

Foreign Languages as a Milestone of Enhancing Social Communication Skills

Lenguas extranjeras como hitos para mejorar las habilidades de comunicación social

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Abstract

The paper discusses the methods and approaches in the field of foreign language teaching. The focus is on the concept that foreign language teaching enhances the individual to use the language as communication tool. It aims not only to impart knowledge, but also to modify a person's attitude to the environment, ensuring its adaptability to ever-changing conditions. And this very fact certainly depends not on the acquired knowledge only, but on the ability to apply practical skills acquired by the students.

Individuals develop their personalities by interacting with other people. It is very important to outline that the study of foreign language often takes place outside the real language contexts and far from the country and the people of the foreign language being studied. This is a very complex process where relations between people are enhanced by the inner necessity for understanding the forms of cultural and social experience.

Key words: foreign language teaching, communication, competences, methods of teaching foreign languages, intercultural learning, cultural exchange

Resumen:

El artículo analiza los métodos y enfoques en el campo de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras. La atención se centra en el concepto de que la enseñanza de

lenguas extranjeras potencia al individuo para utilizar la lengua como herramienta de comunicación. Su objetivo no sólo es impartir conocimientos, sino también modificar la actitud de una persona hacia el medio ambiente, asegurando su adaptabilidad a condiciones en constante cambio. Y este mismo hecho ciertamente depende no sólo del conocimiento adquirido, sino de la capacidad de aplicar las habilidades prácticas adquiridas por los estudiantes.

Los individuos desarrollan su personalidad interactuando con otras personas. Es muy importante señalar que el estudio de una lengua extranjera a menudo se lleva a cabo fuera de los contextos lingüísticos reales y lejos del país y de la gente de la lengua extranjera que se estudia. Este es un proceso muy complejo en el que las relaciones entre las personas se ven reforzadas por la necesidad interna de comprender las formas de la experiencia cultural y social.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, comunicación, competencias, métodos de enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, aprendizaje intercultural, intercambio cultural

INTRODUCTION

The variety of approaches, viewpoints and experiments in the field of foreign language teaching is predetermined by the spirit of the new age where the destruction of borders, the need for free movement of people is not just a close prospective, but a reality, setting new demands on modern language education.

Mutual understanding in the process of intercultural communication is facilitated by acquired intercultural competences. Actually, the competences refer to the ability to communicate in a foreign language, taking into account the difference in cultures and stereotypes of thinking. The level of its mastery is linked to the knowledge of the history, culture, and customs of the people who speak that very language.

THESIS

Modern researchers assumed that the main idea of foreign language teaching is that the individual can use the language to communicate. It is the communicative foreign language teaching that enables learners to master the language by concentrating their efforts on developing communicative competences. Such training focuses on the process of communication - using language appropriately in different types of social situations. Learners solve tasks of a communicative nature such as solving problems or obtaining information. Emphasis is put on using language to communicate with other people. The idea of the communicative foreign language teaching is that people learn language when they practice it. But people practice language in very different contexts. (Dimitrova, 2012: 8). Thus, they are actually applying their acquired competencies. Communicative competencies can be expressed through the components in any language – phonology (dealing with the sound system of the language), structure (dealing with the rules for making meaningful judgments or the so-called grammar) and vocabulary (dealing with the use of words). But we should keep in mind that using a language requires competencies known as listening and reading (passive, receptive skills), speaking and writing (active, productive skills). Thinking in a foreign language can also be classified as language skills. The best way to develop language competencies is to improve them in certain behavioral forms (listening, reading, speaking and writing) incorporated in four competences: discursive, grammatical, socio-linguistic, strategic.

Discursive competence refers to the learner's ability to use language in written or oral expressions. It is important how well one is able to combine grammatical forms and meaning to find different forms of oral or written expression. This competence is often referred to as "fluency" in oral and written expressions (Hammer, M., 2012: 120).

Grammatical competence refers to the ability to use language correctly, i.e. how well a learner applies the grammatical rules of the language. This includes vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax, grammatical accuracy of written or oral expression (*accuracy*). Socio-linguistic competence refers to the learner's ability to use language correctly in a specific social context and depends on factors such as social status, communication goals and expectations of the participation in the communication (Byram, M., 1997:124). The question is how socially acceptable is the use of the foreign language in different social contexts, i.e. how appropriate is the choice of one or another form of language within the individual social context of communication (*appropriateness*).

Strategic competence considers the effective implementation of communication when the learner's vocabulary is insufficient for the social context in which he/she finds himself/herself (Chomsky, N., 2002:167). This competence tells how well a person uses verbal and non-verbal forms of communication to compensate for the lack of knowledge or skills in the area of previous competencies, i.e. is the learner able to find ways to communicate where there are weaknesses in foreign language skills, i.e. what is its communicative efficacy (*communicative efficacy*).

In order to carry out successfully the tasks and activities related to the communicative contexts in which the learners find themselves, participation in communicative events implies the development of additional competences, which are thoroughly examined in the European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment.

All competencies contribute in their own way to the ability to communicate and can be viewed as aspects of communicative competence. The language framework distinguishes those closely related to language from those that represent a form of functional competence of the individual. And this component is of particular importance for the foreign language professional, since functional competence is associated with oral expression and written presentation for specific functional purposes. Competence in communication is not only knowledge of which specific communication functions are performed with specific language forms. Participants are engaged in communication, where each initiative leads to a reaction and moves the communication process forward, towards a sequence of stages and exchange of cues to some conclusion (Chantov, 2012: 6).

Functional competence is expressed by building up a communication structure. More complex situations have more complicated structures of communication, expressed by the use of certain communicative schemes for the implementation of communication, the so-called social interaction patterns. In more complex and goal-oriented interactions, for example, where it is necessary to apply skills of cooperation and assistance, language is used to: form a working group and establish connections between participants; establishing shared knowledge about the relevant features of the situation; determining the need and possibility of making a change; establishing agreement on the objectives and the actions to be taken to achieve them; understanding regarding the roles of the team members in the execution of the tasks; management of activities related to: identifying and dealing with problems during work, coordination and consistency of actions, joint promotion, reporting on

the achievement of sub-goals; reporting on the ultimate achievement of the task objective; performance evaluation; final and summarizing stage.

In didactics of foreign language, there are different concepts about the contents, topics, methods and goals of intercultural learning related to the language competences. But two main concepts stand out:

1. Intercultural learning provides knowledge about the countries. It is information about geography, politics, history, economy, society and culture. This learning process runs parallel to the language work. The learning process aims at learning dates and facts and through this - the formation of lasting knowledge.

2. Intercultural learning supports the language acquisition process. It means that learning a language also requires knowledge of culture and society (Hammer, M., 2005:675). Even when learning words, it is proven that the meanings of these words are not always identical in one's own mind and in native speakers. Sensitivity to cultural differences should be provoked in the learner. Intercultural learning is therefore integrated as an integral part of foreign language learning. The aim of intercultural learning is not only to accumulate knowledge from facts, but also to arise curiosity and develop skills for communicating with a foreign culture. It is a process where not only linguistic and didactic views are shared, but also educational and political ones, thus, incorporating language and intercultural learning. Foreign language learning contributes to freedom from prejudice and supports successful intercultural communication.

Actually, the study of foreign language often takes place outside the real language contexts and far from the country and the people of the foreign language being studied. It is beyond any doubt that the use of authentic materials has a strong impact. Literary texts could serve as such - from the work with fairy tales at an early age of encountering the foreign language, to the literary sources of the masters of the word (Hamilton, J., 2010:567).

But how to implement this very cross-cultural learning in foreign language teaching? Unfortunately, there is no elaborate and systematized concept of how to build intercultural competence of students developed during the years. Most scholars dealing with foreign language didactics agree that traditional forms of foreign language learning should be supplemented by "experimental learning" (Legutke, 2008: 103).

It is also noted there that "consistently in the center of didactic considerations, contents and forms of learning and teaching are being pushed to activate the learner here and now during the foreign language lesson...". Back in 1990, Wolfgang Butzkamm came to the conclusion around which most specialists are united, "those foreign languages should be learned and taught with the reasonable help of the mother tongue and careful emphasis on grammar, but above all on communication, rather than and only on previously prepared exercises", as well as "on the many unsolved problems in the application of these relatively abstract principles in the concrete practice of teaching..." (Butzkamm, 1990: 74).

Foreign languages are often practiced in "non-authentic situations". A significant part of the students never get the opportunity to communicate in foreign language outside the classroom, but nevertheless they are aware of the aims of the language exercises and role-playing games. Fictive action situations are inevitable for the development of communicative competence. However, if we remain only with simulating communication situations, then the foreign language will never become a real "medium of understanding". Foreign language learning needs a "real-world foray" if it aims to enhance interest in learners. What would prevent foreign language

learners from being allowed to act in real communicative situations? It is necessary for them to have the information about the foreign culture and society, but also to be able to interpret it themselves. This requires prior formation of ability and readiness for "implementation" in the life of the other. Such a new perspective and the corresponding approach facilitate the acquisition of multifaceted knowledge about one's own and foreign culture. The method of changing the perspective is often used as an artistic means to obtain the so-called "effect of alienation", i.e. promoting a successful sense of uncertainty in relation to traditional cultural phenomena, asking questions about the already established views of society.

On the other hand, the trainees must also be able to provide differentiated information about their own way of life and microworld. Connecting these two ways of consideration is an integral part of intercultural training. New ambitious programs for foreign language training are being developed, which require the training of a new type of teaching staff who, on the one hand, can speak languages at a high level, and on the other hand, have a deep very well prepared methodology. Programs for additional qualification and improvement of students of pedagogical specialties in foreign languages, financed through various European programs, are being developed and are already being implemented.

The programs in question envisage that the student training activities will be carried out both on the territory of Bulgaria and on the territory of other European countries.

Training programs include:

- teaching according to new methods of foreign language learning, including the application of modern computer technologies;
- conducting intensive specialized training in individual languages;
- organization of specialized courses aimed at improving the qualifications and training of students;
- training in the context of new educational strategies and technologies; in the principles and methods of developing the educational content, plans and programs related to the credit accumulation system; courses on improving the methodology of academic teaching and research activity.

However, when people communicate in a language that is foreign to at least one of the communicators, there is no guarantee that the meanings and values with which the language of communication is embodied at the moment will be the same for all participants in the communication. One of the goals of learning a foreign language is to learn precisely the meanings, values and practices behind it. It is necessary for the individuals to see themselves in the place of the "others" or the so-called "decentralization" (from English decenter), to shift the focus from oneself and one's culture to one's interlocutor and the culture of which one is a carrier.

It is a peculiar process in which certain skills characteristic of intercultural competence are developed. Byrum divides these skills into five areas:

- *Savoir* (knowledge): knowledge about oneself and others, knowledge about the way in which a communicative act takes place, knowledge about the relationship between the individual and society
- *Savoir-faire/savoir comprendre* (skills): skills to interpret and relate information
- *Savoir-s'engager* (awareness): clarity regarding the political implications of education as well as acceptance of different cultural behaviors
- *Savoir-faire/savoir apprendre*(skills): skills to seek information about the relevant culture
- *Savoir-ktre* (attitudes-traits): attitude or readiness to adapt in the given environment and the ability to appreciate the attitudes and understandings of others.

It could be mentioned that three main components are outlined with in the areas mentioned above: attitudes (Attitudes), knowledge (Knowledge) and skills (Skills), which also appear as main factors in intercultural communication. M. Byram connects the attitudes with "curiosity and openness, trust towards the other culture; search for other perspectives to interpret known and unknown phenomena from one or another culture and cultural practices; willingness to experiment with the process of adaptation during interaction with other cultures; readiness for agreements in verbal and non-verbal communication (Byram, 1997: 134–138).

Over the past decades, English has become of crucial importance in interpersonal, international and business communication. Also, it is the most popular foreign language within European educational institutions at every stage of education, from pre-school to higher education.

In this sense, it is not a coincidence that it is the language competencies in learning English as a foreign language that become the object of new research in the confirmation of a modern approach in the foreign language methodology, which covers a variety of forms and applications.

Shumen University in Bulgaria trains future primary teachers and foreign language teachers in primary school, teachers in language schools, centers for working with children. These are enrolled in *Primary School Education and English as a Foreign Language* major.

The qualification characteristics of the specialists who graduated from this major, as well as the curriculum providing their training, are in accordance with the Ordinance on the State Requirements for the Acquisition of Higher Education for the Educational Qualification Degrees "Bachelor", "Master " and "specialist" no. 76 of 06.08.2002, amended State Gazette no. 79 of 05.09.2003/, with the National Classifier of Professions /2006/, the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on Public Education for the Requirements for Occupying the Positions of "Teacher" and "Educator", in accordance with the acquired education, professional qualification and legal capacity /State Gazette, no. 68 of 30.07.1999, add. no. 43 of 06/08/2010, as well as Regulation No. 12 of September 1, 2016 on the status and professional development of teachers, principals and other pedagogical specialists.

In the latest regulation, the idea of applying frameworks and standards for professions such as teaching, which require intellectual work, emotional and moral-ethical commitment, is laid down. Of course, it has its critics and supporters, but the degree to which key competencies find a place in the strategic goals for the development of the education system is indicative of whether there is a managerial will for the key competencies approach to be at the heart of education reform. Furthermore, the degree to which the upgrading of teachers' qualifications in relation to the teaching of key competencies is embedded in the strategic objectives is indicative of the presence of managerial will and understanding for a full-fledged reform.

Therefore, it is important to identify to what extent and how the key competencies are part of the strategic goals and vision for the development of the Bulgarian educational system, as well as whether they are taken into account when determining the strategic course of action in one or another area of the educational sphere.

It turns out that a small number of documents define the development course in question, linked to the formation of key competencies for successful implementation. Foreign language teaching, as part of the basic competencies in pedagogical terms, seeks the conditions and learning environment for their formation through:

- creation of an educational environment for conducting foreign language classes to achieve a specific level of basic competencies, including prerequisites for the personal development of students, determined by the means, approaches and learning technologies used in the educational process, with the leading factor being the teacher, determining the effectiveness of the student's development process;
- taking into account the age, individual-psychological and motivational characteristics of the students, since at this age the process of shaping the individual's abilities to manage their behavior, actions and deeds, to consciously build relationships with others;
- enrichment of the content component of the foreign language course, expressed in maximum strengthening of the communicative orientation of the training, development of speech habits, i.e. such a construction of the exercises for training speech habits and practice, in which not elements of the language system are worked out, but habits and skills for speech communication, maximum convergence of the learning process with that of speech communication, i.e. modeling communication in learning;
- foreign language specialization according to the specifics of the university and based on language actions in specific professional situations;
- motivational orientation of the process of learning a foreign language, realizable through means and approaches of learning, satisfying the needs of the students for novelties in the studied material and variety of the performed exercises;
- complex use of methodical means of training.

The degree of competencies in the professional development of students is characterized by the readiness to use ideas, innovations to achieve goals; basic knowledge of professional fields, such as knowledge of terminology, concepts presented by specialties; ability to solve study cases on problems of professional activity in role-playing and business games in situations close to professional ones; awareness of achievements in the field; level of creative habits, etc.

An informal, anonymous experimental study was conducted among students majoring in Primary School Education with a foreign language at Shumen University who took part under Erasmus mobility programme.

The information obtained leads to the conclusion that among the students, anxiety is felt by the differences in life, lifestyle and thinking between them and their colleagues from European universities until the very moment of peer-to peer communication. Respondents assume that the existing gap is due to socio-economic rather than cultural, ethnic or socio-psychological reasons.

It is interesting to outline (from an academic point of view) that students insist on including a discipline in the curriculum that will enhance their training as future pedagogical staff that are supposed to work in multicultural environment. A significant part of the students (46.3%) believe that such a discipline is necessary for their future realization. 0.7% stated a categorical refusal. A condescending attitude is shown by 9%.

The data obtained confirm the enhancement of the level of intercultural awareness of the students majoring in Primary School Education with a foreign language. The results of the survey show that the students who participated under the mobility programme are aware of the fact that there are cultural differences, but successful communication overcomes the obstacles that arise.

CONCLUSION

The language and cultural exchange programs, including both cultural events, training courses and distribution of original literature, as well as exchange of students who, within a period of up to one year, have the right to study in the respective country, which provides them with shelter and food. This is the reason why the training is aimed at the parallel development of the four basic communication skills - reading, writing, listening and speaking.

In line with modern trends is the wide application of the individual principle in the learning process, attention to the needs and capabilities of each individual student, as well as the skillful and harmonious combination of individual and collective forms of work (creating individual projects, working in groups and etc.).

Today, all those who are involved in the process of foreign language education face with the challenges of the modern globalized world and the uncertainties of the future. The role of teachers is difficult, because the responsibility before the teaching staff is huge. Thus, making it extremely crucial, both related to nowadays and responsible for tomorrow in mastering foreign language skills.

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