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FORMATION OF SOCIOCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN TEACHING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AT THE UPPER-INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

FORMAREA COMPETENȚEI SOCIOCULTURALE ÎN PREDAREA LIMBII ENGLEZE LA NIVELUL DE CUNOȘTINȚE PREAVANSAT

Eraneac Sagoian, dr., conf. univ.,
UPS „Ion Creangă"din Chişinău

Eraneac Sagoian, PhD associate professor
SPU "Ion Creangă", Chişinău

ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9812-1094

Agunik Sagoyan, prof., grad did. II,
LT „D.Cantemir", Chişinău

Anna Solodovnicova, prof., Liceul Moldo-Finlandez, Chişinău
Anna Solodovnicova, Moldo-Finnis Lyceum, Chişinău

Abstract

The notable shift of focus in the field of education in more recent years fostered the idea of teaching a foreign language communicatively, that is, acquiring linguistic competence and communicative skills. Our fundamental interest in this article is sociocultural competence, referring to the speaker's knowledge of how to convey messages within social and cultural context including a better understanding of the conventions of language usage in a society. The article deals with the necessity and value of implementation of teaching the sociocultural competence to students of the upper-intermediate level of English language proficiency and its integration into EFL classes in the context of culture, its values and society for successful communication based upon sociocultural knowledge.

Key-words: communicative competence, sociocultural competence, foreign language acquisition, English as a foreign language, upper-intermediate level, linguistics

Rezumat

Deplasarea vizibilă a centrului de interes în domeniul educației a încurajat ideea predării limbilor străine bazate pe competențe. Interesul nostru fundamental pentru acest articol este competența socioculturală care se

referă la cunoștințele vorbitorului despre cum să transmită mesaje în contextul social și cultural. Acest lucru ridică problema transferării propriei înțelegeri aspectului sociocultural în cultura limbii străine. Pe deasupra, conștientizarea diferențelor interculturale este introdusă treptat în curriculum de limbi străine. Articolul se referă la necesitatea implementării a predării competenței socioculturale pentru studenții de nivel preavansat și integrarea acesteia în clasele EFL pentru o comunicare de succes bazată pe cunoștințe socioculturale.

Cuvinte-cheie: competența comunicativă, competența socioculturală, achiziția limbilor străine, engleza ca limbă străină, nivelul preavansat, lingvistică

In the context of the intercultural paradigm, the modern goal of teaching a foreign language should be seen as an integrative whole. Since language is a sociocultural phenomenon, it's apparently vital to acquire it not only from the grammatical point of view but from the cultural perspective as well. A number of world-known linguists and leading researchers in the fields of education and language teaching have noticed this particular feature which has found its reflection in their works. Based upon the longitudinal research in the field, the communicative competence is represented by a number of competences. For instance, Marianne Celce-Murcia [1, p.43], professor of Applied Linguistics and Teaching English as a Second Language at the University of California, Los Angeles, divided communicative competence into linguistic competence, *sociocultural competence*, actional competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (see *Figure 1*). Responding to Celce-Murcia, Usó Juan and Martínez Flor [8, p.161] claim that strategic competence should be placed at the same level as the rest of the competences since its goal is building discourse competence while allowing simultaneous with the other components development of the communicative ability. (see *Figure 2*) The communicative competence, therefore, is represented by a number of competences, linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, *sociocultural* (sometimes called *intercultural and strategic.*
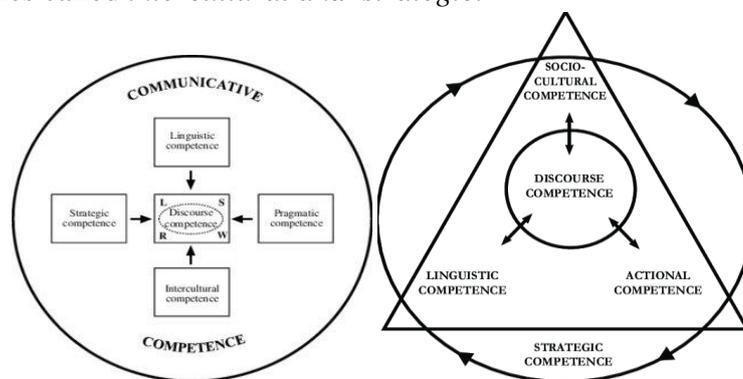

Figure 2

Figure I

In this article, we are taking a keen interest in the specific ability to interpret intercultural differences, to use a foreign language appropriately in diverse ways, in various social and cultural contexts in which the intercultural communication takes place that is called *sociocultural competence* and its teaching as a part of a foreign language acquisition that is essential for a learner of a foreign language who aims to reach the superior level of speaking ability when the one is capable of speaking about abstract topics, communicating in a wide variety of settings, using idiomatic expressions and slang, understanding language of the interlocutor in context, and producing native-like speech. This ability to adjust speech, i.e. communicative competence, to fit the situation in which the speech is made is *sociocultural*

competence, and without this ability, even the most perfectly grammatical utterances can convey an entirely different meaning - different from that one the speaker initially intended. The cultural component is vital for sociocultural competence formation as it creates fertile soil for mastering the language, adaptation and comprehension of a foreign language in the context of culture it is spoken in. And though the aforementioned understanding and awareness exist in educational circles, the number of studies highlight the lack of communicative skills essential for intercultural communication among EFL learners regardless of their proficiency level of linguistic knowledge. In other words, a language learner may produce a grammatically correct utterance the meaning of which interlocutors will understand but the cultural or social meaning will not be conveyed in the target language cultural context. As a result, such concepts as "Moldovan English" or "translation from English into English" appear. The inconsistency between the language teaching methodologies and the specific needs for language use in the real world has become more distinctive than ever. In the introduction to a special issue of "The Modern Language Journal", a publication of the professor Claire Kramsch noted that "*there has never been a time when language teaching and learning has been more interactive and more imaginative than today. Communicative pedagogies have made the classroom more participatory, electronic chatrooms have loosened the tongues and the writing of even the shyest students, video and the Internet have made authentic materials available as never before, telecollaboration and social networks have increased students' access to real native speakers in real cultural environments - and yet there has never been a greater tension between what is taught in the classroom and what the students will need in the real world once they have left the classroom.*" [4, p.296] This article, therefore, highlights the necessity of approaching teaching a foreign language as a holistic process that in turn requires teaching sociocultural competence as a part of the communicative competence in English classrooms.

In spite of all the awareness and published studies confirming its value, the sociocultural competence acquisition process, however, is gradual and quite challenging both for learners living in their native speech environment and teachers trying to find new ways of teaching a foreign language under a new paradigm. For learners living in the target language culture learning English as a second language, it might be assumed that they will acquire sociocultural competence simply by immersion. However, a summary of studies written by Kendall A. King and Rita E. Silver, University of Pennsylvania, on the effect of immersing in a medium on sociolinguistic competence led them to conclude "*that length of stay in a second language environment is beneficial for acquiring sociolinguistic competence but insufficient and time consuming.*" [3, p. 48] Generally second language learners may lack motivation, time or opportunities to acquire sociocultural rules "naturally". One of the factors that makes sociocultural competence so hard to acquire is the large amount of varieties in cultural rules of speaking; in other words, even though the situation in which something is said is the same it may be appropriate in one culture and completely inappropriate in another one. EFL students are, however, by no means socioculturally dumb since they have first acquired the complex sociolinguistic and cultural system of their mother tongue already. Teachers must therefore attempt to elaborate methods and create materials that will facilitate and scaffold the

acquisition of sociocultural competence in a foreign language. Due to the fact that culture is so embedded in people that they don't even notice its characteristics, it is difficult for teachers to teach culture by relying on their perceptions of their own culture. A similar statement could be made about sociocultural aspects of language. As noted above, there is an obvious need for teachers to help their students achieve a high level of language acquisition part of which is sociocultural competence; to help teachers approach this task, however, not many resources are available. Many teachers may nonetheless feel nervous about discussing such a sensitive topic as cultural values in the classroom due to fear of the risk of unintentionally offending learners. Also, culture is something that must be experienced. However, a foreign language classroom may be the only place where learners shall have the opportunity to be provided with tools for understanding basic cultural differences that can then be applied to real-life situations encountered outside the classroom in a foreign culture. All this has encouraged the seeking of educational solutions to these urgent tasks and immediate needs for formation of sociocultural competence in EFL students in scientific works with the further possibility of evaluation and adaptation to the specific regional circumstances or English classroom contexts.

A few studies have focused on methods of teaching culture. Those that served the purpose of the present article are outlined below; none of them had been used intact as the experiment held in the framework of the article proceeded. Nelson H.Brooks, Ph.D., associate professor at Yale University, developed ten topics shown in *Figure 3*, which should serve as the basis for teaching cultural aspects in English classrooms. [5, p.362]

Brooks' Ten Topics Around Which Teaching Culture Should Be Based	
(1) symbolism	(6) love
(2) value	(7) honour
(3) authority	(8) humor
(4) order	(9) beauty
(5) ceremony	(10) spirit

Figure 3

Brooks has also developed the Key Questions constituting two sets of questions, the first set covers individual aspects of a culture (for example, "*How do you act toward a stranger?*" or "*What are your superstitions about?*") and the second one looks at institutional aspects (for example, "*What schools and colleges can you go to?*" or "*What laws must you obey?*"). [2, p.162-163] Cristina Bratt Paulston, associate professor in linguistics, in her article "Linguistic and Communicative Competence" suggests a variety of useful techniques to help EFL learners express themselves appropriately in different social contexts [7, pp.347-362]. Nostrand's Emergent Model [2, pp.165-166] lists nine objectives (learners should have the ability to recognize a pattern when it is illustrated, evaluate the form of a statement concerning a culture pattern, identify basic human purposes that make significant the understanding that is being taught, etc.) that learners should achieve to reach a cultural understanding. Adapting the Kluckhohn Model [6, pp.449-458] in which five basic value orientations (*human nature, man-nature, time, activity, relational*) that are declared to be

common to all cultures and the range of variations postulated for each are listed; Ortuño thus suggests to help EFL learners notice cross-cultural differences by placing one's cultural values within the model's framework. Despite methods described above and some other recent findings on the importance of sociocultural competence in foreign language learning, culture is still often not included in the language curricula, especially for EFL instruction, or despite its inclusion there are no succinct and targeted explanations on how to teach it in practical terms. Culture is often considered an additional topic.

To implement the outcome of the present article investigation and to come up with workable solutions to the formation of sociocultural competence in teaching the English language at upper-intermediate level, descriptive and experimental methods were used:

- Observation
- Analysis
- Questionnaire survey
- Experimental teaching

Having in mind the difficulties that come alongside teaching sociocultural competence in the EFL classroom, this experiment conducted in the framework of the article presented a teaching model lesson designed to form and develop skills in sociocultural competence. Two groups, the experimental group and the control group, of 11th grade students took part in the experiment aimed at teaching and formation of sociocultural competence. The experimental group consisted of 11 upper-intermediate students who attended after school English classes at a language center in Chișinău. The control group consisted of 14 intermediate and upper-intermediate 11th grade students from Liceul Moldo-Finlandez. All of them were Moldovans. There were eleven male and fourteen female participants at the time of the survey, all teenagers with the primary motivation of passing the BAC exam and attending a university. Most of the students were at the upper intermediate level of language proficiency, which according to the ACTFL assessment criteria includes such skills as narrating in major time frames, ability to speak in some formal and informal environments, and talking about concrete objects of personal and public interest. Observation notes were taken during the classes. The lesson plan involved adding extra activities and tasks to the textbook exercises supplementing in this way a regular lesson with some working and successful techniques aimed to help students develop sociocultural competence. It was composed with the focus on the speech acts of compliments as the 1st of March is the World Compliments Day, so it addressed both cultural and cross-cultural, and sociocultural issues connecting these two areas in a single teaching unit for presentation to an EFL class with the main objective of formation sociocultural competence in students through giving and receiving compliments about their possessions like clothing, jewelry, and other belongings. At the lesson, students were exposed to three cultures - American, German and Moldovan. The following activities for teaching both giving and accepting compliments, what is usually neglected, were incorporated into the lesson:

- *Giving/receiving compliments* using the provided patterns gave the possibility for the students from the experimental group to get acquainted with common patterns and adjectives used in western cultures for giving compliments.

- Humorous real-life example of an immigrant woman from the USA that experienced culture shock in Germany was read with the group together at the lesson. It was related to gender and social status, so these aspects were discussed in a free and mindful manner at the lesson.

- Role-play activity provided the students with the opportunities to practice giving and receiving compliments assuming the role of people from different cultures - they were supposed to consider their cultural particularities, gender, age and the same aspects of their partners.

- During the *discussion* time every student had a possibility to share his/her thoughts on the topic, compare different cultures to Moldovan culture, identify differences and similarities, express their attitudes and feelings for both states when they were given and while accepting compliments from others.

- Practical exercises at the end of the experimental lesson gave learners some practice in understanding giving and receiving compliments when they put the phrases from the dialogues in correct order or complete the dialogues with the patterns they've studied at the beginning.

The information on cross-cultural differences was applied to the speech act of compliments; usage of compliments is tied to American cultural values which is not very common to the native culture of the learners. Worksheets with most common compliments, frequency of usage, subjects of compliments, responses to compliments and sociocultural context were provided to learners; these values were tied to the Kluckhohn Model that was discussed earlier. Some humorous examples of cross-cultural misunderstandings were provided as well. This exercise gave learners practice in applying the rules for American compliments and helped raise their awareness of sociocultural elements and how these elements affect various situations.

The experiment consisted of two stages, questionnaire completing and a lesson. Students in the control group completed the questionnaire before their regular lesson. Students in the experimental group completed the questionnaire twice – before and after the experimental lesson that involved extra activities and tasks aimed to help students develop sociocultural competence. The survey was conducted at the end of the classes with some basic questions aiming to see how much information on culture and sociocultural aspect of the language were the learners provided prior to the lesson and whether they find the classes with the activities aimed at formation of sociocultural competence useful for language acquisition.

The *Diagrams 1* and *2* compare the results of the questionnaire completed by the students of the control group before their regular lesson (blue value) and the same questionnaire completed by the students of the experimental group completed before and after the experimental lesson (red and green values respectively). It is worth mentioning that after the conducted experiment the average of students' *understanding of the effectiveness* of the competence development rose by 30%; 7 students rated the *importance of sociocultural competence* acquisition as 'very high'; 10 compared to 6 before the experiment out of 11 students expressed their *understanding of its acquisition*.

Diagram1
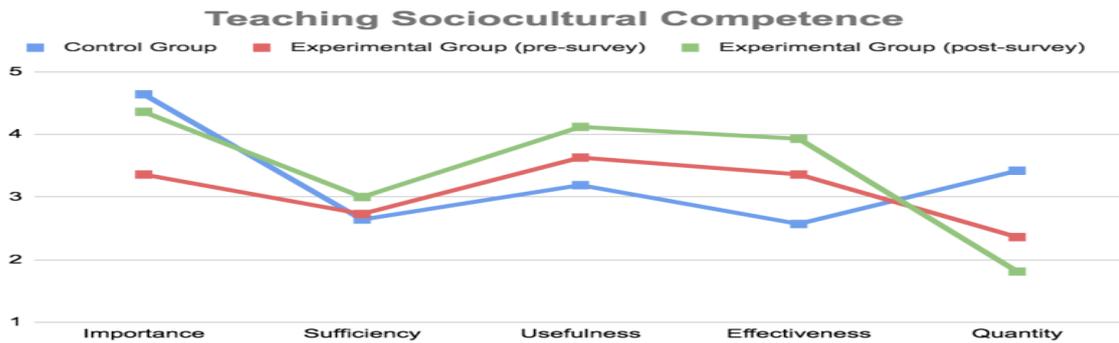
After the experiment, students consider *discussion* as the most effective activity for sociocultural competence acquisition. Students realized the usefulness of all the speech acts in the process of sociocultural competence formation and development. The learners' written responses also provided a few noteworthy comments on the usefulness and relevance of the sociocultural information which had been presented at the lesson, especially the activity with Americans and Moldovans using compliments. In response to the question "*What do you consider to be the most motivating for sociocultural competence formation?*" one student wrote (style and spelling of t the original are kept), "*Having lessons and interactive activities about different cultural aspects, dialects, idioms, etc. that are presenting groups that speak the same language. Diagram 2 The activity about compliments was useful because it was something new for me.*" Another student wrote, "*I consider it really important to know what is the best way to respond to a compliment in a foreign culture. So a dialogue with an nativ american, some interactive thinks and games and lessons help a lot; the book does not help us in our develop socio-cultural competence.*" Another student wrote, "*The ability of socializing. In the case of compliments, you can learn some slang and American traditions.*" Three students from the experimental group weren't really interested in another culture as well as in language acquisition in general and formation of sociocultural competence in particular. These results present some important issues on the teaching sociocultural competence to EFL students. Learners who are interested in learning the English language and fine-tuning its usage find information about the English language culture useful and indispensable. It is not until students reach a specific level of awareness that a sensitivity to material on cross-cultural issues may have developed, and this article itself supports this concept. Upper-intermediate level students recognized the necessity and effectiveness of the provided activities aimed at teaching the sociocultural aspect of the English language and the importance of these activities in the process of learning a foreign language. The conducted experiment has demonstrated that when it comes to learning a foreign language, the sociocultural aspect of it reveals that the grammatical side of a foreign language is not enough to establish successful communication. Foreign language teachers therefore should effectively expose students to English culture and intercultural communication and also design English lessons engaging students into activities aiming to develop cross-cultural literacy in learners that can be achieved by exposing students to different sociocultural aspects of the English language and providing a range of meaningful activities based upon recent studies in the field. In this

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context, the classroom can help support what is learned through experience by giving learners an opportunity to discuss and ask questions about these experiences to the teacher and other students. The final important point to be made from this article's findings is that teachers should consider different aspects such as cultural awareness, acceptability, language level, inasmuch as culture is best emphasized in upper-intermediate or advanced EFL classes.
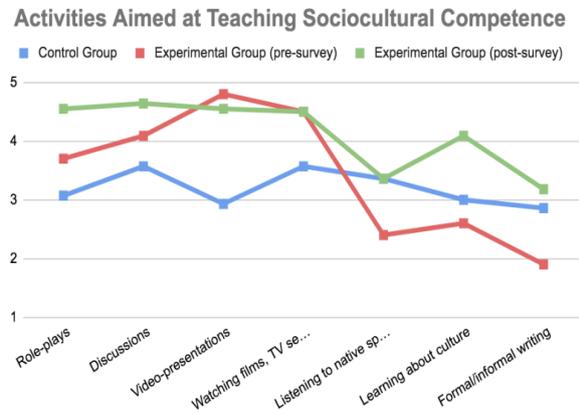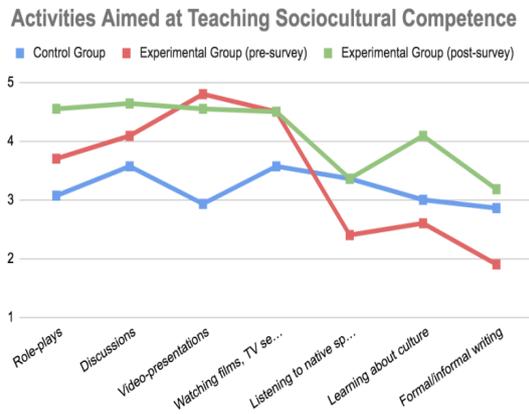
The present article suggests that formation and development of communicative competence with sociocultural competence as one of its components in English language learners is a vital skill that should be closely integrated in foreign language teaching and learning curricula. The findings of this study have clear methodological recommendations for the development of the aforementioned competence in students with the upper-intermediate level of the English language proficiency. Further studies as well as further guidance would be useful, at least in relation to specific aspects of the topic, formation of the sociocultural competence in teachers, and effects of various classroom practices on sociocultural competence development.

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DEVELOPING READING SKILLS THROUGH FAIRY TALES

DEZVOLTAREA ABILITĂȚILOR DE CITIT PRIN POVEŞTI

Jana Grecu, doctor, conf. univ.,
UPS „Ion Creangă" din Chişinău
Jana Grecu, Ph.D., Associate Professor,
SPU "Ion Creangă" , Chisinau
ORCID iD 0000-0003-3007-6762

Rezumat

În acest articol se examinează problema dezvoltării abilităților de citire ale copiilor și utilizarea citirii ca metodă de învățare a unei limbi. Autorul acordă o atenție deosebită rolului poveștilor în acest proces. Autorul vorbește și despre metoda de lucru cu o poveste la lecțiile de limbă engleză pentru a dezvolta creativitatea copiilor și a le stimula procesul de învățare a limbii.

Cuvinte-cheie: limba engleză, dezvoltarea abilităților de citire, metodă de învățare a unei limbi, poveste, citire, copii.

Abstract

The present article examines the issue of developing children's reading skills and the use of reading as a method of learning a language. The author pays special attention to the role of fairy tales in this process. The author also talks about the method of working with a fairy tale in the course of English lessons to develop children's creativity and stimulate their language learning.

Key-words: English language, reading skills development, language learning method, fairy tale, reading, children.

Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.

Richard Steel

Reading is an essential part of learning English. Children first begin to speak and listen, then they learn to read and write. Reading is an important stage of a child's growth, personal evolution and education. Reading teaches children how to correctly construct sentences and express their thoughts. While reading in English, children also get to know more about the culture of the English-speaking people, replenish their vocabulary with useful expressions and enrich their speech with interesting phrases. Children's literature is the art which is closely related to pedagogics, as its mission is to educate taking into account the age characteristics, abilities and needs of the child. That is why stimulating children's reading is of vital importance.

Unfortunately, from year to year the interest of children in reading books decreases. One of the reasons for this negative process is the growing influence of media on them. Reading books is replaced by hours of television viewing. Family libraries are being replaced by video libraries and computer games. In this regard, the formation of a child's interest to reading books remains very relevant. Particular attention to this pedagogical problem should be paid in elementary school.