

Raising Learners' Intercultural Competence in Foreign Language Teaching

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Abstract—The author of the paper deals with intercultural approach, i.e. understanding a culture in foreign language teaching. She defines the intercultural communicative competence and her presence in communication, intercultural awareness and skills and attitudes. The relationship between culture and language is undeniable. When teaching a foreign language, culture and cultural content have to be included into curricula. The more difficult question for us, Slovak teachers, is not what to teach but how to teach it. In the paper the author discusses the essential issues for raising learner's intercultural competence.

Keywords-culture; intercultural competence; foreign language; teaching; foreign language learning; communication; cultural content

I. INTRODUCTION

People learn foreign languages for a variety of reasons. Surely, one of the most important reasons is to learn how to use the language in real communication with people speaking various mother tongues. A foreign language is likely to be used in two types of environments: in interaction with native speakers or in communication with people having another first language. It is common practice to call English *lingua franca*. It has been proved by the findings in the psychology of communication, interaction can function only if the participants share a certain worldview acquired in the course of socialization. Consequently, as nowadays communication across cultural boundaries is increasing and cultures go through a constant transformation, the acquisition of certain means of accessing and interpreting meanings and cultural practices is becoming inevitable. Knowledge of the target language culture and the ability to apply them in real life communication make up the intercultural communicative competence. For effective foreign language learning it is necessary to include the intercultural communicative competence into foreign language teaching itself. Given the nature of language education uniting in itself learning about everyday life with its all cultural, social, political, economical and scientific aspects, it offers an excellent opportunity for an intercultural and interdisciplinary approach. Learning a target language culture is a strong motivational factor as it presents an immediate contact to the real use of the language and to the target country.

II. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

To understand the notion of intercultural communicative competence we have to define the phenomenon of communication itself. Communication is a consistent part of our everyday life. However, our knowledge about all the processes communication encompasses is very limited. The term is very broad. It is used in a variety of ways, for any kind of influence exercised by a system on another or any kind of action that is aimed at open expression of thoughts, feelings or exchange of information. Communication means influencing other people by using signs (in broader sense) in order to make them understand the message. Communication thus generally requires two participants: a sender, addresser, communicator who transmits (directly or indirectly) and an addressee, an interpreter who receives the information. Roles of these participants alternate during the process of communication [1]. It is here where misinterpretations, misunderstandings and thus miscommunication can occur. We assume our partner in communication sees the world as we do. Every individual filters his or her perception of the world according to his previous knowledge, skills and experience. All human communication depends on a shared knowledge of the world (academic knowledge, empirical knowledge, and knowledge of shared values and beliefs of social groups, knowledge of non-verbal elements in communication). This knowledge might be culture specific. This fact makes communication for members of the same cultural community predictable enough to be understood. On the other hand, it is more difficult for non-native speakers as they do not share a common knowledge with native speakers. Acquiring the shared cultural knowledge can be promoted by the development of intercultural awareness. Language itself is always shaped by a culture. Being competent in a language requires understanding the culture that has defined it. Learning a foreign language suggests having an awareness of the culture and how the culture relates to one's own culture. An interculturally competent people should:

- Be able to understand and have awareness of their own culture.
- Be aware of how their culture is seen from the outside, by other cultures.
- Understand or see the target culture from its own perspective.

- Be aware of how they themselves see the target culture [2].

III. INTERCULTURAL SKILLS AND ATTITUDES

Communicative competence entails grammatical competence or the ability to formulate linguistically accurate utterances, sociolinguistic competence or attention to the social context and norms of the given culture, discourse competence as the use of language in context and strategic competence or the ability to cope in authentic communicative situations [3].

Further, in addition to the above mentioned, the skills, attitudes and know-how build up the intercultural communicative competence and thus the desirable goals of teaching culture in an intercultural approach are among others:

- The ability to observe, identify and recognize as basic properties of cultural sensitivity.
- The use of variety of strategies in order to contact members of other cultures.
- Comparing and contrasting, being able to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other. This should happen without judging or labeling either one of them as better or worse.
- Overcoming stereotyped relationships.
- Negotiating meanings.
- Dealing with or tolerating ambiguity.
- Interpreting messages effectively.
- Limiting the possibility of misinterpretations.
- Dealing effectively with situations of intercultural misunderstanding and conflict.
- The capacity to act in the role of a cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign one.
- Defending one's own point of view while acknowledging the legitimacy of others.
- Accepting a difference and at the same time the willingness to relativize one's own cultural value system and viewpoint.
- A general openness towards new experiences, people, cultures and ideas. [4].

Knowledge of foreign cultures is usually relational, i.e. it is knowledge acquired with socialization in one's own social groups and often presented in contrast to the significant characteristics of one's national group and identity [5]. It is often marked by stereotypes and prejudices. In teaching intercultural communication, however, learners have to be made aware of where these pre-conceptions originate and thus how their perceptions of other people are filtered through their social identities. Consequently, from the point of view of intercultural communication, cultural knowledge besides knowledge of social interactions is a relational knowledge of institutions in daily life, of social distinctions and differences

and knowledge of international relationships and national identities. It is relational in the sense that it comprises the experience of these phenomena as perceived by both sides within their own culture and it is complemented by accounts of the learner's country from the outside [5].

IV. TEACHING CULTURE – BASIC PRINCIPLES

As Kramsch [1] points out teaching culture in traditional foreign language education was limited to the transmission of information about the people of the target country and their general attitudes and worldview. The facts that language is a social practice and culture is a complex social construct have been ignored. Kramsch differentiates new lines of thought for culture teaching which seem to emerge today:

A. *Establishing a sphere of interculturality*

Since communication in a foreign language is also communication between cultures, an intercultural approach includes a reflection on both the target and native culture. In this sense an effective language teaching has to embrace both perspectives.

B. *Teaching culture as an interpersonal process*

If language is seen as a social action, then meaning is constructed through social interaction. As a consequence, we should not teach fixed, normative cultural facts but rather a process of communication and suggest strategies appropriate and helpful for understanding otherness.

C. *Teaching culture as difference.*

Students must be made aware of the heterogeneity of cultures: due to the growth of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity of societies national cultural characteristics are losing even more of their overall validity. It is becoming increasingly more difficult to say "Germans do this" or "the English do that". Cultural identities are made up of a range of aspects; one always has to consider further specifications as age, gender, religion, ethnic background, social class, education, etc.

D. *Crossing disciplinary boundaries*

Teachers are encouraged to broaden the range of their knowledge by reading literature, studies by social scientists, ethnographers, sociolinguists in order to present information beyond the field of linguistics and challenge, maybe even motivate their learners and provide them with an appealing presentation of the target society.

According to Kramsch, intercultural communicative competence can be reached or at least approached by sensitizing the learners for realizing, acknowledging and tolerating difference, meeting a person with other cultural and social peculiarities and making them aware of the relativity of their judgment. Thus cultural content in language teaching has to be determined so as to present the difference in an appropriate way.

V. CULTURAL CONTENT

Cultural knowledge about a target country covers an extremely broad field which would not fit the frame of foreign language education. An unsystematic approach to providing information would leave learners rather confused, with a load

of unstructured information but no actual knowledge, without an understanding of the foreign culture reality and thus without intercultural understanding. Making a selection is problematic and again raises the question of the native speaker as a model in foreign language teaching. A learner has been socialized into another culture and has to consciously learn the knowledge which is unconscious and internalized for a native speaker. The knowledge reaches from the commonest greetings through conversational rules of turn-taking and general politeness to non-verbal behaviour [6] or phraseology. A. Habiňák analyzes the importance of phraseoliteracy in a language. "To formulate own ideas in communication the language users often use simple, metaphorical, concise and often humorous phrases expressing the experience of our ancestors. By using them they refine their discourse" [7].

According to Byram's research the general nature of a course of language and culture should allow learners:

- to engage actively with alternative interpretations of phenomena in the foreign culture and compare and contrast them with their own;
- to deal with auto- and hetero-stereotypes within the foreign group as well as within the learner's national group;
- to access the above mentioned unconscious, routine knowledge as well as the conscious knowledge shared by members of the foreign group so that learners can adjust to their own behaviour and understand especially taken-for-granted allusions (e.g. historical or contemporary personalities, events, social institutions, etc.);
- to access and analyze more complex manifestations of values and meanings of the national culture and of the cultures existing within its boundaries as presented in cultural artefacts and cultural institutions, including literature, film, history, education, political parties or social welfare.

Byram set up a list of "minimum Content" [6] proposals, either for integration into language study itself or as a structured information presented independently, in separate learning units. These are: social identity and social groups, social interaction, belief and behaviour, socio-political institutions, socialization and the life-cycle, national history, national geography, national cultural heritage, stereotypes and national identity. In addition, we should not forget Gerhard Neuner's categories [8] of elementary existential experience (Elementare Daseinerfahrungen) intended for foreign language teaching as basic categories shared by individuals regardless of their cultural background. They represent topics for bridging the gaps between one's own and the foreign world. These include e.g. birth and death, personal identity, family structures, interpersonal relationships and gender roles, political system, education, work, art, environment and subjective dimensions such as memories, imagination and memory. The specific implementation of these general categories depends on the nature of the course, the structure of the class, the needs of the learners and most importantly, on the foreign language and the

society of the target country represented in the teaching materials [9].

VI. TEACHER'S ROLE

A factor that cannot be omitted in this discussion is the role of a teacher in the process of developing their pupils' intercultural communicative competence. The teacher in a language classroom has long been seen "...as the expert knower, who represents a native-speaking host community, and whose role is it to impart a certain body of knowledge to non-native speaking non-knowers in order to facilitate their integration into the speech community" [1]. This view corresponds to the ideal of a native speaker's language competence, which has been and probably still is the goal of language learning for many. The teacher's role traditionally stands on the presumptions that he or she is the primary authority in all respects within the language classroom. However, teaching intercultural competence does not necessarily require an all-knowing teacher, and given the extremely broad field of culture it would be even impossible for teachers to meet the requirement. Teachers should rather act as mediators between cultures, although this term sounds vague, as motivators, discourse provokers, eye-openers and guides in the foreign society.

Another problematic issue for teachers is the specific character of knowledge about culture: unlike the traditional view on everything that is taught in a classroom, this knowledge is automatically to be taken as normative, as binding for learners, as something they must comply with while completely getting rid of their own cultural traits. Learners should rather learn how to remain themselves in the foreign language and culture while accepting it and adapting to it to a certain extent. Teachers have the difficult task of suggesting to their learners ways of finding balance between the two. "Learning a language is learning to exercise both a social and a personal voice, it is both a process of socialization into a given speech community and the acquisition of literacy as a means of expressing personal meanings that may put in question those of the speech community" [1].

In addition, teachers trying to raise cultural awareness in their pupils or students unfortunately often have to face the problem such as the lack of learners' systematic knowledge of either their native culture or the target culture as for being able to interpret, analyze and draw conclusions from the cultural phenomena presented to them [10]. A teacher can teach a boundary, i.e. explain, discuss and make students understand the differences. However, we cannot solve the problems. The aim is to reach a right solution or to bridge a gap, but to explore the boundary and explore oneself in the process, which is conditioned by the willingness to engage in distancing oneself from the native culture [11]. As Kramsch explains, the culture emerging from such an intercultural dialogue differs from both the native and the target culture. It offers neither any facts nor any solution to the problems. The final picture, the understanding emerges often only gradually, after repeated reflection, possibly at much later date. Therefore, learners should be taught how to develop critical thinking, learn autonomously, collect and analyze information and how to deal

with various kinds of linguistic and cultural input beyond the frame of language classroom as well.

Once we want a teacher to fulfil his role in the educational process, we have to prepare and teach him how to do it. Current preparation of English teachers in Slovakia is focused mainly on linguistics and literature of the target language. Courses on culture or cultural studies of the target culture are offered among the optional or obligatory optional courses. If we want to change the way of teaching culture at secondary schools and universities, we have to educate highly qualified teachers who will be able to present the cultural knowledge to their students in an adequate way and by the use of appropriate methods. Teachers' education should be therefore aimed at understanding the core of intercultural communication, determining the relationship between language and behaviour (in one's own and target language culture), developing the skill of acquiring and processing information about culture and selection of suitable techniques of teaching culture [12]. Personal experience of the target language culture should be standard. The students of pedagogy are invited to apply for study programmes and students mobility such as Erasmus. The modern world keeps changing and it is the role of teachers to respond to current challenges. The teaching process should reflect the needs of a modern society and develop student's critical thinking and competencies [13]. Combined with the background knowledge of the target language culture the students will be well prepared and able to understand both the context and cultural determinants in face to face communication and messages mediated via mass media [14]. To achieve a successful communication in any social context meeting the above mentioned goals is crucial [15].

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