

Lavinia Nădrag<sup>1</sup>

## An Approach to Multicultural Education

*Abstract: This paper focuses on the concept of 'multicultural education', especially from a psycholinguistic perspective that emphasizes the roles of the participants in the complex process of education. Multicultural education incorporates concepts, theories, and pedagogy rooted in several interdisciplinary fields and applies them to practical educational settings (Banks). The ideal of equal opportunity, diversity, flexibility, freedom to experiment and innovate are some of the main characteristics of (higher) education in the U.S.A. However, there are some other factors that need to be taken into account in multicultural/multilingual education: educational contexts (e.g. segregation, mother tongue maintenance, submersion, immersion), the classroom learning situation, the relationships between teacher and student, social distance, psychological distance, motivation and language aptitude.*

*Key words: multicultural education; multilingual situations; acculturation*

**1. Americans have shown a great concern for education since the early colonial times. Some of the first settlers founded Harvard College in 1636, 140 years before American independence. Another famous institution of higher learning, Yale, was founded in 1701.**

The importance of education in American life was also reflected in the Northwest Ordinance of 1785 which set guidelines for organizing the new lands to the west. It provided for one square mile of land in each township to be reserved for public schools. By 1900, there were almost a thousand institutions of higher education in the U.S. (Stevenson).

Most historians agree that a great deal of the economic, political, scientific, and cultural progress America has made is due to its commitment to the ideal of equal opportunity. Americans have always aimed for equal opportunity in education, regardless of social class, national origin, or racial or ethnic group. The cultural influences on American education are extremely important. For the past several decades public policy and legal decisions have emphasized special rights for ethnic and linguistic minorities in the area of education. Many universities are today seeking students from all ethnic groups.

Education in America has traditionally served the goal of bringing people together, that is, of "Americanization". Schools in the U.S. served (and still serve) to bring together the

---

<sup>1</sup> Ovidius University of Constanța, Romania

hundreds of various cultural and linguistic groups, religions, and social and political backgrounds represented by the millions and millions of immigrants. (Stevenson 54-55)

Variety is a characteristic of American education. The United States does not have a national system of education. Each of the 50 state legislatures is free to determine its own system for its own public schools. Colleges and universities, whether state or private, are free to determine their own individual standards, admissions, and graduation requirements. However, there have been attempts to pass laws which would encourage the states to adopt national standards, nation-wide testing and national curricula. Flexibility is another keyword since there is much opportunity to experiment and to fit programs to a community's wishes and needs. Students at the same school can take courses in different areas. Some of the courses have an emphasis on academic subjects required for college work, while other courses prepare students for vocational or technical positions.

The diversity among schools and their freedom to experiment and innovate is a recognized strength of the American approach to education. State universities and colleges tailor their courses of study to the needs of the states and the students. The American high school is a combination of all the various types of schools which are separated in other countries.

The concept of continuing education is of great importance in the U.S. Millions of Americans 17 years and older further their education through participation in part-time instruction, taking courses in universities, professional associations, government organizations and churches. Adults want to update and upgrade their job skills, to broaden their knowledge or learn something they would enjoy doing such as dancing or photography. Courses in business, health care, engineering and education are most popular (Stevenson 60).

There is a major conflict between two goals of American education: one is the comprehensive, egalitarian education while the other is the highly selective educational emphasis that aims at excellence and the training of scientific elites.

Universities have also been asked to help with certain social and economic problems (divorce, drug problems, etc.). More and more money is made available for special programs for the educationally disadvantaged, for bilingual education, and for minority students.

**2. According to Banks (xi), multicultural education is “an emerging discipline whose major aim is to create equal educational opportunities for students from diverse racial, ethnic, social class, and cultural groups”. Its main goal is to help students acquire the knowledge needed to function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society and to communicate with people from diverse groups to create a civic and moral community that works for the common good.**

Its focus is on equity, justice, and cultural democracy. Therefore, multicultural education is consistent with the democratic ideals of the basic documents of the United States: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

Multicultural education is linked to African American scholarship that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In its contemporary manifestation, multicultural education emerged out of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s when African Americans took to the streets and used the ballot box to demand changes. The establishment of Black studies and ethnic studies was a response to this movement. One of the most significant victories of the women's rights movement was Title IX which prohibits sex discrimination in all educational programs receiving federal support.

As Banks points out, multiethnic education involves systemic and structural reform of the following variables in educational institutions:

- policy and politics;
- the attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and actions of teachers and professors;
- formalized curriculum and course of study;
- assessment and testing procedures;
- teaching styles and strategies;
- instructional materials.

Multicultural education incorporates concepts, theories, and pedagogy rooted in several interdisciplinary fields (history, the social and behavioral sciences, ethnic studies and women's studies) and applies them to practical educational settings. Therefore, the interrelationship of variables such as race, class, and gender is an important concern in multicultural education theory and research.

**3. Skuttnab-Kangas distinguishes four broad types of educational contexts: (1) segregation, (2) mother tongue maintenance (language shelter), (3) submersion, and (4) immersion. These types are all found in multilingual situations of one kind or another.**

Skuttnab-Kangas also identifies a number of factors that she believes will contribute to educational success in these different settings, grouping them under four broad headings: (a) organizational, (b) learner-related affective factors, (c) first language (L1) -related factors, and (d) second language (L2)-related factors.

- (a) Segregation occurs where the L2 learner is educated separately from the majority or a politically powerful minority, who speaks the target language as their mother tongue. Immigrants or migrant workers who are educated in special schools, centers, or units designed to cater for their language needs constitute an example of segregation in a majority setting. Skuttnab-Kangas claims that segregation settings produce poor results. She argues that the overall aim of education in these settings is the development of a limited L2 proficiency - sufficient to meet the

needs of the majority or powerful minority and to ensure their continued political and economic control. She sees segregation education as characterized by inadequate organization and negative learner-affective factors.

However, in certain situations, the provision of separate educational facilities may have beneficial effects. For example, short-term programs for refugees newly arrived in the United States or European countries can help them adjust socially, affectively, and linguistically to the demands of their new country.

- (b) Skuttnab-Kangas points out that mother tongue maintenance can take two forms. In the weaker form, pupils are given classes in their mother tongue, directed at developing formal language skills, including full literacy. In the stronger form, pupils are educated through the medium of their mother tongue. Examples of the former are the programs for Punjabi established in Bradford, UK and for Italian in Bedford for ethnic minority children living in those cities. Examples of the latter are the programs for the seven main language groups in Uzbekistan, and the Finnish-medium classes for Finnish migrant workers in Sweden (Skuttnab-Kangas). Mother tongue maintenance programs are based on enrichment theory, according to which high levels of bilingualism are seen as a cognitive and social advantage. This contrasts with deficit theory, which views bilingualism as a burden and as likely to result in cognitive disadvantage (see Swain and Cummins).

There is also evidence that mother tongue maintenance settings, particularly those of the strong kind, result in considerable educational success (Skuttnab-Kangas). They are characterized by positive organizational factors, success in developing full control of the L1, and a high level of proficiency in the L2.

Mother tongue maintenance provides support for L2 learning in two main ways. First, ensuring that the L2 is an additional rather than a replacement language results in learners developing a positive self-identity. As Spolsky notes, learning an L2 is intimately tied up with one's personality and being forced to learn an L2 as a replacement for the L1 is a 'direct assault on identity' (188). Mother tongue maintenance, then, is more likely to result in the positive attitudes needed for successful L2 development.

The second way involves a consideration of Cummins' inter-dependency principle (Cummins). He notes that whereas L2 communicative skills are typically mastered by immigrant learners in about two years, it can take from five to seven years for the same learners to approach grade norms for L2 academic skills.

- (c) Skuttnab-Kangas defines a submersion program as:

A program where linguistic minority children with a low-status mother tongue are forced to accept instruction through the medium of a foreign majority language with high status, in classes where some children are native speakers of the language of the instruction, where the teacher does not understand the mother tongue of the minority children, and where the majority language constitutes a threat to their mother tongue - a subtractive language learning situation. (Skuttnab-Kangas 40)

Submersion is common in Britain and the United States, where ethnic minority children are educated in mainstream classrooms. Right from the beginning L2 learners are taught with native speakers. This can create communication problems and insecurity in the learners. Both the content and language teachers are typically monolingual and thus unable to communicate with the learners in their L1. Cummins identifies three characteristics that are important for L2 acquisition; (1) a bilingual teacher who can understand students when they speak in their L1, (2) input that has been modified to make it comprehensible, and (3) effective promotion of L1 literacy skills. Submersion contexts have none of these. As Cummins (1981) notes, 'L2 submersion programs for minority students involve virtually no concessions to the child's language or culture and have well-documented negative effects for many children'.

- (d) The term immersion has come to refer to a number of different contexts. Initially, the term was used in the context of Canadian French immersion programs, where members of a majority group (native speakers of English) were educated through the medium of French, the language of a minority group. There are a number of variants of these programs, depending on whether the program begins early (for example, in kindergarten) or late and whether it is full (more or less all instruction is conducted in the L2) or partial.

As Cummins points out, the term *immersion* has also come to be used to refer to a variety of programs for minority students. He distinguishes L2 monolingual immersion programs for minority students which provide English-only instruction directed at classes consisting entirely of L2 learners; L1 bilingual immersion programs for minority students, which begin with L1-medium instruction, introducing L2-medium instruction sometime later; L2 bilingual immersion programs for minority students, which emphasize instruction in and on the L2 but which also promote L1 skills. He also notes that, misleadingly, even submersion programs have been referred to as 'immersion'.

The Canadian French immersion programs have met with considerable success. Swain and Lapkin (1982) review the various programs, reaching similar conclusions. Immersion students acquire normal English language proficiency and show the same or better level of general academic development. Furthermore, immersion students tend to have less rigid ethnolinguistic stereotypes of the target-language community, and place greater value on the importance of inter-ethnic contact.

There are many reasons for the success of majority immersion programs.

- a) One has to do with the fact that *immersion settings* ensure a plentiful supply of *input* that has been tailored to the learners' level and is therefore comprehensible.
- b) There are also *social reasons*. The learners' L1 and their ethnic identity are not threatened, so it is easy for the learners to adjust to the immersion setting (see Swain and Lapkin).
- c) The immersion programs are *optional* and, therefore, are supported by those parents who elect to send their children to them. In the United States there has been considerable opposition to bilingual programs for linguistic minorities, as reflected in the Official English Movement (the attempt to have English

designated as the official language of the United States and to ensure that educational resources are directed towards teaching English rather than some other language.

**4. With regard to the classroom learning situation, the role of the relationships between teacher and student is likely to be crucial, especially in a multicultural environment (see McKay).**

- a) In the case of traditional approaches to language teaching, where the target language is perceived primarily as an 'object' to be mastered by learning about its formal properties, the teacher typically acts as an informer. In the case of innovative approaches where the emphasis is on the use of the target language in 'social behavior' a number of different role relationships are possible, depending on whether the participants have a real-life purpose for communicating, as in information gap activities; the teacher can be 'producer' or 'referee' and the learner 'actor' or 'player'. In real-life situations outside the classroom, a somewhat different role relationship arises ('mentor' and 'apprentice'). The nature of these classroom roles is likely to influence the level and type of proficiency that develops.
- b) Parents may play an active role by monitoring their children's curricular activities. They may also play a more indirect role by modeling attitudes conducive to successful language learning. A number of studies have found a positive relationship between parental encouragement and achievement in L2 learning. Gardner argues that parents' influence on proficiency is mediated through the students' motivation.
- c) Among the social models of second language (L2) acquisition, Schumann's acculturation model was established to account for the acquisition of an L2 by immigrants in majority language settings. It specifically excludes learners who receive formal instruction. Acculturation, which can be defined generally as 'the process of becoming adapted to a new culture' (Brown 129), is seen by Schumann as governing the extent to which learners achieve target-language norms. Schumann distinguishes two kinds of acculturation, depending on whether the learner views the second language group as a reference group or not. Both types involve social integration and therefore contact with the second language group, but the first type of learners wish to assimilate fully into its way of life, whereas the second does not. Schumann argues that both types of acculturation are equally effective in promoting L2 acquisition.

The model recognizes the developmental nature of L2 acquisition and seeks to explain differences in learners' rate of development and also in their ultimate level of achievement in terms of the extent to which they adapt to the target-language culture. But some fail to

progress beyond the early stages of acquisition because they require the L2 for only the communicative function of language (basic information exchange), and not for the integrative function (social identification) or the expressive function (the realization of personal attitudes).

According to Schumann's theory, the extent to which learners acculturate depends on two sets of factors that determine their levels of social distance and psychological distance. Social distance concerns the extent to which individual learners become members of the target-language group and, therefore, achieve contact with them. Psychological distance concerns the extent to which individual learners are comfortable with the learning task and constitutes, therefore, a personal rather than a group dimension.

Undoubtedly, acculturation affects L2 acquisition by its effect on the amount of contact learners have with target language (TL) speakers. Acculturation may also affect the nature of the verbal interactions that learners take part in and thus the quality as well as the quantity of L2 input. Later on other scholars have added a psycholinguistic dimension and a cognitive dimension to this model.

Giles and Byrne identify a number of factors that contribute to a group's ethnolinguistic vitality. They discuss the conditions under which subordinate group members (for example, immigrants or members of an ethnic minority) are most likely to acquire native-like proficiency in the dominant group's language. These are: (1) when in-group identification is weak or the L1 does not function as a salient dimension of ethnic group membership, (2) when interethnic comparisons are quiescent, (3) when perceived in-group vitality is low, (4) when perceived in-group boundaries are soft and open, and (5) when the learners identify strongly with other groups and so develop adequate group identity and intra-group status. When these conditions prevail, learners experience low ethnolinguistic vitality but without insecurity, as they are not aware of the options open to them regarding their status vis-a-vis native-speaker groups. The end result is that learners will achieve high levels of social and communicative proficiency in the L2. Whereas Schumann's model emphasizes 'contact' as the variable that mediates between social factors and L2 acquisition, Giles and Byrne see 'interaction' as crucial.

Gardner's Socio-educational Model was developed to explain L2 learning in classroom settings, in particular the foreign language classroom. The model seeks to interrelate four aspects of L2 learning: (1) the social and cultural milieu, (2) individual learner differences, (3) the setting, and (4) learning outcomes. The basis of the model is that L2 learning - even in a classroom setting - is not just a matter of learning new information but of acquiring symbolic elements of a different ethnolinguistic community (Gardner). The social and cultural milieu in which learners grow up determines their beliefs about language and culture. Gardner identifies a number of variables that result in individual difference: motivation and language aptitude.

The learners' social and cultural milieu determines the extent to which they wish to identify with the target-language culture (their integrative motivation) and also the extent to which they hold positive attitudes towards the learning situation. Both contribute to the learners' motivation. Motivation is seen as independent of language aptitude (the special ability for learning languages). Whereas motivation has a major impact on learning in both formal and informal learning contexts, aptitude is considered to be important only in the former, although it can play secondary role in the latter. These two variables (together with

intelligence and situational anxiety) determine the learning behaviors seen in different learners in the two contexts and, thereby, learning outcomes.

We can conclude that there is a strong relationship between the educational/social/cultural milieu and L2 proficiency, between learners' attitudes and their proficiency, between integrative motivation and proficiency.

## References

- Banks, J.A., McGee Banks, C.A. *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- Brown, H. "The optimal distance model of second language acquisition." *TESOL Quarterly* 14: 157-164, 1980.
- Cummins, J. *Bilingualism and Minority Children*. Ontario: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1981.
- Gardner, R. *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning: The Role of Attitude and Motivation*. London: Edward Arnold, 1985.
- Giles, H., J. Byrne. "An intergroup approach to second language acquisition." *Journal of Multicultural and Multilingual Development* 3: 17-40, 1982.
- McKay, S.L. *Teaching English as an International Language*. Oxford University Press, 2009
- Schumann, J. "Research on the acculturation model for second language acquisition." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 7: 379-92, 1986.
- Skuttnab-Kangas, T., J. Cummins (eds.) *Minority Education*. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters, 1988.
- Spolsky, B. (ed.). *Language and Education in Multilingual Settings*. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters, 1986.
- Stevenson, K.D. "American Life and Institutions." *FPG International LLC*, 1998.
- Swain, M., J. Cummins. "Bilingualism, cognitive functioning and education." *Language Teaching and Abstracts* 4-18, 1979.
- Swain, M., S. Lapkin. *Evaluating Bilingual Education: A Canadian Case Study*. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters, 1982.