ON FOSTERING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH GLOBAL NEWS PROGRAMMES

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Abstract. *The article deals with the issue of fostering intercultural competence through global news programs. The authors consider key concepts of the issues taking Hofstede's viewpoint on culture and his "culture onion" as the basis for understanding whether and how global news can be involved into building intercultural skills so relevant to the globalized world. The issue of media is also viewed through the prism of McLuhan's "understanding the media", where media are seen as a trigger for launching motivation for gaining cultural knowledge. The authors' project generally accepted the structure of intercultural competence and its components onto pedagogical process and shared the finding of their classroom research analyzing the state of cultural awareness and the picture of cultural identity in the group of students of Saint-Petersburg University and came to the conclusion that cultural identity and cultural sensitivity should serve as the background for the process of fostering intercultural competence and that global news possess a considerable potential for this purpose.*

Key words: *intercultural competence, global news as a teaching input, cultural awareness, cultural identity, cultural sensitivity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural competence has become the order of the day for a global EFL classroom as learning English ensures access to at least vague perception of cultural differences existing across the globe. As a lingua franca for the wide audience of academic, business communities and travelers, the English language lifts the barriers to communication between nations, thus eliminating all prejudices that might hinder personal career development after graduation.

It is not possible to know everything about all cultural boundaries. That is why one of the main tasks for those involved in the process of syllabus design is to decide - what teaching input can provide the most relevant information for those graduates who want to 'go global'.

The advantages of studying world cultures through global news have acquired a new dimension in the light of the drastically enlarged opportunities of working abroad and the omnipresent drive for overseas employment often seen as a guarantee of getting a well-paid job on return to the home country. A considerable part of cultural differences may be studied through the news reports transmitted in English for the global audience by the most influential media, such as British Broadcasting Corporation, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and Al Jazeera, etc. This predetermines the material selection focused on the countries and events dominating newscasts and front-page articles whenever studying cultural differences is attempted. More precisely, preceding students' discussion of

political, economic and social aspects of life in these countries, this seems to be one of the main principles in determining the content of studies.

This paper deals with findings of a classroom research into obtaining intercultural competence through building listening and speaking skills as a part of ESP "Worldwide News" course for the undergraduates of the School of International Relations, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation.

Although global news programs have long been used as one of the most efficient language pedagogy resources for many well-known reasons, currently their benefits must be revised as they often provide the input invaluable for language educators in the new learning environment of the globalized and digitalized world. During the last decade the news programs in English have become overwhelmingly available, predominantly repeated several times a day. Broadcasting giants granted the world a great deal of new opportunities for EFL teachers, such as free downloads of audio scripts and MP3 files. Among all this content, the news stories broadcast by BBC have always been considered the paragon of the best English for EFL learners and Received Pronunciation of newsreaders was supposed to serve as an example to follow for those studying English at universities.

But EFL teachers of today have come to realize that educational objectives are being transformed under the impact of the new globalizing world where not only the world order has been changing from a bipolar to multipolar mode, but the main patterns of communication also are gradually shifting from bilateral to multilateral patterns of communication, from a dialogue to a polylogue, where the English language serves as the main communicative tool that unites the communicators into an organism sharing a single cognitive system, which helps to achieve understanding and bridging cultural differences.

However, the role of BBC news as the paragon in the new educational environment is waning and as far as the expediency of listening only to British or American English accents has been questioned by the growing number of speakers of English for whom English is a foreign language. The new patterns of communication are being formed due to the fact that English, which used to belong to a particular culture or a limited number of cultures, now becomes a commonly shared property or a communicative tool that no longer is owned exclusively by its native speakers. It cannot but affect the way global news are employed in the classroom by language educators, because broadcasting globally involves global norm setting and commonly-shared values, both linguistically and socially. In these circumstances the issue of global news as a teaching resource for building intercultural competence, as well as the theoretical grounds of building intercultural competence itself, requires consideration of a whole number of issues that are impacted by the change in global communication forms.

2. DEFINING THE COMPETENCE: SOCIO-CULTURAL, CROSS-CULTURAL OR INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE?

With a great deal of papers considering language-culture dichotomy and implications evoked by globalization, it seems to be the very time to distinguish between the concepts of sociocultural, cross-cultural and intercultural competences. Although the terms are often used as interchangeable in authors' humble opinion, there is a definite difference between these terms that can be presented as follows.

Fostering socio-cultural competence, at least as it is understood and interpreted by Russian EFL methodologies, is seen as a focus on studying culture of the target language country [1, 2], which eventually results in acquiring some background knowledge of

cultural facts and specific behavior and presumably ensure the avoidance of stupid mistakes or any tactless behavior in the situation of communication with the target language speaker. Thus, the pedagogical value of this competence is that it serves as a prerequisite of being successful in the interaction between the representatives of these two cultures.

The terms 'cross-cultural' and 'intercultural competence' have traditionally been interpreted as related to the same educational value, but this viewpoint seems to be no longer relevant at least for two reasons. Firstly, for the benefit of the EFL methodology it is inappropriate to use two different terms referring to the same notion, as it may lead to confusing of the terms and entail misconceptualising. The second reason is that the above mentioned changes in the contemporary patterns of intercultural communication require the change in the way this issue is approached. These gradually proliferating patterns are pushing researchers into the investigation of new processes of interaction among the globe-dwellers in the attempt to construe the concept of Global English [3, 4] - the English language resorted to for interaction among the representatives of cultures different from the UK and USA.

It would be reasonable to note that there is one more area of research closely connected with the growing proficiency of a global EFL learner – that is the investigation of psycholinguistic processes interrelated with approximate systems or interlanguages and a language ego or language identity in the EFL learning environment. The terms "intercultural person" [5], "multicultural man" [6], "mediating person " [7], in the works on intercultural competence demonstrate that the researchers distinguish between cross-cultural or bicultural communication (e.g. Russian-American, French-German, Finnish-English, etc.) Within the framework of this new communication pattern, the intercultural communication, let us say, of our students with their group mates during their participation in international exchange programs is not bilateral because the parties in discussion might be presented by the representative of different cultures whose native language is not English.

By the same token, the cross-cultural competence should be differentiated from the intercultural competence. The model of students' communication within the linguistic environment of student exchange program is multicultural and deserves being termed differently. The most relevant seems to be defining this type of communication as intercultural but not *cross-cultural*. Here the competent user of English should be ready to decode messages which are the products of approximate systems of a number of English-users whose language production will certainly bear the traces of their L1 system and will be a step aside from the Standard English linguistic norm.

Within the framework of such an approach it becomes necessary to revise the understanding of intercultural competence constituents or at least take a fresh look at their supposed collective and discrete meaning. Such approach allows for classifying the types of the intercultural competence according to the learning goal: 1) to find out the specific features of the country of the target language (socio-cultural competence); 2) to concentrate learning on similarities and differences between native and target language cultures so as to achieve maximum efficiency in communication (cross-cultural competence); 3) to be ready for the diversity of cultures and its implications on the language production, concentrate on the most salient differences in multicultural environment. This classification is necessary for the issue under consideration as far as it allows for more precise understanding of the skills that should be formed within the intercultural competence.

3. CULTURE AS THE KEY CONCEPT OF THE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

As far as the founding concept in teaching intercultural competence is the concept of culture, it is obvious that whatever approach or input you employ for fostering intercultural competence you cannot avoid having a clear-cut idea of what concept of culture is in question. Teaching intercultural competence through global news is not any exception. In our way of conceptualizing, as well as many other EFL researchers, we find it reasonable to apply G. Hofstede's concept of culture that he presented in the form of an onion-shaped diagram. The layers of this "onion bulb" are different manifestations of culture with the subsequent extent of salience and therefore, cognizing. As G. Hofstede puts it, the core of the "cultural onion" is cultural values, which imply understanding of such opposing concepts as *evil/good*, *ugly/beautiful*, *normal/abnormal*, etc. The scholar quite righteously believes that as far as these understandings were interiorized early in the childhood, they are unconscious to their holders and cannot be directly observed by representatives of another culture and subsequently they could hardly serve as teachable input. This opposing perception of *evil/good, ugly/beautiful, normal/abnorma*l is different between the representatives of Western cultures influenced by Christianity and Eastern Oriental cultures heavily rooted in Islam and Sharia Laws. The neglecting of this fact might have fundamental negative consequences and ruin the very idea of fostering intercultural competence in a West-East culturally divided classroom.

Undoubtedly, it is not an EFL teacher task to impose any system of values, but it is their main responsibility to teach communication in the target language, which means forming competences ensuring a substantive and constructive dialogue. This involves a plenty of teaching strategies and practices, which in our opinion should be taken into consideration in a separate paper. The task of this paper is to emphasize that considering global news in the capacity of a teaching tool for building intercultural competence a teacher should bear in mind the cultural identities of the students who will be engaged in discussing culturally-sensitive issues.

Close to 'cultural values' are 'rituals' to which Hofstede relates different social religious ceremonies, e.g. the ways people greet and pay respect to each other. In the outlined problem of our research these sound as more teachable through global news as the students may observe some patterns of different cultural behavior which they display in the short news episodes. Two subsequent manifestations of the "onion bulb" layers are 'heroes', which include real and imaginary persons serving as models of behavior, and 'symbols'. The latter are supposed to be the objects which are recognized by the same culture representatives such as local fashions, hairstyles, flags and the like. All except 'values', according to G. Hofstede, can be referred to as "practices" [8].

Having a closer look at Hofstede's understanding of culture, one can easily realize the practical implications of applying it to teaching intercultural competence, and in this case by means of global news and bearing in mind our foundation concept of English as the language of intercultural communication. This view of culture should be brought in line with the structure of intercultural competence that, according to the most renowned researchers of the phenomenon of this competence, comprises such constituents as *cultural awareness*, *cultural identity and cultural sensitivity*. [9, 10, 11 12]

Cultural awareness in the context of EFL class built upon the wide use of global news confines to the recognition and inner readiness of students to admit the fact of coexistence of different L1 cultural backgrounds within the international communication. The pedagogical implications of these learners' attitudes will project on the activities

which might help them to distinguish cultural differences and be prepared for cooperative behavior in a multicultural conversation. For this purpose, while watching global news the teacher will invite students' attention to the features distinguishing from the culture of learners. Practically, it is performed through a 1-2 minute discussion of the visual background of the reported event.

As we have already mentioned cultural values, those cannot be observed and cognized by representatives of other cultures and, consequently, cannot be taught. At least, this holds true for an EFL class, because it is obvious that teaching cultural values in depth cannot be viewed as a direct educational purpose of EFL teaching and too much focus on these issues eventually may turn it into a number of time-wasteful irrelevant activities. Simultaneously, some researchers believe that cultural values are seen as a part of *cultural identity* and present an invariable part of the learner's cognition [13]. This identity, although not explicitly, determines all patterns of perception and, thus would implicitly affect all classroom procedures.

When considering an ethnically-homogenous or country-specific audience the matter of *cultural identity* is not as an important characteristic of classroom communication as in the case of an international audience, but nevertheless, it should be taken into consideration, because initiating a discussion on internationally important issues, a teacher should bear in mind that some aspects of the focused story or phenomenon can be approached differently due to the initially diverse or even opposing systems of cultural values even within a homogenous community, assumingly sharing the single system of values.

In the opinion of a number of scientists, the most opposing are perceptions of West cultures representatives vs. East ones [14, 15]. Presumably, this fact should determine the rationale in material selection and provide guidelines for preparing a discussion. That is why while conducting our classroom research into the most efficient ways of building intercultural competence through global news we asked the learners to fill in the questionnaire, designed to identify the percent of 'westerners' or 'easterners' within the sample group.

There is also a need to distinguish between *cultural awareness* and *cultural sensitivity* as far as both explicitly refer to the aptitude of learners to establish the problem arising somewhere beyond their purely linguistic competence. Here, we would view *cultural awareness* as general cultural knowledge, i.e. the knowledge of global cultural heritage. Cultural awareness involves *cultural sensitivity* which is often understood as desirable empathy or readiness for cooperation and communicative strategies in those cases where the multicultural communication is in focus.

Cultural identity and cultural sensitivity are viewed as permanent, if existing, characteristics of a personality. They seem to be hardly teachable, but in spite of the fact that they could hardly make part of a syllabus, they definitely should be engaged as a background for language pedagogy. Barely are they supposed to be transformed into any particular exercises or activity, but by all means recognition of their importance in the educating for a multicultural world should determine teachers' state of alert and establish the tenor and framework for communication.

4. GLOBAL NEWS AS A TEACHING INPUT

Although global news reporting is a service of a general public interest, being delivered in English it possesses an enormous educational potential for EFL teaching. It provides not only the model of a very good language production, but in our opinion it creates the

ground for discussions, as politics is usually a subject provoking debates where intercultural differences will certainly manifest themselves. That is why we find it advisable to revise the potential of global news as a teaching aid for building intercultural competence as they may provide the visual samples of cultural features and allow the teacher to focus on those manifestations of alien cultures that can be observed, interiorized and the knowledge of which can be applied when the necessity arises.

Here, we cannot but emphasize the endless limits of culture–specific knowledge and therefore, the necessity to elaborate on the principles of selection or organization of the material to which learners are exposed when watching global news and when designing a set of activities that will contribute to the development of intercultural competence rather than overload students with numerous facts they might never need.

Among the principles of material selection in a higher educational establishment, the one of primary importance is the principle of professional relevance. In our case this was the criterion of relevancy for the students of the School of International Relations of Saint-Petersburg State University. Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that in the case of teaching intercultural competence through global news, political subjects are important not only for the international relations specialists.

The theoretical basis of our research, grounded in Hofstede's understanding of culture and structured around the three main constituents of intercultural competence necessitates the analysis of global news in this context. First, the concept of values is transferred through the system of values of a westerner – a person with predominantly liberal views, who socialized in a democratic society and, if being religious, sharing religious values of Christianity in its broadest sense. These are the values often referred to as human universals and therefore any evaluation of actions or events will be exercised through the prism of these values. However, when it comes to 'rituals' and the media, the learners are provided with visual information, then they have a chance to make their own inferences from what they have seen which sometimes may diverge from the imposed assessment of the media reporter. 'Heroes' (people appearing in the news) and 'symbols' (architecture, clothes, public transport images) can also provide some food for visual analysis and forming a perception of a culture. The intensity and changing environment of the news programs allow for the widening of the scope of background information on world cultures.

On the one hand, it is obvious that a certain grain of bias is inevitably present in the news being broadcast globally but from a particular country and every educator should be aware of global versus local interpretation of the events. On the other hand, the same awareness provides for a negotiation of meaning discussion that purportedly is to promote the targeted formation of intercultural competence. Suffice to say, that considering the very notion of global news we mean not only the eventual product that is a news story on TV or MP3 file that students process to develop their linguistic competence, but also news story discourse – the life of the language in the culture of both presenters and those who are presented and the necessity to replenish the details that the learner lacks for his/her adequate perception of the media message.

A great number of practices in the classroom listening activities along with a bulk of material selection performed in preparing for these classes provoked the authors of the article into turning to the media theory in search for the answer to the question: If media-speak is so politicized and biased why then a great number of teacher trainers consider watching international/national/local news to be a good learning habit? The answer to this question can be found in the Canadian media researcher Marchall McLuhan's work

Understanding Media: The extension of a Man (1964) which committed a revolution in the communication studies. It was McLuhan who was the first to communicate the idea that it is not the content of the medium but that the medium itself is the message: "the personal and social consequences of any medium… result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of us"[16, p.7]. McLuhan's view on mass media allows for understanding why global news should be present in an EFL classroom designed to teach intercultural competence, with no denying of possible bias of globally broadcast news and of all grounds for inalienable cultural identity impact in such educational practices. Another McLuhan's thesis of dividing media into "hot" and "cold" also appeared to be extremely important for this research. McLuhan referred to television and comics as to "cold" media, which as he insisted, unlike "hot" media provoke more thinking and engage people's intellect more than radio or a printed text.

When speaking about worldwide news it would also be reasonable to note that our extensive classroom practices observation display that in the situation of visual or audio perception of news programs learners need a sort of specific competence to understand the current events globally and supposedly, that regular practice of cognitive processing news programs content is one of the most efficient and productive forms of building intercultural competence.

5. CLASSROOM RESEARCH PROCEDURE

To substantiate our hypothesis that global news processed by learners can be efficiently used for teaching intercultural competence there was conducted a classroom research, where the sample comprised 20 undergraduates of the School of International Relations at Saint Petersburg State University. Our classroom research was in D. Nunan's terms, conducted as a "systematic process of inquiring consisting of three components: (1) a question, a problem or hypothesis; (2) data; (3) analysis and interpretation" [17, p.3]. In our case the hypothesis we suggested was that in spite of widely accepted criticism of media bias and news reports as their products, global news discourse can become a very efficient input for teaching intercultural competence. The range of problems included the necessity: 1) to find out the scope and depth of motivated cultural awareness of the group; 2) to understand whether TV news are recognized as the source of culture specific knowledge; 3) to map out group cultural identity.

As far as it is not possible to obtain cultural awareness in respect of every culture on the earth, we decided to shortlist the cultures about which students will learn through a complex of exercises. That is why for the first problem to be solved we asked the learners to answer questions of the Questionnaire 1 (Table 1):

Table 1 Questionnaire 1

1) List the countries you are interested in and arrange them according to their importance for you (the rest of countries will be considered as not important and relevant);

2) Rank the countries you listed above according to your awareness of their culture:
    a) I know much (can provide more than 10 culturally specific facts about this country)
    b) I know something(less than 10 culturally specific facts about this country)
    c) nothing, but I would like to
    d) nothing and don't feel interested (the rest of countries)

When answering the questions the sample of 20 students was given five minutes as far as we needed immediate response. The listed countries that first came to their minds and this 'front-mind' product was meant to help us find out the most popular countries to narrow the circle of news input. The learners' responds allowed to group all chosen countries into four main categories which are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Countries of the Learners' Interest

Categories	Countries
news celebrities	The USA, the UK, France, Germany, Italy
neighboring countries	Finland, Poland, Sweden, Baltic states, Ukraine, Belarus
hot spot countries	Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea, Venezuela
holiday stars and exotic country	Spain, Greece, Turkey, Check Republic

The findings determined three main vectors in fostering intercultural competence: 1) a directed practice (a complex of exercises); 2) a semi-directed or a 'wild card' practice (watching the news on BBC, followed by a teacher-organized discussion focused on fostering intercultural) and 3) non-directed practice (students' arbitrary choice of news about countries of their interest).

The second feature that should have been surveyed was to find out their media preferences. The learners were to choose two options out of four, to answer the question which kind of media they find most efficient, if they want to know more about the world cultures. There was a preceding discussion in which they discussed pros and contras of all the suggested media, finalizing the results in the form of a table. Two options were suggested to avoid prevalence of choosing the Internet websites as the way leaving the process unattended.

Table 3 Questionnaire 2

Choose two most effective ways to know more about cultures around the world out of these four options.	
websites	
televised news	
printed media (books, magazines, etc.)	
cartoons, comics	

Here, the answers were confusing with most students saying that all of the media possess their own advantages and disadvantages in terms of the issue in question.

The last component of our survey was meant to understand the learners' cultural identity, so that they may be ready to tackle some sensitive issues, which are especially important when discussion concerns gender issues or the dichotomy of good/evil. For this purpose, there was compiled a questionnaire that consisted of 28 statements describing Western and Eastern (Oriental) behavioral characteristics and attitudes. The task was to say whether the characteristics is typical (Yes), not typical (No), or both (Not sure). This is presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Cultural Identity Questionnaire

Analyze the options and mark what is typical for the culture of the community which you belong to. Tick your answer in the appropriate box.

		Yes	No	Not sure
1	Strong family ties, frequent contacts of family members			
2	Weak family ties, rare contacts of family members			
3	Family provides protection in exchange for lifelong loyalty			
4	Children are supposed to become independent as soon as possible			
5	'Others' are classified as in-group or out-group			
6	'Others' are classified as individuals			
7	People live with close relatives			
8	People live in nuclear or one-parent families			
9	Family relationships can be oppressive			
10	Lasting friendships are believed to be difficult to achieve			
11	Harmony should always be maintained			
12	Speaking one's mind is characteristic of an honest person			
13	Opinions predetermined by the in-group			
14	Personal opinions expected			
15	Nobody is ever alone			
16	Privacy is normal			
17	Businesspersons live with parents			
18	Businesspersons live separately			
19	Choosing not to have children in a marriage is socially acceptable			
20	A marriage without children is not complete			
21	Care for the aged in the family environment, as a family			
22	Aged relatives care for themselves			
23	Nonfamily, unrelated persons can be adopted into the family			
24	family vs. nonfamily distinction is irrelevant			
25	Children learn to think in terms of 'we'			
26	Child learns to think in terms of 'I'			
27	Many divorces			
28	Few divorces			

The number the Western values were shared with the percentage 52% - yes, 26% no, 22% - not sure, and the Eastern culture values shared 38%, with 36% answering no and 26% - not sure. Although, as we see the values of Western civilization are inherent to more than a half of students of the group, nevertheless the percentage of sharing Eastern values is quite significant.

The data collected were suggestive of a number of conclusions. First of the ideas related to the issue of the identity of Russians, as residents of the country which is located both in the territories usually referred to as the West and the territories referred to as the East. Secondly, the understanding that some values even being attributed to the Eastern values are as the matter of fact - human universals, those values shared by all humanity, because such social values as family, friendship, openness to communication can be found in any culture.

Nevertheless the 'westerners' underscored privacy and nuclear or one-parent family as attributes of their culture (giving 15 positive answers in the corresponding line), while easterners emphasized care for the aged people in the family environment and strong family ties, frequent contacts with family members with giving 19 and 15 positive answers respectively. Not only does it confirm our view of the necessity of teacher's awareness of the presence of learners with different cultural identities participating in the classroom meant for fostering intercultural competence, but also proves one more Hofstede's thesis of division the global cultures into individual (West) and collective (East).

6. FINDINGS

The data analysis provided the evidence of the relevance of advisability of regular activities designed on the basis of global news for teaching intercultural competence, it helped to define the principle of material selection and how to work out a course which allows for efficient combination of two educational tasks: developing linguistic and intercultural competences.

First, the data allow increasing learning motivation through providing materials based on students' interest, with the learning process exercised in three different modes (directed, semi-directed and non-directed). The research confirmed the grounds for the use of TV and radio news for teaching intercultural competence alongside with other media such as websites, printed media and cartoons. The analysis of Cultural Identity Questionnaire revealed that even within a classroom where all learners are the citizens of the same country (the Russian Federation in our case) there is a significant percent of learners sharing values of Eastern (Oriental) cultures.

7. CONCLUSION

Global news appear not to have lost their relevance in the new educational environment and their global coverage and global audience orientation turn this contemporary social phenomenon into a virtual model of global village and provide the opportunity to increase cultural awareness and provide scenarios for training cultural sensitivity in the group of learners with different cultural identities. However, to convert global news into an efficient tool which can promote fostering intercultural competence a certain methodology should be worked out. The rationale for this elaborated teaching work is the understanding that global news provide to the learners an instant picture of the world and in case of televised views, the images of peoples leaving all around the globe creating a cultural scaffolding or a sort of a web, where subsequently the learners would be able to conduct their more focused research into a particular area, having a supportive cognitive mechanism that will allow for correlating the subject of their investigation with the global cultural picture.

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