

When intercultural education is problematic: the case of Russian as a foreign language

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Abstract

This paper proposes a reflection on the issues posed by the intercultural teaching of Russian as a foreign language (RFL) in the university context.

In particular, after defining the concepts of “interculturalism”/“intercultural education” and outlining an updated picture of research on intercultural education in RFL, two of the greatest problems of RFL intercultural education are presented: on the one hand, the ambiguity of the theoretical treatment of intercultural education (and, thus, of its practical applications) by RFL scholars, and, on the other hand, the often essentialized, if not stereotypical, portrayal of Russian culture in RFL textbooks, which in some cases distort reality.

Finally, a possible solution is proposed to resolve these issues and make RFL teaching more intercultural.

Keywords: *Russian as a foreign language; intercultural education; intercultural teaching; interculturalism; Russian culture; textbooks.*

1. Introduction

When talking about the concept of “interculturalism” (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2006; Besley & Peters, 2012; Cattle, 2012; Costa & Lacerda, 2007; Dervin, 2016; Kastoryano, 2018; Meer *et al.*, 2016; Penas Ibáñez & López Sáenz, 2006; Sarmiento, 2014; Verkuyten *et al.*, 2019; Zapata-Barrero & Mansouri, 2022), we generally refer to a philosophy or viewpoint that involves support for dialogue between cultures and challenges self-segregation of cultures, ultimately leading to an “intercultural education” (IE), the foundations of which have been laid by the policies of the European Union and UNESCO since the 1990s according to these same assumptions (see, among others: Beacco, 2013; Byram, 2003, 2006, 2009; Byram & Zarate, 1995; Byram *et al.*, 1997; Byram *et al.*, 2002, 2009; Coste *et al.*, 2009; Deardorff, 2020; UNESCO, 2006, 2010, 2013).

In the research field of Russian as a foreign language (RFL), IE is commonly grounded in two basic components: “intercultural communication” (*mezhhkul’turnaya kommunikatsiya*) and “intercultural communicative competence” (*mezhhkul’turnaya kommunikativnaya kompetentsiya*).

Scholars tend to qualify intercultural communication as “an adequate mutual understanding of two participants of a communicative act who belong to different national cultures” (Vereshchagin & Kostomarov, 1973, p. 43; hereafter, the translations are mine). The precondition for and, at the same time, the guarantee of intercultural communication taking place is intercultural communicative competence, which has been defined as “the individual’s ability to exist in a multicultural society, to be successfully understood by representatives of other cultures and by representatives of one’s own culture” (Azimov & Shchukin, 2009, p. 134).

The topic of IE, which has become an object of study in the Russian context since the early 2000s with the publication of Gudkov’s (2000) and Ter-Minasova’s (2000) works devoted to intercultural communication, has been extensively investigated in RFL from various perspectives, with a focus on both theoretical and didactic-methodological aspects (see, among others: Amelina, 2022; Antonova & Arsenyeva, 2019; Berdichevskiy, 2021; Berdichevskiy *et al.*, 2011, 2020; Chumak, 2009, pp. 195–199; Nemtchinova, 2020; Petrikova *et al.*, 2015; Tarchimaeva, 2017).

However, with a few exceptions (e.g., Torresin, 2022a), in RFL research, there is still a lack of critical reflection on the concept of IE that may challenge certain established scientific ideas or orientations and at the same time help to improve the intercultural teaching of RFL in practice.

If IE in general, understood as above, alongside its undoubtedly positive sides, has over time shown dark areas or critical aspects that are difficult to resolve to the point of being criticized

in its very nature and even being related to colonialism (see, e.g., the studies of Aman, 2015, 2017, 2019), IE in the RFL area, as we will see, does not escape this picture either.

This contribution aims to outline two of the greatest problems of RFL intercultural teaching with a focus on the university context: on the one hand, the ambiguity of the theoretical treatment of IE (and, thus, of its practical applications) by RFL scholars (§2.1), and, on the other hand, the often essentialized, if not stereotypical, portrayal of Russian culture in RFL textbooks, which in some cases distort reality (§2.2). Finally, a possible solution is offered to solve the critical issues of IE in RFL and make RFL teaching more intercultural (§3).

2. Problems of RFL intercultural education

This paper discusses the following as the two main problems of RFL IE in the university context: a) how RFL research approaches the concept of IE (§2.1) and b) how RFL textbooks approach the concept of culture (§2.2).

2.1. Intercultural education and ambiguity in RFL studies

It is a well-established fact that scholars still do not agree on what should be meant by “interculturalism” and the correlated concepts “intercultural communication,” “intercultural communicative competence,” “intercultural dialogue,” and others, and that intercultural processes may be looked at through different lenses, perspectives, and approaches (see., e.g., Delanoy, 2020; ten Thije 2020).

However, in the RFL area, the situation is even more complicated. In RFL research on IE, on the one hand, a definition of IE—of its principles and characteristics referable to interculturalism—is seldom provided (see Torresin, 2022a, 2022b), thus giving rise to a wide variety of interpretations. On the other hand, the intercultural dimension, when defined and/or interpreted, is represented in a way that often does not coincide with interculturalism (as we outlined it) but is rather closer to “multiculturalism” (see Torresin, 2022b)—that is, a simple juxtaposition of cultures with the aim of merely “decreasing inter-ethnic tensions,” in which, rather than intercultural dialogue, cultures are invited to a more passive “education for tolerance” (Azimov & Shchukin, 2009, p. 149).

Adding to the ambiguity of uses of the conception of IE in the RFL field is the essentialist treatment of the concept of culture itself (which we will also return to in the next section when discussing RFL textbooks).

Culture is generally conceived by RFL scholars in an exclusively national tone, that is, as merely Russian (see Torresin, 2022a, 2022b), which testifies to a simplified and monolithic view of Russian culture deviating greatly from the foundations and principles of IE. This view completely excludes the transnational “Russophone” world (Caffee, 2013), which

includes Russian-speaking people who are not ethnic Russians, such as many contemporary, internationally renowned Russian-language writers (see Torresin, 2023a).

To sum up, even the most recent RFL studies treat IE in an ambiguous way that does not serve the development of IE itself, as the definitions of intercultural processes and related concepts either lack or are vitiated by multiculturalism (i.e., the pursuit of tolerance rather than dialogue between cultures) on the one hand and, on the other hand, by a simplified and essentialized view of culture itself (understood as purely national, i.e., Russian, or, in other words, in such a way as to exclude the equally important Russophone component).

2.2. RFL textbooks and the distortion of reality

If RFL research approaches the concept of IE in an ambiguous, simplistic, and essentialized way that extends to the same characterization of the target culture, when considering concrete teaching tools at the university level, such as RFL textbooks, the perception and representation of Russian culture here is also rather questionable.

In fact, generally speaking, authors of RFL textbooks seem to rely on (or, if they are academics, to belong to) the RFL didactic-methodological research illustrated above, with which they share a simplified and essentialized view of Russian reality. This influence is evident from the frequently biased, distorted, if not benevolent or even stereotyped portrayal of the Russian world offered by many RFL textbooks (see Torresin, 2022c, 2023b).

In more detail, such a portrayal of the Russian world is conveyed through the omission of some aspects (deemed secondary) over others for subjective and debatable reasons (see Torresin, 2023b). For example, in the well-known RFL textbook *Russkij yazyk: 5 elementov* (Esmantova, 2008–2011), which offers very few cultural topics, more space is reserved for geography, whereas modern and contemporary Russian culture are completely ignored.

Among the deliberately omitted elements is also the Russophone aspect. In other words, the only dimension represented in textbooks is generally that of national Russian culture. For example, in *Poyekhali* (Chernyshov & Chernyshova, 2019–2022), the few cultural elements given refer to the national dimension (Russian holidays, Russian recipes, etc.), especially the classical (among the Russian writers mentioned, we may find Pushkin, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Dostoevskiy), while the transnational one (e.g., Russian-speaking world, contemporary Russian-language writers, etc.) is not present. This reinforces the idea—already present in RFL research, as we have seen—of Russian culture as purely national, monolithic, and static, which is precisely the idea that passes, through the textbooks, to RFL learners.

Moreover, there are quite a few RFL textbooks that propose the myth of the “Russian soul” (*russkaya dusha*) as a learning component (regarding the Italian educational context, see Torresin, 2022c), thereby fostering the reinforcement of this monolithic and essentialized idea of Russian culture. This occurs also in the very recent textbook *Voyazh po-russki*

(Moskalëva *et al.*, 2020), where the Russian identity is depicted as unique and based on certain constants (tension towards the vast spaces, tendency to sadness or anxiety, strong sense of hospitality, etc.) attributable to the “Russian soul” (pp. 73, 250).

In summary, in many RFL textbooks, a distortion of reality takes place, resulting in the partial, essentialized, and even stereotyped representation of Russian culture, interpreted as national and endowed with fixed, unique, and unrepeatable traits (“Russian soul”).

3. Conclusions

As we have seen, the implementation of IE in the RFL context at the university level is problematic for two reasons: on the one hand, because of the ambiguity of the theoretical treatment of IE by RFL scholars, and, on the other hand, because of the biased and essentialized—if not outright stereotypical—portrayal of Russian culture in RFL textbooks.

In my view, a solution to both problems would be improving the critical reflection on the concept of IE. This could be done if RFL scholars and textbook authors were to dialogue both with intercultural studies, particularly intercultural pedagogy, where “culture” is treated as a complex and multifaceted object of study in an anthropological and sociological sense, and with international intercultural studies, which recognize the complexity of culture.

Clearly, this requires a change that involves both RFL research and teaching practice and that also goes through textbooks.

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