UDC 811.111 : 378.016

Developing General Cultural Literacy through Teaching English in a Russian University: Competence and Semiotic Approach

[1]Svetlana A. Zolotareva
[2]Marina V. Mezhova

[1] Kemerovo State University of Culture and Arts, Russian Federation
17 Voroshilov St., Kemerovo, 650029
PhD (Culture Studies), Assistant Professor
E-mail: s.a.zolotareva@gmail.com
[2] Kemerovo State University of Culture and Arts, Russian Federation
17 Voroshilov St., Kemerovo, 650029
PhD (Culture Studies), Head of the Foreign Languages Department
E-mail: mezhova75@mail.ru

Abstract. The article is devoted to some of the issues of teaching English in a Russian university, which arouse as a result of introducing new educational standards and it discusses the ways of forming students' general cultural competence by using authentic curricula, in order to meet the requirements of those standards. It also shows the importance of semiotics for acquisition a foreign language and culture, and reveals the worth of "personalia" as a culture language sign, as well as peculiarity of its functioning, which lies in its ability to represent social and cultural values and priorities in personal-precedential form, thus making a contribution to developingan individual'sconcept scheme and, consequently, general cultural literacy.

Keywords: general cultural competence, sign, personalia, concept scheme, federal educational standards, higher educational institutions, English language teaching.

Introduction. There is no need to argue that the main trend in the development of science, technology, education and other areas of human activity in the twenty-first century is the trend towards globalization. As a result, each individual is included in the process of intercultural communication, both in terms of personal and professional interactions. Reforming the system of Russian higher education implies changes not only in the formal structure, but also its content component.

According to the new educational standards of higher professional education, the most important task of the university is to help the students develop the competences (ability to apply knowledge, skills and personal qualities)vitally important for the further successful professional and social life. Those may include social and cultural, administrative and managerial, academic and professional competences. Russian federal educational standards divide them into two groups: general cultural and professional ones. Being a general academic subject, teaching foreign language is aimed, in the first place, at forming a student's ability to be a full participant of intercultural communication. However, it is not limited to this mission, and that is the subject of this research.

Materials and methods. The sources for this articleare the authentic textbooks for English as a foreign language students published by various British publishing houses: Macmillan, Heinemann, Express Publishing, as well as some fundamental research of the Russian scientists

and Federal educational standards for higher institutions. The methods used in processing the material are: method of continuous selection, method of comparative contextual analysis, method of applied analysis.

Discussion. The requirements of Federal educational standards must be met and are clearly reflected in the curricular used for teaching English in Russian universities. Here we are going to discuss how it is achieved and provide some examples. One of thestandards says "the graduate must possess the culture of thinking, be able to synthesize, analyze and process information", and this is perfectly realized in most language-learning tasks, especially the reading ones, as follows:

"What is personal information?

Personal information is information about you. It can be your name, address or telephone number. It can also be the type of job you do, the things you buy whenyou are shopping and the place you went to school.

Why is managing my personal information important?

Today, like it or not, our personal information is held by many public and private organisations. These may include:government departments, banks and building societies,gas, electric, phone and internet sservice providers, supermarkets and high-street retailers,employers,hospitals and doctors,mail-order and internet companies, the police,schools, airlines and travel agents, local councils.

What is my personal information used for?

Although most of the personal information stored about you will provide benefits like better medical care and financial reassurance, it also brings dangers. If your personal information is wrong, out of date or not held securely, it can cause problems. You could be unfairly refused a job, benefits or credit, or a place at college. In extreme cases, you could be a victim of identity theft or arrested for a crime you did not commit.

(Extract taken from Personal Information Toolkit, 2007, published by th*e* Information Commissioner's Office)

Example:

Personal information includes details of where you live. **T**

33   Personal information includes information about your family.
34   Some people do not like organisations holding their personal information.
35   The leaflet lists all the organisations that hold your personal information.
36   Private organisations are not allowed to hold personal information.
37   Social networking sites store your personal information.
38   Personal information is not kept by shops.

39   Utility companies hold your personal information.
40   On balance, storage of your personal information is likely to be positive foryou.
41   If your personal information is wrong, your doctor could refuse to treat you.
42   It is likely that you will be a victim of identity theft if your personal information is wrong".[6], which teaches the students to compare and contrast the ideas, and analyze the meaning of different lexical and grammar structures.

A lot of Russian students admit they have learned to structure their thoughts thanks to numerous step-by step writing tasks in the authentic English text books, thus building the required by the standards ability "to be able to build oral and written argument logically and clearly".We consider it unnecessary to provide samples of these tasks here, as they can be found in every textbook aimed at learners of different age.

Another excellent example of developing the right competences is represented by the text "Readers' response" in Macmillan Global pre-intermediate [1], where we can find a discussion of the positive and negative effects of using CCTV cameras, demonstrating "abilityto understand significance and function of the information in the development of modern society, to recognize the dangers and threats caused by this process".

Finally, there is no doubt cognition of your individual self is of primary importance, and the authors of Macmillan Global Intermediate [2] give the language learners a wonderful opportunity to understand the way they perceive information, so that they could use this knowledge both for their own benefit and for the social good, which fully corresponds to the competence "to critically evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, to chose the ways and means to developtheir best qualities and address the shortcomings".

The second issue caused by impact of these global processes is the change of formation principles of students'general cultural competence, entailing the transformation of the conceptual scheme of culture representative. The notion of a conceptual scheme was developed by such researchers as W. Quine, D. Davidson, P. Strawson, M. Lebedev. The latter, having systematized all the existing points of view, defines the term as "a set of common worldview and elements of knowledge, i.e. some (scientific) view of the world "[3]. Language training of a modern specialist certainly involves not only teaching to find, analyze and organize information from various sources in foreign languages, but also developing the ability to determine its cultural value. Thus, the process of foreign language teaching in modern conditions turns more into the process of enriching cultural experience and the formation of the overall cultural competence of students.

General cultural competence is defined A.V.Khutorskoy as a "range of issues in relation to which the student must be competent, must have knowledge and experience of, it features national and universal culture, spiritual and moral foundations of human life and humanity, cultural foundations of family, society, social phenomena and traditions, the role of science and religion in human life ... and the same referrers to the experience of students'understanding of the scientific picture of the world, expanding to all mankind, and to cultural understanding of the world" [4]. Formation of general cultural competence takes place on the basis of common cultural content of education, including the "foundations of science, arts, domestic and international traditions ... which are reflected in the school subjects and learning areas, and is expressed in the form of concepts, laws, principles, methods, hypotheses, theories, ritual actions, text, and other works of art that are considered fundamental achievements of the mankind" [4]. Without mastering this complex knowledge of ideas, values, ways of learning, thinking and practice it is impossible to imagine relationships and interaction among people, harmony between an individual and society, people and nature.

One of the means of forming general cultural competence in the process of teaching a foreign language can be the signs of the language of culture . Language of culture, in the broadest sense, are those tools, signs, symbols , texts, which allow people to enter into communication with each other, and to guide them in the cultural space. Language of culture is a universal form of understanding reality, which organizes all emerging or already existing ideas, perceptions, concepts, images, and other similar meaningful patterns or, otherwise, carriers of meaning. The basic structural unit of the language of culture, in terms of semiotics are sign systems. Sign is a material object (phenomenon, event), acting as an objective replacement of some other object, properties or relations,being used for acquisition, storage, processing and transmission of messages (information, knowledge). Having acquired its significance, the sign begins to function as an independent unit, influencing, in a certain way, the recipients by the meaning stored in it. The complete understanding of its content depends on various socio-cultural factors, such as age, education, belonging to different social strata and religious denominations, etc. Personalia, which in this paper is understood as a proper name of a fictitious or real personality, is characterized by recognition and importance for the natives of culture, and reflects their cultural and moral orientations, values and attitudes. Study of personalia as a sign of culture allows to detectthe national-specific value systems reflected in this unit which exist in culture natives' conceptual sphere, as well as the universal elements relevant for most cultures, and evaluate the contribution thissignmakes to the formation of the general cultural competence. [5]

The importance of information transmitted by a proper name is recognized by the representatives of various science and the research of these units has a long academictradition .However, the significance of personalia isbroader and more complex than of the name, as the substantial components of this sign may refer to several sociocultural concepts at the same time. Each personality as a sign of language of culture, corresponds to a certain "set of semantic features", i.e. content of this unit, and in this set there exist characterizing features of two types.

Some reflect the actual data associated with the name, others carry information about the priorities of social activities of individuals to establish universal values.

Nevertheless, when being used, as a rule, the entire set of semantic properties of personalia is not fully realized, but only those which have a priority value for a particular communication purpose, and thus, it is possible to unite a number of personalias into a specific category according to a dominant trait. In other words, they allow you to judge about the relevance of the person's individual qualities for thesociety and about the pursuit to develop them in a human being. Examples of name substituing certain human characteristics can be observed in many educational and journalistic materials, as well as in fiction.

For instance, in one of the learning tasks students should identify in the text dialogue expressions different from record. One of them is the following phrase, which can be seen as an ironic statement: «You're not exactly Miss Einstein yourself!»[6], which in the text of this entry corresponds to the expression: «You are stupid too!».

Similarly, we can evaluate the following example:

«His name was Brad. And he did look a bit like Brad Pitt» [7]. The main characteristic implemented in this context is obviously the visual appeal, beauty and sexuality.

This kind of generalization, for example, may be observed in those cases when it comes to analyzing the widespread popularity ratings based on various criteria. In particular, among the encountered in contemporary periodicals and Internet sites are the following rating categories: influential, popular, sexy, famous, recognizable, well-dressed, and some others, somehow similar to the categories listed above.

We believe that the personalias are associated with certain concepts through characterizing features contained in them. As a basis for the interpretation of concept we take the term of Y.S. Stepanov, i.e.: "The concept is a phenomenon of the same order as the notion. Concept is a clot of culture in human consciousness; something that makes culture part of the mental world of a human being, it is a "bunch" of ideas, concepts, knowledge, associations and feelings that accompany the word. Unlike the meanings concepts not only can be understood, they are experienced. They are the subject of emotions, likes and dislikes, and sometimes conflicts. On the other hand, the concept is something with the help of which people, ordinary, normal people, not "the creators of cultural values" get involved and included into culture, and in some cases affect it "[8], Characterizingproperties form the conceptual configuration comparable to the configurations of concepts. Personalias reflectsuch concepts as: Collectivism and Individualism, Focus on Relationships and Desire to Succeed, Tradition and Novelty, Beauty and Benefits, and all of them, basically, are a representation of socially constructed values.

The meaning of the personaliasis born in the interaction between the sign and the recipient due to thework of the individual consciousness of the perceiver, and the ability to perceive depends on their aggregate socio-cultural experience. The recipient understands the meaning of personalia not as a reference to a particular individual or real factual information, but rather as an evaluation of the activityof the denoted person according to the social and cultural criteria existing in the community he belongs to. As a result,personalias become the personification of priorities of activities and their incentive. The main function of personalia, in our opinion, is to present information about the major worldviews of a particular community, expressed in person - shaped form, and education is the most important area in which personalias realizetheir function.

Proceeding from the fact that the possibility of reference is guaranteed by some level of knowledge about the object, we conclude that there is an interdependence between a personalia and the conceptscheme of the native of culture, which becomes apparent in its adjustment according to the value, philosophical and ideological attitudes of the community. In the process of learning a foreign language educator often finds that students are unable to decode some signs of the language of culture, personalias in particular. There are two variants of contextually conditioned impossibility to identifie the referent of the definite descriptions. In the first case, the situation is caused by the fact that the knowledge possessed by the recipient, not high-grade enough, incomplete or does not meet the requirement of truthfulness. A typical example of the difficulties associated with the lack of knowledge can be the problems of representatives of non-native culturesin the quest to matchpeople to their achievements:

"The 35th president of the USA was:

      a) Bill Clinton   b) J.F. Kennedy".[9]

or:

America	invent discover	Captain James Cook
The television		John Logie Baird
Australia		theWrightBrothers
The telephone		Christopher Columbus
Theairplane		Alexander Graham Bell

[9].

In the situation of insufficient knowledge the context can be clarified by means of coordinating a recipient's individual conceptual scheme and the scheme, shared by all the members of the community. In this case, a common concept scheme represents some minimum allowable knowledge and coordination, in this case, will occur ascompleting the recipient's knowledge by obtaining the missing information. Thus, the recipient'sindividual concept scheme can be adjusted according to the model the commonly shared standard scheme, since most of personaliaspresented in the textbooks are individuals who have made a discovery or an invention of world significance.

According to E.S. Kubryakova "as soon as the speakers of a particular language obtain "additional information about the world, "they also acquire (through the meaning of the words or patterns in theirvocabulary) a range of information about the objects of the world or its structure, and the reflexes of such information replenish the conceptual system of the speakers of the language. Which part of the system they will become –will the specified range of information be included in its core or its periphery – does not depend on language, but on the ontological essence of the designated and its pragmatic value. In this sense, you cannot leave beyond the conceptual picture of the world what a person's thought in the act of nomination was already aimed at , and what has already been recorded in the form of socially proven conventional sign". [10] Consequently, the introduction of new information entails not only broadening of the horizon of knowledge, but also the transformation of worldviews.

Moreover, there is also another version of a mismatch resulting from the conflict between the two social concept schemes fixed by natural languages and existing in socio-cultural communities. Coordination of such schemes causes the need not to adapt to something conventional to eliminate inconsistencies, but to establish equivalence between two classes of concepts. This situation can be understood easier if we use such description as "the inventor of the radio." In this case, natives of the Russian-speaking culture refer this description to the nameof A. Popov, whereas in the western world the authorship of the invention of this device is attributed to G. Marconi, as we can see in the reference books and educational textbooks, which are an integral part of the educational system. Moreover, whereas lately in Russia, Marconi's name, anyway, is mentioned in connection with the invention of the radio, Popov'sname does not appear in non-Russian information sources at all. Therefore, coordination of concept schemes in these cases require explanation that each of these descriptions matches two referents, and to identify an exact match, there can be used clarifying descriptions, for example, in the latter case it may be such a descriptive characteristic "the owner of the patent for the invention of radio".

Analysis of the empirical materialhas shown that personalias differ in the way they are mentioned in the text of books depending on how detailed their presentation is. There can be identified three forms of presenting information: a detailed account of an individual, brief biographical information and a mere mention.

In the first case, understanding of the significance of personality for the culture provides detailed context representing both factual information and connotative elements traced in keywords and the author's expressive and evaluatingcharacteristics. As a rule, this method of presentation is typical for personalias with the characteristics especially important for the people belonging tothe Western culture, but, perhaps, unfamiliar to foreign-language readers, for example, Cindy Jackson. However, such a unit can not be regarded as a real sign when being presented for the first time, because, as pointed out by Ch.S. Pierce,a compulsory condition of the sign's functioning is representing an already known idea,which is not observed in this case. So, the relationship between the signifier, referent, concept and connotation is formed by direct acquaintance with the information, but the next presentation the mentioned proper name cannot be considered as sign for the perceiver.

Nevertheless, for the sender of the message, this figure is already a sign, and, therefore, it is possible to trace the means used to convey the meaning and to form the semiotic units in the minds of the recipient. First, based on the factual information provided in the context develops the substantive significance, i.e.notion. Secondly, emotive lexicon can give an idea of the author's or authors' of the text as a cultural community representatives' attitude to the individual, representing the specific properties and characteristics. These aspects make the referent and interpretantof the sign. However, according to Ch.W. Morris who developed the theory claiming the process of semiosis also includes the impact of the sign and its interpreter, it is logical to assume that the final meaning of the analyzed unit, according to the results of its interpretation will depend on the moral and values of the interpreters. An example of such a situation could be personalities such as Helen Keller. Her name is not as widely known in the Russian cultural environment, although this woman, thanks to the invention of specific communication systems, has enabled deaf people to communicate with each other. However, due to the established in contemporary Russian culture attitudes towards disability, perception of this personality occurs with some distortion in comparison with the meaningimplied by the sender. We can assume that, in this case, change of the meaningfor the recipient happens as a result of stereotype of persons with disabilities existing in a socialist society,who are unable to become productive members of community. Here we see, among other things, a reference to the social value of "benefit" made by a corresponding concept. For the natives of Russian culture, understanding of the significance of this kind of personalities causes a contradiction between the features of utility, socially significant achievements embodied in these signs and their own socio-cultural settings. So, the perception through the prism of the specific socio-cultural stereotypes of the Russians distorts the original idea of iconic figures and changes its meaning in subsequent presentations of the personalia.

Many texts and tasks of the authentic textbooks promote the idea of equal opportunities for all peoplethat emerged initially on the ground of American culture. This is evidenced by the facts contained in the biographical information regarding various celebrities. For example, Madonna worked as a waitress, Elvis Presley was a truck driver, Sylvester Stallone began his career as a carpenter [11].

Another typical example of the importance of the individual for Western culture we see in the statement quoted in one of the books: «When you go to work, if you see your name on the building, you are rich, if your name is on your desk, you are middle-class, if your name is on your shirt, you are poor »[1]. On the contrary, in the Russian tradition it was not commonto advertise your name openly orto calla company after yourself; this trend appeared only in the recent years under the influence of globalization.

To sum up, learning a foreign language not only contributes to the development of the students' communication skills but creates favourable conditions for building their general cultural competences so highly demanded in the modern world.

As forpersonalias, which, being the signs of the language of culture, areassociated with relevant concepts in the minds of its natives, they are a personal-precedential form of expressing the socio-cultural values, they accumulate information about the ideal in culture, for example, to be useful for the society, or to be famous and influential thanks to money, appearance or unusual behavior. Presentation of personalities in the process of teaching a foreign language does not only contribute to the development of knowledge of students, but also a change in their perception of the world, values, cultural understanding, and, consequently, the formation of the general cultural competence of the future specialist.

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