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DEVELOPING SOCIO-CULTURAL COMPETENCE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ON BASIS OF INTERACTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

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Abstract

The ability to successfully interact in business and every day communication has become one of the most important competences in the modern world. According to the requirements of the modern education standards in the Russian Federation this competence should be developed from the primary school and further on in secondary school and universities. However, most attention is paid to developing communicative skills rather than socio-cultural competence though it is an integral part of the communicative competence. There are different factors that contribute to lesser attention to socio-cultural skills when we speak about the teaching English as a foreign language. Among them are the absence of communication with the native speakers, a distanced country of the language studied, lots of drilling to develop grammar and written skills, low motivation to learn English as well as lack of time at the lesson. Any teacher who comes across these challenges draws the conclusion that the only way to teach socio-cultural skills is to use the technologies that in maximum would involve the students into the process or communication that will be close to the situation of the communication in the foreign language. Moreover, interaction is important if teachers want to involve all the students. The article proves that interactive technologies are most efficient when developing students' socio-cultural skills and competence in the course 'Area and Linguistic Studies' in Teachers Training University. The investigation was held using the method of the pilot training in the group of students in Naberezhnye Chelny Teachers Training University.

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Keywords: Area and Linguistic Studies, communication skills, interactive technologies, pilot training method, socio-cultural competence.

1. Introduction

The changes in the political, cultural, social spheres in modern Russia made it possible for a wide range of age and social groups to communicate with the representatives of the English-speaking countries. This involves not only the language proficiency but understanding and taking into account the culture of the interlocutor. Cross-cultural communication is what a Russian student should be ready for (Popova, Almazova, Khalyapina, & Tret'jakova, 2017; Zakharova & Krasnoschokov, 2016; Shipunova, Berezovskaya, Gashkova, & Ivanova, 2017).

These requirements of the modern world could not but be reflected in the modern education standards in the Russian Federation. Socio-cultural component while learning a foreign language is an integral part of the curricular at different education levels in Russia: starting from the primary school, later at secondary and high school and finally at the Universities the students are required to co-learn languages and cultures (Approximate Basic Education Program of the Secondary Education, 2015; Federal State Education Standard of the Secondary education, 2017; Federal State Education Standard of higher education for the students seeking the bachelor degree in 44.03.05 Pedagogical Education, 2017). It seems to be logical because learning a foreign language is not only memorizing words and drilling grammar, communication skills are most vital (Murphy, 1996; Neuner, 2008). If a student knows the words he can combine them many times but that does not guarantee efficient communication if he does not know what to choose at the first meeting in a formal situation: 'Nice to meet you!', 'How do you do!' or which way to greet people at 5 o clock: 'Good afternoon' or 'Good evening'. So, teachers should pay more attention to speech etiquette and background knowledge, but usually they come across several obstacles. Among them are lack of time during the class activities, lots of drilling, students who sometimes fall behind, lack of socio-cultural material in the textbooks, etc. Sooner or later the teacher comes to conclusion that he needs to apply new technologies and teaching techniques otherwise he would sink in the number of information he should cover with the students.

2. Problem Statement

Most of the countries in the world underline the importance of the effective international contacts and the so-called 'culture dialogue'. That can become possible only in case people got the communicative linguistic competence including such aspects as language proficiency, knowledge of the cultural peculiarities of the other country, etiquette norms and socio-cultural skills. Modern educational standards of the Russian Federation also demand the co-study of the languages and cultures, that supposes the formation of the culture knowledge of the studied country as well as the development of the socio-cultural skills. The problem still lies in the teaching techniques to be chosen when developing socio-cultural skills, the choice of the authentic educational means for those purposes (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Moreover, socio-cultural skills remain one of the most difficult to be tested, as most effectively they might be evaluated in real communication only.

3. Research Questions

An intending teacher has got a multiple task. He should be knowledgeable about the State standards created for school and develop his own socio-cultural skills. Among the conditions created for the students

in the system of higher pedagogical education one can mention several disciplines in the curriculum aimed at the development of the socio-cultural competence. Two of them are 'Practical course of the written and spoken English' and a special discipline 'Area and linguistic studies'. The least is a lecture-seminar course the main objective of which is for the students to get a system of knowledge about the English-speaking countries as well as develop their socio-cultural skills.

The conducted investigation based upon the pilot-training method took place in Naberezhnye Chelny Teachers Training University within the group of the students of the second course who work for their bachelor degree in education in two profiles: 'Native language and its literature' (Tatar) and 'Foreign language' (English). All these students are bi-lingual speaking equally their native Tatar language and the Russian language. Most of them have never been abroad and are quite limited in their cross-cultural communication with the native speakers. Most of their contacts are limited to Facebook, e-mail and other forms of on-line communication.

Thus, the research questions include

1) Education content (as there is great amount of sources that contain information about the English-speaking countries and their culture),

2) The choice of the teaching methods and techniques to develop socio-cultural skills (that is even more important, taking onto account students' individual, cultural peculiarities and education needs).

3) The efficiency of the methods and technologies chosen for these particular students group.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to work out a system of the interactive methods and techniques to develop university students' socio-cultural competence and prove their efficiency by the pilot training research method.

5. Research Methods

The study was held on the basis of the pilot training method. It is one of the empirical methods of study based mostly on the intuition of a teacher and his professional skills when he makes a hypothesis and further checks it in his teaching practice. This experience is to confirm or deny a teacher's supposition aimed at improving the education process (as well as the process of teaching a foreign language) (Azimov & Tschukin, 2009). As a rule such a pilot training is held in four logical stages including

1) Organizational stage, that is a stage of developing the hypothesis, working out the study programme and choosing the participants;

2) Implementation stage, that is training itself using the new suggested technologies or techniques;

3) Findings is the analysis of the pilot training results, comparing them with the hypothesis made;

4) Interpretation stage, that is an attempt to explain the results of the training.

6. Findings

The Russian, European and American scientists distinguish a number of the components in the contents of the communicative competence. According to the European researchers the communicative

competence includes such components as socio-cultural, strategic, discursive, linguistic, socio-linguistic and social competences (De Angelis, Jessner, & Kresic, 2015). The Russian methodologists define linguistic, compensatory, educational-cognitive, socio-cultural and speech competences as the components of the communicative one (Annenkova, 2010; Safina, 2013).

The representatives of the socio-cultural approach find the socio-cultural component of the communicative competence the most important one (Valdes, 1986; Harrison, 1990; Safonova, 1996). The socio-cultural competence is complicated in its contents.

According to the opinion of Safonova (1996), who is a founder of the socio-cultural approach in Russia, socio-cultural competence is the skills to use knowledge about different types of civilizations and cultures, ability to distinguish socio-cultural peculiarities and culture facts, skills to adequately interpret culture phenomena, as well as skills to use these points aiming at choosing definite interaction strategies in different forms of intercultural communication.

Thus, following the opinion of Sysoev (2001) socio-cultural competence includes four components:

1) Socio-cultural knowledge (including information about the studied country, moral values, culture and traditions),
2) Communication experience,
3) Linguistic skills,
4) Personal attitude to cultural phenomena.

No doubt, when developing the students' socio-cultural components all these components should be raised equally (Hanks, 2017). Logically, every component requires its own teaching methods and strategies. 'Area and Cultural Studies' is a lecture-seminar course, it was decided to hold both lectures and seminars in the interactive form. The first, the third and the fourth components were formed at the lectures that were organized as problem ones. For instance, the lecture on topic 'The English language in its variety and development' the lecturer in accordance with the structure of the problematic lecture 1) created the problem situation, 2) together with the students divided it into several educational objectives, formulated hypothesis, 3) checking the hypothesis, 4) finding arguments to support the found solution, 5) making findings, 6) coming to new contradiction, prospects of developing the topic, 7) students' questions as feedback to monitor the students' mental activity and the right understanding. The most important task of the teacher at such lecture is to set the right task and monitor the students' activity. For the lecture mentioned above the problem task was set in the following way: the lecturer showed a video in which the girl was speaking English but with some dialect (Cockney – it was unknown for the students), the students at the lecture were to discover her accent, her origin and social status and answer the question if they are going to give her a job of a secretary if they were employees in an English business company.

Seminar classes have wider opportunities to develop the socio-cultural competence and all the four components that enter its contents. Among the teaching interactive methods such types of the seminar classes were chosen: a conference-seminar, a jigsaw seminar and a case-study seminar.

At the conference seminar the students get ready with the reports on different topics, such as 'Native Americans: their fate and culture', 'Why a cowboy is not a shepherd?', 'The Roots of the women's

emancipation in the USA', etc. Further on, they discuss the main or the most interesting points of the reports, that makes the seminar interactive.

The idea of the jigsaw-seminar is taken from the interactive technology of 'Cooperative learning' (Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Johnson & Johnson, 1994) and is about organizing discussion on the chosen topics in small groups. Students study 4-6 topics for the seminar, though one question should be studied properly so that a student becomes an expert in it. Then at the seminar students form groups of 4-6 (depending on the number of the issues to discuss) and the students are to make notes on the topic they did not study listening to the 'expert'. The teacher plays the role of the monitor and a consultant (if necessary). Finally the discussed issues are presented by the students who were not originally experts in these issues, the teacher assesses both the work of the expert and the presenter of the issue. In this way students have an intensive study of the issues and feel responsibility for their groupmates' results at the seminar.

The case-study seminar is based upon the technology of analyzing particular life situations in groups (Garvin, 2003; Palmer, 2015). This method is extremely effective when developing communication experience as an integral part of the socio-cultural competence. In the process of solving a real life problem the students have to apply the knowledge they already have and use the new one if required getting the information from different sources. Besides, the situation suggested usually has different solutions, so the results of the same case may differ from group to group (Ellet, 2007). For example, the case suggested for the students for the seminar on topic 'Business culture in Great Britain' was about the right behaviour and etiquette peculiarities during a business meeting in Great Britain. The students had to remember the etiquette rules on greetings in business situations, forms of address to people, appropriate clothes and gestures, they were also to get additional information about the attitude towards time and punctuality in the English business world, business lunches, presents and other appropriate and inappropriate things in formal situations.

The conducted investigation took place in the group of 29 second-year students (27 female, 2 male) in Naberezhnye Chelny Teachers Training University, Naberezhnye Chelny, Russia. The course 'Area and Linguistic Studies' that they had during the second term included 16 academic hours of lectures and 34 hours of practical classes. In accordance with the chosen research method, that is pilot training, the investigation had the following stages:

1) Organizational stage is a stage when the participants were chosen, the study programme worked out and the hypothesis developed. The hypothesis is that interactive methods used at the lectures and seminars contribute to developing socio-cultural competence even in the groups of the students with limited possibilities for international communication. One more important objective of this stage was to evaluate the level of the socio-cultural competence of the participants that was to reflect all the components in its contents, these are socio-cultural knowledge, communication skills, linguistic skills and personal attitude to cultural phenomenon. The students' results and their level of socio-cultural skills are presented in the bar graph below. Methods used to evaluate every aspect included tests, written papers and oral communication.
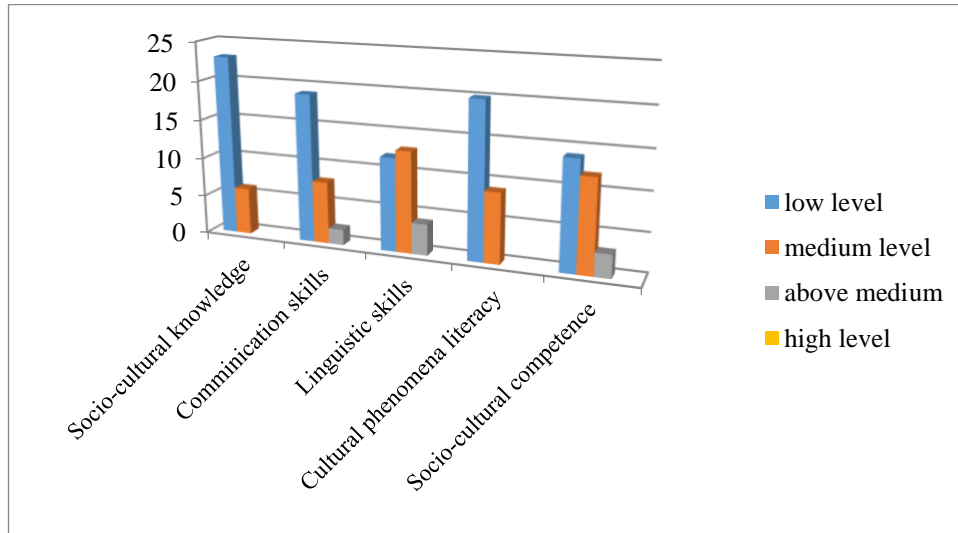
Figure 01. The number of the students showing different levels of socio-cultural competence and its components at the organizational stage of the pilot training

2) The implementation stage was aimed at implementing the chosen interactive lectures and seminars;

3) At the stage of the Findings the analysis of the pilot training results showed that the hypothesis confirmed itself in most of the aspects. The data of the stage are presented by the following bar graph:
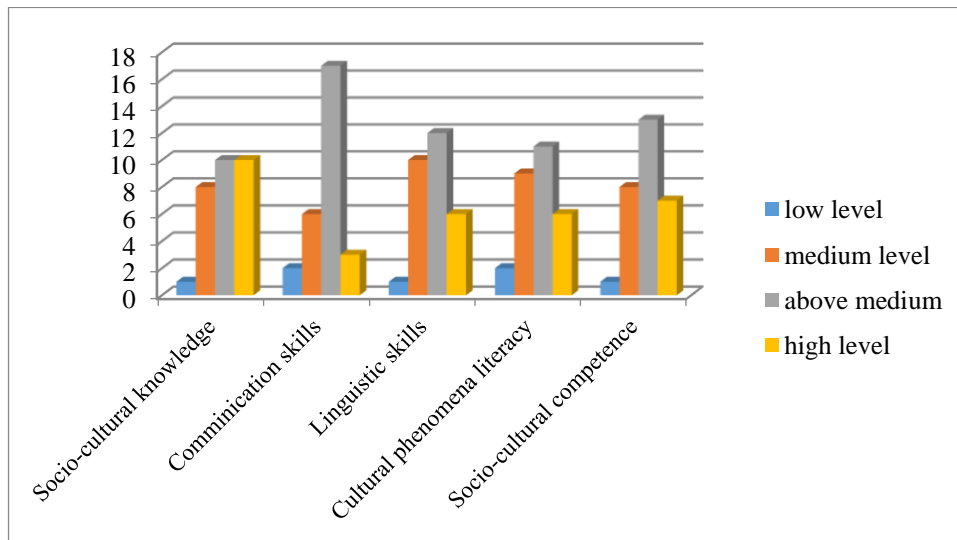

Figure 02. Students' level of the socio-cultural competence and its components at the findings level of the pilot training

4) Comparison of the received data at the previous stages made it possible to confirm the hypothesis that interactive forms of the lectures and seminar classes contribute to developing the socio-cultural competence.
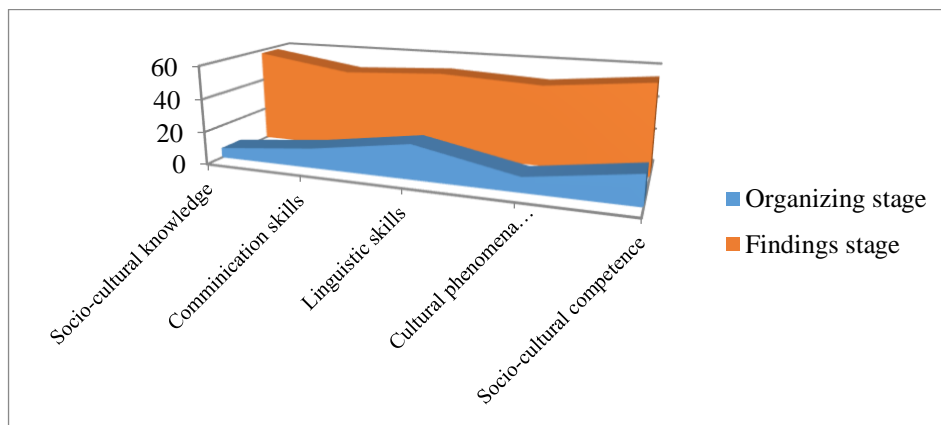
Figure 03. Comparative data of the organizing and findings stages of the pilot training

7. Conclusion

The implemented system of the interactive methods and the pilot training made it possible to make the following conclusions:

- socio-cultural competence development enters the obligatory requirements of the standards of the secondary and higher education in Russia, so it is vital to pay greater attention to its development at school and universities;
- when dealing with the group of students with the limited cross-cultural communication it is preferable to use interactive forms of organizing the lectures and seminar classes;

The developed system of the interactive problematic lectures, discussion and case-study based seminars, jigsaw seminars proved to be effective in the group of bi-lingual students with a medium level of the linguistic competence.

Acknowledgments

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