INTERCULTURAL PATH

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Abstract

The paper addresses practical implementation of several major concepts of cross-cultural dimensions and their communication implications.

The research results elaborated on by G.Hofstede and F.Trompenaars are being challenged by today´s global world. A more fluid concept of Richard Lewis seems to fill in the niche and reacts to the need for making the theories more applicable, updated and less rigid.

As intercultural awareness is a crucial part of a speaker´s communicative competence and also a vehicle for successful international business, the author shares experience from several courses for MA students – English for Specific Purposes at the Faculty of Chemical Engineering and English for Academic Purposes at the Faculty of Economics and Administration.

The paper covers video-conference communication as an introduction of students into hands-on intercultural experience with partners from the Agricultural University of Athens, an in-depth course of intercultural communication within English for Academic Purposes and a concept of Language and Culture scheme based on international cooperation with the University of Central Lancashire.

The link that interweaves the theories and the demonstrated practices goes along not only with developing language skills, but also with building self-confidence of many Czech students in a long-term.

1. Introduction

Cultural differences and similarities manifest themselves in intercultural communication. Students cannot see the degree of mutual communication pattern alikeness without a direct exposure to real life situations. At first sight the development of European countries does not provide extremely different environments and therefore students are often inherently expected to learn only "a language" in terms of lexico-grammar and phonetics and master the communication without much "blunder". Based on long term experience in language teaching both pre-service and in-service students the author claims the above stated expectation seems to be a frequent misconception about success in foreign language communication. Practically oriented training in intercultural communication should become an integral part of language courses at higher levels of CEFR, though intercultural elements should be obviously dealt with also in courses at lower CEFR level.

Cultures feature specific ways of communication given by agreed conventions, reasons for which are often hidden and not easy to fully understand. They may be perceived subconsciously or through observing manifestations of certain phenomena to the outside world. Without understanding reasons for displaying particular behaviours and their pragmatic language demonstrations, there seems to be a long way to reach efficient communication in intercultural environments.

Bearing in mind the needs of students as well as their current and future ambitions, teachers are challenged to prepare such concepts of language training that equip students with enough opportunities to practice different situations, contexts and functions, and consequently a respective language register. It is crucial for learners to understand particular communication conventions valid in a certain society are not hurdles to be shocked by or phenomena to be mocked, but rather vehicles we can use for the respective part of a journey through the counterparts´ cultures. The conventions guarantee a safe journey through establishing relationships, rapport and solidarity, arriving at compromises and satisfactory closures.

2. Intercultural and cross-cultural communication

Communication carried across borders is generally understood as cross-cultural communication. According to Gudykunst and Mody [2] intercultural communication studies forms of heterophilous communication, which is communication taking place between unalike individuals from different cultures.

Today´s world has become immensely interrelated. Therefore communication reflects all the cultural fusion and mutual understanding becomes at stake. The understanding phenomenon rests in comprehending not only all the linguistic aspects of communication, but rather understanding a message and its communication background. Location of the communication predefines also the cultural background and thus it gives an added value to communicated utterances.

2.1 International English

The tendencies of cultures to communicate in a certain way or at least to manifest certain patterns in communication are inferred by numerous factors. Communication conventions represent only the outer manifestation of historical, social, economic, religious or geographical reasoning. What makes situation in English speaking environment more difficult is the relatively newly emerged phenomenon of International English (IE). This concept of "culturally free" language is culturally unbiased in terms of absence of a particular country of origin. Nonetheless, for the same reason it sometimes blurs the code of message conveyed.

IE can be perceived as a global means of communication in plentiful dialects, often very tolerant to non-native enrichments. It does not impose cultural conventions on speakers who use it. Nevertheless, it does not help them to understand the message through conventionally coded speech either. Numerous nations or countries view English as their language. Thus the simplification of lexico-grammar and pronunciation rules is being often counterbalanced by challenges in terms of various possible meanings of notions in varied contexts.

IE as a language without cultural roots and historical connotations compressed in the linguistically compact system comprises two sides of the same coin in itself. It is a fluid, dynamic, and efficient communication vessel; however, in contrast, it naturally opens space for miscommunication. It results from its historical emptiness and lack of conventional communication agreements to which one may adhere during a conversation as to valid safety guidelines usually developed by culturally homogeneous communities.

These potentially risky situations, uncertainties, apprehensions or surprises are to be closely watched and dealt with in language training so that learners can gradually handle them with more confidence.

Speakers of IE often expect to be understood provided they resort to as much correct grammar and lexis as they can. Learners feel especially confused when a message fails to get responded, though was seemingly conveyed and perceived. Discomfort and even conflicts may arise when they fail to comply with a respective situation, appropriateness of reactions, ellipses in communication, and degree of shared knowledge misattributed to a "shared language".

2.2 Communication theories in varied cultural contexts

To help speakers understand and operate within varied cultural contexts numerous scholars tend to bring simplified solutions and categorised modes of behaviour that would be comprehensible across cultures. Some of them are very popular especially in the area of cross-cultural management. Most typically speakers study theories of Hofstede [3], Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner [9]. They are either still adored as a remedy to cross-cultural managements or, on the other hand heavily criticized as a mere quantitative tool unable to reflect complex communication of individuals.

This is to claim that for the purpose of learning IE it is highly useful to get acquainted with theories of Hofstede [3] and Trompenaars [9] while bearing in mind intercultural communication theories of a more fluid character, such as that of Richard Lewis [7].

Hofstede´s [3] and Trompenaars´s [9] theories are often challenged for their strict categorization of cultures and selected methodology. Culture as a social phenomenon cannot be easily categorized without doubt that all cultural aspects have been treated and all fair-research parameters have been met. On the other hand, the quantitative methods provide priceless information on social trends and dominating tendencies. Students can benefit from these comparisons over time if they deal with the research outcomes within historic contexts. To provide students with a bigger picture of what plays an important role in cross-cultural communication, it is advisable to expose them to attitudes and mock communication surveys in classrooms and compare the results on site with the ones of respective cultures gathered by Hofstede [3] or Trompenaars [9] in early 90s. An

opportunity lies in discussing the quantitative research outcomes in line with simultaneous on-site surveys among students in classes and putting both the outputs in comparisons.

Another view the students should be provided with is the view of an intercultural communication based on qualitative studies. Such a tool may be seen in using Richard Lewis´s model of communication [7] which introduces notions of linear-active, multi-active or reactive cultural patterns.

Implications for communication patterns of individuals in different cultures are drawn from a context of a respective culture, personality of a speaker and a situation in which they are uttered. Therefore, it is necessary to equip students with information on communication tendencies and values of respective cultures in their mutual interrelations and with attention paid also to fluidity of these values and trends over time – depending closely on economic, political and social conditions and historical background of the respective society.

3. Role of pragmatics

University students whose primary focus is neither language nor socio-linguistic studies may be versed in lexico-grammatical competence, however, their pragmatic competence may not comply fully with the respective situational contexts. This becomes even more important for IE, where different countries attribute different meanings to English notions.

Lexis and lexico-grammar, pronunciation, and pragmatics influence a message conveyed. IE or English as a lingua franca shows a tendency towards coining new English language standards and it calls for analysing most common mistakes manifested in non-native English speakers´ utterances. Numerous researches underwent this effort, among the most prominent ones being studies of Jenkins on ELF pronunciation [5][6] and Firth [1] and House [4] on pragmatics.

The aim, therefore, is not elimination of mutual enrichments of native and non-native speakers via English neither elimination of the new coined expressions in English, but rather a raised awareness of English fluidity and continuous language development in todays´ international concept.

The key point of language teaching rests in a move away from a pure identification of linguistic aspects forming the means of communication towards a more holistic approach. Such a transfer is described by Seidlhofer [8] in Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey [6] as a move from a surface description of particular features to an explanation of the underlying significance of the forms: to ask what work they do, what functions they are symptomatic of.

4. Practical training in university courses

The practical language learning should reflect all the stated above. Being so global, English learning and teaching should ideally happen in real life situations. The university classroom cannot ensure a full integration of the reality into classes for obvious reasons.

The Language Centre (LC) of the University of Pardubice (UPa) decided to implement intercultural elements into several courses and thus enhance the functional level of language learning. Three courses integrating intercultural issues have been introduced in two degree levels: English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for students of economy and management at the Faculty of Chemical Technology and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for students of economy and management at the Faculty of Economics and Administration, both at the MA degree level, and Language and Culture Scheme as an all-university course for students from both BA and MA degree levels.

4.1 Role of video-conferencing in ESP course

The ESP course focuses on both specific topics from the field of marketing and management of chemical and food industry the students major in and also on fostering their functional language competence. The need for developing pragmatic aspects of language competence can be best accommodated by moderated conversations with students' counterparts with different cultural background in real time. The LC closely cooperates with the language centre of the Agricultural University of Athens (AUA) and therefore optimum counterparts to convey the communication with were international students in English courses at AUA.

The communication was carried via video-conference sessions where students from both the universities participated. The students were assigned three tasks during a term and in matched groups were supposed to present outcomes in video-conference lessons.

The first lesson focused on introductions and small talk. Based on this lesson students were supposed to enter into communication via email, Facebook, or skype and find answers to a set of assigned questions. The guidelines for the interviews provided them with a social springboard and opened the space for informal chatting. The introductory questions focused on personal characteristics, preferences, and hobbies, but also touched the area of preferred communication styles.

The second task focused on comparisons of their studies, learning and teaching, and their future aspirations and professions, as well as typical features of the cultures they represented. The final assignment dealt with presenting a successful national or regional company they would like to introduce in their counterpart´s. During the sessions the students were supposed to present, raise questions and react on the spot. This proved to be the most crucial issue – the more spontaneous students with Greek background reacted more promptly than students of the Czech origin. However, the assignments and home preparations of the Czech students were always thoroughly completed, and also the out-of-school communication via skype, Facebook or email was initiated by the Czech students rather than by the Greek ones. However, readiness of the Czech students to present naturally without "paper" was rather limited.

4.2 In-depth intercultural training in EAP course on campus

The English for Academic Purposes at CEFR B2+ level course is entirely different in terms of the central idea. The course is optional and participants are both Czech and international students. Their primary focus was to develop natural discourse for different cultural environments and to operate comfortably in their studies abroad. Thus their motivation to integrate pragmatic aspects in their language learning was strong. The concept of the course was a blend of theory and practice with an emphasis put on developing argumentation, presentation and feedback competence in international environment. The course was structured inductively – starting from practice to theory and leading in cycle back to the final practical outcome and discussions.

The first assignment concerned a comparison between communication styles of two cultures they encountered, with a special emphasis put on academic institutions and ceremonies. Their presentations were followed with feedback. During the second phase the students were presented Hofstede´s [3] and Trompenaars´s [9] theories and confronted them with surveys carried directly in the class. They critically approached them and came with vivid discussions and original observations. Being an international group of students mostly with experience from abroad, their contributions to the debates were extremely valuable. The third phase of the classes focused on critical incidents and cultural clash scenarios, mainly in business. The students were supposed to provide likely solutions to the potentially conflicting situations with clearly defined aims, e.g. compromising on profit, win-win strategies, face-saving strategies, maintaining long-term relationships etc. Considering the overall competence of the group, the classes addressed hedging in terms of directness and explicitness, concept of politeness, concept of hierarchy and class in society and its reflections in language register, exaggerations and understatements, political correctness etc. The fourth phase of the inductive cycle dealt with a qualitative intercultural Lewis´s - Lewis Model [7]. The course concluded in students' presentations and evaluations.

4.3 Exposure to acculturation out of campus

The Language and Culture Scheme (LCS) course is an optional out-of-campus intercultural course at the level B1+ and above. The students can register for the course based on an interview. The scheme currently comprises two English and one German course. For the purpose of this paper the format of a joint LCS course of the UPa and University of Central Lancashire is described.

The purpose of the scheme is to acquaint the students with a pragmatic context and tangible experience, as well as international contacts they may develop further on their own. The LCS concept addresses two educational pillars sheltered in a holistic approach. The first pillar concerns an intercultural aspect of communication related to professional communication. The second one addresses students´ personality development in terms of fostering students´ self-confidence and integrity, team-work, autonomy, self-reflection competence and ability to nourish social contacts.

An indispensable part of the scheme is an organizational background and "back-office" work of the LC, as well as willingness of the UPa to support students´ intercultural weeks financially. Therefore the scheme may work as a complementary module to standard courses and at the same time to accommodate needs of committed and talented students.

The scheme itself works on mutual cooperation with the UCLan and therefore the students from UPa participate in a five-day programme at the UCLan and vice versa. The programme comprises a common intercultural seminar, participation in lessons according to the respective study programme, Czech lessons for students from UCLan, field trips, company visits, home stays, cultural programme, out-of classes socializing with students´ counterparts etc.

The intercultural seminar as a core element of the course comprises students´ presentations on their cultures followed with discussions. The group of students from UCLan is truly multicultural and therefore the exposure to varied rhetoric styles is essential to the course asset. The course requirements on students include a reflective essay, a project related to a company visit, and a video report.

The feedback from the students' essays provides teachers with priceless information. Students realize they had been acquainted with certain theories before, however, understood it only through their hands-on experience staying abroad – i.e. through observing the manifested phenomena. The programme can be credited also for its comparative value as students perceive and realize eye-opening features about their own cultures and identities when they contrast them to foreign environments.

5. Conclusion

To conclude the experience depicted in the above stated courses, we may claim the exposure of students to real-like situations in addition to the traditional language learning generates numerous opportunities to develop both the language competence and generic personal and interpersonal skills. Immensely valuable student's´ feedbacks in numerous cases confirmed the presumption of this paper, i.e. the often neglected pragmatic layer of a discourse in IE can be efficiently embraced via integrating reality simulating tasks and ambitious direct exposure of the students to the international reality.

The need to address an often underrated aspect of communication in IE, i.e. a pragmatic component of a discourse, led to an innovation in the LC courses concept. The pragmatic layer seems to be difficult to capture in a common reality of a classroom where utterances are often modified and motivated by the need to pass a test or exam. The most significant advantage of the three illustrated courses rests in an opportunity of the students to gain responsibility for their own communication cultivation in real or virtual international environments. This enables them to recognize a language register, dialects and idiolects, to practice and develop their personal register appropriate for intercultural environments within a relatively protected format of a university language course.

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