IMPROVING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION AT RUSSIAN CLASSES IN HUNGARY'S INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION SPECIALISED IN ECONOMICS

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ABSTRACT

Due to a structural change in language teaching after the change of the regime Russian language was pushed into the background. This process concerned universities specialised in economics, as well. In our days, however, a choice of L2 or L3 is heavily influenced by the recognition of the fact that a knowledge of skills related to Russian cultural, economic and political environment is considered to be an advantage on the labour market. Students being attracted to a particular language, culture, and its native speakers, are more motivated and more successful in mastering the language. In our study we rely on Hungarian and international research into motivation in learning foreign languages, on the other hand, we apply a model of learning involving communicative competence and intercultural dimension. A language learner's identity gets shaped while he or she is involved in learning the language, therefore international communication strengthens individual self-cognition by making the learner think of differences in cultures and personalities. In part 3 of this paper three games developing knowledge and skills for intercultural communication are presented, which have been piloted at Russian language classes.

KEYWORDS: the position of Russian language, motivation in learning languages, L2 motivational Self-system, intercultural competence, communicative competence, forming language learners' identity

INTRODUCTION

In Hungary for 30 years since the change of the political-economic system, the situation in teaching and learning Russian has undergone radical changes. As is commonly known, during the preceding forty years learning Russian had been compulsory. It was introduced in 1949, then removed from the curriculum by the Hungarian government in 1989. Social changes involved alterations in both economic and political relations with Russia and the post-Soviet area. Consequently, a re-evaluation of the attitude towards Russian language and culture took place. Notwithstanding, the change of the regime granted Hungarians a freedom of choice in selecting a second language to learn. Certainly, this freedom of choice of the second language still remains theoretical, since quite too often it is the institution of education which renders the selection of languages that are taught. A change in the structure of foreign-language teaching has led to the number of learners of Russian to drop dramatically, and has practically pushed the language to the background.

The state of affairs that had occurred made a significant impact on the structure of teaching foreign languages in institutions of higher education specialised in economics in Hungary, at

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which once students could choose from a wide range of foreign languages. However, due to recent changes learners reconsidered their attitude to Russian language, having previously realised that Russian continued to play an important part in our geographical region, in the sphere of business, and, therefore, knowledge of Russian would be considered as an advantage on the labour market. As there is an ever-increasing demand for staff speaking Russian besides one or two Western European languages, a great many future professionals choose to learn Russian as their second or third language. The majority of students do not normally study Russian previously during secondary school years. So they are supposed to reach level B2 starting from zero at a college or university. However, this is not an easy job to do for multiple reasons. Teachers face a complicated task due to the lack of suitable textbooks and references on Russian specially developed for Hungarian learners, and also due to the huge numbers of students in groups, whereas the number of classes is strictly limited. Today's most pressing task is to provide teaching materials based on up-to-date research and contemporary communicative approaches to language teaching. In our study we rely on results of research carried out in Hungary and foreign countries into motivations in language learning. On the other hand, we use a model of teaching foreign languages targeting communicative competency and intercultural aspect. In part 3 of this study we present three practical tasks, developed at Russian classes, whose aim is to improve intercultural competence. In the process of piloting the tasks, whose descriptions will follow in a separate section, we found that communication with people speaking another language, will shape and modify the learner's personality, therefore intercultural communication, which makes the learner think of cultural and language differences, strengthens the self-understanding of the personality.

The Role of Motivation in Learning a Foreign Language

Learning a language is not only a cognitive process, but an emotional one, as well. A number of pre-conditions are to be fulfilled in order that a learner can, in fact, succeed in learning a foreign language. Both experience in teaching languages and the outcome of research done into its very process, demonstrate that one of the key pre-requisites is the adequate level of learners' motivation. This is why for the past decades in research into learning and teaching foreign languages, attention basically shifted to analysing motivation in second language acquisition and describing the motivated learner. Research is concentrated on the questions, as follows: How to describe the most heterogenic concept of motivation by means of listing implicit variables? How to define motivated learners? What circumstances can help motivate learners, that is: What sort of factors influence the behaviour of those motivated to learn a language?

One of the utmost remarkable tendencies in studying motivation in second language acquisition originates from a social-psychological approach. According to systematic scrutiny of a variety of models, accomplished by Robert Gardner and associates, motivation in learning a foreign language and a motivated attitude of the learners in the learning process can be explained by an *aptitude* linked to the target language and the speakers of that language [1, 2, 3, 4]. Research has also shown that learners being attracted to this or that foreign language and the culture of its native speakers, are likely to be more motivated and successful in learning the language.

In the early 90's new trends for studying motivation in language learning manifested themselves, among them a theory by the Hungarian philologist and teacher, Zoltán Dörnyei, working in England [5]. Dörnyei proposed a novel theoretical approach to understanding processes of motivation in second language acquisition, which is an attempt to blend the most significant theories and results of research into second language acquisition with psychological study of the personality. The new theory was termed 'the L2 Motivational Self-System'. Taken as a starting point, the three sources of motivation are the learner imagining him- or herself speaking the foreign language competently, impact of the milieu, a positive learning experience,

emotionally loaded experience of second language acquisition. The ideal L2 Self comprises ideals and wishes, which the learners strive to achieve at whatever cost. The learner is sure to succeed if an ideal part of his or her Self offers a drive to master a foreign language, i.e. the language learner imagines him- or herself a person who is capable of freely communicating in a foreign language. Dörnyei assumes that a person possesses not only and ideal L2 image of him- or herself, but also a 'seeing this self', which can be called 'ought to self'. This 'self' summarizes internalised motifs, which should be reached in the learner's opinion, however he or she may not be quite convinced if it is necessary.

Between 1993 and 2004, a research team headed by Zoltán Dörnyei conducted three nationwide surveys in Hungary to specify changes in language attitudes and learning motivation in the behaviour of learners aged 13 to 14. First and foremost, 1993's survey revealed that the change of the regime had impacted the attitude to language learning, in 1999 the survey was repeated so that changes afflicting the learning of foreign languages in Hungary in the 1990's could be understood. In the beginning of 2004, the state of the country's population was documented in respect of the questions being examined before Hungary's accession to the European Union.

The survey can be considered historically unique both in Hungary and worldwide, mainly thanks to some aspects of research into the motivation in learning foreign languages. Data were gleaned by using methods of questionnaires. Some questionnaires were applied three times. They were made up of four broad categories: questions about the foreign language, questions about the language-specified country, questions about attitude to learning the language and information about the learners. Questions related to five target languages (English, German, French, Italian, Russian) helped reveal the learner's orientation in learning the language – why they are learning / would learn a particular language, their attitudes to languages, and the energy they would put into mastering a foreign language. Those questioned were also supposed to tell about their parents' language skills. As a result of processing statistical data, five factors and 2 independent factors emerged [6]. The following important factors were specified: *integrativity* reflecting an interest in a particular language, its speakers and the culture. At the negative end of the scale of factors ranged learners who did not accept the foreign language, its speakers or the culture, whereas at the positive end were listed those, who were so attracted to the language that they wanted to master it on a native speaker's level. *Instrumentality:* this factor specifies the usefulness of each language in terms of competitive advantages, which those mastering the language at quite a high level, may attain in everyday life and in the future (e.g. a better job, higher salary). *Attitude to the native speakers of the language:* the given factor totals the impressions gained from meetings with native speakers and travels to their countries. The *factor of cultural interests* includes a set of variables, which reveal their relationship to works of culture (such as films, TV-programmes, journals, pop music) from various countries. The factor described as *the vitality of the L2 community* shows to what extent the learner considers the country where the language is spoken, important and rich. The two additional factors that remain are *self-confidence* in using the language, which comes under the term of images and opinions of the complexity of the target language from the point of potential mastering, and also the *milieu* which comprises the opinions of friends and parents about learning the language. The study of variables influencing the choice of language and the energy to be put in learning it, showed that the factor called *integrativity,* plays the utmost important role in developing a motivated learning technique. By comparing results gleaned in case of respective languages, it was found that learners thought there existed a very precise rating of languages. During the whole period of the study, English was rated as the most popular, whereas Russian the least popular. The continual popularity of English is confirmed by the fact that the 3 periods of time surveyed, showed no substantial changes. German occupies the 2nd place in spite of the fact that learners want to study this regionally important language less and less. The 3rd place is taken by French with scores quite low, but unchanging. After French comes Italian, whose importance

grew significantly between 1999 and 2004. The list is concluded by Russian, which also demonstrates a tendency for an increasing vitality and cultural interests of the community of the first language between 1999 and 2004.

However, it has to be underlined that figures gleaned about the interest in learning Russian in 2004 are much lower than figures showing the interest in other languages.

Intercultural Competencies

Because of processes of globalisation, IT revolution, a growing population mobility and a wide scope of other factors, modern man is frequently compelled to communicate with people coming from other cultures. At present as a basic requirement, employees are expected to be equipped with intercultural communication skills. This is the only technique available today to understand how people coming from different cultures and having different habits, views and values, approach work, business, co-operation, and communication. Interpersonal communication is a social interaction, in which social identity of those involved play a key role: it determines what we say, how we speak, what we expect of one another, and how we interpret the verbal expressions of our intentions. As it is well-known, difficulties in two persons' communication, who come from different cultures, are linked not only to grammatical incompetency. When people from two different countries communicate, their national and cultural statuses play an important role, for in the given situation those involved in the process will perceive each other as representatives of different cultures. Intercultural encounters challenge the communication partners' cultural identity and communicative skills, and necessarily also teach them how to cope with potential misunderstandings arising in the process of conversation, on the level of the language, and with different thinking, unambiguity, cultural miscoding or cultural clashes.

Since one of the essential tasks of teaching a foreign language is to train the learner to communicate successfully, the learner must acquire skills to tackle new challenges arising in intercultural encounters. Problems of intercultural communication and an overall criterion for mutual understanding as well as tolerance, generated a new approach to teaching foreign languages. This approach combines linguistic and cultural training: those learning the language, are expected to develop a positive attitude to native speakers, and skills inevitable for successful communication in intercultural situations. As stipulated in *Recommendations of the European Council Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), section teaching and assessing levels of competencies, learning a language is aimed not only to successfully convey information, but also to build contacts with the representatives of other cultures [7]. Thus, it is by no accident that the intercultural dimension, a model of teaching based on communicative competence, and training for intercultural communication as key features are becoming more and more important in language teaching methodologies, and are stressed more markedly in the process of language teaching. A valuable contribution to contrive theories of communicative competence, was made by the American linguist, Hymes, who addressed the importance of sociocultural skills that are vital for the process of learning the language. Hymes is a leading expert in devising theories of communication competence [8]. Relying on his model, Canale and Swain isolated four basic constituents of communicative competence (language competence, discursive competence, sociolinguistic competence as well as strategic competence), one of which – sociocultural competence includes both sociocultural and pragmatic knowledge of the language [9]. This definition was subsequently amplified by Jan van Ek, who made a clear-cut distinction between sociocultural competence and social competence: Whereas sociocultural competence is related to the ability to function in various cultures, social competence is defined as the ability to communicate with other people by means of applying social habits, trust, empathy and motivation [10]. Learners are required to possess both these competences so that they have the possibility to work up their own cultural roots and

overcome difficulties in cultural adaptation while interacting in a different cultural environment.

The learners' identity develops in the process of communication; simultaneously exploring another culture and maintaining an undisrupted 'dialogue' with his or her own, whose aim is to look for similarities and differences in cultures. In this way, intercultural communication strengthens personal self-understanding and identity. This is exactly why language teaching should provide learners with knowledge and skills indispensable to cope with more complex situations and a complex perception by the representatives of the other culture speaking a different language, and, as a result to avoid simplifying communication partners' personalities, and stereotypes. An intercultural speaker (term coined by Kramsch) [11] possesses knowledge and skills to successfully communicate between cultures, by interpreting texts and conversational situations in their cultural context, critically handling them, recognising their social and cultural aspect, and also overcomes communicative differences even in situations that have a complex cultural background. *The Recommendations of the European Council specifies the constituents of knowledge, skills and settings* which alongside values that come from personal social identity of the speaker, constitute intercultural competence. The most important attitudes are curiosity, open-mindedness and an aptness to realise the relativeness of one's own values and convictions [12], i.e. to be apt to cognise and discover for oneself other cultures in a detached way. As for knowledge, it is not the factual knowledge of distinct culture that is accentuated, but rather the knowledge of processes, which work under the circumstances of social and individual relations [13]. At the same time, these processes and phenomena have to be illustrated with specific examples and specific cultural phenomena. As it is impossible to predict specific knowledge required for the learner in a particular intercultural situation, not only knowledge, but primarily improving skills will play an important role, allowing the learner to foretell, recognise and eliminate misunderstandings created by cultural differences. According to conclusions made by a team doing research into this issue [14], the most important skills are, as follows:

- *Skills of comparison*, which allows one to place ideas alongside each other, and put together ideas, events, documents from different cultures and to see them in a different light.
- *Skills of interpreting and relating* that serve as the basis for exploring particular cultural phenomena and their links with our own culture.
- *Skills of discovery and interaction*, their aim is to obtain new knowledge about the other culture, to ask questions and to use our intercultural competence in communication in real time.
- *Critical cultural awareness*, which is vital to critically examine phenomena in our own culture and in other cultures on the basis of precise governing principles, i.e. for the sake of understanding things, which form the basis of individual phenomena, and on which our judgements are based.

In addition to developing skills listed above, it is also inevitable to improve attitude expressed in openness, showing interest and detached relationship to an alien culture. We claim that in addition to knowledge of culture, it is utmost important to include in classes of Russian at universities the development of intercultural communication skills and suitable relation to the culture of the foreign language. It is vital to study the teaching of language behaviour, cultured language prescriptions, a presentation of the language projections of linguistic thinking and language multicolourness as fundamental resources. Tasks with the aim to develop intercultural competence generally come to the foreground only at an intermediate or advanced level, when the learner is able to communicate relying on a firmly based language competence. Notwithstanding, the intercultural approach may be infiltrated into the process of teaching at a very early stage. Besides, it is quite appropriate to fill the process of teaching grammar, the

work on vocabulary building, and conversation practice, with the content which fits in. Hereinafter we present a few exercises, which are useful both in studying languages and in respect of developing intercultural communication skills. The idea is given by results of work accomplished by Ildikó Lázár [15].

In the instructions to the exercises intercultural, linguistic and further goals are targeted, materials and preparations needed to do the exercise are specifically given, the whole process is clearly described.

Intercultural Games

'In the Power of Time'

By working individually and in groups with mutual interdependence given in small groups, cooperative skills can be easily developed.

Intercultural aims: familiarising oneself with the image of time in other cultures, improving observation abilities, striving to get rid of prejudices and stereotypes, comparing customs and values of other cultures with the customs familiar from one's own culture.

Language focus: vocabulary, practising expressions linked to time: the use of present tense for expressing habits; *reading skills:* reading and summary of short texts; *conversation skills:* forming opinions, comparison, generalization.

Teaching materials: handouts, copies of project questions
Time required: exercises – 8 to 10 minutes, discussion 15 to 20 minutes

Description of the task:

1. After a brief introduction on the topic, participants are divided into groups of 3 to 4 depending on the size of the class.
2. Group 1 is handed a copy of a text (text A), and the other text B. All steps to be accomplished should apply the puzzle method.
3. After reading the texts rapidly, meanings of unknown words are given (if there are any), which are inevitable to understand the text.
4. The next task for each group: to make a short resumé of their text with joint effort, which consequently any member of the group will be able to retell to those who have not read it.
5. New groups are formed through presentations of both texts in each of them.
6. In the new groups students sum up the core of the texts for those who have not read them, in their own words.
7. A series of questions to be asked or projected are read out, answers are to be given, questions are discussed in 5 to 6 minutes.
8. The a student speaking for his/her team presents the most important achievements of the team.
9. A conclusive discussion is done during which it is very important for each student to reflect on Hungarian examples.
10. The end of the discussion, sorting out focus points to study what is unacceptable for standards of conversation and behaviour, and also recognition of the fact that images of certain qualities such as punctuality or accuracy may be completely different in other countries. However, it is also important to underline that generalization are not applicable to everyone. There are clichéd characters, which emerge from national types, as for example 'the calm Italian', 'impatient Englishman' and 'accurate German'.

Text A

Like in the US, in other countries with analogous culture, keeping to deadlines punctually in fulfilling business tasks, has spread to other spheres of life. Lectures and festive dinners must start strictly keeping to a fixed time with a standard deviation of 5 to 10 minutes. If you arrange a business appointment in a street, you must be on time. Even the future is planned well ahead. An invitation to lunch at home or at a restaurant is sent three weeks before, this is the commonly accepted practice now. These day Americans never fail to supply all details, i.e. the time and place of lunch: 22nd May, 3 weeks from Tuesday at the French restaurant Chez Jean on the southwest corner of 35th street and Third Avenue at 1:15. In Russia a fixed appointment may be put off or called off, this is why it is still usual to 'phone each other' to confirm the night before. If you invite guests, hazy wording (such as 'at about 6', 'approximately at 7') is quite common.

Text B

For native speakers of German the whole world falls down, if a train or a plane happens to get delayed. In their culture punctuality and the flawless functioning of transportation play an important part. People in England and the Netherlands, however, think about it differently. In these cultures, the attitude of passengers is, perhaps, best described with the word 'resigned', when transport is delayed. In the United States the proverb 'Time is money' perhaps is more real than anywhere else. If doing a change, a air passenger misses his flight due to plane delays or rebooking, American airlines provide ample compensation. Quite often unsuccessful travellers are granted free hotel rooms and gift cards to compensate them for the waste of time.

Questions for Discussion:

What happens in Hungary, if students turn up 20 minutes late for a seminar or lecture? Will any consequences follow?
On the whole, how much flexible is the regime of beginning and finishing work at workplaces?
If your friends or acquaintances invited you to dinner at 7 p.m., what time do you have to arrive?
When do you have to arrive for a meeting arranged for 10 a. m.?
Where would you place your culture on a scale of punctuality? What are the expectations in terms of punctuality in our country? How much you meet general expectations in this respect?
How do Hungarians usually react, if a train or plane is late? Do you get depressed, or nervous, or try to be understanding or are you patient?
How much does community transport keeps to timetables?
What differences have you revealed in people's attitude to time in different cultures?

'Puzzles Given by Culture'

Working in small groups to solve puzzles, relying on their individual experience and observations and observations is a way for students to come together.

Intercultural aims: acquiring cultural knowledge; comparing customs, value systems; increasing interest in other cultures; surpassing stereotypes.
Language focus: extending vocabulary: studying and using the names and customs of countries; *grammar:* present tense, asking questions; *conversation skills:* making questions, expressing opinions, discussion.
Preparation: drawing up 10 questions for a quiz; Xerox copies or projection of questions.
Time required: 30 minutes

Doing the task:
1. Students form mixed groups of 2 to 3. They should preferably join those who they have never worked with before, or have done so quite rarely.
2. Giving handouts or projecting questions on a screen. It is necessary to tell students to discuss each question, and then to explain why they find statements true or false.
3. Correcting solutions together.
4. Discussing new or unexpected moments having occurred in the game, what information they find important, factors that they think are impossible to prepare for. It is worth fixing that it is impossible to become familiar with all customs, images a people of any may have, but one must keep in mind that many a phenomenon may have different meanings in different cultures, representations of which one may encounter. It can be also interesting to discuss what Hungarian customs and traditions might appear strange to a foreigner visiting Hungary.

True or false?
1. In England it is acceptable to walk with your umbrella pulled up.
2. In France if you are invited to friends or a party it is common to bring some wine.
3. You must instantly put away a name card given by a Japanese businessman and give him yours.
4. In Lebanon males frequently walk hand-in-hand.
5. Women rarely shake hands with each other in Ireland.
6. In Italy it is inappropriate to enquire about your new acquaintances' political views.
7. In Finland people often drink milk with their lunch.
8. In Greece it does not do to be more than 10 minutes late for a formal meeting.
9. In Austria a women is always the first to enter a restaurant before a man.
10. In Hungary it is OK to greet a stranger in an elevator.
11. In Russia people make a toast only at official parties.

Keys to the task:
1. False, because it is thought to bring bad luck.
2. False, because it may disgrace the host who will think you do not trust his choice of wine.
3. False, if we put the card away rapidly and do not look at it gratefully, we may offend a Japanese partner.
4. True, this is a sign of a friendship.
5. True, it is the biggest thing they ever do for each other, but not always.
6. True, this is a delicate topic.
7. True.
8. False, the Greek may be even later.
9. False. Like in Hungary, in Austria a man should go first to make sure it is a safe place for his female companion to enter.
10. True.
11. False. Giving toasts in the company of friends start right after partying starts.

'Cavalcade of Tastes'

Talking about favourite food products and interesting eating habits can be delightful especially if it is possible to have a quick snack. The social experience of having a mealor even cooking it creates a fine atmosphere.

Intercultural aim: observing and analysing various everyday eating habits, and getting extra information about historical and cultural values hidden behind them.
Language focus: extending vocabulary in the topic 'Cooking and Eating Habits'; *grammar:* making questions, Past tense, imperative; *conversation skills:*talk, spontaneous discussion.
Preparations: search for recipes, video showing the making of typical Russian dishes, details of a film about a restaurant, lunch at home, tables containing aspects.
Time required: 20 to 30 min. (can be repeated)

Description of the game:
1. Presenting photos and/or videotape showing one or two Russian dishes and eating habits.
2. Watching a part from a film about a restaurant, lunch or dinner at home. Luckily, there are scenes of dinner parties in many Soviet and Russian films.
3. Studying the menu card of a Russian restaurant in small groups.
Stimulated by visual information in the film or text in the menu card, questions from the tables are answered, or new questions are added.
4. Each student chooses a dish whose recipe he or she has to find for the next class, and then to present it by showing photos or video. If the dish is cooked at home, a tasting can be held.

Aspects:
What sort of oddities have you discovered in the menu card? Is it different from a menu card in a Hungarian restaurant? If yes, how is it different?
What kind of typical spices, ingredients, dishes and drinks can be listed from Russian cuisine?
What is the order of dishes during a meal (salad is served before or at the end of a banquet, is eaten with the main dish, drinks served before/after/during the meal, dishes are served one by one or everything served right away)?
What sort of bread is served? (If any)
What register do restaurant staff use to communicate with customers? (informal, friendly, reserved, humble)
How do Russian eating habits differ from ours?
How do family, business and informal lunches differ from the standards accepted in Hungary?

Conclusions

The integration of intercultural aspect into language teaching is frequently hindered by difficulties. As it is not about obtaining factual knowledge, getting familiarised with the so-called 'high culture' of a given country, if separated from language teaching, in itself will not lead to the development of intercultural competence. The aims of exploring another culture are only reached via integrating into the process of learning its language. However, quite frequently it is not an easy job to combine cultural and language gaols in the framework given by a language class. Creating tasks similar to those presented in this paper, may help make a step to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes vital for intercultural competence. Experience gained during classes verifies that applying such an approach to teaching help students develop not only in respect of mastering the language, but also shape their images of cultural and personal distinctions, and also their relationship to them. One of the keys to successful communication is to realise those differences, and avoid stereotypes when approaching them. One of the models

of cultural synergy, is based on mutual understanding between different cultures and styles of communication. It includes knowledge and acceptance of cultural models, expectations and interpretation strategies of the other side. Learning about a culture with a different language contributes to the learner's personality shaping, whose thinking will become more flexible and apt to perceive global diversity. In this way intercultural competence will stimulate man's self-cognition and the assertion of his own identity. Nevertheless, it is only possible if the culture of the language learner gets involved in this two-way process as an equal partner, enjoys respect, and we develop a relationship to interaction at classes, which makes it a process governed by mutual understanding.

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