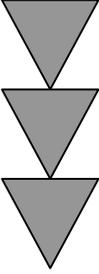


Considerations on LSP
Teaching



**TRAINING THE STUDENTS FOR INTERCULTURAL
COMMUNICATION: A CHALLENGE FOR THE FL TEACHER**



Adriana CHIRIACESCU

Abstract

During the past decades the study of intercultural communication has received much more interest and attention than ever before, although it is as old as civilization; the ease of travel, the development of international trade as well as of multinational organizations – in other words globalization – have made people aware of the fact that they must communicate and cooperate with other people different from themselves in order to succeed and, sometimes, even to survive.

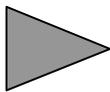
Effective communication in a different context is felt as being important especially in business, because of the competition existing among companies all over the world; at the same time, intercultural communication is very complex, because of the existence of intermingling distinguishing characteristics.

That is why well trained professionals, able to function correctly in different environments are required in practically every field of activity; having to face international competition no company can concentrate only on domestic activities /

markets. In business of any kind, cultural incompetence can jeopardize lots of money through wasted negotiations, lost purchases / sales or contracts and poor customer relations. It is said that “cultural risk is just as real as political risk in international business arena”.

Nowadays, even if a person does not leave his / her own home country to work abroad, it is almost sure that he / she will meet or work with men / women coming from other countries; even the students may share classes with colleagues from different nations and some intercultural training, as well as the experience they will get learning to communicate internationally will be beneficial to them.

Keywords: intercultural communication, globalization, intercultural training



Introduction

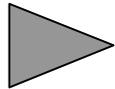
The problem under consideration is where, when and who is going to carry out this intercultural training? Our hope is that it could represent a challenge for the foreign language (FL) teacher, at least at university level, during the FL classes. Some activities meant to develop the students' skills and abilities in intercultural communication could be gradually introduced in class, making use of different training methods; besides getting the real advantage of professional knowledge in the field of intercultural communication, these activities will mean variety and novelty in syllabus design.

The primary aim of this article is to present a very brief analysis of the concept of culture with its various elements, followed, then, by the description of some methods of intercultural communication training which are suggested to the FL teachers.

These methods include three categories:

1. *factual* (books, readings on specific cultures and civilizations, area briefings);
2. *analytical* (sensitivity training, culture assimilators, case studies, classroom language training, films);
3. *experimental* (simulations, field trips, role plays, interactive language training).

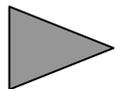
Some of them are symbolic (verbal and observational), others are participative (verbal and behavioural). Depending on the element of culture had in view and desired to be known / learned, the trainers should resort to one or another of these methods, producing corresponding activities.



Culture defined

The scholars define the word “culture” by the total system of values, beliefs, customs, religions, the arts, education, manners etc, as well as material elements, aesthetics or social institutions observed by a group of people, community or nation. It is considered that culture includes some common elements; therefore, culture is learned, shared and transmitted from one generation to the next, being passed on from parents to children, or transmitted by social organizations, special interest groups, schools, church, governments etc.

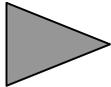
Consequently, no human being can hold himself apart from cultural influence, no one is culture free. In other words, culture could be defined as an integrated system of learned behaviour patterns, characteristic of the members of any given society / group etc, including everything that these members think, say, do or make; at the same time culture is conservative, resisting change and fostering continuity.



Training activities (1)

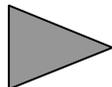
Any training regarding inter-cultural communication should start with a presentation of the concept, the trainees being made aware of it and the unavoidable cultural differences existing among nations / groups / societies; in this respect both experimental and factual methods can be used (see: A. Chiriacescu, 1996). As regards the factual ones, written materials / studies from a variety of sources, providing general or country-specific information plays an important supplementary role; the delivery of special courses of lectures on the culture and civilization of some specific areas should be also considered as necessary supplementary knowledge; the trainees can contribute with area briefings resulting from their own readings, knowledge from personal experiences etc. Travels could be also mentioned here as an experimental method, although only one-time trip to some place, with a stay at a hotel and scheduled sightseeing tour does not contribute significantly to cultural knowledge; maybe those travels involving visits to some institutions (schools, universities, libraries, companies, banks etc), meetings with other students and their families, teaching staff, government officials, agents, etc would really contribute to this knowledge.

Anyway, besides the experimental methods, some factual information obtained from communication, research and education is compulsory as a background for acquiring further, more thorough cultural knowledge.



Elements of culture

One of the most important elements is *language*, described as the mirror of culture. First, the mastery of a language in itself makes the speaker better understand some aspects of the respective culture; language mastery does not mean only technical competence, but also words and phrases that can be understood only in the context or certain grammar structures that unveil a certain life philosophy; words, phrases and grammar are carriers of culture, showing the way culture has developed, viewing some aspects of human existence, the way some people think and what they value.



Training activities (2)

A good training activity could be the comparative analysis of some languages known by students, and the specific characteristics of the respective cultures. (For example the strict grammar rules of the German language and the famous discipline specific to the German culture). Linguistic diversity is an indicator of cultural diversity.

Second, the mastery of a language provides access to local society / group and, implicitly, to its culture; in business, speaking the local language may determine dramatic impacts and the need for a second or third less known foreign language is to be emphasized to the students and explained culturally.

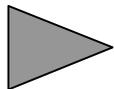
As training method a “brainstorming” session can be organized with the class members: they have to answer the question:

Need we learn other languages (Arab, Japanese, Chinese, Turkish, etc), as long as we can speak an internationally known language (English, French etc). The students should answer “Yes / No”, and give the reason(s) for their choice. A debate could follow underlying the cultural advantages in the case of positive answers.

Referring to the English language, the fact that it is spoken in GB, the USA or Australia means some terms have different meanings, sometimes even opposite. It is the FL teacher's obligation to draw the students' attention to such situations any time they appear, in order to avoid possible culture blunders in future (e.g.: "to table a proposal" meaning "to delay a decision" in American English, while in British English it means "to take immediate action."

Special attention has to be paid to ads and brand names that must be adequate to the specificity of culture, when a product / service is introduced on a new market. (As regards the training methods see: A. Chiriacescu, 1998, where the subject is extensively treated).

Another activity in this case is to ask the class members to provide examples of how advertising policies, product name or slogans used in our country have been ineffective elsewhere because of cultural reasons.



Non-verbal messages in intercultural communication

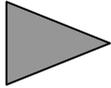
The trainees shall be aware that dealing with people belonging to a foreign culture means to analyze and become familiar with the hidden language of that culture, which is represented by non-verbal messages.

Five key topics – time, space, material possessions, friendship patterns and business agreement – offer a starting point from which they can begin to acquire the necessary understanding for dealing with people coming from foreign cultures.

In some parts of the world time is strictly observed, while, in others, it is flexible and not seen as a limited commodity; individuals - according to the culture they come from – vary in the amount of space they want to separate them from others; some like to stand close to people they are talking with, while others, on the contrary, feel comfortable only standing at a reasonable distance; in some countries social acquaintance and the establishment of appropriate personal relations are essential to conducting business, while, in other places, the partners go straight to business without any previous socializing; in some parts of the world contracts may be bound on handshakes while, in others, lengthy, complex and tedious agreements, in a written form, are taken into consideration. Body language is also an important aspect of non-verbal language indicating – in many cases – different meanings for different cultures.

An interesting activity, useful in training the class members to understand body language as an element of culture is to compare and contrast the styles of different

nationalities. The activities suggested include film watching followed by an attentive analysis of gestures, postures, eye-contact and other nonverbal messages sent by heroes belonging to different cultures; cultural specificity will be obvious; the. The next activity could be to continue watching other short fragments, but without sound (verbal indicators), the students being asked to recognize the culture the people come from, only by nonverbal messages.



Values and attitudes

Values can be defined as shared beliefs or group norms that have been internalized by individuals, while attitudes are considered the evaluations of alternatives based on values. The more rooted the values and attitudes are in central beliefs of group culture, the more cautiously the outsider of that culture has to move.

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