

The potential of educational systems to ensure systematic development of plurilingual and intercultural competence

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Abstract: Today's challenges on national, European and global levels require that young people develop corresponding skills and competences. As pointed out by Karvounaraki et al. (2018), encouraging the development of common European values and consolidating European identity through communicative processes among the representatives of a new generation of EU citizens is of paramount importance. These new citizens are to be capable of working within and across various national, European and global cultures by using multiple languages. In view of the intensified mobility and intellectual exchanges of teachers, scholars and students across national and disciplinary borders it is necessary to understand some of the mechanisms in place which enable such dynamics. This article presents a study of relevant theoretical sources as well as of EU and national documents regarding language and educational policies with a specific focus on the transition between secondary and tertiary education. The research design includes analysis of examples from Bulgaria to shed light on how to ensure systematic and coherent development of plurilingual and intercultural competence in educational practices.

Key words: intercultural competence, multilingualism, plurilingual competence, mobility, internationalization, Europeanization of education, transition between secondary and tertiary education

Introduction

It is hardly questionable that the world is changing ever more intensively, and this has been affecting people's lives on many levels – social, economic, political, educational, professional and personal. In addition, these changes could be considered in an international, European, regional, national or local respect. It is such recent phenomena as global financial crises, terrorist threats, immigration waves, integration and equally strong anti-integration movements, social inequalities, etc., that have led the European Commission to question what is in store for Europe. The “White Paper on the Future for Europe” discusses why this issue is becoming more and more relevant, and points out four factors: 1- the fact that the EU is part of an “evolving world” and is consequently changing; 2- the profound transformations on the economic and social levels; 3- the “heightened threats and concerns about security and borders”; 4, the “questioning of trust and legitimacy” (European commission, 2017b). [1]

An important initiative seeking to deal with modern-day challenges is the European Universities one and the idea to create a European Education Area (European Council 2017). [2] The underlying key ideas of the initiative have been presented in the communication “Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture” (European Commission, 2017c). [3] In this respect, facilitating communication among a new generation of EU citizens able to work together in the context of various European and global cultures, across national, regional and disciplinary boundaries as well as using a variety of languages is especially important (Karvounaraki et. al.

(2018: 5). [4] This entails intensified mobility, exchange of students, teachers and pedagogical approaches not only at the tertiary but also at the secondary level. Being interconnected, both are subject to research and reforms to meet today's demands.

The article aims to look more closely into some relevant theoretical sources, published relevant research findings and EU-level documents, and to discuss the potential of the Bulgarian educational system to provide an environment conducive to the above-outlined measures which are meant to achieve an integrated European Education Area that can lead to deeper European integration. The approach is one of analysis and synthesis.

Internationalization

Following from the above, it can be assumed that a) globalization has had an impact on educational systems and that the international dimension especially of higher education has continuously been subject to systematic research, and that b) the European dimension of education is also an important research topic.

Analysts such as Katz & Martin (1997) have emphasized that enhanced internationalization is at play at the tertiary level. [5] The interest towards internationalization over time has naturally led to a more elaborate definition of the term. The definition proposed by Knight in 2003 (Knight, 2003) [6] and revised in 2004 [7] is the closest to the purposes of the current article. The author emphasizes that internationalization is connected to efforts made at the level not only of individual researchers, but also of organizations and countries to plan and implement activities that go beyond national borders in order to incorporate an international, intercultural or global dimension in their research work and teaching practice, with expectations of quality improvement and of greater relevance of higher education in an interconnected world:

“International, intercultural, and global dimension. These terms are intentionally used as a triad, as together they reflect the breadth of internationalization. International is used in the sense of relationships between and among nations, cultures, or countries. But we know that internationalization is also about relating to the diversity of cultures that exists within countries, communities, and institutions, and so intercultural is used to address the aspects of internationalization at home. Finally, global, a very controversial and value-laden term these days, is included to provide the sense of worldwide scope. These three terms complement each other and together give richness both in breadth and depth to the process of internationalization.” (Knight 2004: 7). [8]

Europeanization

In Europe, twenty years ago, the Bologna Process marked the rise of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and in practice it has led to an unprecedented form of collaboration in the field of tertiary education, which is now evident in the

- three-cycle system of higher education (bachelor, master and doctoral);
- implementation of a European credit transfer system (ECTS);
- strive for mutual recognition of qualifications and terms of education;
- collaboration aimed at ensuring enhanced quality of education;
- support for life-long learning;
- social dimension of higher education;
- enhanced employability, mobility

- growing trend for internationalization
- shared values such as academic freedom and democratic governance (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018). [9]
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Processes such as the ones outlined in the above report on the achievements of the Bologna Process have been unchallenged to a large degree, and that the realms of education and culture have so far been most responsive to implementing a European dimension. One of the consequences is the concept of “a Europeanized education” which is instrumental in constructing “common ground” for all members of the European population, be it in terms of language skills, shared values, mutual understanding, or a shared sense of the past” (Carlson et al. 2018: 396). [10]

Europeanization as a term emerged in the 1980s in connection to political science and is often understood as a top-down process. According to one of its most popular definitions, “Europeanization consists of processes of a) construction, b) diffusion and c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, “ways of doing things” and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public policies.” (Radaelli, 2004: 3). [11] There is another view of Europeanization as a three-dimensional process – firstly, the infiltration of national policies on a EU level; secondly, the way EU policies are implemented on a national level; and thirdly, the exchange between the different states which can be considered to represent a bottom-up, a top-down and a horizontal dimension (Klatt, 2014). [12] The latter definition seems more suitable for the conceptual framework adopted in this paper. It is of a special importance to look into the ways these three aspects of Europeanization are conceptualized by stakeholders. The following paragraph briefly notes the results of some recent qualitative research with a focus on Bulgaria.

Empirical research on “living” internationalization and Europeanization – what do participants in the educational process say?

Whether and to what extent, internationalization and Europeanization are reflected upon by those at the two main sides of education – teachers and students – has been at the heart of a series of recent research. Perhaps the most widely researched level of education is the tertiary one. It can be concluded that the Bologna Process and the presence of the EHEA have played their role as incentives for such studies in a European context. Furthermore, publications concerning the third cycle of tertiary education are becoming more common with the elaboration of the Salzburg Principles governing doctoral education (European University Association, 2010). [13] Here we could cite a few recent publications which focus on how doctoral students conceptualize being international and being European. For example, the article by Byram, Hu and Rahman (2019) [14] sheds light on this aspect of higher education in Luxembourg where doctoral students state that “to be European” is to be international”; while the article by Wang and Byram (2019) dwells on being an international doctoral student in China and exams the supervision process as an “enculturation” practice with its specific features. [15]

As the main concern in this article is to discuss the potential of the Bulgarian educational system, it is important to mention the following studies: Karaasenova’s study of the global mobility of Bulgarian academics (2019) [16]; Stoicheva and Tsvetkova’s chapter on the specific features of the doctoral education through the eyes of PhD students and their supervisors (2019) [17]; Tsvetkova and Birezhakli’s paper on some identity and intercultural aspects of doctoral education

in the country (2017) [18]; and Tsvetkova's paper on what aspects of modern language education in Bulgaria can be considered European and how Bulgarian language teachers see themselves (2016). [19]

All these studies have identified the importance of:

- intercultural competence
- plurilingual competence
- a sense of belonging to wider groups of researchers and educators who share certain above-national aspirations to contribute to the betterment of science, educational practice and, more broadly, society.

EU language policy: Multilingualism and Intercultural dialogue

The EU has a clear and coherent language policy of the which is encoded in the Consolidated Text of the Treaty on European Union, where Article 5 (3) states that [the European Union] “respects the richness of its cultural and linguistic diversity and monitors the conservation and development of the European cultural heritage”. [20] An elaborate expression of the EU language policy is to be found in the policy statement “A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism” (European Commission, 2005). The grounds for the formulation of the EU language policy are related to the understanding of EU as an embodiment of “unity in diversity”: diversity of cultures, customs and beliefs - and of languages...”. It is also seen in the following formulations, “our many mother tongues are a source of wealth and a bridge to greater solidarity and mutual understanding”, and “language is the most direct expression of culture; it is what makes us human and what gives each of us a sense of identity” (European Commission, 2005). In the same document multilingualism is defined as with two aspects – on the one hand, it refers to “a person’s ability to use several languages” and on the other, to “the co-existence of different language communities in one geographical area”. [21]

The focus of the EU language policy is threefold – promoting language learning and safeguarding the rich linguistic diversity in Europe; promoting the creation of a multilingual economy; and providing access to legislation, procedures and information in EU citizens’ native language. It is distinguished by several principles, among which the principle of multilingualism is considered fundamental. This principle is complemented by the following principles: of adhering to the formula of mother tongue plus two other Community languages; of promoting intercultural communication (between multilingual individuals); of recognizing linguistic competence as key to the knowledge society; of accepting the equality of all languages; and of promoting and recognizing the outcomes of lifelong learning (with a view to mastering languages) (Stoicheva, 2006). [22]

Closely related to multilingualism is multiculturalism. In the context of the European Union, multiculturalism refers to the policy that upholds the principle of cultural diversity and the right of different cultural and ethnic groups to retain their distinctive cultural identities. In the foreground is the idea of intercultural dialogue, understood as “the exchange of ideas and opinions between different cultures” (https://ec.europa.eu/culture/policy/strategic-framework/interculturaldialogue_en). Unlike multiculturalism, where its focus is on the preservation of different cultures, intercultural dialogue focuses on active engagement aiming to establish common ground and links between different cultures, communities, and people in order to promote “understanding and communication”. Considering that “if there are 28 countries and many more cultural groups and identities within the European Union, intercultural dialogue is

essential for avoiding conflict and marginalization of citizens based on their cultural identity” (https://ec.europa.eu/culture/policy/strategic-framework/interculturaldialogue_en). [23]

A number of recent initiatives have taken place, among them, The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008 and The Intercultural Europe Platform (2008-2013). The programmes Culture (2007-2013) and Creative Europe (2014-2021) also provide a framework for planning and support for the mutual understanding and enrichment of cultures in the EU.

Yet, Multilingualism does occupy an important position with regard to these processes. If we agree that language is an indispensable element of cultural identity, because it provides “a shared meaning, not just as a semantics - in terms of content - but also as social, cultural, and other conventions in the community” (Stoicheva, 2016) [24], then we should accept that multilingual people can use their different language resources to develop personal goals, especially to create and recreate different identities. The greater the shared knowledge among multilingual speakers, the lower the likelihood of negative results in multilingual meetings. From this point of view, dialogue can benefit from the inclusion of multilingualism as a key element in the study of intercultural communication.

Education plays a significant role in this regard. For instance, the above-cited New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism (European Commission, 2005) [25] identifies several areas of coordinated intervention. Among them are the development of national strategies which aim at encouraging multilingualism, enhancing the quality of language teacher training, introducing foreign language learning in the primary school curriculum, implementing CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), encouraging multilingualism at the tertiary level, and encouraging research into multilingualism.

Modern foreign language education and the intercultural speaker model

In the current state of foreign language learning didactics, multiculturalism and multilingualism have become important factors in changing the ultimate goal of language education from a native speaker model to an intercultural speaker one. Michael Byram discusses two types of arguments in favour of this paradigm shift. The first one is related to the “pragmatic education, widely recognized over the past years” (Byram page?). It is practically impossible to achieve the native speaker linguistic competence and to put this ideal in the center of language education is a prerequisite for inevitable failure. The requirement for learners to master the language to the same extent as (educated) native speakers neglects the conditions under which learners and native speakers learn a language. The second argument is that, even if possible, this would inevitably lead to “wrong competence... speaking this language as native to others... It also implies separation from one’s own culture and... acquisition of a new sociocultural identity” (Byram, 1997: 10 -12). [26].

In the context of increasing multilingualism, of intensive contacts between people speaking a different first language, it is particularly important to keep in mind Byram’s model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in the teaching and learning of a foreign language. His ICC model which comprises five components is still used as a reference for attesting intercultural competence:

- intercultural relations (*savoir être*), such as curiosity and openness, a willingness to overcome distrust of other cultures, and qualifying one’s own as the only right one;
- knowledge (*savoirs*) of social groups and their products and practices, both in their own country and in the country whose language is the subject of study;

- skills for interpretation and communication (*savoir comprendre*), i.e. ability to interpret a document or an event from one culture and to relate / compare it to a document or an event from their own;
- *savoir apprendre / faire* - skills that relate to the ability to acquire new knowledge about a culture and to operate with this knowledge; skills and relationships in the conditions of real communication;
- critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*) – the ability to evaluate prospects, practices and products in their own and in foreign cultures (Byram 1997) [27].

Proposing the above the model, Byram also points out that mastery of ICC can be achieved in the classroom, when working with or under the guidance of a teacher, in a native / foreign cultural environment, or as a result of independent learning [27]. He stresses the importance of formal education and the implications of an adopted curricula, as well as the role of the educators who put those curricula into practice. At the same time, it emphasizes the importance of a learner's personality and his or her autonomous learning skills.

The role of various EU programmes contributing to a practical implementation of multilingualism - from the *Lingua* programme to *Socrates* and *Leonardo da Vinci*; and to the *Lifelong Learning Programme* (2007-2013) and *Erasmus +* (2014-2021) should also be taken into consideration. They represent significant tools that allow project intervention at different levels and provide a real opportunity to improve the quality of language learning and access to it at an institutional level. These European programs also create conditions for the exchange of experiences and good practices, for interaction between different people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, which ultimately leads to mutual recognition, interest and respect for different languages and cultures. The European Programmes should be regarded as conducive for the implementation of the three-dimensional Europeanization processes described by Klatt (2014) [28]. As Stoicheva (2011) points out, such European programmes play an instrumental role in implementing the EU language policy and provide conditions for encouraging linguistic diversity and intercultural dialogue [29]. At the level of school practice, Bulgarian foreign language teachers are also engaged in those initiatives by encouraging their students to participate in various school projects which offer positive factors for enhancing the quality of students' language learning experience and of education in a broad perspective. (Tsvetkova 2016). [30]

What vision for education?

The word “education” is mentioned only once in the “White Paper on the Future for Europe” to the effect that “a major rethink of education and lifelong learning systems” is key in both taking advantage and dealing with the negative aspects of globalization (European commission, 2017b: 4). On the other hand, the adjective “educated” is used with a definitely positive connotation to describe the young generation of the EU; however, it is framed in a context which yields genuine apprehension about the future of these young people - “Europe cannot afford to lose the most educated age group it has ever had” (European commission, 2017b: 3) [31]. Thus, it explicitly focuses on the current needs and the future perspectives of young people. This document, however, is also tightly related to several others with a more specific focus on education. In the “Communication on School development and excellent teaching for a great start in life” (European Commission, 2017d) secondary education is said to play a “pivotal role in life-long learning”. Therefore, measures such as developing better and more inclusive schools, enhancing learning by opening up to new forms of cooperation, improving access to and quality of early childhood

education and care, supporting school leadership, making teaching careers more attractive, and making the most of collaborative environments and digital technologies, etc. [32] are considered to be of key importance. The Communication on a renewed EU agenda for higher education should be seen as complementary to the previously cited one. This document states that “cooperation with schools, vocational providers and adult learning is often limited” (European Commission 2017c: 4) [33] and proposes four priority areas for the improvement of higher education:

- tackling future skills mismatches and promoting excellence in skills development;
- building inclusive and connected higher education systems;
- ensuring higher education institutions contribute to innovation;
- supporting effective and efficient higher education systems.

All this resonates with the research findings in the Bulgarian context cited above. What is more, a close reading of the documents guiding secondary education in the country (The Preschool and School Education Act, 2016) [34] and the new State Educational Standards [35] demonstrate this. If we take language education as an example of the currently implemented national education policies, we can notice that they refer to the Common European Framework of Reference [36] - “from A1 to B2.1 according to the CEFR” (Ordinance No 5 of 30 November 2015 for General Education). [37] The main objectives of foreign language education in the country are connected to developing students’ linguistic, communicative and intercultural competences in order to prepare them to interact with representatives of other cultural and linguistic communities. An additional emphasis is placed on developing skills for autonomous learning through initiative-taking, creativity, problem solving, independent-decision making, critical thinking; on teaching students to use information from foreign language sources; and on how to use foreign languages as a means of acquiring knowledge in different subject fields. All foreign language syllabi for all grades and levels of education are derived from the above Standards and they explicitly state the need to enrich foreign language lessons with civic education content and by intensively applying ICT tools in-class and out-of-class activities (Tsvetkova 2017) [38]. The same article mentions the potential to enrich the content of language education with EU-related study materials which can be exploited to the full by applying the CLIL approach [39].

The above analysis of some EU-level and national documents is in line with the findings reported by Tsvetkova (2016) with regard to how language teachers perceive their practice. The surveyed educators related successful educational practices with:

- a systematic and purposeful application of CLIL in a wider educational context (in Bulgaria, CLIL actually has long traditions but is usually connected mainly with the so-called language high schools);
- the need to use ICT teaching and communication between school and university teachers, school teachers and school students and among students themselves on a national and a cross-border level;
- conceptualizing and subsequently implementing the results of participating in European projects in view of implementing jointly developed good practices and cross-border enrichment of teaching approaches and methods;
- creating conditions for authentic communication in and out of the language classroom which will enhance learners’ motivation, their foreign language and intercultural skills [40].

Conclusion

Education is a multi-faceted process, which depends on a number of factors. Having in mind the complex social, political, economic. phenomena we are experiencing nowadays, it is possible to conclude that education can and should be seen as key in the betterment of the present as well as of the future prospects of young Europeans. What is more, its Europeanization is indeed taking place and this is not only subconsciously felt by teachers and students at the secondary and at the tertiary but also conceptualized. By analyzing the current state of Bulgarian policies concerning secondary education, we can conclude that its potential to prepare students to function successfully in a changing world is in place, and that it is a matter of carefully planning and implementing it if we want to achieve true continuity between school and university education and life outside educational institutions.

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