizacji edukacji włączającej i tworzenia kompetencji międzykulturowej w środowisku szkolnym. Jako jeden z głównych czynników socjalizacji, szkoły bułgarskie i europejskie są wezwane, by zrealizować praktycznie jeden z głównych celów prawodawstwa UE w dziedzinie edukacji – czyli inkluzji społecznej. Można tego dokonać poprzez kształtowanie kompetencji międzykulturowych, ponieważ gdy uczniowie rozumieją różnice między sobą i tolerują siebie nawzajem, będą mogli zaakceptować „obcych” jako równą część społeczeństwa.

Słowa kluczowe: *kompetencje międzykulturowe, nauka języków obcych, edukacja włączająca, włączenie społeczne, program nauczania, Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki*

According to the World Declaration on Education for all, the essence of inclusive education lies in *universalizing education for all children, youth and adults and promoting equity* [UNESCO, 2009, p. 8]. In order for this aim to be realized a lot of involvement is sought on part of teachers, parents, the whole school community, as well as legislative institutions. As a member of both UNESCO and the European Union, Bulgaria complies with the aim of introducing inclusive education and has made legislative efforts to do so. Such are present in the School curricula for foreign language education – the present ones as well as their new versions, which accent on the development of intercultural competence among other purely linguistic priorities. In my opinion, the development of intercultural competence could benefit social inclusion through encouraging positive qualities as tolerance, empathy and solidarity and the medium for this could be the foreign language class at school. Foreign language education centres itself around communication – popular methods are discussion, role-play, visual content, group work – all of which enhance personal involvement and cooperation. All of the aforementioned are not only suitable ways of promoting intercultural competence but also social inclusion. As Bulgarian schools usually educate students of diverse origins (e.g. Bulgarian, Roma, Turkish, Armenian, Jewish and etc.), as well as with different social background or disabilities, the inclusion of such content in a suitable form for the primary school age group is much needed to avoid bullying and conflicts among members of the school community. The foreign language class is suitable for including such aims because language naturally relates to culture and it is customary for language education to include topics from diverse fields, thus creating intercurricular connections with other school subjects.

School curricula – the present and the new foreign language curricula for the primary school – the vision of the Ministry of Education and Science of Bulgaria for the development of intercultural competence

According to foreign language curricula¹ for Bulgarian schools, foreign language education is mandatory for students from the 2nd Grade (around the age of 8 years) and at the end of the 4th Grade (around the age of 10 years), which is the last grade from the primary education level, students are expected to have attained level A1 of the Common European Framework of Reference

¹ Foreign languages discussed in this paper are English, German, French, Spanish, Italian and Russian, which are most commonly taught in Bulgarian schools.

for Languages. The foreign language taught from the 2nd Grade is commonly referred to as 'first foreign language', whereas a 'second foreign language' acquisition is mandatory from the 5th Grade in the educational system of Bulgaria. This means that Bulgarian students typically study two foreign languages as part of their school education. Despite the fact that foreign language education is mandatory from the second year of primary school, a number of schools give students the opportunity to study a foreign language from the 1st Grade. In addition to the opportunities for foreign language education provided by state schools, there are also numerous private tuition classes in foreign languages in the sphere of nonformal education. Lots of students visit such courses which enhance their language competence, and this in turn is beneficial for the development of intercultural competence because a higher level of language competence facilitates the development of intercultural competence.

Currently, the old school curricula for foreign languages are being gradually replaced by new and improved ones in view of including European priorities in education such as intercultural education and citizenship education, as well as inclusive education. This is achieved via the presence of elements encouraging the development of intercultural and citizenship competence (e.g. critical thinking), which in turn could also benefit social inclusion in the school community.

What follows is an analysis in terms of the intercultural viability of the new and the present curricula² and therefore its aim is not to accent on their purely linguistic aspect but to point out some ways in which the Ministry of Education and Science of Bulgaria attempts to include intercultural content into the foreign language class.

The new school curricula for foreign languages for the 2nd Grade

According to the foreign language curricula, the number of school hours assigned for foreign language education in the 2nd Grade is 64 hours per school year. Half of that time is used for the introduction of new material and the other half is for revision. In all of the curricula the accent is placed on the development

² For the 2nd Grade the new school curriculum for foreign languages took effect in the present school year 2017-2018 and for the 3rd and 4th Grades it will take effect respectively in the school years 2018-2019 and 2019-2020.

of communicative competence and the stimulation of students' personal development, both of which achieved through various methods, strategies and techniques freely chosen by the teacher to suit each student's individual needs [Ministry of Education and Science... English, 2015, p. 1-5]. All foreign language curricula aim at learning the language for practical purposes thus stressing on the communicative aspect of language and leaving heavy grammar for later stages [Ministry of Education and Science... Spanish, 2015, p. 7]. The development of language, sociocultural and key competences help students communicate from an early age, which enhances their ability to get to know new cultures and try to understand and juxtapose them with their own culture early on. This in turn is beneficial for the development of critical thinking and intercultural competence. Another highlight of all of the curricula, which could not only enhance intercultural competence but also benefit social inclusion, is promoting the development of basic personal qualities needed for life in the modern society such as morality, legal culture, aesthetic perception, physical culture, knowledge in the sphere of labour rights and communication etiquette [Ministry of Education... Russian, 2015, p. 7]. In addition to encouraging students to expand their personal qualities, stress is put on the development of competences, such as language, sociocultural and key competences³ [Ministry of Education... Italian, 2015, p. 7], as well as *creativity and independent thinking* [Ministry of Education... German, 2015, p. 6].

All curricula for the 2nd Grade are also aimed at *maintaining a positive approach towards the language and culture being learned* [Ministry of Education... French, 2015, p. 6] and *establishing an attitude of willingness for involvement in multicultural communication, development of tolerance and interest towards other cultures and behavioral models, while at the same time promoting a feeling of national identity* [Ibid] when sociocultural information about France/Spain/the UK and the USA/Italy/Russia/Germany is being presented. From an intercultural point of view, the priorities presented beforehand are a sufficient prerequisite for the development of intercultural competence as they encourage the development of critical thinking, the awareness of one's own culture and the ability to compare one's own culture to others', which are all important elements of intercultural communicative competence as defined by Michael Byram [Byram, 2001, p. 5].

³ The key competences as defined by the European Commission are: communication in one's mother tongue, foreign languages, digital skills, literacy, basic skills in maths and science, learning to learn, social and civic responsibility, initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and creativity [European Commission, 2018].

But these priorities also limit intercultural understanding only to understanding the culture associated most closely with the foreign language students are learning (e.g. when studying English, students only learn about the UK and the USA, rarely even about Australia). In order to diversify cultural content presented in textbooks, authors could add information about other countries around the world and the way of life of people there, presented in the form of a reading task or a multiple choice exercise, etc. so as to naturally fit into the structure of the textbook.

The current and the new school curricula for foreign languages for the 3rd and 4th Grades

According to the current foreign language curricula for the 3rd and 4th Grades, foreign language classes comprise 96 school hours per year or 3 hours a week. Among the aims of the curricula is gaining knowledge and skills which would help students *to develop independently, to apply the aforementioned knowledge and skills in a multicultural setting, as well as to be able to work as part of a team, according to international standards* [Ministry of Education... English, 2003, p. 1]. In addition, the foreign language curricula for the 3rd and 4th Grades *help the overall personal development of students, enrich their general knowledge and develop suitable models of social behaviour in situations of intercultural communication* [Ministry of Education... Spanish, 2003, p. 1], the accent being put on the development of communicative skills. Foreign language education is closely related to native language and culture education as communicative skills and strategies acquired when learning the native language serve as a foothold in the learning process [Ibid]. Cross-curricular links are another important foothold, as they help expanding students' general knowledge and vocabulary and aid the development of their language competence. Foreign language curricula stress on the importance of gaining not only purely linguistic knowledge and skills, but also on the development of students' personality and *spurring an interest in foreign cultures and peoples* [Ibid]. From what was previously written, it could be summarized that although not explicitly mentioned in the current foreign language curricula for the 3rd and 4th Grades, intercultural competence is an indelible part of foreign language education. Moreover, the emphasis on developing personal qualities gives an opportunity for including educational elements, representing personal qualities which facilitate

the development of intercultural competence. These elements, such as tolerance, empathy, cooperation and solidarity, nonviolence and etc., could be included into the foreign language class, without interfering with purely linguistic aims via various tasks suitable for the age group – the effect being fulfilling the goals of the curriculum more fully. This could in turn benefit social inclusion, as educating students to develop the aforementioned personal qualities would hopefully result in them being more prepared to communicate with ‘different’ people and less prejudiced against them. However, in the current foreign language curricula there is not an explicitly mentioned goal of ‘developing intercultural competence’, they rather rely on the development of sociocultural competence⁴, which stresses on building predominantly communicative skills.

As far as the new foreign language curricula for the 3rd and 4th Grades are concerned, they are very similar to these for the 2nd Grade – they build on the foundation of the present curricula but the accent is placed on the development of competences and personal qualities, as well as using language for communicative purposes, excluding heavy grammar. The number of study hours for the 3rd Grade remains the same, whereas that for the 4th Grade is increased to 102 hours, which means more time for revision and developing school projects. As a drawback from an intercultural point of view, it could again be noted that information about foreign countries is only constrained to the country/ies most closely associated with the language being learned (e.g. German – Germany, Austria and Switzerland). Including more diverse cultural information will not only facilitate the development of intercultural competence via juxtaposing students’ native culture with various cultural perspectives but also enrich their general culture and their vocabulary in the foreign language being studied.

Methods for social inclusion through the development of intercultural competence in the primary school foreign language class

Topics related to the development of intercultural competence could be included into the learning process, in order to make the curriculum *address the child’s cognitive, emotional, social and creative development* [UNESCO, 2009,

⁴ The concept of ‘sociocultural competence’ is more closely connected with communicative purposes, whereas ‘intercultural competence’ is not only related to communication but also to the development of the whole personality, via the three dimensions: knowledge, abilities and attitudes.

p. 18], which is also fits the criteria for an inclusive curriculum. This could be achieved through various methods and forms, without disrupting the learning process or failing to fulfill goals set in foreign language curricula, on the contrary – such tasks not only diversify learning content, but also help to achieve aims, related to *sustaining and expanding students` interest in learning a foreign language and culture in the context of their own language and culture; ...facilitating the development of a value system, tolerant behaviour and interest towards different opinions and models of behaviour* [Ministry of Education... German, 2003, p. 1, 2]; *finding similarities and differences between their native language and Spanish;...stimulating interest towards Spanish speaking countries;...developing a willingness to communicate and be part of a team; ...enriching their experience and personality by learning about another language and culture* [Ministry of Education... Spanish, 2003, p. 1, 2] and so on. All of the abovementioned aims are the same for all foreign language curricula but the foreign language and culture in question vary accordingly.

A very common method for the inclusion of cultural content is *the use of texts* as part of foreign language education. These texts are usually included in textbooks, in a ‘cultural information’ section, which could give the impression of something additional that could be included only if there is extra time and so it could easily be dropped off. An alternative option is combining cultural information with a linguistic task, so that teachers would be more motivated to use it. Examples are numerous and can include: a multiple choice task on a cultural topic, a reading comprehension task giving information about children`s rights, a listening comprehension about a famous person from a foreign country and so on. Combining the aims of intercultural and language competence development would also increase students` overall level of competence, which is in tune with the accent placed on key competences development in the curricula. In addition, texts on cultural topics could facilitate the development of tolerance and empathy, as well as critical thinking.

Discussing a culture-related story could encourage the development of the ability to juxtapose one`s own culture to others` and gain a better understanding not only of foreigners, but of the students themselves. According to M. Byram, *what we learn about ourselves when learning or teaching a foreign language is just as important as what we learn about others* [Wagner, 2013, p. 32].

In addition to working with texts on cultural topics, teachers could present cultural information in other suitable ways for the age group of primary

school students, such as *role play*, *competitions* or *project work* (the latter is included as a method of work into the curricula) and also a method exerting considerable influence on students – *the personal example of the teacher*. All of these methods could accompany celebrating typical holidays and feasts related to a given cultural tradition, which is traditionally included in foreign language education.

Role play is a basic method...of emotional education, intercultural education, peace education and human rights education...as it involves understanding others' point of view...and at this basis creating better conditions for reaching a consensus when there is a "controversial" issue involved, for the development of tolerance and understanding [Chavdarova-Kostova, 2012, p. 176]. This understanding is achieved through experiencing feelings, when the student is in a particular role and the focus is on empathy [Ibid].

Project work is a method, which usually motivates students as they are given the initiative and it also encourages creativity. If the project is assigned as a collective task, it also helps the development of cooperation skills as well as language competence, all of which benefit the development of intercultural competence and favours social inclusion. It is well-known that when different people work together they get a first hand experience of each other's similarities and differences, which could help break stereotypes and prejudice.

Organizing a friendly *competition* can encourage cooperation and increase motivation to participate in the language class on part of students. Participating in a competition is a way of comparing oneself to others and gaining a realistic idea of one's level of knowledge and skills in a given area. Group competitions, in addition, encourage cooperation, team spirit, self-discipline and morals and satisfy the need to be part of a group [Ibid].

Last but not least is *the personal example* of the foreign language teacher – it is a very powerful tool for the development of intercultural competence and achieving social inclusion at school. The way the teacher behaves could be quite influential, especially for school children at this young age and they tend to copy his/her behaviour just as they copy their parents at home. It is very important for teachers to realize this potential if they are interested in educating their students to be tolerant towards cultural differences.

In conclusion, both the current and the new school curricula for foreign language education in Bulgarian schools possess potential for the development of intercultural competence, which also benefits social inclusion in education. With the use of suitable methods, these curricula could facilitate intercultural

communication and enrich students on a personal level via the development of empathy, cooperation, tolerance and non-violence attitudes. In realizing such an initiative in a school setting there are undoubtedly some challenges to be faced, a substantial one of which is teacher preparation. Before students could develop intercultural competence, teachers have to attain a high level of intercultural competence themselves, but this is a long process and involves personal willingness. At present, university education in Bulgaria provides courses for the development of intercultural competence for future teachers, which means that young specialists are prepared for work in a culturally diverse setting. But for middle-aged or elderly teachers, who outnumber their young colleagues in the education system, the development of intercultural competence remains more a matter of personal initiative and motivation, than an organized process.

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