

The Development of Students' Inter-cultural Competence in the Process of Collaborative Foreign Language Learning at Tertiary Level

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Abstract. The article deals with the formation and development of students' inter-cultural competence in the process of collaborative foreign language learning in a higher institution. Nowadays we can observe a shift in language pedagogy from mere transmitting facts and behaviours about English speaking countries to acquiring social and historical contexts that reveal meaning of cultural phenomena within larger cross-cultural networks: when authentic texts are used in relation to visual, musical and other texts of various kinds (Kramsch, 1993; Kramsch and Lam, 1998). The author of the article has created a model of intercultural competence which represents an integrative unity of socio-cultural and pluricultural competences which interact with each other within inner and outer environment. This inter-cultural competence is a part of collaborative competence worked out by the author. Collaborative learning can be considered to be an effective means of not only students' learning a foreign language but also the development of their inter-cultural competence. The inter-cultural competence within the framework of collaborative learning is defined as a system of knowledge about the history and culture of the native country as well as the target country's experience and skills in its use for successful intercultural communication developed in the process of learning, the ability to be a mediator between cultures as well as the ability to take into consideration specific features of the interlocutor's culture.

Key words: inter-cultural competence, collaborative learning, foreign language, tertiary level students.

Introduction

Knowledge about other cultures and cultural awareness are often regarded to be subordinate to the general aim of intercultural communication. Consequently, educators pay attention to such type of communication which is not culturally specific, but occurs in all types of cross-cultural interaction. It is evident that for that kind of communicative skill knowledge about a certain culture is not essential. This article attempts to put forward the idea of the importance of culture-dependent nature of communicative styles and behaviours. As communicating refers to a more superficial idea of using the language to transfer new information between two people or two groups of people (Saraceni, 2003) foreign language study should mean achieving deeper understanding of other cultures by developing inter-cultural competence in the area of attitude, knowledge and skill involving students' native culture, which will help students express themselves in a foreign language. The author of the article agrees with Saraceni that students expressing themselves will be able to use the target language as they do it in their native one, which allows them to discover similarities and differences in languages and cultures, not only focusing on stereotypes.

The object of the article is the development of students' inter-cultural competence.

The aim of the article is to overview the issues associated with the topic under investigation, to analyse the problem from different viewpoints.

The method of research: problem analysis of psychological, pedagogical, methodological literature.

The objectives of the article:

1. to create a model of students' inter-cultural competence in the process of their foreign language study;
2. To work out the principles of the development of students' inter-cultural competence.
3. To create a model of collaborative learning which is the basis of the development of students' inter-cultural competence.

Principles of Culture Study and the Model of Students' Inter-cultural Competence

Foreign language study when students fulfil bilingual educational programmes denotes that the education is becoming poly-linguistic. As the study of any foreign language is closely connected with the investigation of the culture of the target country it is possible to state that students receive poly-cultural education. The author of the article agrees with Malkova (Малькова, 1997) who defines poly-cultural education which possesses a multi-aspect character as a goal-oriented pedagogical process of students' moral-civic up-bringing, the developing of their global world-outlook, forming positive attitude towards the culture of other nations as well as motivating the development of skills necessary for living in a multinational environment. The author of the article claims that foreign language becomes a means of communication as well as a means of study of the culture of the target country on the basis of understanding the lexical meaning of the language.

More than one hundred years ago Fietor (Паушенбах, 1971) claimed that it was necessary for learners to acquire the culture, customs and traditions of the target country; he regarded a teacher to be an interpreter of life of a foreign country. He postulated the aim of foreign language learning,

which has become very actual today, that is “Kulturunterricht” – understanding the culture and life of people and the country of the target language.

Today in foreign language methodology there exist two approaches to teaching the culture of the target country: first, outward, “panoramic”: learners investigate the literature, music, art, etc. of the country chronologically; second, anthropological: learners study everyday-life of people of the target language and culture.

These approaches can be reflected in the following principles:

1. Foreign culture is the source of foreign cultural education accomplished in four aspects: cognitive, developing, up-bringing and academic.
2. The basis of foreign language study is the dialogue of cultures revealed in comparative / contrast investigation of moral, aesthetic values, genres, ideas, themes and problems of people’s artistic creation as well as peoples’ ways, styles of living in the target country (Мамонтов, 2000).
3. Students’ up-bringing involves moral values common for both cultures.
4. Comparative / contrast investigation of the culture and language of the target country helps students overcome difficulties in understanding differences existing between the native culture and the culture of the target country.

Thus, the dialogue of cultures becomes the first means of polycultural education and personal development. Foreign language study helps to achieve such fundamental pedagogical goal as the development of students’ competence in personal interaction in general and the development of their inter-cultural competence in particular.

The author of the paper claims that this dialogue is possible only when students are aware of their own national culture and their own language. This is vital for intercultural interaction and as a result as the inter-cultural competence. The contact of cultures is carried out through languages (native and the target) and it is based on appropriate level of knowledge of the native language and culture. Thus, to have a good command of a foreign language can be regarded to be a component of a personal growth and cultural level which allows a student to be connected with the culture of the whole world.

It is impossible to communicate inter-culturally in an effective way without going beyond linguistic competence. Cultural competence is achieved when communicative competence is gained as well as basic information about a learned country is acquired.

Foreign language study entails acquiring a new identity and a new set of beliefs and values as languages are “unlike any other subject taught in a classroom in that they involve the acquisition of skills and behaviour patterns which are characteristic of another community” (Gardner, 1985). However, this does not require the abandonment of first culture / language values and norms (Kramsch, 1998).

Today we can observe a shift in language pedagogy from mere transmitting facts and behaviours about English

speaking countries to acquiring social and historical contexts that reveal meaning of cultural phenomena within larger cross-cultural networks: when authentic texts are used in relation to visual, musical and other texts of various kinds (Kramsch, 1993; Kramsch and Lam, 1998).

Structural approach to pedagogical phenomena requires using models. The essence of the model of intercultural competence is reflected in the structure of its components. The structure of the model consists of the following components: socio-cultural competence (field 1) and pluricultural competence (field 2).

These components integrate with each other not only within the inner environment (field 3), but within the outer environment as well. Inner environment of the model can have several levels representing one class, two or more classes, or institution. Outer environment involves students’ activity outside the institution. Light blue and light green colours denote that the development of the inter-cultural competence occurs within the subject and process level, which means, first, that students acquire inter-cultural competence in academic setting taking necessary academic courses (subject level); second, students learn academic subjects within the framework of collaborative learning on the basis of research approach (process level). At the same time students continue developing their inter-cultural competence in real-life situations (in outer environment). The circles are dashed because they denote the integrative character of the components which are not isolated from each other.

This model reveals the development of inter-cultural competence not as a linear process which has its end, but as a process of constant improvement both students’ knowledge and students’ personality.

The numbers of fields are presented according to the order of the development of the components of the model.

Each component of the model possesses its own characteristic features; at the same time they are interconnected and independent. Their integration allows students to adapt to changing inner and outer environment promoting active collaborative learning.

Now let us investigate the components of the model.

Socio-cultural competence (field 1) includes the knowledge of everyday-life situations, interpersonal relationships, values, beliefs, attitudes, social conventions, ritual behaviours (Spitzberg and Cupach, 1984). It corresponds to inward perspective towards culture learning.

Knowledge of the shared values and beliefs held by social groups in other countries and regions, such as religious beliefs, taboos, assumed common history are essential to intercultural communication. These multiple areas of knowledge vary from individual to individual.

It is rather difficult to graduate students’ socio-cultural competence because this gradation is connected with levels of students’ knowledge in different scales, and the knowledge about the culture of the target country also relates to more universal parameters and constants.

According to Bim (Бим, 2001) socio-cultural competence (field 1) contains general knowledge about the culture of a learned country (subject level) representing “panoramic”, outward perspective. It involves:

- its geographical position, nature, places of interest;
- its government, main parties, mass media, educational institutions;
- its prominent representatives of culture, international contacts, social trends.

Foreign language study helps students access cultural values and manifestations of the target culture. Various aspects of culture (national, regional, social) do not only co-exist with each other but they interact actively as they are compared, contrasted by students, who in this way create their pluricultural competence consisting not of a simple additions of monocultural competencies, but allowing different kinds of combinations and changes.

Pluricultural competence (field 2) (Council of Europe, 2000) refers to the ability to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, as a social agent possesses an experience of several cultures. This experience is not stable because it is based on the dynamic process of composite relationships among these competences proving that this model is open.

Pluricultural competence embraces one more significant component that is intercultural awareness, which is reflected in knowledge and understanding the similarities and

differences between the native culture and the culture of the target country. A typical feature of pluricultural competence is its changeable character which manifests itself in revealing more complex experience of the plurality of cultures enhancing students’ educational growth and professional maturity.

Students who form and develop their inter-cultural competence will be able:

- To perform a role of a mediator between native culture and the target one;
- To maintain and increase their own motivation for intercultural communication (Morreale; Spitzbergand and Barge, 2001);
- To possess cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for successful cultural contact;
- To achieve personal outcomes controlling and handling their socio-cultural environment to obtain their goals,
- To assess the resources necessary to achieve these goals,
- To predict foreigner’s responses,
- To reflect upon the results of the inter-cultural interaction.

A high level of intercultural competence enables students to develop an enriched, more complex personality and greater openness to new cultural experiences.

The structure of the model of intercultural competence can be presented in the following figure:

outer environment

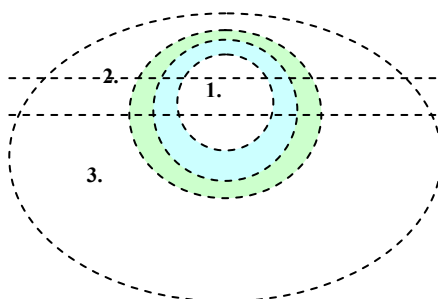


Figure 1. The structure of the model of students’ inter-cultural competence (process and subject levels).

In the framework of the present research students’ inter-cultural competence can be defined as an integrative unity of knowledge about the history and culture of the native and other countries and skillful use of this knowledge for successful intercultural communication developed in the process of learning, the ability to be a mediator between cultures as well as the ability to take into consideration specific features of the interlocutor’s culture.

The development of students’ inter-cultural competence occurs on the basis of collaborative learning the model of which is described in the second part of the article.

The Structure of the Model of Collaborative Learning

The understanding of the components of the model as well as the connections among them (which is very important) helps the lecturer improve students’ foreign language study.

The theoretical basis of the functional model of students’ foreign language study is Dewey’s experimental learning “experience and thinking” (Dewey, 1933), Kolb’s (1985) ideas on learning as “experience + reflection”, Merizow’s (1991) transformational learning according to which learning is based on reflection and on the interpretation of the experience, ideas and assumptions obtained from previous learning. A goal achievement component in students’ study stems out of Leontjev’s (Леонтьев, 1975), Schukin’s (Щукин, 2000) ideas on students’ study in which the goal and motives are interconnected revealing the existence of objective and subjective components.

According to Leontjev’s activity theory objective components are the subject, the goal and the content; the subjective components are motives, means and results (outcomes). The dialectical development of students’ activity is conducted on

the basis of formation and resolve of contradictions existing within the connections among the components.

The functional model of students' foreign language study represents a cycle consisting of the following components: goals, motives, concrete study activity, methods of study,

subject and process competence, outcomes, reflection on subject and process study, formulation of abstract concepts, using acquired competences in a new context / situation.

The structure of the model is represented in the following figure:

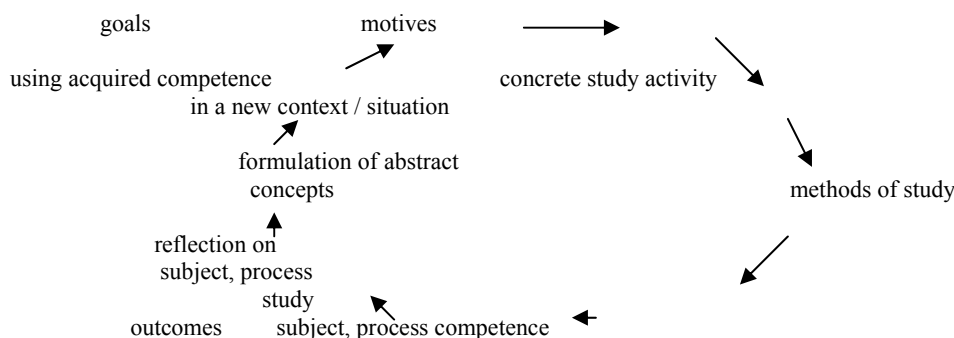


Figure 2. The structure of the model of students' collaborative learning.

The aim of the model is to develop students' inter-cultural competence. The task of the author of the article is to reveal the interconnections among the components of the model representing the stages of the study. It has to be recognized that goal achievement in students' study is of vital importance for their personal development as it determines their self-control in the studies. Being concrete, not abstract, the aim possesses an incentive character, that is the basis for the creation of motives which have become personal for students and drive them to achieve it. Aim setting occurs in all stages of the cycle, and the aim is always concrete making students' study process unified. The aim of the study is an expected result which both the student and the lecturer try to achieve.

The author of the paper points out that, first, students are aware of the aims set by the lecturer, later they are able to set aims themselves self-controlling and self-regulating their study. Foreign language and the target culture as the subjects attract students' interest, drive them transforming these academic subjects into the subjects of cognition forming cognitive motives. Cognitive motives are motives which drive students to acquire and enhance new knowledge; to form, develop skills helping to build up knowledge, metacognitive skills which help them in their self-direct learning.

Besides cognitive motives students develop social motives: motives to empathy, motives of interaction and cooperation. Foreign language and the target culture study become really a goal-oriented process when students are aware of their motives and aims. The stage "aim-motive" is the leading one because it determines the structure of other stages and the dynamics of their development.

The motives support the aim, they drive students to the activity. The resolving of contradiction between the aim and motives at this stage determines the study as a self-organizing process and the formation of students' personal attitude to study. Students become active when the motives are intrinsic and personally significant for them. Cognitive motives reflect the subject level of the model of inter-

cultural competence, while social motives reflect the process level.

Students achieving a concrete aim in a concrete study activity use necessary methods of study and, thus, develop their competence. Methods of study are introduced by the lecturer, but it is students who acquire, form and improve them according to their learning style. Being driven by motives, trying to achieve the goal in a concrete study activity, using methods of study students acquire necessary competence on the subject and process level. This competence causes changes in the structural links within the activity and becomes a means of their further effective learning.

Having acquired a certain level of competence students are able to reflect upon their knowledge and previous study activity. Students' reflection helps them not only evaluate the results of their study but to work out generalizations, or abstract conceptions on it and develop strategies for further activity. Students use acquired competence both within inner and outer environment, this acquired competence is transformed in a new situation denoting that students become more competent obtaining new levels of cognition and experience.

Conclusion

On the basis of psychological, pedagogical, conceptions on inter-cultural competence and collaborative learning, and the result of the analysis of the observation of students' foreign language study it is possible to conclude:

1. Students' intercultural competence is the unity of integrated components functioning on the basis of harmonious interaction. Students study foreign language and the culture of the target country as developed personalities enhancing their competence, which will help them live and interact successfully in culturally diverse world.
2. Inter-cultural competence can be regarded as a main means of students' future integration into real life and helps them successfully function in academic, professional, or business domains.

3. Integration is the principle of formation and development of all the components of students' inter-cultural competence permitting them to become language and cultural agents in a changing society.
4. A significant feature of inter-cultural competence is students' openness to changes in a society, a free choice in their own development, a lot of different forms of self-expression and self-actualization.
5. The pedagogical basis of the integration of all components of the model is the organization of collaborative learning grounded on research approach. Such inner environment which enables language and culture values become a part of students' spiritual world is the basis of the integration of subject and process levels of their inter-cultural competence. Subject level including the knowledge about the language and culture of the target country is acquired during collaborative learning (process level) involving students' emotional and social experience revealed in their needs, motives and resulted in their inter-cultural competence.
6. The development of student' inter-cultural competence occurs on the basis of the didactic model of collaborative learning worked out according to the opinion that students are the subjects of their own learning.
7. Research-based approach within the framework of collaborative learning means the organization of the material on the basis of problem-solving activity in which philosophical problems are regarded to be dominant, which permits to create harmonious balance between knowledge and moral values in the pedagogical process.
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Studentų tarpkultūrinės kompetencijos vystymas aukštojoje mokykloje mokantis užsienio kalbų bendradarbiaujant

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas studentų tarpkultūrinės kompetencijos formavimas ir vystymas mokantis užsienio kalbų bendradarbiaujant. Straipsnio autorė sukūrė tarpkultūrinės kompetencijos modelį, kuris atspindi integruotą sociokultūrinę ir daugiakultūrinę kompetencijų vienovę, kurios sąveikauja viena su kita vidinėje ir išorinėje aplinkoje. Ši tarpkultūrinė kompetencija yra autorės parengtos bendradarbiavimo kompetencijos dalis. Mokymasis bendradarbiaujant gali būti laikomas efektyvia priemone ne tik studentų užsienio kalbų mokymui, bet ir jų tarpkultūrinės kompetencijos vystymui. Tarpkultūrinė kompetencija mokantis bendradarbiaujant yra pateikiama kaip gimtosios ir tikslinės šalies žinių apie istoriją ir kultūrą sistema, kur patirtis ir įgūdžiai tampa sėkmingam tarpkultūriniam bendravimui, išvystytam mokymo proceso metu; galimybė būti tarpininku tarp kultūrų bei galimybė atsižvelgti į specifines pašnekovo kultūros ypatybes.

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