

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) of EFL Students at University Level

Dalia Gulbinskienė¹, Rūta Lasauskienė²

- ¹ Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Philology, Department of the English Language, Str. Studentų 39, LT-08106 Vilnius, dalia.gulbinskiene@leu.lt
² Mykolas Romeris University, Institute of Humanities, Department of Applied Languages, Str. Ateities 20, LT-08303 Vilnius, ruta.lasauskiene@mruni.eu

Summary. Foreign language learning is comprised of grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency and cultural competence. Cultural competence is the knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of another country. Language and culture are inseparable. Culture is the foundation of communication. Language itself makes no sense and has no meaning outside the cultural setting in which it is spoken. In the EFL teaching, great attention should be paid to teaching culture of the target language as well as to teaching linguistic knowledge so that learners intercultural communicative competence (ICC) can be enhanced. Foreign language teachers should be culture teachers. As learners learn about language, they learn about culture and as they learn to use a new language, they learn to communicate with other individuals from a new culture. The problem is that the mastery of vocabulary and structures does not necessarily ensure a person's communicative competence. The appearance of disharmony, misunderstandings and even conflicts in communication is largely due to a lack of ICC. The ability to communicate successfully with native speakers depends not only on language skills but also on comprehension of cultural habits and expectations. In the century of the global communication, the goal of EFL teaching has to be changed and a shift should be made to the cultivation of ICC. The main aim of the paper is to reveal whether EFL students at Mykolas Romeris University and Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences hold intercultural communicative competence.

Keywords: *culture, intercultural communicative competence (ICC), EFL, culture shock.*

1. Introduction

Language and culture are intricately interwoven with each other. The knowledge of other cultures is as important as proficiency in using a foreign language. In the EFL teaching at schools and universities, great attention should be paid to teaching culture of the target language as well as to teaching linguistic knowledge. What the students really need is to be taught directly what people say in particular situations in the English culture. Most language teachers would agree that in order to apply language skills effectively, the knowledge of cultural environment is crucial. Successful intercultural communication means much more than language skills as understanding a foreign language does not ensure understanding the speaker's intentions. It is also a comprehension of cultural habits and expectations. Moreover, international understanding is one of the basic goals of language education. It is important to understand the differences among the various cultures within which people of different races, religions, political and social beliefs live together. Peace and progress in the world depend on understanding, tolerance, exchange and cooperation. Foreign language study is one of the core educational components for achieving this aim. Furthermore, students themselves may be interested in the people who speak English. EFL students want to know what they are like, how they live and how they are different from themselves. However, student's knowledge of the basic aspects of target culture may be incomprehensive if they have not been provided with systematic cultural knowledge at school or university. Overall, foreign language teaching should help students lay a solid foundation of language and cultivate their cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of social development. English as the medium of international communication at present, is called upon to mediate a whole range of cross-cultural concepts. Thus, English language teaching and English culture teaching is coming to the foreground and EFL teachers should not neglect culture and pay due attention to it in the classroom. The main aim of this research is to try to reveal whether EFL students at Mykolas Romeris University and the University of Educational Sciences hold intercultural communicative competence.

2. The Importance of Teaching Intercultural Communicative Competence to EFL Students

What is culture? There are a lot of different definitions. According to Sapir, "culture may be defined as what a society does and thinks." According to Duranti, it is "something learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next, through human actions, often in the form of face-to-face interaction and through linguistic communication." Anthropologists define culture as "the whole way of life of a people or group; culture includes the social practices that bond a group of people together and distinguish them

from others.” In the past, people learned a foreign language to study its literature, and this was the main medium of culture, i. e. it was through reading that students learned of the civilization of the target language. Today, however, language learners are concerned with such crucial aspects of culture as greetings, expletives, personal possessions, verbal taboos, cafes, contrasts in town and country life, patterns of politeness, fashion, medicine, etc. Generally people think of culture as “high culture” – art, literature, music, and the like. However, the most important part of culture in communication is that which is internal and hidden, but which governs the behaviour and includes values and thought patterns. According to Lustig (2009), this dimension of culture can be seen as an iceberg with the tip sticking above the water level of conscious awareness. By far the most significant part, however, is unconscious or below the water level of awareness.

It is generally recognized that language and culture are related to each other. Language is communication between people with their own cultural norms. Culture is a complex concept that includes language. Georgieva (2010) has argued, that only when the cultural context is understood can the language rooted in the context be thoroughly comprehensible. Moreover, Leavitt (2010) claims, that misunderstandings are likely to occur between members of different cultures and we must learn to deal with them in any situation in which two cultures come into contact. Furthermore, language is considered to be the most visible and available expression of any culture. To sum up, culture is related to language and vice versa. It is necessary to teach both language and culture in an integrated way, i.e. to use the target language as the medium of instruction in culture teaching.

When students learn a foreign language, they learn more than a linguistic system. They acquire a certain degree of familiarity with the foreign cultural system. Lum (2004) claims, that communication in real situations is never out of context, and because culture is part of most contexts, communication is rarely culture-free. The same word, if used in different culture, would get different psychological response. Neglecting the cultural difference results in misunderstandings. Therefore, according to Alyan (2011), it is necessary to learn how to understand and create language that is in accordance with the sociocultural parameters of the specific situation, as EFL students first of all ground communication on the background of their native culture and only then on the culture of the target language, which is called intercultural communication. Intercultural communication is interactional data from members of different cultural backgrounds, i. e. it is communication across cultures or comparative data and studies of a large number of cultures. Sehlaoui (2011) claims, that intercultural communication is a symbolic process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings. Intercultural communication is concerned with unmediated communication between people from different cultural backgrounds. In the 21st century we have no choice about whether to live and communicate in a world of many cultures. Thus, what competence should foreign language learners have to meet the need of communicating appropriately and effectively in such a world? The

answer is that EFL teaching should cultivate learners' intercultural communicative competence.

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is defined as the competence to obtain effective outcomes in intercultural communication situations. Recently ICC has become an important research area in intercultural communication studies. ICC is related to the cultural factors, because they have their reflections in a practical communicative situation. More and more EFL teachers place emphasis upon the improvement of ICC, as well as the linguistic competence at the same time. According to Vyas & Patel (2009), ICC refers to implicit mastery of the norms of a society, the unspoken rules describing certain behaviour as acceptable or unacceptable. ICC also implies knowledge of many aspects of society and culture: forms of address, choices of register and style, differences between social and regional dialects, as well as social values attached to these differences. To be successful in the intercultural communication, both linguistic and cultural competence are needed.

Diller & Moule (2004) argue, that ICC is the ability to identify cultural diversity and develop empathy, i.e. to see things from the point of view of others. A learner's socio-cultural knowledge restricts how he exploits his linguistic potential. It is generally believed that if a student lacks socio-cultural knowledge relevant to the target language, he can hardly use a language accurately and appropriately and be an effective intercultural communicator. Cultural awareness teaching should be involved with viewpoints, and with allowing students to gain a perspective through comparison, in the process of which from the two viewpoints there lies the possibility of attaining leverage on both cultures, and thereby acquiring an intercultural communicative competence. Leigh (2001) claims, that when integrating English culture awareness into teaching, there are some problems that EFL teachers face, e.g. how to provide the cultural information needed, what to teach, or how to test whether students are attaining their cultural goals. Often students do not realize that the teacher is attempting to teach aspects of the target language culture, as very often culture is not considered a fundamental component of the class content. Currently, the most practical approach to testing culture is to test the facts and insight into cultural behaviour. Cultural understanding covers understanding of daily life, knowledge of cultural connotations of words and phrases, even the development of interest or curiosity toward the target culture.

According to Berardo, Deardorff et al (2012), a lack of ICC may cause culture shock. Culture shock is caused by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs (words, gestures, facial expressions, customs, norms) and symbols or social contacts. The individual undergoing culture shock reflects his anxiety and nervousness with culture differences, he feels insecure, lonely, angry, frustrated, even incompetent. Teel & Obidah (2008) claim, that in order to cope with all of these problems and anxieties and avoid culture shock, learners should cultivate intercultural communicative competence. What methods can be used in order to achieve that aim? Using authentic sources from

the native speech community helps to engage students in authentic cultural experiences. Sources can include films, news broadcasts, television shows, websites, photographs, magazines, newspapers, restaurant menus, travel brochures, etc. After the students have viewed the relevant segments, the teacher can engage the students in discussion of the cultural norms and what these norms might say about the values of the culture. Discussion topics might include nonverbal behaviours, gestures, eye contact, societal roles, the physical distance between speakers, etc. Films are often the most current and comprehensive ways to encapsulate the look, feel, and rhythm of culture. Another method used can be discussion of common proverbs in the target language. It could focus on how the proverbs are different from or similar to proverbs in the student's native language, as proverbs reveal historical and cultural background of the country. Moreover, exchange students, immigrant students, or students who speak the target language at home can be invited to the classroom as expert sources. They can share authentic insights into the home and cultural life of native speakers of the language. Furthermore, literary texts can be very helpful in allowing students to acquire insight into a culture. It is generally recognized, that the most effective way for students to learn about the target language and culture is to live for some time in the target community and to get in touch with their family, professional, social lives, etc. Anyway, as Walcott (2006) notes, cultivating ICC should be more than focusing a few lessons on holidays, customary clothing, folk songs, or food. Understanding the cultural context of day-to-day conversational conventions such as greetings, farewells, forms of address, thanking, making requests, giving or receiving compliments means more than just being able to produce grammatical sentences. It means knowing what is appropriate to say to whom, and in what situations, and it means understanding the beliefs and values represented by the various forms and usages of the language.

3. Research Findings

3.1 Research methodology

A survey data analysis method was used in order to get an insight into the intercultural communicative competence of EFL students and to identify the learners' attitudes, needs and expectations as far as EFL courses are concerned. A questionnaire was developed and administered to 30 first year students of English Philology at Mykolas Romeris University and 30 Turkish students doing a preparatory course for English Philology studies at Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences. As a result, in total 60 questionnaires were collected. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items asking the students to reflect on their awareness in such areas as the history of the UK, English proverbs, arts and artists in the UK, greeting phrases in English, the patterns of politeness in English, British traditional dishes, non-verbal behaviour or body language in the UK, British educational

system, British political system, religion and moral values in the UK. The students were asked to choose an appropriate answer that reflects their learning experience and tick one of the given options 'yes', 'no' or 'not sure'.

The diagrams below illustrate the research data analysis of the EFL students' answers to some of the questions that in our opinion best reveal their awareness of ICC.

Do you read books by British writers in the original?

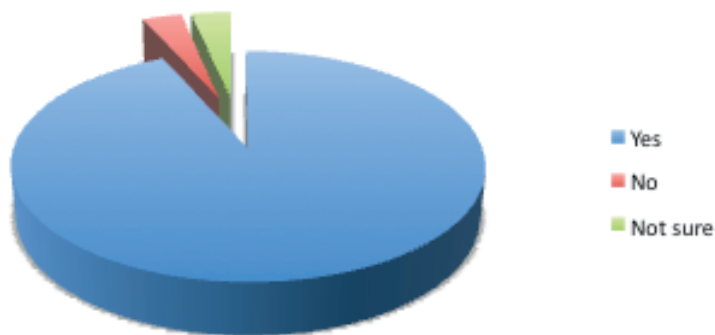


Diagram 1.

Diagram 1 illustrates the fact that nearly all surveyed students (93%) at Mykolas Romeris University and Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences read books by British writers in the original. Only a few students either do not read such books or they are not sure of the fact if the books are by British authors in the original.

Do you read authentic English texts and listen to authentic recordings?

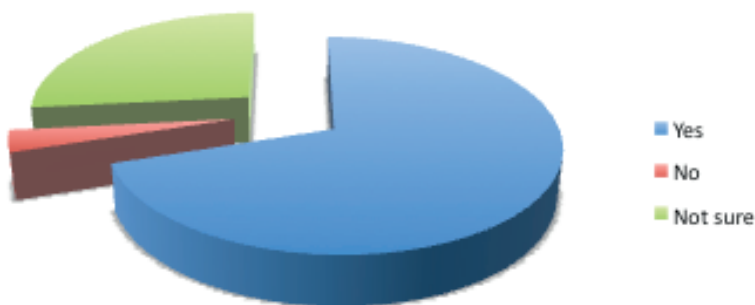


Diagram 2.

Furthermore, as you can see in Diagram 2, the survey findings reveal that nearly a third of the respondents (27%) are not so sure of authentic English texts and listening to authentic recordings, although the majority of the questioned students (70%) in fact read authentic English texts and listen to authentic recordings.

Do you know enough about British customs and traditions?



Diagram 3.

Diagram 3 shows that only a third of all respondents (38%) admitted being aware of British customs and traditions. Another third of the surveyed students either do not know enough about British customs and traditions (30%) or they are not sure of the fact (32%).

Would you like to find out more about British customs and traditions ?



Diagram 4.

In relation to the same issue of customs and traditions, as you can see in Diagram 4, the survey findings revealed that the majority of the respondents (70%) would like to find out more about British customs and traditions. Only a small number of the questioned students (13%) are not interested in finding out more about this area of culture or they are not sure if they are willing to explore it (17%).

Could you say that you have cultural competence to fluently communicate with native speakers in English?



Diagram 5.

Diagram 5 shows that there is a slight difference in the number of the surveyed students who think that they have cultural competence to fluently communicate with native speakers in English (35%) in comparison with the number who think the opposite (32%) or are not sure of the fact (33%).

Conclusions

With the development of technology and the globalization of world economy, the communication between various cultures has become closer and more frequent. Thus, the teaching of culture should become an integral part of foreign language instruction. EFL teachers should present their students with a true picture and representation of English culture and language. In order to get good ICC, students should possess cultural background information in their language learning process, compare British lifestyle with that of their own to find out the similarities and differences. In this way, students can better prepare themselves for the everyday communication they are likely to encounter. The students at MRU and LEU claim to have had a sufficient amount of teaching material on British culture provided during their English classes. The research showed

that the students are aware of the benefits of cultural information. However, the survey revealed that EFL students at Mykolas Romeris University and Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences still feel a lack of intercultural communicative competence. Despite the fact, that they know a lot of facts about the British history, literature, arts, political system, education, as well as they are aware of British moral values, patterns of politeness or non-verbal behaviour, they still do not feel confident enough to communicate with English native speakers or claim that they hold ICC. Cultivating ICC is a lifelong process and the students seem to be willing to enhance their ICC in the future.

References

- Alyan, A. (2011). *The Intercultural Dimension in EFL University Context: EFL Teachers Beliefs regarding the Concepts of Culture*. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Berardo, K., Deardorff, D. K., Trompenaars, F. (2012). *Building Cultural Competence: Innovative Activities and Models*. Stylus Publishing.
- Diller, J., Moule, J. (2004). *Cultural Competence: A Primer for Educators*. Wadsworth Publishing.
- Georgieva, M., James, A. (2010). *Globalization in English Studies*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Leavitt, R. (2010). *Cultural Competence: A Lifelong Journey to Cultural Proficiency*. Slack Incorporated.
- Leigh, J. W. (2001). *Communicating for Cultural Competence*. Waveland Pr. Incorporated.
- Lum, D. (2004). *Cultural Competence, Practice Stages, and Client Systems: A Case Study Approach*. Cengage Learning.
- Lustig, M. W., Koester, J. (2009). *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication Across Cultures*. Pearson.
- Lustig, M. W., Koester, J. (2012). *Intercultural Competence*. Pearson.
- Rothman, J. C. (2007). *Cultural Competence in Process and Practice: Building Bridges*. Pearson
- Sehlaoui, A. S. (2011). *Developing ESL/EFL Teachers' Crosscultural Communicative Competence: A Research-based Critical Pedagogical Model*. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Teel, K. M., Obidah, J. E. (2008). *Building Racial and Cultural Competence in the Classroom (Practitioner Inquiry)*. Teachers College Press.
- Vyas, M. A., Patel, Y. L. (2009). *Teaching English as a Second Language: A New Pedagogy for a New Century*. PHI Learning Private Limited.
- Walcott, W. H. (2006). *Knowledge, Competence, and Communication: Chomsky, Freire, Searle, and Communicative Language Teaching*. Black Rose Books.
- <http://essaybank.degree-essays.com/languages/culture-in-foreign-language-teaching.php>

Užsienio kalbų studentų tarpkultūrinė komunikacinė kompetencija

Dalia Gulbinskienė¹, Rūta Lasauskienė²

¹ Lietuvos edukologijos universitetas, Filologijos fakultetas, Anglų kalbos katedra, Studentų g. 39, 08106 Vilnius, dalia.gulbinskiene@leu.lt

² Mykolo Romerio universitetas, Humanitarinis institutas, Taikomosios kalbotyros katedra, Ateities g. 20, 08303 Vilnius, ruta.lasauskiene@mruni.eu

Santrauka

Užsienio kalbos mokymasis susideda iš gramatinės kompetencijos, komunikacinės kompetencijos, kalbos mokėjimo ir kultūrinės kompetencijos. Kultūrinė kompetencija yra žinios apimančios kitos šalies normas, papročius, įsitikinimus ir reikšmių sistemas. Kalba ir kultūra yra neatskiriamos. Kultūra yra komunikacijos pagrindas. Pati kalba praranda prasmę atsiribojus nuo kultūrinės aplinkos kurioje yra ja kalbama. Kuomet anglų kalba yra mokoma kaip užsienio kalba, turėtų būti skiriamas didelis dėmesys ne tik lingvistinėms žinioms, bet ir mokomosios kalbos šalies kultūrai, nes tuo būdu yra vystoma besimokančiųjų tarpkultūrinė komunikacinė kompetencija. Užsienio kalbų mokytojai turėtų būti ir kultūros mokytojais. Tuo pat metu, kai mokomasi kalbos, besimokantieji sužino ir apie kultūrą, ir tuo pačiu jie mokosi bendrauti su asmenimis iš naujos kultūros. Problema yra tai, kad žodyno ir kalbos struktūrų išmanymas nebūtinai užtikrina asmens komunikacinę kompetenciją. Bendravimo disharmonijos, nesupratimų ar netgi konfliktų atsiradimas dažnai įvyksta dėl tarpkultūrinės komunikacinės kompetencijos trūkumo. Sugebėjimas sėkmingai bendrauti su gimtakalbiais priklauso ne tik nuo kalbinių įgūdžių, bet ir nuo kultūrinių įpročių ir lūkesčių. Pasaulinės komunikacijos amžiuje anglų kalbos kaip užsienio kalbos mokymas turėtų būti krepjiamas tarpkultūrinės komunikacinės kompetencijos ugdymo linkme. Pagrindinis šio straipsnio tikslas yra atskleisti ar Mykolo Romerio universiteto ir Lietuvos Edukologijos universiteto užsienio kalbų studentai yra išsiugdę tarpkultūrinę komunikacinę kompetenciją.

Esminiai žodžiai: kultūra, tarpkultūrinės komunikacijos kompetencijos (ICC), EFL, kultūrinis šokas.

Pateikta / Submitted 2014 09 23

Priimta / Accepted 2014 10 10