

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Summary

The article focuses on applying intercultural awareness in English language teaching for university students. Teaching a foreign language cannot be separated from teaching about other cultures. The use of English as a tool for intercultural communication plays an important role in acquiring knowledge on other countries and their culture. In such aspect teaching English cannot be separated from teaching about other cultures. Effective ways of acquiring intercultural competence are solving practical problems, dealing with case studies and using authentic materials. Most case studies require students to answer open-ended questions or develop a solution to an open-ended problem with potential solutions. Good training can help understand intercultural differences in the areas like decision making, communication style, management style, leadership and meetings. The acquired skills will allow them to interact in an appropriate way when working with people who have different cultural backgrounds. The role of the teacher is to facilitate and monitor their work and possibly correct mistakes made by students. Effective communication requires more than mastering grammar and vocabulary of a language. It is the process that requires also knowledge of culture. Culture becomes an important part of the language teaching process. Having knowledge in intercultural competence is the key to successful professional activity for future specialists.

Keywords: intercultural competence, cultural dimensions, intercultural awareness, method of problem situations, interacting modeling method, method of simulation.

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1. Introduction

In the era of information revolution and globalization cross-cultural contact among people from different countries has become an ordinary event in their lives. People communicate through modern information technologies on the daily basis formally and informally. In international contacts they have to overcome many obstacles emerging from different countries, not only different languages but different ways of life. Intercultural differences have become an inevitable part of teaching foreign languages.

Developing intercultural competence together with language and professional skills is becoming actual and necessary for surviving in the global marketplace. Teaching a foreign language is not enough in today's global world. Acquiring foreign language skills cannot be separated from developing intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is the ability

to communicate successfully at all levels of professional activity. This competence can be obtained as an essential component of the English language teaching process at universities.

The aim of this paper is to prove the hypothesis: developing intercultural competence together with language and professional skills is becoming necessary for preparing high qualified specialists. Methods used in the study: general scientific (analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction), methods of theoretical research (from abstract to concrete).

The problem of intercultural competence in the foreign language teaching has become a special concern of foreign and Ukrainian researchers such as Michael Byram, John Saeed, Nancy Buerkel-Rothfus, S. Ter-Minasova, I. Khaleeva, A. Solodka, O. Krychivska.

2. Cultural dimensions of G. Hofstede

Intercultural differences stem from different cultures, which identify different ways of life in different countries. There exist a large number of definitions of culture. Thus, Bates and Plog see culture as “a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning” (*Bates and Plog, 1990*). An anthropologist E.T. Hall defines culture as “the way of life of people. It is the sum of their learned behaviour patterns, attitudes, and material things” (*Hall, 1959*).

That means culture is perceived as something learned, not inborn. Each society is based on certain dominant values, which may vary significantly. They affect the way of communication, conduct and outcome of trade negotiations as well as purchasing behaviour and consumption patterns. These dominant values are disseminated through various institutions such as justice, family, education, religion. Culture reflects the human aspect of the human environment. It consists of beliefs, morals and habits that you learn from other people. To understand each other at the international level people have to know foreign language and the culture of this country.

Two communicational tools for this understanding are high-context and low-context communication, and individualist and communitarian conception of self and other. High-context and low-context communication was developed by E.T. Hall (*Hall, 1971*). Communication depends on the field of dependence, which refers to which things outside communication affect the communication itself. In high-context setting, nonverbal communication conveys important messages to understand the situation. In low-context setting, verbal communication is more important for understanding the situation than the context. Communication in low-context settings is more direct. Low-context communication is typical for Western cultures. To be successful in international conversations people have to learn how to balance between these two different settings. Western cultures can be characterized as the cultures with the individualist approach, whereas Eastern cultures based on the communication approach.

Nowadays people of different culture work together and communicate more often than in the past which requires paying more attention to raising intercultural awareness. If you work in international business, you may sometimes have difficulty understanding how different people in other cultures behave. Therefore, if someone goes into another country, he or she cannot expect people to behave in the same way as they do in their home country. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the Dutch psychologist G. Hofstede gathered data about national cultures from employees working in subsidiaries of IBM. He published the outcome of his research, which can be used as the guidelines for understanding other cultures in a book called *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-related Values* (1980). Hofstede identified

four cultural dimensions to distinguish different cultures. Some years later he added the fifth and the sixth ones and created the model of five dimensions of culture:

1. Power distance (PDI)
2. Individualism/ Collectivism (IDV)
3. Masculinity/Femininity (MAS)
4. Uncertainty avoidance (UAI)
5. Long-term orientation (LTO)
6. Indulgence (IVR)

Power distance tells us about the inequality in a society, what way members of a society accept distribution of power in the society. The higher the score, the higher inequality in a society is accepted. Ukraine with the score 92 points in comparison with the UK and Germany 35 points and the USA 40 points is near at the top of this dimension and shows the attitude of Ukrainians to institutions (*Hofstede, 1980*).

The degree of interdependence among the members of society is expressed by the dimension of individualism. Ukraine's score of 25 points in comparison with the UK 89, Germany 67 and the USA 91 points identifies Ukraine as an individualistic society close to the middle apart from three other countries which can be characterized as individualistic societies oriented to their families (*Hofstede, 1980*).

On the scale of the dimension of masculinity or femininity Ukraine has a score of 27 points, which indicates a highly femininity society. The MAS index for the UK, Germany and the USA is higher (66, 66, 62 points) (*Hofstede, 1980*), that shows that statues in the society is balanced with caring for others and the quality of life.

The UAI score (uncertainty avoidance) indicates the attitude of the members of a society towards the future. The higher the score, the higher uncertainty avoidance is preferred. The members of a society with the high score of the UAI index prefer security and predictability of their future life. The uncertainty avoidance scores for Ukraine, the UK, Germany and the USA are 95, 35, 65 and 46 points (*Hofstede, 1980*).

The long term orientation dimension (LTO) shows whether the country is oriented to the future or to the present. Among four compared countries (Ukraine, the UK, Germany, the USA) only Ukraine and Germany are long-term oriented countries with scores of 55 and 83 points. The others (the UK and the USA) are short-oriented countries to the present time with scores of 25 and 29 points (*Hofstede, 1980*).

Hofstede's sixth dimension, discovered and described together with Michael Minkov, is also relatively new, and is therefore accompanied by less data. Countries with a high IVR score allow or encourage relatively free gratification of people's own drives and emotions, such as enjoying life and having fun. In a society with a low IVR score, there is more emphasis on suppressing gratification and more regulation of people's conduct and behavior, and there are stricter social norms. The IVR index for Ukraine is 18 points in comparison with the UK (69 points), Germany (40 points) and the USA (68 points) (*Hofstede, 1980*). Ukraine has a low IVR score and according to Hofstede's model is characterized by a restrained culture, where there is a tendency towards pessimism.

Cultural norms play a large part in interpersonal relationships at work. When you grow up in a certain culture, you take the behavioral norms of your society for granted, and you don't have to think about your reactions, preferences and feelings, provided that you don't deviate too much from the central tendency in your society. But when you step into a foreign culture, things suddenly seem different, and you don't want to cause offense. By using Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions as a starting point, you can evaluate your approach, your decisions, and

your actions, based on a general sense of how people in a particular society might think and react. Of course, everybody is unique, and no society is uniform, but we can use this model to make the unknown less intimidating, avoid making mistakes, and to provide a much-needed confidence boost when you're working in an unfamiliar country.

The Hofstede's 6-D Model helps to understand the cultures of different countries and the comparison of these six dimensions provides us with useful information how to deal with people from different countries.

3. Gaining intercultural communicative competence

Teaching a foreign language is not enough in today's global world. Acquiring foreign language skills cannot be separated from developing intercultural competence. There are a number of reasons for this. The globalization of national economies has increased the need for intercultural communication. Future specialists have to deal with culturally diverse staff, suppliers and customers. Since culture affects every facet of our life – from dress code to the way of doing business – people need to develop particular attitudes and skills to become successful in their home country as well as abroad. The acquired skills will allow them to interact in an appropriate way when working with people who have different cultural backgrounds.

Defining intercultural competence is a complex task. At the heart of intercultural competence is the preparation of individuals to interact appropriately and effectively with those from other cultural backgrounds (*Sinicrope, Norris, Watanabe, 2007*). As a result, understanding culture becomes an integral component of intercultural competence. Nieto's definition of culture as, "...the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and world view created, shared, and transformed by a group of people..." (*Nieto, 1999*) makes it difficult to identify which aspects of a given culture should be included in classroom instruction.

Good training can help understand intercultural differences in the areas like decision making, communication style, management style, leadership and meetings. Constantly increasing number of immigrants, tourists and mobility students need certain level of intercultural awareness. Intercultural awareness will also help employees going to work abroad adjust faster to living and working in a foreign country, and thus to achieve better professional results. John Saeed sees "the main source of misunderstanding among cultures" in "the differences in values and priorities. Some of the most common misconceptions reflect the way in which different cultures understand time, thought patterns and reasoning, personal space, material possessions, language, religion, ethnocentric beliefs as well as the presence of many languages" (*Saeed, 2007*).

Intercultural competence is the ability to communicate successfully at all levels of professional activity. This competence can be obtained as an essential component of the English language teaching process at universities. The use of English as a tool for intercultural communication plays an important role in acquiring knowledge on other countries and their culture. When speaking with the English, it is also important to learn how to keep the conversation going as well as knowing which topics acceptable and which are taboo. Intercultural competence also involves the knowledge of common greetings, rules on shaking hands, physical contact, eye contact, addressing people, the use of titles, colour and number symbolism, gestures, dressing, gifts.

Effective ways of acquiring intercultural competence are solving practical problems, dealing with case studies and using authentic materials. Most case studies require students to answer open-ended questions or develop a solution to an open-ended problem with potential

solutions. The role of the teacher is to facilitate and monitor their work and possibly correct mistakes made by students.

Professor Michael Byram in his book “Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence” depicts someone who gains skills in intercultural communicative competence as an individual who is successful in: building relationships while speaking the foreign language of the other participant; negotiating how to effectively communicate so that both individuals’ communicative needs are addressed; mediating conversations between those of diverse cultural backgrounds; and continuing to acquire communicative skills in foreign languages not yet studied. This final characteristic stresses that when an effective intercultural communicator learns to interact with those from a specific culture, a foundation of language and culture learning has been built, and that individual is more likely to continue to gather linguistic information from other cultures in order to broaden the spectrum of intercultural encounters. Gaining intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is about more than simple exchanges, rather it centers on building relationships and engaging in communication even when the participants involved do not share the same worldview (Byram, 1997).

In Byram’s Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence, foreign language teachers are asked to guide learners through the process of acquiring competencies in attitudes, knowledge, and skills related to intercultural competence while using a foreign language. Teachers must lead students through activities in which attitudes about the “other” are considered, and ideally transform the learner. The goal for the students is to start by questioning their preconceived ideas before entering into a process of discovery about the “other” with the intent of becoming more willing to seek out and engage with otherness in order to ultimately experience relationships of reciprocity (Byram, 1997).

As students continue to engage in analysis of other cultures, certain knowledge must be acquired. It is imperative that the foreign language educator allows time to explore the national identity of the home culture and the target culture in relation to history, geography, and social institutions (Byram, 1997). Once learners have taken time to discover the similarities and differences between their culture and that of the target culture, the teacher must craft activities that will prepare students to build relationships with people of diverse backgrounds and languages (Byram, 1997). Next, foreign language students must be provided the time and the space to develop skills in interpreting and relating. When students begin to identify ethnocentric perspectives and misunderstandings related to cross-cultural situations, they become able to understand and then explain the origins of conflict and mediate situations appropriately in order to avoid misinterpretations (Byram, 1997). Finally, skills in discovery and interaction allow intercultural speakers to identify similarities and differences between home cultures and foreign cultures resulting in successful communication and the establishment of meaningful relationships (Byram, 1997). A successful intercultural speaker seeks out opportunities to meet individuals from diverse cultures in order to share information through communication in a foreign language.

Based on the information provided in Byram’s Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 1997), foreign language teachers must reconsider methods for teaching language and culture in the classroom if the goal is to create true interculturally competent speakers of the language. Traditional methods for teaching foreign languages emphasized the importance of students practicing language structures, pronunciation and vocabulary in order to become native like speakers. Byram explains that putting the focus on the creation of native speakers actually sets most students up for failure because they are asked to detach from their own culture while accepting the fact that the native speaker holds the power in the interaction. This inhibits growth toward intercultural competence, as the learner is not

given equal opportunity to bring his/her beliefs into the conversation. Rather than pushing students toward using a foreign language like a native speaker, language teachers should guide students toward using language that structures new discoveries about the “other” and about themselves (Byram, 1997). The focus shifts from preparing students to communicate without error in order to survive a foreign culture to communicating openly in order to build relationships so that they can thrive in a foreign culture. When the teaching of intercultural communicative competence includes models of reciprocal relationships in which students play the role of a “social actor”, students experience the mutual discovery of another language and culture, and language classrooms become places where students and teachers consider questions of values and morals, which can ultimately promote the notion of democracy (Byram, Gribkova, Starkey, 2002).

4. Methods of teaching intercultural communication

Nowadays the state of the teaching methods of foreign languages in universities does not always reflect the real needs of the society in the development of foreign languages. English for Communication programs include only general guidelines for forming linguistic and communicative competences for students of higher educational institutions. Unlike the required minimum of school education, programs at the university do not indicate the specific degrees and methods of differentiating language skills. Therefore, the choice of educational material remains for the teacher.

On the basis of the analysis of some educational and methodological complexes for the study of a foreign language, one can conclude that, at the initial stage of study at a faculty of foreign philology, the acquisition of a foreign language can be achieved by including in the teaching materials operational-semantic differences, which are correlated both in the native language and in the language being studied. This aspect of mastering foreign language in an intensive course corresponds to the section “Vocabulary oriented learning”. It contains only lexical material, which provides the process of communication in its various aspects. Student engagement with dialogue speeches based on authentic dialogues and techniques for working with them with the purpose of gaining intercultural communicative competence. All study guides are universal in nature, have no narrow thematic constraints and can be used in work on a variety of subjects.

The intercultural orientation in teaching English for Communication may be added to the dominant cultural and household topics. In this case it becomes possible to conduct regular conversations about events from students’ lives. Naturally, that the intercultural content of each topic or sub-topic requires appropriate lexical content. So, when studying the topic “customs and traditions” it is possible to provide students the opportunity to compare cultural differences of countries using nationally biased lexical units of native and target languages. When selecting vocabulary, the principle of functionality should not conflict with the principle of frequency, although in some cases it is inevitable. However, the selected vocabulary for each individual topic cannot, of course, be introduced simultaneously, all at once. It should be done in small, strictly dosed portions. Such approach depends on specific nature of cultural and household topics. As it was discovered through a special survey, within these themes, the flow of new, communicatively-motivated information is continuously carried out, in connection with which there is a possibility of repeated return to each of them and the expansion of these themes to the new ones, introducing new portions of intercultural vocabulary. This is the main specificity

of cultural and household themes, from which we can draw the following conclusion: the main cultural themes should be repeated from year to year with their gradual expansion and complication of intercultural lexical units. They should be studied in the form of expanding intercultural semantic concepts, each of which marks a return to the previous studied topic or in the next academic year and is associated every time with the introduction of the next portion of communicative and valuable vocabulary.

The possession of the linguistic material is necessary for the implementation of intercultural communication and can be achieved only with the complex study of all kinds of linguistic activity and the assimilation of the linguistic material in the interaction of all analyzers, that is, in the unity of speaking, listening, reading and writing.

The process of training master degree students of intercultural communication in Ukrainian universities can be based on the analysis and interpretation of real cultural contacts. Therefore, the most effective method of teaching intercultural communication is training. Traditional forms of learning suggest predominantly general development of the individual, while the training is more focused on practical requirements and the study of specific situations (*Solodka, 2007*). This orientation stimulates the development of a whole group of applied methods, the use of which in the learning process made it possible to make learning intercultural communication effective and purposeful (*Buerkel-Rothfus, 1985*).

Here are some examples of the following methods:

1. The method of interactive modeling is aimed at conscious reproduction of various individual and group situations of intercultural communication. Due to this method intercultural and emotional energy of the participants of the educational process is directed to the analysis and assessment of situations. Simplified world of interactive models enables participants to understand and explore the ways and types of relationships in intercultural contacts better than in real life. We can offer a discussion of the problem situation aroused in the process of communication between representatives of different cultures, which differ in language, behavior, customs, etc.

2. The method of simulation is to create artificially a specific situation of intercultural communication and to predict possible options and outcomes, based on different points of view and aspects. Singular situations allow you to enter the image of a person of another culture and, as a rule, is the generalized experience of intercultural communication of all participants in the process. An important feature of this method is the compulsory creation of conditions for cultural creativity, since creativity itself is the main activity of its participants. Implementation of these requirements to a large extent is ensured by the use of simulation games. The goal of simulation games is to teach students how to function in a culture that means being in an unfamiliar cultural environment, which feelings and emotions can be felt by people at the same time. Participants have the opportunity to test themselves in different roles. Game results are discussed (*Solodka, 2007*).

3. The method of problem situations is to organize such situations, in which intellectual-ethical issues transform into emotional. Due to this, the participants understand the lack of resources used, find in cooperation with the teacher the necessary material to overcome the difficulties, independently set the tasks for the development of their own capabilities, which are necessary for the development of an appropriate strategy of action in the indirect or immediate situation of intercultural communication. It is possible to set, for example, the following questions: What language differences can indicate different national characteristics? How is the way of life, cultural values reflected in the language of every nation?

5. Conclusions

Consequently, the processes of globalization and integration in the world and the cardinal socio-economic transformations associated with them in Ukrainian society necessitate the reformation of foreign language training of masters in higher pedagogical educational institutions. The practice of intercultural communication shows that knowledge of the lexical-grammar system of a foreign language does not guarantee the achievement of mutual understanding, because the cultural differences of the interlocutors can lead to misunderstanding or even to conflict and “cultural shock”. Taking into account these circumstances, we can conclude that the main purpose of training specialists by means of foreign languages is the formation of the ability to intercultural communication.

Effective communication requires more than mastering grammar and vocabulary of a language. It is the process that requires also knowledge of culture. Culture becomes an important part of the language teaching process. Having knowledge in intercultural competence is the key to successful professional activity for future specialists.

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