Techniques Developing Intercultural Communicative Competences in English Language Lessons

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Abstract

Mutual understanding and intercultural competences are very important in the today’s global world, because they allow us to overcome prejudice, discrimination and misunderstandings between people of different cultural backgrounds. Intercultural communicative competences (ICC) in English language education permit learners to understand and communicate successfully with representatives of the target language cultures. Acquiring ICC is a complex matter, which involves a new approach not found in traditional language lessons. Additionally teachers find it difficult to identify themselves with and apply intercultural aspects of the target language. Even though, all the curricular documents emphasise importance of development of ICC for learners, the recommendations are mostly only general and do not provide specific guidance for teachers. Consequently, teachers are often confused and the question of content, materials and techniques often arises. Also ICC next to grammar or vocabulary are less tangible and more difficult to comprehend, but on the other hand ICC are very much needed for real life usage. Traditional classrooms provide systematic presentation and acquisition of knowledge and skills under the guidance of a teacher, but offer very little chance to develop skills for interaction in real world scenarios. The aim of acquiring intercultural communicative competences is prepare learners to act appropriately and successfully in real life situations in a foreign language. This paper gives brief guidance to teachers on how to manage developing ICC in English language lessons. Several techniques (comparison method, cultural assimilation, cultural capsule, drama, TPR, cultural island, reformulation, noticing, treasure hunt, prediction, role plays, research, songs, games, portfolio, field trip) are suggested, with examples of how to deal with various aspects of intercultural communicative competences.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competences; teaching English as a foreign language; techniques for teaching culture

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1. Culture and foreign language education

The majority of scholars believe that culture is an inseparable part of foreign language education (Byram, 1989, 1997; Dunnett, Dubin, Lezberg, 1986; Kramsch, 1993, 1998; Brooks, 2001; Cullen, 2000; Robinson, 1985; Huhn, 1978). There is a tendency though to treat language independently of the culture (Byram, 1989). Teaching culture cannot be considered an extra skill, but has to be a part of teaching listening, speaking, reading and writing. Dunnett, Dubin, Lezberg (1986) claim that most of teaching time is devoted to the development of four language skills and it is difficult to convince the language teachers that the teaching of culture is not a secondary goal. According to Politzer (in Brooks, 2001), teaching language without culture would be like teaching meaningless symbols to which students add the wrong meanings. Kramsch (1993) claims that speakers have expectations based on their own experiences and consequently interpret situations based on their own cultures, and this can often lead to misunderstanding. It is important though to teach target culture in contrast and comparison with one’s own culture (Huhn, 1978). Robinson (1985) adds that cultures never remain static and that they are constantly changing, which makes it especially difficult for foreign language teachers to keep up with developments.

With the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages by the Council of Europe (CEFR, 2001) much greater importance was given to cultural aspects in foreign language education. The aim was to equip learners with the ability to communicate appropriately across linguistic and cultural boundaries in multicultural and multilingual Europe. Even though, the CEFR emphasises the importance of developing ICC, it only gives general instruction. It does not specify all the aspects of cultural teaching and does not provide specific guidance for teachers. National curricular documents are based on the CEFR, and usually provide even less guidance concerning the development of ICC (Reid, 2014; Europublic, 2006; Zerzová, 2012; Kostková, 2012). Consequently, teachers can become confused and do not know which contents, approaches and techniques to use with the aim of developing intercultural communicative competences.

The main aim of this paper is to introduce the techniques for developing ICC, but also to briefly discuss the contents of cultural teaching. The following contents are excerpted from the CEFR and summarized based on the theory of culture and intercultural communication (Reid, 2014). Socio-cultural knowledge (everyday living, living conditions, interpersonal relations, history, values, beliefs, taboos, social conventions, ritual behaviour), sociolinguistic competences (greetings, addressing, dialect, accent, register, positive and negative politeness, idioms, etc.), pragmatic competences (advising, persuading, urging, socialising, interaction patterns) and non-verbal communication (body language, gestures, eye contact, proxemics, etc.) are the most fundamental components necessary for development of ICC. It is important to include cultural activities right from the beginning of foreign language education for all age groups. The aim is to enrich the learners’ awareness, attitudes, knowledge and skills concerning not only the target culture, but also their own culture and other cultures.

2. Techniques for teaching culture in foreign language education

Various techniques for teaching cultural aspects are introduced in this paper, but also examples of activities are provided, which can inspire teachers for their cultural teaching. Byram (1997) claims that acquiring ICC is a complex matter involving more than traditional language lessons. According to Brooks (2001), ICC are the best gained practically, just like learners acquire phonological accuracy, syntax or morphology through actual practice. Regular conversational topics should be about daily tasks, which should highlight identity, similarity and differences in comparable patterns of culture. Research findings indicate, that teachers mainly teach socio-cultural aspects (factual information, holidays, traditions, food, housing, etc.) and pay little attention to sociolinguistic, pragmatic competences and non-verbal communication (Reid, 2014; Zerzová, 2012; Kostková, 2012). Often only pleasant aspects of the target culture are presented, which creates an unrealistic picture in learners’ perception. Realistic, accurate, contemporary and factual information should be presented to the learners (Huhn, 1978).
2.1. Comparison method

The comparison method is one of the most used techniques for teaching cultures. This technique concentrates on discussing the differences between the native and target cultures (Hughes, 1986). Not only features of different cultures, but also those within a single culture should be compared, because cultures never remain static, they are constantly changing and different generations interpret things differently (Robinson, 1985). The following activity can be used for developing socio-cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and non-verbal competences. A very popular example with primary and lower secondary school pupils is the topic of “school”, including school routine, subjects, length of classes, clothes to wear, school buildings, homework, school meals, phrases, and ways of behaviour. Pupils watch a simple short video, which shows a typical British school day. The video is available on youtube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMUJKH1fFF0) and has subtitles for better understanding. The video presents a typical school day for an 11 year old pupil. It offers socio-cultural knowledge, but also sociolinguistic and pragmatic phrases (greetings, addressing people, polite requests, proper use of please and thank you, formal register) and also non-verbal communication (in Slovakia pupils should raise their hand if they wish to request the teacher’s attention, in Britain pupils verbally address the teacher). Pupils can discuss and compare the typical Slovak and British school day, decide for pros and cons of each school system. It is also an important comparison between the phrases for requesting, offering, thanking, and addressing the teacher (in Slovakia Mrs. teacher is used, while in Britain Mrs. Surname is used) and also the differences of non-verbal communication.

2.2 Cultural assimilation

With the technique of cultural assimilation the learners are presented with a critical incident, which would probably be misunderstood. Learners are given several possibilities, from which they choose the one which they think is correct. Non-verbal greetings are probably the most common examples of misunderstanding. Cheek kissing is a common greeting, which people think is universal. However, cheek kissing varies from one to four kisses, depending on culture. The following activity practices non-verbal communication. A teacher can demonstrate on somebody different types of cheek kiss greetings: one kiss, two kisses, three and four kisses. Learners should decide which type of kiss greeting is correct. Based on their own experience, they would choose the type of greeting typical for their own culture. Teacher should explain, that all types of cheek kiss greetings are correct, but vary across different cultures. The teacher should acknowledge for the learners that there are differences even within one culture. Social kissing in the UK is rare and there is usually only one kiss. Slovakia, Croatia, Austria, Spain use two kisses, but it can vary from region to region and also with the gender of the people who kiss. Three kisses are used in the Netherlands, Switzerland and Belgium. France can vary from region to region and correspondingly the numbers of kisses used between two to four.

2.3 Cultural capsule

The technique of cultural capsule demonstrates, for example a custom, which is different in two cultures. It can be accompanied by visual aids to show differences and a set of questions for class discussion (Hughes, 1986). The following activity practices socio-cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences. For example, the issue of the main meal of the day could be discussed. For example, the main meal of the day in Slovakia is a hot lunch consisting of soup followed by a main course, and in the UK it is generally the evening meal with a main course and a pudding. Pictures of different typical meals can be presented. Learners should discuss the pros and cons of the eating habits of each culture. Sociolinguistic and pragmatic phrases connected to eating habits should be also compared.
2.4 Cultural island

*Cultural island* is a very simple but effective technique, as it is always subconsciously effecting the learners. Contemporary posters and pictures of actors, singers, films, writers, books, famous places should be put on the walls in the classrooms. Their aim is to attract the learners’ attention, evoke comments and maintain the cultural atmosphere (Hughes, 1986). Cultural island focuses on socio-cultural knowledge. In most language classrooms grammar charts, vocabulary posters and other language connected pictures are present, which are not really attractive to learners. They should be replaced by attractive, popular posters and pictures.

2.5 Reformulation

*Reformulation* is retelling a story to a partner in his/her own words. *Noticing* is paying attention to particular features (Cullen, 2000). Both techniques could be used with the previously mentioned video of the British school day. Pupils could retell parts of the story, through which they practise speaking and their socio-cultural knowledge. Noticing is a very effective technique, by which learners look for specific features connected to the topic (e.g. differences between British and Slovak schools, the number of times the word “please” is used, etc.). Reformulation and noticing can be used for practicing socio-cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and non-verbal competences.

2.6 Prediction

*Prediction* engages students actively by finishing (predicting) a half told story, guessing the contents of an article or a book based on the headlines, predicting the contents of a topic based on a few pieces of information. This should evoke the students’ curiosity and interest to talk, no matter if their predictions are correct or not (Cullen, 2000). For example a headline from a magazine “Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie to adopt again” already suggests the two famous people and the generally known knowledge of their adopted children. Learners discuss and predict what the article might be about. The topic of adoption can be discussed in deeper ways and different cultural views can be compared. This activity is more suitable for advanced mature learners and it can practice socio-cultural knowledge, but also system of values.

2.7 TPR

*TPR* technique is designed to respond to oral commands in order to act out a cultural experience (Hughes, 1986; Pokrivčáková, 2013)). TPR is very popular with small children, who love to act out songs, stories, and even grammar structures. TPR in cultural teaching is most suitable for non-verbal communication and can be used with different age groups. Learners need to acknowledge by practice, different gestures and their meanings in different cultures. Good examples, such as what was already mentioned, can be: kissing on the cheek, a hand shake, thumbs up, a thumb and forefinger sign, shaking of the head, etc. These actions often have different meanings in different cultures. A learner acts out various gestures and other learners assign it to the cultures where the gesture is appropriate or inappropriate.

2.8 Role play

*Role play* is a very effective technique practicing sociolinguistic and pragmatic phrases, socio-cultural knowledge, but also non-verbal communication. For example, learners can practice situations in a restaurant, shop,
bus station, etc. The role plays are the closest possible opportunities for learners to practice real life situations, which are necessary for intercultural communication. Role plays are suitable for all levels of language proficiency and age groups.

2.9 Treasure hunt

Treasure hunt involves searching for certain items set in advance, for example people, dates, events in a news or magazine article. Research is a powerful learning tool, which combines learning and interests. Students are asked to research any aspects of the target culture which interest them, present their projects and also create and present posters. Drama is a technique where learners act out short scenes of misinterpretation and also clarification of something that happens between two cultures, which is caused by misunderstanding the target culture. An effective technique for the development of the intercultural perspective is the use of personal diaries, journals and portfolio. Learners should make notes of their own understanding of intercultural elements, describe encounters with someone in the foreign language, experiences from visiting a foreign country, etc. They can retrospectively look at the development of their ICC. Also most of the standard EFL activities (games, field trips, songs, etc.) could be adapted for teaching culture.

The ambition of this paper was to discuss various techniques for teaching culture and to inspire teachers of foreign languages to teach culture and develop the ICC of their learners.

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References


