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Business simulation as a means of developing intercultural competence

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Abstract

In the age of globalization, there is a sharp need to bring intercultural components to communicative skills in foreign language teaching at universities. This research aimed to find out about role-playing and business simulation effectiveness in acquiring intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes. The participants were second-year students of People's Friendship University of Russia. Methods such as interviews, observations, and testing were applied. The results show that business simulations can increase intercultural competence, strengthen communicative components and help in acquiring the socio-cultural knowledge and skills necessary for effective cross-cultural communication when studying a foreign language.

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1. Introduction

Globalization and the process of integration at both national and multicultural levels have affected all spheres of life, including political, social, economic, and educational spheres. Various nations and ethnic groups are becoming more involved in intercultural communication. Acquiring intercultural competence is an important issue, especially in large cities and in megalopolises where high school students with different cultural, ethnic, religious, and moral

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principles are educated and interact with one another. Additionally, managers of many large companies and firms currently seek employees who have the ability to establish long-term contacts with foreign business partners and also to make decisions at cross-cultural levels. Therefore, young specialists must appreciate and understand how to build effective business relationships with their colleagues and customers in other countries. To deal successfully with representatives of other cultures professionals need to recognize the psychological and linguacultural aspects of intercultural communication. Understanding both aspects is important for developing strong socio-cultural knowledge and skills.

Increasing demands to interact at multicultural levels indicate that acquisition of only linguistic knowledge will not guarantee national and international perception of the world. Many Russian and foreign scientists and researchers have noted this point. Feng, Byram, and Fleming (2009) believe that the successful integration of culture and language teaching can contribute significantly to general humanistic knowledge, and that global understanding ought to be a mandatory component of basic education. Pillar (2013) remarks that the goal of English language teaching in an increasingly global world has changed from a narrow focus on linguistic competence to an intercultural communicative competence. Tomalin and Nicks (2007, p. 67) note that for people working in business and administration “the use of English is mostly about ensuring the communication flow works successfully, and this immediately brings in the cultural dimension, as different business communities views on what constitutes effective communication can vary greatly”. According to Kramsch (2013, p. 245), “in an age of global information technologies and global market foreign language study is challenged to reconcile the local and the global, its national premise and its transnational entailments”. Hadley (2001, p. 345) believes that “language and cultural issues should be taught inseparably in order to cope with the multicultural world whose understanding ensures our secure and peaceful existence, and economic well-being”.

Importantly, Catana (2014, p. 344) stresses that “since motivation plays an important part in a successful English language course focusing on cross-cultural communication issues, we should attach a major importance to increasing the students’ capacity to reflect on different cross-cultural instances of communication and behaviour, to make comparisons between different types of communicative approaches”.

New approaches have recently emerged in Russian universities. These approaches are oriented towards teaching cultural issues in an English language course to develop students’ cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence. Many Russian researchers and teachers note that valuing of ethnic and cultural diversity must continue to be a high priority in education as Russian students learn to live in an increasingly interdependent world (Vereschagin and Kostomarov, 2005; Khaleeva, 1999). A number of scientific papers have explored the psychological and didactical aspects of intercultural communication (Zymnyaya, 1987; Ter-Minasova, 2007; Samokhina, 2005).

The theoretical and methodological foundations of our research were based on the theory of cognitive activity (Vergasov, 1987); the theory of building students’ cognitive interests (Schukina, 1988); the psychological aspects of intercultural differences (Passov, 1988; Zimnyaya, 1987); role-playing pedagogy (Verbitsky, 1991; Pidkasisty and Khaidarov, 1996); and the theory and technology of classwork and self-study integration (Kazarenkov, 2003).

2. Methods and methodology

Role-playing and business simulations have been used for many years and in different countries. For some practitioners, role-playing is a means of improving the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar structures (Greder, 1993; Livingstone, 1998). Others have noted that students communicate, express their feelings, enrich their vocabulary and appraise their existing knowledge through role-playing (Baudains & Baudains, 1990; Revell, 1989; Jones, 2001). According to Donahue and Parsons (1982), business simulations help support the acquisition of the intercultural skills necessary for overcoming misunderstandings in a multicultural business society. Magos and Politi (2008, p.101) note that role-play “offers a more pleasant language-learning experience, creating a safe environment where learners are relaxed, creative and inventive”.

The objective of our research was to explore whether business simulations and role-play were effective for students’ developing intercultural competence as well as communicative skills.

Before starting our pedagogical experiment we developed relationships with the students of experimental groups to estimate their level of English proficiency and their willingness and readiness to participate in the experiment. For

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