

Adaptation of Foreign Students to the Foreign Culture Learning Environment Using the Six Thinking Hats Method

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Received: January 15, 2015 Accepted: February 23, 2015 Online Published: May 28, 2015

doi:10.5539/ies.v8n6p124

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ies.v8n6p124>

Abstract

The contemporary life is characterized by various ways and forms of communication, sometimes but not always successful and leading to conflict situations. When a man occurs in the environment, alien to him, he meets misunderstanding and is overwhelmed with incomprehensible emotions as if he were covered with an avalanche. He has to solve problems that seem quite unnecessary, not reasonable to him. As a result—the increased state of anxiety, which is warmed up by weak knowledge of the foreign language and cultural and social aspects. A foreign language teacher, whose task is to search for optimal teaching methods, oriented to the expectations of the group and facilitating favourable adaptation of each student with mental and social experience, characteristic only of him, is very helpful in this case. A set of methods, as a teaching approach offered in this article, has shown itself to good advantage as one of the rational and optimal methods used by a teacher who is not afraid of risking. The method assists foreign students in being involved in the university learning environment enabling them to use the most of interpersonal activity potential and basic motivation to perceive a foreign culture in the shortest possible time and with minimum losses.

Keywords: adaptation, Russian as the foreign language, effective communication, parallel thinking, literary characters, cross-cultural competence

1. Introduction

In the years two thousand the interest in the Russian language has been resumed. Learning Russian has acquired some practical value (an illustrative example is China). According to the China Association of Teachers of the Russian Language and Literature, in 1999 the Russian language was studied by three thousand Chinese, for five years this figure grew twice and by 2008 it was 12 thousand people, and by 2011—already 25 thousand people. The geography of teaching Russian in China shows that Beijing counts on cross-border cooperation—the higher education institutions, where the language is studied, are concentrated in the north-eastern part of China. The similar situation is in Finland where since 2009 the program for the Russian language expansion since the eighth grade has been working at the municipal level in some south-eastern provinces of the country bordering Russia. In Poland the interest in the Russian language returned in connection with opening of the area bordering Kaliningrad. It is believed that the modern generation of learners treats the Russian language without prejudice (Nakamura, 1999; Berdichevsky, 2000).

More and more foreign students come to Russia on exchange programs every year, and there is an urgent task for teachers of Russian as the foreign language not only to intensify the learning process but also to search for effective uncommon ways of foreign students' adaptation to the new environment.

The foreign students' adaptation to the new environment is understood as acceptance of cultural differences, smoothing a psychological barrier between the culture of students and the culture of a recipient country. Also the problem of ethnic origin and personal status, which the foreign students arriving in a foreign country are no less concerned about, should be solved.

The Russian scientists mainly covered the problem of foreign students' adaptation from the didactic point of view. Investigations into the issue by Ivanova and Shiryayeva (Ivanova & Titkova, 1993; Shiryayeva, 1980), and also Vitkovskaya and Trotsuk (2005) deserve attention. At the same time, analyzing the writings of foreign researchers (Bochner, 1982; Brisling, 1993; Camilleri, 1997; Clément & Noels, 1992; Clément et al., 1994; Coelho, 1962;

Gaudet & Clément, 2005) and also relying on our experience at the higher school, we can say that the role of such an important competence as cross-cultural in adaptation of foreign students has been insufficiently covered by the Russian scientists. This has specified a problem of our research, as a search for optimal organizational methods of teaching the Russian language, facilitating smoother inclusion of foreign students in the learning process of a Russian university.

2. Reasons for Application

When working with a multicultural group of foreign students united by a common goal—studying Russian as the foreign language—we offer to apply several methods which we regard as effective tools facilitating the communication process. These are Edward de Bono’s “Six Thinking Hats” method, transactional analysis and cinelogy. As a reflective practice, we offer the students to evaluate their learning performance and satisfaction in the form of an essay.

The “Six Thinking Hats” method (de Bono, 1991) has long been successfully applied in various business trainings in order to find a non-trivial solution in the fastest way. Some evidence of its efficacy has been presented by the western higher school (Note 1), but little attention is unfairly paid to it at the Russian universities. In search for rational organizing ways of communication in the cross-cultural environment, which is represented by our groups of foreign students, we found it interesting to use the “Six Thinking Hats” method, as it offers the students to discuss unclear questions, relying on the parallel thinking different from the traditional one in that, firstly, it is based on the collision of opinions and, secondly, it leads to the fact that the participants of communication learn gradually to hear another person’s point of view, to accept it as having the right to exist, thereby, unconsciously preparing themselves for life in the foreign cultural environment.

It should be noted that the method also works for other language (and social) disciplines, but in our paper we describe it relating to the groups studying Russian, since its efficiency is indisputable, as evidenced by the successful work for the past few years.

To enhance “Six Thinking Hats” and assist in coherent discourse production we propose here a method of transactional analysis (Berne, 1996) as an aid to remove psychological barriers, regulate self-feeling and keep a positive perception of the surrounding world.

To aim students’ efforts at fulfilling themselves we resort to the help of cinelogy by creating an authentic language medium. This enables mental projections of one’s values and anxieties on the film characters, with synchronous acceptance of a target culture. Cinelogy was introduced by Antonio Meneghetti (2005) as a technique for emotive dynamics analysis, but can be used when teaching foreign languages in the multicultural group with the purpose of transmitting existing mental images to another circumstance.

2.1 *The Problem of Multiculturalism in Teaching a Foreign Language*

Students from different countries (East, West and countries of the former Soviet Union), who are trained at different levels (undergraduate, graduate), probationers arrived for a semester internship program, as a rule, make up a training group. Every academic year the students from Italy, Germany, the Czech Republic, Thailand, China, Korea, Kirghizia, and Tajikistan (up to 25 people in a group) are trained in our class. During training we have come to the need to create more intensive mechanisms of developing a cultural dialogue that is directly related to the ability of people to communicate in the foreign language. The problems of interaction of different cultures were justified in the linguistic relativity hypothesis of B.L. Whorf and E. Sapir (the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis), according to which the concept systems, existing in a person’s mind, and, therefore, also the essential features of his thinking are defined by that certain language, the speaker of which this person is (Sapir, 1993). The main purpose of teaching the foreign-language communication is the formation of cross-cultural communicative competence. This becomes possible when studying foreign languages is “in indissoluble unity with the world and culture of the nations speaking these languages” (Ter-Minasova, 2000).

The strong obstacles in teaching Russian are differences in the language systems and the genetic affiliation of languages. Thus, the structures of the Chinese and Russian languages are considerably different: the Russian language belongs to the group of Indo-European languages, Slavic subgroup, while the Chinese language – to the Sino-Tibetan group. Therefore, the language of the Chinese students speaking Russian reveals a greater number of defects than, for example, the language of the Czech students speaking Russian. Besides the orthoepic mistakes and the accent, which is a natural result of differences in the phonetics of two languages, there are mistakes caused by violation of all kinds of the Russian language norms (graphic, spelling, punctuation, lexical, grammatical, syntactic, stylistic, and communicative). The improvement of linguistic competence—the main task of foreign students studying Russian—is manifested, in particular, in the ability “...to distinguish the linguistically

correct statements from the wrong ones” (Apresyan, 1980) and to combine the cultural funds of communicators: “...communication can be made more successful only if the fragments of the cultural funds of communicators, actualized in discourse, are largely combined” (Vinogradov, 1996). Therefore, a necessary condition of positive cross-cultural communication, in our opinion, is the development of cross-cultural competence.

When foreign students study the Russian language the priorities of language acquisition are given to: a) improvement of accuracy and cohesion of monologues and dialogues; b) skills building in grammatical, syntactic and stylistic correction of a statement; c) introduction of cultural material into the teaching practice. A teacher’s emphasis on ethno-cultural and ethno-psychological features of students and use of linguistic-cultural aspects of the Russian language of an appropriate level in the learning process facilitate the process (Godunova, 2006; Passov, 1991).

2.2 Description of the Method

Teaching according to de Bono’s method can be performed effectively not only in the individual group but in the small one (preferably 6 people), as well as in the group exceeding the small one in the number of students in 3–4 times (up to 30 people). In the first case the students carry out the analysis of a problem on each aspect themselves, in the second case the analysis can be carried out in two ways: either each student is given one aspect for the analysis, or each of the participants analyzes the whole problem aspect by aspect, and then the collective discussion and systematization of the results take place. In the latter case the students are divided into several groups of 3–5 people, and each group (as well as in the first case) analyzes one of the aspects of the problem situation.

There are 6 hats, different in colours, in the structure of the method: red, white, yellow, black, green and blue. The white hat is impartial and objective, directs one’s attention to information, dry facts and figures. The black hat is pessimistic and requires indication of disadvantages, critical assessments, challenging of the words and figures, and search for potential risks. The yellow hat is optimistic, opposite of the black one, aimed at seeing potential benefits (of very different nature, not only the material well-being) and advantages, requires search for positive aspects of the analyzed phenomenon. The green hat thinks out new ideas, investigates opportunities, searches for alternatives, and modifies the existing ones. The red hat allows to state intuitive guesses and feelings on the matter, not explanations. The blue hat operates the working process, kicks into gear at the initial stage of discussion to determine the forthcoming tasks, and finally to summarize the achieved, if necessary, and designate prospects. Thanks to the blue hat all actions of the participants pursue a common goal. A leader or head of a conference wears the blue hat all the time.

The most reasonable task is arranging the hats in such a way that the blue hat is handed over to an instructor (a teacher), yet it depends on the didactic task to be solved in the process. When practicing the method a teacher solves additional pedagogical tasks such as building group working skills or identifying leaders and outsiders in the group, along with building rhetorical skills, abilities to think critically, defend one’s own opinion, and state counter-arguments, etc. Therefore, handing over the blue hat to any of the participants can be more appropriate if a teacher instructs a student not only by the blue hat but also by the hidden organizational and methodological supplements clear only to a teacher. Thus, an obvious outsider or a “permanent non-achiever” not able to go beyond algorithm or to defend his point of view may be wearing the blue hat. Next time it is advisable to change “roles”, so that students could understand how versatile the method is and “look into” themselves.

To make this possible, the method of transactional analysis serves as an additional mechanism, promoting personality reconstruction on the basis of reviewed life strategies and awareness of one’s inefficient manners that prevent from making adequate decisions. The teacher’s task is to apply the analysis of verbal and nonverbal interactions between the students in the group. The students are offered to choose from the literary texts the most typical verbal characteristics of the personages with these people’s emotional conditions in mind. The verbal transactions are considered from the three alter ego states “parent”, “adult”, and “child”. Interpreting the behavior of literary characters within the text helps recognize which stereotypes and existing mental images need to be kept and which to be abandoned. Thus, the students form communication strategies of effective social interactions in the other culture.

The cinelogy method facilitates classroom interaction. Pre-reading video watching assists in perceiving a printed text, as verbal images are visualized and become tangible and intelligible. Later, during the discussion stage with the “hats on” a teacher can address certain video excerpt as many times as necessary. The created synergy is beneficial to both language acquisition (Russian in our case) and cultural adaptation.

The final assessment of the affective skills, such as students’ motivation and self-feeling, is arranged in the frame of end-term foreign language (Russian) exam. We developed a special assessment scale (4 points is the

maximum) with the following criteria:

- Low adaptation—a student feels isolated, unwilling to contact and speak a foreign language; has a limited vocabulary and makes a lot of language mistakes;
- Medium adaptation—a student is willing to contact with familiar people but lacks flexibility; shows a good speech competence with just few mistakes, makes efforts to enlarge his vocabulary with new words and idioms;
- High adaptation—a student is eager to make contacts with unfamiliar people, showing flexibility of mind and genuine interest; willingly communicates but sometimes does not show initiative; has a good command of oral and written language;
- Advanced adaptation—a student initiates a discussion showing a good degree of flexibility; skillfully applies speech and communication strategies; assists less competent group-mates; has a high level of foreign language literacy.

2.3 Research Material

The works of fiction, newspaper publications, etc. may be used as learning material for discussion. Thus, for example, anti-Utopias can be taken for training students of the social majors. The long-term experience with students of the socio-political majors, whose professional competences include abilities to analyze political and social processes at the local, regional or interstate level, to reveal the conflict situation in due time, to find effective ways of problem solution, etc., has shown that the classical anti-Utopias of Orwell (2001, 2003), Zamyatin (2009), and Huxley (2002) have a high teaching potential. At the training sessions the problems of the citizens and the political system are discussed, passing over the advantages of an art style or a plot. The work of art serves as some informative source, a kind of newspaper archive for the certain period of the society's life.

In this case, when having the red hat on, it's the ideologies of the society described in the chosen anti-Utopia that are discussed. It is better to begin the discussion with the red hat, specifying the main historical events such as the party system, political order, authorities, relationship of the power and citizens, etc.

The order of yellow and black hats depends on the discussion purpose, including the teaching one: aiming to highlight the positive facts it is necessary to begin with the black hat (at first giving criticism and then an optimistic remark or argument on each negative fact); wishing to strengthen criticism it is necessary to begin with the yellow hat, providing a risk factor for each positive moment.

When having the green hat on, the students should consider a succession of events in the given society. This requires a potential for each variant of social development and the students must prove its existence with the textual information.

3. Results

3.1 Building up an Effective Dialogue

The communication efficiency depends on the way the participants of the dialogue obtain information. The cultures in need of additional information to fully communicate are called "low-context" cultures. And on the contrary, the cultures with no need for more detailed information, owing to a sufficient number of informal information networks, are called cultures with a "high" context (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001). Spain, Italy, the countries of the East and Asia, Japan and Russia belong to the countries with a high context of culture. Germany, Switzerland, the USA are referred to the type of low-contextual cultures. Therefore, it is very important, considering a context, to adapt the amount of information to the respective information requirements as closely as possible.

Proceeding from the context we can also observe unanimity among the students of our group. As for an issue of power distance (Hofstede, 2001), this characteristic distinguishes the representatives of various cultures receiving training in the group. In the cultures with a low power distance (European countries and the USA) the greatest importance is attached to such values as equality in relationship and individual freedom. Therefore, communication is less formal in this case, equality of interlocutors is heavily emphasized, and the communication style is more consultative than in the cultures with a high distance of the power (the countries of the East and Asia), where the strong dependence between the superiors and subordinates is established. The employees must either admit the power of their boss or completely reject it and break off the relationship. The division of cultures into the individualist or collectivist ones (Hofstede, 2001) is one of the important indicators in cross-cultural communication as it explains the differences in behaviour of representatives of different cultures. The collectivist societies are those in which the interests of a group prevail over the interests of an individual.

Between the individual and the group dependency relationship develops from the very beginning. “We are a group” serves as a protection for an individual, and in return, a constant group loyalty is required from him. There is no “personal opinion” in such societies. A personal opinion is determined by the opinion of a group. The societies, in which the interests of an individual prevail over the interests of a group, are called individualist. In such societies personal characteristics are considered more important than group affiliation. The index of individualism is the highest for the countries of Western Europe and is low for the countries of East and Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The collective work in the group will be more effective if the positive potential of an individual is used for the adjustment purpose of fulfilling certain tasks. In this case a teacher not only acts as a catalyst in the interaction process of the training, but it makes possible to greater motivate students to explore themselves and others. This helps students break the fixed stereotypes of perception and adapt their behaviour according to the situational tasks.

One more important factor in cross-cultural communication–nonverbal language–can’t be ignored, as it is an integral part of the daily experience, and, as a rule, has a practical value and of a world outlook nature. As well as verbal language, nonverbal language is social. Most of the nonverbal gestures are acquired and their meanings are culturally conditioned. Moreover, the same gestures or intonations can be differently interpreted in different national cultures. Let us consider the gesture “to put out the tongue” as an example. In the Russian body language this gesture is a typical childish tease, in the south of China moving of a tongue out and pulling it inside the mouth means “confusion”. In Tibet putting out a tongue is a ritual form of respectful greeting, and in the Marquesas Islands the same gesture expresses denial (Pease, 1994).

Ignoring the existing differences inevitably leads to communicative failures–loss of time, broken relationship, and unsuccessful decisions. The methods mentioned above allow of structuring and improving communication by giving a necessary peace of mind during the dispute. It makes it possible to correctly evaluate an interlocutor, a certain event or facts, and to think about a possible correct decision which won’t make a person regret afterwards.

3.2 Research Material (“Humble Folk” and “Six Thinking Hats”)

By analogy with anti-Utopias, discussions of short stories of Chekhov (1977), the famous Russian writer, have shown interesting results in our training of foreign students. Chekhov’s works, in our opinion, are effective for training students of pedagogical and psychological fields, specialists in the social sphere, journalism and tourism. Thus, for example, when reading the story “Man in a Case” students interpret the characters of Belikov and his colleagues in the way which is different from the traditional image accepted by the high school practice.

Belikov is one of those who are called “humble folk” and “cranks” in the Russian literature. Chekhov’s works are rich in such characters. In modern conditions of Internet reading and Web education young people, as a rule, do not go into the heart of such personages with their difficulties and name them, putting it mildly, abnormal. When the “Six Thinking Hats” method is applied the foreign students are able to feel the subtleties of the Russian characters, to find explanations for their deeds and identify the reasons for their personal tragedies which led to death in many stories.

The same effect becomes apparent when the students examine the character of Akaki Akakievich Bashmachkin from Gogol’s (1983, 2004) “The overcoat”. This unimportant man causes much more than sympathy in them; he becomes more than a personage from the Russian literature who just died at the end of the story.

As a rule, it is appropriate to examine Russian literary characters in rather big student groups of 10–12 people. The participants are easily divided into two groups not only by the number of hats but also by the number of the characters taking part in the life of a central personage under discussion and at the end of the story. Thus, there are at least two groups of hats on one blue (common) hat-moderator. The most important blue hat-moderator conducts all the discussion and sums up the results. The aspect by aspect analysis of the text provides the additional artistic details of a Russian literary work, enriching the research result by applying supplemented methods of quantitative and qualitative linguistic analysis. By means of characters’ evaluation the foreign students master the techniques of verbal behavior in the conflict situation. They start estimating the attitudes of the participants in a different way. The importance of what has been said to a listener and the possible response is also seen differently, and this leads to a more responsible speech communication with a representative of the Russian culture.

The hats’ metaphor in the process of group discussion plays an important role in reducing emotional tension and moderating discussions. The blue hat should provide a continual control. Each hat holder can join in the position

of any other hat at the suggestion of the blue hat-moderator. As a rule, thanks to the division of human thinking process into six various modes (perhaps, followed up by a various biochemical balance in different modes of brain functioning—criticism, emotions, creativity), the discussion is held in the fascinating form. Besides, correction of the possible language mistakes by a teacher is deferred, and the communicative mistakes generally do not cause aggressive response from the participants.

With a subsequent training session the chosen text for discussion can be of a higher level; all stages of discussion are accepted as having their value (the destructive factors are excluded); thanks to the structuring and avoidance of fruitless conversation the result after discussing even the simplest problem is considered both constructive and productive. In the process of discussion, the results obtained in one mode (hat) underlie another one, and, gradually, the last blue hat is being loaded, converting from a relatively “monochrome” into a “full-colour” idea.

4. Discussion

Application of the above procedure to the discussion of the Russian literary characters brings the development of compensatory competence to the forefront. Since the students show an insufficient knowledge of the new language, they resort to the knowledge skills appropriate to their native language. When dealing with a foreign-language text different kinds of guesses (linguistic, logic, contextual and interlanguage) function as compensation. It is regrettable that these guesses are paid unfairly little attention to in linguodidactics despite their high potential. The so-called linguistic diffusion, consisting of loans, international words and expressions, their derivatives and international affixes, serves a basis for guesses formation. As a rule, they are recognized without special practice and facilitate students’ lexis enlargement: the material of the closely related languages extends the list of such words.

Discussion of the literary texts, different in the level of complexity, is aimed at developing students’ abilities to think logically, infer word meanings from inductive and deductive reasoning, compare, analyze, notice similarities and actively use their own knowledge. A teacher’s task is to help students to develop skills needed to work with implied meaning of a word. The three methods help not only reveal the nature of an unclear fact but also imitate various speech situations that make students “try on” different roles and different cultures. Armed with the knowledge about the described procedure, a teacher is ready to anticipate, explain, correct and eliminate mistakes caused by language interference. In addition to the didactic potential, the methods assist the students in achieving satisfaction from acquired knowledge and understanding of the fact that they can influence their learning process, not as passive consumers but active competent creators involved in the training format.

This can be justified by the students’ essays which provide assessment of their individual experience projected on the life of literary characters from Russian and foreign texts. In particular, many students stated that their judgments about the host culture had gradually changed in the process of text reading and movie watching. Moreover, their self-consciousness has also changed. On the whole, we may conclude from the essays that the developed procedure has its potential and significantly eases the process of inclusion in another culture and language.

Besides, the final assessment revealed that the group of students, involved in the learning process (main group) with cinelogy as additional technique, showed a higher adaptation and greater language skills than the students from the control group, who were taught without cinelogy. Nevertheless, the last group showed a sufficiently good progress. The figure below shows average statistic data from the academic year 2010-2014.

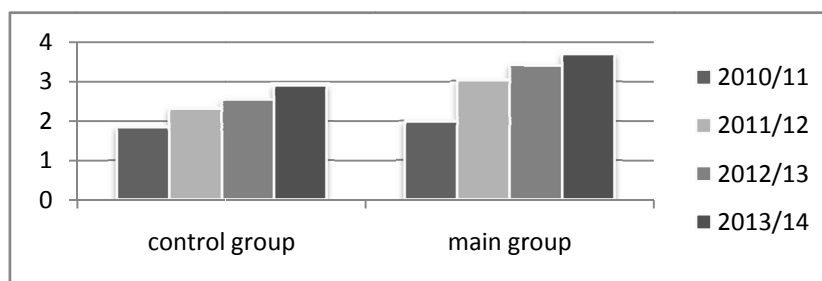


Figure 1. Adaptation dynamics and growth of language skills in the multicultural groups

5. Conclusions

As the main results of the research, it is possible to specify the following:

- 1) Application of the “Six Thinking Hats” method in teaching foreign languages (in our case—the Russian language) in the multicultural group of students expands the borders of cross-cultural communication, and this facilitates the development of cross-cultural communicative competence.
- 2) Incorporation of the three methods in the range of other foreign languages teaching techniques promotes both better acquisition of new language information and its application in speech practice. A smoother students’ inclusion in the unfamiliar environment is another advantage.
- 3) Developing lateral thinking alongside with other teaching techniques in the conditions of multicultural group meets the needs for creative self-realization, as it generates the productive types of speech interaction, and, as a result, the latter leads to the effective cross-cultural communication in the learning environment and the professional sphere.

When applying the three methods to the learning environment of the Russian university a teacher should assist with the transferring of the approved results to other university environments, for example, introducing it to the traditional scheme of foreign students’ interaction with the university administration. We can see the obvious benefits for all the participants: effective mastering of the foreign language and cultural values, on the one hand, and improving of the administrative services for less painful adaptation of foreign students, on the other hand. At the same time, the described procedure does not claim to be universal as it demands skillful and flexible teachers, who are willing to take risk and adjust their individual perceptions to the new learning environment.

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Notes

Note 1. Innovations in Higher Education with the Edward de Bono Thinking System. (http://www.debonoconsulting.com/six_thinking_hats.asp)

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