

Inter-cultural Awareness and its Role in Enriching Students' Communicative Competence

Alla Kourova and Doan Modianos

University of Central Florida, USA

Abstract

Globalization and technological advancements are breaking down barriers and borders with vast implications for education in general and foreign language teaching in particular. More than ever, our programs need to address internationalization and cross-cultural understanding. Contemporary language classes must account for features far beyond just the linguistic. They must incorporate the larger cultural fabric of which language is only a part. There is a developing consensus that it is important to include culture learning as part of language learning with a primary goal of making students aware of alternative ways of interpreting personal and social experiences (Sellami, 2000).

The paper will focus on the application of the above principle through an international partnership called the "Connecting Classrooms Project." The project goals include promoting students' cultural/intercultural awareness, clarifying cultural identities, and challenging preconceptions. Students examine the inter-relations among language and other cultural expressions. American students who are studying the Russian language interact through videoconferencing and social media tools with a classroom of students in Russia. Together they work on projects that increase their understanding of the language and culture of the target language and so, build a richer appreciation of their own culture.

The cultural experiences that students go through enable them to become independent learners and open the scope for them to be novice researchers who are capable of using research tools and resources to find information on culture-related issues and topics. It also helps them develop a high level of thinking through analysis of material, reflection, and evaluation.

Keywords

Cross-cultural understanding, cultural/intercultural awareness, language, globalization

Introduction

In the last three decades, language teachers have come to see language learning as being embedded in a sociocultural context. Students are routinely expected to develop cultural

competence in addition to language learning (Fenner, 2008). On the other hand, language can condition cognitive processes and varies according to geographic location. In addition, language is the vehicle by which social experiences of a people are carried down across generations (Vegas-Puente, 1997). Language learning is a case of learning symbols and systems of codes but is as well a matter of developing cultural knowledge and competence. In fact, culture can be viewed as being a feature of language itself. (Kramsch, 1993, cited in Fenner, 2008).

With the vast implications of new phenomena in the world, such as globalization and technological advancements that break down barriers and borders, the aims of foreign language teaching and learning have now expanded to include promoting and fostering the understanding and acceptance of other cultures. There is a growing consensus that the task of language teaching must include culture learning as a part of language learning, thus expanding the ways that students can understand their world (Sellami, 2000).

Research categorizes the goals of teaching the target language culture as part of the language class into two main categories consisting of pragmatic goals and educational goals (Byram, 1997, Planken and Korzilius, 2004). Pragmatic goals include having a cultural component which helps students to communicate successfully with other speakers of the target culture using the target language; helping to eliminate the notions of negative interference and transfer of stereotypes about the target culture, helping students socialize with other speakers of the language, both native and non-native; helping arouse students' motivation and interest in the foreign language as they "relate the often abstract sounds and forms of a foreign language to real people and places" (Fenner, 2008); and helping prepare learners for the future by reducing the element of culture shock for students who go to study abroad. The educational goals of teaching culture include the acquisition of a wider world-view and learning to be open, accepting, and caring citizens of the world community. Encouraging positive attitudes and understanding of other people that could ultimately lead to tolerance, the overcoming of stereotypes, and the reduction of prejudice and ego centrality are other educational goals.

Another major development in the literature on culture and its incorporation in the foreign language class is the introduction of the term "intercultural" to replace the term "cultural". How we view cultural understanding within the language class has evolved from an understanding of the "target culture" toward an understanding of how two different cultures are related (Fenner, 2008). When students learn and internalize a new language and its new culture they do not work in a vacuum. Indeed, their beliefs, values, and assumptions shape their understanding of themselves and their understanding of others. Students are embedded in the cultural context of their home society, and this contextual embedding lets students use this knowledge to interpret the meaning of linguistic information of the target language. Furthermore, learning about another culture prompts students to reflect on their own culture. Students' local culture is their starting point and what students learn in the process of learning a foreign language goes back to the students' own culture.

The present paper draws on a number of principles of involving intercultural awareness and competence. Interest in cultural competence arose naturally from the experiences of Westerners doing business overseas. That interest has grown with the growth of international business and has also been affected by the popularity of study abroad, and by the needs of expatriates living overseas (Sinicropo, Norris, and Watanabe, 2007). Researchers and practitioners now routinely

assume that language learning and developing cultural competence are interrelated. (Byram, 1997, Planken and Korzilius, 2004). In Byram's view (Byram, 1997), foreign language courses should not only teach students the language needed to communicate but also make them encounter another culture and perceive it in its own context.

Literature Review

Intercultural awareness is the development of awareness and understanding of one's own and other cultures. Intercultural awareness occurs when people no longer assume that their culture's way of looking at things is the best way or the only way, and when people therefore begin to evaluate other perspectives (Yassine, 2006).

There is more to intercultural awareness than merely acquiring facts about another culture. Chris Rose (2004, cited in Yassine 2006), lists observing, identifying and recording elements in both the home and target cultures, comparing and contrasting, negotiating meaning, dealing with or tolerating ambiguity, accepting difference, defending one's own point of view while acknowledging the legitimacy of others, and not limiting the possibility of interpretation as necessary skills and attitudes for heightened intercultural awareness.

One of the most well-established models of intercultural competence was developed by Byram in 1997 (Sinicrope, Norris and Watanabe, 2007). Byram proposed a five-factor model of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997, Chapter 2): 1) The attitude factor which refers to the ability to see oneself in relation to others, 2) knowledge about one's own and other cultures, and in addition knowledge about the process of social interaction, 3) the skills of interpreting and relating, 4) the skills of discovery and interaction, and 5) cultural awareness which describes the ability to use perspectives, practices, and products in one's own culture and in other cultures to make evaluations.

Intercultural competence involves raising the learner's awareness of their own culture as well as raising awareness of the culture of the language being learned. Learners are often asked to reflect on aspects related to their own culture and the target culture as they look at differences and similarities and explore areas that are often taken for granted. This will ultimately help to clarify what is deepest and most relevant to their identity (ibid, 2005). Students gradually develop an awareness of themselves and how they relate to those who are from the other culture, the "other." With the right choice of activities, the foreign language classroom can help learners turn their attention back to their lives and discover certain aspects in which they can take pride.

Learners are very active agents in the learning process; the focus is on them, what they can bring into the classroom, and what they can take out of it. Learning about the target culture is redirected towards a more concerted hands-on experience learning approach where the learner engages in a discovery process of both the target and home cultures and their ways of life (Sellami, 2000). The learner, in the process, does not only learn a foreign language but also develops as a person and as a member of a larger community. Incorporating intercultural awareness in the foreign language class can and should promote developing awareness of the learner's own identity, (see Fenner, 2008) and thus personal growth. The personal growth is a product of enabling students to reconcile their own beliefs with ideas from the culture of the "other" that may be very new and challenging (Porto, 2009).

According to Straub (1999) as cited in Thanasoulas (2001), learners need to be provided with some kind of meta-language in order to talk about their culture and “to cultivate a degree of intellectual objectivity essential in cross-cultural analysis.” Critical thinking skills are developed when students are forced to confront the foundations of their own culture as they relate to the foundations of the culture of the language being learned.

English/Russian as a Foreign Language in Russia and the USA

Given the prominent role English has gained in the last century, especially in the worlds of science, advanced technology, and communication, it has become an international language and a lingua franca used by an increasing number of people in various fields of life all over the world. To further discussion of the role of culture in learning a foreign language, it would be beneficial to understand current practice of teaching English as a foreign language in the Russian educational system. Teaching and learning English have become a necessity in Russia where the aim is to develop the social and economic lives of the future generation. In Russia, English plays a very significant role in the economic and social life of the country. Since the beginning of the nineties, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the knowledge of the English language helped one keep abreast of the developments taking place in other parts of the world. Russia began a process of industrial, trade, and financial activities where the use of English is indispensable. English is now widely used in almost all sectors of life. In its institutionalized form, it is used in mass media, business, and education.

Since the introduction of a modern system of teaching foreign language in Russian education in the 1990s, English has been designated as the main foreign language in public schooling. English is now taught as a main school subject in all public classes from as early as the first grade in specialized schools and the fifth grade in the public schools. This allows Russian students to study the language for a total of six years before embarking on their higher education. In higher education institutions, English is the medium of instruction for most science, technology, and commerce-based specializations. In the society at large, English is exerting an increasingly important influence on all aspects of Russian society and its development. Knowledge of English is now an essential prerequisite for obtaining employment in many different types of jobs in both the public and private sectors, and it helps open the door for a higher position in society in general.

English language teaching programs in Russia show the uses and values of using English in the Russian society as perceived by his participants of university graduates, English language teachers, supervisors, and school principals. Four main uses are identified. First, English is seen as the prime medium of international communication and is the tool that bridges the linguistic gap between the different parts of the world. English can facilitate international integration, understanding, and cooperation. Second, English is vastly acknowledged as a bridge leading to good employment, a better future, and a better life. Third, English is used for academic purposes. It is the main medium of instruction in most higher education institutions that often require students to have gained a certain level of proficiency in it as a condition for admission. Fourth, English is also perceived valuable for enhancing cultural analysis and understanding. Moreover,

Russian education leaders believe that English is a powerful tool for transmitting and accessing culture and knowledge and for opening doors of modernization and understanding.

At the school level, the English curriculum in Russia is based on a communicative syllabus as well as a content-based syllabus that has cultural material related to both Russian and English speaking countries. One of the main objectives of the textbooks prescribed by the Ministry of Education is "to encourage students to develop a positive attitude towards and take an interest in their own and different cultures and peoples" (Ministry of Education and Science Bill, zakonproekt2012). The investigation of English as a Foreign Language (Russian EFL) teachers' perceptions of cultural aspects in Russian EFL textbooks reports that teachers identified the following aims for the incorporation of cultural material: expanding learners' understanding of the world, motivating learners to learn more about other cultures, developing a positive attitude towards other people and their cultures, raising learners' awareness of other cultures, developing learners' understanding of their own culture, identifying similarities and differences between Russian culture and international cultures, and developing learners' language ability to reflect critically on the cultural issues identified in the material.

In contrast to Russian educational methodology with respect to teaching English, the teaching of Russian as a foreign language in the United States has a completely different history and is still trying to find its place as one of the critical languages in the list of languages taught in the universities and high schools. Over the past several years, the study of Russian in American universities has grown from merely 23,921 students in 2002 to 26,883 in 2009, an increase of 12%. It remains difficult at the university level and nearly impossible for K-12 students to find offerings in Russian language instruction. Even when Russian language instruction is offered, the majority of the textbooks available for use in teaching Russian as a foreign language are based on a communicative method with only modest presentation of cultural information; this current practice does not as yet serve students well.

At the University of Central Florida (UCF), the Russian program at the intermediate level includes a project called "Connecting Classrooms" that has enhanced both the students' cultural and intercultural awareness and their sense of pride in their cultural identity. The mission of the project is multidimensional as it aims at combining language instruction with real experience to foster meaningful social, cultural, and personal learning. Some of the goals of the project can be stated as follows:

- 1) To improve students' proficiency and communication skills in Russian, especially oral skills
- 2) To increase student motivation and interest in improving their language skills by providing them with opportunities for student involvement and "ownership" of their learning
- 3) To encourage mutual respect and openness to different ideas among both Russian and American students

As part of the Russian class at the University of Central Florida, students work closely with students from Lyceum #7 in Novochoerkassk, Rostov-on-Don, Russia (mainly via email correspondence and Skype) on collaborative curriculum projects. For the past two academic

years, partnerships in which the same group of students from both participating schools (UCF and Russian) work on a variety of joint projects have taken them outside the boundaries of their classrooms and involved them in a discovery process about themselves and the other students with respect to language, culture, and society. The activities and examples presented and described below in Table 1 are based on the experiences of the two schools. Both schools use the principal of international project methodology. More on this may be found in Kourova (2013).

Table 1. Project Preparation and Overview

1. Discussing the project idea, problems, the goals of the projects	Both teachers presented the cultural information and the connection between cultures and explained what the students had to do.
2. Discussing specific activities	Both teachers presented specific information about the foreign educational system, geographical location, and cultural mores and gave the details of individual assignments.
3. Preparing for students' analysis of interaction	Both teachers prepared brainstorming activities for use during the project.
4. Encouraging students' independent communication and research	Both teachers encouraged and supported students' independent communication through e-mail and Skype, their work, and their research. Practicing face to face communication as preparation for individual activities occurred.
5. Supervising the students' progress	Both teachers consistently monitored students' progress during the project.
6. Evaluating mid-project progress	Both teachers and the students evaluated their project to that point in terms of strengths and weaknesses.
7. Preparing for the final Skype interaction	Both teachers helped students to develop the content and structure for the final semester Skype interaction.
8. Conducting the final Skype conference	Both teachers explained proper attire and demeanor to their students.
9. Assessing the project	Both teachers together with their students assessed learning outcomes.

Year one

The first year is called "Breaking down Barriers". This is the year when students from both countries get to know each other at personal, institutional, and cultural levels. Students exchange letters, e-mails, videos, and CDs including information about themselves, their hobbies, families, villages, subjects and educational systems at their schools as well as different aspects of their cultures. Parcels containing letters, gifts, and artifacts are exchanged. In their classes, students examine the contents of the parcel, discuss it, and express opinions. This process continues for

some time, as parcels are exchanged at least three times throughout the semester. This is then followed by an evaluation stage where students analyze and discuss what they have learned about each other and give short presentations.

Year two

In the second year of the project, students work on a multi-disciplinary range of subject-specific projects. In their classes, one of the most pioneering projects is students' work on the collection, translation, and writing of folktales from their local villages. Students engage in the research process as they interview older members of their local cultures and listen to folktales. Students compile these in the form of a booklet and also use them as a basis for creating their own original stories. Each participating school creates a book of both traditional stories and stories received from the other school as part of its permanent display of student work. A copy of this book is exchanged with the partner school. In the class, students analyze different aspects of the American traditional stories and identify areas of similarities and differences between them and the folktales sent from Russia.

Participating students also make drawings depicting different elements of their culture, such as festivals, architectural designs, clothes and jewelry, Russian and American customs and traditions. These are sent together with samples of a variety of artifacts that represent both Russia's and America's rich cultural heritages to the partner school. Participating in the project has also encouraged students to address some very important environmental issues such as climate change, recycling, and pollution through the medium of both the Russian and English languages. With the help of their teacher, students develop questionnaires including items they would like to investigate regarding the geography and environment of the partner school. Items cover areas related to climate, life style, and geographical and demographical features. Students' research results in the creation of a local school newspaper or a radio report that is broadcasted through local media venues.

Discussion and Conclusion

The main premise of this paper is to demonstrate, through the presentation of one example of a class project, how the teaching of English as a foreign language in Russia and teaching of Russian as a foreign Language in America can help students learn not only about other countries and their cultures, but also open their eyes to their own local culture and promote their sense of identity and pride in its rich cultural heritage. The present example of a join Russian-American class project describes how students can gradually develop an awareness of themselves and their own culture by being made to engage with a culture that is unfamiliar to them. In the process, students develop an understanding of the target culture and they develop positive attitudes toward the target culture. They learn that there are multiple ways of perceiving matters and understanding them and, most importantly, they learn that their views and those of their local culture have a large impact on their lives.

The literature detailed in the present paper outlined the connection between foreign language learning and identity construction and highlighted the inextricable relationship between the two. In this join Russian-American class project, learners are encouraged to play multiple and

different roles drawing on their varied and rich cultural backgrounds and experiences. In the process, students become aware of the context of their cultural experiences and engaging with another culture helps students make the connections to their own cultures conscious. In a similar vein, their foreign language learning experience and exposure to the target culture(s) helps them understand what it means to be part of a culture, be it their own local one, regional one, or the global culture at large.

An important benefit of enriching cultural experiences is that students develop the skills to do their own research on cultural topics. The level of student thought is enhanced by the experience of having to discover, analyze, and make judgments about cultural materials.

Project Connecting Classrooms helped students not only bridge the chasm between people separated by differences in cultural background and see what they have in common, but also brought them closer to the richness of the variety of their own local culture. It goes without saying that the onus is on teachers to help create atmospheres that encourage dialogue, curiosity, and openness in their classrooms.

Project Connecting Classrooms is an example of how interaction with target-language students can give students enriching opportunities that become part of the fabric of their cultural understanding. Right from the beginning, students develop friendships with their target culture peers and write to them explaining aspects related to their own cultures. In order to gather information, students engage in a search process in their local environments by doing activities that bring them closer to their culture and its rich heritage such as investigating museums and forts, seeking stories and legends, taking photographs, and making drawings.

Project Connecting Classrooms does not only benefit its participating students and teachers, but also benefits the whole local community by spreading greater social cohesion. Young people develop an understanding and appreciation for the “other” but also, and of equal importance, they become more aware of their own culture and their place in it.

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The results show that the students performed at least as well in the blended course as in the traditional POGIL course. Based on anecdotal evidence, blended learning did help students to adapt to a cooperative learning strategy. There appeared to be no student resistance to the teaching strategy in the blended course, and the perception problem sometimes observed in POGIL classes did not occur.

The blended POGIL classroom was more efficient and economical of face-to-face time than the traditional POGIL classroom. Time usually taken to address confusion and refocus students in a normal POGIL course was spent covering additional material. Teachers often complain that student-centered instruction is too time consuming and that not enough important material can be included in an active learning syllabus. The blended classroom appears to be, at least, a partial solution to this problem.

Many students become disengaged as they perceive active learning to be difficult and confusing. This is compounded by a common perception that science is dry, boring, and irrelevant to student's lives. The results of this study show that good student engagement can be maintained in a blended POGIL class.

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Bios

Dr. Alla Kourova graduated from Moscow State University. Her Ph.D. is in TESOL and Russian. She has thirty years of work experience in teaching ESL/RFL students in Russia, Britain, and America. In 2002, Dr. Kourova was a Fulbright scholar at the University of Montana sponsored by the American Council and Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs U.S. Department of States. She is the author of four textbooks and 20 articles focusing on ESL methodology. For many years Dr. Kourova has been a member of the National TESOL, AATSEEL. She has received several Awards of Excellence in American Studies from the American Council for ESL Teachers and the Peace Corps. In 2007 she was nominated teacher of the year in the 11th annual edition of "Who's Who among American Teachers", Vol.II. Her current research is based on cross-cultural components in teaching foreign language. Contact email: alla.kourova@ucf.edu



Dr. Doan Modianos received a Ph.D. in psychology from Texas Christian University. He has worked with a number of Russian universities on curriculum reform for twenty years. His experience in study abroad in Russia has led his professional interests to now focus upon developing students' intercultural competence. He is also interested in psychological correlates of cultural differences. Contact email: doan.modianos@ucf.edu