

# INTERCULTURAL CITIZENSHIP AND ENGLISH CLASSROOM LANGUAGE

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## ABSTRACT

*This article studies Intercultural Communicative Competence in EFL (English as Foreign Language) classroom in the context of students' everyday interactions. It also focuses on the challenges the teacher meets when motivating students to practice speech skills that will enable them to achieve communication objectives and gain positive intercultural experiences.*

*The authors' aim is to explore the developing intercultural communicative competence in students through classroom language. The last mentioned is considered in the article both through the prism of pedagogy-methodology and as a social event, which allows teachers to develop students' interpersonal language skills to be used in probable unpredictable situations connected with intercultural citizenship. We used the following relevant methods in our research: a data analysis based on surveys, questionnaires and the statistical method. The paper concludes that Tatarstan, as a multinational republic with different religions, traditions, customs and attitudes, provides good opportunities for developing the qualities that will ensure successful intercultural communication. The authors analyse classroom language, used in current EFL classroom practices, and suggest strategies intended to develop classroom communication in the circumstances of intercultural citizenship in a multinational environment.*

**Key words** *Intercultural communicative competence, classroom language, intercultural citizenship, multilingual classroom.*

## INTRODUCTION

Tatarstan has always been at the intersection of religions, cultures, traditions and languages. The population census of 2013 confirms that Tatarstan is one of the most multinational territories of Russia: representatives of over 173 nationalities live in the territory of the Republic of Tatarstan. Consequently, the issues of intercultural communication, ethnic tolerance and peaceful coexistence of peoples with different beliefs, behaviors and mentality have always been a relevant area of study. The question of multicultural education in our region remains vital as well [Abdrafikova A.R., 2014: 544]. Globalization and migration of workforce have made it all the more important for the solution of current everyday problems, most of which arise because of inadequate communication strategies, crucial to the development of intercultural dialogue.

Among academic subjects, which focus on oral speech skills, foreign language lessons are practically the only means of developing communicative skills required by social intercourse. However, a non-native environment is a great challenge for teachers of English as students are not motivated to use the target language in everyday interactions. The formal frame of classroom procedures in Russian educational institutions suggests formal foreign language phrases to deal with pressing issues of daily routines, while students' language is

based on their native language experience and depends on the associations with the corresponding own-language phrases in the learner's memory.

Besides, most of the English language teachers in Russia are non-native speakers and imperative sentences predominate in their classroom language, which is characteristic of Russian school practices but is hardly acceptable in intercultural communication. It is all the more true in the case of "clash of cultures" when "differences in culture between students and teachers mean that students from different cultural backgrounds may view, interpret, evaluate and react differently to what the teacher says and does in the classroom" [Bridget M.W. Palmer, 2015: 80]. "Intercultural factors therefore create the potential for numerous communication problems and intercultural conflict" [Johann Le Roux, 2002: 38].

The ESL(English as the second language)/EFL classroom is, by definition, a place where different cultures meet and interact [Theron Muller, 2007]. Foreign language learning in a multicultural class is successful if students are personally and emotionally involved in classroom activities, which happens when communicative situations are meaningful to them. As Dana-Anca Cehan puts it, classroom discourse should aim at interpersonal communication, not only pedagogic communication [Dana-Anca Cehan , 2002: 59-60]. Thus "teacher talk plays a very important role in the teaching process as an interactive device" [Liu Yanfen & Zhao Yuqin, 2010: 85]. It takes time and effort to create teaching materials that would stimulate speech of all the students from different countries and make them use target language in communicative games, role-playing, simulations, and other types of classroom activities. Teachers rely on coursebooks and other useful resources in their search for situations that might enable them to practice communication skills and help students better memorize the language covered in the lesson. But few of these resources take into account intercultural relationships in a class with students of different religious beliefs and cultural backgrounds. The teacher should adapt communicative tasks to the specific conditions of multicultural environments as real life situations are the most efficient means of developing intercultural competence and lay the foundation for a successful intercultural dialogue in and outside the classroom.

## **Literature Review**

Intercultural issues in EFL and ESL classes have been the object of numerous studies in the USA (The United States Institute of Peace, Bridget M. W. Palmer, Mary McGroarty, Ines Marquez Chisholm) and other countries (C. Kramsch, Johann Le Roux, R. Muhammad, L. Prodromou). Many researchers study cross-cultural teacher-student relationships in the situations, where students' culture is different from the culture of the teacher, usually a native English speaker (Theron Muller, Bridget M. W. Palmer).

As for classroom language, in most studies it is explored in terms of using learners' mother tongue (D. Atkinson, Baynham, M. and others), students' perception of teachers' language (Mizuka Tsukamoto); EFL classroom discourse strategies (Dana-Anca Cehan) or teacher-student interaction development trends (Chura Bahadur Thapa & Angel M. Y. Lin, Xuemei Meng & Xuesong Wang, Luu Trong Tuan & Nguyen Thi Kim Nhu and others)

## **The Features of Classroom Language**

Teachers' and learners' classroom languages are very different things: if the former is supposed to be rich in vocabulary and grammar, providing an example of authentic target language speech, the latter is based on learners' native language experience, it is usually quite simple as the initial acquisition of new words in a foreign language depends on the association of these items with corresponding own-language items in the learner's memory.

[Philip Kerr, 2015] We do not mean to say that teachers should simplify suggested phrases to the extent when they sound foreign to a native language speaker's ear, however they should not sound foreign to learners' ears either, especially if these ears are "multilingual". How to gear the classroom language to a multicultural environment in the EFL class?

The questions, we are searching the answers to, are the following:

- 1) How can multicultural/multilingual environment in an EFL classroom influence the classroom language?
- 2) How can classroom language in multicultural/multilingual classes improve students' intercultural competence?

We suggest, that the more multicultural the environment is, the greater influence it should have on the classroom language used by students belonging to different cultural backgrounds.

## **RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY**

Our research took place at Leo Tolstoy Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication of Kazan Federal University. Being a culturally diverse educational institution it offers a good opportunity for this research. Today, the Institute is one of the largest schools of KFU with about three thousand students, including over 100 international scholars and students from China, South Korea, Turkey, Japan, Iran, France, Iraq, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and other countries.

We asked fifteen teachers and thirty students, whose double majors are either "Tatar + English" or "Russian + English", to complete these questionnaires. We did not take into account the students' level of language competence, as many students enter Kazan Universities without having mastered fundamental English skills. The class structure is the following: the teacher and the majority of students represent one of the host cultures (Russian or Tatar) and the smallest part of students is from other countries. The average number of the students in the classroom is 13-15 and the average number of foreign students is 4-6.

The demographic information of the EFL teacher respondents is the following: ten of fifteen teacher respondents are Tatar (three of them stated Russian language as native). Their average English teaching experience is 10-20 years.

A total of 30 students of 10 nationalities from 7 countries completed the questionnaire. Thirteen of them come from China, four are from Uzbekistan, four – from Turkmenia, three – from Turkey, two – from Tajikistan, two – from Kazakhstan, one – from South Korea and one – from Japan. Eighty three per cent of the students reported Islam as their religion; the rest of the students did not indicate their religion.

After the research design had been adopted the permission was obtained from the institution to administer questionnaires to the teachers and students with double majors "Tatar + English", "Russian + English". All questionnaires were administered in person, in a hard-copy format. The questionnaires asked for some biographical data from each participant in order to gather relevant information about their backgrounds.

The questionnaires asked teachers to share their opinion on seven statements about the classroom language they use in a multicultural classroom with the words "Yes", "No", "Not always". If teachers chose the last answer he or she was to complete the sentence "It depends on..."

The student questionnaires asked them to share their opinion on seven statements about the classroom language they hear and use in the multicultural classroom with the words "strongly disagree"; "tend to disagree"; "neutral"; "tend to agree"; and "strongly agree".

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Table 2 provides information about teachers' awareness in terms of intercultural citizenship. As we see, the teachers admit that students with different cultural backgrounds have difficulties in communicating with each other and they realize how important classroom language is for developing students' intercultural competence. However, we should note that less than half of the respondents are sure that students feel teachers understand their culture. As a result, their instructions are not fully understood and students have problems with understanding the gestures and postures the teacher uses. That means they use different languages and their classroom language has not become a means of mutual understanding and creative collaboration. The table shows that teachers' language remains formal to a great extent.

**Table 1**  
**THE RESULTS OF TEACHERS' QUESTIONNAIRE**

#	Statements	Yes	No	Not always (It depends on...)
1.	The classroom language should be formal.	-	-	15
2.	My classroom language in multicultural class is different from the language I use in monocultural class.	2	1	11
3.	My instructions are fully understood by both the students of the same culture and the foreign students.	5	1	9
4.	I usually have problems with understanding the gestures and postures I use in my classroom language.	-	9	5
5.	In my opinion, my students feel I understand their culture.	7	2	6
6.	My students from different cultures find it difficult to communicate with one another within the class.	1	4	10
7.	In my opinion, classroom language I use in the multicultural class can greatly develop the students' intercultural competence.	14	-	1

As we see from Table 3, for every statement the third answer "Not always. It depends on..." was chosen by the teachers. All of the teacher respondents gave such an answer to the first statement and here we present the variants of their answers in the decreasing order: "It depends on the students (diversity, their temper, mood, level of knowledge)", "It depends on the learning stage (learning theme, learning aims, learning background)", "It depends on my insight (mood, relationships with the students here and now). The next three statements are commented in the same way ("It depends on the students' cultural background, (English level, and experience of learning English). As for the fifth statement ("In my opinion, my students feel I understand their culture"), six teachers (all of them are young) failed to provide full answers. We think this is due to the fact that it is difficult for them to define the factors showing if the students feel or not the teacher's attitude. The teachers, who chose the third answer for the sixth sentence, stated in no uncertain terms that smooth communication between the students within the class depends on the language they use and the level of English.

**Table 2**  
**THE RESULTS OF STUDENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE**

#	Statements	strongly disagree	tend to disagree	Neutral	tend to agree	strongly agree
1.	The classroom language should be formal.	3	7	7	6	7
2.	The classroom language the teacher uses in multicultural class should be different from the language he/she uses in monocultural class.	4	5	9	10	2
3.	Sometimes I feel confused, because of something the teacher or the students say within the class.	11	6	-	10	5
4.	Sometimes I feel confused because of gestures or postures our teacher and other students use.	15	3	10	4	-
5.	I feel that my teacher and other students understand my culture.	-	-	5	9	16
6.	I do not find it difficult to communicate with the students from other countries with other religions/ cultures within the class.	3	3	4	14	6
7.	In my opinion, classroom language used by the teacher can greatly develop our intercultural competence.	1		8	9	12

Students fail to express any definite opinion of the type of classroom language teachers should use. However, for half of them both verbal and non-verbal classroom language is confusing. Most of them are open to new knowledge, which other cultures bring to their classroom and find no difficulty in communicating with students of other cultures. They realize how important teachers' classroom language is for the development of intercultural competence.

There exists little difference between teachers' attitudes to classroom language and the way students perceive it in a multicultural classroom. Both teachers and students note that in most cases they find no difficulty in establishing contact with representatives of other cultures. However, students attach great significance to manifestations of inadequate intercultural competence on the part of their teacher. It is especially true of the cases, when students feel personally involved, and the teachers' disregard of their cultural backgrounds hurts their feelings.

We realize that within any individual experience, there are many distinct characteristics that will make a classroom language specific (to do with location, people involved, time available, preceding events, relationships, moods and many other factors). But there is no denying that cultural diversity in the classroom has great impact on classroom discourse styles and strategies.

## CONCLUSION

Teaching effectively in culturally diverse classrooms means using culturally sensitive strategies and content to ensure equitable opportunities for academic success, personal development, and individual fulfillment for all students [Ines Marquez Chisholm, 1994]. This research has shown that the appropriate nation and culture related language in the EFL classroom can greatly encourage students' intercultural competence.

## SUMMARY

Classroom language used in a multicultural classroom should be carefully thought out with respect to its form and content. In a multicultural environment, classroom language should both promote interactivity and enhance tolerance in students. Teachers should be sensitive to the differences in cultural backgrounds and cooperate with students in the elaboration of the classroom language that would cover the most frequent classroom situations, be meaningful to students and helpful in achieving communicative aims. English, which is foreign to all the students in a specific class, puts them all on the same level, when problem situations are easier to resolve. As the teacher remains the main source of information and an example to follow in traditional education, his or her classroom language should meet the criteria of intercultural citizenship, creating the environment, which ensures mutual understanding, tolerance and desire to collaborate in team work.

Cultural sensitive classroom language is useful as a strategy to enhance intercultural speaking skills. Teachers should therefore be sensitive to the potentially problematic outcomes of intercultural communication in the culturally diverse class [Johann Le Roux, 2002: 37-48]. They "need to find out whether learners have ever experienced mixed educational groupings; whether they expect male and female teachers to behave differently; and how different classroom activities, including various group configurations (pairs or small groups) or activity types (e.g., role plays or dialogue practice), might affect learners differently because of their native cultural constraints" [Mary McGroarty, 1993].

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