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DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS FOR OVERCOMING STEREOTYPES IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The article addresses the issue of developing students' critical thinking skills as an effective way of dealing with stereotypes arising in intercultural communication. These skills constitute an integral component of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which is the result of merging communicative and intercultural competences and recognized as a key goal in foreign language teaching. The article gives an overview of critical thinking skills and substantiates that these skills are instrumental in overcoming cultural stereotypes. Based on their teaching experience, the authors suggest a technique for developing critical thinking skills in foreign language classrooms. This technique is aimed at reducing and preventing stereotypes, or overgeneralizations, which often lead to misunderstanding and distorted perceptions of other cultures as well as students' own culture. The suggested technique consists of four consecutive stages, which are motivational, educational, practical and controlling stages. The authors describe the purpose of each stage and give examples of activities and tasks used at each stage. They also provide guidelines for teachers, including lists of questions for critical evaluation of information.

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1. Introduction

The increasing internationalization and globalization set specific requirements on professional education, including professionally integrated foreign language education, the overall goal of which should be intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Having rather a complex structure, this competence requires an interdisciplinary approach. Studies in psychology, linguistics, language teaching science and theory of communication (Wiseman, 2006) enable to indicate constituents of ICC, the complex development of which provides effective language and culture learning with the aim of successful intercultural communication. One of these constituents is critical thinking skills (Bennett, 2013; Deardorff, 2009; Wiseman, 2006). In intercultural communication, often impeded by stereotypes, prejudices and biases, critical thinking skills are a vital asset, especially if we take into account an unprecedented amount of information to which people are exposed. This article considers how critical thinking skills can be used for dealing with stereotypes in intercultural communication and what activities can be recommended for developing these skills in EFL classrooms.

2. Problem Statement

Before designing a teaching technique for developing students' critical thinking skills to overcome cultural stereotypes in intercultural communication, let us consider:

- what intercultural communicative competence is;
- what the core skills of critical thinking are;
- why it is important to cope with stereotypes.

2.1. The definition of intercultural communicative competence

The phenomenon of intercultural communicative competence emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century as a result of integration of communicative and intercultural competences. Communicative competence has been the chief goal in a foreign language acquisition, which meant a certain level of language and socio-cultural knowledge and skills enabling students to act properly in various cross-cultural situations. Practice showed that such knowledge and skills are not enough for successful intercultural communication. In case of developing communicative competence students became oriented to a target language social background assuming other view of the world, whereas proper intercultural communication presupposes a parity dialogue of cultures, the result of which, according to Bakhtin (1986), will be understanding and acceptance of differences between them; it is the process of mutual cultural exchange within which new intercultural values are created (Moeller & Nugent, 2014, p. 2). Thus, it became more appropriate to speak about intercultural competence, which emphasizes students' background knowledge, tolerance, speaking strategies (including non-verbal techniques), interpretation and ability to get feedback (Byram, 1997). The problem was that developing intercultural competence did not imply excellent language proficiency, making it possible to refer to a professional interpreter if needed. This was accentuated by Byram (1997), who refers intercultural competence to people's "ability to interact in their own language with the people from another country and culture," while intercultural communicative

competence takes into account language teaching and focuses on “the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language” (p. 71).

Some scientists have taken attempts to incorporate intercultural elements into communicative competence structure; others, on the contrary, added communicative component to intercultural competence, asserting the fact that pragmatic sphere is as important as cognitive and motivational ones (Kim, 1991). The second point of view seems more reliable as in this case the communicative component is naturally introduced into the intercultural competence structure. The authors accentuate the importance of the ability to understand and overcome cross-cultural diversities, realizing one’s own linguistic identity and correlating different views of the world. Having coined a common conceptual meaning in their minds, the communicators can efficiently carry out intercultural interaction. Moreover, it is even more important that cognizing other culture individuals at the same time enrich knowledge of their own one.

Eventually, intercultural competence has been reintroduced; today it is more appropriate to talk about the phenomenon of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC).

In literature we can find numerous definitions of ICC, with the authors accentuating these or those aspects of the notion. For example, Byram (1997) views a person who has developed ICC as able to build relationships while speaking in the foreign language; to communicate effectively, taking into consideration his own and the other person’s viewpoint and needs; to mediate interactions between people of different backgrounds, and who strives to continue developing communicative skills. As is seen from the suggested definition, the author puts forward attitudes as a key component of ICC.

Chen and Starosta (1999) define ICC as “the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviours that negotiate each other’s cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment” (p. 28). Obviously, the authors emphasize the adaptability as a core element of ICC.

Kim (1991) suggests that intercultural communication competence is comprised of knowledge, skills, and motivation needed to interact effectively and appropriately with persons from different cultures. In this definition, motivation is a unique element not included in some of the other definitions of ICC and is further defined as “the set of feelings, intentions, needs and drives associated with the anticipation of or actual engagement in intercultural communication” (Kim, 1991, p. 263).

According to Wiseman (2006), the structure of ICC can be represented through six “C”s:

- 1) Communicative competence;
- 2) Cooperative competence;
- 3) Confidence;
- 4) Commitment to universal human rights;
- 5) Critical thinking;
- 6) Comparability.

As is seen from the suggested pattern, critical thinking skills make a substantial part of IC along with the knowledge of not less than two languages, ability to work in a team, person’s assertiveness as a professional, person’s civic duties and responsibilities, patriotism and tolerance, skills of interpreting and relating. This point of view seems the most well-founded as the complex of skills proposed by the author is aimed not only at high language proficiency and acquaintance with the target culture, but also at analysing

and interpreting other's view of the world through one's own perspective. Such a strategy will ensure the cognitive flexibility, with the help of which a student is able to continually supplement and revise existing knowledge to create new categories rather than forcing new knowledge into old categories. This will, first of all, prevent the formation of stereotypes and can help them avoid prejudging an encounter or jumping to conclusions; second, being able to reflect on and adapt their knowledge as they gain new experiences, students will enrich and understand their own world view better.

2.2. Critical thinking and its core skills

Since critical thinking was first described by Dewey (2008) in 1910, there have been numerous definitions of this term. Educators generally understand the core of this concept as "careful goal-directed thinking"; yet, the existing definitions of critical thinking "can vary according to its presumed scope, its presumed goal, one's criteria and threshold for being careful, and the thinking component on which one focuses" (Hitchcock, 2018, p. 29).

A lot of attention has been given to determining what cognitive skills critical thinking consists of. Ennis (1985) claims that since critical thinking is "reflective and reasonable" and "focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 45), it goes beyond the lower-order thinking skills in the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy, which are knowledge and comprehension, and comprises a significant part of the higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation. This means that besides recalling, organizing, comparing, interpreting and summarizing information, critical thinkers are able to reason and apply knowledge to solve problems, to thoroughly examine information and to explore different viewpoints, to combine information in new patterns and to draw conclusions (Ennis, 1985).

Wade (1995) distinguishes eight characteristics of critical thinking. In her opinion, a critical thinker should be able to ask questions, determine problems, analyse evidence, scrutinize assumptions and biased judgments, avoid emotional reasoning, eschew oversimplified statements, take into account multiple interpretations and be willing to accept ambiguity.

Facione's (2010) research, during which he surveyed a group of forty-six experts about essential elements of critical thinking, shows that critical thinking includes six main cognitive skills: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation.

The Pearson RED critical thinking model (Chatrand et al., 2011) arranges critical thinking skills into three groups, which are Recognizing assumptions, Evaluating arguments, and Drawing conclusions. Although this model was designed for training programs in business environment, it is also applicable in other contexts, for example, in teaching foreign languages. Being able to recognize assumptions and evaluate the quality of arguments before making a logical conclusion based on solid evidence is vital in intercultural communication where the view of another culture is often subject to overgeneralizing and stereotyping. Since critical thinking was first described by Dewey (2008) in 1910, there have been numerous definitions of this term. Educators generally understand the core of this concept as careful goal-directed thinking; yet, the existing definitions can vary according to the scope of critical thinking, its goal, the thinking component, the criteria and threshold for being careful (Hitchcock, 2018).

2.3. Stereotypes in intercultural communication

The term “stereotype” is used to describe rigid beliefs about a particular category of people considered to conform to one pattern and lack any individuality. These beliefs can be based on different variables, such as social class, nationality, gender, education, religion, sexual orientation and others.

Since stereotypes originate from social categorization, which is a natural cognitive process, people tend to have generalizing preconceptions about others and overlook their individual characteristics. Such oversimplified representations of a specific national group are common in intercultural communication.

Any stereotype, whether it is positive or negative, is a misleading overgeneralization based on judgmental attitude and selective perception. Blum (2004) calls stereotypes “a form of morally defective regard of persons” because they are “false and unwarranted” (p. 271). In Blum’s (2004) opinion, among the deficiencies of stereotyping are “viewing members of the stereotyped group as more similar to one another than they actually are” and “viewing members of the stereotyped group as more different from other groups than they actually are” (p. 275).

In intercultural communication, stereotypes often lead to misunderstanding or even cultural conflicts as they prevent representatives of one national culture from rationally evaluating products, perspectives, and practices related to another culture. Besides, as stereotypes are typically acquired in a subconscious way, as part of socialization (Macrae et al., 1996), people are often unaware that they hold stereotypic beliefs about other cultures. As these stereotypes are deeply rooted, they are hard to recognize and to subject to a critical examination.

Overcoming stereotypes as barriers to successful communication across cultures is one of the central roles in teaching foreign languages. Developing critical thinking skills is an effective way of deconstructing stereotypical perceptions and promoting openness toward other worldviews. The term “stereotype” is used to describe rigid beliefs about a particular category of people considered to conform to one pattern and lack any individuality. These beliefs can be based on different variables, such as social class, nationality, gender, education, religion, sexual orientation and others.

3. Research Questions

Developing critical thinking skills which are necessary for dealing with overgeneralizations (stereotypes) in intercultural communication is an elaborate process. We suggest a special teaching technique for this purpose. Since critical thinking comprises a set of interrelated skills often applied simultaneously, it is hardly possible to develop each of these skills in a discrete and linear way. It means that the technique suggested in this article includes activities which are often multi-purpose. At the same time, like any other teaching technique, this technique consists of four clear-cut stages, which are **motivational, educational, practical (autonomous) and controlling**. Before students start doing critical thinking activities, it is necessary to motivate them and to activate their cognitive sphere. The next step is to instruct students how to analyse and evaluate information properly before they begin to autonomously fulfil critical thinking tasks. Finally, the teacher should control and assess students’ work, discuss the results and make corrections if necessary.

4. Purpose of the Study

The practical goal of the study is to give a detailed description of each stage of the teaching technique for developing students' critical thinking skills as one of the key components of intercultural communicative competence. This will enable them to overcome cultural stereotypes during intercultural communication.

4.1. Motivational Stage

The first, motivational, stage involves engaging students and stimulating their interest in examining their own world views and the worldviews of people from other cultural backgrounds. At this stage, students need to realize that there are divergent world views, both across cultures and within one culture, yet people tend to have stereotypical perceptions distorting the complexity of the world. It should be emphasized that for successful intercultural communication it is vital to avoid overgeneralizations and to demonstrate flexibility in considering alternatives and opinions.

To stimulate students' interest, the teacher can, for example, show a video which gives examples of cultural stereotypes, or assign the students to read a text which contains cultural stereotypes, or ask the students to name some common stereotypes. These stereotypes can be about the students' own culture or about the culture they study. Then, the following questions can be discussed: "How do such stereotypes develop?"; "What effect do they have?"; "Does it make a difference whether the stereotypes are positive or negative?"; "Do you think it is possible to avoid such stereotypes?" Such a discussion will be a good lead-in to further activities.

4.2. Educational Stage

During the second, educational, stage the teacher's task is to provide activities aimed at developing students' critical thinking skills of recognizing assumptions and subjecting them to a critical examination. The teacher gives explanations and instructions and then guides the students as they do the activities.

Being able to recognize assumptions about other national cultures is essential as some of these assumptions may turn out to be false and may lead to stereotyping. Recognizing assumptions includes such skills as separating facts from opinions, evaluating the credibility of sources, and examining assumptions from multiple perspectives.

These skills can be developed through exposing students to information coming from different sources and asking them to evaluate the quality of the information and the sources. The following questions for such an evaluation can be suggested:

- Can this statement be verified?
- Does the statement look like an expression of judgment or belief?
- Is this statement based on research and supported by evidence (e.g. statistics, documentation, etc.)?
- Are there any biased words in the statement?
- Who is the author? What are his/her credentials? Are these credentials sufficient?

- What kind of source does the information come from (e.g. a blog, a personal website, a movie, a documentary, a website of an educational organization, etc.)? Do you think it is a credible source? Do you think it is a biased source? Why/Why not?
- Can you rely on one source of information? Why/Why not?

For instance, the teacher selects various texts on the topic “How do Americans view Russians?” The length and the difficulty of these texts vary depending on the students’ level of language proficiency. These texts could include an episode from an American movie featuring a Russian character, an extract from a book or an article written by an American author about Russians, a blog/ a video blog in which opinions about Russians are expressed, etc. The students study these texts and answer the questions above. Besides learning to differentiate between facts and opinions and to evaluate the sources of information, students get a valuable experience of dealing with multiple viewpoints, which gives them a richer perspective on the topic.

The next step is to critically analyse the assumptions. This means questioning the quality of evidence and identifying possible biases and logical fallacies. One of the most common biases resulting in stereotypical distortions and clichés about cultures is confirmation bias. This bias means the tendency to process information by selecting information which matches one’s world view and to ignore the information which is not consistent with it. For example, if a person has an idea that Americans are an individualistic nation, giving priority to personal liberty, s/he is likely to look for confirmatory examples and to reject contradictory examples.

For example, while doing the activity described above, students may come across some negative opinions about Russians and they may feel like rejecting this information under the influence of confirmation bias. In this case, analysing information objectively and accurately means detaching yourself from your mind-set and gaining a different perspective of your culture. These critical thinking skills are vital for better intercultural communication.

Sweeping generalizations (also called unqualified generalizations) and hasty generalizations (also known as faulty generalizations) are both logical fallacies which lead to stereotyping, exaggerations and unwarranted conclusions in any communication, including intercultural communication. The two fallacies are the inverse of each other. A sweeping generalization means treating a general rule as universally true and applying it to any specific situation, regardless of the circumstances, whereas a hasty generalization means taking a small sample and extrapolating a specific rule about this sample to a general situation. In both fallacies conclusions are not justified by sufficient, proper evidence. An example of a sweeping generalization could be a situation when a person says that because all Americans like eating fast food, a particular American must also like fast food. An example of a hasty generalization could be the opposite situation when a person says that he knows an American who likes eating fast food, so it must be true of all Americans.

Students should be taught how to identify these logical fallacies in other people’s reasoning and to avoid overgeneralizations in intercultural communication. This could be done through analysing a selection of texts on one aspect of culture from different sources, for example, texts about typical housing or fast food in the USA. The following questions can be suggested for discussing these texts:

- Does the source contain a personal experience or findings of a study?
- Is one person's experience enough to determine a group's characteristic?
- Is one study enough to determine a group's characteristic? Is it important to know how the study was conducted?
- How similar do you think members of one national culture are? How different do you think they are? What makes them similar or different?
- How much evidence is needed to make a justified generalization about a national culture?
- What linguistic means help to make a justified generalization?

These questions aim to stimulate students to question the assumptions and to reconsider them, to bring diverse information together and to avoid unwarranted generalizations.

It is important that students be taught how to use hedging to make qualified generalizations about other cultures, taking into account diversity of any group. Hedging, or cautious language, turns an overgeneralization into a credible claim. This language includes using modal verbs (e.g. may, might, can, could, etc.), certain lexical verbs (e.g. to seem, to appear, to tend, etc.), probability adjectives (e.g. probable, possible, (un)likely, etc.) and adverbs (e.g. probably, perhaps, apparently, etc.), qualifiers of degree, quantity, frequency, and time (e.g. roughly, generally, some, somewhat, often, etc.) and other features.

The following activity could be suggested. Students make a list of some common stereotypes about a nation, for example, about Americans or the English, and then change these overgeneralizations by means of hedging. If students have difficulty making such a list, the teacher can show a video with on-the-street interviews where people from one country talk about their stereotypes of another culture (there are plenty of videos of this type on the Internet). After the hedging activity, the teacher asks the students to discuss the effect caused by the use of hedging.

4.3. Practical Stage

The third stage of the technique is called practical, or autonomous. During this stage, students are given tasks in which they can practice their critical thinking skills for dealing with cultural stereotypes. These tasks vary in their content and form depending on the students' level of language proficiency and the syllabus. Let us consider a few examples.

Students can be asked to critically explore their own views of their national culture and to realize that this culture is not homogenous. The purpose of this exercise is to teach students to see multiple perspectives and to identify possible auto stereotypes, or overgeneralized perceptions of themselves. Students can do it in several ways:

- The teacher chooses a particular cultural aspect or several aspects (e.g. family, home, customs, work rules, community, food, time, sense of space, etc.) and makes a list of questions about people's behaviour and attitudes. For example, if the teacher chooses the topic "Family", such questions can be asked: "Do several generations usually live together, under one roof?"; "Who takes care of the elderly members of the family?"; "Do young people tend to move out when they come out of age?"; "Who does the household chores?" and others. The teacher asks students to

imagine a situation when a person from an English-speaking country asks them these questions. Working in small groups, students discuss how they would answer the questions. Then they present the results of their discussions to class. This task can be done in class or assigned as homework.

- Alternatively, this activity can be done individually. In this case, the teacher asks students to imagine that they need to write a post for a blog or make a video for a video blog about Russians. The teacher (or the students themselves) can create a blog on a free platform for the students to publish their content.

Similar projects can be done about various aspects of a foreign culture – its products, practices and perspectives. The teacher can organize work in a number of ways. Besides discussions and blogs/vlogs, students can make presentations, write essays and critical reviews, prepare posters, participate in debates, etc. When doing these projects, students will use their critical thinking skills to examine not only their view of the foreign culture but also that of their own culture. Comparing and contrasting the two cultures will eventually enrich their cognitive structure, making it broader, more flexible and interculturally equipped.

4.4. Controlling Stage

During the fourth stage of the technique the teacher exercises control and checks the correctness of the tasks completed by the students. The main focus is put on how well the students can identify overgeneralizations and use the language of hedging, how good they are at evaluating the quality of reasoning and considering multiple viewpoints before arriving at a conclusion.

5. Research Methods

Having taken into account the theoretical issues discussed above, the authors put into practice the procedure of teaching students intercultural communication with the aim of developing their critical thinking skills. The technique was tested with a group of second-year students (15 people) of Irkutsk State University (Baikal International Business School) majoring in management. These students study English for professional purposes and have 12 hours of language classes a week.

Before starting a series of classes devoted to the problem of stereotypes in intercultural communication, the students were offered an interactive lecture on stereotypes. After discussing numerous examples of stereotypical situations, they did a questionnaire. The results showed that 96% of the students are aware of the phenomenon of stereotypes and understand that it is a problem that can prevent effective communication with representatives from other cultures. About 30% of the group are able to distinguish between stereotypes and objective facts. Only 5% of the students have a vague idea of how to deal with stereotypes in intercultural communication.

Below is an example of one of the classes based on the suggested technique.

In this class, the teacher set the task of critically examining the concept of the American dream, the belief that everyone in the USA has the chance to be successful and happy if they work hard. There may be stereotypes about this concept which need to be recognized and challenged.

During the first stage, the teacher activated the students' background knowledge by brainstorming their ideas about the American dream. These ideas were written down on paper / on the board and grouped into categories. Only 67% of the group could describe this phenomenon in the American culture.

During the second stage the students watched a video where a journalist does man-on-the-street interviews and gets a range of opinions on how Americans understand the concept of the American dream. These ideas were also written down on paper or on the board. Then, the students discussed similarities and differences between the ideas which they have brainstormed and learned from the video. The teacher also asked the students to assess the reliability and sufficiency of the information from the video.

During the third stage the students were given the assignment to find more sources of information about the American dream and analyze them using the questions suggested above. They were encouraged to consider multiple viewpoints to get a richer perspective on this issue. The teacher suggested that they find answers to these questions: "Do all Americans believe in the American dream? Do they understand it in the same way? Is the American dream something unique, found in the USA only?" The results of this work were presented in the form of a report, a poster or an essay.

During the fourth stage the teacher assessed the results of the students' work and paid attention to how many sources of information the students have used and what these sources are like, how well they have analyzed this information, and whether they have used hedging to present their conclusions as reasonable claims, not as overgeneralizations.

6. Findings

The study showed the interrelation and interconnection between intercultural communicative competence and critical thinking skills and their importance for overcoming stereotypes. A series of classes designed on the basis of the suggested technique was taught to a group of students during which they were introduced to such concepts of American culture as American dream, privacy, patriotism, family and individualism. The teacher conducted diagnostic tests at the beginning and at the end of each series. The following criteria were under control:

- students' level of acquisition of linguacultural phenomena;
- changes in values when accepting facts about the target culture;
- students' level of analytical and interpretative skills.

Comparing the results of the tests we found out that the indicators tend to increase. The final test showed that 90% of the students are apt to make logical conclusions, evaluate quality of arguments and specify rather than generalize preconceptions. These results allow us to conclude that the technique presented in the study can be considered quite effective.

7. Conclusion

In this paper the value of critical thinking skills for overcoming cultural stereotypes in intercultural communication has been studied. First, the concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) was

clarified. Its distinction from related concepts of intercultural and communicative competences was defined. Then, it was proved that critical thinking skills are a key constituent of ICC and are crucial for overcoming cultural stereotypes. These skills were also specified. The purpose of the study was to work out a specific teaching technique for developing students' critical thinking skills which would enable them to successfully participate in intercultural communication dealing with stereotypes. The theoretical framework of this technique includes linguacultural, cognitive and communicative aspects of EFL teaching. The technique was tested on the students of Business School majoring in management. The testing before and after implementing a series of language classes based on the designed technique showed that the students started to process the information more carefully. They got acquainted with a number of concepts of American culture and realised that some of them are rather stereotypical. They improved their skills of examining information from different perspectives and extrapolating it into their own culture and view of the world. These skills will undoubtedly contribute to their future professional communication in cross-cultural situations.

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