

VI. ИЗ ОПЫТА ЗАРУБЕЖНЫХ ВУЗОВ

УДК 811.111'27(045)

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JCCC AND UDSU: MORE THAN SUCCESSFUL ACADEMIC COLLABORATION

The article covers the question of the contemporary model of communicative competence which should include a vital component of cultural awareness. It is obvious that in order to exist and interact successfully in a diverse environment, it is necessary for students to develop this essential competence.

In an EFL class, learners are monolingual and have little access to a well-educated native speaker. From this perspective, online courses with an American professor teaching the class, might be highly beneficial to the students whose major is English.

The article discusses the structure of an online course called “Intercultural communication”, its main goals, topics and aspects of teaching. The course widens the learners’ perspectives by gaining insight into the American culture, including such critical notions as: attitudes, beliefs, norms and values, discourse organization and body language. Special attention is paid to language which also reflects and interprets culture. There are a lot of examples of unsuccessful cross-cultural communication and such misunderstandings of verbal messages can often lead to the formation of a distorted picture of another society.

Thus, this course helps both American and Russian students to view another culture objectively, not as a violation from the norm but simply as an alternative.

Key words: intercultural communication, international cooperation, online course, cultural competence, the English language.

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Introduction

Nowadays to know a foreign language well usually requires profound knowledge not only of grammar rules and collocation patterns, but also appropriate cultural content to be used in the process of communication. The goal of this article is to show how the adoption of cultural approach in English language teaching has helped to enhance essential socio-linguistic competence among Russian students by introducing an online-course in their curriculum. In the framework of the long-lasting cooperation between Udmurt State University (UdSU) and Johnson County Community College (JCCC) this online-course in intercultural education has acquired immense significance and helped Russian students be interested, responsive and highly motivated when dealing with exploration of different cultures.

The course represents a new form of teaching practice which turned out to be quite successful. The fact is, hybrid education is gaining popularity and requires special attention from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers.

The article outlines the structure of the course and its methodology which is based on the research of such distinguished scholars as R. Moloney and L. Harbon [2]; A. Scarino [3]; C. Sinicrope, J. Norris, and Y. Watanabe [4], which provide ready-made activities and training material as well as fundamental theoretical findings used in the development of the course.

The structure of the article comprises the following aspects: the historical background of international cooperation which began more than 20 years ago, the format peculiarities of the course, that have been specially created by the American professor for Russian students. The article dwells on the essential learning outcomes of the on-line course, working in which learners can acquire necessary skills to become competent communicators.

1. Background of Collaboration between JCCC and UdsU

JCCC is known for its strong reputation for educational excellence and student success. It offers more than 100 different degree and certificate options in 48 programmes of study. There is a class for every interest, including liberal arts like English and humanities, emerging technologies like game development and information technology, and specialty areas like hotel and lodging management, chef apprenticeship, dental hygiene and emergency medical science [5].

UdsU is the leading education institution of Udmurtia. Over 85 years of academic excellence and research experience made a great basis to develop UdsU into dynamic and innovative institution recognizing classical approaches to higher education training. 13 Institutes of UdsU offer a wide range of degree programmes in humanities, sciences and engineering [6].

JCCC and UdsU have been successfully cooperating for more than twenty years. This cooperation began in the 1990s at the time of “perestroika” when a lot of changes took place all over the world. The Soviet Union ceased to exist as well as the iron curtain which separated Russians from the entire world. Some Russian professors seized the opportunity and set off to discover America for themselves and their students. It was crucial for them because in EFL class, students are usually monolingual and they learn English while living in their own country. They have little access to the target culture and therefore a limited ability to become culturally competent. Immediately after the professors’ return, a lot of new ideas were introduced into UdsU curriculum, but more important was the fact that the first visit marked the beginning of a long lasting friendship among staff and faculty members of both universities.

A lot of work has been done since then with more than 40 people participating in the exchange visits to give a series of lectures or to teach practical classes. Some American students came to Russia to participate in the work of Summer school and three online courses supervised by JCCC have been introduced into UdsU curriculum.

At present both educational institutions are trying to find new forms of cooperation such as involving more teaching staff as well as students, introducing video-conferencing to encourage American and Russians students to interact with each other and working out new educational programmes which might be beneficial to both JCCC and UdsU.

An essential goal of this cooperation is to enhance the Russian students’ cross-cultural awareness. Nowadays it is a widely known fact that teaching and learning a foreign language cannot be reduced to the direct teaching of linguistic skills like phonology, morphology, vocabulary, and syntax. The contemporary models of communicative competence show that there is much more to learning a language, and they include the vital component of cultural knowledge and awareness [1]. Cultural knowledge and awareness cover at least two areas of language study which are closely interrelated. First, the students have to gain some factual knowledge about the fine arts such as literature, music, painting, theater, and film. Another aspect of cultural awareness comprises a wide variety of culturally significant topics, many of which are interconnected including attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, perceptions, norms and values, social relationships, customs, celebrations, rituals, politeness conventions, patterns of interaction and discourse organization, the use of time in communication and the use of physical space and body language.

Needless to say, language is also part and parcel of what we call culture, it also reflects and interprets it. A person who lacks knowledge of linguistic behavior more often than not encounters unsuccessful cross-cultural communication. There are numerous examples of such miscommunication, let us consider just one of them: an American student was amazed when his Russian peer being asked “How are you?” began to tell him about his mishaps and problems with health, instead of giving a ready-made answer “I’m fine, thank you”.

To avoid such mistakes in communication and sound more authentic, the teacher should develop thought-provoking, challenging cross-cultural situations, dealing with which might help students to reveal their creative potential, the ability to widen their knowledge of a foreign language and exhibit appropriate linguistic behaviour.

Thus, it is obvious that this English language course taught by the American professor facilitates not only language acquisition on a more advanced level but also covers a number of essential cross-cultural issues which you cannot do without when learning the English language.

2. The Format of the On-line Course, its Goals and Learning Outcomes

The course “Intercultural Communication” taught by Dr. Terri Easley-Giraldo is extremely popular among UdSU students. She visited UdSU in May 2012 and had the opportunity to learn more about Russian culture, system of education, and everyday life. Dr. Terri Easley-Giraldo is a Professor of Speech and Debate at JCCC, and she teaches several classes: Public Speaking, Intercultural Communication, Political Communication, Leadership and Debate.

Dr. Easley-Giraldo created an online module of the course for UdSU students that gives them information on how to get started, how to find assignments for the course, the calendar of events, notes about the time difference, the way the discussion works during the course. The course has the following structure. First, each week the students do a discussion post on one of the topics. Here is the list of subjects to study through the semester:

- What is culture? In this unit students learn the main aspects which constitute culture.
- How do we learn culture? The way people can acquire knowledge about culture.
- Family. This notion is one of the main components of any culture.
- Religion. This is a particular system of faith and worship.
- History. The changing of culture through the time.
- Values. There are some core values in each culture, which can influence our behavior.
- Identity. The state of having unique characteristics held by no other person.
- Language. The method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way.
- Non-verbal communication. To avoid misunderstanding or even serious offence when dealing with other cultures it is crucial to learn language of signs.

The American professor provides a prompt with several questions for each topic and the students first do the initial discussion, answer all the questions and give their own opinion about it. The next step is to do two responses to Russian peers in the USA and these responses are supposed to be complete and thought-provoking. The professor encourages Russian students to get their American peers interested and ask challenging questions for them to point out something that they have noticed in the presentations of other students to keep the conversation going. This really allows both American and Russian students to interact and learn more about cultures.

For example, the presentation which was quite challenging for UdSU students had the following prompt: *How can intercultural communication be used to improve relationships between people from fundamentally different cultures and countries to facilitate peaceful interactions and global understanding?* Then, more specifically – *what would be your advice for promoting better intercultural communication between Russia and the United States in our current political environment?* To answer all the questions and to make impressive presentation students should be able to handle the main language structures with confidence and communicate in English in a variety of social situations. Moreover, it requires creative thinking, imagination and appeal to the reader or listener both intellectual and emotional, the ability to communicate their ideas clearly and effectively.

Throughout the semester besides these general topics for discussions the students work on a major project where they have to choose a country and then learn a lot about it by finding sources and suggest in-depth research outlines. At the end of the semester they make an online presentation on the country they have chosen. The first step is to get general information on the country: its climate, geography, population, government and so on. The following step is to analyze some static components: people, food, holidays, family, stereotypes. In the last section called “Cultural contrast” the students are supposed to give answers to the questions whether the country is of individualistic or collectivistic culture, masculine or feminine, whether they are monochronic or polychronic in time.

After completing the course successfully each UdSU student gets a certificate which testifies to the fact that the course covers the skills necessary to be a competent communicator in intercultural communication. As the result, the student is supposed to be able to:

- identify and understand how communication processes differ among cultures;
- develop knowledge, skills and attitudes that increase intercultural competence;
- demonstrate the effect of language on intercultural communication;
- develop ideas with sustained discussion, examples, and details;
- effectively interact with students in other countries;
- identify and implement ways to improve the intercultural communications in various professional, academic and social settings.

Diana Izmailova, the second year student from UdSU, has the following opinion about the course: “JCCC gives international students everything to help them succeed. Due to this course, I expanded my lexical stock, gained a solid understanding of different cultures, learned how to appreciate and respect other people’s culture in the right way, and also made new friends.”

Dr. Easley-Giraldo is constantly improving the course. Thus, this year Russian students had a unique opportunity to take part in Intercultural Communication Contest. They did extensive research and presented their findings in the form of 10–12 minute online presentation to the board of prominent JCCC scholars to assess the work done.

We cannot but agree with Dr. L. Michael McCloud, Chief Academic Officer and Vice President of Academic Affairs at JCCC who said: “I think it is a wonderful idea that our faculty members have done a great deal of work together and I hope that we can continue this in the future. I hope our students can learn how to focus outside of their comfort zone, outside of their small corner of existence and really use intercultural communication to infuse the rest of their life with a policy of openness and friendship, and of acceptance of people from other cultures and other experiences.”

Conclusion

This article describes mutually beneficial cooperation between two educational institutions. New inspirational ideas and innovative projects have been initiated between UdSU and JCCC. The exchange programme might be considered as the instrument for raising the quality of English language teaching and adjustment of professional competences to a new changing international environment. Moreover, it helps to shift a teaching, learning and assessment paradigm to a more effective level at UdSU on the whole, and the Institute of Language and Literature, in particular.

The article features the goals, content, structure and encouraging results of the online course. By implementing “Intercultural Communication” into UdSU curriculum we have not only enriched the structure of practical English class, but also quite effectively introduced the new method of intercultural approach into the classroom on a firm basis. This course offers students the opportunity not only to practice verbal skills which are of considerable importance as their major is English, but also to improve their knowledge of world culture. More than that, the class provides opportunities for professional and personal growth, it enhances the students’ learning abilities, and makes them better prepared for the future. Thus, this interaction between teachers and students equips them with forward-thinking, respect of the cultural diversity and core values which in the long run will help the future generation of the two countries to live in peace and understanding.

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JCCC и УдГУ: БОЛЬШЕ, ЧЕМ УСПЕШНОЕ АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОЕ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВО

В статье рассматривается вопрос о современной модели коммуникативной компетентности, которая должна включать один из важнейших компонентов общения – социокультурные знания. Очевидно, что студентам необходимо развивать этот навык, чтобы успешно взаимодействовать с представителями разных культур.

В большинстве случаев, студенты, изучающие английский язык, – это монолингвы, которые не имеют возможности часто общаться с хорошо образованными носителями языка, поэтому онлайн-курс с профессором из Америки, обучающим группу, является эффективным и востребованным среди студентов УдГУ.

В статье обсуждается структура курса «Межкультурная коммуникация», его основные темы и аспекты. Курс расширяет кругозор учащихся, давая им возможность получить представление об американской культуре, содержащей такие проблемные понятия, как отношения, убеждения, нормы и ценности, речевые структуры и невербальное общение.

Особое внимание уделяется языку, который отражает и интерпретирует культуру. Данный курс помогает как американским, так и русским студентам объективно относиться к другой культуре, воспринимать ее не как отклонение от нормы, а просто как альтернативу.

Ключевые слова: межкультурная коммуникация, международное сотрудничество, он-лайн курс, культурная компетенция, английский язык.

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