ENHANCING TEACHERS' INTERCULTURAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT COMPETENCES THROUGH DIGITAL GAME-BASED LEARNING: A PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

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Summary

With the recent immigration flows, diversity has become a structural characteristic of European societies. The growing proportion of students with a migrant background implies a series of challenges for the education systems in most member states: diversity leads to educational disparities between dominant cultural groups and immigrant students; also, discrimination and intercultural conflicts have become significant phenomena at school. Teacher education programs do not seem to adequately address those challenges. Hence, there is a growing need to prepare educators to effectively deal with diversity and to build bridges towards migrant communities. In the context of the ACCORD project (Erasmus+ programme), this paper proposes a pedagogical framework aiming to prepare teachers to take an active stand against intercultural conflicts. Through an open online course using scenario-based learning and game-based learning, teachers will develop competences in terms of intercultural literacy, inclusive education and conflict management. A preliminary study, based on national focus groups conducted in five European countries, allowed for confronting the pedagogical framework to teachers' views and practices. Results allowed for validating and refining the ACCORD competence areas, pedagogical approaches and digital tools.

Introduction

Europe has recently experienced increased population flows, and immigration now constitutes the main factor of demographic growth (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017). Consequently, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity has become a structural characteristic of European societies (European Commission, 2017). In this context, the education sector faces a growing proportion of students with a migration background. This implies a series of challenges at the level of the classroom, the school, and the whole education system. First, diversity leads to educational disparities between dominant cultural groups and immigrant students (Bishop, 2010). Furthermore, intolerance, discrimination and intercultural conflicts increase in schools; as a result, migrant students sometimes experience feelings of isolation or prejudice (Janta & Harte, 2016). Finally, some teachers lean towards developing negative attitudes towards students with diverse cultural backgrounds (Agirdag, Loobuyck, & van Houtte, 2012). Teacher education programs do not seem to adequately address those challenges (Katsarova, 2016). Hence, there is a growing need to prepare educators to effectively deal with diversity and to build bridges towards migrant communities. Indeed, when adequately

addressed, diversity constitutes a substantial opportunity for education: it may enhance rich learning processes by promoting intercultural interaction and peer-learning (European Commission, 2017).

In the context of the ACCORD project, this paper presents a pedagogical framework aiming to prepare teachers to take an active stand against intercultural conflicts. Through an open online course using Scenario-Based Learning (SBL) and Game-Based Learning (GBL), teachers will develop competences in terms of intercultural literacy, inclusive education and conflict management. A preliminary study, based on national focus groups conducted in five European countries, allowed for confronting the pedagogical framework to teachers' views and practices.

ACCORD Pedagogical framework

The ACCORD project targets secondary school teachers. Indeed, students from secondary education tend to show a prominent and developed cultural personality, as well as conflictive attitudes towards teachers in comparison to primary classrooms (Oliver, 2016). The following subsections synthesise the competence areas, pedagogical approaches and digital tools selected for developing teachers' intercultural conflict management competences.

Competence areas

On the basis of relevant literature, we have identified three different competence areas, namely intercultural literacy, conflict management and inclusive education. Below we elaborate on each of those areas.

Intercultural literacy

This first area refers to the upstream competences required by teachers for understanding and addressing culturally diverse educational environments. Numerous terms and theories address intercultural abilities; we selected the concept of intercultural literacy, which is widely used in the field of education. It defines the "ability to interpret documents and artefacts from a range of cultural contexts, as well as to effectively communicate messages and interact constructively with interlocutors across different cultural contexts" (Dudeney, Hockly, & Pegrum, 2014). Heyward (2002) highlights the multidimensional aspect of the concept: "understandings, competencies, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation and identities which enable successful participation in cross-cultural setting" (p.10). By focusing on intercultural literacy, we aim to help teachers to better understand the world and its cultures, as well as to develop their ability to function and effectively interact in culturally diverse classroom contexts.

Inclusive education

It refers to the competences needed by teachers for applying methodologies oriented to an inclusive school, featured by intercultural interaction and positive approach towards conflicts. Inclusive education can be defined as "the inclusion and teaching of all children in formal or non-formal learning environments without regard to gender, physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, cultural, religious, or other characteristics" (UNESCO, 2015). When

inclusive in nature, education has the potential to prevent conflicts, contribute to peace by reducing inequalities, and promoting tolerance (Kotite, 2012). In ACCORD, we relate inclusive education to several interconnected educational practices for learning how to live together (UNESCO, 2006), e.g., peace education, intercultural education, as well as proactive restorative practices, which prevent the emergence of conflicts through affective communication, social connection and community-building (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016).

Conflict management

This last area refers to the competences required for peacefully resolving conflicts when they occur. Conflict management practices include a wide range of strategies, such as communication, problem solving, dealing with emotion, understanding positions (Brett, 2001), as well as negotiation and mediation (Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992). As applied to education, the challenge for teachers is to channel conflicts into constructive responses (Kotite, 2012). In ACCORD, we consider conflicts as opportunities for stimulating relations and moving towards group cohesion.

Intercultural conflicts define the implicit or explicit emotional struggle or frustration between individuals from different cultures over perceived incompatible morals, values, norms, face concerns, goals, scarce resources, processes, and/or outcomes in a communication situation (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). In order to help teachers to deal with such situations, the ACCORD training explores the different aspects and levels of intercultural clashes, as well as their impacts on the involved parts and on the overall classroom dynamics.

Pedagogical approaches

As explained below, ACCORD adopts two main pedagogical approaches, i.e., SBL and GBL.

Scenario-based learning

SBL is part of the situated learning approach (Lave & Wenger, 1991) embedded in the constructivist learning paradigm (Duffy & Jonnasen, 1991). Situated learning provides meaningful learning experiences by engaging students in authentic learning environments based on real world experiences (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). In such contexts, knowledge can be transformed into action competences. Erol, Jäger, Hold, Ott, Wilfried, and Sihna (2016) define SBL as the use of scenarios to support active learning. To the authors, scenarios constitute a starting point for students to immerse in a real-world problem and in a subsequent solution finding process. SBL has proved to support reflective practices in teachers' professional development (Naidu, Menon, Gunawardena, Lekamge, & Karunanayaka, 2005). Furthermore, its application to digital environments enables learners to find solutions to real-world problems (Mery & Blakiston, 2010). In the context of ACCORD, we design scenarios depicting intercultural classroom conflicts, which teachers will be able to solve by testing different dialogue patterns.

Game-based learning

Various authors (e.g. McClarty et al., 2012; Rapeepisarn, Wong, Fung, & Khine, 2008) have demonstrated the potential of digital games for educational purposes. They promote learner-centred methodologies, by offering a learning path which adjusts to individuals' pace and performance: following a scaffolding system, games allow for personalized learning processes which adapt to different profiles, learning styles and level of skills (Gee, 2003). In the context of ACCORD, such self-paced learning processes are particularly suited for teachers, given their professional and time constraints.

In addition, digital games are interactive objects which react and give feedback; hence, they provide players with a real sense of agency over their actions (Gee, 2005). They also create meaningful learning experiences by simulating highly interactive scenarios where learners face real-world problems (Ulicsak & Williamson, 2011). This interactive quality seems adapted for the ACCORD training, which aims to reflect real-life intercultural conflict scenarios.

Games constitute virtual worlds featured by freedom and exploration (Gee, 2009): they allow for trying out different roles and identities. They present risk-free environments where learners can try out various options without suffering the consequences of failure in real life (Perrotta et al., 2013). Rather, failures are considered positive in games, as they enable to understand new patterns and progress towards a goal. In this context, failure naturally shapes the learning experience (McClarty et al., 2012). In the context of ACCORD, this quality would allow teachers for experiencing intercultural conflicts from different points of view, in safe and controlled settings.

Online environment and digital tools

The ACCORD training programme is supported by an innovative digital platform. This will allow for reaching a large number of teachers, making the training available as a freely accessible tool, as well as rebating implementation costs. First, we design, implement and validate a MOOC course which includes a series of Open Educational Resources (OERs).

In addition, we use ENACT (www.enactgame.eu), a game platform which allows for developing skills through a role-play simulation using autonomous agents as virtual interlocutors (3D bots). An intelligent tutor provides a reliable analysis of players' intercultural conflict resolution competences. The game is organized into different scenarios, each one independent from the others, in which users play a different character and negotiate with various virtual agents. The conflict resolution model is based on the five styles of handling conflict, i.e., integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). Figure 1 shows some interface characteristics of the game.
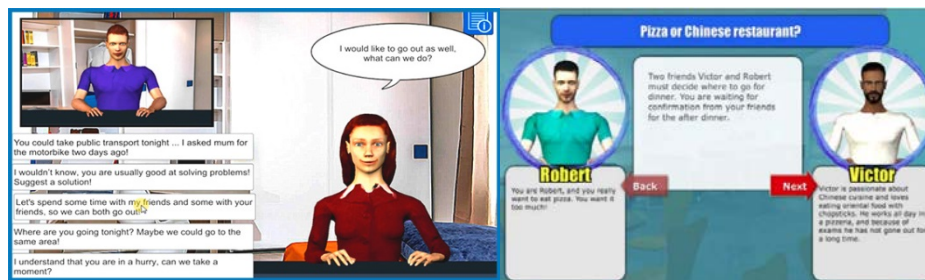
Figure 1. Screenshots of the ENACT game

Methodology

Following a qualitative approach, we conducted focus groups in five European countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy and Spain), in order to collect secondary school teachers' perspectives and feedback on the ACCORD pedagogical framework (i.e., competence areas, pedagogical approaches and digital tools). Participants were carefully recruited, so to obtain a heterogeneous group of teachers from different levels and disciplines. In order to stimulate active discussion among participants and collect in-depth information, each focus group gathered a small number of people (between 5 and 12). In total, 69 secondary school teachers participated.

Following common guidelines, facilitators introduced participants to the ACCORD consortium, context, objectives, activities and pedagogical framework. Furthermore, they addressed the status of intercultural education at both European and local levels. Afterwards, participants were shown examples of typical intercultural classroom conflict scenarios, and exchanged their points of views. Finally, teachers expressed their perceptions on the ACCORD pedagogical framework, as well as their training needs in terms of inclusive education and intercultural conflict management.

Findings

A systematic analysis of the focus group results across the different countries allowed for confronting the pedagogical framework to teachers' views and practices, as described below.

Teachers' perspectives on competence areas

Teachers acknowledged the relevance of the ACCORD competence areas. Indeed, they generally feel unprepared to deal with intercultural concerns, to apply training methodologies which challenge discrimination and racism, as well as to solve related classroom conflicts.

In terms of intercultural literacy, teachers highlighted the importance of understanding the key-elements which characterise the cultures of their students (e.g., codes of conduct and manners, value systems and beliefs, religions and communicative conventions). Regarding inclusive education, teachers need to get familiar with practical strategies for creating a democratic classroom culture, e.g., participatory approaches involving students in decision-making and cross-cultural collaborative learning activities. As for conflict management, teachers find it critical to learn about the factors that contribute to the development of classroom conflicts (e.g.,

stereotypes and prejudices which create discrimination among students), as well as the steps and strategies for solving them (e.g., discussion circles for promoting students' expression, responsibility and reparation in case of damages).

Teachers' perspectives on pedagogical approaches

SBL was considered to be a relevant and innovative approach for teachers. To them, real-life scenarios constitute a powerful tool for reflecting on their teaching practices and sharing their insecurities in terms of intercultural conflicts. They also argued that scenarios allow for embodying theoretical concepts into real situations. Teachers highlighted the need to address more examples of real-life conflict situations, to share their own scenarios, and to address potential solutions for solving them.

The GBL approach was highly valued across the different countries: some teachers stated that "the use of games allows for a better understanding of intercultural concepts in a safe simulation application"; another teacher compared the GBL strategy to "a gym where to get hands-on experience on the dynamics of intercultural conflict".

Besides SBL and GBL approaches, teachers expressed their need for collaboration with other educators. Indeed, they find it critical to debate and discuss around intercultural conflicts, as well as to share related experiences and good practices (e.g., testimonies). Collaboration would allow them for appraising teaching practices across Europe, and critically evaluating theirs. As expressed by a teacher, "we should create a team of teachers reflecting around intercultural topics, an online space where everyone can share their experiences and, most importantly, without being afraid of sharing missteps and mistakes". Furthermore, teachers highlighted the importance of accessing practical learning resources (e.g., protocols related to mediation, negotiation and group management; lesson plans for inclusive educational practices; examples of classroom activities like role-plays and creative writing), and hands-on activities, so to become confident when facing classroom conflict situations.

Teachers' perspectives on the online environment and digital tools

With regards to digital tools, the MOOC was seen as a flexible solution which matches teachers' time constraints. Indeed, they expressed their need to set up their own pedagogical objectives, self-manage their learning time, as well as decide on the study location and freely access OERs. To teachers, the MOOC should also allow them for uploading and sharing their own materials and cases within the project community. As for the ENACT game platform, it was perceived by teachers as a "powerful tool to make real-life experiences visual, thanks to the use of e-characters".

Conclusions

This paper sets a pedagogical framework for enhancing teachers' competences in terms of intercultural conflict management in the context of inclusive education. On the basis of relevant literature, we identified competence areas, pedagogical approaches and digital tools. We

confronted this framework to teachers' perspectives and practices, in the context of national focus groups conducted in five European countries. Results allowed for validating and refining the ACCORD competence areas, pedagogical approaches and digital tools.

The ACCORD pedagogical framework is composed of three competence areas, namely intercultural literacy, inclusive pedagogical approaches and conflict management. It is supported by two main pedagogical approaches (SBL and GBL) and mediated by a MOOC and the ENACT game platform.

This pedagogical framework will guide the design of the ACCORD training content, activities and digital tools. As future steps, this paper constitutes a solid basis for the elaboration of a complete competence model in the field of intercultural conflict management, as applied to today education contexts.

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