

## INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCES AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

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**Abstract:** *The article is focused on the effect of intercultural experiences (Erasmus mobilities, learning, working in other countries) and transformative learning. One of the contemporary learning theories is transformative learning, which has usually been defined as transformations of meaning perspectives, frames of reference, and habits of mind (Mezirow). The intercultural experiences are an occasion to exercise critical thinking, to manage the positive and negative feelings, to adapt behavioural strategies. We used a questionnaire regarding students' attitudes on intercultural experiences and focused-groups were used. A number of 100 participants were included in the study, pupils from the XII<sup>th</sup> grade at CT Maria Baiulescu and third year students from the Transilvania University of Brasov. As a conclusion, we found that the intercultural experiences are a good occasion to develop intercultural competences through transformative learning.*

**Keywords:** *intercultural experiences, transformative learning, intercultural education*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

We are living in a changing society which involves new strategies of learning new competences to cope the diversity of reality: critical thinking skills, democracy, tolerance, cooperation, etc. For all educators it is a challenge to identify how to teach more adequately for students which are in a "digital era" while the educators are in an "analogic era". The values of post-modern society, described by many sociologists, such as Ritzer (2003; 2010) Huntigton (2012), Lipovestki (2007) put their mark on the way young people learn and especially, on the way they build their learning.

In other words, postmodernism encourages a different kind of learning, much different from the traditional learning, based on the dominance of cognitive processes and ignoring the socio-emotional learning. Today's learning route is closely linked to the route of individual growth, where the emotional aspects are as important as the cognitive ones, where the scale of values changes according to changes in context and the "change of mind" in the sense described by H. Gardner (2006) is an attribute of emotional intelligence and cognitive flexibility. Young people today, corresponding to the description of "Homo zappiens", with the specific requirements of the world in which they were born and live, consider

school "just one of the focal points of life", much more important for them being the relationships with friends, part-time jobs and going out at the week-end" (Veen, Wracking, 2011:11).

In this context, what kind of learning theory is able to answer students' and social needs? A possible answer is transformative learning, which has usually been defined as transformations of meaning perspectives, frames of reference, and habits of mind (Mezirow, 2014). This learning is not only in agreement with the principles of the constructivist pedagogy (Siebert, 2001), but aims the person entirely, with its lifelong learning, in different contexts. This learning is capable of producing transformations in individuals' minds because it fully involves the individual in learning and invites to introspection, reflection and reconstruction. Transformative learning is more than learning, it is a real opportunity to reflect and develop oneself. Even if this kind of learning is typical for adults, we think that transformative learning must be promoted in school through practice and experiences. For example, schools must be turned into "open spaces" of experiences and social exercises.

Intercultural education is based on the effects and benefits of transformative learning that leads to changing the stereotypes, prejudices, values, or more simply said, leads to changes in the individual's mind. This is possible because

transformative learning involves: critical reflection on the source, the nature and the consequences of the relevant assumptions, being them ours or the others'; seeking for evidence for transformation, acting in our transformed perspective; acquiring a particular disposition to validate our transformed position (Mezirow, 2014:171).

But how can we bring transformative learning in schools? – One answer may be: through intercultural experiences and intercultural education!

## **2. INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCES AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING**

For the students, in the current socio-economic context, intercultural skills become true adaptation tools for a sustainable society, which improve employability in a dynamic and complex labour market, where interactions with other cultures will be more numerous, more profound, more dynamic.

Intercultural competence is a multi-dimensional concept, dependent on a number of psycho-individual factors, as shown in numerous explanatory models of the concept presented in the specialty literature - structural, interactional, developmental, cultural, adaptive, causal models, synthesized by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009).

Byram and Zarate describe the structure of intercultural competences: 1) Attitudes: curiosity, openness to deal with stereotypes of other groups and beliefs about the them; 2) Knowledge of social groups, their "products" and their own culture or practices of others, general processes of social interaction on the macro-and micro-level; 3) Interpretation skills and networking. Balanced analysis of a document or event belonging to a culture, and explanation of proper relationship with those of their culture; 4) Skills of interaction and discovery, ability to receive new information and practices of other cultures, to operate with knowledge, attitudes, skills in communication and interaction within reality's limits; 5) Reflection and critical evaluation skills on the basis of perspectives, practices and products of their culture and of the others (Nedelcu, 2008:25-26).

We can see that these components of the intercultural competence are formed through a

progressive training process, based on the complex interactions in the environment where the individual lives, starting with the family and community and ending at the macro level, society. The most important ingredient in the formation of the intercultural competence is, however, participation.

Hence the importance of the social context that reveals a person's intercultural competences" (Voinea, 2014:p.64).

Beyond the questionable aspects of contemporary society, from the perspective of interculturalism and transformative learning, society gives us more and more opportunities for experimentation with different ways of thinking and acting, due to the openness to other cultures or, as Hofstede et al (2012) suggestively calls them, opportunities of "intercultural encounter", such as educational programmes of cultural exchanges, sports, media, tourism, working with international corporations.

## **3. THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCES ON STUDENTS LEARNING - A PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH**

The main purpose of this research was to demonstrate the role of intercultural experiences in students' learning.

Methods: A questionnaire regarding students' attitudes on intercultural experiences and two focus-groups, as well as an analysis of the activity products (reflexive journals) were used.

Research hypothesis: the more intercultural experiences students / pupils have, the more transforming learning effects occur, resulting in critical thinking, spirit of cooperation, tolerance.

A number of 100 participants (30 pupils in the twelfth form and 70 students in the third year) were included in the study, XII<sup>th</sup> grade pupils from "Maria Baiulescu" College and third year students at "Transilvania" University of Brasov. Both pupils and students were selected taking into consideration the intercultural experiences they had had. The selection criterion was the number of intercultural experiences (minimum one during the last year) and their duration (at least a month). The analysis of data collected through the questionnaire showed that intercultural experiences, regardless of their purpose (whether for work, tourism or learning) are rated as positive in 96% of the cases, with beneficial effects on learning in dimensions / plans as they are represented in Fig.1.

Differences among the learning dimensions appear if we refer to the type of intercultural experience and the status of the subjects. Thus, the high school students have intercultural experiences such as visits to parents or relatives working or living abroad. For them, the most important effect of the intercultural experience is reflected in exercising the language of the host country and

getting to know certain lifestyle traditions and customs specific to the host country.

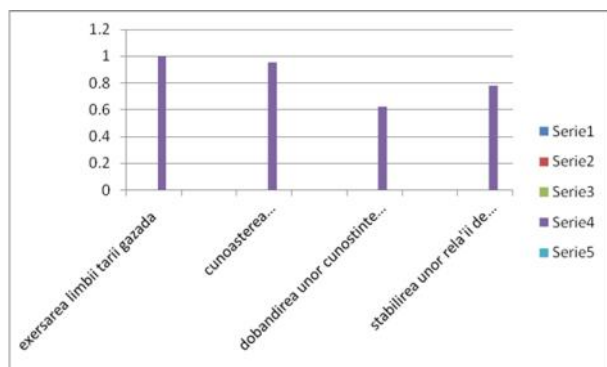


Fig.1 Dimensions of learning from intercultural experiences

Students, who were mostly involved in Erasmus exchange projects or through various educational projects / programs in other countries believe that the most important effects (as in the case of pupils) are: knowledge of host country language, binding friendships with other students, acquiring knowledge in a specific field. It can be noted that, both for pupils and for students, the formative effects are felt primarily on the socio-emotional level. While not denying the cognitive dimension of the intercultural experience, the emotional impact and motivation are much easier to notice and describe.

The analysis of data from two focus groups with pupils, respectively, with students revealed the following:

1. The intercultural experiences are motivating for both students and pupils. Most of them want "to learn as well as they can" to be able to study in another country.

2. The intercultural experiences have the power to "open their mind", fact much better described by students.

Significant in this regard is the statement of a student who was for a month in China (and, at the suggestion of a teacher, she kept a diary while being there):

I am happy that I have greatly enriched myself and I have gained so many new experiences and information (DB, student).

The analysis of the reflexive journal, which the student made available to the researchers, highlighted the main themes of reflection: customs and traditions, lifestyle, educational system. The reflexive journal used to facilitate experiential learning, was analysed using the SOLO taxonomy developed by Biggs and Collis (1982). It was

found that the journal reflected the abstract level, the subject being capable of understanding complex phenomena, transfer of knowledge, having a deep understanding of his own emotions / beliefs, being awareness of both the limits and the advantages of their own reference systems. The interaction with the Chinese learning system and thus the learning experiences were likely to lead to increased self-confidence, to experimenting positive, stimulating emotions:

In the end, even the Chinese teacher told me that I did a good job presenting my work in Chinese. I do not know how good it was, but I felt good and proud that I could hear myself speaking Chinese!

Summarizing all the data gathered, we can say that the intercultural experiences produce learning capable of transformations, more or less subtle, depending on a number of factors: the subject's age and ability of receiving and understanding the experience, the type of experience (tourism, work, study), its duration, method of processing experience, etc. Regardless of these variables, however, intercultural experience is able to produce an effective learning, useful for individual.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

From the research undertaken and the assessments made so far in the paper, the idea that intercultural experiences promote transformative learning emerges. Although there are limits concerning the number of research subjects and the intercultural experiences conducted (most subjects appreciate this experience as positive because many of them go into a safe environment – visiting relatives or for study), the subjectivity of the participants or their previous intercultural experiences, we may consider that even these somewhat shallow, superficial experiences are likely to produce changes in the individual's system of values and mind. The practical conclusion of our entire paper is obvious: taking any opportunity of intercultural "meeting" lead to extensive formative effects in the overall development of the individual. School should be rethought in the light of current transformative learning, by opening it to wider contexts of learning.

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