

ON PROBLEMS OF INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE AMONG CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Lessons of a foreign language are primarily designed to establish and develop communicative competences in the target language, but they are also a good opportunity to develop social, personal, interpersonal and intercultural skills. As people are characterized by cognitive complexity perceive the world in a multivariate way, the author of the research focuses her attention to students' intercultural awareness because it is the cognitive dimension of intercultural communication competence and it refers to a person's ability to understand similarities and differences of others' cultures.

Keywords: *cultural awareness, cultural shock, cultural elements, intercultural communication, intercultural competences, self-awareness, stereotyping*

Rezumat

Lecțiile de limbă străină sunt concepute, în primul rând, pentru a forma și dezvolta competențe comunicative în limba-țintă. Totodată, ele permit de a dezvolta abilități sociale, personale, interpersonale și interculturale. Întrucât la indivizii umani se înregistrează complexitate în activitatea de cunoaștere și ei percep variat realitatea, ne propunem să cercetăm „conștientizarea” interculturală la elevi, deoarece aceasta este dimensiunea cognitivă a competenței de comunicare interculturală, care se referă la capacitatea unei persoane de a înțelege asemănările și deosebirile dintre culturi.

Cuvinte-cheie: *conștiință culturală, șoc cultural, elemente culturale, comunicare interculturală, competențe interculturale, conștiința de sine, stereotipizare*

The study of language and culture interaction becomes up-to-date in the research of many scholars, such as G. Chen, W. Starosta, G. Elizarova, I. Sterlin, S. Ter-Minasova and others. In modern methods of teaching foreign languages, a special attention is given to the ability to cross-cultural communication. In this context, it seems appropriate at the initial stage of training to acquaint university students with the culture and traditions not only of the target language but also learning to analyze the similarities and differences in communicative behaviour of different cultures. Lessons of a foreign language are primarily designed to establish and develop communicative competences in the target language, but they are also a good opportunity to teach social, personal, interpersonal and intercultural skills. Awareness of how different cultural beliefs may influence one's own and others' linguistic choices is fundamental to successful spoken communication. The problem of

intercultural competences might be discussed from the point of view of cultural differences of interlocutors, possible communication barriers and misunderstanding, intercultural education and the problematics of foreign language tuition.

G. Chen and W. Starosta developed a *model of intercultural communication competence* that integrates features of both cross-cultural attitude and behavioural skills models (Chen & Starosta, 1996). According to the authors, intercultural communication competence is comprised of three dimensions: intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural adroitness.

We decided to focus our attention to students' intercultural awareness because it is the cognitive dimension of intercultural communication competence and it refers to a person's ability to understand similarities and differences of others' cultures. It is worth mentioning that the individual's perception of reality is determined by his cultural background, experience, interests, education and others. By the way, it is also shaped by the process of an active interaction of an individual with the surrounding cultural and social environment. But when people from different cultures begin communicating with each other, the impact of a cultural aspect on perception is particularly apparent. Thus, in mono-cultural communication the link between background and new experience serves as a cognitive basis for establishing cohesion between them, allowing to avoid fails in communication, while the incongruity of individuals' cognitive structures often leads to misunderstanding and intercultural conflicts in intercultural interaction. The research done by G. Elizarova (2001) proved the fact that the attribution in the process of intercultural communication can lead to interpreting events and the behaviour of people from different cultures on the basis of their own cultural categories.

When meeting representatives of other peoples and cultures, people usually have a natural disposition to perceive their behaviour from the position of their own culture, leading to a distorted interpretation. This determines the main psychological difference between intercultural communication and communication within one culture when attributing own categories doesn't impede but promotes communication. Intercultural competence development is also closely connected with the number of concepts in a person's mental experience. People are characterized by cognitive complexity perceive the world in a multivariate way, in all its manifestations, contrasts and shades, while cognitive, simple people possess a white and black perception and are not able to adapt to the real life contradictions. It becomes clear that the cognitive style "cognitive simplicity – cognitive complexity" is also responsible for some frame of world perception, determining the style of cognition and the way a person performs in a multicultural environment.

Since the process of intercultural communication is associated with overcoming stereotypes, cognitive parameters of tolerance – intolerance to unrea-

listic experience and rigidity – flexibility of cognitive control hold great importance as they are responsible for individual differences in ways of organizing his perception. Also, parameter rigidity – flexibility of cognitive control - is essential in the learning process, because it characterizes the immunity of an individual in the process of switching to other types of activities and methods in accordance with the objective requirements and evaluated by the speed and accuracy of critical tasks (Gardner *et alii*, 1999).

Awareness of one's own culture and the cultural differences between societies is a part of intercultural competence. The dimension includes two components: self-awareness and cultural awareness (Chen & Starosta, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000).

Cognitive styles in the educational process manifest themselves in certain approaches to solving problems or performing tasks applied by the students, as well as in the way of processing foreign language information. In the methodology, the ways of organizing cognitive activity are referred to as the strategies. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines strategies as specific actions; behaviours, steps, or techniques students use – often consciously – to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the second language (Oxford, 1990).

Objectives



This academic year I have a chance to make my post-doctoral studies in Valencia (Spain) at Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV), at the Department of Applied Linguistics. Spanish culture is a special historical heritage among Western cultures. It is a unique system that differs from the others with its synthesis of Latin, Arabic, European, Latin American cultures (and cultures that reflect the composition of the population - Catalan, Basque, Galician, Jewish, Gypsy). Pablo Picasso and Francisco Goya, Diego Velazquez and Salvador Dalí, Joaquin Sorolla and El Greco, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra and Vicente Blasco Ibáñez were inspired by cultural diversity of this country. The influence of different nations, religions and cultures; boundary position between Europe and Africa; the Mediterranean insularity and the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean - all these factors are reflected in the majestic monuments and interesting traditions of Spain.

We elaborated the questionnaire for UPV language students with the purpose of *understanding the level of students' intercultural awareness*. The study focused on the willingness of students to learn a foreign language (English) and on their initial understanding of "culture", "cultural ele-

ments", "and stereotyping", "cultural shock" and on the necessity of integrating intercultural issues in EFL learning process.

Methods

Participants

The participants included 20 language learners with B1 level of English who voluntarily filled out the questionnaire and whose first language was different – Chinese, Spanish, Korean and others. The age of the learner participants varies – the majority's (85%) age ranged was 20-25 and the minority's (15%) age ranged was 25-30. As the administrative staff of UPV promotes the correct internationalization policy, there are many students all over the world who study at the UPV due to diverse international exchange programs. That's why the respondents in our research were not only from Spain (25% of respondents), but also from China (40% of respondents), Kazakhstan (10% of respondents), Morocco (10% of respondents), India (10% of respondents), Republic of Korea (5% of respondents).

Procedure

In our research we did not apply to any scales that include "agree" or "disagree" variants as we were interested in students' points of view and their attitudes. For the purposes of the present study, the language on the questionnaire was chosen English. A brief explanation about the purposes of the study as well as the importance of culture and intercultural communication in language education was given. The participants were encouraged to ask questions in order to clarify any misunderstanding they were likely to face when completing the questionnaires.

Results

Our first question concerning the importance of learning a foreign language was challenging one because 60% of respondents agreed to the point of learning English; they found it desirable and motivating to learn a foreign language but at the same time 40% of respondents didn't care about the necessity of learning another language.

The second question asked respondents to circle or underline the words that they consider represent "culture". The number of words was given to them such as *literature, art, history, behaviour, drama, daily routine, family values, patriotism*. As culture learning involves acquiring knowledge, behavioural skills, and attitude related to two types of domain – big "C" culture and small "c" culture, it is worth mentioning that the majority of respondents (75%) circled the words that represented Big "C" culture – the words related to the *arts, history, geography, business, education, literature*. We consider it is very natural because these phenomena are easily seen, they are "above the water" (referring to the schematic "iceberg" representation of culture made by many scholars) and might be easily memorized by learners. Any-

way 30% of respondents highlighted *behaviour* and *daily routine* as ones from small “c” culture. Some respondents (8%) hardly mentioned *cultural* or *family values* and *patriotism* as the elements of culture. We explain their choice and unfamiliarity with the fact that these words refer to the invisible and deeper sense of a target culture, that is, the mainstream sociocultural values, norms and beliefs, taking into consideration such socio-cultural variables as age, gender and social status.

The third question was concerning *cultural shock* and many respondents (85%) experience culture shock in their when beginning a course in a foreign language, travelling in a foreign country, studying in a new cultural environment, talking to friends or class-mates not in their native language or even dancing at disco in a foreign country. We strongly agree that such a shock is caused the difficulty of adapting to a new environment or new society. It happens to such persons who may differ culturally from host country culture and when their host culture differs much on which they are used in the homeland. Such persons hardly acclimatize themselves to a new academic context. This can be dangerous for them as it might lead to another extreme, which will eventually end in a confidence crisis which may seriously slow down their adaptation to the host culture and their learning.

It is obvious that English is the language of communication and it can create a bridge between different cultures but many respondents answering the fourth question (almost 90% of respondents) stated that they experienced *language barrier* in their life. Besides, 60% of respondents stated that they easily started a conversation with anyone outside their own culture but 40% said that it was difficult for them to talk to people who belonged to different culture than theirs. The analysis of respondents’ answers leads us to the argument that barriers in communication with peers are connected with all types of stereotypes that can be distinguished in any society. Even answering the question about sharing the room or the desk with someone of another cultural background, 20% of respondents categorically refused to do it and 10% of respondents answered that they were afraid of strangers although about 55% of respondents did not see any problems in this suggestion.

Based on the results of the present study, we can say that the problem of stereotypes facing academic society today is still waiting for its solution. According W. Lippmann’s point of view of stereotypes as “pictures in our heads” (Lippmann, 1992, p. 3), students are concerned with the way to cognize social, cultural, ethnic, religious stereotypes and try to manage them. Another scholar E. Bartminkij regards stereotypes as reinforcing prejudices that construct barriers in intercultural communication (Bartminkij, 2009). We strongly agree that negative stereotypes may facilitate the students’ comprehension of unfamiliar behavioural patterns and they can lead to intolerance towards the representatives of other cultural groups and impede intercultural communi-

cation. Some respondents (about 75%) agreed that many cultural groups are more stereotyped and even gave several examples, such as British, Americans, Germans, Indians, and Chinese. Undoubtedly, stereotypes exist in proverbs and idioms, folklore and oral speech, even in our minds and in this connection, we were interested in the issue of those positive or negative stereotypes that students had towards different cultures. Our next task to the respondents was to write some *associations with the given nations*. The overall analysis shows that the learners (58% of respondents) associate British with cricket, 5 o'clock tea and world conquer. The learners consider Englishmen reserved in manners, dress and speech. Germans for 78% of respondents are serious with many cars, beer and technology, although 15% of respondents associate them with Nazi. Romanticism, love, kisses, Paris, baguette, and Eiffel Tower are association words for 87% of respondents when they hear the word "France". Russian people are associated with cold and snow for 40% of respondents and with vodka, power, nuclear power and control for 35% of respondents. As for Americans, they are associated with fast-food and money for 75% of respondents and 40% of respondents consider them crazy, open-minded and talkative people. According to the results of this task, we can say that students' associations are quite stereotyped. Students' perceptions of representatives of diverse cultural groups are mainly a result of the assimilation of information received from other people, mass media, literature, films, and other indirect sources, but not as a result of direct contact with representatives of these peoples. One cannot be absolutely free from stereotypes. They are perceived as a finished product, or are born in our mind in the process of perception of any information. Therefore, we can say that positive or negative stereotypes that exist in the society influence upon of students' awareness and their opinions.

The next two questions of our questionnaire touched the problem of adaptability in a foreign country and some aspects of host country's customs. As our respondents were from outside Spain and it was interesting for us to know their perceptions about Spanish day-by-day routine. We asked them about Spanish habit to take or not to take the shoes off inside the house and about Spaniards reaction to the English-speaking person in the street. Based on the results, 25% of respondents outside Spain strongly agreed that in Spain, taking the shoes off was appropriate when the person were with close friends at someone's house. 10% of respondents had the opinion that taking the shoes off was appropriate if the person went to a house where the friends had a carpet on the floor. The next question we formulated like this: "When travelling around rural areas of Spain, what would you expect?" The analysis of the answers showed us that 30% of respondents outside Spain thought that Spaniards could only understand English or only could say "Hello", "Please" and "Thank you" in English. The rest of respondents con-

sidered that Spaniards could understand but couldn't speak English at all (10%). According to the results of this task, we can say that for the effective interaction between representatives of different lingua-cultures it is necessary to have basic knowledge of the characteristics of cultural identity of verbal and nonverbal behaviour of people from different countries. For adequate perception and effective intercultural interpretation of communicative



behaviour of members of other lingua-cultures, communication in a foreign language should be based on knowledge of the cultural traditions and specific features of national character of the partners in the dialogue.

A special attention in our research was given to Spanish students. Their points of view were important for us as they were a part of the Host University.

As English and Spanish languages are the most common and studied languages in the world, the questions of national and cultural features of communicative behaviour of these people require were of great interest for us. Noticing an advertisement (a slogan) on the wall of Valencia underground with the phrase "We want to learn another language" and the response was "Yes, we want", we understood that something was "wrong" in the process of learning English in local language institutions. Based on the results of *Estudio Europeo de Competencia Lingüística* (EECL) made by the Ministry of Education of Spain, the process of learning English as a foreign language is a great problem nowadays. Many European researchers had made a serie of interviews among the learners and argued that English language in Spain is owned by about 24 % of the students (only oral skills). The level of English is worse only in Hungary (65% monolinguals), Italy (62%), the UK (61% native speakers), Portugal (61%), Ireland 60%) and France (41%). Interviewing Spanish students we made a conclusion that Spaniards are proud of their language and culture, and are wary of the presence of English loan words in their native language, which accounts for the sometimes unwillingness to learn this language. Some of them (45% of respondents) believe that the knowledge of the Spanish language is sufficient for life, some students (30% of respondents) are certain that if Spanish language is considered the second world language it is necessary to pay more attention to co-official or regional languages such as Basque, Galician, Catalan, Aragonese and others then to learn "alien" languages.

The main conclusions of the research show that for successful implementation of intercultural communication, students must have extensive background knowledge. The learners found it rather desirable to have better understanding of cultural diversity, to learn the target culture in order to com-

municate appropriately with English-speaking friends and with other cultural groups. Learners believe that it is rather necessary to learn cultural features to communicate appropriately. Besides, the majority of respondents (90%) stand for the necessity of learning intercultural issues at EFL classes but they are not prepared enough to live in a multicultural society as they need to learn about the target language culture and traditions as well as to learn and to analyze the similarities and differences in communicative behaviour of different cultures. The students believe that the integration of intercultural issues into the language classroom might help the mover come any negative reaction or misunderstanding and give them the opportunity to compare and contrast the cultural values of different languages and the ability to cite a basic definition of culture, to contrast aspects of the host language and culture with their own language and culture, to recognize signs of cultural stress and learn strategies for overcoming them.

Conclusions

Learning a foreign language enables students to learn about other cultures (English-speaking and non-English speaking countries) and contributes to the discovery of their own identity and the developing of their own culture. This process leads to tolerance, understanding, sympathy and sensitivity, and brings a higher quality of life. We strongly agree that teaching of foreign languages nowadays should be carried out taking into account the specific characteristics of the national communicative behaviour and cultural traditions of interlocutors.

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