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Intercultural communicative competence and medical students from Haiti: the case of the Faculty of Medical Sciences at National University of Rosario, Argentina

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Abstract

This paper shows how the Faculty of Medical Sciences at the National University of Rosario in Argentina responds to the growing number of students from Haiti who have come to Rosario city during the last few years. These strategies are analyzed from the intercultural communicative competence concept -formed by attitudes, knowledge and skills- which arise when interacting with people from other cultures. An ethnographic methodological strategy was designed, and interviews and documental analysis were conducted, with the objective of determining the way in which the Departments of Medicine, Nursery and Speech Therapy meet the different needs arising from the integration of immigrants from one of the most impoverished countries on earth. As there are no antecedents on this empirical scope, this research is explanatory; specifically, it is a singular case study. The collected data include the creation of specific didactic material, the organization of a financial aid campaign for their country of origin, the implementation of medical offices for specific needs, among other devices. The conclusion points out a strong institutional commitment in the sense of the promotion of the intercultural communicative competence among the participants. Besides meeting the functional goal of facilitating the sociocultural integration of the Haitian students, the achievements benefit the intercultural development of the host community.

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1. Introduction

Migration is a phenomenon present throughout all of human history. However, it has recently been intensified by the widening disparity of incomes and deteriorating economic conditions. Of the various factors influencing population displacement, student mobility is one of the various forms. When these potential university students come from ejection countries like Haiti, the phenomenon becomes especially complex. It is not only a matter of difficulties of social and economic survival, but also one that involves the challenge of developing professionally in an unknown language. That has been the case of Haitians coming in to the city of Rosario, Argentina, for several years, in order to get a University education. In this context, this paper aims to systematize the individual, group and institutional responses of the Faculty of Medical Sciences of the National University of Rosario to the growing number of Haitians. These responses are analyzed from the concept of intercultural communicative competence, composed by attitudes, knowledge and skills, that arises when interacting with people from other cultures.

1.1. Conceptual definitions

The concept of intercultural communicative competence has given place to many models that intend to explain its components and assessment tools. Some authors take into account the role of language in its definitions. In this sense, Fantini (2010) considers the role of language in this competence in a general sense; whether it be the first, second or a foreign language.

Intercultural communicative competence is a complex system of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself. Whereas “effective” relates to one’s own view of one’s performance in the LC2 (i.e., an “etic” or an outsider’s view of the host culture); “appropriate” relates to how one’s performance is perceived by one’s hosts (i.e., an “emic” or insider’s view). (p.1)

In the situation that is analyzed in this paper, the different mother tongues spoken by the participants (Argentinean Spanish of the hosts and the French creole of the Haitians) is an important variable. As we are interested in the effort towards communication made by both parties (the native speakers of the vehicular language and the ones who try to learn it), Fantini’s definition (2010) is very operational. As defined, “effective” and “appropriate” are two helpful features to analyse empirical data. We adopt them here to analyse the different actors involved (host and foreign students, and university staff and administrators) and the institution as a whole.

In the case of the actors, the intercultural communicative competence is made visible in the intercultural speaker, who:

1. Is conscious of his/her own identity and culture, of how he/she is perceived, and how he/she knows the identities and cultures of the people with whom he/she interacts.
2. Builds bridges and mediates between his/her own culture and that of others'. He/she is able to explain and accept the difference and see what the human dimension is made of.
3. Knows about one or more cultures and enjoys the ability to discover and to relate with people of different backgrounds.
4. Is conscious that he/she is involved in a process which is constantly developing. (Byram & Fleming 2001, synthesis by Bermejo Alonso 2003, p.11)

At the institutional level, the intercultural communicative competence shows itself in cultural pluralism, as is defined by the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001). Its 2nd Article -“From cultural diversity to cultural pluralism”- says:

Policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society and peace. Thus defined, cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. Indissociable from a democratic framework, cultural pluralism is conducive to cultural exchange and to the flourishing of creative capacities that sustain public life.

This expression points out that cultural pluralism is a more convenient term than cultural diversity or even, multiculturalism. It emphasises the political engagement, the concrete actions and the democratic context in which it exists.

1.2. Antecedents

A similar study was carried out in the Faculty of Psychology at the same university (Ugarteche, Jiménez y Pozzo, 2012). It concludes that there are scarce strategies implemented to help the inclusion of foreign students, no matter their place of origin. Although the number of students of foreign nationalities is lower than the ones in the Medical Sciences Faculty, it is surprising that a career focused on the interpersonal links does not pay enough attention to its diverse students as a learning situation.

In the same Faculty, another researcher (Tosi 2009) studied the impact of the migration experience in the constitution of subjectivity, together with material limitations, uprooting, loss of social ties and uncertainty.

Moreover, we conducted a similar survey, though referred not only to a particular educational level but to all educational strategies -formal and non formal- implemented in the city of Vancouver, Canada (Pozzo, 2012). The findings show a great variety of strategies related to cultural plurality. The varied range of foreign languages at school, study tours, international study groups, and community events to retain the ethno-linguistic vitality of immigrant groups are indicators of pluralist politics. The teaching of English as a second language, literacy programs for immigrants, orientation days for international students and support workshops in English for non-English speaking university students are compensatory strategies aimed at overcoming the cultural deficits of immigrants. On the other hand, research on multiculturalism and related issues also show a policy of cultural pluralism through educational activities which include the rights of minorities and the positive effects of ethnic diversity.

2. Methodology

2.1. Case study

In order to accomplish the objectives, an ethnographic methodology was designed to reveal the responses through which the Faculty of Medical Sciences of the National University of Rosario attends to the needs arising from the arrival of migrants from Haiti. Since there are no previous studies, this is an exploratory research, and in particular a contextualized case study in its singularity, as is illustrated in the following sections.

2.1.1. Haiti, the issuing country

In terms of Hadjadj (2010, p.11), the first black republic has suffered considerable pressure from both within and without, which has made for a turbulent history. Ostracized by France and the United States, which wouldn't accept its emancipation, Haiti has faced tyrannical regimes founded upon the exclusion of the people, held in a state of utter destitution.

If this outlook was bleak, there was still a worse one to come. On January 12, 2010, the capital of Haiti, Port au Prince, suffered a fatal earthquake. As Oriol argues (2010), before the earthquake Haiti was considered to be the poorest country in the Northern hemisphere; now it sees itself as the unluckiest one, perhaps even cursed. Roc adds (2010, p.19): With unemployment running at 90%, Haiti's economy was already in the red long before the earthquake.

Twenty years of populism -adds the author- had polarized Haitian society, accelerating a brain drain that began under the François Duvalier regime. "Over 83% of the best qualified workforce produced in Haiti ends up leaving the country to live abroad," says the World Bank (cit. by Roc, 2010, p.19). Following the 12 January earthquake, this hemorrhaging out of the country has already increased and could get worse if concrete and urgent action is not taken very soon, she concludes.

After examining the critical background of the emigrants, we will revise the host society in successive stages: the country-Argentina-, city-Rosario- its university and the Faculty of Medical Sciences.

2.1.2. Argentina, the host country

In Argentina, the current Migration Law No. 25.871 of 2004, was drawn up after the restoration of democracy in 1983. The severe economic and political crisis of 2001 caused a significant movement of emigration by the

influx of migrants from neighboring countries especially affected also by the processes of social exclusion. This double phenomenon began to generate more sensitive attitudes on migration, which were a change in focus from that of the European migration in the late nineteenth century. This policy was initiated at the signing of the Declaration of Quito, a document which resulted from the "First South American Migration Civil Society" (Ecuador, August 2002), in order to strengthen the rights of migrants, refugees, displaced persons and their families.

2.1.3. The host Institution

The National University of Rosario -created as such in 1968- consists of twelve faculties and three pre-university schools. It offers 102 undergraduate degrees and 169 graduate degrees. It has 76.006 national students, and 1,100 international ones. The community also comprises 6,500 teachers, 2,503 non-academic staff and 2,809 researchers.

The University participates in the Program for Promotion of Argentina University, organized by the Ministry of Education of the Nation. One of the most visible aspects is the increased presence of foreign students in the universities, in addition to the classic student exchange programs.

The Faculty of Medical Sciences of the National University of Rosario comprises three grade schools: Medicine, Nursing and Speech Therapy. It also offers four doctorates, two Masters and seven specializations. Its facilities include primary care, emergency units, hospitals and therapeutic schools. It has a high quality technical support thanks to cooperation agreements with public and private institutions.

In 2011, the Faculty of Medical Sciences had 1,491 teachers, 226 administrative staff and 457 researchers. Of the 12,846 students of the Faculty in 2012, 108 are Haitian, out of a total of 157 in the whole university. In turn, these 108 Haitians form one of the largest groups in a total of 979 foreign students in the health area, behind Paraguayans (373) and Brazilians (270). It is also interesting to note that the health area has the highest number of foreign students among the 1,458 reported across the university, followed by socio-economics (173), humanities and arts (161) technology (128) and agriculture (17).

2.2. *Data collection techniques*

In order to investigate the responses to the Haitians (knowledge, attitudes and experiences) given by the members of the academic community and the institution as a whole, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Argentine and Haitian students, faculty, and institutional representatives of the Faculty. Data collection took place during the second half of September 2013 and includes interviews with seven Argentinean students at different levels of the undergraduate degree, a member of the Faculty, a Haitian student in 2nd year as well as two institutional representatives: Secretary of Student Affairs and Student Manager (convenience sampling-not statistical).

In addition to these interviews, personal communications and primary sources collected and compiled by the research group along the work with Haitians in Rosario since 2008 were systematized. Institutional documents and journals were also consulted.

3. Results

In this section, we present the results of the field work grouped in thematic sections as appears from the analysis of the empirical data.

3.1. *Daily life*

Haitians in Rosario live in groups in student hostels. In the Faculty, they also interact primarily with students of the same nationality. They experience many difficulties in terms of entering the labor market. When they do enter, they work as waiters or salespeople in major commercial centers of the city.

3.2. *About the Faculty*

To be registered as a student, foreigners must pass four exams for the following secondary school subjects related to local culture: Argentine History, Ethics and Citizenship, Geography and Language and Literature. The exams are administered orally and written in one of the high schools assigned to the University. Since 2010, the school staff prepared a photocopied compilation of manuals with the topics of history and geography exams. In interviews with the principal, we were informed about the repeated failure of Haitian students and the despair that these results left on the teachers. Until they pass these tests, Haitians begin to attend classes as auditors.

The Faculty implements a mandatory course on University Inclusion of three modules: Human Rights, Health Systems and University Citizenship. It lasts three months and it is necessary to have completed the accreditation after final examinations to yield material freshmen. The classroom work is always in small groups and its assessment is continuous. Each module has booklets available online. This way of working helps foreign applicants but, as noted by its contents, does not provide specific information to their needs.

3.3. *Interaction between the actors of the academic community*

The interviews yielded interesting clues about the ways of communication between the different actors of the Faculty. Due to space restrictions, only a selection of data collected is transcribed. The answers reveal the mixture of attitudes, knowledge and skills, as we mentioned in the conceptual section. Thus, the students' expressions show clearly attitudinal considerations, as seen in the following example: *Among Argentine students, there is everything ... Those who do not talk to the Haitians studying here, and feel angry because they are studying here, "taking up" room of Argentinean students, and those who make every effort to make the Haitians feel like one of them.*

Argentinean students expressed that teachers do not tend to provide any special treatment to foreign students. The teacher believes that it is the individual responsibility of foreign students to strive to understand and communicate effectively. In the words of one student: *There's everything... Some teachers believe that Haitians come to Argentina just to get the university degree, and then go back, so the professors ignore them. There are also teachers who, consider them just as national students (how it should be), and there are those professors that have them take especially complicated exams... . It's varied.*

However, the Haitian student says that there are some teachers and students who strive to help them understand in class.

A professor argues that teaching staff generally lack resources to work with non-Spanish speaking students. He considers it essential that foreign students who speak another language learn the local language before starting the courses. As stated by the student: *"Teachers in general do not like the idea that they come to study in our free university because they argue that it is maintained by us, the Argentineans, who live here and pay taxes, while the Haitians come to study here without having to pay, and some return to their countries or if they remain here, they are "occupying the space" of an Argentine student, which is generally frowned upon. Faculty staff believes the Haitians should have fewer points for example in entering a residence, such as it is with the students of private schools."*

3.4. *Institutional Strategies*

Institutional representatives referred to the absence, both at the University and the Faculty levels, of institutional programs for the reception and integration of foreign students. Since 2012, there is a program for teaching Spanish to foreign students, but it is not organized by the Faculty but by a political group, the National Reform Movement (MNR).

The Department of International Relations at the University presented in August 2012 a System of International Student Admission "ERI 2.0" developed by the National University of Cordoba. It is a web tool for admission, registration, and monitoring international students who will articulate academic activities at the National University of Rosario. It is still in process. Haitians do not arrive as part of exchange programs and scholarships, but they are financed wholly or partially by their families.

3.5. Health Care

The National University of Rosario has a Health Care Center "April 7th" for uninsured students. At the same time, it functions as a linkage of students with the community for training and research. With regard to the difficulties expressed by teachers of medicine to communicate with Haitian students, the Health Care is thought about as a way of intervention that promotes the communicative competence of foreign students.

3.6. Aid to the earthquake

The earthquake that struck the capital of Haiti, Port-au-Prince, on January 12, 2010 left thousands of victims and a devastated territory. According to Telam news, at least 60 young Haitians studied at the time in the city of Rosario and lived uncertain days in not being able to communicate with their families. In this tragedy, the Faculty of Medical Sciences, the Local and Provincial Governments' Health Departments formed a Committee of Solidarity with the Haitian people to help organize support for the victims. About 60 professionals, including physicians, nurses, rescue workers and translators, met at the building of the Faculty. The group also worked on professional psychological support for Haitian students living in the city through the Department of Health and Labour. Moreover, a list of volunteers to travel to Haiti was made on demand by the White Helmets, who coordinated the action of the humanitarian mission.

During February 22nd, 23rd and 24th, 2010, the Natural Disasters Contingency Committee of the Faculty of Medical Sciences organized a solidarity festival called "All for Haiti" on the steps of its building. Thanks to the performance of local musicians, a big audience contributed with donations. Students from the Institute of Higher Education N° 28 "Olga Cossettini" especially supported the initiative, since the institution dictates the only French teacher Training College in the city, in which four Haitian students were enrolled at that time.

4. Conclusions

The study showed a number of results that can be read through the theoretical categories mentioned at the beginning of the article. In this sense, the analysis of intercultural communicative competence according to Fantini's definition (2010) shows in the case under study an emphasis on effective communication rather than on appropriate communication. That is, there is a greater concern given to understand and be understood for the purposes of academic performance. The feature of appropriateness, how one is perceived, what the host does about it, is neglected, as is the case with the foreign student who is forced to make the effort to assimilate into the society. This view is conditioned by the idea that immigrants come to snatch social places, as it has circulated throughout the country's history.

With regard to intercultural speaker's features mentioned at the beginning, there is scarce knowledge of the identities and cultures of the people with whom the locals interact with. Future studies should investigate the knowledge the Argentines have about the suffering of the Haitian people. Little information about it could justify the lack of interest in engaging more host contact with them. However, the tragedy of the 2010 earthquake awakened a great response of solidarity. Out of a moderate acceptance and reception, an unconditional help emerged, even when current respondents do not know about the charity actions taken by the Faculty three years ago.

Even if the organization of an aid campaign for Haiti in a critical situation as the 2010 earthquake is remarkable, Oriol (2010) warns: *We [the Haitians] have long been subject to incessant victimization by our leaders, but also by many Haitian and foreign intellectuals... In our very fragile institutional context, the world's kindness and generosity may undermine our capacity to look after ourselves. We must banish victimhood and rediscover our self-esteem. An eternal victim does not see himself as master of his own destiny* (p.17-8).

The promotion of intercultural communicative competence of students, faculty and staff of the national university should be free of paternalism to contribute to the construction of the Haitians' destiny. According to Hadjadj (2010, p.11), to escape from slavery means overcoming one's negative self-image and finding the light of true liberation inside oneself, not by repeating patterns of dominance inherited from the past. And the author

concludes: "It is in these conditions of political and psychological violence that Haitian liberty served its apprenticeship." (Hadjadj, 2010, p.12). This traumatic learning would explain the inbreeding that members of the academic community note about these students. In this tragic context we ask, is it not worth deploying a full intercultural communicative competence?

That answer is affirmative if we consider other actions taken by the Faculty to contribute to the integration of Haitians: the implementation of an introductory course to college life in general and to medical career in particular, health care available for everybody and an emerging monitoring system for international students. To sum up, the empirical data indicate the existence of an institutional sensitivity defined as the promotion of intercultural speakers between the actors involved. Besides the practical purposes of helping sociocultural inclusion of Haitians, these results are beneficial for the development of the host community towards cultural pluralism.

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