**The Intercultural Identity**

The term ‘intercultural identity’ imbeds the mutual and the strong influence that exist between culture, language, and communication and interaction, especially in a modern world characterized by technology and globalization.

The concept of identity can be divided into two main components, based on the work of the social psychologist Mead (1934), a social component or social identity, and a personal component or personal identity (Spreckels & Kotthoff, 2007). The social identity, called also cultural identity is defined as “ that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership”  (Tajfel, 1982 cited in Spreckels & Kotthoff, 2007 p. 415).

Individuals become members of certain social groups through the process of ‘socialization’ (Byram, 1997). They understand their relations with the surrounding world, and how these relations change over time and space (Norton, 2000); and they keep continuously negotiating their beliefs, behaviours and meanings for a better understanding of the future (Byram,1997). Hence, sociocultural approaches view social / cultural identity as dynamic and continuously changing since individuals are constantly getting involved in new experiences and relations which affect their view of the self and how they relate to others (Ricento, 2005). Then, « without the ‘they’ no ‘we’ can exist » (Spreckels & Kotthoff, 2007 p.419). That is to say, by being part of communities of practice, members engage in action verbally and/or non-verbally through which they negotiate their identities and transform them through a series of changes (Wenger,1998 cited in Ryan,2009).

Norton (1997) explained further the notion of cultural identity stating that it is

 - complex, contradictory and multifaceted;

* identity is seen as dynamic across time and place ;
* identity constructs and is constructed by language ;
* the construction of identity must be understood with respect to larger social processes, marked by coercive or collaborative relations of power.

(cited in Leung and Lee, 2006 p.29)

Norton (1997) did not only manifest the complex and the dynamic nature of cultural identity, but also emphasized the strong mutual influence of identity and language. Thus, “an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner’s own identity” (Norton, 2000 p.11). In other words, the study of the target language should be linked to the speakers and their social relationships, because learner’s identity both influence his motivation to learn the target language (TL) and is influenced by the TL cultural context. Consequently, interactants bring their identities to the communicative process, and negotiate them through interaction using language. Therefore, mutual interaction with other members of the community would help participants bring changes in their identities.

As opposed to the ancient generations whose identity construction is related to the direct context in which they were born, nowadays, individuals have increasing possibilities and choices that, if deeply considered, would make them highly insecure and cause identity crisis and inconsistency (Spreckels & Kotthoff, 2007). Within this vein, Giddens (1991 cited in Spreckels and Kotthoff, 2007 p.417) stated that “modernity confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices and […] at the same time offers little help as to which options should be selected”. The reason behind this identity inconsistency is the so-called the “ Dissolution of guarantees of coherency” (Spreckels & Kotthoff, 2007 p.417) represented in the family, the nation, religion, etc. which have been losing throughout time stability and their functioning as reference.

Empirical research showed that youth are less and less identifying themselves with particular identities, a situation that is described differently by various researchers referring to it as  ‘market place of identities’ (Eckert, 2000),   ‘surfing between various experiential worlds’ (Baacke,1987), and ‘ patch work identities’(Elkind, 1990). The main characteristic of such identity is that it is formulated out of different identities which cannot be unified into an integrated unit, although individuals possessing such kind of identity are successful in everyday life (Spreckels & Kotthoff, 2007).

In spite the fact that modern identities are proved to be patchwork constructions due to globalization and the highly developed communication means, these identities need stability, coherence with their respective cultures to gain assertion and security (Sparckels & Kotthoff, 2007). Thus, the development of intercultural identity may challenge the concept of national identity but cannot replace it (Byram, 2008). This idea echoed Kramsch’s concept of ‘the third place’ or ‘the third space’. The latter refers to “an intermediate zone where mediated ways of behaving and modes of thinking are identified and individual identities are negotiated and transformed, usually partially” (Feng, 2009 p.88). In other words, it is a space where intercultural interaction takes place, and by means of which change emerges.

Schools are institutions that play a major role in individuals’ acquisition of the language, as well as the transmission of culture and the construction of identities. They are “politically mandated to transmit the basic elements of citizenship and national identity, in order to ensure the continuity and endurance of the political community” (Scherr, 2007 p.303). This takes place through providing historical and political information of themselves as citizens, and making them aware of their duties towards their nation. Hence, schools represent spaces where learners acquire much of their cultural background, and practice it while interacting with others (learners and / or teachers).

Within the same vein, Byram (1997) gave examples of educational systems that aim at raising learners’ cultural awareness without threatening their own national identity, but instead strive to reinforce it (e.g. the European union, Canada) through providing learners with knowledge related to their mother culture/national culture together with techniques and methods of analyzing other cultures.