

THE IMPORTANCE OF CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING FOR ESL STUDENTS

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*Recommended for Publication by Doctor of Philology,
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Key words and phrases: cross-cultural communication; cross-cultural competence; cross-cultural understanding; cultural competence; socio-linguistic competence.

Abstract: Theoretical bases of cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural understanding are considered. Various kinds of activities to develop cross-cultural understanding of ESL students have been discussed. The need to introduce the topic “Cross-cultural understanding” in the ESL course has been concluded.

As it was written in one English textbook “...The modern world is becoming smaller all the time...” Advances in transport and communications technology combined with the development of the world economy have resulted in people from different nations, cultures, languages and backgrounds now communicating, meeting and doing business with one another more than ever. One of the strong motivations for studying English for modern students is the fact that English is the language of business and the language of international communication. Very few businesses can escape the need to at some point in time deal with foreign colleagues, clients or customers. Business is international and if an organization wants to develop and grow it needs to harness the potential an international stage offers. Students now understand that the ability to speak English will be a great advantage in making their career and in international business communication. But speaking English is not enough to be able to crack foreign markets. The world’s inhabitants come from many faiths, cultures, world views and experiences. This cultural diversity affects the business culture, especially when it comes to doing business across borders

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(whether political, religious, cultural or linguistic); it's obvious that successful communication requires not just excellent foreign language skills, but also cross-cultural understanding.

Many foreign scientists were engaged in researching the problems of cross-cultural communication: I.A. Boduen de Kurtene, W. Von Humboldt, E. Sapir, B. Whorf, Edward T. Hall, Geert Hofstede, Harry C. Triandis, Fons Trompenaars, Clifford Geertz and Shalom Schwartz and many others.

Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf brought attention to the relationship between language, thought, and culture. Edward Sapir studied the research of Wilhelm von Humboldt and expanded the idea that a man lived in the world about him principally, indeed exclusively, as language presented it to him. E. Sapir revealed in "The Status of Linguistics as a Science":

"Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression in their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection: The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached...Even comparatively simple acts of perception are very much more at the mercy of the social patterns called words than we might suppose...We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation" [9].

B.L. Whorf developed Sapir's idea about close relation of our culture and language in his work "Science and Linguistics":

"We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees" [9].

So Sapir and Whorf insured that culture determined language, which in turn determined the way that people categorized their thoughts about the world and their experiences in it.

Successful cross-cultural communication assumes knowledge of a foreign language and foreign culture. According to W. Von Humboldt learning a foreign language is having the other point of view from which one had before in one's understanding of the world [3]. W. Von Humboldt also believed that

different languages are completely not various designations of the same thing, and its various visions... Languages are hieroglyphs in which the person makes the peace and the imagination [3, p. 349].

As Goethe noted the German should study all languages so that at home foreigners seemed to be not strangers, and in the other foreign country they would be like at home. After all the one who doesn't know foreign languages, also doesn't know one's native language [8].

After Karlfried Knapp 'intercultural communication' can be defined "as the interpersonal interaction between members of different groups, which differ from each other in respect of the knowledge shared by their members and in respect of their linguistic forms of symbolic behavior" [11].

"Intra-cultural, inter-cultural and cross-cultural communication issues have been investigated with culture having been defined as characteristic of countries as well as smaller groupings based on gender, social class, age et cetera" [6, p. 18–19].

Problems, difficulties and achievements in the field of realization of the idea of cross-cultural communication in Russian philological science are analyzed in the works of N.V. Baryshnikov, N.V. Eluhina, I.I. Haleyeva, L.N. Jakovleva, V.V. Kabakchi, V.V. Korotenkova, V.G. Kostomarov, V.V. Safonova, S.G. Ter-Minasova, E.M. Vereshchagin and other researchers.

Teaching the ability of cross-cultural understanding should take the leading place in language studies. As S.G. Ter-Minasova thought it was especially important, when mixture of people, languages, cultures has reached unprecedented big size and, there was a great problem of teaching tolerance to other cultures, attracting interest and respect for these cultures, overcoming a feeling of irritation and redundancy in oneself and overcoming a feeling of insufficiency or simply dissimilarity of other cultures [5, p. 9].

In Russian linguistic didactics various definitions of the concept 'cross-cultural communication' ('intercultural dialogue') are offered.

Classical definition is given in E.M. Vereschagin and V.G. Kostomarov's book "Language and Culture" where 'cross-cultural communication' is understood as adequate mutual understanding of participants of the communication belonging to different national cultures [2, p. 26].

V.V. Safonova defines cross-cultural dialogue as functionally caused communicative interaction of people which act as originers of different cultural communities according to their comprehension by other people of their accessory to different geopolitical, continental, regional, religious, national and ethnic communities, and also to social subcultures [4, p. 18].

The famous Russian ethnographer S.A. Arutyunov noticed that ethnic distinctions were shown in the way people dress and eat, in their favourite poses of standing or sitting, but all people on the earth dress, eat, stand and sit. These distinctions show that people of different nationalities have different cultural principles and belong to different cultures. Parallel to spoken language there is also an "extra spoken" language, i.e. language of material and behavioural part of culture [1]. Any statement bears additional semantic load and has historical, cultural, political and other components.

Fluency in a foreign language enabling to carry out cross-cultural interaction successfully, assumes studying the features of culture defining

specific public and business behavior of the partner, determined by influence of historical traditions and customs, a way of life, etc. That is why foreign languages as a means of communication between representatives of different people and cultures should be studied in indissoluble unity with the world and culture of the people speaking these languages.

The real use of the words, real speaking is substantially defined by knowledge of social and cultural life of the speakers using this language. Language doesn't exist out of the culture, i.e. out of socially inherited set of practical skills and the ideas characterizing our way of life. As social cultural structures are the basis of language structures, so it is necessary to know better “the world of the studied language” for active use of language as means of communication [5].

The Actress Elena Safonova, living in Paris, considered that the matter was not only speaking a foreign language. The matter is that, when she said a word “a table” in a foreign language, she saw before herself a round wooden table with four legs and with tea cups on it. And when Frenchmen said “a table”, they saw a table made of glass on one leg and with a vase of flowers on it. According to Elena Safonova’s mind, it was wrong to blame the Frenchmen for their associations that were different from Russian ones. They weren't worse; they were simply different from Russian people [5, p. 56].

It has been widely agreed 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, and the description of what is to be learnt 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’.

Intercultural awareness. Knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities and distinctive differences) between the ‘world of origin’ and the ‘world of the target community’ produce an intercultural awareness. It is, of course, important to note that intercultural awareness includes an awareness of the regional and social diversity of both worlds. It is also enriched by awareness of a wider range of cultures than those carried by the learner's L1 and L2. This wider awareness helps to place both in context. In addition to objective knowledge, intercultural awareness covers awareness of how each community appears from the perspective of the other, often in the form of national stereotypes.

Intercultural skills and know-how include:

- the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other;
- cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures;
- the capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between one’s own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations;
- the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships” [10].

Cross-cultural training is impossible without the development of the intercultural competence of a foreign language teacher. From various theoretical sources we know that the intercultural competence is a unity of socio-cultural competence and socio-linguistic competence. In simple terms, the socio-cultural competence involves understanding of common cultural background, national culture of the country of studied language and the knowledge of history, geography, infrastructure and the way different people live. There are a lot of books and brochures about country studies in various book publishing houses. As to the second part of intercultural competence, very often a teacher of a foreign language having experience of visiting the country of the studied language is the only carrier of socio-linguistic competence and can inform the students about authentic rules of speech behavior.

Intercultural language learning is a stance on language teaching and learning that emphasizes the interdependence of language and culture and the importance of intercultural understanding as a goal of language education. It is increasingly being promoted as a way to develop learners' ability to negotiate meanings across languages and cultures and prepare them for living in a multicultural world. The importance of developing intercultural communicative competence alongside linguistic competence has resulted from learners' needs for acquiring intercultural skills for cross-cultural communication in which they may encounter linguistic and cultural barriers. Teaching from an intercultural perspective involves developing in learners critical cultural awareness of their own culturally-shaped world view and behaviour as well as the skills and attitudes to understand and successfully interact with people from other cultures, that is, to become interculturally as well as linguistically competent. ESL teachers need to shift from a traditional stance to an inter-cultural one to develop both linguistic and intercultural competences of learners.

Following the modern tendencies of important intercultural language teaching we suggest including a special unit "Cross-Cultural Understanding" in ESL learning.

This topic is almost completely developed by the teacher of a foreign language in our country because of the lack of special language teaching methods of intercultural understanding in the ESL educational programmers for Russian high schools and universities. We suggest several practical steps of interactive tasks and activities to engage learners cognitively, behaviorally and affectively in culture learning during ESL lessons.

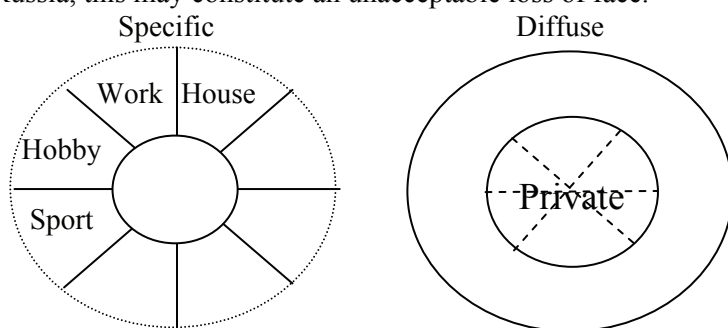
1 step. *Revising the names of the world countries, their capitals and nationalities. Showing them on the map.*

2 step. *Defining religions in different countries.* Different religions influence much different aspects of everyday life. For example, in some Arab countries because of the alcohol prohibition by Islamic religion many hotels of 5 stars rank are not allowed to have mini-bars in rooms, so that is why they get 4 stars rank.

3 step. *Dividing countries according to their cultures into Affective and Neutral [7].* Members of neutral cultures do not show their feelings, but keep them carefully controlled and subdued. Such relationships can be found in Japan, Indonesia, the U.K., Norway and the Netherlands. In highly affective cultures people show their feelings plainly by laughing, smiling, grimacing,

scowling – and sometimes crying, shouting, or walking out of the room. Such relationships can be found in Italy, Greece, France, the U.S., Singapore, Russia and other Slavic countries. Multinational teams consisting of individuals from highly neutral and highly affective cultures need careful management and considerable intercultural understanding. Otherwise, the affective persons will view the neutral persons as ice-cold, and the affective persons will be viewed as out of control by the neutrals.

4 step. *Dividing countries according to their cultures into Specific and Defuse* [7]. In Specific culture private and business spheres of life are strictly separated and independent from each other. Such relationships can be found in Australia, the U.K., the USA, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands and many other European countries. In Defuse culture private and business spheres of life are connected with each other. The chief manager of the company plays at the same time the roles of a friend and a neighbor in the street he lives. Such relationships can be found in Latin America, Southern Europe, Egypt and Russia. Managers of specific culture such as Denmark are much more prone to criticize subordinates directly and openly without regarding their criticism as a personal matter. In the context of a subsidiary in a diffuse culture such as Russia, this may constitute an unacceptable loss of face.



5 step. *Dividing countries according to their cultures into high-context or low-context.* High-context cultures (Mediterranean, Slavic, Central European, Latin American, African, Arab, Asian) leave much of the message to be understood through context, nonverbal cues, and between-the-lines interpretation of what is actually said. In high-context countries personal contact and non-formal agreements are more important and stronger than formal e-mail and fax messages. Low-context cultures (most of the Germanic and English-speaking countries) expect messages to be explicit and specific. Low-context culture such as the United States, Canada and Germany are usually advanced industrialized nations. They rely heavily on electronic technology and emphasize written messages over oral or face-to-face communication.

6 step. *Studying different ways of greeting and saying good-bye in different cultures.* For example, many Europeans shake hands, wave or nod when they meet someone. The French usually kiss on the cheeks. But the Japanese and Chinese normally bow when they greet each other.

7 step. *Studying cross-cultural dining etiquette.* For example, the British are happy to have a business lunch and discuss business matters with a drink during the meal; the Japanese prefer not to work while eating. Lunch is a time to relax and get to know one another, and they rarely drink at lunchtime.

8 step. *Studying cross-cultural guest etiquette and ways of entertaining people.* Playing role-games with students of inviting foreigners to different national homes for a meal and informal meeting. For example, in the Middle East you must never use the left hand for greeting, eating, drinking, or smoking. Also, you should take care not to admire anything in your host's home. They will feel that they have to give it to you. In Russia you must match your hosts drink for drink or they will think you are unfriendly.

9 step. *Final project paper work "My Business Trip to a Foreign Country":*

1. Country:
2. Capital:
3. Currency:
4. Nationality:
5. Languages:
6. Religion:
7. National dish:
8. National drink:
9. National dress:
10. My business clothes:
11. Way of greeting:
12. National character:
13. National culture and traditions:
14. Dos and Don'ts while going to...(the name of the country) (write as many Dos and Don'ts as possible):
 - Do be polite.
 - Do respect your partner's religion.
 - Don't be late for business lunch (dinner).
 - Don't interrupt your partner when he is speaking.
15. Famous people and what they are famous for.

In the following paper work a student chooses any country according to his/her taste and tries to give us some kind of help message of cross-cultural understanding of a particular country to promote business links to this country.

In reality, cultures are not right or wrong, better or worse; they are just different. The key to cross-cultural success for ESL teachers is to develop in our students an understanding of and a deep respect for the differences.

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**Актуальность темы «Межкультурное понимание»
для студентов, изучающих английский язык как иностранный**

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ФГБОУ ВПО «Первый Тамбовский филиал Российской академии народного хозяйства и государственной службы при Президенте РФ»; ФГБОУ ВПО «Тамбовский государственный технический университет», г. Тамбов

Ключевые слова и фразы: межкультурная коммуникация; межкультурная компетенция; межкультурное понимание; социально-культурная компетенция; социально-лингвистическая компетенция.

Аннотация: Рассмотрены теоретические основы межкультурной коммуникации и межкультурного понимания. Перечислены различные виды деятельности по развитию межкультурного понимания для студентов, изучающих иностранный язык. Сделан вывод об актуальности включения темы «Межкультурное понимание» в курс современного иностранного языка.

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