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Intercultural communication in the space of higher education: issues of theory and practice

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Abstract

This paper aimed at exploring and discussing modern methods of teaching and learning of inter-cultural communication in higher school. To fulfil the study, both general scientific methods and methods of a number of humanities were applied including an inter-disciplinary approach and philosophy of synergetics. The survey and interviews with direct questions were conducted among students. As the result of the research, discussions on methods of introducing students cross-cultural knowledge and practical skills were held, and the preferences of the students on the issues of learning and teaching inter-cultural communication were revealed. The most effective methods and approaches to teaching and learning inter-cultural communication in higher school are the philosophy of synergetics and the dialogue style of communication in the classroom. A key challenge for further research is to identify dimensions for inter-cultural competence measurement.

Keywords: Inter-cultural communication, philosophy of synergetics, dialogue style, inter-disciplinary approach.

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1. Introduction

In the conclusion to the book *'Cultural Intelligence: Surviving and Thriving in the Global Village'*, its authors David Thomas and Kerr Inkson wrote: 'The twenty-first century world is increasingly global, and relating effectively to others, who are culturally different has become a daily necessity' (Thomas & Inkson, 2017, p. 159). In fact, it is no doubt that we live in the rapidly changing time. Globalisation became one of the main buzzwords of the 21st century. We feel its presence in almost every field of our life: in economics, politics, culture and education.

The most important worldwide trend in modern education is its integration and internationalisation, leading to creating the conditions for the formation of a single world educational space. The students and professors take active part in different programmes of mobility with an educational purpose, international student exchange programmes, international scientific conferences and projects of international cooperation in the sphere of education. The cooperation in the sphere of higher education makes the teaching and learning inter-cultural cooperation indispensable in the globalised world.

This paper has grown out of our personal experience of teaching inter-cultural communication at the Department of Mass Communication at the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), where students from more than 140 countries of the world study. Working in multi-national classroom puts an urgent question of the communication style between the university lecturer and the student. It is the way of the education executed that determines and create the atmosphere in the classroom and, consequently, the level of students' knowledge. Besides giving the students deep theoretical knowledge, we are trying to incorporate in the course cross-cultural trainings aimed at deeper understanding of cultural differences and development of practical skills. The aim of the study is to draw attention of the scientific community to the importance of teaching and learning cross-cultural communication in higher school and to explore and discuss the essential theoretical and practical questions.

2. Philosophy and methods of teaching in the university classroom

2.1. Philosophy of synergetics

Under the conditions of globalising world, young people face the issues of adaptation to new life conditions, unexpected phenomena and the diversity of inter-cultural contacts. A new approach in the study of inter-cultural communication is the synergistic one. Synergetics, born in the depths of natural science, penetrates increasingly into the sphere of humanities and social sciences. This new scientific area is engaged in the study and research of unstable, open nonlinear systems and, therefore,, its philosophy and methodology can be applied to the study of such complex equilibrium systems as man, society and culture. The nature of both synergetics and inter-cultural communication lies in their inter-disciplinarity. The main points, ideas, concepts of synergetics, such as the theory of dynamic chaos and order, the theory of self-organisation, non-linearity and openness of the world, the responsibility of choosing the path of development form the basis of the theory and practice of inter-cultural communication, which describes and study unstable, unpredictable and continuously updated world. 'Modern scientific research in the field of inter-cultural communication from the position of synergetics allows a new look at such problems as the transformation of the inter-cultural personality, tolerance, the relationship between the East and the West, the manifestation of collectivism and individualism in the inter-cultural communication (Kolosova & Poplavskaya, 2013, p. 100). The formation of an inter-cultural personality is impossible without the philosophy of synergetics, which means a multiple vision of the world, openness to other cultures and the psychological readiness to act synergistically with others. Integrating mission of synergetics and inter-cultural communication is trying to find 'a narrow path between globalisation and the preservation of cultural pluralism,' between 'the culture of war and the culture of reason' (Prigogine, p. 21).

2.1.1. Dialogue as main way of teaching in the university classroom

Dialogue as a method of teaching originated in the period of antiquity and was successfully applied by Socrates, Aristotle and Plato. Plato believed that real science could exist only in the conditions of constant dialogue between the teacher and a student. It develops critical thinking, rhetorical and listening skills, making conclusions. Dialogue has an educational value, because it cultivates respect to the person you are talking to. It teaches the students not to impose their own opinion on the interlocutor, but allows them to put themselves in the place of another. This ability, called empathy in social psychology, is the principle component of effective inter-cultural interaction.

2.1.1.1. Passive and active forms of education

There are passive and active forms of education. The passive method is a form of education in which the teacher is the main actor and manager of the lesson, and the students act as passive listeners. The passive methods assume an authoritative style of management. The active method is a dialogue form of interaction between the pupils and the teacher in which the students are active participants in the process of education. This method assumes the democratic style of communication in the classroom. The interactive methods are oriented towards a wider interaction of students not only with the lecturer but also with each other and the dominance of students' activity in the learning process. At interactive lessons, the students perform different tasks and assignments the teacher has planned. How these methods and approaches are applied in the inter-cultural communication course?

2.1.1.1.1. Lectures in the framework of higher education

One of the main forms of organising teaching and learning process in the university is lecture in which the groundwork for scientific knowledge is laid. The word 'lecture' comes from the Latin 'lection' which means reading. The lecture appeared in Ancient Greece received its further development in ancient Rome and the Middle Ages. The university lecture is the main link in the didactic cycle of higher education. Its goal is to form an orientation basis for the subsequent mastering of the teaching material by students. The lecture performs the following functions: informational, stimulating (evokes interest in the topic), educating, developing, thinking, orienting (in the problem, in the literature), explaining, persuading and the function of systematisation and structuring of the knowledge.

The topics of the lectures on inter-cultural communication include the core issues and concepts related to the interaction of people from different countries and cultures. They are as follows: national and global culture, national and universal values, cultural identity, the questions of inter-cultural communication in the conditions of globalisation, national character, cultural and ethnic stereotypes, the concept of discourse in the context of inter-cultural communication, the concept of assertiveness in inter-cultural communication, inter-cultural transformation of personality, international etiquette, cultural synergy and others. Basic theories of inter-cultural communication: Edward Hall's theory of High- and Low-Context Cultures, G. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions theory, R. Lewis's theory and the theories of time perception in different cultures are also included.

On the one hand, lecture in higher education is one of the most important forms of organisation's teaching and learning process. On the other hand, this type of a lesson is a widespread type of passive education, which from the point of view of modern pedagogical technologies, is considered to be the most inefficient method of education. Is it possible to transform the passive form of lecture into active? The answer is 'Yes'. It can be done in the form of dialogue.

3. Innovative paradigms of teaching inter-cultural communication

3.1. New forms of lectures on inter-cultural communication

In addition to traditional forms of lectures, the new innovative forms of lectures are being developed: problem lecture, lecture-press conference, lecture-conversation, lecture-discussion, lecture-conference and lecture case study (recommendations on the use of innovative educational technologies in the training process).

The problem lecture begins, as the rule, with questions, with the statement of the problem.

The lecture is constructed in the form of a dialogue communication. Interaction of the teacher and students happens in the form of cooperation when the teacher not only transfers the information, but involves students in the decision making and solving the problem. For this purpose as a rule, the most important sections of the course are selected, which constitute the main conceptual content of the academic discipline. In the context of inter-cultural communication, it can be the issue of national and universal values. This question is the most disputable in not only the modern scientific community, but also among politicians and social and cultural circles. The lecture can start with the question: Do you believe in the existence of universal values? At the end of the lecture, the students come to the conclusion that universal values are the basis of inter-cultural communication. 'The unity that human values bring with them lies or can be the basis of human communication as a dialogue of differences' (Grechko, 2006, p. 267). Style of the communication at the problem lecture is characterised by sharing the ideas, the ability of the students to express their personal points of view and make independent conclusions.

Lecture press conference is usually conducted at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of the course. We prefer to do it at the end of the entire course with the aim of determining the depth of the gained theoretical knowledge and the general level of mastering practical skills determining future professional activity of the students. It is a good practice to organise the lecture press conference in which two or three lectures of different subject areas can participate. For example, in the framework of the master's degree programme 'Applied international journalism' for the students of the first year of studying, the lecture in the form of press-conference is held. It can help the lecturers to sum up their work and make necessary corrections in the curriculum for the next school year.

Due to the traditions of the academic system of education and the requirements of the higher school, both teachers and students are accustomed to intellectual methods of teaching (knowledge transfer). The modern system of international education and teaching and learning inter-cultural communication includes an affective component, which requires not only the development of intelligence quotient but also emotional, social and cultural intelligence. The moral position and ethics principles of the participants of educational process are manifested in the emotional communication. The knowledge filled with emotion feelings can be fully justified as an axiological knowledge (Grechko, 2006). High emotionality can be achieved at the lecture-conversation, lecture-discussion and lecture with case studies.

Lecture-conversation or 'dialogue with the audience' is a method of teaching that has been known since the time of Socrates. The questions are asked at the beginning of the lecture and on its course and are addressed to the entire audience. In the multi-cultural classroom, the teacher should take into account the cultural and national background of the students. To the students from the countries of Asia, such as China and Japan, the questions should be addressed personally. At the lecture-discussion, the teacher organises a free exchange of opinions, ideas and views on the issue under study. At the lecture with case studies, the teacher describes a concrete situation or behaviour of the group or individual in inter-cultural interaction from different cultural setting. The discussion can be postponed and continued at the practical seminars.

3.1.1. Seminars and inter-cultural training

The theoretical knowledge obtained at the lectures is further developed in seminars and practical classes where the students gain practical skills of inter-cultural interaction. The seminars are usually organised in the form of discussion and dialogical forms of independent collaboration between students. The main topics for discussions can be the following: cultural identity, key words in the space of national language and culture and non-equivalent lexis, the concepts of empathy and tolerance and perception and interpretation of cultural differences.

As the main goal of the practical classes is to provide students with the opportunity to master the skills and abilities of using theoretical knowledge, the new forms of inter-cultural communication teaching and learning can be introduced. They are inter-cultural trainings, which can be organised in the form of role-plays, doing case studies, developing inter-cultural competence and cultural intelligence, and doing different training exercises and tasks. For example, 'From the list of values, identify in pairs universal, cultural and personal values', 'Range the items of pyramid of values' and 'The stages of cultural shock'. One of the most favourite training exercises for the students is 'Meeting at the airport', including performing two roles: 'Traveller' and 'Welcomer'. The task is to find among a large number of passengers the fellow citizen. It is possible to recognise him/her only by the traditional greeting accepted in your culture. The one who will greet you in the same way as yours is your fellow countryman. The students are offered to perform the roles of representatives from different cultures.

At the practical seminars, the students do different tests, such as 'The Conflict Management Style Test', the results of which provide them with the knowledge of preferred strategy for dealing with a conflict: collaborating, competing, avoiding, accommodating, and compromising, 'Assertiveness Test' and others. The test 'What's Your Cultural Orientation?' reveals the individualist-collectivist orientation, high- and low-context characteristics, preferences for the low or high power distance, indicates a masculine and feminine orientation, and finally, tolerance for ambiguity or uncertainty.

3.1.1.1. Independent work of students

We cannot help speaking about the independent work of the students in the course of inter-cultural communication. Different forms of independent work of students are writing essays (e.g., 'My experience of coping with culture shock' and 'Expectations of learning in another country: dreams and reality'), analysing critical incidents and culture assimilators, doing special tasks on comparison different cultures and so on. These assignments provide students with valuable examples for discussion and learning about cross-cultural interaction and sharing personal inter-cultural experience. Nowadays, independent work is usually organised using information and communication technologies and multimedia, which allows to develop online project work. As one of the modern scholars argues, in the contemporary world, communication is both digital and cross-cultural (Kalogeras, 2014).

In the inter-cultural communication course, the students have a great possibility to combine their professional and cross-cultural skills. This idea is proven in the work titled 'Chinese students in Russia', performed by the master's degree students studying at the Department of Mass Communication at RUDN University (Available at <http://wp.me/p7hn6f-7n>). It is an obvious example of applying one of the modern trends in the process of development of higher school: introduction of transmedia storytelling technology to the university education.

On completion of the course, the survey and a short interview were conducted. The students were asked to answer the questions like these: Which style of education do you prefer? democratic or authoritative? Which kind of lectures do you prefer? Would you like to take an active part in the lectures-conferences? What did you experience travelling abroad? Will you remember and describe an incident that happened to you while abroad? What new have you learned from the course? Was it

helpful for your future profession or communication? What aspects of this course helped you learn best? Do you prefer listening to lectures or working in practical seminars doing training exercises?

4. Conclusion

The combination of active and passive methods applied at the lectures, practical seminars and inter-cultural training enables students with practical skills of effective communication with people from different cultural backgrounds and helps them to perform and adapt within any variety of cross-cultural situations. Dialogue is the basis of teaching and learning inter-cultural communication. The skills and abilities of critical thinking, listening, making conclusions, empathy and others, developed at the lectures, seminars and trainings are crucial for cross-cultural interaction.

As the result of the study and the analysis of the survey conducted, we came to the conclusion that the integration of theoretical knowledge along with teaching practical skills based on the philosophy of synergetics and the dialogue style of communication in the context of higher education are the most effective methods and approaches to teaching and learning inter-cultural communication.

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