Deconstructing the Canon: MI As a Powerful Tool To Build Language Teachers' Compentence[*]

Geleneği Bozmak: Dil Öğretmenlerinin Yeterliliklerini İnşa Etmek İçin Güçlü Bir Araç Olarak MI

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Abstract

This presentation briefs on a four years' teacher training experience within a master program for graduate Language students. Our aim is to develop a research partnership with the enrolled students and, as a result, to improve learning in the schools where the findings are applied. The research consists in identifying the methodological stereotypes that prevent Language teachers from effectively facilitating their students' deep understanding of the subject matter. We look for solutions to deconstruct such stereotypes. In this respect MI (Multiple Intelligence) theory is our students' top choice: MI provides a good lens to read the literary canon from the perspectives of the students' needs and in the context of today's culture. MI also represents a set of concepts that help the students build their own deep understanding of Language teaching competence. Thus MI is the partnership frame where professor, student teachers and pupils explore various learning difficulties at different levels.

Keywords: Multiple intelligences, Teaching/methodological stereotype, Research partnership

Özet

Bu sunum, yüksek lisans programı çerçevesinde yer verilen dil eğitimi öğrencileriyle paylaşılan dört yıllık öğretmen eğitimi tecrübesini özetler. Bizim amacımız öğrenciler ile bir araştırma ortaklığı kurmak ve bunun sonucu olarak elde edilen bulguları uygulama okullarında kullanarak okuldaki öğrenmeyi geliştirmektir. Araştırma, dil öğretmenlerinin, öğrencilerinin konuyu derinden anlamasını etkin bir şekilde sağlamasını engelleyen yöntembilimsel stereotipleri içerir. Bu tarz stereotipleri ayrıştırarak

çözümleri araştırmaktayız. Bu bağlamda, ÇZ (Çoklu Zeka) teorisi öğrencilerimizin birinci öncelikli tercihidir: ÇZ, öğrencilerin ihtiyaçları perspektifi ve bugünün kültürü bağlamından yola çıkarak edebi nitelikte bir edebiyat düzeneğini anlamak için iyi bir mercek sağlar. ÇZ aynı zamanda öğrencilerin dil öğretimi yeterliliklerinde kendi derin anlamalarını inşa etmelerine yardım eden bir dizi kavramları temsil eder. Böylelikle MI, öğretim üyesi, öğretmen adayları ve öğrencilerin farklı seviyelerde çeşitli öğrenme güçlüklerini keşfettikleri ortak bir çerçevedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çoklu zeka, Öğretme/yöntemsel stereotip, Araştırma ortaklığı

Introduction

Starting with the late 90s the Romanian new National Curriculum brought about a competence-based perspective on Language&Literature teaching and learning. Unfortunately, during the last decade the curricular change did not touch the classroom practice. At all levels of education teachers remained clustered in the traditional paradigm.

Irrespective of the provision in the written curriculum, teachers prefer to present literature and grammar in isolation as if these were two separate school subjects. Consequently they offer a decontextualized teaching that highlights the discourse of the textbook and minimize (sometimes even ignore) the cognitive profile of their students as well as their needs and aspirations.

Young graduates make no exception. They step into the teaching career with a very strict pattern they thouroughly learnt during their formal education. They value the literary canon as a rigid selection of fiction. They also value traditional grammar as an academic description of the language system. These two options are as distant from our youngsters as Katmandu or New Guinea. What school students need is a purpose-oriented learning and a deep understanding of what is valued (and still valid) in our culture. Functional grammar, communication competences, cultural awareness, plural reading of both fiction and non-fictional texts represent the must-s for an optimal social and professional insertion. How could these become teaching inputs and learning outcomes?
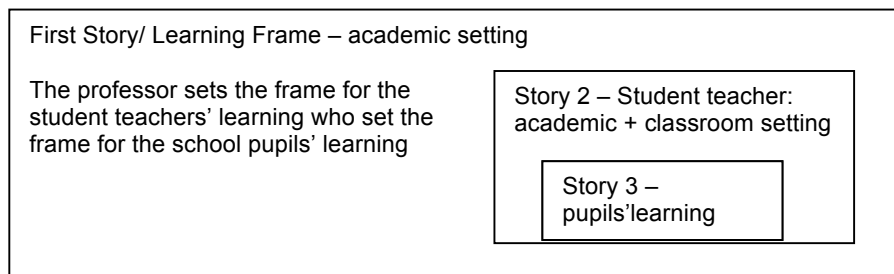
When the Faculty of Letters at the University of Bucharest started a new master program that was focused on the development of the graduates' teaching competences I took the challenge and designed a research partnership aimed at gradually changing the classroom practice. My hypothesis was the following: If student teachers identify their stereotypes and experience meaningful learning that they further transfer into their schools, they will start structuring meaningful learning for their own pupils.

Being a philologist myself but also a researcher in education I knew from my MI-based experiments (Sarivan 1996, 1999) that Language&Literature can become full of flavour for the learners if the teacher shifts perspectives. Instead of telling the textbook story to a neutral class the language teachers need to support their individual students from mixed-talents, mixed-culture groups to (re)create a (learning) story out of the variety of texts at hand. As a result, school students (even children in primary education) become good readers and critical thinkers, they enjoy interpreting all sorts of verbal and non-verbal messages, they develop language awareness and communicative competence, they are less likely to be manipulated by media discourse.

All this sounds lovely and matches the official curriculum but from declaration to genuine acts a whole teaching paradigm is challenged and hopefully shifted. A single teacher trainer cannot change the students' mind sets. But this seems plausible within a research partnership involving professor, graduate student teachers and students from the actual schools.

Methodology

The reasearch partnership we developed within the master program for graduate Language students combines: face-to-face sessions, online sharing of experiences and discussion as well as activities carried out by the students-researchers in their own schools with their own pupils. This blended learning scenario operates like a frame story (Sarivan, 2005). The figure below suggests the construction of the frame story and/ or what we call here a frame learning.

First Story/ Learning Frame – academic setting

The professor sets the frame for the student teachers' learning who set the frame for the school pupils' learning

Story 2 – Student teacher: academic + classroom setting

Story 3 – pupils'learning

Figure 1. The construction of the frame story/ The frame learning

The story-within-the-story or the frame story is the literary pattern that deepens the veridicity of the fictional work by making a number of characters meet within a story. The plot of the latter puts them in the situation of telling stories (most often to one another). Thus, a sequence of many other stories develops in the context of the first story.

Sometimes characters in the story-in-the-story (story 2) tell another story of their own (story 3). The pattern of the story is consequently reiterated and transfered from the frame to more and more particular settings. Sometimes a character-turned story teller in a third level plot seems a more experienced fiction author than the producer of the frame himself/ herself.

In our research partnership the pattern of learning develops in a similar way. Student teachers come to discover MI concepts within the design of an experiential interactive course. The concepts that are to become the methodological tools of the graduate teachers are first introduced in a methodological frame. For instance I used a linguistic entry point (Gardner, 2000) in order to present a concept like intelligence profile (Gardner, 1993, 2006) or curricular planning. Thus the students first experience the entry point as a methodological vehicle (which is the exact use they are going to make when they transfer it in the classroom). Then they conceptualize it by reflecting on their learning experience. They manage to define it and find examples of their own. Finally they include the concept in their personal methodological frame and use the entry point for the concept of – let's say - modern novel when they introduce this operational category to their 10 graders. Basically my graduate students reiterate at school level the methodological approach I use at the master program level. At this point the research partnership becomes an extended learning partnership: professor – student teachers – school students each making a profit from procedural knowledge transfer.

In order to reinforce the idea of trasfer from the academic class to the school context I challenge my students in a role play where they pretend to be my five graders or eight graders etc. while I am their teacher. The main objective of the role play is to demonstrate that the procedures and concepts they discover and work with can be transfered at lower levels of education. Moreover the role play is intended to build their understanding of a teacher who really is a facilitator of his/ her class learning and not just the authority voice who gives the standard example, transmits the canon, builds obedience and routine. More than any other activity, the role play highlights that effective learning can be achieved in a variety of contexts, the marginal ones included. It also highlights that the teachers'role is more than speaking about, but rather providing the living experience by the design of genuine learning contexts in accordance to the students' backgrounds, culture and environments. Thus, the role play helps at identifying and gradually deconstructing stereotypes, challenging student teachers to identify their routine as a harmful cliché and to step out of it. The debriefing at the end of each face-to-face session supports student teachers' reflexivity and highlights the basic methodological issues of the day.

The online component was in the beginning just email communication and group discussion, Yet even in that rudimentary form it did match our individualized approach as well as group interaction. With the progress of our digital resources we can now meet on a Moodle facility and enjoy the benefits of eLearning.

During the last year the presentation of controversial issues and the tutoring for the research took place entirely online. The forum option encourages and sustains the exchange of experiences among the students and offers opportunities to debate the weekly topics.

The online component helps student teachers to change their perspective on learning and on communication. In the virtual reality messages are less formal while hierarchies tend to lose their strengths. Moreover the online activity prepares student teachers to better relate to their pupils in the ICT era. Deconstructing the canon – be it the literary or the methodological one – is not gratuitous. The point is to value the personal profile of the students and relate to the niches of the contemporary society and culture. A teacher who is digitally literate can far better cope with the texting propensions of her students and use ICT to strengthen the learning interactions and partnership.

Last but not least, the classroom activities give us the real purpose for our research design and implementation. They also provide the necessary feedback as well as a generator of new methodological tricks. The option for the classroom intervention belongs to each student teacher for as long as the research frame is met, i.e. the participants develop a research project that aims at implementing a student-centered approach. The participants are also asked to compare the results in the experimental group with another same age group where no innovation is implemented. The developers of similar projects are invited to share their observations online as well as in the face-to-face sessions. We use interactive workshops in order to exchange experiences about the progress of the intervention and improve the implementation process.

Assessment criteria focus on: the students' involvement in the learning interaction (both online and face-to-face), the quality of the reasearch project (research question or hypothesis, action plan, use of MI-based approach), data analysis and conclusions, artefacts produced by school students during the project implementation, metacognitive skills.

Findings

Since we started the program 100 student teachers have been enrolled, out of which five dropped out. About 80% of the ones who completed the program consider the MI-based research as a fruitful experience for both themselves and their own students.

Every year the first findings refer to the methodological stereotypes the student teachers identify. Here is a brief description of the ones that are on top of the list.

The holy textbook is an ironical metaphor somebody once used in order to show the disproportionate respect for the curricular resource which is the textbook. The graduates recognize their dependance on the textbook when they prepare their classes. The big problem is that many of them hardly prepare anything. They mechanically go through the textbook without giving a thought to adapting their approach to the group and variety within the group. They use the textbook extensively without a prior analysis and subsequent decision for an appropriate selection. They overwhelmingly rely on the information, examples and questions in the textbook instead of designing personal teaching strategies.

Verbal excellence is mostly valued. At first sight, since we all teach languages how could we praise anything else? Are we not supposed to teach students to express in and decypher the verbal code? Most surely yes. Yet there is an overwhelming praise for verbal excellence and verbal excellence uniquely. The curriculum gives provision for the teaching of reading competence in the context of other school subjects. But teachers do not care about the curriculum very much. As I have mentioned above this attitude starts from the textbook addiction. Throughout the research the graduates discovered that when students can freely choose upon the means and shape of a requested product the results are far better than when they have to write an essay.

Insisting on descriptive grammar – about half of the enrolled students testify about this stereotype even if they all understand that such approach will not support students improve language awareness, communicative competence and complex transactions of meanings in everyday life. The graduates motivate their complescence by telling they are afraid of the inspector and other "learned" teachers who might have a position of authority and who all share the traditional perspective on grammar.

Decontextualized learning is a frequent stereotype. Very seldom, if ever, do student teachers question the utility of what they teach. High school students ask the why question

quite often and they get either reprimanded or no reply at all. Throughout the research partnership the graduates learned how to relate the curricular perspective to the needs and concerns of their students.

The fill-in-the-barn pattern (Gardner, 2000) is the nightmare of every child who is confronted by tons of "important" facts that need to be learned and later reproduced in the pencil-and-paper assessments. The student teachers recognize that they mostly focus on the quantitative aspect than work on facilitating a solid conceptual construction.

Identifying stereotypes is neither easy job nor a comfortable conclusion on behalf of the student teachers. Somebody emailed to me: 'I haven't slept last night. I went through the list of my stereotypes again and again. I don't like it at all. Better said I don't like myself anymore. But I want to change. Most surely I want to change. My problem is I don't know where to start from'.

Most of the graduates admit that the stereotype identification is a necessary step to begin renovating their teaching approach. For the majority this operation is more of a revolution and it needs several attempts in order to be able to develop a coherent research project and apply it in class.

So far we have designed the classroom interventions by specifically targeting the multiple representations (Gardner, 2000). At the level of a learning unit the teacher and her students explore a communication concept or a literary one by making use of entry points, analogies and multiple representations. The approaches vary from topic to topic and the choice of the group: either same ability group/ individual response to a question or a mixed-talents group who aim at a complex product requiring inputs in various codes. Irrespective of this variation, when the graduate teachers plan thouroughly the results are always amazing: beautiful and conceptually coherent artifacts. School students who previously had said they didn't see any point in opening a book discover the pleasure of reading and the excitement to show their conclusions to their peers. Teachers find out that the low attainers can understand the text and realise that the low attainment should be more finely described: do the pupils fail because they didn't understand the text or because they are not able to write the essay to explain what they understood? Whether they are 10 year olds ('It was fun. I liked it when you allowed me to sing about it. Please can we do this next time again?') or demotivated teenagers in 10th grade ('It was good. Really good. Nothing boring') the pupils mark an improvement in their knowledge as they construct it themselves.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our story is not a fairy tale. Definitely not the canonic one with the nice ones, bad ones and the happy ending where the good triumphs over the evil. We discover with each project implementation lots of weaknesses we have not thought of (the groups are not well formed, a certain student is not that talented at drawing as previously observed, a good entry point is not that good, the analogy is not that striking, questions prove to be less clear when asked in front of the class). Sometimes we can redesign the approach and obtain excellent results, sometimes not.

Above all it is important that student teachers try to change, do change and try again. It is also important that students have the opportunity to learn better. It is important as well that our research can be shared with other teachers. By the end of 2009 we intend to publish a first book, and hopefully not the single one, in which we gather the best examples of good practice.

Last but not least we intend to continue the research partnership beyond the limits of the master program and extend the research with new highlights. For the next academic year we hope to launch projects inspired by the Five minds for the future (Gardner, 2007).

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