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A SHORT WORKSHOP FOR TEACHING INTERCULTURAL
SKILLS

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Abstract

This paper is devoted to the problem of teaching skills of intercultural communication of students participating in different international students' programs. Our world is becoming more and more complex, and thus higher and higher levels of educational achievement will be needed to be in control of one's own life, to understand one's culture and other cultures, and to find fulfilling work. Recently the number of students of Kalmyk State University having an opportunity to study or to work in a foreign country has greatly increased. The main aim of this work is to investigate how a short intercultural training workshop can promote the development of intercultural competence and teach these students to adapt to new cultural and language environment. Teachers of foreign languages are aware that study abroad experiences require developing the level of intercultural competence and acquiring cultural sensitivity by these students. We have studied the concept of intercultural communication and different methods for acquiring this competence. Different scholars suggest their view on how to expand students' knowledge of multi-cultural issues, skills relating across cultures, and awareness of cultural distinctiveness in order to acquire specific skills in cultural competence. We have delivered a short intercultural training workshop for students to enhance their cross-cultural skills and global understanding. When students return home from abroad, they reported higher levels of emotional resilience, openness and flexibility.

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Keywords: Intercultural communication, teachers of foreign languages, intercultural competence, cross-cultural skills, intercultural training workshop, international students' programs.



1. Introduction

This article highlights the work of a short intercultural training workshop designed for a group of students who have an opportunity to go abroad as interns with agricultural farms in Germany and language courses in Chinese universities. The number of these students of the Kalmyk State University named after B.B. Gorodovikov increases every year due to cooperation with foreign universities and programs. When students return home we speak with them and uncover many problems common to all participants in the programs. Students have to cope with communication in a foreign language and be able to adapt to the conditions of life in a foreign country. Students learn a second language, but its command is not enough for a complete intercultural understanding of people from different countries. Leading authorities on intercultural communication reinforce the importance of developing specific intercultural competencies such as self-awareness, verbal communication, worldview frameworks, and cultural dimensions. Therefore, it is necessary to know the cultural features, traditions, characteristics of the mentality, the behavior of partners for the upcoming communication. Teachers of foreign languages teach students these aspects of life by the example of texts about the life in English-speaking and German-speaking countries. But foreign language classes are unlikely to give teachers enough time to deal with the cultural traditions and customs of various countries of the world. Thus, a short intercultural training workshop is needed to make students aware of the impact that culture and intercultural competence have on everyday life.

The purpose of the study was to investigate how a short intercultural training workshop helps students to be promoted to an openness towards other culture and view it as a way to get to know about other cultures and social systems, how it can introduce students to theories of ‘intercultural communication’ and provide students with knowledge and skills to interact successfully abroad, how students discuss their verbal and non-verbal interaction within their own cultural norms and how this translates and gets interpreted when interacting with others, especially between high and low context cultures, how effectively they discuss the aspects of life where cultural differences may lead to cultural conflicts and can discuss key issues of ‘culture shock’ to help students to minimize this problem.

By the end of this short intercultural training workshop, students should be able to demonstrate: attitudes of intercultural openness, knowledge of cultural self-awareness and worldview frameworks, skills of nonverbal and verbal communication and empathy.

2. Problem Statement

The number of students of Kalmyk State University having an opportunity to study abroad has greatly increased. Teachers of foreign languages are aware that they should acquire skills of intercultural communication.

The modern world is witnessing the acceleration of the processes of integration, globalization and expansion in spheres of intercultural interaction. Modern global and virtual labor market requires deep language skills and also intercultural skills. The main focus is on the ability to cope with cultural strangeness, as well as successfully communicate and interact with people from other cultures. Intercultural knowledge and competence are “a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts.” (Bennett, 1998; Bennet, 2008). And for education and for society as a whole, the important task is to prepare the young generation

to work with people who represent different cultures and different faiths. This requires that each person should be able to understand and accept a different culture in order to be able to adapt in an unfamiliar environment, to live and work with other people who are carriers of different cultures. Therefore, the acquisition of intercultural competence, which helps people transform their knowledge, attitude and behavior, has become an important problem for education.

3. Research Questions

The study was interested in two questions: 1) How do different scholars suggest their view on expansion students' knowledge of multi-cultural issues and awareness of cultural distinctiveness in order to acquire specific skills in cultural competence; 2) How can a short intercultural training workshop enhance students' cross-cultural skills and global understanding.

In support of our workshop we made a review of research literature concerning the concept of intercultural communication. The concept of 'intercultural communication' was first formulated in the work of G. Traider and E. Hall "Culture and Communication. Model of Analysis", it is an ideal goal that every person should strive for in his desire to adapt better and effectively to the world around him. Professor S.G. Ter-Minasova defines the importance of intercultural communication. "Knowledge of grammar and meanings of words does not ensure successes in communication, it requires knowledge of the culture of their partners, their general cultural background, their way of life, their social structure, their habits and traditions, norms of behavior, a system of values, relations between themselves and the perception of the world "(Ter-Minasova, 2008). Intercultural competence includes respect for the realities of the culture of another people, the ability to apply knowledge of norms and customs to solve intercultural problems, tolerance, ability to assess and compare cultures, traditions and values. One Austrian scientist notes that the Germans believe that a leisurely, but smooth speech is an indicator of the competence of the speaker in any matter, a slow speech indicates slow thinking, and a fast speech is assessed as careless and superficial.

Intercultural competence as an object of research is considered in the works of many modern researchers, such as following: M. By`ram, N.N. Vasilyeva, N.D. Galskova, S.I. Garmaeva, N.I. Gez, A.P. Sadokhin, V.V. Safonova. Many authors, as (Byram, 2000), while examining intercultural communication, focus mainly on expanding the list of language competencies including special, ethical, aesthetic, cultural competencies.

A. Knapp-Potthoff divides the content of intercultural competence into three groups of knowledge:

- a) affective elements** - empathy and tolerance. Empathy (from the Greek *empathia* - co-living) = the quality of the individual, his ability to penetrate through the senses in the emotional experiences of other people, sympathize with them, empathize;
- b) cognitive elements** - ethnocentrism and ethno cultural relativism, which serve as the basis for an adequate interpretation of the communicative behavior of representatives of another culture to prevent misunderstanding and change one's own communicative behavior in an interactive process;
- c) procedural elements** - strategies used in situations of intercultural contacts: first, aimed at the success of such interaction, encouraging speech action, searching for common cultural elements, readiness to understand and identify signals of misunderstanding, using the experience of

previous contacts, etc.; second, aimed at replenishing knowledge of the cultural identity of the partner (Knapp-Potthoff, 1990).

M. Byram developed the structure and ways of assessing the concept of intercultural competence. The Byram model covers various qualities, abilities of the individual. According to this model, intercultural competence consists of five elements:

- relations;
- knowledge;
- the ability to interpret and correlate;
- skills of discovery and interaction;
- critical awareness of culture or political education (Byram, 2000).

An integral part of the course of intercultural communication is stereotypes. The concept of "stereotype" was introduced by W. Lippman, who defined stereotypes as "... preconceptions that decisively govern all processes of perception" (Lippman, 1964). S.G. Ter-Minasova defines the stereotype as "a schematic, standardized image or idea of a social phenomenon or object, usually emotionally colored and possessing stability. The stereotype expresses the habitual attitude of a person to a phenomenon that has developed under the influence of social conditions and previous experience. (Ter-Minasova, 2000)

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate how a short intercultural training workshop helps students to be promoted to an openness towards other culture and view it as a way to get to know about other cultures and social systems, and provide students with knowledge and skills to interact successfully abroad.

5. Research Methods

In our work we used the following methods: socio-pedagogical, comparative and experimental. We reviewed research works concerning the concept of 'intercultural competence' and 'intercultural communication', conducted experimental work with students in a short intercultural workshop and interviewed students with the help of a questioner, evaluated students' readiness to communicate effectively in a new cultural environment.

6. Findings

Every year students of the engineering, economic and agrarian faculties can participate in a 5-month agricultural internship in Germany under the program "Deula-Nirenberg" and "LOGO" and also students of different faculties can learn Chinese in China. These programs are academic programs offering students to gain experience in both the workplace and in the social context.

The students were assigned to one of two groups:

- Those in group one had a short intercultural training workshop.
- Those in group two – the control one – received no guidance.

Our aim was to help students acquire a certain level of intercultural competence and compare their level with those who went abroad without attending a short course on the basics of intercultural communication and those who participated in the classes. Also we were interested in the question “Has the foreign work experience influenced your further study, life goals and how successful your career will be in future”. We interviewed about 43 students who participated in various programs. This short workshop provides students with knowledge and skills to interact effectively once they are abroad. It will also encourage them to participate in other foreign programs and feel themselves more confident in a foreign environment.

This workshop provides a general course in intercultural competence. It helps students to develop cultural competency by developing an understanding of how to perceive and react to cultural rules of other peoples. Intercultural Competence provides students with the background and confidence to succeed in today's multicultural environment. We tell students that you cannot choose your family, but you can choose your friends. You cannot choose which culture to belong to because you are simply born into one. This culture shapes your attitudes, your behavior, and your perceptions.

Intercultural competence includes respect for the realities of the culture of another people, the ability to apply knowledge of norms and customs to solve intercultural problems, tolerance, ability to assess and compare cultures, traditions and values. Communicative competence includes the ability to carry out various types of communication based on knowledge of the rules of etiquette, the ability to really assess communication situations on the basis of value relationships and to cooperate without conflicts.

In helping students better understand new cultural settings, we quote the words of Elmer D. who suggests that cultural differences aren't “right or wrong, they're just different” (Elmer, 2009). We teach students to be careful not to judge too quickly before deciding that some part of the culture is right or wrong. You'd better stop and evaluate personal feelings and the feelings of others, suspend judgment, and ask “why” questions. Following these suggestions will allow students to have a more positive experience with cultural transitions.

The problem of the globalization of education and its impact on the development of intercultural competence of students are studied by teachers in many universities around the world. Teachers at the University of Indiana (Czerwionka, Artamonova, & Barbosa, 2015) describe in their study an increase in intercultural skills for students with experience of internships abroad. Interviews with students were held before departure and after returning to their homeland. Conversations with students convince teachers of the need to conduct classes not only in a foreign language, but also to acquaint students with the specifics of culture, history, politics and the daily life of the country where students are sent for internships.

Researchers from the University of California (Barbuto, Beenen, & Tran, 2015) talk about the experience of being abroad students of the business college, who were introduced before leaving with cultural characteristics of foreign countries. Such lessons have helped students successfully adapt to foreign universities, gain the necessary knowledge and achieve success in their studies.

Scientists from the University of Boston (Mody, Gordon, Lehto & Adler, 2017) studied the impact of short-term internship on the intercultural skills of students. Their experience shows that it is easier for students to adapt in a country whose culture is closer to the student's native culture.

In the theory of lingual didactics, three levels of interpersonal communication are distinguished. The first level requires the ability to establish a psychological relationship with a communication partner in a foreign language. At this level, communication is conducted using phrases, gestures and smiles, which indicates linguistic alienation. The second level is characterized by the ability to conduct a business conversation on a particular topic or the ability to compose a document in a foreign language. At the second level, there is a need for profound knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, knowledge of the culture of the people speaking the language. "The culture of interethnic communication is a set of special knowledge, skills, personal qualities, as well as actions and actions that are adequate to them, manifested in interpersonal contacts and interaction of representatives of various ethnic communities and allowing rapid and painless achievement of mutual understanding and harmony in the common interests" (Markova, 2010). The third level is classified as "intercultural". This level is characterized by free command of a foreign language, knowledge of culture, history and mentality of the people, the ability to fully understand the interlocutor.

In the course of workshop language training, it is necessary to master the intercultural competence to ensure understanding and respect for the culture of another people in order to achieve successful practical communication and further personal development in order to fit into a new cultural environment, establish interpersonal relations with foreign colleagues, and perceive that a global society is much characterized by interdependence.

When students return back home, we interviewed them and they were able to recall and discuss the details of their experience abroad. One student said, "I don't have to abandon for myself, but I must adjust my behavior and not judge others based upon my own values. In my opinion, if you cannot accept others' beliefs or if you continue to judge others based on your own cultural values, you will not be successful in living or working abroad." Intercultural competence helps to achieve mutual understanding and ability to communicate in a foreign language, as well as to solve production problems, which is part of the responsibility of professional competence. Therefore, for students, the knowledge of the peculiarities of national culture as an expression of national psychology is especially important.

We asked to give their opinion about the program of the short intercultural workshop in the form of a questionnaire. The students were given some statements and asked whether they agree or disagree with them:

- the program of the workshop corresponds to your needs;
- the program of the intercultural workshop is necessary and urgent;
- the information you received corresponds to the program of the workshop;
- it is possible to apply received knowledge in practice;
- I will recommend this workshop to my peers;
- the program changed your opinion about the host country.

Having analyzed the answers of 43 students, we obtained the following results: 88.4% of students answered that the declared program corresponded to their needs. 5% answered that the program didn't correspond to their needs and the remaining 7% were neutral, they didn't realize their needs. Absolute majority of students are satisfied with the opportunity to apply the received knowledge in practical work by evaluating corresponding item number 4 of the test for 'agree' and 'strongly agree'.

For convenience of perception, we present the data in the form of Figure 01.

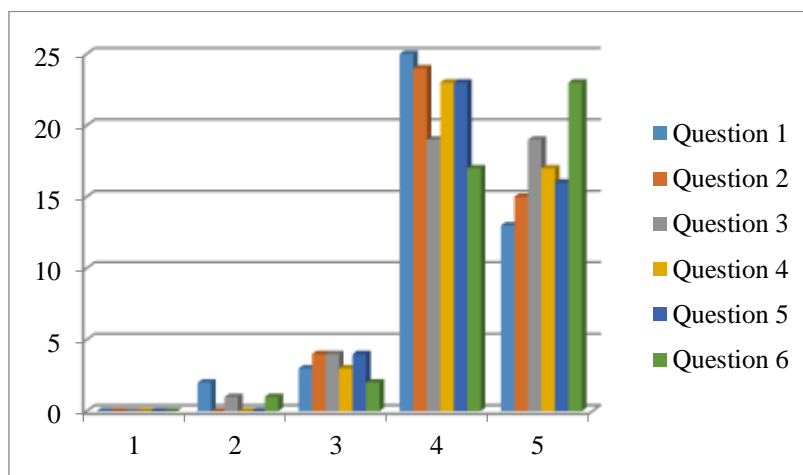


Figure 01. Answers to statements.

Only 14% of students think that participation in the course did not give the necessary base for applying the knowledge gained in practical work which gives us the reason to pay more attention to this issue.

Students who have cultural and professional experience of internship abroad, who use their experience in their work are invited to the workshop on the basics of intercultural communication for students traveling to Germany. They share personal impressions of housing conditions and working conditions and social life during the practice. They also tell a lot about everyday life and about the agriculture of Germany, about their acquaintance with different enterprises and about the experience of working in various structures. Students' internship of various specialties abroad helps them apply knowledge of intercultural communication in practice. One of the examples of successful influence of participation in foreign programs, can be Lyudmila Bikel (Babicheva), the graduate of the agricultural department of our university. She passed the practice in 2006-2007 at German enterprises and currently resides in Osnabrück (Germany) with her husband and daughter and works as a coordinator of the LOGO program (Streltsova, 2013).

In addition, cognitive and affective components are distinguished in the intercultural competence. In the opinion of A.P. Sadokhin intercultural competence is "a body of knowledge, skills and abilities that allows an individual to communicate with representatives of other cultures at both routine and professional levels".

7. Conclusion

Overall, evidence on the impact of our short intercultural training workshop was found to be broadly positive. Experiments show that intercultural competence can encourage students to behave properly in different cultural environment. Our work proves that internship of students in a foreign country is important for the internationalization of higher education. Student mobility has been and remains an important part of globalization and the expansion of areas of intercultural interaction. Our work is important because, firstly, we have tried to find out the influence of foreign internship on the students' educational motivation,

and secondly, the influence of a short intercultural training workshop on the basics of intercultural communication in new living conditions. Although attendance is optional, the high percentage of participation shows that all these students are happy to take the opportunity to learn more about different cultures and getting to know about different people and cultures. They are satisfied with the results of their internship abroad and advise their friends to go abroad after attending our workshop. Now students are aware of how their culture shaped their own cultural rules and they are able to adapt and to take opportunities to practice and to understand rules of communication in different cultures. When they have knowledge of cultural worldview frameworks, they can understand the elements important to members of another culture. These elements can relate to the culture's history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, beliefs, and practices. There is scope for further developing intercultural training workshop using a variety of different types of work with students.

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