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# DEVELOPING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE FOR ACADEMIC MOBILITY PURPOSES

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## Abstract

The article deals with the problem of developing students' intercultural communicative competence for intercultural exchanging programs which are a natural feature of global education and a necessary experience for a future professional. The article reveals the idea of academic mobility and discusses its tasks and challenges in general and in Irkutsk State Agrarian University named after A.A. Ezhevsky in particular. It proves that for efficient participating in international exchange programs students should obtain a certain degree of intercultural communicative competence. Comparative analysis of this competence with the relating phenomena showed that it has a complex characteristic which enables students to interact successfully with the representatives from the culture of a target language. The structure of intercultural communicative competence has been specified with particular criteria. Each criterion has been identified by certain descriptors so as to assess students' level of intercultural communicative competence. Some difficulties of developing students' intercultural communicative competence for academic mobility purposes have been pointed out, namely, writing a CV and a letter of motivation. A teaching technique for training certain intercultural students' skills for academic mobility has been designed and tested. The technique consists of four subsequent steps (motivational, educational, practical (independent) and correctional) and proved to be effective.

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*Keywords:* Academic mobility, foreign language acquisition, intercultural communicative competence, intercultural skills descriptors, teaching technique, TOEFL



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## 1. Introduction

Science and education being open and international by nature require constant collaboration with knowledge and practices exchange between scholars and professionals all over the world. Globalization processes facilitated communication between countries on scientific bases, and students got an opportunity to easily spend an academic year abroad or participate in short-term seminars and summer schools. The aim of academic mobility is binary. First of all, it is a necessity of introducing multistep credits/modules educational system and unifying state educational standards with the European ones (in the frames of Bologna Process). Secondly, it is a possibility to improve the quality of higher education by exchanging experience and getting broader opportunities beyond state borders (Bogoslovsky & Pisareva, 2007). Such a practice ensures students' greater demand as future professionals at the labour market and increases their chances to get a better job.

The development of international relationship with the universities of Europe and Asia is very dynamic at Irkutsk State Agrarian University. The University cooperates with the Universities of Life Sciences of Poznan and Warsaw (Poland), University of Lion (France), Agricultural University of Inner Mongolia (China), Chonbuk National University (Korea), Agricultural University of Madrid (Spain). Students have an opportunity to study at these universities during 1-2 semesters due to correlated curricula. Besides, the university offers an international educational bachelor and master's programs of double degree together with the Henan University of Animal Husbandry and Economics (Zhengzhou, China). As a result of these training programs students obtain two diplomas simultaneously. Moreover, there are numerous possibilities for the students to get a two-week summer internship in Finland, Denmark, Great Britain, Germany, Czech Republic, Poland, Kazakhstan and other countries. The University also takes part in Erasmus Academic Mobility Program.

Despite of such ample opportunities and awareness of their importance for one's personal and professional development, not so many students are ready to participate in international educational programs. One of the major obstacles preventing them from such an experience is lack of necessary language proficiency (communicative competence). For a student of non-linguistic specialization it takes time and great effort to acquire a foreign language at a certain level. However, even having mastered it well enough for studying purposes, the program applicants have particular difficulties living abroad, as they constantly have to solve everyday situations, work in an international team, be tolerant, think critically, interpret and relate, and analyse facts and events from the perspectives of two cultures: one's own and the target one. It is obvious that teaching students a foreign language for academic mobility purposes, it is more appropriate and advisable to develop their intercultural communicative competence, which is a much broader and deeper phenomenon than just a communicative competence.

The article describes one of the techniques of developing students' intercultural communicative competence with the aim of effective participation in academic mobility.

## 2. Problem Statement

**Academic mobility** can be regarded as one of the forms of education, connected with the students' migration to another educational establishment for a limited period of time. Eventually, a student has to return to his home university to complete his education and get a diploma.

According to the classification, academic mobility can be differentiated by its entities – students and teachers; by its objects – studies, research, advanced training and professional development, experience exchange; by forms – real and virtual; by extent – regional, state, international (Bogoslovsky & Pisareva, 2007).

Bologna Declaration points out two types of academic mobility: vertical and horizontal. Vertical mobility assumes student's completing education and getting a degree in a foreign university, whereas horizontal mobility means studying there within a limited period of time (a term or an academic year) (Bologna declaration, 1999). Academic mobility being a key point of Bologna Declaration is rather difficult and challenging for implementing (Gafurova & Tverdohlebova, 2010).

Scientists (Bogoslovsky & Pisareva, 2007; Martynenko & Zhukova, 2008) identify a number of tasks to be solved for organizing academic mobility at a certain establishment of higher education:

- creating and developing of grant system for students and teachers;
- improving of organizational mechanisms and documental support of academic mobility;
- providing students with comprehensive information about educational possibilities in other countries and universities;
- stimulating and motivating learning foreign languages, international relations and communication;
- integrating educational programs and study schedules with foreign universities;
- developing and maintaining cooperation with other universities;
- creating infrastructure for foreign students' support;
- creating necessary social and residential conditions;
- working out inner system of academic mobility assessment;
- organizing regular competition for participating in educational exchange programs.

Most of the above mentioned tasks are being successfully fulfilled at Irkutsk State Agrarian University. Practice of developing academic mobility at the university showed that the major problem is connected with students' language proficiency, as probably in most specialized non-linguistic universities.

To complete an international program a student should know not only a foreign language (communicative competence), but also the cultural background of the country in which he/she is going to study. Moreover, a student should obtain particular knowledge and skills (apart from communicative ones) to be an effective intercultural communicator. Thus, it is more appropriate to talk about intercultural communicative competence.

### 3. Research Questions

In various ELT literature we find the references to such notions as communicative competence, intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence. Each of these phenomena is regarded as a goal of a foreign language acquisition.

Analysis shows that communicative competence implies certain language and socio-cultural knowledge and skills letting the individual to act properly in communicative situations (Safonova, 1996). The principle task of the communicants in this case is to create a common meaning of the on-going event (Yelizarova, 2001). Beside language proficiency, this competence is aimed at acquaintance with some socio-cultural background. Thus, the student becomes oriented at the target culture and perceives the facts as granted. He/she does not always realize and take into account the fact that his/her own view of the world is sometimes drastically different from that he/she deals with.

Effective intercultural communication requires initiating of the process of “dialogue of cultures” in students’ minds (Bakhtin, 1986). In this case it is more appropriate to talk about intercultural competence, which assumes the ability of an individual to conduct intercultural communication taking into consideration the fact of differences between the two cultures (Byram, 1997; Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006; Skopinskaya, 2009). The authors also emphasize developing such qualities of the communicators as tolerance, openness, friendliness, strategic of interaction and feedback, leaving behind language proficiency, however (Ruiz & Spínola, 2019). It was Byram (1997), who noted that intercultural competence refers 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” (Byram, 1997, p.71). Thus, teaching language and culture for academic mobility purposes we should aim at intercultural communicative competence in the case of which a student will be able to build relationships while speaking in the foreign language; communicate effectively, taking into consideration his own and the other person’s viewpoint and needs; mediate interactions between people of different backgrounds, and strive to continue developing communicative skills.

In recent years, scientists have taken numerous attempts to merge the two competences – communicative and intercultural ones – and introduce a new phenomenon of intercultural communicative competence. This competence, in general sense, “implies the ability to realize, understand and interpret the two world views – one’s own and that of a target language – in their interconnection and on this foundation to execute the process of intercultural communication” (Intercultural Language Education: Lingua-didactic Strategies and Tactics, 2014, p. 69). The individual in this case acts as a mediator between the two cultures (Sercu, 2004).

### 4. Purpose of the Study

There is a large amount of approaches and analyses of the intercultural communicative competence structure (Alptekin, 2002; Byram, 1997; Chen & Starosta, 1996; Kim, 1995; Sercu, 2004; Spitzberg, 2000). Most of the authors distinguish three aspects / criteria in the structure: cognitive, motivational and behavioural.

Cognitive aspect includes skills and abilities to realize common and specific in the two world views through comparing and contrasting, comprehending and embracing the discrepancies in the norms, values, behavioural patterns during intercultural communication. At the same time a student should be able to reveal intercultural universals and analyse them.

Motivational aspect characterizes acquisition of human values of a multicultural society, respect to intercultural mismatches, and tolerant and non- stereotypical attitude to the representatives of the other culture and motivation to intercultural interaction.

Behavioural aspect involves ability to understand the significance of intercultural contradictions, and to form non-categorical opinions; high level of cognitive independence and activity, self-satisfaction, frequency and quality of applying of the knowledge in practice.

We have worked out a number of descriptors for each criterion with the help of which we can assess the level of students' intercultural communicative competence development (Table 01).

**Table 1.** Criteria for assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence

Criteria	Descriptors
Cognitive	knowledge of facts of everyday life and interpersonal relations in one's own and the target culture; knowledge of the value system and beliefs in the two lingua-cultures; knowledge of the etiquette rules and behavioural stereotypes in one's own and the target culture; ability to relate facts and events in the two cultures; ability to percept intercultural discrepancies as significant. ability and willingness to existing cultural stereotypes; admission or ignorance of cultural identity of each lingua-society;
Motivational	degree of tolerance and positive attitude to unusual/strange behaviour and way of thinking of the other culture representative; adequate expectancy of possible outcomes from communication with people from a target culture. degree of openness and interest for perception of something new and unusual; readiness to alter one's own perception of the two cultures;
Behavioural	critical thinking skills; ability and willingness to apply the knowledge and skills in the process of intercultural communication.

The level of intercultural communicative competence development can be considered optimal if 100-91% indicators for each criterion are revealed. 90-75% indicate a satisfactory level, 74-60% – elementary. Below 60% the level is very low (unsatisfactory).

The purpose of our research is to design a teaching technique that will enable a teacher to affect these spheres.

## 5. Research Methods

Observations and discussions with the students preparing to participate in academic mobility let us make some very important conclusions about the process of language teaching with the aim of developing students' intercultural communicative competence for academic mobility purposes. The first thing each applicant should do is prove his/her level of language proficiency passing one of international English

language tests (IELTS, TOEFL, KET, PET, FCE, CAE, CPE, BEC, etc.) and getting a corresponding certificate. Due to a very limited number of a foreign language training hours on the curricular, students have to attend various additional language courses and learn a foreign language independently. As a result, most of them pass the exam quite successfully. The next stage is to compose Curriculum Vitae (CV) or a resume and a portfolio which will include awards, certificates, and prizes in studies, science and sports. Beside this, a student has to write a motivation letter, describing research and professional projects he/she participated in, working experience and other achievements relevant to the Program and proving the fact that he/she is the best candidate. The CV and motivation letter are considered some of the most difficult and crucial documents to submit, as they require the knowledge of a particular strategic and tactics for their composition.

## 6. Findings

The technique of teaching students to write a CV and a motivation letter consists of four steps: **motivational, educational, practical (independent) and correctional**. Below, each step is carefully described from the standpoint of must-be-achieved goals, ways of teacher-student / student-student interactions, methods used and tasks and exercises fulfilled.

### 6.1. Step 1 (motivational)

At this stage the motivational basis for writing CV and motivation letter is formed. The following tasks should be set and solved:

- developing students' interest and stimulating curiosity;
- activating and systematizing students' background knowledge on the problem;
- extrapolating the problem into students' own lingua-culture; finding out its topicality for their cultural background;
- developing students' interest to intercultural contrasts.

To stimulate students' interest, we suggest a discussion of the following questions:

1. *What can be the purpose of writing CV and a motivation letter?*

2. *Have you seen any examples of these documents in your own and the other culture? Are there any differences between them?*

3. *Think if there are any differences in contents and details depending on the purpose of writing CV and a motivation letter.*

4. *Have you ever composed any of such papers?*

After the students' background knowledge and experience were activated and curiosity awoken, they can proceed to the next step.

## 6.2. Step 2 (educational)

The goals achieved at this stage should be:

- explaining and instructing students about specifics of the activity;
- fulfilling exercises together with the teacher.

First of all, the teacher provides the students with the authentic examples of CV and a motivation letter in Russian and English. The task for the students is to analyze and compare the documents from the point of view of their structure, form, language clichés used, information and details given. It is efficient to make students guess, what the purpose of an applicant to write the paper was.

Then, the students fulfill a number of language exercises which will enable them to compose their own documents at the third stage. Below there are some examples of such tasks:

1. *Read the resume of (name) and complete it with words from the box.*
2. *Answer the comprehension questions to the resume.*
3. *Find and write down words from the resume sample that fit the definitions given below.*
4. *Complete the chart (Table 02):*

**Table 2.** Job-related word-forms fill-in chart example

Noun	Verb	Adjective
<i>supervisor</i>	...	... <i>skills</i>
<i>experience</i>	....	... <i>person</i>
...	...	...

*Fill in the blanks in the sentences below with the correct form of the words from the chart.*

5. *Using the prompts below, interview your partner about his/her experience or expectations. Ask questions in turns.*
6. *Think of your ideal study experience. Make a list of expressions you need to describe possible activities, events, assignments, publications, and communication programs. Working with a partner, take turns to interview each other about your ideal study experience and responsibilities.*

In the end students work out their own template of Curriculum Vitae basing on the conclusions made while doing the above tasks.

To work on a motivation letter students are suggested some samples and made to discuss them from the point of view of their purpose, format, style and structure. It is better to organize this work in small groups with the following presenting and sharing the result of the discussion. It should be noted that in the Russian culture such type of business letters is not so popular and wide spread. That is why most students have rather a vague idea of what they are going to work with, and the absence of background knowledge on the issue complicates the task. It is crucial for a teacher to make students find the place for this new knowledge in their cognitive structure and not to reject it as something alien. After discussing the general concept of the letter, students should pay attention to the way the authors address and salute the intended recipient. The teacher comments on all the possible ways to do it. Next the teacher makes the student pay attention to the structure of the motivation letter. Usually it comprises four paragraphs with a particular

goal each. Studying each paragraph step by step, students make conclusions about their goals. Finally, it will be quite reasonable to compile a list of instructions “HOW TO WRITE AN IMPRESSIVE MOTIVATION LETTER”. The work here can be organized in two ways: it can be a group work and the instructions will be presented in the form of a poster; or it can be an individual project and there will be a contest for the best one afterwards. The instructions should contain strategic statements on the layout, excellent introduction, language, length, positive attitude, etc.

After the students were armed with the necessary knowledge and skills, they can start creating their own CVs and motivation letters.

### **6.3. Step 3 (practical)**

The chief goal of this step for the students is to compile their own CVs and motivation letters. This is an independent creative work demanding time, effort and concentration. It is better to give it as a home assignment done out of class, setting a definite deadline. The works are then given in to the teacher for assessment.

### **6.4. Step 4 (correctional)**

At this stage the teacher checks the correctness of the tasks done by the students. He/she assess the works by certain criteria. Then in class it is efficient to discuss and comment on particular elements which deserve paying attention to as good or bad. A good idea may be also organizing a role-play where two or three students will act as a jury studying and deciding who the best candidate for the program is and why.

## **7. Conclusion**

In this paper, the value of intercultural communicative competence for academic mobility has been studied. The paper addressed the question of why the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence is important in higher education, especially for student exchanges. It defined intercultural communicative competence and provided analytical information about its various components. The implications of this information for assessment purposes are also discussed. Finally, a technique of developing students' intercultural communicative competence has been developed. The described technique has been tested on the students of Economics at Irkutsk State Agrarian University. The results show essential rise in students' motivation to studying the English language, growth of their confidence and assertiveness, wish to analyse and find out cultural peculiarities and contrasts and consider them when working in an intercultural team.

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