Developing Intercultural Awareness by Integrating Features of Englishness and Romanianness

Monica Oprescu and Florin Oprescu
West University of Timişoara (Romania), University of Vienna (Austria)

Abstract

In the 20th and 21st centuries the importance of cultural elements in education has increased, competences of cultural and intercultural awareness becoming more and more important. These are skills teachers in the field of ELT focus on, in order to develop students' understanding of their own culture and other cultures, as a manner of expressing their identity and adapting to the requirements of the global world. Our intention is to discover how English/Romanian characteristics are viewed by Philology students training to be teachers of English in Romania, at the West University of Timişoara, to what extent Englishness and Romanianness meet, to distinguish similarities and differences and inquire how these elements are to be found in teaching English. The data used will be both theoretical (collected from studies already published) and empirical (through qualitative and quantitative research methods). The focus of the paper is to discover the common and different characteristics of the English and Romanian, see how they are discussed and analysed in specialized courses (culture and civilization) and how they lead to the development of identity features and improve intercultural awareness, as only learning about others, discovering own and other identities are manners of accepting the difference and becoming tolerant.

Keywords: cultural/intercultural awareness, identity, Englishness, Romanianness.

1. Theoretical introduction

A definition of culture, provided by the Longman dictionary (www.ldoceonline.com), gives the following explanations of the term:

> 1. (in a society) the beliefs, way of life, art, and customs that are shared and accepted by people in a particular society;
> 2. (in a group) the attitudes and beliefs about something that are shared by a particular group of people or in a particular organization;
> 3. (art/ music/ literature) activities that are related to art, music, literature, etc.
> 4. (society) a society that existed at a particular time in history.

Trying to define the term, Tomalin and Stempleski (1993), inquiring the field of cultural and intercultural awareness, propose the following distinction, when dealing with elements of culture in EFL classes:
- the big "C" / achievement culture, which refers to the elements of geography, history, religion, art;
- behaviour culture – customs, beliefs, stereotypes.

Teaching culture implies all these fundamentals and the reasons for teaching culture in EFL classes may refer to the development of the following competences: it enriches students' knowledge, motivates students to learn the language by offering interesting topics to study and therefore it enhances cultural awareness/intercultural awareness and also helps develop students' cultural identity. The courses should also focus on cultural awareness, which is 'a term used to describe the sensitivity to the impact of culturally induced behaviour on language use and communication' (Tomalin, Stemplesky 1993), and intercultural awareness, the process of becoming aware and understanding one's culture and other cultures around the world.

All these elements contribute to the students' development of cultural identity, viewed as a 'sum of characteristics given by place, gender, age, history, nationality, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, orientation, ethnicity' (Meyer). From the psychological perspective, cultural identity can be seen as an 'individual's self-concept deriving from his/her awareness of membership in a particular social group' (Milville, Koonce, Darlington, & Whitlock, 2000). Campbell (2000) assumed cultural identity as a 'social construct' and considered that the ability to move across cultural boundaries was an advantage. By examining the role of cultural identity, Lee explained that it could be formed by 'the complex configuration of one's awareness of one's own culture and a recognition of the social group to which one belongs in practice' (2002: 118).

Culture and civilisation in English are subjects discussed during EFL classes. English is taught nowadays, in Romania, as well, as lingua franca or international language, a 'contact language' between persons who share different mother tongues and different cultures (Firth, 1996). Therefore, it 'does not necessarily embody English native speaking cultures, but the meaning of its users and the surrounding context in which it is used' (Baker, 2009: 18). English may be considered a culture – free language, representing a diversity of cultures, an 'international culture' (Alptekin, 2005).

Nevertheless, we needed to limit our research to some cultural elements, to make it easier to administer, and we chose the students' cultural elements within their families and from those learnt in school. Consequently, we decided to have a more restricted approach, referring to Englishness (as part of the culture taught during English classes) and Romanianness, as part of their tradition.

Englishness has been considered a controversial term; there have been many attempts to define Englishness, from Orwell to Easthope and the oscillation Britishness / Englishness has been a constant of the process. 'England is a state of mind, not a consciously organized political institution' (Rose, McAllister 1982). Keyserling (1993) refers to English psychology which is based on both conscious and subconscious drives, he considers. Fox tries to establish 'rules that identify our national identity and character. I would also maintain, with George Orwell, that this identity 'is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature', she mentions (2004: 2). The characteristics / stereotypes distinguished would be: politeness, irony, sensitivity, discipline, fair play, but also instinctive behaviour, strictness etc.

Romanianness' perception has also been divided between two opposing views: admirer of Romanian virtues (Eliade, Iorga); virulent position (Cioran). A sociologist's perspective, Chelcea's (1991) research, is meant to investigate ethnic stereotypes: positive – social and intellectual qualities; negative – social attitudes, traits of character and intellectual elements. The characteristics / stereotypes advanced would be: hospitability, diligence, intelligence, honesty, but also dishonesty, laziness etc.

In what follows we are going to identify how these elements related to culture (cultural/intercultural awareness, cultural identity) have been influenced by the study of the English language and, implicitly, English culture. We are interested in learning whether the students' identity has been formed by modern elements, related to their school education, or it has been shaped by their family culture.

2. Case study

The research questions bring together the topics of culture learning, developing cultural/intercultural awareness and cultural identity.
- Does students' cultural and intercultural awareness increase due to the study of subjects of culture?
- Which are students' perceptions on Englishness and Romanianness?
- Does learning English culture influence students' cultural identities?

Participants: 29 students in English at the West University of Timişoara, Romania.

Data collection methods: qualitative and quantitative questionnaire, students'essays.

Results
All the students that participated in the research are Romanians and some of them have combined origins, including: German, Serbian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, specific for the Banat region of Romania, which has been multicultural and multilingual for centuries.
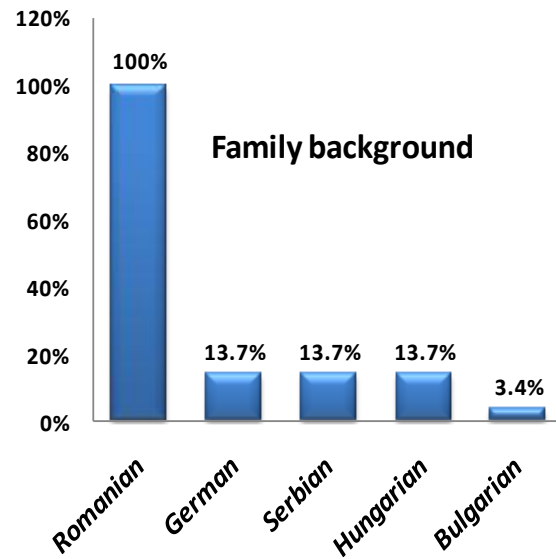
Figure 1: Family background

Next we were interested in finding out what languages students speak. Besides Romanian and English, which are common languages, some of them speak languages such as Serbian, Hungarian, German, due to the ethnic elements mentioned earlier. Other languages learnt in school and used are Spanish, French, Italian.
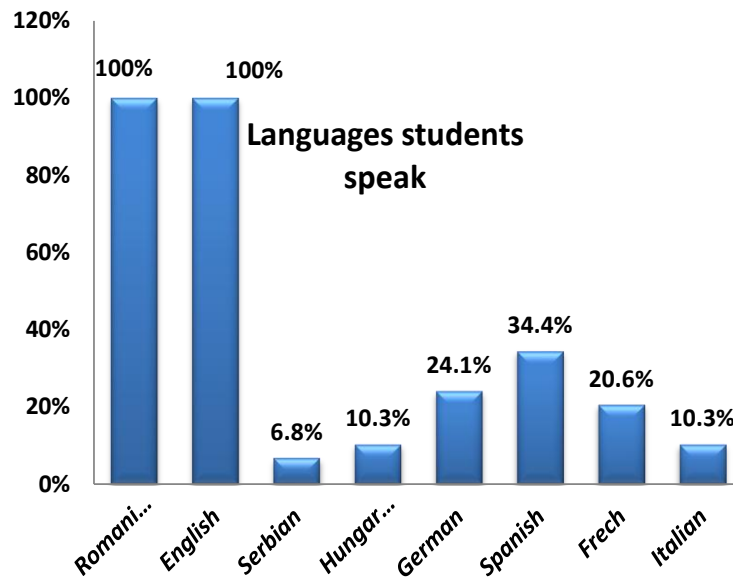
Figure 2: Languages students speak

Students start learning English at an early age, the majority of our students learning it in primary school (58,7%), but also in pre-school (24,1%) or secondary scho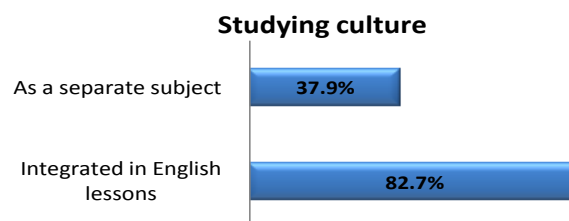ol (17,2%). Culture and civilization are sometimes taught during English lessons, integrated, or as separate subjects, focusing mostly on topics related to Great Britain.

Figure 3: Studying culture

The competences that are developed during such courses focus mostly on language skills, the topics being just an interesting approach meant to increase students' language level. Student motivation is another important element that these classes focus on, as just the sole study of language becomes arid, while the topics related to art, geography, history, people's lives, customs and traditions, beliefs, are vivid examples that arouse

interest towards a certain culture and its language, as well. Moreover, the development of cultural and intercultural awareness, as key competences in EFL classes today, proved of real help for teachers.

The extent to which the learning of English has influenced the students' development is very high: 93,1%.

English language/ English culture influenced students' development

6,9%

■ Positive answers
■ Negative answers

93,1%
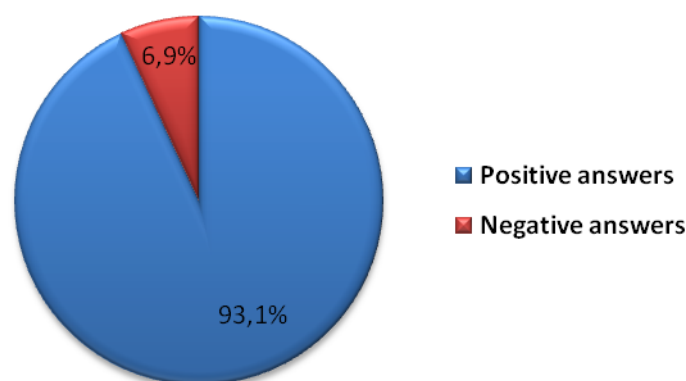
Figure 4: English language/ English culture influenced students' development

The explanations offered by the students are multiple, referring to the following reasons:
- English as an international language;
- elements of culture and civilization: students became aware of the British/American culture;
- cultural/intercultural awareness: "it helped me view other perspectives and be more open and tolerant"; "I could compare my own culture to other cultures"; "gave me a different perspective of another nation, of their customs and gave me the opportunity to connect with other nations through that language"; "learning about a different culture helped me broaden my horizons".
- perspective on education: "it offered me a new perspective in learning; helped me a lot from all points of view: school, travelling, technology".

Next we were interested in finding out how Romanian students view issues related to ethnic stereotypes. Therefore, the following questions related to the characteristics of the English and the Romanian. The English features, as viewed by the students, are the following: politeness, intelligence, communicativeness, coldness, democratic thinking, faithfulness, seriousness, funny, fairness, sociability, honesty, tolerance, calmness, elegance, modesty, conservativeness. Out of these the five most frequent were: politeness, coldness, seriousness, open mindedness, intelligence.

The characteristics of the Romanians mentioned by the participants in the study are: friendliness, communicativeness, calmness, laziness, superficiality, honesty, intelligence, imaginativeness, ambitiousness, traditional spirit, faithfulness; and the five most frequent: friendliness, intelligence, sense of humour.

We also asked about our students' opinions on stereotypes. They proved aware of the relative nature of these characteristics and also offered solutions for reducing the danger of judging another culture and other people in this manner. Here are two of their opinions:

> In spite of these major characteristics, we cannot formulate generalised statements that describe the people of a country because affirmations are relative. They are based on the subjectivity of people and we cannot assume that all English people are polite and all Romanians are hospitable. (B.M.)
> Deconstruction of such stereotypes should be approached in schools during lessons of culture and civilisation, or by encouraging students to travel as much as possible, or by sharing one's own experiences regarding a personal deconstruction of such stereotypes. (A.O.)

Students' cultural identity is another issue we were interested in. The students were asked to define it by mentioning the composing elements.
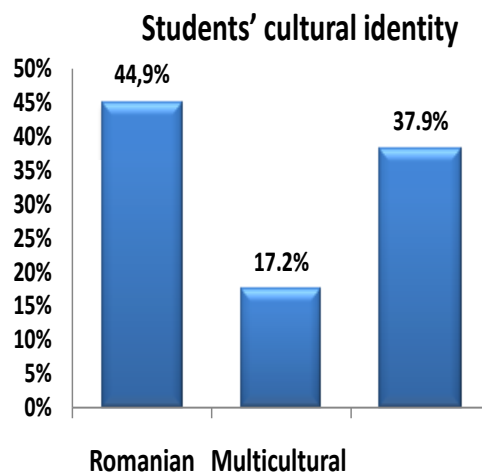
Figure 5: Students' cultural identity

Some of the students answers are relevant in the matter: 'I have been raised and educated according to Romanian traditional culture. I cherish my cultural identity even though it is hard to be different in your own country'; 'I possess characteristics of the Serbian and Romanian cultures'; although I am half Serbian, half Hungarian, I see myself as belonging to the Romanian national identity because I live in this country and follow its rules and customs.

157

Discussions

The students participating in the study are all of Romanian origin; however, some belong to the nations that co-exist in Banat area: Serbians, Hungarian, German, Bulgarian, showing a space which is multicultural and multilingual. Therefore, a complexity of languages is spoken: besides those learnt at home (German, Hungarian, Serbian, Bulgarian) modern languages add to their knowledge, including English. Students have started learning English at an early age (most of them in primary school) and studied elements of culture and civilization, as well, especially integrated in English lessons. As a consequence, the competences developed referred mostly to language and afterwards cultural/intercultural elements were mentioned.

The majority of the participants in the case study admitted that the learning of English language and culture has influenced them, in terms of developing cultural/intercultural awareness, expanding their horizon, teaching them about the differences between cultures and leading to tolerance. The elements related to the characteristics of the English / Romanian proved stereotypical, fact students were aware of and for which they also proposed solutions.

When describing their cultural identity English elements were not mentioned; Romanian, German, Hungarian, Serbian and Bulgarian heritage was considered important, some considering themselves multicultural. Students' intercultural awareness is obviously raised through activities or courses based on cultural elements, as well as through family education, due to the multicultural context.

3. Conclusions

Guest (2002) specifies that 'EFL cultural research can lead to misrepresentations of foreign cultures by reinforcing popular stereotypes and constructing these cultures as monolithic, static "Others", rather than dynamic, fluid entities' (2002:154). This is one of the dangers we encounter in culture and civilization classes, one which can be overthrown through Baker's (2011) activities meant to develop intercultural competences:
- 'exploring local cultures';
- 'exploring the traditional media and arts through English';
- 'cultural informants';
- 'face-to-face intercultural communication'.

Therefore, the role of culture teaching and learning refers to 'successfully preparing language learners for intercultural communication' (Baker, 2011: 62), a chance for our students to overpass stereotypes and to prepare for the global world we are leaving in.

References

www.ldoceonline.com

Alptekin, C. (2005). Dual language instruction: Multiculturalism through a lingua franca. In a *TESOL Symposium on Dual Language Education: Teaching and Learning in Two Languages in the EFL Setting*. Istanbul: Bogazici University.

Baker, W. (2011). From cultural awareness to intercultural awareness: culture in ELT. *ELT Journal*. 66/1, pp 62-70

Baker, W. (2009). Language, Culture and Identity through English as a Lingua Franca in Asia: Notes from the Field, in *The Linguistics Journal. 4, pp 8-35*

Campbell, A. (2000). Cultural identity as a social construct in *Intercultural Education*. 11(1), pp 31-39

Chelcea, S. 1991. Imaginea de sine a românilor/ The Self Image of the Romanians in *Reviste de psihologie/ Journals of Psychology*. 37, pp 1-2

Firth, A. 1996. The discursive accomplishment of normality. On "lingua franca" English and conversation analyses in *Journal of pragmatics*. 26, pp 37-59

Fox, K. (2004). *Watching the English. The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*. London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd.

Guest, M. (2002). A critical 'checkbook' for culture teaching and learning. *ELT Journal*. 56/2, pp 154-161

Milville, M., Koonce, D., Darlington, P., & Whitlock, B. (2000). Exploring the relationships between racial/cultural identity and ego identity among African Americans and Mexican Americans. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development,* 28(4), 208-225

Rose, R., McAllistair, I., (1982).*United Kingdom Facts*, London: MacMillan

Tomalin,B., Stempleski, S., (1993). *Cultural Awareness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press