

Speaking Culturally as a Key to Effective Communication

Abstract:

Second language learning is often misleadingly seen as learning the vocabulary and grammar of a foreign language. However, this approach languages is flawed by severe language interference resulting in communication failure.

Solution to this can be seen in teaching languages *culturally*, through the lens of culture, focusing on specific ways of shaping the reality, showing another way of thinking about things.

The most difficult problem lies in differences between speech etiquettes of the languages in contact (honorifics), ethnically shaped humour rules, etc. Without understanding these cultural aspects, to build a solid bridge of professional communication and to have an effective negotiation process is next to impossible.

The situation is even more troubling if we consider languages of Asia and Africa in the Russian setting. The patterns of the native language are applied to the linguistic material of Asian or African languages leading to even deeper misunderstanding.

The 'cultural' approach to teaching any foreign language can help students avoid misconceptions about a second language, giving them a key to successful communication in life and professional activity.

Key words:

Second language acquisition, culture, speech etiquette, language interference, hierarchy of mistakes.

The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that an approach to teaching foreign languages through cultures can help to avoid failures in communication. The main method used is contrastive analysis of language structures and ways to shape linguistic picture of the world.

Second language learning is often misleadingly seen as learning the vocabulary and grammar of a foreign language. However, this approach to learning languages is seriously flawed by severe language interference resulting in mistakes and inaccuracies and, finally, leading to communication failure.

Solution to this can be seen in teaching foreign languages *culturally*, through the lens of culture and language, that is, focusing on specific ways languages shape the reality, demonstrating and emphasizing these particular differences between any contacting languages (two or even more) and, thus, showing students another way of thinking about things.

An approach to teach the grammar and vocabulary of another language constantly referring to its cultural aspects is nothing new (see, for example, "Culturally Speaking" by Rhona B. Genzel and Martha Graves Cummings), however, it doesn't seem to be consistently resorted to when teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

The first step is to build a "hierarchy" of the most pervasive mistakes in the English speech of Russians, since this can help to clearly demonstrate principal 'culturally' weak points in the grammar and vocabulary of the contacting languages and draw students' attention to the aspects of the second language which, unluckily, tend to be neglected.

The principal mistakes which appear to be very hard to avoid concern the following: 1) expressing agreement with negative statements; 2) using modal verbs with mental verbs and verbs of sensual perception; 3) possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns with parts of the body and terms of kinship; 4) prepositions of time and space; 5) word order; 6) words which are differently connoted in Russian and English.

If the wrong use of prepositions and word order only makes communication "bumpy" and not smooth, a speaker's inability to agree or disagree with their interlocutor in a proper way as well as words with wrongly used connotations can seriously damage communication.

These are the problems which refer to all spheres of language usage, though they might become a serious hinder in business negotiations and from this point view they are especially important in ESP.

Another problem arises when a speaker transposes his native ideas and patterns of structuring the reality (reflected in their native language) onto their foreign speech, as this leads to even more severe misunderstandings. Classical examples of this are the way speakers of different languages "divide" the day, though dictionaries misleadingly give them definite pairs of equivalents (e.g., morning for English speakers begins right after midnight, while for Russian speakers it starts at the moment a person opens his/her eyes after a night sleep). No less known is the distribution between 'lunch', 'dinner', on the one hand, and 'обед', on the other. Here again a misused word may block understanding between communicants.

The most difficult problem lies in differences between speech etiquettes of the languages in contact including specific ways of using honorifics, ethnically shaped humour rules and understatement which is a mark of 'Englishness' (Kate Fox). Without understanding these cultural aspects of a second language it is practically impossible to build a solid bridge of communication, especially in business or another professional sphere, or to lead a negotiation process effectively.

The same troubling situation occurs when we turn to languages of Asia and Africa taught in the Russian setting. The patterns of the native, in our case - Russian, language are applied to the linguistic material of Asian or African languages. In this case clashes between the first language culture and the second one can bring about even deeper misunderstandings.

All of these types of mistakes obviously result from negative language interference, when a Russian form or structure is mistakenly transposed onto English which happens if the Russian

way thinking is applied while combining English words into sentences. It turns out to be even worse when the English language of a native Russian is applied to the professional sphere of Asian and African studies, neglecting cultural peculiarities of both English culture and that of an African (Asian) country.

The approach that shows culture through language can contribute to an effective teaching of any foreign language, which will help students avoid misconceptions about a second language, thus giving them a key to successful communication in life and professional activity.

List of references:

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