

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURALLY-DEFINED BELIEFS ON EFFECTIVE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION WITHIN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

VPLYV KULTÚROU DEFINOVANÝCH KONCEPTOV NA INTERKULTÚRNU KOMUNIKÁCIU V RÁMCI OSVOJENIA SI CUDZIEHO JAZYKA

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Contemporary crisis of multiculturalism in Europe and the integration problem of immigrants into European society obtainable in the last decade brings the issue of intercultural tolerance and consequently increases the importance of intercultural communication as an integrative part of second/foreign language acquisition. In today's international, globalized world the issue of understanding interrelationship between language and culture and its influence on second/foreign language acquisition is highly important. Considering tolerance within today's European multiculturalism as one of the most valuable tools in peaceful coexistence of various cultures, intercultural understanding opens the door to the whole world in the way of knowing and communicating with other cultures. Second/foreign language learner should become aware of the coexistence of different concepts within multicultural environment. Therefore, multicultural education, as a factor affecting second language teaching and learning process, should be taken into consideration.

What is Culture?

Understanding of the interdependence of culture and language has its own development within linguistics. We believe that intercultural communication is an inseparable part of effective communication in second/foreign language. Second/foreign language learning containing training in intercultural communication potentially means more effective communication in second/foreign language with members of a different cultural (and language) group.

To understand what intercultural communication represents, it is useful to define culture as a term. There were many attempts to define culture for various purposes. L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhorn write in their book that the efforts to define a culture have been taking place in science since centuries (Kroeber – Kluckhorn, 1952) (In: Mistrík et al., 1999). According to them the first scientific definition of a term culture appeared already in 1871 in the work of E. B. Tylor. It is understandable that the definition of the term culture varies within the history according to the purposes of its definition.

E. Mistrík (1999) mentions existence more than 200 argued definitions of culture. From the historical point of view he divides definitions of culture in five main groups and each of them comes out from the principles related to the conception of human being. Mistrík's definition of culture within multicultural education concept is inspired by Claude Lévi-Strauss's work *La pensée sauvage* (1996) (In: Mistrík et al., 1999) where he writes about the creative activity in art (painting) as about a dialogue with a model, a material or a user according to the direction of an artist's effort, aimed at the integration of a network as a certain structure and in each of the types of arts he sees

all three aspects present where they differ only according to the emphasis given on one of them (Lévi-Strauss, 1996, pp. 44 – 46). Mistrík (1999) consequently defines culture as a system of three aspects which exist only together where a cognitive aspect “concentrates, contains, processes and transmits information about the world”, a sign system “contains the objectivised ideas and information in signs, instructions, records, symbols, norms, ciphers,” and an active system in a sense that “all above mentioned parts of culture would not function if they were not involved in the activity of the concrete society and they even would not arise without their involvement in the activity. Contents and the way of their processing are thus formed by culture with regard to their user, i.e. with regard to their use in life of the existing generations and in life of future generations” (Mistrík et al., 1999).

As described above, the definitions of culture can vary according to the purpose of the definition. Within the concept of intercultural communication as a part of second language acquisition we prefer to use simplified definitions of culture represented by the Moerman’s definition of culture: “Culture is a set – perhaps a system – of principles of interpretation, together with the products of that system” (Moerman, 1988). Within his definition, culture can be understood as a subjective concept of ideas, beliefs and assumptions through which the other people acting and behaviour could be interpreted. Focussing on cultural differences Craig Storti (1999) defines culture as “the shared assumptions, values, and beliefs of a group of people which result in characteristic behaviours”. He believes that “cultural differences, on the ways in which a person from one culture thinks and behaves differently from a person from another” (Storti, 1999, p. 5).

Consequently, second/foreign language learner should become aware of the coexistence of different concepts within multicultural environment. Knowledge and understanding of unlimited numbers of different cultures is impossible. To simplify the classification of different cultures coexisting within Europe and the world, we found it useful to define horizontal and vertical stratification of culture. Within vertical stratification we can distinguish various cultural groups in a society prevalingly speaking the same language. For the intercommunication of various cultural groups with the same nationality we prefer to use a term cross-cultural communication. For the purpose of the intercultural communication aspect in second language acquisition we concentrate on the differences in cultures within horizontal stratification where we classify a culture group as a nation. Intercultural communication is preferred as a term for the communication among cultures groups within the concept of horizontal stratification.

Culture and Language

Before introducing the aspects of intercultural communication it is useful to define process of communication. Ted Slater in his essay “A Definition and Model for Communication” (Slater) notes that from the etymological point of view, “communication” is related to word “communion” and “community”. The origin of the word comes from the Latin “communicare” – “to make common” (Weekley, 1967, p. 338). DeVito (1986) formulates his definition for communication as “the process or act of transmitting a message from a sender to a receiver, through a channel and with the interference of noise” (DeVito, 1986, p. 61). Paraphrasing DeVito’s definition of communication, intercultural communication could be seen as the process or act of transmitting a message from a sender from one cultural group to a receiver from another cultural group, through a channel and with the interference of noise. Assuming that misunderstandings related to language barrier are minimized when considering that intercultural communication is realized between the groups within earlier mentioned horizontal culture stratification, cultural misinterpretations may lead into negative feelings and confusion and are often perceived as personal rather than cultural.

The increasing interest in the interrelationship between culture and language has been obtainable in the last few decades in a field of applied linguistics but understanding of the interdependence of culture and language has its development. Hinkel (1999, p. 2) introduces a few studies to be considered as a contribution to an understanding of the relationship between culture and language. She mentions Franz Boas who studied the structure of Amer-indian languages in 1911 and who noted that relationships among thought and language as the means of communication is

very complex. "His work, especially his Handbook of American Indian Language inspired and influenced many researches who concentrated their research on relation of language and culture" (Hinkel, 1999, p. 3).

Then she introduces Edward Sapir who in the 1920s explained that a language and the culture of its speakers cannot be analyzed separately. "He described language as a way to describe and represent human experience and understanding of the world (Sapir, [1921], 1961) and considers language as a referential framework of expression" (Hinkel, 1999, p. 3) and she compares Sapir with Whorf: "Whorf (1956) who notes the thought processes that separated Amerindian worldviews and beliefs from those of Europeans in terms of their definitions of time, space, and natural phenomena" (Hinkel, 1999, p. 3). She concludes that the study of culture has become the challenge for anthropologist, culture as the way of life of people and also sociolinguistics analyses the social relations in a group, the frames of behaviour within a group from the point of view of socialization processes.

Hinkel mentions also the anthropological approach: "Geertz in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (1973) concludes that language and its uses within a group are in a centre of social anthropologists as they are a relevant part of human behaviour that represents symbolic action resulting from the social structure and interactions within the group. He also explains that behaviour is a part of culture and determines how language is used to express meaning" (Hinkel, 1999, p. 3).

Based on the analyses of language and its use, through access to cultural frameworks, the concept of world perceived by members of different cultural groups could be understood by socio-anthropologist. Culture theory, based on researches within social anthropology is further investigated by sociolinguists describing the close interrelation between language and culture.

Current Perspectives in Applied Linguistics

As for the current perspectives in applied linguistics of the last two decades, several researchers extended the thinking about the relation of language and culture in language teaching. Kramsch (1993, p. 8) mentions Halliday considering grammar as "a theory of human experience and text the linguistic form of social interaction". She also sees a different approach of Quasthoff and Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper who "have explored the cultural dimensions of speech acts a discourse pragmatics". Kramsch (1993, p. 8) further notes Keller's and Muller-Jacquier's examination of stereotypes and self- and other-perceptions and also Byram's reassessment of the cultural studies role in foreign language education. Kramsch (1993, p. 9) also introduces perspectives in applied linguistics in United States mentioning "Nostrand and Kramsch are re-evaluating the notion of cultural authenticity, while Valdes gives a fresh look at the 'cultural gap' in language teaching" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 9). The interrelation between culture and language has become the interests of many researchers approaching this idea from different points of view. This subject "brings together research in anthropology and social cognition, as well as second language learning, acquisition, and teaching. The authors take the position that multidisciplinary studies on culture carried out in various domains of applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, interaction and pragmatics, and rhetoric and writing can inform second and foreign language learning and teaching. Conversely, the environments in which languages are learned and taught often serve as research grounds where the impact of culture can be investigated" (Hinkel, 1999, p. 2).

Slovak culture within the concept of general cultural differences

Considering the outcome of recent researches, especially in a field of applied linguistics, we believe that a second/foreign language learner should become aware of the coexistence of different concepts within multicultural environment and understand that cultural differences "cause most of the confusion, frustration, sometimes even hostility that occur when people from different cultures interact with each other" (Storti, 1999, p. 5).

Although it is known that any generalizations can contain unfair and not accurate statements about the individuals as members of a group we agree that "cultural generalizations can help to

understand how people from certain cultural group may act and behave in situation and not necessarily how they will behave” (Storti, 1999, p. 3).

Based on author’s over seventeen work experience in multinational companies, a gap in a research on Slovak cultural group generalizations was found. We believe that identifying the position of Slovak culture within the concept of general cultural differences could be contribution to the intercultural understanding of Slovak position of culture within “Blocks of Culture” as defined by Storti (1999, p. 19).

We assume that introducing the concept of general cultural differences to a second language learner within “cultural matrix of language in verbal exchanges” (Kramersch, 1993) and “blocks of culture which correspond to four broad categories of human experience” (Storti, 1999, p. 19) and consequently identifying foreign language learner's position within the defined categories will help a foreign language learner to identify the possible cultural differences and consequently avoid “the confusion, frustration, sometimes even hostility that occur when people from different cultures interact with each other” (Storti, 1999, p. 5).

We are aiming to identify the position of Slovak culture within the concept of general cultural differences characterized “from outside”, by the members of other culture groups – nations; and consequently to equip the second language learners with this findings and to define to which extend it will decrease frustration streaming from misunderstandings in intercultural communication compared to the foreign language learners who were not introduced any cultural differences concepts.

Pilot Research

We conducted a pre-research within two groups; each of them consisting of eight foreign university students learning Slovak as a foreign language in Slovakia. The members of the second group, where some of the cultural differences were discussed, expressed less frustrations streaming from culture shock at the end of school term (3 months) and were looking for opportunities to communicate with native speakers even outside the classroom. The students from the second group without any knowledge about cultural differences expressed enormous frustration streaming from misunderstandings in intercultural communication at the end of school term, felt confused and rejected by native speakers. Foreign language learners equipped with the basic knowledge about cultural specifications within defined categories of intercultural differences feel more comfortable in communication with the native speakers in the foreign language and express lower level of possible culture shock frustrations.

Research Perspectives

Based on the results of the conducted pilot research we decided to continue in research in order to prove that foreign language learners equipped with the basic knowledge about cultural specifications within defined categories of intercultural differences feel more comfortable in communication with the native speakers in the foreign language and express lower level of possible culture shock frustrations.

We consider research question as a qualitative one and we will use qualitative methods for the first findings; interviews and focus groups; with the help of audio recordings and transcripts. The interviews will be semi-structured, conducted on the basis of a loose structure, made up of open-ended questions defining the area of cultural differences obtained by foreign students to be explored. A topic guide will contain a list of the key areas to be covered, with some useful prompts to encourage the interviewee to talk about specific issues if they do not come up spontaneously.

Through the qualitative methods we aim to understand the experiences and attitudes of students and generated hypotheses will be then tested by quantitative methods – questionnaire in order to compare the findings and confirm the hypotheses. The questionnaire will be used for the group of 40 students of foreign language learners equipped with the basic knowledge about cultural specifications within defined categories of intercultural differences and the group of 40 students of

foreign language learners not equipped with the basic knowledge about cultural specifications within defined categories of intercultural differences.

Our preliminary findings show that students are not always aware of the power of consciously using the knowledge about specific cultural features when communicating with a member of a different culture group which may cause misunderstandings in communication resulting into frustrations. We assume that a skilled second/foreign language teacher should be the one who could help to eliminate the negative impact of the potential cultural misunderstandings within intercultural communication.

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Resumé

Autorka sa zameriava na aspekt kultúrneho porozumenia v efektívnej komunikácii ako neoddeliteľnej súčasťi osvojenia si cudzieho jazyka s dôrazom na vzťah medzi jazykom a kultúrou, keďže táto téma „stmeljuje výskum v antropológii a sociálnej kognícii, ako aj v osvojovaní si cudzieho jazyka“ (Hinkel, Eli. 1999. *Culture in Second Language Teaching and Learning*). Autorka sa ďalej pokúša stručne predstaviť na danom priestore trendy uplynulých dvoch dekád vo výskume zameranom na interkulturnú komunikáciu a taktiež sa zmieňuje o jej vlastných zisteniach v oblasti interkulturnej komunikácie, vyplývajúcich zo skúseností získaných počas sedemnásťročnej praxe v multinárodnom prostredí vrátane perspektív vo výskume špecifik slovenskej kultúry z pohľadu interkulturnej komunikácie a definovaní pozície slovenskej kultúry v rámci konceptu definície všeobecných

kultúrnych rozdielov a to charakterizovaných „zvonku“, členmi iných kultúrnych skupín – národností a predstavuje hypotézu, že študenti cudzieho jazyka vybavení základnými znalosťami o kultúrnych charakteristikách v rámci preddefinovaných kategórií interkultúrnych rozdielov sa cítia komfortnejšie v komunikácii s ľuďmi s rodným cieľovým jazykom a vyjadrujú nižšiu hladinu možných frustrácií prameniacich z kultúrneho šoku.

Summary

The work concentrates on the aspect of cultural understanding in effective communication as an inseparable part of second/foreign language acquisition with the focus on interrelationship between language and culture. This subject “brings together research in anthropology and social cognition, as well as second language learning, acquisition, and teaching” (Hinkel, Eli. 1999. *Culture in Second Language Teaching and Learning*) and the attempt of the paper is a brief introduction to the trends in research on intercultural communication in the last two decades and mentioning some of the author's findings in the field of intercultural communication as the result of seventeen year work experience in multinational environment including the research perspectives in the definition of the position of Slovak culture within the concept of general cultural differences characterized “from outside”, by the members of other culture groups – nations and introducing the hypothesis that foreign language learners equipped with the basic knowledge about cultural specifications within pre-defined categories of intercultural differences feel more comfortable in communication with the native speakers in the foreign language and express lower level of possible culture shock frustrations.