

Linguistic Issues in Multicultural Education¹

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Abstract

Multicultural education is an ideal in such a world where natural sources are not only unequally distributed, but are also diminishing day by day as a result of wars, high technology and economic competition based on unconscious consumption. Such exchange programs as Socrates or Erasmus aim at bringing potentials of nations together. However, linguistic and cultural differences pose barriers in achieving this end. In spite of these hurdles, they lay the foundations of international cooperation in such a way as to enrich and respect each other's worldview as well as linguistic genius, which provide unity in diversity. Although culture and language can be thought as an inseparable couple, it is impossible for one to develop multicultural understanding and tolerance without perfect knowledge of foreign language. In other words, language reflects the linguistic genius of nations. Undoubtedly, in such programs students are expected to know certain degree of foreign language. Moreover, it is generally in English that foreign students exchange knowledge or views with each other. There comes to one's mind two questions: if English is medium of education so why should they ask to go to other countries?; the next one is using only one foreign language as a medium of such exchange programs serves only to standardize knowledge but not extending it in different directions from the angle of other languages. However, I have always imagined such programs would broaden one's worldview, but would not narrow it down by limiting it within the borders of just one language and culture if we acknowledge language as the heart of culture. Accordingly, this paper will scrutinize linguistic issues within the context of student exchange programs in higher education, and will identify linguistic hurdles especially in unrelated languages and cultures as well as the importance of language acquisition to serve for the ends of Socrates programme.

Keywords: language acquisition, language competence, academic mobility, Lingua

Historical Background

There was cultural mobility in the past; however, the underlying reasons were different from today. It was generally political, economic and religious reasons as well as curiosity that coerced people to immigrate to other lands; however, those who were driven to exile have had constructive impacts on the lands they immigrated. Whatever the underlying reasons were in the past, cultures have gained momentum as a result of cultural mobility. When seen from this angle, it can be claimed that mobility has always helped to disseminate not only universal knowledge, but also cultural heritage of different nations. In short, the dynamic nature of mobility caused even conservative nations to adopt political strategies to support it to strip away the cultural stagnancy pervading in the society. Considering the relationship between culture and language, it was first under the guise translation centers that the authorities in power authorized cultural mobility.

The first example of academic mobility was the "House of Wisdom" in Baghdat in the 9th century. It was the center of translation enterprise where Arabic, Syriac and Jewish scholars came together to translate the scientific and philosophical works of ancient Greece into Arabic. A result of such translational activity was that Arabic flourished as a scientific language. With the collapse of Baghdat center the storage of knowledge moved to Toledo school in the 12th century. In that center of translational activity, the Arabic Translations of Antic Age was first translated into Latin, then in the 13th century with the insistence of Alfonso X, the Spanish vernacular was adopted as scientific language (Salama-Carr 1995:112-120). In other words, the academic mobility under the guise of translation enterprise in the past was conducive to enrich vernacular languages and consolidate them in such way as to act as

a means to pass from culture of orality to written culture. Similarly, when Majesties [Ferdinand and Isabella] issued the edict that all Jews should be driven out of the kingdom and its territories, they were expelled from Spain in the 15th century, and those who escaped to Ottoman lands were welcomed warmly by Sultan Bajazet as disclosed by his following remarks:

"How can you call Ferdinand of Aragon a wise king, the same Ferdinand who impoverished his own land and enriched ours?" (Guleryuz, 2005)

However, mobility can not be assumed as a one-way interaction. For example, while they transferred medical knowledge of the Renaissance from the East, they were influenced by the tunes of Ottoman music and composed a new kind of music called "Sepharad", which best reflects the multicultural impact of exiles. In Sephardic music, the tunes were oriental, but the stories in these songs were in Spanish, which, on the one hand, function as a medium to transfer cultural heritage from old generation to the siblings, on the other hand, function as a tool in getting acquainted with the new culture they were driven to exile. Music can be claimed to have played a great part in helping the Spanish exiles to recognize the Ottoman culture, since the tunes reflect not only the logicity of cultures, but also the phoneticity of languages (Oktay, 2003). We may infer from this small piece of historical information, cultural elements such as music, folklore and literature lay the foundations of naturalistic way of language acquisition. Music and folklore helped to awaken somatic, emotional and intuitive feel for a foreign language in the past; It is on this foundation that adult learners could build cognitive meta-linguistic knowledge (Kiraly, 2000: 168-170).

Cognitive meta-linguistic skill covers both linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge. Therefore, it can be claimed that language competence is in direct proportion with the level of extralinguistic knowledge. For example, the medium of medical training in the first half of the 19th century was French in Turkey, and students read Fenelon's book called "Telemaque", in addition to basic language learning materials before specializing in their own field of specialty. This way of cultural outlook on language learning in the past helped students develop a feel for foreign language, which ended in laying the foundations of Imperial Decree of Reformation in 1839. That is to say, language acquisition is a purposeful action, which has a dual function on both cultures. (Yazıcı 2004:101-105). In history, it was through language learning that the students of medical faculty fostered the notion of democracy and played an active role in the foundation of Republic. As seen in this example, a conscious approach to language teaching served higher ends than just acquiring basic language skills.

Multilinguistic Approach Today

Today, the main purpose of academic mobility is not only to provide mutual understanding between different nations, but also to share knowledge in such a way as to enrich universal outlook on worldly issues. This means that cultural exchange programs should serve for the ends of raising awareness in maintaining cultural mosaic of the world. In other terms, the underlying reason for academic mobility is to direct economic as well as natural resources of nations not for deconstructive ends such as holocausts, wars and racism, but for constructive ends to maintain "the diversity in unity". Raising such awareness through such programs would bring nations together not only against natural disasters such as pandemics and global warming, but they would also help nations see different aspects of reality as Edward Sapir claims:

No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (as cited by Bassnett 1980:13)

Here, with intralinguistic worldview, Edward Sapir stressed on not only the different aspects of social reality, but also different aspects of physical reality. For example, nearly everyone has heard about the story of Newton and an apple, in which he questioned the Earth's gravitation. His way of reasoning arose from the empirical outlook on natural issues, which resulted from the empirical knowledge assimilated in the Western culture. Whereas, in the same period the same "apple" in the East was associated with nothing more than "sin", because speculative sciences were still pervading in the shaping of the world. On the other hand, the concept of "woman" as a symbol of beauty, faith, and loyalty was imported from the East into Western literary tradition. It was only after such an interaction in the 12th century that a new genre called Troubadour Poetry was born to foster the notion of "praising the woman" (Abdelwahed, 2005). That is to say, although the above-mentioned examples denote to

the same objects, their connotational meanings help us see different facets of world which ends in setting up different correlations with different aspects of reality.

From the point of language learner today, the study of collocations, idioms and knowledge of terminology will provide easy access to discern the diversity of languages. For example, in English when a Turkish student sees such an idiom as “love me, love my dog”, he/she may not understand the message easily, although there is an equivalent idiom bearing the same message in Turkish. However, it is expressed in such a way as setting up relationship between “rose” and “thorn”. Even these simple examples, at word level, disclose that language acquisition cannot be limited with transfer of denotative meanings of words, or grammatical rules, if the aim of such cultural mobility programmes is to overcome cultural, religious, and ideological barriers and bring nations together to gain new perspectives. Therefore, a special emphasis should be placed on teaching metaphorical usage of language.

Intermediary languages as a medium of academic training

The acquisition of knowledge through intermediary languages is not sufficient, if the main aim of cultural mobility programmes is to provide international cooperation and understanding. One can achieve such an end only through efficient communication in the target language. Or, as Nida stated “to communicate efficiently one must respect the genius of each language” (cited by Fawcett 1997:57). Here, language is the main hurdle hindering such programmes from working properly.

If considered within the context of Socrates Exchange Program, the requisites asked from participants are high scores from one’s field of study and knowledge of one of the main internationally acknowledged languages such as English, French or German. There are two points here; the first is to what extent the above-mentioned intermediary languages can serve to bridge the gap between cultures; the next is, if efficient communication cannot be fulfilled through intermediary languages, what should be done in developing language-learning methods of other native languages. In fact, the answers to both questions are interrelated with each other. In the first case, even if the participant’s score of the so-called languages may be high, the inert linguistic knowledge they have acquired may not suffice to meet the needs of participants if they were to act as active partners in bridging the gap between nations. In other words, the high scores they have taken from intermediary languages generally measure their cerebral power because participants have learnt these languages in sterile classroom atmospheres isolated from real life situations. Of course, the main aim of advocating education through intermediary languages may arise from providing consensus on universal truths, which requires the skill of “generalization.” However, intermediary languages as a medium of education may fall short of expectations. Even if the participant’s level of intermediary language is high, the lack of cultural and situational pre-knowledge may end not only in misunderstanding, but also in “domestication”, or “specification” of the general knowledge (Katan 1999: 96-97). For example, when I asked 10 students in my department to analyze the certain terms from a text on “aggression”, I see that they have interpreted the terms from the point of their own cultural knowledge without any regard to the universal side of it. The extract is as follows:

“If we are to understand our aggressive urges, we must see them against the back ground of our animal urges. As a species we are so occupied with mass-produced and mass-destroying violence at the present time that we tend to lose our objectivity when this discussing this subject. It is a fact that the most levelheaded intellectuals become violently expressive when discussing the urgent need to suppress aggression” (Kanelli 1978:99).

The eight of students set up correlations with the situation they are in and the institutional structuring of their culture. First, they relate “aggression” to the students involving in political actions in their faculty, next they associate “the most levelheaded intellectuals” with academic staff holding highest ranks, since the academic board in their faculty responsible not only for the quality of higher education, but also for the order of it. In other terms, in place of associating the word “levelheaded” with calmness, sensibility, or objectivity of intellectuals in “general”, they directly relate it to the situation in their country and relate it to the academic staff in our faculty. It discloses that even in such a universal issue as aggression, students project it into their own cultural and situational frameworks. On the contrary, if they had learnt it by physical, emotional, and social interaction, they would only have questioned aggressive urges and their consequences as a universal issue without reducing it to their own situation. When setting out from this example, it is obvious that language learning for academic purposes requires extra cultural and situational knowledge other than mechanic linguistic knowledge for simple communicative purposes. Here, the main goal of teaching or learning foreign language should be

moving the learner from the framework of his own language and culture to the source language and culture. It is only by the help of such mobility that one can strip away the unilateral outlook, and develop multilateral worldview on international as well as natural issues. Of course, this arises from learning language as a system of grammatical rules or “langue”, but not as a living body, or as “parole”, which triggers individual creativity as well as universal knowledge (Fawcett 1997: 1-10). To sum up, effective communication and knowledge acquisition can be achieved only through developing language competence in real-life situations.

Socrates and Lingua

In the past, the above-mentioned intermediary languages may have served the ends of Socrates because academic exchange programs were held between the neighboring countries. That is to say, they come from the same language families as well as sharing the same geography and cultural heritage. Today with the increasing number of members of European Union the number of unrelated languages increase in direct proportion with the expansion of the union. In this case, using only one of the foreign languages as a medium of such exchange programs serves only to standardize knowledge, but not extending it in different directions from the angle of other languages. However, when the qualifications of the candidates and the prospective objectives of Socrates programme are considered, it appears as an urgent issue to adapt academic mobility programmes to the political and socio-economic requirements of our age. It is only by such contemporary arrangements that participants could broaden their worldview in place of limiting it within the borders of an intermediary language and culture. On the other hand, even if participants may attend to language courses arranged by the host universities, they can neither reach such a level as to discern the cultural diversity, nor to share their cultural outlook with their friends. As a result, such exchange programs fall short of expectations in terms of bilateral ends.

To serve for bilateral ends, the students who participate in such exchange programmes should assume the responsibility for not only exporting knowledge from their own culture, but also for importing foreign scientific and cultural outlook into their culture. Therefore, participants as actors of future world should not be satisfied with perceiving such programs to serve for only temporary ends. However, duration of participant’s programme and the quality of language courses hinder successful participants from gaining cultural insights arising from diversity. In this case, he/she will do with classes which shares universally acknowledged knowledge in intermediary languages, which he/she can also acquire in his /her country. According to me, the academic mobility programmes can be claimed to reach their aims only if the participants can attend classes where culture-bound subjects are dealt with, and students can exchange ideas with each other without any linguistic barrier.

Although such language learning programmes as Lingua within the coverage of Socrates may serve this end by encouraging and supporting linguistic diversity, it mainly addresses to wider range of learners. Accordingly, in the first phase it aims at teaching language as a system rather than as “parole”. Of course, in the beginning learning a language as a system help the learner to see the logicity of language. However, it is not sufficient for the ends Socrates aims at. In this case, learning language as “parole” comes into the agenda, which is directly related with the creative, metaphorical, and pragmatic side of language. Here, we can focus on the second aim of Lingua programme, which aims to promote language-learning opportunities appropriate to each individual’s needs (available from: http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/lingua/index_en.html). It is this latter option that would help us to identify our goals in developing language learning materials for Socrates programme.

Concluding Remarks

The linguistic issues I have touched on within the context of history may illuminate what material and methods we can develop and what points we should place stress on as linguists in helping such academic mobility programs attain the aims they have aspired to. The following points may help surpassing linguistic barrier in cultural mobility programmes:

In the first stage, I suggest those who are elected for Socrates programme should learn the basic linguistic knowledge in their own country. Therefore, standard language learning material based on grammatical rules and a certain degree of vocabulary will help them solve their basic needs in arrival.

At this stage, English as an intermediary language can help the participant to retrieve information and develop a feel for the foreign language through translations. For example, they may read the translations of leading writers and scientists to obtain cultural knowledge. Besides navigating newspapers or songs on the web will help the participants to recognize the foreign culture and will shorten the incubation period in passing from beginner stage to the advanced stage to attend the classes in universities.

However, in the next stage, or after the arrival of the participants, it should be the responsibility of linguistic departments of universities to prepare the language material according to the fields of participants. The linguistic material may cover domain specific knowledge, since the domain specific knowledge is helpful not only in acquiring terminological knowledge, but also in determining the language use between the sides of the communication in an academic environment; however, it should also cover cultural, and literary material to help participant see and gain new cognitive skills. Here, sociolinguistic as well as pragmatic knowledge of the linguists will help linguists to choose such material as to consolidate communicative skills as well as metaphorical usage of knowledge which best reflect the genius of languages.

Of course, creating social occasions outside the classrooms or turning classrooms into a center of social events will help the participant to get into efficient communication more easily since one can discern different levels of formality and metaphorical usage only in natural settings.

All in all, considering the impact of cultural mobility in the past in spite of the economic, political and technological restrictions, why should we limit academic exchange programs with just intermediary languages today? What I advocate is that we should not limit the aims due to linguistic constraints. On the contrary, we should develop such material consisting of linguistic, cultural, as well as institutional knowledge to help the participants to adapt to the social and academic environment more easily and gain flexibility in approaching worldly issues. If we really intend to preserve the multicultural rubric of the world, we should support learning languages with such academic mobility programmes to help future actors of the world to develop problem-solving skills as well as laying the foundations of multicultural universities, where knowledge flourishes for the humanitarian ends.

Note

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