



## Graduate and International Students Explore Language and Identity within a Win-Win Learning Partnership

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### Abstract

*Our paper documents three years of learning partnerships that involve two groups of participants: 1) international students enrolled in the preparatory year and 2) language graduate students enrolled in an Intercultural Studies Master programme at the University of Ploiesti. The first have an overall objective of obtaining the B2 level in Romanian for the certification exam allowing admission for any academic programme in Romania; the second are to explore identity and otherness while developing a cultural project focused on supporting the international students' language acquisition and integration in their new community. For both groups there is an opportunity to meet learning needs in meaningful contexts and to offer support to one another in order to attain their respective academic goals. The design of this approach originates in identifying solutions to the various learning problems of the two groups, namely the cultural shock and the effort to build the progression from scratch to B2 in only two semesters of intensive study (group 1) and the overcoming of cultural stereotypes beyond the knowledge sanctioned in the classic exams (group 2). The project-based design relies on team teaching and the community of practice among faculty members who work with the two groups and who jointly organize learning situations as part of the academic curriculum and in outdoors and extracurricular activities. On the other hand, the graduate students in group 2 are invited to further extend their autonomy as they connect via social media to discuss, plan and develop their project and make decisions about teaming with international students in group 1. After three years of monitoring, the results of the learning partnership are constantly win-win: 80% of the international students pass their exams; the language graduates develop good projects and are very satisfied with the outcomes; last but not least real friendships develop among the two groups and more innovative faculty members revise their methodology.*

**Keywords:** *cultural dialogue, student-centred approach, learning partnership, contextualized language acquisition.*

### 1. The context of a partnership: brief history

The idea of this partnership originates in the setting up of the MA programme "Concepts and Strategies of Intercultural Communication" at the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti twelve years ago. The curriculum was designed to develop the students' intercultural competence. Considering now the initial steps in retrospect, we must admit that all courses had a clearly theoretical penchant, although the main declared goal was to raise the students' cultural awareness and make them competent intercultural communicators. Too little, if any, real exposure to cultural difference there was at the time. Issues of identity were exclusively addressed by case studies in diverse media [5]. The programme is still running nowadays, but the approach has changed substantially.

The same faculty which coordinates the MA programme organizes the activity of the preparatory year attended by international students from more than fifteen countries, which represent as many culturally diverse environments, involved in the intensive study of Romanian language with the overall objective of obtaining the B2 level.

Judging by the way the Romanian academic system is tailored, these two programmes are not supposed to have too much in common other than being administratively hosted by the same faculty.

In 2012, a project-based design of certain modules of the MA programme was applied, which presupposed, on the one hand, team teaching and a community of practice among faculty members and, on the other hand, the involvement of MA students in projects with relevance for the problematics of intercultural communication. The same year, the students have identified "the need of a strategic change regarding our University's library in order to develop a better environment in which both professors and students are able to interact, expand learning activities, discuss research issues and become partakers in cultural exchange." [6]. The students' project, presented in [6], served as a wake-up call to the university staff, but it would have been just wishful thinking, but for the involvement of the university management. It took five years and a competitive project to turn the 2012 imagined library



into practice. The university now has a learning centre where students are able to genuinely take part in the cultural exchange.

The learning partnership has been seen as a solution to various learning and real-life challenges, such as acquiring Romanian while adapting to a new culture or overcoming stereotypes and becoming sensitive to difference [1], [2], [4]. The graduate students and the prep year international students were brought together and started working in projects in and outside the university, in the academic environment, as well as in real-life situations. Learning Romanian is no longer limited to the confines of the classroom, itself perceived, even by the Romanian students, as hostile. International students strive for B2. They do it in the academic environment, by formal activities, but they also do it because they feel the urge to communicate with their Romanian peers, because they want to make and keep friends, which helps them overcome the cultural shock. The Romanian graduates become sensitive to difference by being exposed to the foreign other, they become aware of their intercultural flaws, they develop a more in-depth understanding of stereotypes and clichés, and, very importantly, of their own identity and adaptation problems.

## **2. The project of a partnership: curriculum design and methodology**

A learning partnership between two different groups from two different programmes is far from smooth but with focused planning the implementation comes into being! The academic curricula were revised to give more room to language practice for the international students in the prep year (G1) and to include learning by doing courses in project writing and project management for the grads (G2). Timetables of G1 and G2 are harmonized for Friday afternoon in order to allow a joint course once a month. The grads make the overture by preparing cultural project offers that aim at supporting G1 with language acquisition and cultural integration. These are presented in the first meeting with the international students. At that point, G2 had already been exposed to how to write a project proposal and how to introduce it to a potential beneficiary. The “abc” of project writing is tested nevertheless with the real needs and profile of a culturally diverse group in a meaningful learning context where G1 and G2 engage in authentic dialogue. Consequently, the project teams in G2 revise the initial proposals and discuss the details of a possible implementation. The steps of project writing are discovered, revisited and turned into action during the fall term when teams in G1 and G2 participate in at least one joint event outside the university. G2 have to document their event planning and outcomes for their exam in January. The spring term follows a similar design but with more complex learning: G1 are by then at A2 level and their communication and cultural needs are more demanding while G2 focus on project management. The second term joint meetings and outdoor planned events develop in a learning spiral on the basis of increasing better understanding among the project teams, which is sustained by their extensive use of social media [3]. G2 are given more autonomy in organizing the Friday joint meetings; they also explore project management concepts with selected feature films or documentaries on intercultural topics. Sometimes this gives them the idea to invite G1 to the movies!

The learning progress in G2 is monitored with project grids both in self assessment and teacher-based assessment and is the object of the exams in January and June. The grads also fill in reflective essays at the end of each course. G1 take CEFRL-based tests, with a final assessment in June. A final questionnaire is filled by G2 at the end of the academic year.

## **3. Highlights of a partnership: main results**

The methodology presented above has been implemented since October 2016. The three consecutive years highlight increased learning progress as well as popularity among students:

- The teaching staff observation documents improved quality in language learning, students' interaction and confidence: the international students pass their finals with the very few exceptions of G1 members who skip classes. The young people are always willing to participate in an exchange outside the class and some of them are confident enough to initiate a dialogue with teachers if they meet them in real life contexts (in town or during travels).
- The teachers who work with G1 have diversified their methodology: they constantly bring more cultural issues in their language class and mark the main Romanian holidays with practical traditional activities (e.g. painting eggs before Easter!)
- Throughout the academic year G2 evolve from stiff transmitters to communicators with versatile competences in interaction with G1. Their project work improves from one term to another and their presentation skills diversify in informal discussion with G1 and public speaking for the exams.



- G2's questionnaires also reveal interesting feedback: the use of cinematic material for the exploration of project management concepts is unanimously praised; more than 75% consider the learning partnership with G1 as a very valuable experience for life; more than two thirds consider teamwork an asset of the course and would like to have more opportunities of this kind during their higher education; their comments refer to the need for more courses like the project management one to involve them in critical thinking and discussion of the subject matter.

#### **4. In search of meaning and relationship**

Our new approach to the curriculum has led to a totally different approach to education, which has proved beneficial to all parties involved. The first and most palpable outcome is that both the graduates and the international students reached their learning goals. The projects in partnership gave them the opportunity to perform in meaningful contexts and to offer support to one another in order to attain their respective academic goals. Besides, the teaching staff have become part of this new learning partnership. They had to perform beyond their comfort zone and design, themselves, courses whose focus no longer was knowledge about, but rather understanding of issues pertaining to intercultural communication.

The substantial benefit, then, resides in partakers developing a deeper understanding of otherness, becoming willing and able to deal with their own prejudice, to overcome stereotypical images and clichés. By the encounter with the other, issues of identity have begun to surface. Both students and teachers have acquired a more in-depth knowledge of themselves.

Learning Romanian, as well as learning intercultural communication have been achieved by interaction in meaningful real-life contexts. Academic relationships start being doubled by quality human relationships. The overarching benefit of this partnership is threefold. 1) The international students deal with the cultural shock more easily and are better equipped to adapt to the new culture. 2) The Romanian graduates develop awareness of the fact that identity and adaptation problems are likely to occur at home, as much as abroad. 3) The teaching staff start reconsidering their old approach to the curriculum and begin revising methodology.

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