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### PREPARING PROFESSIONALS TO PERFORM BETTER IN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXTS

Interaction among professionals with differing cultural backgrounds has increased dramatically in the past few decades and will likely continue to grow. However many Russian people involved in intercultural activity complain that their work is not always as effective as they want it to be. We argue that the difficulties and communication failures which occur in intercultural professional communication are caused mostly by intercultural incompetence and functional illiteracy. We also argue that well-designed training programs can prepare professionals to perform better in intercultural setting. We support the statement that effective intercultural communication does not just happen as a result of exposure to other cultures, but it has to be learned (Rothwell, 2001).

The main aim of this study is to summarize the training programs which are being developed in Barnaul State Pedagogical University, Russia. Barnaul State Pedagogical University (BSPU) is basically a teacher training higher educational establishment. In 1998, the University was licensed to train specialists in Linguistics and Intercultural Communication, and in the year 2000, an evening department was opened which offered students majoring in law, medicine, and business, courses aimed at raising their linguistic and intercultural competence.

It should be noted, that until the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Russia was a relatively closed country separated from the rest of the world, and Russian universities, with the exception of educational institutions in Moscow and St. Petersburg, had very limited contacts with foreign counterparts. Actually, until the early 1990s there was no need in training professionals for intercultural encounters, especially in provincial cities like Barnaul, and there were no teaching materials or methodologies available for the vast majority of Russian teachers. However, the situation has radically changed during the last decade when international links with Russia have grown considerably in size, quality, and significance. It had a great

impact on the whole system of higher education in Russia. Along with other changes, the introduction of fee-paying forms of education made universities more flexible in their curriculum and enrollment policies, and allowed them to offer new programs and courses to meet the demands of students.

It was at that time that the Altai Region (of which Barnaul is the capital city) was granted the status of Free Economic Zone, and immediately its contacts with foreign companies began to grow. A lot of foreign businessmen, managers, administrators, and professionals came to Barnaul, and many people from the Altai Region went abroad to study or to establish professional contacts. Very soon, however, it became clear that many Russian professionals who wanted to participate in intercultural programs and projects were not adequately prepared for this. As during the Soviet era, many Russian people lived in a relative isolation from other cultures. They were not able to construe cultural differences in complex ways and were often guided by stereotypes. Even if they recognized that there were differences among cultures, they accepted only superficial differences, such as eating customs and other social norms, but they assumed that deep down all people are the same, and that their lives are regulated by the same basic customs.

The denial and minimization of cultural differences are distinct forms of ethnocentrism, which often lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication. Ethnocentric people believe that the way they think, express themselves and act is the only way to do things and to perceive the world. They have learned what is required of them in order to be successful members of a given group and what is right and good in the process of socialization. Once they have been socialized they are hardly aware that other realities can exist (Cushner and Brislin, 5).

Ethnocentric people experience strong emotional reactions when their cultural values are violated. They expect specific things to occur in certain ways as a result of their behaviors. When things do not unfold according to their expectations, they often have strong emotional responses (Cushner and Brislin).

After the first unsuccessful attempts at intercultural communication, many Russian professionals realized that they needed to broaden their knowledge concerning issues at play in intercultural interaction. They wanted to learn more about their own socialization and that of others. They understood that this knowledge would enable them to interact more effectively with those who are different from them. As a result, Barnaul State Pedagogical University received a lot of requests from firms, organizations, and individuals

to help them acquire necessary skills to perform better in intercultural contexts.

It was a very challenging task, and it made us reconsider our teaching strategies, to design new courses and new training programs to meet the demands of two major groups of learners: 1) those who planned to develop relationships with foreign partners or work in foreign companies and joint ventures in Russia; and 2) those who planned to go abroad for work or education.

Our research showed that intercultural training was a relatively young, but rapidly growing field (Martin, 1986; Paige, 1986); that various programs had been designed to prepare people for successful stays in other countries, and both researchers and practitioners had been involved in designing the programs (Cushner and Brislin). Among trainers there was considerable controversy on what constituted appropriate training and how to measure cross-cultural effectiveness (Bennett). Extensive literature exists regarding intercultural training activities and training design issues (Hoopes and Ventura; Landis and Brislin; Gudykunst and Hammer; Kohl and Knight; Brislin and Yoshida; Cushner and Brislin; Landis and Bhagah; Ferdman and Brody).

Our research also revealed that sometimes cross-cultural orientation and training programs did not succeed in their aims (Gudykunst, Guzley and Hammer), that unintended and undesirable outcomes made these programs at best, ineffective and, at worst, harmful (McCaffery, 160).

Despite differences in approaches, many researchers and practitioners in the field of intercultural education and training agree that the programs must have:

- 1) meaningful goals and objectives;
- 2) the methodology and teaching strategies should be consistent with the aims;
- 3) the programs should be delivered in a style that is congruent with and reinforces the methodology and education aim;
- 4) the trainers must be well-prepared and must understand what constitutes effectiveness in the target culture or multicultural environment;
- 5) the focus in intercultural training must be on skill-building rather than only on information transmission;

- 6) the trainees expectations should be realistic;
- 7) the trainees should realize that no program can fully prepare them to function effectively in a different culture, that they will have to learn many things by themselves, thus, the main aim of any program is to prepare the learners to continue the process of learning in a different culture or in a multicultural environment;
- 8) the practitioners must continue to develop training methods and strategies that are compatible with the theoretical perspective emphasizing learning how to learn.

In designing our program we proceeded from the basic assumption that to function effectively in an intercultural context a professional should:

- a) have technical skills, including the ability to accomplish the task within the new cultural setting (Paige);
- b) have knowledge about the target culture;
- c) be able to adjust properly to the new culture or multicultural environment;
- d) be able to establish interpersonal relationships with co-workers and within a culturally different community.

There is one more factor which we consider crucial for the success of intercultural communication, which is the knowledge of the target language. We regard language as a means of entry into a culture, because the more enhanced the language skills are, the greater access to the culture a foreigner has. We support the opinion that lack of language skills can lead to social isolation and frustration (Paige). We argue that language-learning opportunities should be integrated into a program's design.

We differentiate between target language knowledge per se and communicative and functional literacy. The concept of communicative competence was developed in the 1970s and 1980s by educational specialists involved in teaching foreign languages. They defined communicative competence as a synthesis of knowledge of basic grammatical principles, knowledge of how language is used in social setting to perform communicative functions, and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined according to the principles of discourse (Canale and Swain).

Taking the framework of communicative competence as a starting point, Verhoeven, Elbro and Reitsma developed the construct of functional literacy that incorporated the following competences: grammatical competence, discourse competence, (de)coding competence, strategic competence, and sociolinguistic competence. It is apparent, that grammatical competence (the mastery of phonological rules, lexical items, morpho-syntactic

rules and rules of sentence formation), discourse competence (knowledge of conventions regarding the cohesion and coherence of various types of discourse), and (de)coding competence (the mastery of the essentials of the written language code itself) constitute the basis of functional literacy in a foreign language setting. Sociolinguistic competence, which comprises both literacy conventions and cultural background knowledge, enables a person to function effectively in everyday life. Sociolinguistic competence is relative; a person may be functionally competent in one context (e.g. filling out an application) and incompetent in another (e.g. compiling a resume).

Communicative competence and functional literacy theories emphasize a very important point, that a person who has a good command of grammar and vocabulary of a foreign language may be functionally illiterate. S/he might be able to decipher the grammatical patterns and the words of the oral speech and written text, but would not be able to fully understand the information. They would, therefore, not be able to use it appropriately or successfully. Thus, we come to a conclusion that to be functionally literate in a foreign culture, people must be able to obtain information they need and to translate that information into action, must be able to read, write and speak adequately to satisfy their own requirements and the demands made on them by society, must be able to communicate the ideas effectively in speech and writing, must be able to fulfill their own self-determined objectives. If foreign language learners do not realize that knowledge of a foreign language does not necessarily lead to success in all literacy events, they may develop a sense of frustration in situations which require definite functional literacy skills.

All those who have some teaching experience know that there is no universal model that can be used by a teacher with all learners. Teaching has to fit the occasion, the students, and the teacher's own style. But there are some models, principles and techniques that can be used in different educational and training programs. Many researchers and practitioners (Martin; Cushner and Brislin; Chen and Starosta; Bennett) argue that such programs should be interdisciplinary in nature, should be based on various intercultural training models, and should employ various intercultural training methods and techniques.

A basic training program designed in BSPU is based on two intercultural training models: cognitive and interactional. The following diagram serves to illustrate the sequence of training models applied in the program: We begin with traditional cognitive (intellectual, classroom) education, which

promotes cognitive understanding and helps trainees to get more information about culture, communication, language, and interpersonal relationships. Our program incorporates four main content areas: culture, communication, self-awareness, and functional language competence.

#### CULTURE

Culture is often considered the core concept in intercultural communication. Cultural area is subdivided into three subgroups: 1) general cultural awareness; 2) awareness of one's own culture; 3) awareness of the target culture.

##### 1) *General Cultural Awareness*

The main aims are:

- to give a general perspective of cultural understanding;
- to teach the learners to understand the aspects of culture that are universal and specific;
- to help the learners to understand that our own cultural identity is only one possibility among numerous others;
- to teach them to overcome ethnocentrism, to become tolerant to cultural differences.

This field integrates such courses as: Cultural Studies, World Cultures, Intercultural Communication (culture, identity, stereotypes, prejudice, power, context, etc.), Ethnography, and Religions of the World. The main teaching techniques are: lectures, readings, presentations, case studies, group/small group discussions.

##### 2) *Awareness of One's Own Culture*

One characteristic of culture is that it functions largely at a subconscious level. It is very difficult to identify our own cultural backgrounds and assumptions until we encounter behavior that is different from our own. As Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama say: "Trying to understand one's own culture is like trying to explain to a fish that it lives in water" (54). That is why the main aim of this part of the program is to help the learners understand their own culture on the basis of general cultural knowledge and teach them to critically approach their own cultural values, norms and attitudes.

The main teaching techniques are: group/small group discussions, case studies, presentations, projects (individual, team), readings.

### 3) *Awareness of the Target Culture*

The main aims are:

- to help the learners to get more information about the target culture, its values, customs, people, etc.;
- to promote understanding of differences and similarities of one's own culture and the target culture.

It incorporates such traditional courses as: Country Study (e.g. American/British Studies), Literature (of the target culture), and Mass Media (of the target culture).

The main teaching techniques are: lectures/discussions, videos, readings (fiction, newspapers, magazines, brochures, catalogues, etc.), presentations, projects (group, individual), cultural assimilators, case studies.

### SELF-AWARENESS

The main aims are:

- to help the learners to understand themselves as cultural beings;
- to help them to identify factors that shape the development of their self-concept;
- to teach them to understand how one's behavior is influenced by others;
- to train the learners to be sensitive to another's expressions;
- to describe how one's self-concept affects one's relationships with others

It integrates three courses: psychology, sociology, and interpersonal communication. The main teaching techniques are: lectures/discussions, self-assessment exercises, simulations, team projects, cultural collages.

### COMMUNICATION

It is subdivided into 1) interpersonal and 2) intercultural communication.

### 1) *Interpersonal Communication*

The main aims are to help learners to:

- understand factors affecting human communication;
- identify the effects of one's communication style on one's relationships with others;
- improve interpersonal communication skills;
- understand the development of interpersonal relationships;
- understand interpersonal conflict and to develop conflict management skills.

It integrates two courses: psychology and interpersonal communication. The main teaching techniques are: lectures, group/small group discussions, videos, simulations, case studies, role-playing.

### 2) *Intercultural Communication*

The main aims are to help the learners:

- understand the relationships between culture and communication;
- understand the relationship between communication and context, communication and power;
- understand relationships between language and culture;
- understand nonverbal communication;
- understand intercultural transitions;
- describe culture shock and process of cultural adaptation;
- avoid intercultural miscommunication;
- understand the challenges of intercultural relationships.

Intercultural communication is a new course for Russian universities and it requires the development of methodology as well as teaching materials. The main teaching techniques are: lectures, group/small group discussions, simulations, case studies, projects (individual, group), videos, cultural assimilators, critical incidents.

### FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

Functional language skills can be taught, but we argue that the learners cannot obtain functional literacy through traditional ESL programs. Func-

tional literacy training treats the illiterate in a context related to a given environment. The basic characteristic of a functional language program is that it is geared to individual needs. It is adjusted to specific objectives. It usually uses an intense approach as a step towards the ultimate acquisition of necessary skills and usable knowledge. Functional language programs are variable and flexible.

The second stage of the training is interactional. The trainees are required to interact directly with members of the target culture. The main aim is to test the knowledge the trainees acquired at the first, cognitive stage of training, and to gain experience in intercultural communication. One of the main problems at this stage is the lack of opportunity to travel to the target country. That is why we try to find all existing options for our trainees to interact with people from different cultures in general, and the target culture, in particular. We encourage our students to apply to grant programs offered by the United States Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, to work as camp counselors in American summer camps (the program administered by the U.S. Camp Counselor Association /USCCA), to participate in sister-university teacher-student exchange program (BSPU has been running an exchange program with Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, Arizona, for eleven years); to work as translators, interpreters, guides, or assistants for foreigners who come to Barnaul; and to participate in international conferences and seminars held in Barnaul. We also invite teachers from the United States to teach our students, and this contributes a lot to the development of trainees' linguistic and intercultural competence. During this period of face-to-face interaction with foreigners and foreign culture(s) we ask our students to keep a journal in which they write about their intercultural experiences, describe the situations of effective intercultural communication and communication failures, and write about their linguistic and cultural discoveries.

The third stage is analysis of how effective was the performance of our trainees during the interactional stage. They summarize and analyze their diaries, present their observations, and speak about their intercultural successes and failures. This stage incorporates two forms of performance evaluation: self-evaluation and external evaluation (evaluation of the trainees performance by peers and trainers). It is a very important stage for both the learners and the trainers. It gives them an opportunity to evaluate how effective the first stage was, and how the learners could transfer their knowledge into appropriate intercultural behavior at the second stage of training.

It is also the time when every trainee under the supervision of the instructor can design his/her individual strategy how to perform effectively in intercultural setting and how to lessen the likelihood of misunderstanding.

The fourth stage is, strictly speaking, not training or education, it is a real-life activity in intercultural environment. We consider it as a part of the training program because we always try to maintain contacts with our trainees. We tell them that their experience will help us to perfect the program and they are usually very responsive. We also organize alumni seminars and reunions and invite the former trainees to participate in our classes.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Dramatic changes that have taken place in Russia forced universities all over the country to find the most effective ways of preparing their students for successful intercultural communication. In the new political, economic and social setting, Russian universities became more flexible in their curriculum and enrollment policies and started to develop their own programs to meet the needs of students. We present one of the innovative programs that aims to prepare professionals to perform better in intercultural context.

The program described is interdisciplinary in nature (it incorporates such courses as Psychology, Intercultural and Interpersonal Communication, Cultures of the World, Country Study, Sociology, ESL, etc.) and is based on two training models (cognitive and interactional). It incorporates four main content areas: culture, communication, self-awareness, and functional language competence. The program is student-centered, and designed to meet the individual needs of the learners. The main objective of the program is to prepare students to continue the process of learning throughout their professional activity.

The merit of the program is its four-stage structure: at the first stage the learners acquire the cognitive understanding of culture, communication, language, and themselves; the second stage (interactional) provides the learners with the opportunity to test their knowledge and to gain experience in intercultural communication; at the third stage the learners together with the trainers analyze their experience (successes and communication failures); and at the fourth stage learners have an independent professional activity, during which they maintain close contacts with the University and participate in various alumni activities. The program cannot be considered as a universal model, but it outlines the main principles and techniques that

can be used for different educational and training purposes with different learners.

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