



WCLTA 2013

Development of Intercultural Competence in the Teaching of Business Russian

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Abstract

The article focuses on development of intercultural awareness in teaching of professional Russian. The formation of intercultural competence represents one of key elements in professional teaching of specialists. The intercultural competence comprises skills which are vital both for verbal and nonverbal communication with foreign language native speakers, requiring the perception and management of various socially and culturally rooted language phenomena and consideration of cultural peculiarities pertaining to the country of the language being studied. The need to develop such competence poses new challenges to teachers by requiring from them to develop a new perception of learning goals. The respective article dwells on didactic aspects of learners' adaptation to peculiarities of a foreign culture, as well as on teaching of effective communication to achieve professional goals by considering the intercultural factor. Various didactic techniques are therein analysed, namely the linguo-conceptual approach in teaching of a foreign language, formation of discourse frames necessary for professional and everyday communication, exercises with texts containing culturological information. The tailor-made system of exercises is targeted at eliminating possible communication failures inflicted by cultural discrepancies. The purpose is to achieve the level of competence which is sufficient for an adequate and correct implementation of communication goals in analysed situations of everyday and business communication.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of WCLTA 2013.

Keywords: Language, culture, intercultural competence, linguo-cultural knowledge, concept, text;

1. Introduction

Language and culture are closely interconnected and greatly influence verbal and nonverbal communication. Language reflects the person's inner world, national culture, system of values, mentality, and interpersonal relations (Kramsch, 1998). When learning a foreign language, one becomes familiar with the respective foreign culture and compares the newly acquired knowledge with one's own culture.

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In order to ensure, at a professional level, effective communication by means of a foreign language, students do not only need to master the lexical and grammatical systems of a foreign language, but they also need to acquire knowledge of native speakers' cultural peculiarities, habits, traditions, norms of conduct and etiquette, and be able to adequately implement the acquired knowledge. All these factors are an important component of intercultural communication and form a basis for intercultural competence development.

The development of intercultural competence is one of the key aspects for the professional teaching of specialists. Within the scope of business communication, foreign communication competence represents the ability to tackle business challenges in order to achieve a certain result in an alien business reality and culture. Discrepancies between business cultures during communication might trigger failures in the decision making algorithm or in reaching compromises or resolving conflicts. To avoid such communication failures, it is important to ensure that during the studying process the intercultural competence essentials are developed by students.

2. Methods

Intercultural competence stands for necessary basic knowledge used by a person in life activities and reflecting the perception of the system of values, norms and rules pertinent to the respective culture and language. Intercultural competence comprises the following:

- a system of linguo-cultural knowledge which is developed at the foreign language learning stage;
- a system of cross-cultural views which is developed during the person's upbringing, education and professional activity with respect to inner values and views;
- a system of the person's individual norms of conduct which is developed on the grounds of cultural and language samples.

Linguo-cultural competence is developed by means of joint activities between the teacher and students, as well as during students' individual activities. The teacher is required to teach students to decipher and pinpoint national and cultural semantics elements in the language signs of a foreign language in the light of values pertaining to one's own national culture. Thus, the language turns into cognitive process leverage. The purpose is to achieve the level of competence sufficient for an adequate and correct implementation of communication goals in the analysis of everyday business communicative situations.

The realities of another culture are reflected at all language levels, but mostly in lexis. Words with common denotata are perceived differently by representatives of various cultures because they tend to possess a broad, but rather varying system of associative connections and connotations. Thus, teaching lexis with national and cultural elements of meaning is vital for the development of learners' intercultural competence. The linguo-conceptual approach is rather efficient in this respect as it is grounded in basic linguo-cultural concepts.

The cultural concept in contemporary cognitive linguistics represents a mental unit, an element of consciousness. It comprises results of any kinds of mental activity: not only abstract or intellectual cognitive structures, but also sensory, motoric and emotional experiences in a time retrospective (Langacker, 2001). According to Stepanov (2001), the cultural concept is an operational unit of the "memory of culture", comprising elements of notion and images. In other words, it is an attribute or constant of culture in the person's consciousness. Concepts form a conceptual sphere of the given nation and can perform functions of basic elements when comparing cultural paradigms of representatives from various lingual societies.

In the studying process, the development of intercultural competence is based on the perception of basic cultural concepts such as verbalized signs (symbols) of foreign culture represent core motives of a national language picture of the world. Thus, the Russian conceptual sphere is characterized by such typical word-concepts (verbal concepts) as *душа* (soul), *труд* (labor), *сердце* (heart), *судьба* (destiny), *тоска* (melancholy), *широта* (latitude) and others. Each nomination of such concepts embraces broad associative connections, represents primary and secondary lexical meanings and is a source for metaphors, symbols and phraseology. The development of intercultural competence during the teaching of a foreign language is based on conceptual analysis. In order to analyse the meaning of a certain word-concept, it is necessary to determine the cognitive context forming the meaning of the respective word and to structure it, i.e. to shape the frame indicating the respective meaning. The purpose of conceptual analysis is to pinpoint the frame type corresponding to the Russian lexical unit and determine the influence of its elements, as compared with its corresponding concept in the learner's native language. Thus, a teacher of the Russian language is expected to develop the ability to analyse concepts pertaining to the Russian culture and compare these concepts with concepts from another culture, as well as to pinpoint the conceptually determined reasons for the usage of particular units in a text. As such, we implement a system of exercises based on the comparative principle and aimed towards the perception of Russian cultural concepts. Such exercises comprise

methods of analysis and comparison, for instance: *compare...*, *show the difference ...*, *highlight the main and secondary ...*, *exclude from the list of...*, *translate into Russian and comment on the use of...*. In order to develop among students a conscious usage of particular language structures, students are requested to search for mistakes and do corrective exercises. The whole system of exercises is aimed at eliminating possible communication failures related to intercultural discrepancies.

Communicative skills of learners are always implemented in discourse, i.e. in a text relevant for the respective communicative situation. It is evident that linguo-cultural peculiarities of the studied language influence the discourse and conduct patterns in various communicative situations. The discourse is based on the text, thus, the development of linguo-cultural competence is provided by texts of different types and genres, representing and transmitting linguo-cultural information. Text exercises are aimed at developing the ability to create a communicative act with respect to social and cultural peculiarities. When choosing texts for practice, the teacher evaluates their linguo-cultural value, topicality, level of difficulty, and correspondence to the respective teaching stage. Texts are to have specific meaning, reveal a specific communicative situation and contain culturological information. The text studied does not only provide meaning to key cultural concepts, but also creates particular cultural images in the student's mind. Any text is rooted in culture by means of numerous connections and can be decoded only in terms of macro cultural context.

Texts tend to provide allusions to other texts, the so-called precedent phenomena, which are to be correctly perceived and interpreted by students. Precedent phenomena are a certain group of verbal or verbalized phenomena, which are known to an average representative of a linguo-cultural community and are part of the cognitive base of this community (Gudkov, 2003). Precedent phenomena reflect facts of national culture, literature, mythology, traditions, perception and the evaluation of historic events, personalities, etc. The teacher is expected to familiarize students with basic units of Russian precedent phenomena, whilst students need to learn how to decode precedent phenomena which are conundrums of Russian cultural realities. Although the text language level, containing a precedent phenomenon, is not always complex, the perception of its meaning might be challenging even to students with advanced foreign language knowledge. The following are a few examples of precedent phenomena usage in media texts: *Требуется маршал Жуков для финансового фронта* (Marshal Zhukov is a well-known Second World War commander); *Поезд реформ набрал ход, и остановить его не сможет никакая Анна Каренина* (Anna Karenina is a character portrayed by L. Tolstoy). *Students become involved in a game in which they are asked to identify which cultural phenomenon or historical event a particular allusion is related to, to pinpoint its meaning, name possible associations stemming from the respective allusion and to justify the usage of the allusion in the given context. Working with a text with precedent phenomena comprises several stages. At the beginning the teacher provides a linguistic and culturological comment which helps reveal the hidden meaning of the precedent unit and outlines its source (original text, historical event or cultural phenomenon). Afterwards the usage of the respective precedent unit is practiced by students in a typical communication situation with a focus on correct identification and reproduction. Texts with precedent phenomena are a valuable source of culturological information and serve to create communication situations which develop the students' speech skills by using authentic language material.*

The communication between representatives of different cultures is based on grammatical skills, comprising the ability to establish contact, initiate, maintain and end a conversation, follow social norms and the speech etiquette of the alien culture's representatives. Knowledge of national etiquette peculiarities and speech patterns and understanding business communication pertaining to a particular country, are important for the future professional activities of students, since the more one knows a foreign culture, the smaller the likelihood of communication failure. When teaching Business Russian, a system of specific exercises is aimed at creating frames of typical discourses which are implemented in different genres of business communication.

3. Results

In order to evaluate the level of the intercultural competence of students who learn Business Russian at the Pedagogical Department of the University of J. E. Purkyně in Ústí nad Labem (the Czech Republic), testing was conducted at the beginning and at the end of the second year of studying for obtaining a Bachelor's Degree. Reading, listening and speaking tests were specifically drafted to evaluate the level of students' communication competence, in particular the level of understanding and interpretation of authentic texts, contact initiation and dialogue support, as well as the expression of personal opinions on various topics. The final testing was participated in by 28 students. Following the testing rules, the creative level was represented by students who could voice their opinion on the problem and the productive level by students who could express their thoughts based on the learning

material. The reproductive level was represented by students who needed assistance to express their thoughts. At the beginning of the experiment, 14.5% of the students reached the creative level, 35.8% the productive level and 49.7% the reproductive level. At the end of the experiment, 18.8% of the students reached the creative level, 51.1% the productive level and 29.1% the reproductive level. As such, following two semesters of teaching Business Russian with respect to developing intercultural competence, there is an evident increase in the number of creative and productive level students due to a decrease in the number of reproductive level students. The biggest increase was evidenced among productive level students.

4. Conclusion

Thus, it can be safely concluded that the development of intercultural competence is fostered by such didactic methods as the linguo-conceptual approach to teaching of foreign language, the formation of discourse frames which are necessary for professional and everyday communication, and exercises with texts containing culturological information. Well selected authentic texts and a system of specific exercises help students to develop the ability to conduct successful communication with respect to communication conditions within a certain cultural context.

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