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## Theory and Practice of Intercultural Communication in Language Teacher Training and Translator Training

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### Abstract

Intercultural communication as an academic subject was introduced into linguistic Bachelor and Master education in Russia about twenty years ago. Unlike various aspects of linguistics, English studies, British and American literature which have been part and parcel of the curriculum in foreign language departments for many decades, this subject is new both to teachers and students. Its appearance in the curriculum is due to Russia's entering the global educational environment. This subject as central theoretical component of training specialists in foreign languages requires practical manuals with reference to new educational standards. Intercultural communication as a field of study is so wide that it requires the efforts of specialists in linguistics, psychology, cultural anthropology, etc. It is but natural that teaching intercultural communication in universities is limited mostly to contrastive insights into communication between representatives of two linguo-cultures – those of Russia and the country/countries of a foreign language (mostly English). This paper discusses various ways and means of developing intercultural competence, practiced in Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education. The paper also presents the results of regular anonymous questionnaires among our students dealing with teaching intercultural communication. The authors conclude that theory of intercultural communication is firmly rooted as the subject that forms young people's cultural awareness. Our experience shows that students are genuinely interested in the subject, mostly because of its possible application to their future profession.

Key words: intercultural communication, language teacher training, translator training, intercultural competence, higher education

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## Introduction

Many theories concerning culture and its relationship to language have highlighted the intertwining of these two concepts (Halliday 1975, Vygotsky 1981, Lantolf & Appel, 1996 Cattell, 2004). It can even be claimed that it is through language and communication that culture is transmitted from one generation to another and thus preserved. Values, norms and rules which are considered central to a society are shared with each new generation. Transmission can take various forms (e.g. stories, art, education etc.) and can have several 'carriers' (e.g. families, teachers, friends, and media) but fundamentally culture is transmitted through language and communication (Smith & Bond, 1993). Due to increased migration, tourism and global media, people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are now more in contact than ever before. The over-all character of cultural and linguistic contact has resulted in a strong interest in intercultural communication (ICC), both inside and outside academia (Piller 2011).

At present there are several books and manuals on intercultural communication but due to the vast character of the subject many zones and aspects of it are unmapped. Empirical and contrastive character of ICC is naturally reflected in those Russian manuals which describe communication between representatives of two cultures – Russian and English/American/German, etc. One of the most popular books of this kind is “Language and Intercultural communication” by S.G. Ter-Minasova where ICC is viewed in terms of language being the mirror of culture and its instrument (Ter-Minasova 2008).

Thus, successful communication in intercultural encounters is often related not only to foreign language proficiency but also to intercultural awareness which together make an intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communicative competence is a framework for intercultural learning that prepares students, especially those learning foreign languages, for meaningful interactions with those from other cultures by addressing the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed for effective intercultural communication (Byram 1997). As the world becomes more and more globalized and internationalized, there is a growing need to improve global understanding through increasing this intercultural communication competence.

### *1.2 Present situation*

For the reasons mentioned above, ICC as an academic subject has been taught for about two decades as a compulsory course for students of the faculty of foreign languages in many Russian universities. For many years previously, culture has been neglected or being treated as a subsidiary topic in teaching English as a Foreign Language. The Intercultural Communication course was introduced to meet the demand of rapid globalisation. The course was the only opportunity for students of provincial universities to explore differences and similarities in intercultural communication by comparing different cultures and nations (Makeeva & Lopukhova 2018).

This paper continues the series of articles devoted to students' appreciation of how various subjects are taught at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of our University. Such feedback from students helps to develop the course and take their needs into account. Our previous article dealt with teaching foreign literatures (Kulinich, Savitskaya & Makeeva 2018). Being worried that students do not want to read either in Russian or in English and enter a foreign language teaching department with a non-existent level of philological competence, in the course of our study we came to conclusion that the most effective way to develop philological competence in image-oriented and IT-oriented students is to resort to various ways of promoting students' interest. These ways and means are mostly based on the results of the survey we conducted: interactive methods, projects, video-club.

The practical and conceptual framework of the intercultural communication course generally included cultural variations in communicative behaviours and motivations, and verbal and communication activities across a variety of cultural contexts. The course aimed at developing an individual's intellectual appreciation for cultural differences and sensitivity regarding intercultural interactions, mostly through the medium of the language. Thus, we can say that this course presented rather a linguistic approach which looked at communication as a rule-governed process of signification. The main objective of the linguistic approach was to help students overcome intercultural communication problems by providing them with a fixed set of rules and strategies for communication. Up to this moment, in many universities the intercultural course is taught in this framework.

At the same time, we believe that this subject as central theoretical component of training specialists in foreign languages requires practical manuals with reference to new educational standard and to changeable political environment. Intercultural communication as a field of study is so wide that it requires the efforts of specialists in linguistics, psychology, cultural anthropology, sociology, etc. It is but natural that teaching intercultural communication in universities is limited mostly to contrastive insights into communication between representatives of two linguo-cultures – those of Russia and the country/countries of a foreign language (mostly English). An example of such manual is “Theory and practice of intercultural communication” developed in our University (Kostrova & Kulinich 2017). It covers various aspects of “Intercultural basics in the teaching profession” (for Bachelors of Education), “Introduction into theory of Intercultural communication” (for Bachelors of Translation Studies) and “Theory of Intercultural communication” (for Master's programs). However, we did not stop at covering the content of the manual at seminars, but we have also started doing research on students' expectations before the course and the level of their satisfaction with the course content afterwards, in the hope that students' answers will further help us improve and modernize the course.

### Methodology

The authors employed qualitative research with survey design and elements of direct and covert observation. The study consisted of three main stages: the selection of the participants, the process of data collection, and the data analysis.

The research has been conducted in Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education, the Faculty of Foreign Languages, for 3 years. 256 students who had the Intercultural Communication course as compulsory were questioned.

Table 1 below shows groups of students:

	Bachelors of Education	Bachelors of Translation Studies	Master's programs
2016-2017	41	18	13
2017-2018	44	25	15
2018-2019	53	32	15

**Table 1.** Groups of surveyed students

Before the course students are asked the following questions (in Russian):

1. Try to guess what this new course is going to be about. What topics are you likely to study?

2. In your view, what is meant by “intercultural communication”?
3. What cultures (countries) are you familiar with?
4. To what culture do you refer yourself?
5. Why should a would-be teacher/translator/interpreter know the basics of intercultural communication? In what way may it help you in your future profession?

After-the-course survey of students’ opinions include the following questions

1. What themes (aspects) of the course were most important for your future profession?
2. What else would you like to learn about intercultural communication?
3. What are suggestions to lecturers and teachers conducting seminars?

## Results

### 3.1 Before-the-course stage

In order to match students’ expectations to what we taught them, we suggested five questions mentioned above. Here are their most typical answers summarized in the tables below.

Table 2 demonstrates most typical answers to Question 1: “Try to guess what this new course is going to be about. What topics are you likely to study?” Most students gave more than one answer.

Typical answer	Rating
Communication between representatives of different cultures	95%
Rules of cross-cultural interaction	75%
Various cultural values, traditions, beliefs	50%
Cultural differences/stereotypes	26%
The importance of intercultural communication in the work of a teacher/interpreter	22%

**Table 2.** Question 1. Topics

Answers to the first questions show that students’ guesses were quite correct: 95% suggested “Communication between representatives of different cultures”, then come “Rules of cross-cultural interaction”, various cultural values, traditions, beliefs, cultural differences/ stereotypes, the importance of intercultural communication in the work of a teacher/interpreter. These topics will have been covered in the course. The least frequent answer reveals students’ awareness of the fact that if a course is suggested to their attention it is supposed to be part of their professional training.

Table 3 shows most typical answers to Question 2: “In your view, what is meant by “intercultural communication”?”

Typical answer	Rating
Communication between representatives of different cultures	90 %

Communication between different peoples	50%
Sharing ideas, beliefs, opinions with representatives of different cultures	40%
Communication between different social groups	25%
A means of preventing misunderstandings, conflicts, wars between countries	5%

**Table 3.** Question 2. Students' definitions of Intercultural Communication

Answers to the second question revealed that 90 % of students understand correctly what intercultural communication implies: communication between representatives of different cultures. Other answers anticipate the topics covered in the course - communication between different social groups and a means of preventing misunderstandings, conflicts, wars between countries.

Table 4 presents answers to Question 3: "What cultures (countries) are you familiar with?"

Typical answer	Rating
UK	98%
USA	85%
Germany/France	70%
Italy/Spain	45%
Other (Middle East, China, India, South America)	10%

**Table 4.** Question 3. Cultures

As for cultures (countries) students are familiar with, it is but natural that students mention cultures of Britain and USA (they have a course in Country Studies/History and Culture of English-speaking countries), English being their Major; then come French and German cultures (they study French or German as their second foreign language); then Italy/Spain - most popular tourist destinations.

Table 5 summarizes students' answers to Question 4: "To what culture do you refer yourself?"

Typical answer	Rating
Russian	90%
Kazakh	4%
Tatar	3%
Azerbaijan	2%

Other	1%
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**Table 5.** Question 4. Cultures of students

We also thought is important to ask students about the culture they identify themselves with. As could be expected, 90% identify themselves with Russian culture, 3% with Tatar (Samara can boast of large Tatar community). There are also international students in our University, which explains their identification with Kazakh, Azerbaijan and other cultures.

Table 6 shows most typical answers to Question 5: “Why should a would-be teacher/translator/interpreter know the basics of intercultural communication? In what way may it help you in your future profession?”

Typical answer	Rating
To be a professional in one’s field (“to be a good teacher”, “to be a highly paid interpreter”)	87%
To understand people better	50%
To feel at home in English speaking countries	36%
To understand one’s own culture better	20%
Other	7%

**Table 6.** Question 5. ICC course importance

Answers to why should a would-be teacher/translator/interpreter know the basics of intercultural communication and in what way may it help them in your future profession are rather vague (to be a good teacher, to be a highly paid interpreter). Only 20% gave the reason “to broaden one’s views”. 7% were discerning enough to state that the basics of this course may help to understand one’s own culture better.

### 3.2 After-the-course stage

Student comments after they have completed the course seem to us even more important as they can help us plan classes for the next academic year and take their suggestions into account.

Table 7 covers answers given to Question 1: “Do you find the ICC course relevant to your future profession?”

Typical answer	Rating
Yes, absolutely	90%
Yes, maybe	7%
I haven’t chosen a profession yet	3%

**Table 7.** Question 1. ICC course relevance

Answers to Question 2 “What themes (aspects) of the course were most important for your future profession?” and Question 3 “What else would you like to learn about intercultural communication?” (which are crucial for the after-course survey) are given in Tables 8 and 9.

Typical answer	Rating
Stereotypes and ways of overcoming them	76%
Laws of communication	65%
Presentations of various cultural icebergs (“a means of getting to know cultures better”)	50%
“Real life” situations presented by the teachers	49%
Language examples	20%

**Table 8.** Question 2. Most important ICC aspects

Typical answer	Rating
Getting to grips with the laws of intercultural communication	50%
Learning more about everyday life of foreigners	40%
Mastering some tricks for successful intercultural communication	5%
“Now I know everything I need”	5%

**Table 9.** Question 3. Most important ICC aspects

The last question, “What are your suggestions to lecturers and teachers conducting seminars?” was meant to give us some clues to development and perfection of the course.

Typical answer	Rating
Having more ICC classes in the curriculum	86%
Everything was “just fine”	60%
Adding YouTube videos	60%
Having less lectures-more “real life” activities	30%
Inviting foreigners to classes	25%

**Table 10.** Question 4. Students’ suggestions

Results of after-the-course survey are up to our expectations. Students almost unanimously agree that the ICC course is of great practical value to them. The most interesting topics were stereotypes and ways of overcoming them, laws of communication, non-verbal communication, “real life” situations. The question “what else would you like to learn about intercultural communication?” turned to be rather challenging. The answers are rather general: to learn more about everyday life of foreigners (40%), mastering some tricks for successful intercultural communication (5%). Many students (86%) want more time for this course in their curriculum. Suggestions include adding more videos and inviting foreigners to classes in order to have round-table discussions. Suggestion of having less lectures sounds strange, as the ratio of lectures vs. Seminars is 1:4.

### *3.3 Topics for group projects*

At the end of the course, by way of summing up, students present a project on a topic selected by themselves and agreed upon by the teacher. This assignment asks students to apply some basic concepts and conceptual framework that they have learned in the course and discuss topics they are interested in. They are also encouraged to conduct short and easily manageable empirical investigations. The input runs as follows: conduct a short survey of your coursemates opinions and present statistics; having done this, write an opinion essay on one of the following topics:

- 1) Tolerant: to be or not to be?
- 2) Some people believe that a person can never understand the culture of a country unless they speak the language. Is it true for you?
- 3) Can “cultural shock” influence our perception of other people’s cultures?
- 4) Is immigration a way to enrich a culture or to destroy it?
- 5) Was colonialism essential for the development of European countries?
- 6) Is it true that with the development of online communication people will never be alone?
- 7) Is learning a foreign language a waste of time, as today computers translate accurately and quickly?
- 8) Have an interview with a student who has completed a term abroad as an exchange student in Germany/Turkey/France, etc. and find out the main differences in Russian and foreign academic life.
- 9) What are the advantages and disadvantages of studying abroad?
- 10) What may be teacher’s strategies while teaching in a multi-ethnic class?
- 11) If you share the room in a student dorm with a person from another culture would you follow her habits in everyday life or try to introduce your own?
- 12) Do stereotypes about other countries help intercultural inter-cultural communication or not?

### **Discussion**

In Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education, the Intercultural communication course is offered to second-year bachelor students of Education, third-year bachelor students of translation Studies and first-year students of Master program Theory and practice of Translation/Interpretation in Intercultural Communication. It includes 5 double-classes of lectures, 9 double classes of seminars and a set of tasks for self-study, based on the manual mentioned above and other reading materials. Lectures are supported by PowerPoint presentations. For seminars, students are expected to pre-read the assigned materials and come to the class ready to participate actively in the discussions. Classroom activities are designed to promote discussions and exchange of ideas and opinions among the students. At the end of the

course students also present a project on a topic selected by themselves and agreed upon by the teacher. Students are traditionally assessed in the end of the term according to their performance: this includes attending the classes regularly, coming to classes on time, coming prepared and participating actively in classroom discussions, and contributing positively to classroom environment.

The main topics covered in the course are as follows:

- verbal and non-verbal communication;
- different cultural values in language expressions;
- cultural literacy;
- laws and principles of communication;
- stereotypes in cross-cultural communication;
- academic communication in different cultures;
- humour as a part of national cultures;
- translation as a variety of cross-cultural communication;
- etc.

As a result, by the end of the course, students acquire comprehensive knowledge of cultural differences, but do not gain cross-cultural communication skills as all groups are mostly monolingual, and are not able to apply cross-cultural terms, concepts and theories to real life situations, current events and information learned from the course materials. However, some students from former Soviet republics such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan come to study at our University and teachers of ICC involve them into modeling real-life situations (for example, what difficulties they have trying to adapt themselves to alien cultural milieu, both academic and social, how they would act in certain situations, etc.).

### **Conclusion**

Our research revealed that forming intercultural competence can be achieved when students are genuinely interested in life, habits, communicative behaviour of other ethnic cultures. The results of regular anonymous questionnaires among our students dealing with teaching intercultural communication led us to conclude that theory of intercultural communication is firmly rooted as the subject that forms young people's cultural awareness. Many students want the continuation of the course which its relevance and usefulness to them (not many subjects in the curriculum can boast of this).

Our experience shows that students are genuinely interested in the subject, mostly because of its possible application to their future profession. Our next research stage will be devoted to developing an electronic manual where videos displaying real-life situations will be used as teaching material.

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