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Formation of Socio-Cultural Competence in Foreign Language Teaching

Minnisa S. Safina [a] *

[a] Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, Kremlevskaya str., 18, Kazan, 420008, Russia

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe the process of the formation of socio-cultural competence in foreign language teaching, and the possibility of using the discipline "Foreign Language" in achieving this goal. The importance of students' socio-cultural competence formation is caused by modern Russian society inconsistencies: on the one hand globalisation processes are going on, and on the other inter-ethnic relations are getting worse, and conflicts are getting more violent. The characteristics of the components of socio-cultural competence are outlined in the paper and the stages of this competence formation (motivational, informative, activity) in teaching a foreign language in high school with the use of effective methods and technologies are described.

Keywords: Competence, socio-cultural competence, ethnic conflict, willingness and readiness to communicate, learning content, interaction, intercultural communications;

1. Introduction

The modern world is quite contradictory. On the one hand, processes of globalisation are occurring, and on the other, inter-ethnic relations are getting worse and ethnic conflict is becoming more violent. Ethnic conflicts are a real problem today. According to research on actual world problems by the Stockholm International Institute in 1990, two-thirds of the acute social conflicts in the 20th century were inter-ethnic: more than 100 million people were killed in the 20th century. Most scholars assert that ethnic conflict is almost the most dangerous internal threat to the state, as it destabilises a society, hampering socio-economic development. Most of the features of inter-ethnic

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* Corresponding Author: Minnisa S. Safina.. Tel.: +7-917-237-8378
  E-mail address: minnisa@mail.ru

conflicts are socio-cultural in nature: the differences in language, religion, standards, values, customs, traditions, stereotypes, national symbols, ways of thinking and behaviour, etc.

There is an intense mixing of peoples and nations today in the world. The Russian Federation alone is now home to over 150 different nationalities. And they have to live in the same society, and interact in the workplace, in the process of studying in educational establishments and in their leisure hours.

Therefore, the problem of the students' socio-cultural competence formation currently attains special significance. The formed socio-cultural competence is a guarantor of effective cross-cultural communication, i.e. an adequate interaction with representatives of other cultures.

2. Stages and methods of socio-cultural competence forming

If we consider the concept of "competence" in terms of the educational process, we can say that competence is primarily the result of training. Through the study of educational material the student acquires a particular competence – specific knowledge, skills – and gains experience (professional quality) and thus demonstrates perseverance, self-reliance and responsibility (personal qualities). In addition, competence in the educational process is the result of integrated learning (the integration of theory and practice, the integration of teaching methods and educational technologies, the integration of academic disciplines).

Competence is characterised by the possibility (the ability, willingness) to apply knowledge and skills in real life, showing the best personal qualities.

Socio-cultural competence is a complex phenomenon. It includes the following components:

- Linguistic-cultural – knowledge of lexical items with the socio-cultural semantics (e.g., greeting, forms of address, and farewell, in oral and written speech);

- Sociolinguistic – knowledge of the language features of social classes, different generations, genders, social groups;

- Cultural component – knowledge of cultural peculiarities of English-speaking countries, their habits, traditions, standards of behaviour, etiquette and the ability to understand and use them appropriately in the communication process, while remaining a carrier of another culture.

G.A. Vorobjev (2003) notes "socio-cultural competence is a complex phenomenon and includes a set of components belonging to different categories" [1]. According to R.P. Milrud (2004), "sociocultural competence refers to the activity-component of communicative competence" [2]. V.V. Safonova (2001) believes that "didactic description of the objectives of socio-cultural education by means of a foreign language is to be done in terms of socio-cultural competence" [3].

We understand socio-cultural competence as the possession of and the ability to apply a set of multicultural knowledge, skills and qualities in the process of intercultural communication in the specific conditions of life and tolerance towards people of other nationalities.

The formation of socio-cultural competence is carried out in three stages; each stage has its own challenges due to its objectives.

The first stage is "motivational", i.e. providing psychological readiness to communicate with all learners. M.I. Dyachenko & L.A. Kandybovich (1976) and other scientists highlighted the problem of readiness at different times and from different positions in their research. Thus, readiness is a particular mental state that allows you to perceive a certain situation or to act [4].

The objective of this stage is to interest students in gaining knowledge about different peoples and their cultures, to show how diverse both the world is and the people living in this world, to achieve a positive attitude towards learning about other cultures and to awaken in them the desire to interact with other cultures. P.P. Stepanov (2001) states that the main goal of a teacher is not only to give information on different cultures, but to change trainees' treatment of other cultures [5]. At this stage, the native language is used along with English because the information given in the native language quickly comes to mind. Watching feature films and documentaries describing the way of life, traditions and customs of different nationalities and discussing them appears to be effective. Discussion takes a specific place in the sphere of dialogic communication. The main objective of the discussion is the development of communicative culture in the search for the truth. Awareness of and understanding the problems and contradictions, identification of available information, revision of knowledge, development of skills to argue and justify the point of

view, inclusion of knowledge in a new context are the main substantial objectives of discussion. N.A. Astashova (2003) asserts that skilfully organised discussion is the most important form of the methodical development of tolerance. Within the scope of work with trainees by means of directed reflection common cultural values are converted to values of personal character where tolerant relations occupy their rightful place [6]. E.M. Adzhieva (2003) believes that the moral value of the idea of a dialogue is in the objective perception of the diversity of the surrounding people, nations and cultures [7]. In the spotlight is the fact that sensible people all around the world, regardless of their nationality or religion, show tolerance of and respect for each other and appreciate the cultural heritage of the community. The core values of all peoples are the same. Discussing the movies seen helps students to penetrate the essence of the question, and gives them a chance to ask questions and express their opinion. This work makes it possible to achieve the goal – to form a new quality of a person – a willingness to cooperate.

The second stage of the formation of socio-cultural competence is "informative". The main objectives of this phase are the collecting and processing of learning material, which is the content of training. The law of the Russian Federation "On Education" states that the content of education should promote understanding and cooperation between peoples and nations, irrespective of race, nationality, ethnicity, religion or social origin and take into account a variety of philosophical approaches.

We consider the content of training as a constantly changing and evolving category connected with the process of learning. An interrelation of the activities of teaching (the activity of the teacher) and learning (student activities) is addressed in the material, or in other words, in the content of the subject. The content of education is not only the subject of what you can hear or see in the lesson that is explicitly expressed or clearly represented by a teacher or a student, but also what they think, feel and experience, as well as the mental processes that occur in their "heads" when one opens up and the other develops the world of a different culture. We are not talking about the formation by a trainee of a new consciousness, totally identical to the host consciousness of the target language.

The task is to enrich the student's consciousness through initiation into the image of linguistic consciousness of his peers abroad – carriers of other conceptual systems of the world. The perception of any material has a bright personality colour. A preliminary analysis of the materials is worked up by using one's own experience and available knowledge. Students prepare a monologue speech on the issue, and make up questions. Thus it is not only familiarising the student with living modern English but also enriching the vocabulary, broadening the outlook, "immersing" in a foreign cultural environment and increasing the motivation for learning a foreign language. Training material, in our opinion, must meet the following criteria: cross-cultural content, modernity, actuality and credibility.

The next step is to organise cooperation on the basis of subject-oriented, motivated communication activities between students themselves and with the teacher.

All the complexity of studying a foreign language from the point of view of psychology is that the attention of the trainee is distributed simultaneously to multiple objects: the definition of the content of statements, selection and fixation of linguistic resources, establishing and keeping in mind a logical sequence of statements, its implementation in the external plan (speaking). During training, the teacher should help the student to organise his/her thoughts, clarify the solution to the problem of communication, find ways for its implementation and create the conditions of natural communication in the target language if that language is not an end in itself but a means of communication. Material for communication should not require specialised knowledge, but must arouse interest, inducing the expression of one's own opinion and assessment.

Pair or group work creates a situation close to the real conditions of foreign language communication in the classroom. An effective form of group work is gaming technology. The game develops creative thinking, fosters a culture of communication and allows you to organise spontaneous communication in class when the learning situation becomes natural. V.M. Ustinenko (1980), considering the game as a cultural phenomenon, believes that "the game is one of the ways of learning the world, and self-affirmation of an individual when a person takes on the role (not real but imaginary) and puts himself into a conditional situation" [8]. A variety of aspects of the game are highlighted in the study of domestic and foreign educators and psychologists. The game is seen as a means of knowledge and self-knowledge. The right selection of situational roles and themes for the games are of great importance. An unknown subject cannot be the subject of discussion even in their native language, but especially in the foreign language.

The project-method, which has been used by us, suggests an independent cognitive activity of students on the given topic or issue. What is important about this method is that the trainee focuses his/her attention not on the English language but the problem researched. In project work language is used for its essential purpose of exchanging information; it becomes more of a means than an objective. Students learn not only new words but also learn new things and new ways of doing things. The original idea of this method is to involve students in "learning by doing" activities, which allows them to choose what they want to study and create an end-product based on their activities. The main idea of students' presentations is to reflect the vibrant culture of the people living on different continents.

We would like to mention that the methods used by us in the process of learning activities are based on the conscious-comparative approach. This is based on the principle of awareness of linguistic phenomena in the period of learning and using, and on the principle of a comparative study of a foreign language with a native language. The stage of comprehension, comparing, analysing and correcting is the most important in the work, as this is exactly where the intellectual growth and development of personality, the disclosure of students' personal potentials and awakening of their interest in knowledge of and familiarity with the foreign culture happens, i.e. the formation of socio-cultural competence.

The final stage of the work is the formation of the concept of "socio-cultural competence" together with the students, defining the means of its manifestations in contemporary conditions and its practical consequences. The students make up some possible strategies to oppose prejudice and preconception. Filling out a questionnaire with the list of countries and nationalities is followed by discussion and determining the slogan for life. Here are some of them: "Do you want to change the world for the better? Start with yourself"; "Treat people the way you would like them to treat you"; "Be friendly and you will see how the world around you has changed"; "Man is born for happiness", and others.

3. Conclusion

The process of formation of socio-cultural competence is quite time-consuming and arduous. The educational subject "Foreign Language" has great potential for solving this problem.

Workshops conducted by us are a well-balanced system of teaching techniques and assignments based on the idea of gaining experience of intercultural communication.

We see one of the main challenges in improving the effectiveness of training and seek optimum conditions for its implementation, developing new approaches that give a good result, since in the process of practical training the workshop participants (the students) affect and influence each other, thus accelerating or retarding the acquisition of this experience.

Thus, the sphere of education, being an integral part of civil society, should initiate and support the creation of truly humane laws and legal standards, regulating tolerant relationships at individual and community levels, and at the level of intergovernmental relations.

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