

Multicultural Education of Multi-Ethnic Students at the Foreign Language Class

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ABSTRACT

The relevance of the problems stated in the article is determined by the fact that with the expansion of relations between the nations all over the world, the problems caused by misunderstanding, religion differences, and lack of cultural tolerance, have become more vital than ever. In this regard, this article is aimed at studying the conditions of teaching university students to live and communicate successfully in the multicultural world. The authors of the article consider an elective course 'A Multicultural Planet', aimed at teaching students to be tolerant towards people belonging to different cultural and religious groups, is an important part of the process of foreign language learning. The article presents theoretical ideas of multicultural education; aims and tasks of the elective course, approaches and principles it is based on; the results of the study conducted among the university students. The materials of the article are intended for university foreign language teachers.

KEYWORDS

Multicultural education, dialogue of cultures, cross-cultural communication, tolerance, foreign language.

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Introduction

The political situation in the world, new acts of terrorism, instability in the Middle East countries make the scientific society become more and more interested in the problem of cross-cultural communication. The second reason is wider opportunities for travelling and ability to change jobs, with freer movement from country to country now the norm. The world has become more multicultural than ever. This also causes a number of problems since people find it difficult to tolerate new cultures and as a result suffer from demonstrating

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poor communication skills within a group of multicultural students, colleagues, etc.

Russia has always been a multicultural country and all its regions are familiar with the problems of cross-cultural communication. The Republic of Tatarstan is an excellent example. Its population includes people of different nationalities – the Tatars, the Russians, the Ukrainians, the Armenians, the Georgians, and representatives of the neighbouring republics – the Maris, the Udmurts, the Chuvashes and the Bashkirians. For centuries these peoples have lived next to each other. Since their childhood Tatarstan children are taught to live and communicate in the multicultural society, to be tolerant towards other cultures' way of living and world outlook. They participate in various national festivals and events – Tatar or Russian; they learn both the Tatar and Russian languages at school making no differentiation, since they are expected to be familiar with both cultures. Nevertheless, conflicts caused by the so-called 'culture shock' are still the topic of numerous discussions. An uncomprehended set of rules, and unknown customs and traditions can be quite rigorous in some ethnic groups and can easily result in misunderstanding and more serious problems among young people, since they might find it difficult to deal with these problems.

It is generally known that, to some extent, higher education is responsible for providing young people with knowledge about the cultural values of their own nation and teaching them to respect diverse cultures. It is to help young people to determine their place in the multicultural world. Due to the world situation, the Russian system of higher education has to be aimed at the problems on multiculturalism; it should be predicated on the principle of equality for all students, regardless of their culture. According to this, one of the main aims of higher education should be teaching students cross-cultural communication skills which include being tolerant towards people from different cultural backgrounds; understanding; being able to demonstrate sympathy, politeness, friendliness towards people of other nationalities and being successful communicators.

Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University is considered to be a multicultural student society. Students from Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Georgia, the Ukraine, Belorussia, and the Congo have chosen this educational institution to get the Certificate of Higher Education. Both the institute government and teaching staff are of the opinion that multicultural education is considered to be an important part of the learning process, and lectures should be planned to make students get involved into the process of cross-cultural interaction since this helps form a tolerant attitude towards people of different nationalities, nations and religions. Multicultural education aims to moderate students' attitude towards different nations, their history background, culture, traditions, and world outlook.

All students are parts of their own culture. At the university they are involved in the atmosphere of a mixed cultural world and have an opportunity to share their cultural values with each other. This both teaches young people to be part of the multicultural world and makes them become interested in other cultures as well as trying to learn more about their own cultures, languages, and traditions. To get ready for cross-cultural communication one should be informed about the cultural peculiarities of his partner's country; have achieved some

cross-cultural communication experience; have achieved the abilities to express tolerance and respect towards people of other religious and cultural communities; recognize the diversity of the multicultural society, and recognize themselves as part of the multicultural world.

At first sight, the multicultural atmosphere of Elabuga Institute of KFU gives rise to cross-cultural communication. Actually, young people find it difficult to start communicating. Foreign students tend to communicate within their ethnic communities and speak their mother tongues. The majority of them demonstrate quite a basic level of the Russian language. The Tatar language (the second official language in Tatarstan) is spoken by the vast majority of Russian students including those who are Russian by origin. Tatar is an alternative for those students whose native languages are similar to the Tatar language. Nevertheless, many foreign students prefer to keep silent, rather than asking Russian students for help, in the event they struggle to understand a teacher's instructions.

The other reason which explains the lack of desire to get in touch with other students is the fact that many foreign young people were brought up in the one-culture society. Interviews with foreign students have shown that a great portion of young people have no any experience of communicating with people belonging to another culture, or nationality.

The third reason is that foreign students live in the same hostel and do not share rooms with students from other countries. Their close neighbours are nearly always their own compatriots. They naturally feel more comfortable communicating within their cultural group till they get in trouble because of different cultural problems.

Literature Review

The ideas of multicultural education were first developed by foreign scientists. According to their research, multicultural education aims at eradication of racism in all spheres of life including the system of education (Banks, 1979). Its main is to form a specific and peculiar state which will be common for people of different nations since, all their cultural values will be mixed together, and the new society will demonstrate a community of different cultures united on the principles of democracy (Banks, 1991). European educational researchers consider multicultural education as a pedagogical reaction towards the reality of the multicultural society, and the teachers' contribution into the process of upbringing young generation in the spirit of peace and friendship used as teaching techniques to solve ethnical conflicts (Pomerin, 1984); as a motive to analyze the person's own culture and its values (Thomas, 1987); as an educational system aimed at teaching students their own culture via other cultures (Boos-Nünning, 1983). They stress that multicultural education provides opportunities for students to become more familiar with other cultures which differ from their own (Labaree, 1997) as well as friendlier, opener, and more tolerant with people of different cultural backgrounds (Sandfuchs, 1981). In terms of some scientists' ideas multicultural education helps to teach students that other people should accept them with their distinct identities without being changed to gain appreciation from other (Alotaibi, 2015).

Russian scientists became interested in multicultural education in the 1990s when school and university teachers paid particular attention to the role of a native language in the educational process. Numerous research works of Russian scientists conducted in the field of multicultural education, prove the importance of the ideas of multicultural education for Russian higher education, since one of its aims are considered to be students' intellectual enrichment and readiness to live and communicate in the multinational world (Miller, 2008).

The phenomenon of 'multicultural education' has been analyzed by different Russian scientists. It is understood as a means of familiarization of students with different cultures aimed at forming their awareness of cultural diversity which will enable them to communicate with people of different countries and nations (Vasilyeva, 2011). Multicultural education is considered to be a complex system aimed at different aspects such as providing all students with equal opportunities; taking into account the fact that they belong to different cultural and social groups; developing students' knowledge about a positive cultural interaction; developing skills of communication within a different ethnic group (Bogdanova, 2009). Multicultural education is supposed to teach students to respect other cultural values which are not recognized by their ethnical group, and try and preserve all cultural diversity (Dzhurinskiy, 2016).

Methodology and Research Design

The study was conducted in Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University in 2015-2016. The experiment involved 97 first-year students (35 foreign and 62 Russian students).

The aims of the study are to help students get in touch with people of different cultural and religious backgrounds and to remove cultural barriers between the students of different nationalities.

The tasks of the study are:

- to analyze psychological and pedagogical literature on the issue (both of foreign and Russian scientists);
- to make a questionnaire and organize a survey among the students to find out their attitude towards other cultures;
- to develop a special course to achieve the aims of the study.

The Diagnostic Stage (October 2015-January 2016)

The diagnostic stage of the study was search and theoretical one. At this stage research of literature on multicultural education as carried out; the aims, tasks, and methodology of the study were developed; the students were interviewed; the course 'Multicultural Planet' was developed.

The students were asked to complete a questionnaire which consisted of the following questions:

1. 'Do you find it difficult to communicate with students of other nationalities / from another country? Why?/Why not?'
2. 'Would you like to make friends with a student(s) of other nationalities / from another country? Why?/Why not?'
3. 'Would you like to learn more about other cultures, traditions, and history? Why?/Why not?'

According to the results of the study, 28 foreign students and 44 Russian students have problems communicating with students of other

nationalities/from another country. Many foreign students express concern over being misunderstood because of the numerous grammar mistakes they make while speaking Russian (19 students); the majority of the students do not want to try and communicate with the others since they are not sure their Russian is good enough (22 students). Only 7 students do not express any worries about communicating with foreign students. It should be stressed that 5 of them have demonstrated a higher degree of familiarity with the Russian language, while the other two students try and communicate using both English and Russian. Both of them have mentioned the importance of communicating with the Russian students for improving their own Russian capability.

One third of the interviewees have showed no wish to make friends with people of other nationalities since they find it more comfortable to communicate and spend their free time with the people from their own ethnic community' (13 students). Fifteen young people would like to find friends among the other foreign students. Five of them have stressed they would like to be friends with the students from another country, provided they belonged to the same religious group.

Nearly all foreign students have showed interest in other cultures (31 students). They would like to learn more about other nations' traditions, customs, national cuisine, history, and etc. Three students have written that they are not interested in other cultures and find it a waste of time to learn about them. One student has answered he does not mind if he is told something about other people's traditions and customs but he is not particularly interested in them.

It should be pointed out that the Russian students have shown more desire to communicate with the foreign student. Though, as it is mentioned above, 44 of the 62 interviewees have problems communicating with the foreign students (language barrier (38 students); different cultural and religious background (15 students), the majority of them (39 students) would like to try and communicate with them irrespective of the problems they have. Those 18 students, who do not express anxiety about communication with the people belonging to different nations and nationalities, have stressed they are in good terms with their foreign classmates, and 7 of them have made friends with some of the foreign students.

The overwhelming majority of the Russian students (53 students) have expressed interest in other cultures and mentioned they would like to enlarge their knowledge and experience by learning about other countries' history, traditions, customs, and etc. The other 9 students have given different reasons for not being interested in other cultures – it is not interesting for them (5 students); no sense of learning about other countries because there are no opportunities to visit these countries (2 students); not sure (2 students).

The Experimental Stage (February 2016–June 2016)

Educational researchers in the field of foreign language teaching are convinced that foreign language teachers are expected to increase their students' awareness of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, and to incorporate more multicultural education into the curriculum (Lee, 2006; Phillips & Draper, 1999). The results of the questionnaire, scientific research on the problem, and our personal experience as foreign language teachers gave us an idea of creating

an English course called “Multicultural Planet”. The course was included into the list of extracurricular activities.

All the interviewees were offered to attend the ‘Multicultural Planet’ course. Seventy-two students (of the 97 ones) joined the course – 30 foreign students and 42 of Russian origin. Among the course participants there were 25 foreign students and 34 Russians who had stressed difficulties in communication with foreign people.

The students were divided into six mixed groups – 12 students in each group. They had two classes a week (20 classes in total). At the lessons, the teachers organized the work of the groups so that the students of different nationalities and nations had a chance to collaborate in group or pair activities. It was not allowed to speak native languages at the lessons, so all the students had to use the English language common for all the members of the group.

Results and Discussion

While reflecting on *the content of the course*, we experimented and chose different topics which could be discussed by people who belong to different cultural groups. We concentrated on articles and video films devoted to customs and traditions (wedding ceremonies, the way of talking to adults, etc.), lifestyle, superstitions, traditional food, fairy tales and folk songs, national clothes, and proverbs, and etc. (Zorina, 2015).

The main aims of the course, based on the principles of multicultural education, are to increase students’ awareness of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, and help them feel ready to communicate successfully with people of other cultures, religions, and nationalities.

The tasks of the course are:

- to support students’ interest in learning more about other cultures;
- to help students try and preserve their cultural originality;
- to form students’ multicultural world outlook;
- to create a positive atmosphere at the lesson;
- to make students become involved in an active studying process;
- to increase students’ motivation towards foreign language learning;
- to broaden students’ range of interests;
- to extend students’ intellectual enrichment (Zorina, 2015).

To achieve the listed above tasks, we organized the learning process according to the following *approaches* – the action approach, the dialogue approach, the cultural approach, and the person-oriented approaches. The aim of *the action approach* is to make students get involved in the active learning process, since the perception of cultural values of different nations including students’ native culture can be done in a combined activity in the classroom (Tarasov & Sorokin, 1977). *The dialogue approach* is based on the ideas of the so-called ‘dialogue of cultures which is aimed at gaining mutual understanding providing that people have different points of view, as they belong to different cultures. The ‘dialogue of cultures’ helps participants learn more about both other cultures and their own ones (Tarasov & Sorokin, 1977). According to *the cultural approach* the learning material is taught from the point of view of the ‘dialogue of cultures’. Classes’ content includes various topics

concerning cultural differences, rules of behavior, customs and traditions of various nations. A man is part of his culture. He develops through life with the help of his cultural values introducing something new, something very personal (Sternin, 2005). The ideas of teaching students to be tolerant, to be able to listen to other people, to accept other people's opinions and points of view, to live and communicate in the multicultural society are based on **the person-oriented approach**. According to this approach, a person, his cultural values, background and life experience are put into the centre of the teacher's attention (Pligin, 2003; Bondarevskaya, 2000).

The content of the course "Multicultural Planet" is based on the following **principles**:

— the dialogic principle means 'the dialogue among different cultures'. According to this principle students learn to accept other people's experience, views, and try and achieve understanding with other participants without paying attention to the cultural and religious diversities they have;

— the person-oriented principle means equality among all the participants of the learning process. While making a decision or discussing a question, it is important for a teacher to create an atmosphere of understanding, trust, and respect among his or her students to ensure all the members of the group including the teacher interact as full-fledged members of the educational process (Zorina, 2016);

— the principle of creativity means the learning process should be based on the ideas of creativity to develop students' creative abilities;

— the principle of psychological comfort means the classes are delivered in a positive, free of conflict atmosphere, this helps the teacher and his /her students to be involved in a collaborative creative activity.

At the end of the course the students were offered to answer the same questions they had answered at the diagnostic stage. **The results** are as follows:

— Absence of anxiety while communicating with people of other cultural or religious backgrounds. The majority of the students who had had communication problems (27 of 30 foreign students and 32 of 34 Russian ones) confirmed they found it less difficult to communicate with people of other cultural backgrounds. The foreign students stressed they were less anxious about the grammar and pronunciation mistakes they made, since they had realized the other students understood them quite well and were always ready to help.

— Willingness to have friends among the students of another religious or cultural group. The 5 students who still demonstrated some anxiety about getting in touch with people of other cultures, mentioned they would like to get rid of their shyness in the future.

— A higher level of cultural awareness. By the end of the course it was recognized by both the teachers and students that the course participants were more interested in other cultures, their history, traditions, etc. The students found it interesting to look for cultural peculiarities and differences (proverbs, national cuisine, fairy tales, etc.); to read more about other cultures.

— The ability to be tolerant towards people of other nationalities and religions. The teachers pointed out that at the beginning of the course the students expressed misunderstanding and some negative reaction towards some

traditions of other cultural groups (wedding traditions in some African tribes, Scottish kilts, etc.). The teachers' explanations and their positive attitude towards the national phenomena mentioned, helped the students become more tolerant. They encouraged their students' cognitive skills which were positively affected during the educational process.

— The ability to communicate and cooperate successfully in a multicultural team. The students expressed a commitment to positive interaction in the team (solving learning problems, sharing ideas, expressing opinion, etc.).

The research shows the educational standards of the Russian system of higher education should be developed in the way to ensure that students are taught according to the cultural and person-oriented principles, and interactive teaching methods, aimed to make young people more confident members of the multicultural society and to increase their cultural awareness.

Multicultural education is an interdisciplinary process which is found in every subject of any curriculum. A foreign language is considered to be one of those university subjects which provide students with opportunities to learn more about other cultures. At the foreign language classes all students of a multicultural group experience a chance to enlarge their knowledge about other nationalities, and obtain some experience of cross-cultural communication while sharing their cultural values with each other. Foreign language teachers, it is predicted, will increase students' awareness of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, and to incorporate more multicultural education into foreign language classes in order to help students be more culturally competent. Foreign language teachers have a responsibility to teach their students both to appreciate their own uniqueness whilst simultaneously respecting others. They can try and use their students' cultural differences as advantages, rather than handicaps to facilitate cultural awareness in them; they can encourage young people to share their cultural diversity with others and, thereby, obtain real-life experience.

The course 'Multicultural Planet' is designed to teach students to be more friendly and tolerant with people who belong to different nations and religions, to respect other peoples cultural background, as well as their own. It is to help them form the skills of cross-cultural communication which are considered to be of great importance in the modern multicultural world. This can help ensure their successful interaction in the multicultural world. It is regarded as an essential condition for life, personal and professional development of individuals.

Due to the teachers' awareness and high professional skills it was possible to create a positive atmosphere in the groups of multicultural student population, this was considered to be of a major importance for achieving the goals. All the materials, used at the classes, are to be published to be used in the future.

In the whole the results of the study, the teachers received at the end of the course, show the use of multicultural aspects are an effective teaching method. It is recognized the research is not finished yet, and the future work requires studying theoretical and practical basis of teaching foreign languages in the context of cultural diversity to multi-ethnic students to make the educational process more successful. The study does not cover all aspects of the problem. The further research is to be done in the theoretical and practical spheres to develop the methodology and to receive a higher level of students' cultural awareness and tolerance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study is useful as it represents mixed research based on a conversation with the students, teachers' observations during the learning process. The final result being the course - 'Multicultural Planet'. The results of the study can inform university, college and school teachers, parents and policymakers on how important the issue of multicultural education is currently and how the use of multicultural education in foreign language classes can influence the notion of justice and equity in the society (Thomas, 1983).

Teaching foreign languages by linking them both to students' cultures and other world's cultures helps make young people competent members of the multicultural society. To engage students in social life and to help them get in touch with people of other nationalities and religious groups in order to solve their personal and study problems, foreign language teachers should act effectively through joint engagement by using cultural tools (Norton & Toohey, 2011).

The study substantiates that students should be taught different cultures as part of Foreign Language classes since social interactions and engagement is key to a successful life experience for them (Anyon, 2005). Students will feel more competent with less anxiety when communicating in the cross-cultural society if they are helped by university educators. Being engaged in activities within the contexts of different cultures, the traditions and customs, including the rules of life of the country students live and study in, makes it easier for young people to get used to living and communicating successfully amongst people with different cultural backgrounds.

The integration of culture into a Foreign Language is proved to be of a major importance since it helps improve the sociocultural competencies of young people (Al-Kahtani, 2005). The study shows there is a need for including cultural teaching into a Foreign Language since teaching foreign languages is always directed towards teaching students the importance of becoming global citizens and being able to fit in different countries and cultures (Levinson, 1999).

The course 'Multicultural Planet' is recommended for Foreign Language teachers. It can be used as an elective course for students who are interested in other cultures, and try and improve their foreign language skills. The course also can be used at the Foreign Language classes as an additional material to the main themes of the subject.

In search for ideas to engage their students and make Foreign Language classes more interesting and full of vitally important material, teachers should not restrict themselves to using texts and films which inform students about the culture of the foreign language they are taught. There is a hope, the article will make foreign language teachers think more seriously about the material they use at the lessons, and also helps them use their imagination to include different materials with a cultural context.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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