The Methodology of Intercultural Competence Development on the Basis of a Cognitive Style-inclusive Approach

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Abstract

The author's view of the problem consists in the integration of cognitive, learner-centered and intercultural approaches to teaching intercultural communication. The paper shows that cognitive style is involved in the picture of the world's formation. The analysis of the intercultural communication phenomenon from the position of cognitive science reveals that one of the most essential conditions for effective intercultural communication is the cognitive readiness for intercultural communication that comprises of cognitive and communicative abilities to participate in the intercultural dialogue and can be improved by the development of a wider range of cognitive strategies utilized by a person in the learning process.

1. Introduction

In recent years, many research papers and manuscripts have been published on the implementation of cognitive style theory into the foreign language teaching process. The emphasis was put on learning strategies as the demonstration of the learner's cognitive style which should be taken into consideration to practice individualized modes of teaching and introduce differentiation in teaching foreign languages (e.g., Avdeeva, 2005; Chechik, 2005; Dornyei, 2005; Ehrman, Leaver, & Oxford, 2003; Ginnis, 2002; Liver, 2000; Riding, 2002; Zhirnova, 2011). While researchers stress the importance of allowing for learners' cognitive styles, the methodologies providing each student

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with assignments according to their styles were not widely adopted, as they require a special teacher training and psychological follow-up.

Moreover the research conducted by the author of the paper has revealed that the cognitive style also determines the communicant's perception of another culture, thus influencing the effectiveness of the intercultural communication process which can be constrained by such cognitive parameters as stereotypes, rigidity, intolerance to unrealistic experience, concrete conceptualization, etc. (Obdalova, Soboleva, Nayman, 2013). Conventional intercultural competence training methodologies appear to lack the theoretical and empirical bases to acknowledge the important role played by the cognitive processes in intercultural communication.

The aim of the paper is to consider the relationship between cognitive style and intercultural communication performance and to suggest some practical ways in which foreign language teachers can adopt students' cognitive strategies in the teaching process to develop intercultural communication skills more effectively.

2. Cognitive dimension of intercultural communication

Besides the individual's perception of reality being determined by his background, prior experience, personal interests, education, needs and other personal characteristics, it is shaped by the process of an active interaction of an individual with the surrounding cultural and social environment. The impact of a cultural aspect on perception is particularly apparent when it comes to communication between people from different cultures. This is due to the fact that, when interacting and communicating with each other, people from different cultures take different perceptual experience as a premise. Thus, in monocultural communication the link between background and new experience serves as a cognitive basis for establishing cohesion between them, allowing to avoid fails in communication, while the incongruity of individuals' cognitive structures often leads to misunderstanding and intercultural conflicts in intercultural interaction.

On perceiving the outside world our brain actively constitutes meanings, filling information gaps on the basis of prior knowledge and assumptions. The dominant aspect of perception that influences the expectations and affective evaluation is causal attribution or the process by which individuals explain the causes of behavior and events. Though the process of attribution participates in human's analysis of diverse social phenomena in the interpersonal communication theory, the emphasis is put on the behavior of a partner in communication. According to Sadokhin (Sadokhin, 2005), the perception of a partner in communication performs by way of "reading" his inner world and personal characteristics with the help of some external signals, mainly nonverbal and paraverbal, effective evaluation, undertaking an attempt to understand the logic of his thinking and behaviour and basing your future performance on the knowledge derived. Research has revealed that people tend to overvalue dispositional or personality-based explanations for behavior while undervaluing situational explanations. This phenomenon is referred to as the fundamental attribution error. Thus people tend to attribute their own aberrant actions to the situation and others aberrant actions to their personality. Research by Elizarova (Elizarova, 2001) proved that the attribution in the process of intercultural communication can lead to interpreting events and the behaviour of people from different cultures on the basis of their own cultural categories. When meeting representatives of other peoples and cultures, people usually have a natural disposition to perceive their behaviour from the position of their own culture, leading to a distorted interpretation. This determines the main psychological difference between intercultural communication and communication within one culture when attributing own categories doesn't impede but promotes communication.

Attribution is closely connected with the process of socialization. It stems from social interaction and is based on the cognitive process of categorization as the causes of behavior are often explained based on a person's professional, gender, ethnic and other identity. Categorization is the process in which ideas and objects are recognized, differentiated and understood. Scientists prove that people are unable to analyze new stimulus and new situations every time in a new way and thus perform a unique reaction at a wide range of segmental and separated elements. The input information coming from the outer world is systematized and arranged by a human in the most favoured way on the basis of breaking up the surrounding things, people, events, relations and phenomena into relative groups, classes, types or categories. Facets of the process include information selection and transformation, decision making, generating hypotheses and making meaning from information and experiences. Within one

linguistic community, according to Khaleeva (Khaleeva, 1986), there is a common way of the world's categorization for each member.

When people from one culture interpret the behavior of people from another culture, the causal attribution to a large extent depends upon stereotypical representations of both parties about the way of life, customs, traditions, habits shared by the culture members. Stereotyping refers to the process of constructing new images and concepts based upon existing stable representation. Stereotypes represent generalized ideas about typical features which are characteristic for some people or its culture. They are based on mental representations of different people categories that emphasize the similarity between them and ignore differences. In intercultural communication stereotypical representations play a significant role. In spite of validity or invalidity, truth or falsity of stereotypes, all of them are an integral element of any culture and by its very existence, they influence the behavior of people at their international contacts.

In view of the above, it can be concluded that the development of intercultural competence when teaching foreign language requires considering the differences in cognitive structures of language learners as the subjects of speech activity.

3. Cognitive diversity and intercultural communication

Cognitive behavior is determined to a large extent by a learners' cognitive style, referred to as a complicated construct that characterizes the individual's particular mindset that correlates to different psychological characteristics of an individual. It is related to mental behaviour that individuals apply when solving problems influencing attitudes, values and social interaction. We adhere to the research that treat cognitive style as a bipolar concept, meaning that learners can be found on a continuum of two opposing characteristics which does not appear to be related to intelligence and reflects qualitative rather than quantitative differences between individuals in their thinking processes.

Performing in the world, a person depends on his interpretation of it. In this case it is not a fact, but its interpretation that makes difference. In this regard psychologists say that a person constructs or creates the world. During his life an individual works out an integrate system of constructs that help him to compare phenomena and processes of the objective world. For every person this comparison will be performed on a different basis. Hence a construct directs the analysis of the information perceived. Since every person, while constructing the image of the world, constitutes his own category system that describes this world, of greater importance is the categorical control of evaluation and judgment that is determined by such characteristics of cognitive behavior as differentiation and abstraction in concept formation, analysis-synthesis, category breadth, cognitive complexity or simplicity. In accordance with these parameters in the process of perception, some people focus on differences between objects and notions, make their judgments based upon wide categories, interpret a situation with the assistance of a wide range of concepts and the rules of their comparison and combination, while others are apt to apply narrow categories, emphasize mainly distinctive features of the same objects and concepts and interpret the surroundings poorly relying on their notional experience.

For Kholodnaya (Kholodnaya, 2001), the application of wide categories and abstraction in concept formation in relation to some topical areas speaks for the maturity of categorical control and is typical for the creative mode of intellectual activity. In general, progressing differentiation and integration of cognitive experience constitutes the basis for cognitive development. Ultimately the difference between abstraction and differentiation lies in an individual's variations depending on a stimulus that is the degree of a person's ability to ignore physical characteristics of affecting stimulus in comprehending and perceiving a situation. Higher abstraction of the concept system indicates the ability of a person to go beyond the limits of obvious perception and perceive the world from the position of more distant, temporary, semantic and conceptual points. On this ground we can draw the conclusion about the necessity of high abstraction level for the effectiveness of intercultural communication as it is determined by the width of alternative schemes for object perception and the rejection of stereotypical judgments on the basis of higher ability to inward concept transformations.

Intercultural competence development is also closely connected with the number of concepts in a person's mental experience. People characterized by cognitive complexity perceive the world in a multivariate way, in all its

manifestations, contrasts and shades, while cognitive, simple people possess a white and black perception and are not able to adapt to the real life contradictions. It becomes clear that the cognitive style "cognitive simplicity-cognitive complexity" is also responsible for some frame of world perception, determining the style of cognition and the way a person performs in a multicultural environment.

This parameter is lined with the cognitive style "scanning-focusing control" that refers to individual differences in a person's attention organization on being confronted with difficulties. The lack of this style parameter can lead to the effect of centration at the level of events comprehension by way of sticking to the only probable point of view, a biased judgment of another person, a "black-and-white" perception of the situation. These can lead to perceptual deformation, while focused and large-scale attention results in experience clarity and a wide range of awareness.

Since the process of intercultural communication is associated with overcoming stereotypes, cognitive parameters of tolerance – intolerance to unrealistic experience and rigidity – flexibility of cognitive control hold great importance as they are responsible for individual differences in ways of organizing his perception. Also, parameter rigidity – flexibility of cognitive control is essential in the learning process, because it characterizes the immunity of an individual in the process of switching to other types of activities and methods in accordance with the objective requirements and evaluated by the speed and accuracy of critical tasks (Gardner et al., 1959).

Finally, field dependence – field independence dimension characterized as the ability to distinguish key elements from a distracting and confusing background has an important application to the intercultural communication development. It is considered to be through stylistic characteristic that affects not only cognitive organization but also the communication style and interpersonal interaction (Libin, 1999). Since the style characteristic of field dependence – field independence indicates the degree of differentiation of the perceptual field, affects self-identity and the nature of the interaction with people, the tendency of the student to a particular pole will affect the success of communication in the situations of intercultural interaction. Field dependent people are unable to differentiate the necessary information from the "background", they depend on the situation; have unregimented ideas about themselves and the world. Field-independent people can easily differentiate relevant information from irrelevant, do not depend on the external situation and views, and have differentiated ideas about themselves and the world.

Based on the analysis of relevant psychological and pedagogical studies in cognitive styles and on the assumption of application cognitive styles to teaching and training foreign languages in higher education, we believe we can theoretically combine the characteristics of cognitive style into two groups based on the specifics of an individual's stylistic behavior in terms of intercultural foreign language communication. The first group, that we refer to as basic cognitive styles, encompasses cognitive style parameters that are most conducive to the development of intercultural communicative competence and hence to the person's performance in a multicultural foreign environment. These include field independence, analysis, wide categories, cognitive complexity, tolerance to unrealistic experiences, flexibility of cognitive control, abstraction and scanning. The second group consists of stylistic properties, hindering the perception and understanding of the cultural context: field dependence, narrow categories, differentiation, cognitive simplicity, intolerance to unrealistic experience, cognitive rigidity, synthesis, focusing. Submitted groups of cognitive style parameters reflect intercultural settings of perception and comprehension of the intercultural communication context and assign the basic vectors of the cognition by a person of own nature and the surrounding world.

We suggest that the stylistic parameters assigned to the first group determine the degree of flexibility of cognitive organization and the openness of the cognitive position which result in maximum efficiency of cognitive activity of an individual in the process of developing a foreign language competence and acquiring intercultural communication skills. The need to develop the student's personality in all the above parameters requires the development of a special personal quality that characterizes value, conscious attitude to intercultural communication as a way of understanding the world, to its goals and objectives, processes and outcome. In this respect, we consider it necessary to introduce the concept of cognitive readiness for intercultural communication, which reflects the cognitive parameters of individual's abilities to interact in the context of intercultural dialogue. We believe that it is the quality of the individual that is essential to the success of the intercultural competence development process.

4. Application to teaching and training

Cognitive styles in the educational process manifest themselves in certain approaches to solving problems or performing tasks applied by the students, as well as in the way of processing foreign language information. In the methodology, the ways of organizing cognitive activity are referred to as the strategies. The Oxford Dictionary defines strategies as specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use – often consciously – to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the second language (Oxford Dictionary, 1990). Most researchers recognize that students should get assistance in acquiring new strategies. Though it is time and energy consuming, it is of great importance for developing students' ability of self-control and self-correction and promoting the success of the academic development and a positive result of their study. The expanding set of strategies, used by the student, along with a number of other characteristics, will testify upon the development of cognitive readiness for intercultural communication. The teacher's task lies in developing the student's flexibility in using different strategies, switching from one activity to another, learning to apply certain strategies according to the situation.

The organization of foreign language teaching, taking into account the cognitive style dimensions of the student's personality and cognitive aspects of learning, involves the implementation of a specially developed set of tasks and activities, focused on the integration of various components of intercultural competence into the educational process (Obdalova, & Soboleva, 2013). Activities aimed at developing cognitive readiness within a particular lexical grammatical and socio-cultural topic should provide the actualization of all stylistic characteristics and the involvement of various modalities of the perceptual experience in the learning process (sensory, visual, auditory, kinesthetic) as well as work with certain cultural concepts and their attributes, and editing links with other concepts. Moreover, since the cognitive style is characterized by the bipolar manifestation of its characteristics, some of which contribute to the success of individual's participation in intercultural dialogue, while others impede it, the development of cognitive readiness for intercultural communication should involve teaching students to apply cognitive strategies related to basic cognitive styles, that contribute to the effectiveness of intercultural communication. When a student acquires new ways of perceiving and processing foreign language information besides those that are characteristic of his intrinsic cognitive styles, a set of strategies used by a student enlarges and cognitive style gets mobile, thus contributing to the cognitive readiness for intercultural communication.

It is necessary to consider the fact that "there is a style where there is freedom of self-expression; it is connected with the goals and motives, and it's determined both by the external conditions and inner possibilities of a personality" (Shkuratova, 1994), so one of the basic conditions for cognitive readiness development is a variation of content, types and forms of educational activities aimed at the development of various stylistic parameters. The development of cognitive readiness for intercultural communication, aimed at different groups of strategies, performs as a cycle consisting of three stages, each of which provides the involvement of a specific set of strategies: ways of perception and organization of foreign language information, strategies of analyzing and processing foreign language information and objective ways of interpretation and critical evaluation from the perspective of intercultural dialogue (Fig. 1).

Fig.1. The cycle of cognitive readiness for intercultural communication development

We recommend arranging the development of intercultural skills within one topical module in accordance with the allocated stages of development of cognitive readiness for intercultural communication. These stages should correspond to the steps of communicative competence development, adopted in modern methodology: introduction of a new material – practice – using it in speech (Solovova, 2010). These steps are not new in teaching foreign languages and we also apply this productive way of the educational process organization. However, we have linked these steps with the stages of personality cognitive dimension development based on the account of students' cognitive style characteristics, and developed the system of communicative activities that are to be applied at each stage. This approach to the development of foreign language skills is essential for intercultural communication and provides gradual internalization and the development of different cognitive style characteristics in accordance with the steps of communicative competence development.

In accordance with the principles underlying our methodology a teacher must provide the optimum correlation between different cognitive strategies used by students in solving a variety of communicative tasks at each stage. A communicative task is referred to as a problem that requires the use of verbal and/or nonverbal action to achieve a particular purpose in a particular communicative situation. A communicative task must be set in such a way that it clarifies the purpose of communication (communicative intention) and serves as a springboard for communication. Moreover, a communicative task also serves as a way of facilitating students to use certain strategies: compile, organize, rank, comment, compare, contrast, etc. Thus, the development of communicative competence allows for a cognitive stylistic approach a communicative task performs a determining factor of the process, as it directs the use of strategy as well as the process of solving the problem in general?? Doesn't make any sense. Adequately set, a communicative task determines the success of the development of students' cognitive readiness to intercultural communication as a communicative task implicitly suggests the strategy for its performing, which requires activation of specific cognitive parameters. The variety of communicative tasks are designed to activate various strategies and techniques that focus on the formation of concepts, ability to find relevant information, ability transform the information from one form into another (for example from text to the diagram), ability to prove your point of view, etc.

The table below illustrates the examples of communicative tasks aimed at involving different cognitive strategies.

Table 1. The examples of a communicative task aimed at the development of different cognitive strategies

Cognitive strategies	Communicative tasks
generalization	- scan the article/text to find the main idea
	- listen to the text and choose the title, that characterizes it
abstraction	- scan the article/text to find the information about…/and answer the questions below
synthesis	- make up the story using the words from the box
	- listen to the text and match the jumbled pieces of the typescript
hypothesis	- guess the meaning of the words from the context
	- considering the title of the text predict the topics it will cover
analysis	- read several speakers' opinions on some issue and tell whose opinion you adhere
	- find the mistakes
	- match the words and their synonyms
comparison	- compare and contrast
	- scan the texts and find the differences between…
identification	- compare and find similarities
	- scan the texts and find what is common between …
classification	- read the words in box and divide them in the following groups:…

ranging	- arrange in the correct order
mapping	- draw the framework of the text
	-compose the structure of the dialogue

The cycle of cognitive readiness for intercultural competence development allows, on the one hand, ensuring differentiation of tasks thus creating favorable conditions for foreign language acquisition by students with different stylistic preferences and peculiarities of ways to form the picture of the world. On the other hand, it provides the conditions for the increase in the number of strategies applied by students in learning practice, and consequently influences the effectiveness of foreign language training.

5. Conclusion

In the process of intercultural competence it is essential to provide a sequential development of basic cognitive styles essential for successful intercultural communication, even if initially these styles are not typical for the student. Such organization of the educational process allows students not only to master their communicative abilities, but also to gain the experience in managing their cogitative process in terms of solving communicative problems in intercultural interaction. Cognitive readiness for intercultural communication is concerned with both operational and affective levels of cognitive structure of a student that provides psychological preparedness to interact with people from other cultures, to overcome stereotypes and that expands their world view through acquisition and embracing other norms, cultural values, customs, etc.

Sequential acquisition of cognitive strategies is ensured by providing students with variable tasks aimed at practicing the same lexical, grammatical, social and cultural material from different perspectives that allows the implementation of the principles of individualization and differentiation to the educational process. The variation in styles involved in task performance is achieved by changing the external conditions with no variation in the subject of speech and by varying the degree of task specification. Accounting for cognitive styles is achieved by differences in the formulation of communicative tasks at different stages, providing a complex interaction of different cognitive strategies. Communicative tasks implicitly include instructions to use certain strategies needed for assignments accomplishment. In addition it's important to ensure multisensory perception at all stages and cooperation of students with different cognitive styles.

The methodology based on the development of students' cognitive strategies contributes to the development of their gnostic and metacognitive experience and facilitates the development of intercultural communication ability.

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