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IMPORTANCE OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND CROSS-CULTURAL EMPATHY

In the article, we try to define some notions important for dealing with international students. Cross-cultural competence and empathy are important capacities for coping with cross-cultural problems adequately and effectively. Effective communication can be enhanced when competence is conveyed and the ability in intercultural empathy can be developed by consistently trying to put your feet in another's shoes.

Key words: *cross-cultural competence, cross-cultural empathy, cultural diversity, EFL (English as a second language).*

Globalization provokes the world to change, people travel across the globe for business, education or leisure. We meet people of different origins, backgrounds, habits, values and cultures. What is common in one culture can be unknown in another. The meaning of a gesture, a word or a communication style in one culture can have a totally opposite meaning and understanding in another one. That can bring along tension, frustration and misunderstandings together with unpleasant and ineffective working or studying environment, often leading to unsatisfactory results.

At the same time, the cultural diversity in teams can bring new ideas, new ways of working and thinking, it brings the new 'blood' and 'fresh air'. Multiculturalism enriches our lives in the means of discovering new cultures and making us think about our own culture, in particular.

Cultural diversity and the cultural differences are the main issues in cross-cultural groups. People working primarily with the international students need to be cross-culturally competent enough to help to overcome culture shock and to function as the bridges between Ukrainian and other non-Ukrainian cultures.

EFL learning consists of various components, such as grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, as well as attitudes towards one's own or another culture. However, in the past decades, there are still some deeply ingrained beliefs about the nature of language teaching and learning—beliefs that influence methodology as well as the content of the foreign language curriculum, which have gradually and seriously undermine the teaching and learning of culture.

Most EFL teachers are facing the fact that foreign language learning is foreign culture learning, and that to cultivate students' competence for cross-cultural communication, teachers need first to arouse their cultural awareness. In

addition, as a trend, culture has implicitly or explicitly been taught in the foreign language classroom. What remain to be clarified, though, is what is meant by the notion “cultural awareness” and how it is integrated into language learning and teaching.

Cross-cultural competence can be regarded as the foundation of communication. It involves two qualities: one is the awareness of one’s own culture; the other is the awareness of another culture. In other words, it involves the ability of standing back from our own point and becoming aware of not only our own cultural values, beliefs and perceptions, but also those of other cultures. Cultural competence becomes essential when people communicate with people from other cultures. Because people see, interpret and evaluate things in different ways, what is considered as appropriate in one culture is likely to be inappropriate in another, and therefore, misunderstandings arise when people communicate.

Misinterpretations occur primarily when we are not aware of our own behavioral rules and project them onto others. In absence of cultural awareness, we tend to misinterpret the verbal or the non-verbal behavior of the person with whom we interact. However, the mere realization of cultural awareness is far from sufficient. As an effective way to develop their communicative competence, language learners in cross-cultural situations should try by every means to cultivate empathetic concepts and precepts in the process of foreign language learning.

As a word from the Greek «*empathia*», empathy means understanding others by entering their world, or “standing in somebody else's shoes”. The empathy in foreign language learning and cross-cultural communication is what we call cross-cultural empathy, which means placing himself into the cultural background of the target language and being able to effectively communicate his understanding of that world.

The ability to be culturally empathic is of great significance in many ways. First, it is the prerequisite and assurance for effective cultural communication. Empathy leads us not only to experience the feelings of another but also to reflect on those feelings and compare them to our own. Only when one truly understands what the other is thinking and behaving, can he be able to get access to ideal communication. When the communicator consciously and willingly shifts from one’s own cultural frame of reference and actively projects oneself in another culture, without abandoning one’s own perspective on the situation, it will bring an active consequence. However, it is important to emphasize that cultural empathy is not sympathy with, agreement with or identification with a specific culture. Rather, it is the appropriate understanding of a culture’s values and beliefs; it has been described as «seeing the world through another’s eyes, hearing as they might hear, and feeling and experiencing their internal world», which does not involve «mixing your own thoughts and actions with those of the client».

Therefore, the culturally empathic language learners retain their separate cultural identity and simultaneously are aware of and accept the cultural values and

beliefs of the people with different cultural background. In this sense, one does not need to agree with those values and beliefs to understand them and one does not need for his culture to be like that culture to have empathy.

Second, cross-cultural empathy is essential in helping people build a good relationship and achieve a smooth cross-cultural communication. In cross-cultural communication, people usually exhibit a variety of personal differences in their empathy ability. By applying knowledge about their own and other's cultures and consciously shift into a different culture, they can empathize or take another person's perspective in order to understand and be understood across cultural boundaries. In addition, people can go beyond personal boundaries and try to learn about the experiences of people who are different from their own, to know others with an empathic eye.

An effective communication with people is a foundation for success anywhere, at school, at work or even in everyday life. According to the respondents, it might get more challenging if the interacting people are of different cultures and using a non-mother language to communicate. It is very connected to basic cultural knowledge, as it helps to understand one's way of communication and furthermore, one can adjust one's own style.

Depending on the cultural background of an individual, one expresses him/herself more or less through the body language. As participants confirmed, they tend to use more gestures while using English to simply support what is said verbally. However, gestures, facial expressions and eye contact degree may have different and very often negative meaning in some cultures.

To sum up, the ability of cross-cultural empathy is a mirror of one's competence reflecting his understanding of the emotional states of people in the target culture, to minimize the psychological barriers caused by the target culture. Cross-cultural competence is a vital competence in the globalized world, especially for those involved in the interaction with people.

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