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Perceptions and Practices*

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INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT IN ESL CLASSROOM

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Abstract: This paper is devoted to cultural competence and its development in the teaching and learning environment. The definition of the notion 'cultural competence' is presented and constituent elements of intercultural competence – knowledge, skills, and attitudes are specified. The attention of the author is devoted to authentic materials and some activities of their usage are presented. Some methods and techniques of intercultural competence teaching are noticed and specified.

Keywords: intercultural competence, skill, knowledge, attitude, authentic material, methods.

It has been widely recognized in the language teaching profession that learners need not just knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways. This was the major innovation of 'communicative language teaching'. At the same time, the 'communicative approach' introduced changes in methods of teaching, the materials used, the description of what is to be learned and assessment of learning. The Council of Europe's 'Common European Framework of Reference' embodies these innovations and also emphasizes the importance of 'intercultural awareness', 'intercultural skills', and 'existential competence'. The 'Common European Framework', like other recent publications, thus introduces the 'Intercultural Dimension' into the aims of language teaching. Its essence is to help language learners to interact with speakers of other languages on equal terms, and to be aware of their own identities and those of their interlocutors. It is the hope that language learners who thus become 'intercultural speakers' will be successful not only in communicating information but also in developing a human relationship with people of other languages and cultures [3].

There are many definitions of "culture". The American psychologist Harry Triandis, for example, defines culture as "the human-made part of the environment" [8]. The Dutch cultural psychologist Hofstede defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind" [6]. Culture can be defined as "the sum of a way of life,

including expected behavior, beliefs, values, language and living practices shared by members of society. It consists of both explicit and implicit rules through which experience is interpreted” [5]. Geert Hofstede, the most famous researcher in the field, refers to culture as a “programming of the mind” [6]. All researchers dealing with the concept of culture on a theoretical basis agree that culture covers a very broad field.

A great deal of research has been undertaken in the field of intercultural competence which has led to many different definitions and understandings. Almost researchers understand “intercultural competence” as an ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behavior and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions [4].

Constituent elements of intercultural competence (Adapted from Deardorff, 2006) are knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Knowledge: cultural self-awareness (articulating how one’s own culture has shaped one’s identity and world view); culture-specific knowledge (analysing and explaining basic information about other cultures (history, values, politics, economics, communication styles, values, beliefs and practices)); sociolinguistic awareness (acquiring basic local language skills, articulating differences in verbal/ non-verbal communication and adjusting one’s speech to accommodate nationals from other cultures); grasp of global issues and trends (explaining the meaning and implications of globalization and relating local issues to global forces).

Skills: listening, observing, evaluating (using patience and perseverance to identify and minimize ethnocentrism, seek out cultural clues and meaning); analysing, interpreting and relating (seeking out linkages, causality and relationships using comparative techniques of analysis); critical thinking (viewing and interpreting the world from other cultures’ point of view and identifying one’s own).

Attitudes: respect (seeking out other cultures’ attributes; value cultural diversity; thinking comparatively and without prejudice about cultural differences); openness (suspending criticism of other cultures; investing in collecting ‘evidence’ of cultural difference; being disposed to be proven wrong); curiosity (seeking out intercultural interactions, viewing difference as a learning opportunity, being aware of one’s own ignorance); discovery (tolerating ambiguity and viewing it as a positive experience; willingness to move beyond one’s comfort zone) [4].

The development of intercultural competence is never complete and perfect, but to be a successful intercultural speaker does not require complete and perfect competence. The first reason for this is more obvious: it is not possible to acquire or to anticipate all the knowledge one might need in interacting with people of other cultures. Those cultures are themselves constantly changing; one cannot know with whom one will use a specific language since many languages are spoken in more than one country. Similarly, there are in any one country in many different cultures and languages. And thirdly any language can be used as a lingua franca with anyone from any country [3].

The role of the language teacher is, therefore, to develop skills, attitudes, and awareness of values just as much as to develop knowledge of a particular culture or country. So a teacher does not have to know everything about 'the target culture'. This is, in any case, impossible and in fact, there are many cultures associated with a particular language, for example, many countries where English is spoken as the first language, and within those countries many variations on beliefs, values, and behaviours which people share, in other words, many cultures [3].

So a teacher should try to design a series of activities to enable learners to discuss and draw conclusions from their own experience of the target culture solely as a result of what they have heard or read. The teacher might provide some factual information related to the lifestyles current in the culture and patterns usually followed by members of these cultures, but the important thing is to encourage comparative analysis with learners' own culture.

There are a lot of materials that could be used in teaching culture. Nowadays, the authors of English language textbooks are aware of the necessity to develop intercultural competence of learners and are trying to make more effort to create culturally relevant texts, recordings, and activities. Modern English language textbooks offer materials developing intercultural competence in separate parts titled "cultural pages", for example, "Solution". However, it is often difficult to convince English teachers that the teaching of culture is not a secondary goal. Most of the researchers agree that culture is an inseparable part of foreign language teaching because language without culture is a set of symbols which can be misinterpreted if they are not understood in the right cultural context [3].

Authentic materials are for sure the best materials for teaching cultural aspects, as they bridge the gap between the classroom and the outside world and they bring reality into the classroom. Authentic materials focus mainly on contents and meaning and not on linguistic forms and structures, they do not replace textbooks but could be very beneficial additional materials or a substitution for certain texts that might not be well suited for the specific classroom. Most everyday objects in the target language could be qualified as authentic materials.

According to Nunan and Miller, authentic materials are those which were not created or edited for language learners [7]. Exposure to the authentic materials allows language learners to make contact with the real-life language, which can be a great motivational factor and it helps them to recognize that there is a community of users who live their lives in this other language.

Authentic materials are classified into audio, visual and printed materials.

Audio materials include TV programs, commercials, news, weather reports, films, cartoons, phone messages, podcasts, radio programs, music, internet audio materials, audio-recorded stories, announcements at the stations and airports, shops, etc.

Visual materials include photographs, paintings, drawings, wordless street signs, images, pictures from magazines, newspapers, postcards, stamps, coins, wordless picture books, toys, food, and any items.

Printed materials include newspapers, magazines, books, TV guides, catalogues, lyrics to songs, restaurant menus, product labels, street signs, tourist information brochures, maps, letters, greeting cards, junk mail, school notices, billboards, public transport schedules, traffic tickets, application forms, information on the internet, packing slips, packaging from various items, food labels, etc.

To specify authentic materials usage, here are several activities using authentic materials with the aim of developing intercultural competencies are listed here. Teaching about customs, for example, the Ukrainian and American Christmas is an example of developing socio-cultural knowledge. First of all, the teacher and learners discuss the habits of Christmas celebration in Ukraine. The teacher tries to find out from learners what they know about Christmas in the USA, custom, meal, etc. Learners are encouraged to name films and describe the Christmas customs in both countries. The topic can be supported by authentic photographs of both cultural habits. There are many

youtube videos showing cultural habits, which learners could watch and by the technique of noticing, learners pick and write down the peculiarities of the shown habits. This activity is very effective with young learners.

Sociolinguistic competences practices greetings, addressing forms, turn taking, politeness and register. For example, authentic menus, tickets, checks, etc. The best way of working with such materials is to practice ordering food in role-play, buying or changing a ticket at the railway station, using the correct sociolinguistic phrases in the queue or public transport, etc.

The correct usage of non-verbal communication belongs to pragmatic competences (greeting gestures, which are different in various cultures). There are a lot of videos available showing various greeting gestures, which could be shown to the learners from youtube.com. The teacher gives a list of countries and photographs representing the greetings (e.g. handshake, hand kiss, fist shake, bow, kiss, cheek kiss, wave, nod, hug, shoulder tapping, high five, etc.). Learners try to match greetings with the photographs. Then, pupils act out gesture greetings and other pupils guess the country where these greetings are appropriate. The teacher should also warn learners about certain gestures being inappropriate in different cultures.

There is a great choice of authentic materials, which could be used in teaching culture in foreign language lessons, but teachers need to pay a lot of attention in choosing appropriate materials. Teachers should set up criteria for selecting materials, which would suit the specific groups of learners. The materials should fulfill the requirements of the curriculum topics, the interest of learners.

As for the methods for teaching cultural aspects in the ESL classes, there is a variety of them, and the teacher can choose an appropriate due to the level of learners or the topic of the classes. Byram claims that intercultural competence is a complex matter involving more than traditional language lessons [2]. According to Brooks, intercultural competence is the best gained practically, just like learners acquire phonological accuracy, syntax or morphology through actual practice [1]. 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.

Some methods are known to be effective in the English classroom. The method of comparison is one of the most often used techniques for teaching cultures. This technique is focused on discussing the differences between the native and British or American cultures. Comparison is used for developing socio-cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and non-verbal competence. It is widely popular in primary and secondary school to compare in such topics as “School”, “Cuisine”, “Festivals” etc. Pupils watch short video materials, which present typical British school, cuisine or festival procedure, which is available on the Internet with subtitles for better understanding. They suggest not only socio-cultural knowledge but also sociolinguistic and pragmatic phrases (greetings, addressing people, polite requests, formal register) as well as standards of non-verbal communication. Watching video is followed by a discussion of differences in two cultures.

The TPR (Total Physical response) method is designed to respond physically to oral commands in order to act out cultural experience (Hughes, 1986). TPR is very popular in teaching young learners, as children like to act out songs and stories. TPR in cultural competence development is very useful in the formation of the standards of non-verbal communication. Learners need to practice different gestures and to acknowledge their meaning in different cultures, such as kissing, handshaking, thumb up and forefinger sign, shaking of the head, etc. These actions often have different meanings in different cultures.

Role-playing is a very effective method for practicing sociolinguistic and pragmatic phrases, socio-cultural knowledge, but also non-verbal communication. Learners practice real-life situation in a café, restaurant, shop, bus station, airport, etc. Roleplaying is suitable for young learners and adults as well. Learners act the role of visitors to their own country and meet with other learners acting like themselves and not as the stereotypes that the visitors are expecting. This kind of experiential learning is powerful in developing self-awareness as well as perceptions of other countries [3].

To conclude this paper, it is worth to mention that authentic materials provide a rich source of cultural context. Teachers should not be afraid to use authentic materials, as such practice is fun, motivational and educational. Certainly, authentic materials should be

carefully chosen and prepared. Teachers have to pay great attention to the methods and techniques used in working with authentic materials. Thus, developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching involves recognizing that the aims are: to give learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence, to prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures, to enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours, and to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience. If learners are regularly working with authentic materials, they could avoid cultural shock visiting a country with a different culture.

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