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EXPERIENCE OF RUSSIAN-GERMAN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract

This paper presents the experiences gathered by students participating in double degree programs at both universities in Russia and in Germany. The interview results show clear evidence about evolving and expanding the intercultural competence among practical knowledge. In addition to the personal development of students, it is the processional trinity of intercultural competence developing in the time before the exchange, the time of immersion in the foreign culture and the time of acculturation, and finally the time of homecoming and the processing of the experienced knowledge by self-reflection. With regard the background of the currently significant positioning of intercultural competence as the main qualification for the successful entry into the job market independently of the industry, we show its role in educational system, especially when studying abroad and reflection of those experiences at the home university. Therefore, the phenomenon of intercultural competence as shown in following can be considered as one of the main points of the internationalisation of educational programs and not only a result of broad sociopolitical developments and global markets which needs to be observed in particular, but a constituent part of education career.

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1. Introduction

The increasing heterogeneity of modern society, caused by the processes of globalization and migration, leads to a growing demand for specialists with intercultural communicative competence for successful work in an environment characterized by multilingualism and cultural diversity. Therefore, the development of cultural competence acquires special importance in the field of educational policy. In addition, today the key to competitiveness of universities and improving the quality of educational services is the internationalization of education. Modern universities position themselves as open intercultural organizations. The intercultural openness of universities, on the other hand, contributes to the further internationalization of higher education, including the attraction of foreign students and the activation of academic mobility. However, this position presupposes the existence of intercultural competence among students and teachers and university staff.

Representatives of various fields of knowledge (educators, psychologists, linguists, specialists in intercultural communication) deal with the issues of the formation and development of intercultural competence as this issue includes theoretical, methodological and empirical aspects. In this study, relying on research in the field of intercultural communication, we analyze the experience of joint Russian-German educational programs on the formation and development of intercultural competence. The development of intercultural communication as an academic and scientific discipline in German universities began much earlier than in Russian ones. And the migration problems of the last decade have given an extra boost for an in-depth study of intercultural competence. Today, German universities have gained great practical experience in building intercultural competence in the academic environment and training specialists to work in a multilingual and multicultural society.

2. Problem Statement

Over the past 30 years, approaches to understanding and studying intercultural competence have been actively formed abroad, comprehensive, multicomponent models of intercultural competence have been developed (Bennet, 1998; Bolten, 2007; Bolten, 2016; Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Gudykunst, 2004; Hiller & Vogler-Lipp, 2010; Hiller, Lüsebrink, Oster-Stierle, & Vatter, 2017; Spitzberg, 1989; Thomas, 2018). Russian scientists later began to study the phenomenon of intercultural competence, but today this issue is very relevant and is the subject of research in pedagogy, linguistics, international management, intercultural communication, in tourism (Andryukhina & Fadeeva, 2016; Gudkova & Yakusheva, 2016; Pluzhnik, 2016; Sadokhin, 2016; Tsukanova & Sharonova, 2018, etc.).

Considering the peculiarities of the formation of intercultural competence in the academic environment, theoretical and applied research on the issues raised can be distinguished in a separate direction. In the works of German researchers, intercultural competence is designated as one of the key competencies (Schlüsselqualifikation) that should be formed in universities (Aymans, Friese, & Kauffeld, 2017; Berninghouse, 2017; Hiller & Vogler-Lipp, 2010; Hiller, Lüsebrink, Oster-Stierle, & Vatter, 2017; Schumann, 2012). Problems arising during academic exchanges and the implementation of joint educational programs are considered by both Russian and German scientists (Aleksandrova, Moskvicheva, & Bubnova, 2018; Aymans, Friese, & Kauffeld, 2017; Berninghouse, 2017; Hiller, Lüsebrink, Oster-

Stierle, & Vatter, 2017; Nedopekina, Evsikova, & Mikheeva, 2018; Ushanova, Vozmiller, & Zhukova, 2019).

What is meant by intercultural competence in the academic environment? Today, there are many definitions of intercultural competence; there is no complete unity in this matter. Thus, Hiller in his work «Schlüsselqualifikation Interkulturelle Kompetenz an Hochschulen», under the key “intercultural competence”, understands “a set of skills that allow a person to evaluate a partner, as well as a situation or context in situations of intercultural interaction, and to respond flexibly and “adequately” to this” (Hiller & Vogler-Lipp, 2010, p. 19). This definition, however, does not provide information on what the characteristics of intercultural competence are in the academic context. These features, given the dynamic nature of intercultural competence, depend on several factors, including the current needs of society, the state of the labor market, educational policy and etc. Analyzing the work of the past 20 years, several main reasons can be identified that determined the need for studying intercultural competence in German universities. First, in order for university graduates to successfully integrate into the multicultural globalized labor market, they must have developed intercultural competence during their studies. Secondly, an important aspect of successful internationalization of a university is the integration of foreign students into a new academic culture. International students, scholars and researchers are becoming one of the increasingly significant sources of meeting the growing needs of the German labor market for skilled labor (bmbf.de). Thirdly, it is very important that their students participating in international academic mobility programs are prepared to study abroad. The role of international academic mobility and the internationalization of education is spelled out in the main European documents of recent years. The process initiated by the Bologna agreement and continuing in the framework of EU programs. A feature of modern academic culture in recent years has become cultural and linguistic diversity, the heterogeneity of student and teaching staff, with each social group making its own specific requirements to the university that meet the special educational needs and expectations of its representatives. The recent report “Wissenschaftweltoffen 2019” (Deutschland, 2019), prepared by *the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)* and *the German Center for Research in Higher Education and Science (DZHW)*, confirms the effectiveness of measures to build and develop intercultural competence in the university environment in Germany. According to the data for 2019, Germany took the fourth place in the world after the USA, Great Britain and Australia in attractiveness for foreign students, and the third place in popularity for foreign scientists and researchers. In the winter semester 2017-2018 in Germany, 375 thousand international students were enrolled who came to Germany for educational or humanitarian reasons (including students from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Eritrea, Iran, Pakistan and Somalia). German students are also very mobile. According to data for 2016, almost 145 thousand Germans sought to obtain a diploma of higher education abroad. About a third of all German students during their studies at a German university participate in the educational programs of foreign universities (for one or two semester studies) (Deutschland, 2019).

To date, the solution to such problems is relevant for Russian universities. Therefore, the experience of German universities, which successfully implement in practice a variety of strategies for the development of intercultural competence of students and teachers, seems very interesting. In the framework of this study, we will draw on the ideas of the famous German cultural expert and intercultural communication specialist

Bolten (2007, 2016) and the American researcher Deardorff (2006), who are supporters of dynamic process models of intercultural competence. Traditionally, many researchers of intercultural competence adhere to the separation of components of intercultural competence into three groups (Bennet, 1998; Byram, 1997; Sadokhin, 2016; Spitzberg, 1989): cognitive, regarding knowledge of cultures and understanding the background of intercultural contacts; affective, including a positive attitude towards oneself and others, as well as to situations of intercultural contacts; behavioral, regarding the ability to interact with representatives of other cultures. Bolten (2007), in turn, does not just divide the components into three groups, but focus on the interdependence of cognitive, affective, and conative competencies. Intercultural competence refers to “successful holistic interaction of individual, social, professional and strategic actions in an intercultural context” (p. 88). Thus, intercultural competence should not be concentrated exclusively in the field of soft skills, as it concerns the entire spectrum of actions. Unlike his colleagues, Bolten (2007) very accurately emphasizes that intercultural competence is “not a key qualification, but a cross-cutting task whose success presupposes the interplay of various key qualifications” (p. 112).

Deardorff’s model (2006) is important for the purposes of our study, primarily because it identifies another important element in determining intercultural competence, namely (self) reflection. According to her ideas, intercultural competence allows effective and proper interaction in intercultural situations based on specific views and attitudes, as well as specific skills of activity and reflection. In addition, Deardorff attaches particular importance to individual attitudes, making a distinction between individual level and level of interaction. The individual level includes such components as position, knowledge, abilities, as well as intercultural learning outcomes. An individual position (respect for other cultures, openness, and curiosity) leads to the development of knowledge and understanding (cultural awareness, deep cultural knowledge and sociolinguistic awareness) by applying certain skills (to listen, observe, evaluate and analyze, interpret and relate to each other).

In her spiral-shaped procedural model of intercultural competence development Deardorff (2006) identifies four dimensions of intercultural communication in which a dynamic process of its development, enrichment and development takes place: the level of motivation (position and attitude), activity competence, reflective competence (as an internal impact), and constructive interaction (as the external effect of intercultural competence). The more dimensions affected, the higher degree of intercultural competence (p. 8). What is the role of the competence of reflection (Reflexions kompetenz) in the development of intercultural competence? Intercultural competence implies the presence of the ability to expand or correlate one's own system of values, the ability to flexibly adapt to new intercultural situations, such as communication styles abroad, lifestyle, and norms. This means that their own cultural, religious or ethnocentric worldview is not absolutely established, but reflects. Reflection can also lead to an affective reappraisal of other people's ways of thinking and behavior. This is a prerequisite for the development of empathy and the adoption of foreign behavior in their own repertoire (Deardorff, 2006).

In the implementation of joint international educational programs (double diploma), in our opinion, the reflection stage plays a special role in the development of intercultural competence of participating students.

3. Research Questions

The authors of the study proceed from the fact that the process of formation and development of intercultural competence is divided into three stages: before leaving abroad, during studies abroad, i.e. during contact with a foreign (academic) culture, and upon returning to his native university to complete his studies. An empirical study is designed to answer the following questions:

- Is it possible to form intercultural competence sufficient to successfully enter a new academic culture, before starting study abroad?
- Does intercultural competence develop through experience in interactions and in times of crisis?
- Does (self) reflection influence the development of intercultural communication in the academic environment?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study is based on the assumption that the participation of students in joint educational programs, in this case, in Russian-German, requires a pre-formed intercultural competence, on the one hand, and contributes to its further development, on the other hand. The Russian-German «double diploma» educational program, implemented at the Yaroslav-the-Wise Novgorod State University and the Hildesheim Stock University, is aimed at students of linguistics. Therefore, the level of their knowledge and skills in the field of intercultural communication before the start of participation in the program is relatively high. According to Müller-Jacquier's thesis (2000) students should be able to distinguish, that intercultural communication is not about isolated cases, which are understood in that regular application of foreign communication rules as an expression of foreign action and value orientations and that "[...] psychological action attributions always in a second step, i.e. according to a linguistic interaction analysis, which works out the relationship between certain forms of expression and individual intentions as accurately as possible" (p. 22).

Therefore, the development of intercultural competence during training at a partner university is a continuation of the formation of intercultural competence, its consolidation in connection with the acquisition of new experience in intercultural interaction.

Another objective of this study is to determine the level of formation of intercultural competence among students before the start of academic mobility to make changes to the content of academic disciplines.

5. Research Methods

At the first stage of the study, an analysis of foreign concepts and models of intercultural competence was made, as well as practical measures aimed at the formation and development of intercultural competence in German universities. The empirical study is based on an analysis of the written texts of students containing their reflection on specific intercultural situations. The main method is discursive analysis. Participants –the students of the second, third and fourth courses whose speciality is Linguistics (with major of Translation and Translation Studies). To search for answers to the first two problematic

questions, written reports on students' educational and practical training were analysed. At the second stage, the written work of students who studied for two semesters at the partner university in the Double Diploma program was analysed. These works are a reflection of students after completing courses on intercultural communication.

6. Findings

To identify trends in the development of intercultural communicative competence in the academic environment of the university, 58 works of 2-4-year Russian and German students were analysed.

The educational practice in the previous academic year was held at the "School of Hanseatic Volunteers". The purpose of this practice was to develop communication skills, teamwork, flexibility, empathy, expand knowledge in the field of historical and cultural ties of Veliky Novgorod, i.e. all those competencies that are components of intercultural competence. In addition, some students with a higher level of linguistic knowledge participated as volunteer translators at the World Skills event, in the international futsal tournament. Traditionally, all students were involved in the annual Week of International Cooperation of NovSU, where they performed the functions of accompanying guests and assisting in communication. Reports on practice includes a large section where the student in the process of self-reflection describes the course of practice, his impressions, highlights the pros and cons.

The results of the analysis of reports on educational practice showed that the priority for students is the desire to improve language / translation competencies. But at the same time, the majority of the second year students (the fourth semester) lack an understanding of the importance of additional background knowledge and competencies that they could receive during their practice at the "Hanseatic Volunteer School", namely, historical and cultural knowledge, the ability to organize and conduct major events of urban and international level, communication skills, etc. Nevertheless, examples have been discovered that indicate a conscious attitude to this practice:

- *At this stage, we gained experience in a team, when it is important that everyone takes part in the discussion of ideas, so that everyone can be listened to. This is a quality you cannot survive without in the modern world.*

Positive impressions from the practice at World Skills events, futsal tournament and Week of International Cooperation among students:

- *Participating in such a competition is a unique experience. We saw with our own eyes how the competition of international importance is held.*

Many examples indicate the development of an effective component of intercultural competence, i.e. the formation of a positive image of representatives of other cultures and the development of empathy. For example:

- *For the first time I got into a situation of a language barrier, since I had never been abroad before, and was able to overcome it. For three days I practiced my English. I listened to a lot of German. I listened to a lot of Finnish speech. I am very grateful for this opportunity. I met many good people. All Finns were very good and kind, it was pleasant to communicate and cooperate with them. This is an incredibly rewarding experience for me. I realized my problems in the language that need to be worked on.*

The reflection of one of the students during the report allowed him to formulate the following conclusions and conceptualize the experience gained:

- *1. Language practice is a unique experience. 2. It is difficult for any person in an unfamiliar place, and everything possible must be done to make him feel at home. 3. It is necessary to exchange experience with foreigners: they tell us about their country, we – about our own. 4. The language barrier will be removed as soon as people talk to each other more and more.*

In the two previous and following examples, we also see how students are aware of their abilities in overcoming a crisis situation (language barrier, insufficient language knowledge):

- *This activity was extremely useful for us as future translators. It helped us in the fight against the language barrier and the development of language skills. It is also worth noting that we had a lot of contact with strangers, which is useful to us when we begin our professional activities, as communication skills are extremely important for any translator.*

Thus, we see that crisis intercultural situations also affect the formation of intercultural competencies, in this case, intercultural communicative competence. However, such situations, as D. V. Tsukanova and Sharonova (2018) note in their work, depending on the level of awareness and critical thinking of a person, can have both inhibitory and development-promoting effects (p. 55).

In what follows, we present the results of our analyses of students reflections in the class “Interkulturelle Kommunikation und Kompetenz” at the University of Hildesheim. As it can be seen by following examples the students respect the relevance of the topic:

- *The topic of this seminar is very important and interesting because it is relevant to today life. The prosperity of people allows more and more to travel, that is, the members of different cultures meet and mix more and more. In such situations, misunderstandings can occur.*

The altering teaching as well as the heterogeneity of the class inspires the students. In their intention to grasp the cultural aspects of the opponents, they give preference to work in small groups so we assume that external phenomena are crucial and trigger discussions:

- *I find this course very exciting and important because our world is in the process of globalization. Not only linguistics and ICC professionals are interested in the successful intercultural interaction, but also other people who simply want to get to know different cultures or to travel abroad. ... In my opinion it was a good idea to organize group work, because you work in the groups much more effectively, discuss intensively unclear aspects and share new information with each other. There was also a nice atmosphere in the student discussion course, which is very important. I am very satisfied with this course and the results.*

Nothnagel (2018) examines the students' difference experience with the following result:

- Experiences explicated as a cultural experience of difference can later be reinterpreted (i.e. 'de-culturalised') or changed in their relevance, or individual observations / experiences can be 'culturalized' in connection with further experiences (including experiences of third parties) and the additionally transported knowledge. This insight is also central to a theory of action-based determination of intercultural learning (p. 102).

Because of the experiences made by students at the German university they are allowed to compare their needs during that period, so we ran an additional analysis for reflection of those problems which might be considered by students themselves.

Our first result that the foreign language and the amount of offer to evolve it make the primal need of international students. Furthermore, it doesn't obtain significant differences, which language is used. The reflections in our cases show the need to get involved in a conversation in both, in German and in English:

- *Anyone coming to Germany from other countries needs support and advice. The universities have to offer the help. For example, to avoid negative experiences, one can use Internet sites that inform about university and city, German culture in German and in English. With the help of foreign students it is possible to translate all information into other languages. Students from other countries do not always know where and with whom they can find help.*

The self-management strategies as a natural accompaniment in the context of studying at the German University are interesting. The student considers misunderstandings, cultural shock and homesickness to be natural side effects of intercultural encounters in the educational exchange. So the experiences and lessons made at the university abroad are reflected as following:

- *First, you can participate more in social life to avoid loneliness. Second, it helps to learn more about the culture of the host country. Third, you have to eat healthy, reduce stress and, of course, think positive. Homesickness is normal.*

The findings of the present study about experiences made by students in situation of intercultural communication do support the intercultural competence in educational process described in Deardorff (2006), where self-awareness and self-reflection is part of the definition. Their intercultural experience teaches them the regularities, which are considered a priori as essential in the respective academic culture and - in the case of a violation - are strongly condemned. All the more important is the intercultural exchange in order to close potential gaps in knowledge and to complement cultural knowledge. The presented data and the results clearly show, that students value the intercultural communication as a way of linguistic practice as well as to broaden their personal horizons.

7. Conclusion

In the present paper, we analysed the interviews of students and compared concepts and models of intercultural competence. Our focus was on practical measures aimed at the formation and development of intercultural competence. Both at German and Russian universities, the number of international students is steadily increasing, but their academic success often lags significantly behind that of native students. Communication structures and ways of working of and between students of different nationalities may be as different as those between university teachers and students. Different norms and approaches to research, teaching and learning are often based on fundamentally different scientific concepts. Therefore, it is important to form and develop intercultural competence among both students and young university teachers, to prepare them for work with multicultural heterogeneous groups. Taking into consideration German experience and Russian students' needs we put the following main tasks, the solution of which will help to achieve the goals mentioned above: 1) to expand the content of modules on intercultural communication for more intensive preparing Russian students for academic mobility; 2) to strengthen the training of translators for work in heterogeneous multicultural organizations; 3) to increase intercultural competence of students and young teachers of NovSU in the framework of special trainings and workshops.

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