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Topical Issues of Linguistics and Teaching Methods in Business and Professional Communication

DEVELOPING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AND SKILLS

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Abstract

This article deals with the issue of developing intercultural awareness and skills of economics students in English lessons. The relevance of the article is caused by the need of elaboration of the topic of the development students' intercultural communicative skills as the future professionals working globally. As future specialists working in multinational environment students should practice these skills when learning foreign language in business discourse. This article considers the theoretical basis of the notion of cultural awareness and focuses on the cultural awareness approach in foreign languages teaching. The author elaborates on the principles, objectives and steps of developing cultural awareness, giving the students the idea about the cultural diversity. In this article, the author also provides the reader with the features of national mentality of the Russians and the British, as a pattern of the collaboration in business. This article contains the examples aimed to illustrate the developing the students' intercultural awareness and skills. The author arrives at the conclusion that the future professionals with cultural awareness and skills are able to effectively cooperate with different cultural agents working globally in multinational environment.

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Keywords: Intercultural communication, globalization, cultural differences, teaching, cultural awareness.



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1. Introduction

It is now relevant to elaborate the topic of the cultural awareness development. This need in turn is due to the processes of business globalization. The requirements and challenges to the future professionals are that they should be able to communicate in multinational environments globally. In the future, they have to deal with their colleagues in multicultural organizations and firms.

There is no doubt currently, with all business processes performing globally, that to perform business cooperation effectively businesspeople have to master the business communication skills, and not to a lesser degree than skills – empathy toward a foreign culture agent. That means that in the process of intercultural communication people now learn the foreign cultural environment, norms and standards, customs and traditions. In addition, they are aware and reflect on another culture's values, different from their own ones. Today, the challenge of developing cultural awareness is looming large. The teachers have to help the students develop the ability to recognize cultural differences and form cultural awareness to cooperate effectively respecting the foreign culture values (Hřebačková, 2019; Samokhina, 2019; Vouillemin, 2020).

Inevitably, understanding a language involves not only the knowledge of grammar, phonology, and lexis but also of certain features and characteristics of the culture. Communicating internationally involves communicating interculturally. In other words, language is a part of culture and culture is a part of a language. The two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate them without losing the significance of either language or culture. (Brown, 2007, p. 7)

1.1. How does intercultural communication happen?

Such experts in the sphere of intercultural communication as L. Bredella, D. Buttjes, M. Byram, W. Delaney emphasize that intercultural cooperation could not always happen in accordance with the standards and norms of a foreign culture. The cultural agents should be aware of the “logic of the foreign culture”, and moreover, they have to critically approach and be aware of their own culture. They mean that language learning equals culture study. These are parts of the whole. That is why, the foreign language teachers have to teach the cultural awareness of students simultaneously with language teaching.

1.2. What is culture?

As it is commonly known there are a lot of definitions of culture. Culture is briefly defined by Brown (2007) as “a way of life. It is the context within which we exist, think, feel and relate to others. It is the glue that binds a group of people together” (p. 188) Culture governs our behavior in groups and helps us to know what others expect of us and what will happen if we do not live up to their expectations”. In other words, culture helps us to require the expectations of foreign cultural agents about the norms of behaviour in different life situations. Culture is the difference between the cultural representatives.

1.3. Cultural awareness. What do we mean?

We have now to consider what is meant by cultural awareness. According to scientists Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004), cultural awareness consists of perceptions of our own and other people's cultures. These perceptions are:

- internal: they develop in our minds
- dynamic: they are constantly being added to and changed
- variable: they are modified from experience
- multi-dimensional: they are represented through sensory images (mental pictures), mental connections, and affective associations, as well as through the inner voice (Masuhara, 2003; Tomlinson, 2000a)
- interactive in that they connect with and inform each other.

This means, that cultural awareness development process will take a lot of attempts and energy to achieve the goal – the tolerance towards the foreign culture parallelly with the cultural self-identification. Cultural awareness involves a “gradually developing inner sense of the equality of cultures, an increased understanding of your own and other people’s cultures, and a positive interest in how cultures both connect and differ. Such awareness can broaden the mind, increase tolerance and facilitate international communication” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 5). That level of personality development will mean, that a person aware of basic values of their own and the foreign cultures. That level of personality development will help to successfully communicate in multinational environment.

“Increased cultural knowledge can give us increased credibility and expertise, and increased cultural awareness can help us to achieve cultural empathy and sensitivity. It can facilitate language acquisition, as being positive, empathetic and inquisitive. It can also contribute to one of the optimal conditions for language acquisition: motivated exposure to language in use” (Tomlinson, 2000b, p. 9). Achieving the level of cultural empathy and sensitivity a person shares the values of foreign culture. This means they are feeling comfortable when communicating amongst the foreigners. Also they can effectively cooperate with different cultural agents working globally.

2. Problem Statement

“Logic of a foreign culture” and cultural awareness

People when communicating with foreign cultural agents are supposed to adequately respond to the expectations from them. To do so, they have to deeply understand the “logic of a foreign culture”, comparing it inevitably with their own.

This, in their terms, means that a person should 1 share the basic values of the foreign culture 2 know the norms of behaviour in different everyday life situations 3 speak the language adequately.

By the notion the “logic of a foreign culture” we mean the basis platform for explanation every act of speech or behaviour of a foreign cultural agent. To speak the language adequately means to not to be sound strange for foreigner.

To master cultural awareness is a successful step to tolerance and effective communication in different situations of everyday life and at work. We believe, this process will take a lot of time and effort. But, with the help of the teacher, who aims to develop the students’ cultural awareness, these skills could likely be trained faster and more successfully.

3. Research Questions

3.1. What is the cultural awareness approach?

After we have considered what cultural awareness involves, we have to elaborate on the cultural awareness approach in teaching foreign languages. Following the professionals in the area, we consider the principles, objectives and steps of the cultural awareness teaching approach.

According to Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004), “the main learning principles of a cultural awareness approach involve the encouragement of:

- learning from experience
- apprehension before comprehension, in that the learner is helped to become aware of something before trying to achieve conscious understanding of it
- affective and cognitive engagement with an encounter, text, or task
- intake responses to an encounter, text, or task in the sense of developing and articulating representations of the experience
- discovering clues to the interpretation of an experience by reflecting on that experience
- tolerance of ambiguity. That is, not worrying about not being able to interpret an experience, or not fixing an immediate and absolute interpretation.

These principles, as Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) believe, are coherent in the sense that they connect with each other and have been developed to facilitate the deep processing of experience which can lead to informed awareness, sensitivity and empathy, and to language acquisition, too.

Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) also state that “the main objectives of the cultural awareness approach are to help the learners to:

- discover assumptions, values, and attitudes that underlie utterances and behaviours in other cultures
- discover assumptions, values, and attitudes that underlie utterances and behaviours in their own cultures
- notice implicit conflicts and analyze the causes
- identify options for conflict solutions
- try out options, observe the consequences, and take necessary measures
- resist falling back on stereotyping and ethnocentrism
- develop sensitivity to cultures
- develop empathy with other cultures
- acquire cross-cultural skills
- develop the ability to use language appropriately and effectively in various cultural contexts

Bearing in mind this classification, the teachers could effectively work out the idea of students’ cultural awareness development.

3.2. Steps in developing cultural awareness

As we have previously said, the process of cultural awareness development is time-consuming. It could be split into steps. Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) recommend the following steps when developing

cultural awareness in foreign language teaching. These recommendations will help teachers to enable students to recognize the cultural differences, become aware of their self-cultural identification and develop empathy. According to the scientists, the steps are as follows:

- Start and finish an activity in the minds of learners (e.g. by getting them to think about an experience in their own culture before providing them with a similar one in another culture; by getting them to ‘translate’ a new experience in another culture into an equivalent experience in their own culture)
- Provide cultural encounters (e.g. through visits, video, songs, literature, simulations)
- Facilitate connections between the old and the new (e.g. by encouraging the learners to constantly think of comparable personal experiences)
- Stimulate multi-dimensional representation of cultural experiences (e.g. through visualization and inner voice activities)
- Provide focused discovery activities which guide the learners to find out things for themselves
- Contribute your personal interpretations but don’t provide them as definitive answers
- Contribute your personal experiences of other cultures.

This separate steps and permanent work of both- the teachers and students - will broaden the students’ minds in terms of cultural awareness development.

4. Purpose of the Study

After we have considered the basic theory on the topic, we are going to discuss how it could be embedded in practice when teaching foreign languages, specifically English.

4.1. Cultural awareness implementation

We, in our university are teaching English to Russian students in their vast majority. We set simultaneously the goal to develop cultural awareness of them. In the first place, we are focused on the main differences between Russian and English people’s mentality, which are obviously reflected in these languages. Generally, let us compare the main features of the Russians and English people. It is commonly known that the main characteristics of Russians are openness, sentimentality, victimhood, self-indictment, respect for the foreign, the habit of pleasure. The British, on the contrary, are reserved, pragmatic, and economical. They demonstrate such features of national character as equality, self-preservation, external indictment, respect for the national.

It is impossible to deeply research the process of forming the national characters of Russians and the British within the framework of the present article. That is why, we only mention the factors which contribute to the formation of a national character. They are as follows: historical, geographical, climate, and other factors. We, in our article will focus on analysing the reflection of the mentality in the languages respectively.

4.2. How the national mentality is influencing the conversation

“Because language is closely entwined with culture, language teachers entering a different culture must respect other culture’s values. As Englebert (2004) describes: “... to teach a foreign language is also to teach a foreign culture, and it is important to teach a foreign culture, and it is important to be sensitive to the fact that our students, our colleges, our administrators, and, if we live abroad, our neighbours do not share all of our cultural paradigms” (as cited in Leveridge, 2008, p. 100).

Bearing in mind the theoretical knowledge of the topic and principles of the cultural awareness approach considered before, we in the English lessons at RUDN University (Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia) give the students the idea of how the national mentality is influencing the conversation. This will help students not to automatically learn clichés in accordance with the communicative situation, but to use foreign language fluently, based on a great background of knowledge why it is appropriate.

The open self-expression of Russians manifests itself in direct communication style. The reserve of English people is caused by their will to save their privacy. To better construct the discussion in English it would be useful to use such clichés as *It’d be a great help if.../ I’d really appreciate it if.../ Is there any way you can... ?/ Would you mind ... -ing? I don’t suppose you could ...?* In practice, it is rather difficult for first-year students to get used to speaking that way. And it is not because they are not able to learn appropriate clichés, but because the Russian communication style is characterized by greater directness.

Awareness of differences between languages as a mirror of cultural diversity is, in our opinion, a principal thing when learning any foreign language, especially being adult, when a person learns the language analytically.

For example, the Russian language as a language of a culture where people are not sure if they are in charge of their own lives or everything depends on someone from above, contains key words which have the meaning of hopelessness. The Russian language demonstrates the Russian mentality through lexis, grammar, and idioms (Burikova, 2018). Many of impersonal Russian constructions are translated into English as personal ones: *I am cold. I am embarrassed.* In English, a personal pronoun shows personal responsibility.

5. Research Methods

5.1. The idea about the adequacy of using clichés

All authentic books for English business learners contain Working Across Cultures sections, which should be worked out thoroughly in classes. It had been better if a teacher, having the background about basis notions and parameters of different cultures, would give students the idea about the adequacy of using clichés and appropriate phrases and behavioral way in order not to disrupt the communication and cooperation.

A great practice to acquire the skills of intercultural communication and awareness is to discuss issues like: What advice should be given to an exchange student who is going to come to your university for the first time? What are some special things at your university, and in your city? What are the unwritten rules in student’s life and study? How to get ready for the trip to a British university to avoid or smooth the cultural shock?

6. Findings

6.1. Cultural diversity

The controversial issues of cultural diversity are very urgent and topical today, because of increasing and expanding global processes in all spheres of human life. People with trained cultural awareness will, undoubtedly, be more successful and have fewer failures in communication with foreign cultural agents, be it in business or everyday life. Having some basic knowledge about cultural diversity will mean possessing cultural awareness, which, in turn, will help feel the ‘logic’ of another culture and specify some main features of its mentality, avoiding stereotypical perception.

To put it simply, cultural awareness is the ability to recognise and understand that all cultures are different, but all are equal and all have their rights on the living on the earth. It is allowing yourself to take a step out of the confines of your own culture (but still being aware of that) and acknowledge, accept and appreciate the differences of other cultures.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Communications within a business environment

After we have considered the issue of the cultural awareness, we arrived to the conclusion that this notion is extremely important currently. It has a great impact on communication and negotiations, in the first place within a business environment. Addressing the cultural awareness properly, people can affectively build good cross-cultural business relations. Moreover, future professionals, who will not be able to distinguish and respect the cultural diversity and ignore them, because they have not been thought, having lack of cultural awareness, will not be able to construct effective and successful business communication. This undoubtedly will lead to breakdowns in communication and business relationships.

Currently, it is the language teaching professionals’ duty to look for professional development opportunities that enable future professionals to understand cultural processes better.

In the words of William M. Chase (as cited in Culture Coach, n.d.), “Diversity... is not casual liberal tolerance of anything not yourself. It is not polite accommodation. Instead, diversity is, in action, the sometimes painful awareness that other people, other races, other voices, other habits of mind have as much integrity of being, as much claim on the world as you do... And I urge you, amid all the differences present to the eye and mind, to reach out to create the bond that... will protect us all. We are all meant to be here together”. English teaching professionals in the world have the mission and responsibility to create that bond: to teach cultural understanding.

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