DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL LITERACY IN HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

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Abstract

The world has always been interconnected, and now even more so. Our actions, attitudes and opinions have a profound impact on others, as do cultural differences that affect each of our perceptions, behaviours, work and learning styles etc. At the same time, we need more tolerance and empathy to understand and accept others, especially those who behave, think and act differently in the teaching/learning process. In this context, the need for intercultural literacy is increasingly relevant. In addition, since intercultural education is a continuous, permanent process that is not always harmonious, self-directed learning skills are very relevant. The analysis of the theoretical and practical discourse once again confirmed the importance of intercultural literacy and self-directed learning competencies - as 21st century competencies - in order to become active citizens who will pursue social justice in communities and around the world (Boutte, 1999). The presentation will be based on a survey and analysis of the experience of the Šiauliai State Higher Education Institution in developing those competencies for our domestic and international students. Analysis of empirical data showed how intercultural literacy and self-directed learning competencies could be developed in formal and non-formal education, what are the positive factors, as well as challenges and problems here, how self-directed learning skills support the development of intercultural competences. The main methodological concepts are based on social constructivism and reconstructivism, which enable critical interpretation of "formed" educational phenomena and understanding them in a sociocultural context. A phenomenological approach favours a dialogue between learner and teacher, which requires a lot of effort and preparation required from the teacher. Humanistic psychology and pedagogy, where education in a democratic community is characterized by "cooperation, participation in the management of educational institutions, social integration, social responsibility and independent learners learning to enjoy themselves freedom, independence and life can take hold. The main conclusions, which were done, are the following: • Theoretical and empirical analysis of the discourse allows us to distinguish some positive factors that could be the basis for more effective development of intercultural literacy. • On the other hand, the development of intercultural literacy is not a harmonious process. This means that it is necessary to continue this in all possible ways, places, aspects and levels, because it is, clear that in a successful situation there are certain challenges and problems.

Keywords: Intercultural literacy, self-directed learning competencies, higher education, intercultural and multicultural communication, management of teaching/learning process.

1. Introduction

The world has always been interconnected, and now even more so. Our actions, attitudes and opinions have a profound impact on others, as do cultural differences that affect each of our perceptions, behaviours, work and learning styles etc. At the same time, we need more tolerance and empathy to understand and accept others, especially those who behave, think and act differently in the teaching/learning process. In this context, the need for intercultural literacy is increasingly relevant. In addition, since intercultural education is a continuous, permanent process that is not always harmonious, self-directed learning skills are very relevant.

The analysis of the theoretical and practical discourse once again confirmed the importance of intercultural literacy and self-directed learning competencies - as 21st century competencies - in order to become active citizens who will pursue social justice in communities and around the world (Boutte, 1999, Banks, 2009, Banks & Russell, 2003).

Comparative analysis of theoretical discourse (Jandt, 2013, Pruskus, 2012, Baraldsnes, 2012, Starkey et al., 2010, The Handbook of Intercultural ..., 2014, Multicultural & Global Literacy ..., 2017) enabled to identify the main aims and objectives of intercultural literacy development. The most important aims and objectives here are understanding of your own and other cultures, avoidance of cultural prejudices about your own and other cultures, valuation of cultural diversity, openness to cultural differences, otherness, even openness to changes, seeking compromises in a culturally diverse environment and so on. No less relevant is also understanding that our own culture has influence on our understanding of our as well as of another culture. That every person's culture has influence on his/her perception, behaviour, thinking, communication, even teaching, learning, working and living in general. That's why the best methods of intercultural literacy development are those which are based on person's experience, which enable to learn through participation, practice, communication and all other activities that involve as many as possible senses.

For those reasons very important in intercultural literacy became development of skills, especially such as communication, interaction, work, co-work with people from different cultures, ability to see the everyday things and events from new corner, to adapt in changing environment, society, to make new decision.

The main methodological concepts are based on:

- Social constructivism and reconstructivism, which enable critical interpretation of "formed" educational phenomena and understanding them in a sociocultural context. (Berger, Luckmann, 1999; Duoblienė, 2006)
- A phenomenological approach favours a dialogue between learner and teacher, which requires a lot of effort and preparation required from the teacher. (Mickūnas & Stewart, 1994,)
- Humanistic psychology and pedagogy, where education in a democratic community is characterized by "cooperation, participation in the management of educational institutions, social integration, social responsibility and independent learners learning to enjoy themselves freedom, independence and life can take hold. (Maslow, 1943; Rodgers, 1996)

2. Objectives

Šiaulių valstybinė kolegija / Higher Education Institution were great experience in development of intercultural and multicultural competencies and literacy of national and international students. That experience already was presented in the conferences and publications (Pocevičienė, 2023). The main goal of this research was to know how students themselves evaluate those activities and based on analysis of empirical data to identify:

- How intercultural literacy could be developed in formal and non-formal higher education,
- What are the positive factors as well as challenges and problems could be identified in development of intercultural literacy.

3. Methods

With the goal to identify the opportunities of intercultural literacy development in higher educational institutions the survey was done. The quantative and qualitative analysis based on of the experience of Šiaulių valstybinė kolegija / Higher Education Institution in developing of intercultural literacy of national students has been completed.

4. Design

In the survey, 78 national students from different study programmes were participated. Majority of them already had experience of participation in majority of the activities suggested in the survey. Because of this circumstance, their answers should not be seen as based on cognitive knowledge, but as the result of experiential learning and reflection. Of course, for deeper understanding the positive factors that could influence the quality of intercultural literacy as well as to identify the challenges and problems it would be necessary to repeat the survey with the bigger amount of respondents.

5. Discussion

Students were presented with the main intercultural literacy education activities carried out at the institution with a brief description of them. A detailed description of these activities was decided against for several reasons. First of all, this is because most of the students who participated in the research had

the experience of participating in these activities themselves. Another important reason was to try to reduce as much as possible the opportunity for students, when answering questions and evaluating activities, to rely on their cognitive knowledge about what activities are possible and when they are useful. As mentioned earlier, the aim was for the students to answer the questions and evaluate the activities based on their experience and not just their knowledge. The following activities were submitted for student evaluation:

- **Study results in a study programme,** especially social or/and personal study results (for example, "[...] communicating in writing and orally in [...] foreign languages in an unfamiliar, changing, interdisciplinary environment")
- **Study subjects (compulsory or/and optional) where English is the language of instruction**
- **Introduction with the new cultures by** studying foreign languages (in Šiaulių valstybinė kolegija / Higher Education Institution in all study programmes one, and in social sciences, business and management at least two foreign languages are compulsory)
- **Study subjects that are directly related with international and intercultural communication** (for example, *International Marketing or International and Intercultural Communication*)
- **Topics in the study subjects**
- **Visiting professors from foreign higher educational institutions** (according to Erasmus+ programme, programme of Ministry of Education, Science and Sports in Lithuania or the programmes of municipalities)
- **Involving international students to the extra-curriculum activities in higher educational institution** (for example, **c**onferences, participating in seminars, round-table discussions, presentations of home culture, home university, city etc.)
- **Introduction with the new cultures.**
- **Meetings with other students** who have intercultural experience
- **Joint activities of national and international students in the higher educational institution**
- **Participating in different exchange programmes** (for example, Erasmus +, BIP, etc.)
- **Participating of HEI in European University Alliances etc.**

Opinion of the respondents about different activities is presented in the Table 1.

Table 1. Opinion of the Respondents about Activities for Development Intercultural Literacy.

Activities for Development Intercultural Literacy	Percentages
Involvement of intercultural literacy into study results	80,8
Compulsory study subjects where English is the language of instruction	69,2
Optional study subjects where English is the language of instruction	89,8
Introduction with a new cultures by studying foreign languages	89,8
Topics related with interculturality in the study subjects	92,3
Visiting professors from foreign higher educational institutions	96,2
Involving international students to the extra-curriculum activities in higher educational institution	89,8
introduction with new cultures in different extra-curriculum activities	69,2
Meetings with other students who have intercultural experience	65,4
Joint activities of national and international students in the higher educational institution or outside	78,2
Participating in different exchange programmes (for example, Erasmus +, BIP, etc.)	65,4
Participating of HEI in European University Alliances	76,9

The analysis of empirical data allows us to say that the vast majority of students positively evaluate all the activities carried out. On the other hand, a deeper analysis shows that those activities in which students have more personal experience (for example, *introduction with a new cultures by studying foreign languages* or *visiting professors from foreign higher educational institutions* or *Involving international students to the extra-curriculum activities in higher educational institution*) or those activities that pose less challenges to them are evaluated more positively than those in which they have less experience or believe that participating in them would pose additional challenges or require additional efforts.

Analysis of empirical data showed that intercultural literacy is also much related with self-directed learning competencies (Kazlauskienė et al., 2015, Kazlauskienė et al., 2010, Poceviciene, 2014, 2019) that also could be developed in formal and non-formal education. In addition, that the most positive factors for intercultural literacy development are practice, participating and gathering own experience as well as in formal and informal activities.

As the other activities are already more or less analysed in before, more attention should be paid to initiative of European Universities alliances to one of which belong and Šiaulių valstybinė kolegija / Higher Education Institution. (NEOLAiA, 2023) The European Universities initiative is an ambitious EU

initiative aimed at establishing alliances between higher institutions from all across Europe, for the benefit of their students, staff and society. (The European Universities alliances in action, 2023).

By developing long-term structural, strategic, and sustainable cooperation between the higher education institutions in the European Universities alliances, the initiative aims to improve the international competitiveness of higher education institutions in Europe promote European values and identity that is very important aspect of intercultural literacy. (The European Universities alliances in action, 2023).

The initiative has the potential to bring greater benefits to higher education institutions than any previous cooperation projects because through these alliances students can not only get a degree by combining studies in several European countries, but also very qualitatively develop their intercultural literacy.

The main challenges and problems in intercultural literacy development are mostly related with lack of the experience, as well as with some characteristics of students, such as avoidance of unknown, uncertainty, as well as lack of self-directed learning skills that also support the development of intercultural competences.

6. Conclusions

- There is a wide spectrum of formal and informal activities for intercultural literacy development in HEI, but the most successful are those where students are able participate themselves.
- The most valuable would be those activities that are permanent, especially relevant in this case are and in future even more will be the European Universities alliances, which provides not only more opportunities, but also whole and global context of values for development of different types competencies also of intercultural literacy
- Theoretical and empirical analysis of the discourse allows us to distinguish some positive factors that could be the basis for more effective development of intercultural literacy such as personal experience, openness to diversity and changes as well as reflection and other skills and competencies in general related with self-directed learning competencies.
- On the other hand, the development of intercultural literacy is not a harmonious process. This means that it is necessary to continue this in all possible ways, places, aspects and levels, because it is, clear that in a successful situation there are certain challenges and problems.

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