INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY AT EFL LESSONS

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Abstract: The article describes the relationship between language and culture as well as the ways of discussing about cultural identity and cultural diversity at EFL classes to university students. The author offers an analysis of researchers' views of the interaction between culture and language and suggests some practical ideas for intercultural dialogue at EFL classes. The author of the article highlights the idea that knowing the language gives an appearance of understanding people of different cultures but does not give a sufficient knowledge about the foreign culture. Taking into account that verbal as well as nonverbal communication involves much more than transmitting a particular message and it reflects everyone's identifications, keeping their cultural values, the author of the article suggests several practical ideas for EFL classroom to provide a real interaction between cultures through comparison of different cultural values.
Keywords: communication, cultural/ intercultural awareness, cultural identity, intercultural communication

The multicultural reality generates clearly the phenomenon of interculturalism. Understanding this phenomenon depends much of the concept of identity. To live is actually to have an identity. The person defines himself through individual identity, in relation to his social group and social environment. Communicative act involves the interaction of two or more individuals, each of whom brings to the situation of communication their psycho-cultural features, personal experience and individual view of the world. On the one hand, culture determines the individual world view and individual behaviour styles (including communicative one) and on the other hand, the degree of native culture influence upon its representatives may be different and it depends on many factors.

Inter-lingual and interpersonal interactions are often shaped by cultural norms, manners, types of behaviour and expectations at different situations: at EFL classes or some business negotiations. Nowadays university students are involved in diverse exchange educational programs, such as *ERASMUS, EUROEAST, TEMPUS, JANUS* and others. Speaking about the culture of a particular nation, we mean not only to cultural heritage that for centuries was

accumulated in the territory of his residence. Culture in its broadest sense includes values, ideals and worldview of the people, their customs and traditions. People who identify themselves with the same culture trust each other more than strangers. When they are in other cultural environment, they experience the conflict of old and new norms, called "cultural shock". Conversation between people from different cultural backgrounds often leads to frustration and misunderstanding if they do not have enough knowledge and even not ready to communicate with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Researchers, such as Gudykunst, Bhugra, Ruben, Pavlenko, Ting Toomey, Hall, Smidt, Baldwin, etc. highlighted the idea of focus teacher's attention on cultural issues at EFL classes and to help students to build intercultural communication competence. S. Ting–Toomey in "*Communicating across cultures*" points out that verbal as well as nonverbal communication involves much more than transmitting a particular message and it reflects everyone's identifications, keeping their cultural values. The interaction between culture and the individual is generally considered through comparison of different types of identity.

As Bhugra states it is the '*Racial, cultural and ethnic identities form part of one's identity, and identity will change with development at a personal as well as at a social level along with migration and acculturation*' [Bhugra 2004:3]. The very notion of identity is related to self-identification and awareness of belonging to a certain group of individuals. But according to Ting-Toomey, identity must be defined as "the reflective self-conception or self-image that we each derive from our cultural, ethnic, and gender socialisation processes. It is acquired via our interaction with others in particular situations" [Ting-Toomey 1999:28]. According to Ting-Toomey's definition, identity is the reflective view of a person's self, and this reflection is relevant to his or her culture. Traditionally there are several types of identity: cultural, ethnic, linguistic, gender, professional, personal, and others. This separation is necessary and at the same time is rather arbitrary. As Ting - Toomey states that culture influences much on personal identity. However, different types of identity rightfully can be separated from one another and interact in different ways with each other.

Cultural identity is understood as a self-identification with a particular culture, a culture of the applicable forms and norms of behaviour. Every individual who is aware of himself as a member of

a cultural community is the representative of his cultural heritage. The boundaries between the cultural, linguistic and ethnic background can be blurred in a multicultural society (for example, in Russia or in Spain); in the context of mass immigration (for example, in the USA or in Canada); in the multilingual environment (for example, in Switzerland or Holland). Russian researcher A. Pavlenko mentions that identity is composed of many components and in the situation of communication we can notice one or the other of them [Pavlenko 2001:196-202]. For example, in professional communication with colleagues from other cultures, similarity (or compatible) of professional identities can smooth out the differences in cultural identity. Personal identity is generally more mobile as is caused not only a sense of belonging, but also a personal experience of participation in community life: cultural, ethnic, professional.

The most successful classification of personality traits necessary for successful intercultural communication, we find at G-M. Chen, who divides them into four groups: the power of the individual, communicative competence, psychological adaptability and cultural literacy. Person's power includes self-perception, open communication, that is, the desire to reveal information about them; self-monitoring, that is, the ability to modify their behaviour according to the information received, as well as relaxation, i.e. the ability to not be anxious in the communication process.

The communicative competence, according to G-M. Chen, consists of the following components:
a) *Language competence* (the ability to understand and use language that is communication);
b) *Flexibility of behaviour* (the ability to choose the most appropriate forms of behaviour);
c) *Management of interaction in the process of communication* (the ability to start a conversation, etc.);
d) *Social competence* (the ability to simultaneously maintain their own identity and feel empathy for the other person).

Psychological adaptability is the ability to adapt to the new environment and cope with the state of "culture shock", which is characterized by frustration, a sense of alienation, rejection of features from other cultures, and so on. Referring to individual feathers that prevent the effective cross-cultural communication, we found at E. Jandt that barriers in intercultural communication can be the following:

a) *Anxiety* (which makes focusing on their own feelings, rather than on what they talk); b) *Waiting for the similarities between cultures rather than differences, which can lead to a false premise*; c) *Ethnocentrism*; d) *Stereotypes and prejudices*; e) *Language problems*; f) *Ignorance of the peculiarities of non-verbal communication* [Jandt 1988:448].

As our world becomes more and more culturally diverse, we, language teachers, should make changes in educational curriculum to teach a foreign language with a goal of speaking, living and interacting in-between spaces not forgetting about our cultural identity. Most theorists in the field of FL teaching have not yet provided an adequately developed understanding on which practitioners can base their teaching. The other theorists suggest specific activities for integrating culture and the teaching of vocabulary, grammar, listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing, while another consider that newspapers could be vehicles to teach culture.

Peterson and Coltrane suggest various strategies to teach language and culture that is helpful for practitioners to integrate cultural aspect in their EFL lessons. Based on their research, we adapted their ideas and introduced at our EFL lessons the following:

1. ***Using authentic materials*** (films, news, websites, photographs, magazines, restaurant menus, travel brochures, and other printed materials to engage the students in discussion of cultural issues).

At our lessons we were working with R. Weschler's comedy "My big fat Greek wedding", focusing on the vocabulary and cultural differences. It was interesting and useful for students to understand such words and expressions as: *Corinthian columns, heritage, a mean punch, to drive smb' crazy, to come up with*, etc.

During group discussion, the students were to answer the following questions: *a) If you were Ian, would you have agreed to join another church in order to marry Toula? b) Has the United States largely succeeded in creating a great "melting pot" (in which people from all cultures have blended together), or is it more like a "salad bowl" (in which people from different cultures stick to their own groups)? c) How does your family compare to Toula's? What about compared to Ian's?*

2. ***Using proverbs*** (to help students to explore the target or own culture).

At laboratory lessons we practiced such activity as: Find the end of the following proverbs:

- A Bulgarian proverb: You can wash a dirty bottom,…
- A Romanian proverb: Honey is sweet, …
- A Russian proverb: A kind word is like …
- A Gagauz proverb: Good advice is given; …

(...but you can't wash a dirty tongue; ...good esteem is not given; ... but the bee stings; ... a Spring day)

3. ***Having students act out a miscommunication based on cultural differences***.

We suggest to students with B1 level to comment on the following cultural "*misunderstanding*'": *Claire, Emma, Michelle and Tom are four British students in Spain for the year. They decide to spend the evening in a bar or two. Not knowing Bilbao very well yet they get a bit lost and stop to consult a town plan. They are pleased when a young inhabitant approaches and offers to show them a few bars. They chat and he wants to know where the four come from. Tom is Irish and the women are English. Tom and the Spanish man walk ahead of the women and the Spanish man begins to talk politics and compares the situation in the Basque country with the situation in Northern Ireland and then asks Tom why he is with English women. Claire, Emma and Michelle are right behind and don't know what's going on. Suddenly Tom turns round to them and says 'Right, let's drop him and go'.* Would you have done what Tom did or not? Why?

4. ***Presenting objects*** (jewelry or images that originate from the target culture to serve as a foundation from which the teachers can discuss other cultural, historical, and linguistic factors). We suggest using even well-known cultural symbols of different countries to speak or to prepare a project on the historical or linguistic factors.

5. ***Using exchange students*** (eg. *ERASMUS* scholarship holders) to compare cultural values and traditions of different countries.

6. ***Using literary texts, films and television segments*** (to provide students with an opportunity to witness behaviours which are not obvious in texts) [adapted from Peterson and Coltrane, 2003].

Language teacher should practice empathy as they relate to their students in cultural matters and pay attention to student's cultural identity, behaviour patterns, ambiguity and tolerance. The teachers should show openness to new ideas and ways of thinking while students should develop their attitudes toward their own and the second language culture as well as their view of individualism versus collectivism. Practicing the ideas described above at our EFL classes, we focused on the creative written activity – "*What's in a name?*"

when students had to think about the ***origin*** of their names. The issues that they expressed at their presentations were the following: a) Thoughts and feelings you have about your own name; b) You like it or not, you think it suits you or not; c) Your name has/has not an influence on the way you regard yourself; d) Your name's signification. We would like to share some of their answers.

a) "…*I was named Natalia thanks to my father… People with this name have a deep inner desire to create and express themselves, often in public speaking, acting, writing or singing. They also tend to have beauty around them in their home and work environment. People with this name tend to be a powerful force to all whose lives they touch. They are capable, charismatic leaders who often undertake large endeavors with great success. They value truth, justice and discipline and may be quick tempered with those who do not. If they fail to develop their potential, they may become impractical and rigid…*"

b) *"…I have always been interested in the origin of my name and what is the meaning of my name. To my mind, this research helped me to find the answers on my questions. Let me begin by pointing out that many scientists belief that my name is a Russian, Catholic, Slavonic and Orthodox name and besides I rather know that my name is a Polish one. My name has several version of the origin. On the one hand, my name comes from male`s name Yoann, which belongs to the ancient Hebrew name and which means:" God is gracious". I think this is a primary meaning of my name. On the other hand, it is a Slavonic name, which comes from a Slavonic word. This word means a river which was called "Yana"…*

Summing up, an important aspect of foreign language learning consists of acquiring the formal elements of the target language. The link between language and culture in the process of learning a foreign language is reflected in the meaning and usage of the elements of the target language. It is essential to find meaningful ways to incorporate the richness of students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum. Recognizing and validating multiple cultural identities in the classroom community and developing positive student–teacher relationships strengthen individuals' sense of worth and, ultimately, their academic performance.

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