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## **LEARNING**

**AND TEACHING EXPERIENCES IN MULTICULTURAL AND  
MULTILINGUISTIC CONTEXTS**

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## AND TEACHING EXPERIENCES IN MULTICULTURAL AND MULTILINGUISTIC CONTEXTS

### EXPERIENCIAS DE APRENDIZAJE Y ENSEÑANZA DE LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS EN CONTEXTOS MULTICULTURALES Y MULTILINGÜES

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#### ABSTRACT

The paper entitled Experiences on foreign languages learning and teaching in multicultural and multilingual contexts comprises the author reflections about her experience as foreign language learner first, and as a teacher of them in both monolingual and multicultural and multilingual contexts afterwards. The author based her research on the historical logical method within the Education Comparative method to analyze the object of the study and support her proposition, based on theoretical points of view to establish her viewpoints regarding the advantages and disadvantages of studying and teaching foreign languages both in the sociocultural environment of the target language, and in contexts that are detached from the culture of the language been learned and taught. The objective of this analysis is to make a call to support language learning projects in contexts that are proper of the target language, under such modalities that can interest educative institutions in favor of the internationalization of multicultural and multilingual programs.

**Keywords:** Multicultural, multilingualism, teaching and learning foreign languages, experience, learning contexts, comparative analysis.

#### RESUMEN

El trabajo titulado Experiencias de aprendizaje y enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en contextos multiculturales y multilingües recoge reflexiones acerca de la experiencia vivida por la autora como aprendiz de lenguas extranjeras primero y luego enseñando las mismas en contextos tanto monolingües como multiculturales y multilingües. El método utilizado por la autora es el histórico lógico dentro de la educación comparada para analizar el comportamiento del fenómeno objeto de estudio y argumentar su proposición, apoyada de los puntos de vista teóricos para establecer sus puntos de vista acerca de las ventajas de estudiar la lengua en el contexto sociocultural de la lengua objeto de aprendizaje y de enseñanza, las desventajas de aprender y enseñar lenguas en contextos alejados de la cultura de la lengua que se enseña y aprende. Estas reflexiones tienen como objetivo hacer un llamado a apoyar proyectos de formación en lenguas en contextos propios de la lengua que se enseña y aprende, bajo modalidades que interesen a las instituciones educativas en la internacionalización de programas multiculturales y multilingües.

**Palabras clave:** Multiculturalidad, multilingüismo, enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, experiencia, contextos de aprendizaje, análisis comparativo.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, language has been one of the main tools of communication among people, allowing mutual understanding. Notwithstanding its origin and the linguistic group to which each person belongs, there has always been a way to transmit and decode the messages different languages transmit. That is why studying a second language constitutes a need at an international level.

Even though some experiences related to foreign languages teaching and learning in the context of the language can be found in the second half of the XX century, the XXI century seems to bring about huge changes in such educative processes conceptions, where contexts in which languages teaching and learning take place play an important role. As result of the globalization, the information technologies advances, the increase of the international relationships and the emerging of higher education internationalization programs, among others, different languages and cultures are put into contact as two parts of the same phenomenon, finding a way to live together through mutual understanding.

Such phenomenon increases to unstoppable dimensions, reaching almost all the social life spheres at a global range, putting cultures and languages preservation at risk. As consequence, different education systems and cultural institutions show a growing endeavor in finding ways to keep each culture by taking advantage of multicultural and multilingual contexts to favor the awareness and improvement of the different and own knowledge of each student, to achieve harmony among the diversity in the teaching and learning environments, where various cultures come together, thus various mother tongues are spoken.

However, the movement of large numbers of people from one region to another, who take with them their cultures and the need to integrate in the new context, cannot be blamed on the globalization. The beginning of huge encounters among cultures and languages can be found in the XV century, as result of the different regions colonization and conquering of different territories. Those events put a benchmark to the meeting of different cultures and languages that are extended, in an increasing manner, up to date.

From that time up to the present, an essential objective, for many language scholars, has been the achievement of common understanding, acceptance, and respect to the others, as well as finding coexistence and fluid communication among the members of the new communities,

being the target to know each other's language as to be able to communicate.

In the colonial times, missionaries were the ones in charge of finding coexistence among the emerging communities inhabitants - such communities were composed by people from different regions, who brought their manners, traditions and languages with them, and thus it was necessary to find a common language and an acceptable behavior for all.

In the XXI century, people with different cultures and languages continue migrating and moving from different regions to others, with many different objectives. They come together at work, in social and school environments, among others. All of them, having the need to communicate. However, many just see communication from the linguistic point of view; not having into consideration that communication is the only way to achieve coexistence. That is why foreign language didactics scholars seek for the advantages that the richness that each of the participant cultures has, by using one language that may be common to all, and taking what each of them can provide as a communication and socialization tool to accept the contributions of each one's culture as well as the culture of the others.

On that respect, different multicultural and multilingual projects can be found in several countries of the world, being Europe a leader on it. As result of the European Union, many countries established the requirement to train their human resources in the languages of the countries members of the Union, to ease their mobility from one region to another. Many opportunities have been provided to access to the culture of the language that learners are trained through different exchange programs within the European countries. In most of such programs they require to spend at least a term in the country of the language being learnt as part of the school curriculum (many times more than one language is required).

Even if up to the decade of 1960 foreign languages were taught with two main goals: as part of the school curriculum and with professional purposes, in these new contexts, what they try to do is finding solutions to common communication needs in multicultural and multilingual contexts.

Lately, it seems common to find multicultural and multilingual learning and teaching contexts at an international level. Namely, the classroom is not only a place where people learn a new language to be able to communicate and integrate in a new social space, but a space where people learn and someone teaches languages with a new image, where different ethnic, linguistic, religious, historic, and economic characteristic coexist. Such features help defining multicultural and multilingual classrooms contexts as

those spaces where people from different cultures and languages share the same space to achieve common learning objectives. Such scenarios rise new research lines to the foreign language didactics in the challenge to finding ways for the achievement of the main goal: communication in a common language (the one that is taught and learnt in a pedagogically organized manner), in a cultural and heterogenic environment. Then, it is paramount to achieve harmony in the learning and coexisting process to get common goals. These new contexts require new didactic principles. Starting from the lesson planning, it is required that students feel they are acknowledged by the others, and accepted. Then it is necessary to work avoiding stereotypes, prejudices, ethnocentrism, among others, that may stop the learning process due to issues that may arise among the students having different cultures and languages (Quicios, 2006). Thus it is required to find common points and take advantage of the differences to enrich communication and mutual knowledge.

In the efforts to understand and enhance appropriate methods to the new learning contexts, there are concepts which have emerged during the second half of the XX century, such as bilingualism, plurilingualism, multilingualism, cultural identity, multiculturalism, and cultural plurality; among other didactic – linguistic endeavors addressed to helping immigrants to adapt and integrate to the new contexts.

Other concepts that stand out in this field of knowledge are interdisciplinarity - transdisciplinarity; alterity - biliteracy - transversality, among others, aimed at achieving peaceful coexistence, inclusion and acceptance of different cultures and languages as opportunities for enriching one's own culture and developing a worldview of the new generations.

The multilingual teaching approach is based on the principle of providing students with tools that help them using the language they learn and what they have learned in another language (mother tongue or another foreign language) (Arocena, 2015). Teaching languages under this approach implies more than knowing the linguistic system (grammatical structures, lexicon, phonetics, etc.), it requires achieving communication from the understanding and acceptance of the different, that is, understanding the cultures of students and taking advantage of what their mother tongues can provide to facilitate the learning of the new language.

It is necessary to establish norms of conducts based on the respect of the other, in the development of assertive positions. In addition to teaching language, it is teaching and promoting values. It seeks to take advantage of the habits and skills learned in previous languages to facilitate the learning of the new one.

Different studies on the subject range from the relationships between people who share schools and classrooms with different cultures and languages, whose objective is to be accepted and assimilated by the host context; as well as the effects of the internationalization of a hegemonic language on minority groups. These studies seek the preservation of each of the existing languages, such as the case of indigenous languages in Latin America. Other efforts focus on what happens when a mother tongue and an official language coexist, for example, in Canada, India, China, among others; or the results of the study of a language for professional purposes in contexts of the host language, and also, when the language that is learned is studied in the context of the mother tongue; among other investigations.

Each of these scenarios has very different learning objectives and contexts. Therefore, attention has to be paid to the search around the specific situation addressed. There are different studies in each of these directions.

In this paper, the author focuses on the experience lived as a student and teacher in contexts of the mother tongue and the foreign language, in monolingual and multilingual classrooms, with the aim to establish the advantages of one context over the other to suggest developing international projects addressed to enhancing learning and teaching in the cultural context of the language being studied.

The analysis is based on the comparative education method to compare different scenarios aimed at one objective, learning a foreign language or teaching it. It is also based on lived processes to get to generalizations regarding the possible advantages or disadvantages of each scenario and to propose ways to meet the objective of teaching and learning languages in favor of communication in contexts where diverse cultures and mother tongues converge.

## DEVELOPMENT

Within multicultural and multilingual classroom conception, the teaching of foreign languages seek the design of a syllabus model that allows the development of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997), which favors, beyond the domain of the new language, the ability to understand the perspective of others and question their own. That is, the development of the ability to understand the other and oneself, from the point of view of a multiple culture in the language lessons.

This model then includes the search for common standards of courtesy, respect, and coexistence, as well as an instrument of verbal communication. According to Byram (1997), among the most important objectives in the foreign languages teaching-learning process in these contexts, are

the achievement of proper communication in the learners, who are expected to understand each other and themselves.

But, to achieve such aims, it is necessary to establish classroom techniques that help the students seeing and understanding the differences to accept them; to discover new aspects of the culture of the target language, as well as to rediscover their own. That is to say, it is about developing an intercultural communicative competence in the students, which includes the positive attitude towards other cultures, eliminating prejudices and beliefs, to achieve a change of concept about the group as a social, cultural, cognitive interaction and experiential field, and the development of skills to overcome obstacles.

When looking at the origin of the concept of multilingualism in multicultural contexts, it can be found in countries such as Canada, with immersion programs, the former Soviet Union with the training programs of professionals from the countries members of the CAME (by its Spanish acronym); in India with the teaching of English in communities where different ethnic groups converge with different languages and cultures; in Latin America with Spanish as the official language and the aboriginal languages; and more recently in the European Union, with training in the languages of the countries members of the Union, for professional and labor purposes.

The author of the paper, bases her viewpoints on studies on the topic to propose the advantages and disadvantages of studying a language in a multilingual and multicultural context versus monolingual contexts or away from the culture of the target language. Such insights are supported by the author's experience as foreign languages learner and teacher, in both scenarios. Her reflections constitute learned lessons in favor of multicultural and multilingual contexts to enhance learning a new language and a new culture.

Two examples belonging to the same program are compared: one example involves the learning of a foreign language (Russian), in its cultural context, and the other, the learning of the language takes place isolated from its cultural context. Such program could be considered as part of the genesis of multicultural and multilingual educational processes at the international level, taking into account the number of nationalities and cultures involved, which however, has been not sufficiently studied.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, as part of the agreements of the CAME (Council of Mutual Economic Assistance, by its Spanish acronym), an organization belonging to the countries of the socialist area between the 1960s and the end of the 1990s. This organization kept a plan of scholarships for Higher Education students of

the countries members of this Council. Such scholarships were aimed at young people from member countries and developing countries. Many youngsters from Cuba, China, Viet Nam, Afghanistan, India, Angola, Germany, among others benefited from this program. These students traveled to the countries of Eastern Europe to engage in the most varied university studies. As part of their insertion in the programs of study, in the culture and in the new context, they had to master the language of the country of destination. As illustration, the specific case of Cuban students who traveled to the former Soviet Union is taken as example, being the author part of such program.

The sample for the comparison is composed by two groups of students who were submitted to different learning contexts, even though the target language was the same (Russian). These groups are called group A (who received preparation in the language of the country of destination in their own homeland (in the context of their mother tongue) and a group B (who traveled to the country of destination, with no knowledge of the target language, that is, without any possibility of verbal communication).

Group A, students were trained in the language of the country to which they would travel (Russian), in the context of their mother tongue. Besides Russian language they were taught basic subjects of the program they would study in the host country by Russian professors, who traveled to Cuba to teach in the "preparatory faculties"<sup>1</sup>, and were native-speakers of the target language, teaching their mother tongue in a strange, for them, cultural context.

Group B, was composed by students of philological and Linguistics programs. In this case the language object of study was that of the country to which students were going. Group B students did not get any preparation in the target language (Russian) in Cuba. They traveled to the Soviet Union with no knowledge of Russian. Upon their arrival at their destination, these students would have a short but intensive period of language learning (6 hours a day-x two months). This period included familiarization with the social context, excursions, and participatory cultural activities.

As well as for group A, their teachers were native speakers of the target language, with the difference that they taught in their own cultural context. Once this intensive period ended, students started taking the subjects of the major they had enrolled in. This program, as the

<sup>1</sup> Preparatory Faculty: - a faculty created in the 1970s and retaken during the 1990s in Cuban Universities, dedicated to training in foreign languages, including Spanish those students who traveled to Cuba, mainly from Africa and Arabic countries, or in other languages for Cuban students who traveled to other countries to enroll in university studies. It had an intensive character (6 hours daily).



students themselves called, was a “shock therapy”, due to the impact they suffered, from the cultural point of view. Everything they got in contact with was new for them (language, customs, diet, climate, etc.). That fact made them learn quickly in order to integrate into the context of the Soviet Union. After three months of being there, they could already communicate easily in the language, and their linguistic command was acceptable, to the extent that, upon the arrival of group A students, in the Soviet context, Group B students served as translators to them, notwithstanding the fact that group A students had received Russian in Cuba for almost a year and group B did not.

Among the aspects to be highlighted between the two groups, it is worth noting that group A students at their arrival to the Soviet universities, were inserted into groups composed of students from different regions: African, Arab, Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Afghan, Indian, Latin American, and others. This required the use of the Russian language to communicate with each other during the class and in university contexts, outside the classroom (library, laboratories, living areas and student residence). While, the students of group B were grouped by nationalities. That is to say, within the classroom, they could communicate with each other in the mother tongue, even when teachers demanded then to communicate in the Russian language, which was used only to do homework, to read textbooks and to talk with the teacher. Outside the classroom, students lived in residences, where they exchanged socially with students of their own nationality, as well as with Russians and other countries member of the CAME. This allowed them using their mother tongue and the Russian language at the same time.

The students of group A learned the Russian language to communicate with each other and as a tool to get the knowledge of their field of study (exchange with professors, reading of specialized literature, etc.). That is to say, they used the language with specific purposes (ESP by its acronym in English). In contrast, students of group B, learned the language for professional purposes (EPP by its acronym in English), as well as a tool for communication in the social context.

When comparing the performance of groups A and B in the Russian language, by the end of the first semester of students stay and study in the USSR, the following behaviors were observed (with some exceptions of very advanced students in the language): Students performance in the first semester of stay in the context of the language.

Students' behaviors in relation to the cultural and linguistic

contexts

### Group A

Upon the arrival of the students in the context of the target language, the linguistic knowledge that they brought from their homeland, did not seem to have covered the communicative needs as they needed help to make themselves understood.

Once inserted in the context, after a short period of time (approximately one month), students began to communicate fluently, although with grammatical and pronunciation errors.

Students did not feel the need to improve the language, as what they knew was enough to be understood in a rudimentary way and with the support of non-verbal language, although they felt uncertainty and frustration when comparing what they learned with the possibilities of understanding Soviet people.

The cultural shock on arrival made students to forget many things in the language they had learned in their own country, which gradually dissipated until reaching the adaptation.

There was no great progress in the knowledge of language structures (use of grammatical cases and phonetics), although this did not impede fluency (they were communicated at all times in Russian, both in the classroom and outside of it). Students' social relations were open and fluid.

### Group B

The first two months resulted in a high cultural shock, but the need to communicate forced them to learn quickly, to devote a lot of time to learning phrases and communicative strategies that allowed them to adapt.

The insertion in cultural programs, for which students had to use the language, allowed them to develop a high cultural sensitivity, encouraging them to delve into literature, theater, movies, among others, being the language the instrument for appropriation of knowledge. Any situation constituted learning content to achieve a rapid insertion in the culture. They searched for the knowledge of the language in all situations, since it was the object of their profession.

The need for insertion was the driving element of learning.

Being students of languages, they were more concerned about mastering Russian grammar and phonetics than

about producing the language. The fear of making mistakes constituted a strong psychological barrier.

They limited themselves to establishing friendships with people of different cultures, other than the Russian students, with whom they develop social relationships.

From this comparison the following generalizations can be extracted:

- The need to communicate in order to solve everyday problems, such as survival (feeding, orientation, solving everyday needs) is a driving force behind the motivation for learning.
- The constant contact with the language of study and the interaction with the members of the student community develop fluency when communicating with people of the most varied formations and social strata.
- When communication is the objective, what matters is linguistic production, regardless the mastery of the target language grammar or phonetics.
- Beyond the contents of the language lessons, the cultural context of the target language provides important learning contents for communication (formal language of teachers versus the colloquial language of people on the streets, the informal language of peer students in the dorms, as well as signs, posters, audiovisual media, etc.). It means that the contact with the real communication medium of the language provides an important linguistic input. Thus the environment is considered a valuable material for the appropriation of the language, as it provides cultural, social, geographic, political, climatological and other daily contents feedback. That is to say, this context puts the students in contact with all kinds of information in the target language.
- Teachers, as native speakers of the target language, being in their own context, felt free to use the environment as practical and handy teaching material for students, while those who traveled to the country of origin of the students were outside of its context and, therefore, limited in its didactic possibilities to teach and put the students in contact with the elements of the culture of the target language.
- Confluence of several cultures and languages in the same classroom put the students in direct contact with cultures that were different from the host culture and their own, provoking the need to find ways to share with the rest of the university community, sharing the same experiences and taking advantage of other cultures contributions, which at the same time helped developing

a much broader worldview. The need to put oneself in the place of the other, and to be seen from others' mirror, allowed harmonious coexistence, having the obligation to use the Russian language as the only communication tool.

Although the situations of coexistence and exposure to the medium of the target language were sources of knowledge and practice of the target language, the same context led foreign students to experience rejection from national students, who considered them as invaders, scandalous, undisciplined, and badly educated. This could be attributed to the difference in the ways of behaving of European and Latino cultures, which were totally novel for both parties, as each of them lacked the understanding and knowledge of the whys of the others manners, thus rejecting each other. From both sides they wanted to maintain their own customs, and as a consequence distance.

It is worth pointing out that the students of technical programs, once they arrived in the country of destination, were located in groups composed of students from different countries: that is, groups made up of students Russians, Germans, Czechs, Chinese, Vietnamese, Indians, Africans, etc. And therefore they had to use Russian to communicate with each other, with teachers and with the community.

While the students of philological programs or with a pedagogical profile, and those to be teachers of the target language, were organized into groups of up to six students, usually of the same nationality for practical classes and in groups of up to 60 students for lectures.

When comparing the performance in the target language of those students who were integrated into multicultural groups with those who studied Russian for professional purposes, it could be seen that the acquisition of the language was faster in multicultural groups than in those of the same culture, although with more grammatical and pronunciation errors than students from groups formed by the same culture. It should be taken into account that the learning objectives of the language were different. In those groups having multiple cultures, they needed the language to communicate, understand the contents of the subjects of their profession and to demonstrate their knowledge in the field of study. For the group B, the objective was to be professionals of the language; therefore they had to communicate with correction to demonstrate that they mastered the language.

For students with a teaching profile, it took longer to develop fluency in the language, because they paid more attention to producing the language correctly, in terms of pronunciation and grammar.

Regarding fluency, it is important to bear in mind that being

in groups of the same culture and language, the second group had less need to communicate with each other in the target language outside the educational context. They did so in the classroom only, and therefore, they sought correction; in outdoor spaces, to solve personal problems, they did not have the necessary training to talk freely without paying attention to their linguistic correctness. All this could have slowed students learning of the language, which put them at a disadvantage compared to multicultural groups. Although it was recognized that, from the grammatical correctness point of view, selection of the right words, pronunciation and intonation, their linguistic production was much closer to that of native speakers.

On the other hand, multicultural groups students, although more fluid, they made more grammatical and phonetic errors. Thus it can be extracted, returning to Krashen's "Monitor" theory (1982) that states that fluency and correctness do not always go together. In other words, when students activate their language monitor, they become more cautious and thus produce fewer messages, being less creative and less fluent in the language than those who think about achieving communication only, which would seem to be the case of the students who learned the language to understand and assimilate the contents of their program (different from those of philological and linguistic profiles). However, after the period of the monitor, students of the language with professional purposes, exceeded this barrier and achieved more fluency, correction and linguistic production.

Both sociocultural and academic contexts contributed in the students' development of a better fluency and deep knowledge, which, as a whole, contributed to fluid and correct linguistic production.

On the contrary, students from other programs, were fluent in the language but with frequent pronunciation and grammatical errors. However, they managed to communicate easily. This could have happened due to several reasons:

- » The monitor (Krashen, 1982) that students activate to produce the language correctly can constitute a barrier to fluency.
- » The fact of learning the language in groups of the same nationality, although they were in the context of the target language, limited the need to use the language to communicate with the other members of the group, as the mother tongue always exerts greater influence.
- » Not taking into account the linguistic monitor, the students did not think about the possible errors when communicating but on the objective of the message they needed to transmit.
- » In the early stages, students of the language with professional purposes were worried about speaking

correctly, thus being more aware of errors were lower in their linguistic production. Although, after a while, they were able to communicate freely and correctly.

- » The students who studied the language with specific purposes (group A), however, kept repeating the mistakes because they were more interested in communicating than about knowing the language and using it correctly. Their goal was communication.
- » The students of group A needed to use the language as a communication tool to demonstrate their knowledge of other subjects. As well, their teachers paid attention to the linguistic production rather than to correcting it.
- » The students of the language as an object of their profession (Group B), were required to use the language correctly to demonstrate their linguistic performance. This correction was subject to evaluation of their language knowledge. Then, teachers saw students' mistakes as signs of not learning or not mastering the language.
- » Both students of Group A and B, when leaving the classroom, were pushed to use the target language as an instrument of communication to achieve their objectives in the sociocultural environment of the language.

The experience of these programs allowed establishing a series of conclusions regarding the learning of Russian, as the target language in the case of this analysis, in the context of the language and its culture.

- » The process of learning Russian in its sociocultural context allowed the students to use the language as an indispensable requirement to communicate in the context.
- » By getting in touch with the culture of the people who speak the target language, students were able to experience different ways of communicating: linguistic turns, idioms, jargon of each situation and communicative context; as well as listening and getting the pronunciation and intonation of each communicative situation, receiving that way, the necessary feedback they needed to communicate in real situations.
- » The context provided learning elements independent from those provided by the classroom, contributing to develop the communicative competence. Such elements are difficult to incorporate into teaching programs.

These experiences provided the students with knowledge and skills necessary for their coexistence and understanding among themselves, such as the culture of the other, finding common characteristics in all; as well they learnt to understand and respect the characteristics of the others.

Then, it could be affirmed that the language learning in its cultural and social context is much faster and more effective,



as students manage to communicate more fluently and with greater linguistic baggage than those who learn the language in their mother tongue context. Moreover, when the classroom context is multicultural, the need to communicate in the language is strengthened.

From the theoretical point of view, this process was defined by Schumann (1978), as an acculturation phenomenon. This author explained the existence of a social and psychological distance between the one who learns the language and the cultural context of it. He related the social aspect to the context of learning, and the psychological aspect to how the person assimilates this new context, the shock that occurs between the mother tongue and the new language, when arriving at the context where the target language is spoken, a context that shows a different culture as well.

Schumann's point of view makes it possible to understand why many of the students who went to the countries of the socialist field, without knowledge of the language, could easily deal with social distance and integrate themselves into the host culture, adapting quickly to the new context, which at the same time, facilitated the learning of the language.

To Schumann's approach, it should be added that these students had a vital need to communicate, as they would have to adapt quickly, in order to be able to understand the environment, and use it to meet their goals, to survive being so distant from their relatives and their culture, to cope with differences between the new culture and their own culture (customs, traditions, ways of life, etc.).

Another important element that may influence the learning of the language in the case of analysis, could have been the distance between the target language and the students' mother tongue; In this case, Spanish, and Russian, example case in this article, are very different languages from the alphabetical, phonological, grammatical, and syntactic points of view; being Spanish an Indo-European language and Russian a Slavic language.

Such differences could be considered in favor of learning, taking into account that there is little room for confusion on the part of Spanish-speaking students. While they learned Russian, there was no opportunity to interference, as often happens between Spanish and English, having similar alphabets, but different ways of pronouncing the same letters. Adjectives position of and syntactic rules in Spanish differ from those of English language. However, the differences between Spanish and Russian pushed students into making greater effort to incorporate into their minds so many completely new elements, for which they had very few points of reference.

The target language cultural context versus that one of the mother tongue

A retro versa comparison allowed the author, who was subjected to the learning of English in Cuba, several years after having learnt Russian in the target language environment. But this time, she learned English in the context of her mother tongue and culture, thus very differently to how she learnt Russian, away from the context of the language object of learning.

When learning a second foreign language, the author felt the absence of many important elements, which never took place in the classroom, possibly because the teachers of the language, as well had that void, in relation to learning the language in its own context, where phrasal verbs, sayings, typical expressions of culture, take place, and which are not possible to be gathered in textbooks of foreign languages, no matter how close books situations may be to reality; or possibly also, because there was no direct connection with the target language outside the classroom.

The need to fill that void, led the researcher to seek for the concepts of acquisition and learning (Krashen, 1987), to prove herself, that acquisition can take place in the language environment and little in the classroom, when the language is studied outside its cultural medium. One can learn a language in pedagogically organized contexts, but when producing it as a second language, the speaker searches for elements that take place in the daily life communicative situations with native speakers, not being able to find them. This phenomenon is hard to be understood even for the most advantaged students.

To this questioning, the author adds her experience in teaching foreign languages in contexts far from the language object of learning as well as within such contexts, which allowed her to confirm the advantages and disadvantages already dealt with above, by comparing the experiences of Russian learning in two different groups. This time she adds to the analysis, her observations to the performance of a group of Canadian students who studied Spanish (15 students) in Canada and in Cuba, that is to say out of and in the context of the target language.

### In Canada

The students made an effort to use the language in the classroom, but never outside of it. They feared and refused to speak in Spanish; although the Spanish textbook was based on communicative situations in contexts of different Spanish-speaking countries and it supported students understanding with illustrations, the students had difficulties to represent the cultural and social environment that was

described in the sentences and texts aimed at supporting students' understanding of the vocabulary and grammar.

The teacher, native speaker of Spanish, relied on songs, films, and images, and her pronunciation was that of the target language, however, the students' development in this sense was very limited.

The students had difficulties understanding and articulating the sounds in Spanish, especially the articulation of the *rr*; they were not able to establish a fluent conversation and were afraid to speak;

The conjugation of the verbs was difficult for them; they could not differentiate when to use *por* and *para* and the use of the verbs *ser* or *estar*, due to these elements differences in English and Spanish.

### In Cuba

The students required to use Spanish outside the classroom to communicate with the hosts of the houses where they stayed (family homes), on the streets, and at the university. The fact of living with families allowed them to understand aspects of the culture which were very abstract in texts and audiovisual materials; they learned phrasal verbs and sayings typical of the Spanish colloquial language;

In the classroom students were more motivated towards the activities of the subject matter; they asked about aspects of citizens' behavior, which they brought into the classroom as topics of conversation and inquiry;

The students developed an adequate level of fluency, although they made grammatical errors, especially with the conjugation of verbs, but they felt more confident while speaking in Spanish,

In this context, students shared with students from different countries who had different mother tongues, thus at the university context, they communicated in Spanish. They had to find the ways to live and communicate by dealing with their differences and common aspects of each of their cultures (Caribbean, African, Arab and Cuban students).

Students did not need to use the language in their daily communication.

In this second analysis, the author confirmed the statements regarding the importance of the context in the learning of a foreign language, as well as the multicultural and multilingual contexts to achieve a fluid communication, notwithstanding the level of linguistic correctness actually achieved by the language learners.

Both the CAME programs, and those dedicated to learning a language away from its cultural context, as well as teaching Spanish as a foreign language in the context of English (Canada) and in the target language context (Cuba), constituted references for the processes of language teaching in multicultural contexts, which are worth to study as referents to support programs dedicated to foreign language learning in the language contexts, as well as to encourage their generalization.

Currently, there are students' exchange programs at the international level, which are a source of inspiration for the development of educational projects, aimed at multiculturalism and multilingualism. Such programs can be strengthened through institutional networks to allow students and teachers mobility. As stated in the comparative analysis above, those programs help students finding ways to coexist with the culture of the people who speak the target language, understand them, know them and, therefore, respect them and collaborate together in a world at peace, as the better and more people communicate the better they would understand each other better.

### CONCLUSIONS

Foreign languages or second languages are best learned in contexts where students need language, firstly to communicate with the other members of the classroom community and outside of it, being the need the driving force for learning; secondly, when the language is learned in its cultural context, it provides knowledge beyond what is taught in the class, which is an important part of the communicative competence to be reached by the students, whose contents are very difficult to include in programs and class plans.

The teaching and learning process in multilingual and multicultural contexts provides a wealth of knowledge that is offered by each member of the group, which must be taken into account by the designers of programs aimed at this type of space; by the teacher and by the students themselves, in order to learn the target language with the help of the elements of each of the languages involved, and their cultures, to achieve not only the learners insertion in the context, but also a fluid communication and values for coexistence, collaboration, understanding and peace.

The author suggests taking the positive experiences from each case analyzed, so that teachers and syllabus designers are able to improve the foreign language learning and teaching processes through international projects to allow students to travel to the countries speaking the target languages, as to be able to live the language to acquire it at the same time that they learn it.

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