ENHANCING INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

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Summary. The article analyzes the essence and content of terms «intercultural communicative competence», «cultural awareness», «critical cultural awareness», the ways of efficient developing critical cultural awareness when learning foreign language by means of information and communication technology.

Key words: intercultural communication, intercultural communicative competence, critical cultural awareness, foreign language online learning, information and communication technology.

In the new area of digital media, society faces profound challenges to the traditional ways of human interaction. Online communication is provided through highly interconnected and complex digital environment. The media of human interaction affects various forms and content of information exchanged between people of different cultures as well as the way people understand each other. In addition, new media creates prerequisites for developing new culture that, on the other hand, may create controversy with traditional values of society. That will cause obstacles for mutual understanding between generations even of the same culture. The situation will require constructing new cultural models and rearranging old ones, changing their behavioral patterns in communication within and outside their community, in particular, members of other cultures. The ways of adopting to new conditions and gaining effective communication for people of various ethnic and cultural groups appear to be a considerable challenge for daily interaction activities to overcome as well as scholars for future research. That in confirmed by growing number of scientists and investigation works [1], [15].

Nowadays development of education in the course of modern national and global social transformations requires strong emphasis on enhancing cultural understanding. In the context of complex human knowledge, effective combination of language teaching and culture education are inherent components of that phenomenon. Language skills and cultural comprehension are essential elements of security, defense as well as economic prosperity of the country [7].

Modern research emphasizes the important role of socio-cultural context in the study of a foreign language, as well as the need to model social interaction for the development of intercultural communicative competence. Analysis of foreign
language learning process often uses concepts such as intercultural dimension, cultural competence, intercultural communicative competence, and such analysis always emphasizes the importance of understanding other cultures and acquiring cultural communication skills when learning a foreign language. According to Hains, the interpretation of intercultural communication focuses on the ability of individuals to communicate with representatives of other cultures, ethnic groups, languages and those who share other values [8]. Meyer views intercultural communication as part of foreign language competence and the ability of people to act appropriately and flexibly in response to the actions, expectations and attitudes of other cultures [13].

It is essential for language learners to be aware of the individuals’ and groups’ state of mind in the country of the language learned [17]. Cultural awareness includes essential components: an internal sense of cultural equality, positive attitude toward diversity and interaction of cultures, a developed comprehension of one's own and other people's cultures. Enhanced cultural awareness fosters broadening learner’s mind, cultivating tolerance and cultural empathy [19]. In their studies, Tomalin and Stempleski outline three components of cultural awareness: awareness of one's own and others' behavior stipulated by culture, ability to explain personal cultural views [18].

Learning foreign language cannot be effective without developing communicative skills while efficiently interacting with representatives of other cultures. In the meantime, few research works provided detailed description of procedure itself aimed at constructing critical cultural awareness in a classroom when learning foreign language. Byram defines critical culture awareness as “an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” [2]. Learners acquire skills, which enable them to communicate locally and globally through high level of understanding and cultural awareness. When learning foreign language, students can enhance their critical cultural awareness, advance their assessment skills, correlate material learned and real-world issues ([11], [14]), develop experience by exploring critical thinking skills thus exercising intellectual abilities while learning foreign language [14].

In the modern digital environment with enhanced information technology, globalization many countries are increasingly mutually dependent. There is a wide variety of possibilities for students to access a wide range of cultural resources and apply them in the best way. Natural real-time communication with foreign language speakers is another advantage of online environment. The real issue here is teacher’s abilities of combining language and culture teaching in the most efficient way [9].

Effective communicative interaction requires mastery of communicative competence, i.e. the presence of several types of communicators’ common knowledge. Its components are, firstly, knowledge of the actual system of symbols which provide communication, and, secondly, knowledge of the surrounding world construction. Perceptions of the world consist of personal experience, fundamental knowledge of the world common to all people, and other knowledge due to different ethnic, social, national, religious, professional and other human groups. Developing intercultural communicative competence, which includes critical cultural awareness,
is provided through arranging learning conditions for students allowing them to exercise correlation between learning content and real-world problems. Modern researchers of foreign language learning process consider intercultural communicative competence as an essential prerequisite of efficient intercultural interaction [5], [11], [16].

Intercultural learning at the foreign language classes based on intercultural communicative competence provides students with the skills of meaningful interactions with the representatives of other cultures applying knowledge, attitudes, and experience providing efficient intercultural communication [2], [5]. The issue of intercultural communicative competence primarily concerns with training learners to properly and efficiently interact with representatives of various backgrounds, worldviews, and linguistic systems [2], [5], [16]. For gaining experience of intercultural interaction, students should be encouraged to reflect on their own ideas about another culture issues [2], [5], [12]. Later on students can develop their intercultural skills to participate in reciprocal relationships with people of diverse cultures on the basis of students’ attitudes and knowledge [2].

Byram emphasizes the role of critical cultural awareness in the context of intercultural communicative competence [2]. He views critical cultural awareness as “an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries”. One of the ways to enhance critical cultural awareness in the course of intercultural learning using foreign language is practicing critical evaluation skills. Elaborating such high-level skills requires proper forms and methods of learning, which enable students to assess all prerequisites of the culture in focus.

The procedure of constructing critical cultural awareness is identifying and analyzing ideas, beliefs, and opinions concerning representatives of another culture. This activity will provide comprehensive students’ judgment of their own ideas during intercultural conversation. Developing critical cultural awareness while learning foreign language will enable students to analyze events from various standpoints; examine the structure of cultures, personalities, and knowledge; define the backgrounds and consequences of various values, views, ideas, perceptions; correlate local and worldwide scope, question any ideas regarding surrounding world, events, and people. While enhancing critical awareness, foreign language learners should consider new values and beliefs on the basis of facts discovered during research process. This form of intercultural learning is presented as cooperative investigation where students work together to control the direction of their learning with the teacher operating as a guide throughout the process of discovery [6], [10], [11].

The teacher shouldn’t impose personal point of view but create an environment of inquiry allowing students to discover backgrounds of judgments or stereotypes independently [4]. The key task foreign language teachers is to support communication with other cultures and overcome such barriers as personal stereotypes.

Students’ research activities provide them with new knowledge as a part of intercultural communicative competence. It enables them to convincingly substantiate their beliefs concerning foreign language culture. That will lead to
changing learners' beliefs and deepening understanding of foreign culture [2], [5]. Developing communicative cultural awareness finalizes with creating simulated or real opportunities of interactions with representatives of various cultural worldviews and backgrounds. Thus, learners can communicate their ideas with people of possibly other backgrounds and beliefs. In other words, foreign language learners should be encouraged to enhance their foreign language skills comprehending in the meantime the impact of other languages and cultures on national traditions. The elaborated experience of analyzing dynamics of foreign cultures can be of great use for researching various tendencies of national culture. In addition, students should be encouraged to explore correlation between language and person's identity [3]. Learners who are able to assess their own personal transformation while studying foreign language and culture, will efficiently analyze the effect of foreign language and culture on other personalities.

Conclusion.

Nowadays learning foreign language increasingly gets enriched with intercultural component which induces students' awareness of inherent interdependence between language and culture. Linguistic and cultural education are naturally integrated with one other. Intercultural dimension of language teaching has a substantial influence on its methods, forms, and learning content. The focus on developing intercultural competence and its components forces students and teachers to deal with profound changes in today's foreign language education.

References: