

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECT OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS BY TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES (BASED ON GERMAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE)

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Abstract

The relevance of the problem under discussion is caused by the fact that knowledge of foreign languages is a strong necessity in today's world. However, it is not enough to teach students how to form sentences correctly on grammatical and lexical levels. It is important to help students develop intercultural communication skills. One of the main components of the intercultural competence is the socio-cultural aspect. The purpose of this publication is to review the problem of selecting the content of the socio-cultural component in a foreign language class under modern conditions. We made an attempt to answer the question, how such phenomena as, for example, migration, climate change, self-identification, etc. can affect the content of the socio-cultural component in language studies. The applied research methods are theoretical analysis of linguistic and educational literature, studies and best practices. The results can be useful for educators in the field of teaching foreign languages.

Keywords: dialogue among cultures, foreign language, cross-cultural competence, intercultural communication, socio-cultural component, culture, language personality, tolerance.

1 INTRODUCTION

The process of learning foreign languages has remained one of the most relevant topics in human history. Since the representatives of different language groups needed to make agreements in different fields, such as trade, business and diplomatic relations, conflict resolution, exchange of cultures and ideas, they had to communicate with each other in order to reach mutual understanding. Due to the factors mentioned above, the issue of teaching and learning foreign languages remains a problematic field. In the second half of the XX century it became absolutely obvious that learning foreign languages is indissolubly related to discovering new cultures, as any culture is the reflection of a language. This is the axiom of the dialogue among cultures related to the problem of cross-cultural communication coming into widespread acceptance. It is becoming evident, that it is necessary to develop cross-cultural competence when learning a foreign language. And this conclusion has had a huge impact on development of new methods of teaching foreign languages.

As A.Y. Kasyuk notes: «...well-developed skills of cross-cultural communication mainly depend on both good language skills and sufficient socio-cultural background knowledge, as well as the adequate perception of the culture and community of people whose language you are learning...» [1]. Thus, besides the language barrier it is required to overcome the cultural barrier too in order to achieve success in communication with representatives of different cultures. Here it is important to remind about the trichotomy of «language - culture - communication», in which a language, on the one hand, is the product of culture and, on the other hand, the key factor in the formation process of the identity within this culture. According to S.G. Ter-Minasova it is highly important to learn about the life of native speakers, their national features, their culture, as the use of words when communicating and the communication itself mainly depend on the background knowledge of these distinctive features of social and cultural life in the country of a target language. The objectives of teaching a foreign language as means of communication are closely related to the objectives of learning social and cultural life of the target language native speakers [2].

Stated differently, the cross-cultural competence is linked with the communicative skills, and one of the key components of the latter is the socio-cultural competence. The problem of defining what the socio-cultural competence is, was addressed by a number of Russian scholars, such as I.L. Bim, R.K. Minyar-Beloruichev, B.A. Lapidus, G.V. Rogova, V.V. Safonova, E.N. Solovova, J.S. Melnikova, N.G. Muravieva, M.A. Bogatyreva and others. In general, the definitions given by the mentioned scholars, do not contradict each other; and according with the definition listed in the new dictionary of methodological terms and concepts “the socio-cultural competence is the accumulated knowledge about the country of the target language, national and cultural characteristics of people, their behavior

and the ability to use this knowledge in the process of communication, following customs, rules of conduct, norms of etiquette, social prerequisites and stereotypes of native speakers” [3].

The content of the socio-cultural competence can be determined as the system of four components:

- 1 socio-cultural knowledge (information about the country, its moral values, traditions and other specific features of mentality);
- 2 experience of communication (the ability to select an acceptable communication style, appropriate interpretation of the foreign culture phenomena);
- 3 personal attitude towards facts of a foreign culture (including the ability to overcome and resolve socio-cultural conflicts in communication);
- 4 linguistic proficiency (such as correct use of socially marked language units in various fields of cross-cultural communication, susceptibility to similarities and differences between native and foreign-language socio-cultural phenomena) [3].

E.N. Elina presents the model of socio-cultural competence formation from a relatively new perspective; this model includes two aspects:

- 1 linguistic;
- 2 informative.

The linguistic aspect covers the process of teaching a foreign language (the process of learning foreign language and culture through the language) and the socio-linguistic competence (the ability to use a language in various social situations). The informative aspect includes:

- a) information on a target culture (namely, culture achievements, etiquette, national cuisine, national costume, non-verbal means of communication, daily routine, customs, system of education, social institutes) and
- b) area studies (information on geographical position, climate, political and economic systems, etc.).

This review is aimed to analyze the approaches to formation of an informative aspect of socio-cultural communication (area studies), developed in Russia and Germany.

2 METHODOLOGY

German language is the second most popular language among students in Russia after English language. The methods of teaching German as a foreign language in our country has a long history and traditions, having been developed separately from methods developed in other countries, including Germany. A great contribution to the development of methods of teaching German language was made by such famous educators as S.F. Shatilov, E.I. Passov, I.L. Bim, N. D. Galskova and others. Accordingly, Russia has developed its own vision of what the content of the informative component of the socio-cultural competence in teaching German as a foreign language should be. In the course of our teaching activities, we noticed that in recent years, the material for teaching area studies offered by German educators differs from the conventional ways to present a number of topics. In our opinion, there is a need to carry out a comparative analysis of the materials used in the two countries in order to get the comprehensive understanding of the area studies content required to develop the socio-cultural competence. And the effective cross-cultural communication is impossible without the socio-cultural competence. Among the research methods we applied are analysis and generalization of research data in the field.

As part of the analysis of Russian and German scholars' research data, we were able to get interesting findings. Despite the fact that the methods of teaching area studies in both countries are developing along the same trajectory, where the impact of modern trends in teaching methods in general is pretty traceable, Russian educators do not see any contradictions or problems in changing the content of the area studies component when teaching German. Educators from Germany face a number of challenges, defining them as the crisis of the existing approach in teaching area studies and, moreover, they are calling for a change in the paradigm of teaching area studies (for example, such scholars as C. Altmayer [5], R.E. Cramer [6]).

3 RESULTS

Throughout the history of developing teaching methods of foreign languages, the concept of linkage between learning both language and culture, and the impossibility of teaching a language without teaching the culture of the target country have always been stated. This point of view was expressed by Johann Amos Comenius, Erasmus Roterodamus, J.-J. Rousseau, G. Leibniz, J. H. Pestalozzi and K.D. Ushinskiy [7]. First of all, this approach was implemented through implicit presentation of educational texts in a class. But since the end of the XIX century, with rising demand for living languages studies, but not Latin or Greek as international languages, area studies has become an independent aspect of foreign languages learning process.

In Germany this subject was first named as “realia studies (Realienkunde)”. Starting from the 1920-ies the name of the subject changed for “culture studies (Kulturenkunde)”. In the 1960 - 1970-ies due to the theoretical and academic diversity of teaching materials the name was changed to “land or area studies (Landeskunde)”. In Russia the definition of “area studies” was introduced from the same beginning, and is used till now.

Area studies as an individual aspect was first used when the grammar-translation method of teaching foreign languages was widely applied. The primary task of this method was to memorize grammatical structures, so the language was normally studied for the language itself. The area studies were aimed at real facts about the country and native speakers. Students gained knowledge through texts that contained information on history and geography of the target country, being replete with dates, facts and numbers. Those texts could also include information on culture, politics, economics and social issues of the native speakers. Students also got to know more about cultural phenomena, customs and traditions of the target country. Very often the materials contained many graphs, tables, charts, statistics and photographs. This approach would further be referred to as “a normative approach”.

With development of the communicative approach in teaching foreign languages the new concept of the area studies content started developing too. The focus switched from providing factual information to communicative competence formation. It means that lingual competence should have been developing along with understanding of the cultural phenomena of the target language. The studying materials had to meet the students’ needs and be close to real life situations and events. Educators started using such types of texts as tickets, road maps, advertisements, questionnaires, menu, blank-forms, a city plan, etc. These types of materials met the needs of the so-called communicative approach.

In Russia, as we have already mentioned earlier, scholars didn’t indicate any problems related to the area studies content. Moreover, the communicative approach in area studies teaching was often mixed with the normative approach. S.A. Yarunina noted that “the objective of studying culture of native speakers when learning a foreign language is to transfer the minimum background knowledge required for effective communication in a foreign language, to students. That background knowledge is namely related to geography, history, social life, art, customs and traditions in the country of a target language.” [8]. Her statement was “learning a foreign language through gaining knowledge about historic and cultural peculiarities of the target language is really important for formation and development of the general cultural competence...” [8].

In Germany the content of area studies, on the contrary, is a matter of argument. Many educators talk about the crisis in area studies and the need for complete rethinking of its content.

As part of the communicative method German scholars define three approaches to area studies content: cognitive and normative, communicative and cross-cultural [5]. The first two, as we see, completely coincide with the existent approaches in Russia. The third approach appeared, in our opinion, not in consequence of the rapid development of cross-cultural theories in late XX century, especially in Germany, but as a result of discrepancy of the area studies content with the real situation in the country.

The first reason to criticize the existent approach was related to the names of “Germany” and “German language” themselves, as initially the area studies mainly covered Germany as the target country, while German language is a state language in some other countries, such as Austria, Switzerland and Lichtenstein; German language is a widely spread language in some other European countries where many residents are German native speakers – for example, in boarder regions on the territory of Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands. However, the practice of considering those countries too, as well as appearance of D-A-CH-area studies cannot solve the problem, as C. Altmayer suggests [5], because discussing either Germany or Austria in a classroom, the land itself presents as a collective image, an

abstract territory with national borders. Consequently, the people living on that territory, are presented as a homogeneous nation [6], which is not true. Germany has been a multi-cultural state for a long period of time. Due to a number of historic events, starting from the 1950-ies till the 2010-ies a great number of former migrants of diverse origin has been moving there. Therefore, such topic as "Food", for example, turns out to be a tricky one – what should be consider to be the national German cuisine? Along with pork knuckle and sausages we can say that doner, pizza, pasta, halal dishes are also the national cuisine of Germany. Another aspect mentioned by C. Altmayer [5] is the process of globalization. According to this point of view, there cannot be a country, where only one ethnic group has an exclusive right of residence. There cannot be a single culture, religion or nation that would exist in isolation. Everyone lives in the same neighborhood, interacting with each other, having impact on each other. It is possible to state the same about modern environmental problems affecting every individual on the planet, migration having an impact on globalization, and vice versa. If we analyze each individual, for example in Germany, we will notice that everyone is a result of mixed processes. The issues of self-identification also should be considered. Modern people do not resemble each other, being either neighbors or even relatives. We can no longer talk about the national characteristics of an average individual and support old stereotypes or multiply new ones, since we live in a new world where old familiar ties are crumbling and new and unusual ones are arising. And we must take all this into account when selecting the area studies content.

Based on the three approaches to teaching area studies mentioned above, a new approach started developing, known in Germany as discursive area studies. C. Altmayer [5], the author of this approach, discovers it in a following way: "... culture-oriented learning is no longer associated with such constructive elements as "a country" or "a national state" or "a territory", but mainly related to the language and its thematic discourse. In this regard, we do not discuss "German culture" or "culture of the German-speaking region" any longer, we talk about "the culture of German-language discourse", meaning all interpretations used in German-language discourse to ensure mutual understanding".

4 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we would like to mention that a different attitude towards area studies content in Russia and Germany can be explained. Russian methods of teaching German as a foreign language have been developing out of the real life context of Germany. That, on the one hand, complicates their work, as they do not have a complete picture of the current state and development of the target country, but, on the other hand, facilitates their work, since they mainly deal with an abstract phenomenon. As for German scholars, working in the field of teaching German as a foreign language, they are in the course of a "field research" that provides opportunities for observing the real time dynamic changes and transformations in the modern world. Thus, they understand better that the existent paradigms do not meet the demands of the modern world. However, in our opinion, we do not have to reject the accumulated experience of the previous generations. As in any field of our life, the best solution lies in reaching compromise and balance when applying the accumulated experience into practice. When planning the German class, we should consider the objectives of this certain class and refer to any of the existing approaches as components of the socio-cultural competence.

The problem is becoming more and more relevant and has a great potential for further research work.

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