LEARNING CULTURES AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES WITH DIGITAL TOOLS

Nataliia Saienko

D.Sc., Professor, Kharkiv National Automobile and Highway University, Ukraine

e-mail: saienkonv@ukr.net, orcid.org/0000-0001-7953-3747

Summary

The main difficulties faced by newcomers to various countries as well as language learners who want to expand their international ties, are the lack of knowledge of the language and culture of a host country. However, today cultural components in modern foreign language courses are often represented in a chaotic and scant manner that contributes to the poor adaptation of some newcomers to cultural values of other countries. With all the diversity of languages and cultures the English language is considered the global language of communication, interaction, teaching, learning, and research. In the paper we describe an approach to selection of the elements of culture to be included in the programmes for learning English, analyze the potential of using the mother tongue in teaching a foreign language and offer a technology of learning languages and cultures with the use of such a modern digital tool as audiovisiual translation. As an alternative, we use a parallel translation into the learner's mother tongue that appears to be an effective way to ensure the comprehensibility of the input. The method of voiced parallel translation, where students receive a bilingual script, as well as video and audio recordings of new words and texts for self-study outside of the classroom is described. This approach can be seen as a component of adaptive learning, which has a great potential for autonomy and personalization in language training.

Key words: studying English, culture-related online course, audiovisual translation.

1. Introduction

In the past few years, the topic of migration to Europe and other developed regions of the world has become especially acute on the background of the war in Ukraine, the refugee crisis, the difficulties of adaption of newcomers to sociocultural conditions of a host country. In addition, in the context of globalization, more and more people are entering into intercultural relations.

In scientific debates on migration and international cooperation, a central place is often taken by cultural differences, which often become the cause of various conflict situations. As a rule, the attention is focused on finding the ways to overcome obstacles that hinder acculturation as a process of mutual influence of cultures, the perception of the other people's culture.

Berry (1997) pointed out four main forms of acculturation: 1) assimilation occurs when individuals adopt the cultural norms of a dominant or host culture; 2) separation is a rejection by an individual or a social group of another culture in favour of preserving their culture of origin; 3) integration occurs when individuals are able to adopt the cultural norms of the dominant or host culture while maintaining their culture of origin, it is an identification with both the old and the new culture that leads to, and is often synonymous with biculturalism; 4) marginalization occurs when individuals reject both their culture of origin and the dominant host culture.

Integration may be considered the most desirable result of acculturation and, hence, adaptation. In its broadest form, it can be regarded as the process of "immersion" of an individual or an ethnic group into a new culture, the gradual mastering of its norms, values, and patterns of behaviour. It begins for immigrants with the study of a foreign language – either of the country in which they arrive, or English, which has become a symbol of the globalized world.

The relationship between language and culture has become an axiom in the field of teaching foreign languages. In the global world it is already impossible to study culture of one country, in a multicultural society one must be ready to communicate with representatives of different cultures. And learning a foreign language can become a powerful practical tool of acculturation, though under the conditions that the process of learning cultures and languages is properly organized.

2. An approach to development of sociocultural competence

We believe that a carefully designed, culture-related educational programme designated for HEI students as well as immigrants, is required. Such a programme could guarantee a certain degree of universality of cultural knowledge and values, become a kind of a basic fund of objects and concepts that an "educated person" should acquire.

According to Hobsbawm (2013), it is extremely unlikely that in the 21st century the names of Beethoven, Picasso and Mona Lisa have disappeared from the list of generally available facts. Of course, this basic fund of "knowledge" will no longer be as regional as it was fifty years ago. Traveling to Machu Picchu, Angkor Wat, Isfahan and the South Indian palace cities will become the same part of education as trips to Venice and Florence.

However, today the cultural component in modern foreign language courses is not completely clear and very fragmented. Such courses certainly fulfill their function of forming the communicative competence of university students and other categories of learners, they teach grammar, vocabulary, form skills in four types of speech activity – speaking, reading, listening, and writing, but the cultural component is represented in them haphazardly and chaotically. Perhaps, this is to a certain extent the reason of poor adaptation of some immigrants to European values, as well as the reason of low erudition, poor worldview and morality of university students.

Communicative competence is known to include three components: linguistic competence, i.e. phonetic, lexical, grammar and spelling knowledge and corresponding skills; b) language competence, namely, skills in speaking, reading, listening comprehension and writing at the receptive and productive levels; c) sociocultural or cross-cultural competence, that is, the ability to interact with representatives of other cultures. Combination of these three components allows people to organize their activity adequately to the situation, and by means of the foreign language to solve the problems of communication and to reach mutual understanding between representatives of various cultures in various spheres of activity.

There is almost a complete coincidence of opinions among the foreign language methodologists on how to develop the first two components of communicative competence. Worldwide there is a great variety of text-books based on commonly acknowledged modern principles of teaching languages which cope more or less successfully with the task of forming these two components of communicative competence. But the issue of what should be considered sociocultural or cross-cultural competence and what this component should include remains open and is still being widely discussed all over the world, and so far various points of view at defining the content of sociocultural competence do not give the solution of the problem which could satisfy all.

Everybody understands that it is impossible to embrace the whole culture, but it is possible and necessary to single out a number of components, which will constitute the compulsory cultural basis for all learners.

To specify cultural components to be taught in a foreign language we should decide in the first place what the concept of "culture" means to us.

Despite multiple attempts and continuous efforts to define the term "culture," researchers have not yet come up with a single agreed-upon definition *(Tang, 2006),* because culture is a "very broad concept embracing all aspects of human life" *(Seelye, 1993, p. 15).*

It is clear that culture as a complex and multi-faceted concept can hardly be assimilated by students to the fullest extent, so a sound selection of cultural elements that reflect the culture in its entire structural completeness is needed.

It seems appropriate to give here an interesting argument by Nietzsche (2004) about the macrocosm and microcosm of culture. The man creates a building of culture within himself, in which different forces and directions act. But such a building within one particular person should be similar to the structure of culture in all historical epochs. Over the first 30 years, the person learns a course at which the mankind has worked, perhaps, for thirty thousand years. Higher education assumes assimilation of numerous spheres and types of culture as a whole, and the method of studying culture can be considered as "climbing the summit". Dozens of cultural spheres can be distinguished: seven wonders of the world, Egyptian painting, Sumerian mythology, the Babylonian epic, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Yoga, Christianity, Islam, Greek sculpture, architecture, drama, philosophy, European painting, music, science and technology, Russian icon painting and literature, etc.

It is here that we are challenged with the most difficult task of determining the content of cultural training in foreign languages in the light of humanistic traditions – to select from a large number of "summits" those that students can actually climb, at first, with the help of the teacher, and then they will continue climbing by their own.

To determine the elements of culture, we found it expedient to use a well-established presentation of human culture in the form of "three-dimensional space of culture" which is characterized by three subsystems: spiritual culture, social culture, technological culture *(White & Carneiro, 1949).*

Then we specified the structure of these subsystems and developed a list of topics including not only traditionally accepted sections of culture, but also those which in recent decades were associated with mass culture. As a result, this list of topics contained a significant volume of cultural knowledge, which could be taught to students in a foreign language.

In most cases technological culture is correlated with knowledge about: science as an area of human activity aimed at developing and systematizing the objective knowledge of reality; technology as the application of scientific knowledge to solve practical problems; spiritual culture includes such areas as fine arts, history, literature, music, religion, etc. We associate social culture in the first place with the sphere of communication, in which we distinguish every-day and cross-cultural communication as communication between representatives of various cultures.

To teach culture in all its variety we developed a special course, aimed at familiarizing the learners with the most important cultural achievements, from the primitive times to the present day, finding out some regularities of the world cultural process, the main stages of the cultural development of the human society, helping the learners to join the cultural treasury of the mankind.

In addition to mastering the material side of culture (fine arts, music, painting, literature, technological achievements), there is even more important aspect – spiritual culture. All the

world's disasters arise from the lack of morality and spirituality, which are the most difficult to form in young people – hence terrorism, violence, wars, crimes.

This re-conceptualized approach to culture shifted the focus of teaching culture to a study of underlying values, attitudes, and beliefs, rather than simply learning cultural products and practices. As pointed out by Morain (1997), second language (L2) learners experience little difficulty with understanding L2 cultural products and practices, however, they have trouble identifying and understanding cultural perspectives. As the author claims, the challenge with cultural perspectives lies in the fact that values, beliefs, and attitudes are intangible, and therefore cannot be easily introduced by a teacher. Textbooks also rarely contain any information on values, attitudes, and beliefs in L2 culture, making the teacher's task even more challenging.

3. Strengthening cultural adaptability via digital tools

One of the outcomes of our research was a developed culture-related digital course for teaching and learning English with the use of audiovisual translation. The course comprised thirty units that supported the formation of competences in various cultural spheres: history, politics, arts, cinema, music, religions, education, science, traditions and customs, etc., and was designed on the basis of a bilingual approach.

Attempts to justify the advantages of bilingualism in foreign language learning, that is, the use of a mother tongue (L1) along with the use of a foreign language (L2) in the process of foreign language training, have become quite popular in recent years.

The effectiveness of using only L2 in its teaching has not been confirmed by any research *(Kerr, 2016)*. And although the policy of using only the language being studied in the educational process remains in force in many educational institutions around the world, the arguments in favour of it are at best unproven and at worst harmful and untenable *(Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009)*.

Butzkamm & Caldwell (2009), consistent defenders of the use of the mother tongue in foreign language teaching, insist on a radical rethinking of the methodology of teaching foreign languages using the mother tongue. Researchers believe that L1 should be used regularly, systematically and where it is appropriate. Teachers should have at their disposal a set of proven methods, both monolingual and bilingual, and decide for themselves which of them will serve the achievement of educational goals in each specific case.

In recent years, there are more and more works devoted to the positive role of L1 in the process of L2 acquisition *(Krashen, 2004)*. As arguments in favour of using L1 in learning L2, researchers refer to the fact that language acquisition is possible only under the condition of comprehensible input information, without which full production of output information is impossible.

According to Krashen's "input hypothesis", students acquire language better when they understand language input that is not much higher than their current level. Krashen called this input level "i+1", where "I" meant the input language material and "+1" is the next level of language acquisition.

Psycholinguistic studies show that L1 and L2 are in a state of permanent interaction with each other, and the native language necessarily takes part in the formation and formulation of thoughts in a foreign language. This is called language coactivation *(Rankin, Grosso, & Reiterev, 2016)*. The parallel activation of the native language and the one being studied explains numerous facts of the influence of the two language systems on each other, and the transition from one language to another is called translingual learning.

Practice proves that an effective way to ensure input comprehensibility is parallel translation into the student's native language. Parallel translation is a translation placed on the same

page as a foreign language original, thanks to which the information in both languages is visually accessible at the same time.

One of the approaches to L2 learning is the use of parallel texts, where a foreign language text is placed parallel to the text in L1. In linguistics, it is called a bitext, and large arrays of parallel texts are called parallel corpora.

This approach, an example of which can be found on the YouTube platform (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCF9gPDPSDh0djwmvv8ZyU6A/), is being actively used by the teachers of the department of foreign languages at Kharkiv National Automobile and Highway University in distance learning and has proven its effectiveness.

We developed our own videos for mastering culture-related vocabulary and content. Students could work with the videos at a pace convenient for them, listen to them as many times as they needed in order to feel confident during the lesson. In class, students performed communicative tasks based on a self-studied material and were ready for a discussion on various problems of an applied and evaluative nature.

With this approach learners are able to listen to the videos as many times as they want, and in the pauses made by the recorded speaker, repeat words and phrases as many times as they need. When students adequately process the basic situation, they are ready to move away from it and use the knowledge gained to solve problem and creative tasks *(Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009)*. The more often a language element is repeated, the more it is fixed in the memory and linguistic experience of students. In the context of learning, consolidation is equivalent to practice.

One of the postulates of the theory of skill-building and modern cognitive-functional linguistics is that regardless of the method being used, learning a language requires considerable practice, diligence, and time. In other words, "... the amount of material you learn depends on the amount of your practice" *(Baddeley, 1986)*.

The training course was developed in accordance with the requirements of the Bologna Process and National Qualifications Framework and included open access to theoretical, practical and e-learning components. The course combined various modern types of educational activities such as discussions, round tables, practical work on joint projects, case studies, simulation games, team work etc. The curriculum for learning English was modernized due to including more culture-related elements into the educational process.

In our opinion, the biggest advantage of this approach is that students get used to self-directedness in their studies, are responsible for organizing their own learning, thus becoming completely autonomous and independent of external conditions. In modern literature, this is called adaptive learning, the popularity of which is growing in connection with the development of information and communication technologies. The purpose of adaptive technology is to teach students to acquire knowledge independently, to facilitate online learning that is becoming personalized according to the needs of each individual student. Personalized learning is at the core of educational programmes around the world and is one of the greatest educational challenges of the 21st century *(Trilling & Fadel, 2009)*.

4. Conclusions

This research proposed the following innovative elements: the integrated learning of a language and culture where culture was taken as the totality of thoroughly selected scientifically grounded cultural components vs chaotic representation of cultures in many resources for teaching languages; utilising the advanced learning technologies within a digital environment;

due to the online platform learners outside educational institutions were able to enhace their language proficiency in the wide cultural context.

The culture-related online course for learning English based on the proposed approach can be learnt not only by university students but by many other categories of learners due to its demanded and ever-lasting contents.

Culture-related events, both virtual and real, in the form of contests, intellectual games, quizzes, debates, round-tables, actions stimulating civic commitments among young people, artistic initiatives can be organized based on the content of the course. Modernized curricula including a more expanded sociocultural component can be used by teachers of foreign languages for the next generation of learners.

The proposed technology not only increases the level of language proficiency of university students, but, first and foremost, contributes to bringing up intellectually, culturally and multi-culturally developed citizens with deep awareness of ever-lasting values. The culture-related course can be used for unlimited time by unlimited number of foreign language learners due to its ever-lasting contents; modernized foreign language study curricula including wide cultural contexts can serve the purpose of improving cultural education of the following generations of students and immigrants who are interested in improving their foreign language and civic skills as well as adaptability to a new cultural environment.

References

1. Baddeley, A. (1986). Your memory. A user's guide. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

2. Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. Applied Psychology: An International Review, 46, pp. 5–34.

3. Butzkamm W., & Caldwell J.A.W. (2009). The bilingual reform: a paradigm shift in foreign language teaching. Tübingen: Narr.

4. Hobsbawm, E. (2013). The Broken Time, Culture and Society in the Twentieth Century. New York: Little, Brown.

5. Kerr, P. (2016). Questioning 'English-only' classrooms: own-language use in ELT. Hall, Graham, ed. The Routledge Handbook of English Language Teaching. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 513–526.

6. Krashen, S. (2004). Applying the comprehension hypothesis: some suggestions. International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching. Vol. 1. pp. 21–29.

7. Morain, G. (1997). A perspective on cultural perspectives. In M. H. Rosenbusch (Ed.), Bringing the standards into the classroom: A teacher's guide (2nd ed.). Ames: Iowa State University, 35–37.

8. Nietzsche, F. (2004). Human, All Too Human. Penguin Classics. Transl. Marion Faber. Penguin Books.

9. Rankin J., Grosso S., & Reiterev, S. (2016). Effect of L1 co-activation on the processing of L2 mopho-syntax in German-speaking learners of English. Proceedings of the 13th Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Conference. Somerville. MA. pp. 196–207.

10. Seelye, H. N. (1993). Teaching culture: Strategies for intercultural communication (3rd ed.). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

11. Shumenko, M. (2009). Cpetsifika «vhozhdeniya» migrantov v novuyu kulturu [Specifics of migrants' entering the new culture]. Gumanitarnyie i sotsialnyie nauki, 3, pp. 23–32.

12. Tang, Y. (2006). Beyond behavior: Goals of cultural learning in the second language classroom. The Modern Language Journal, 90 (1), pp. 86–99.

13. Trilling, B. & Fadel, C. (2009). 21st Century Skills. San Francisco: Wiley.

14. Turnbull, M., & Dailey-O'Cain, J. (2009). First language use in second and foreign language learning. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, pp. 182–186.

15. White, L. A., & Carneiro, R. K. (1949). The Science of Culture: A Study of Man and Civilization. New York: Grove Press.