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Language as a social behaviour: integration of language, communicative competence and identity development

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Abstract

The tendency to support diversity and, at the same time, to promote integration in Europe has become evident in the educational programmes of nation states and in the emergence of a new international educational space in Europe. Language education is discussed today within the context of European citizenship, multiculturalism, mobility, intercultural adjustment and adaptability, as well as an efficient outcome of education. It is strongly suggested that university graduates, regardless of their specialization, should have a mastery of two foreign languages when they graduate. In practice, this means a relatively high level of communicative competence in English, and at least a workable minimum in a second foreign language. The role of the English language (as a language for communicative integration in Europe) is that of putting a bridge between language, intercultural communicative competence and European identity.
Keywords: *intercultural communicative competence, communicative integration, European identity, European citizenship, multiculturalism, linguistic unity, language as a social behaviour, emotional aspect of communicative competence, emotion command, positive thinking, personal responsibility, flexibility, critical thinking*

Cultural and linguistic diversity within Europe stimulates the development of linguistic unity which is fundamental to European integration. In light of this, the teaching and learning of English language has become the subject of research at the Information Systems Management University (Riga, Latvia) with focus on the nature of language as a social behaviour and the integration of language, which we argue are necessarily entwined with intercultural communicative competence and the role of language in identity development.

Inferred from our previous research is the idea that different students are differently motivated to learn a foreign language. Since motivation to learn a language is inextricably intertwined with the emotional aspect, it seems reasonable to presume that communicative competence has to be grounded not only on developing linguistic proficiency, but also synthesize emotional components derived from social interaction and communicative experience – critical/positive thinking, openness, flexibility, empathy and emotion regulation.

Fostering positive intercultural communication requires the development of effective communicative competence which comprises continuous emotional adjustment and adaptation to the cultural differences with which we engage in the process of social interaction. Unfortunately, for too long emotions were banished from the classroom practice, perhaps, because they seemed too amorphous and non-resourceful reactions to events. The Platonic notion, as outlined in the Republic, that feelings were the enemy of reason and that true 'citizens' would do all they could to banish emotion from their day-to-day 'cognitive' decisions, has had far-reaching implications for the way people have dealt with emotional life, and has dominated psychological, philosophical and pedagogical thinking until relatively recently.
However, within psychology, philosophy and pedagogy, there has been a sea change in our approach to emotions over the last 50 years. The Aristotelian view that cognition is an integral part of emotion, an approach that has been ignored for millennia, is now probably the dominant paradigm in pedagogy. Furthermore, even more radical suggestion that emotions are integral to adaptive cognitive processing, is enticing many cognitive pedagogical theorists and educators to take a closer look at the issue of cognition-emotion interactions.

Emotional development, which turns out also to be social development, has now achieved an importance at least equal to intellectual development. This understanding is important in education, because it has finally established emotion as essential to motivation and learning success. Our previous research on motivation and the quality of student achievement in language learning has demonstrated

how fundamentally important these domains are in their influence on each other (Lobanova, Shunin ,2008).

A current cognitive conception, for which there is a broad consensus, is that emotions are central to mental and social life because they are our fundamental mediators between internal and external worlds. They relate what is personally important (goals, concerns, aspirations) to the world (people, things, events).

Understanding emotions has distinctive areas of application, notably intercultural communications. These are modern descendents of those pioneered by the Hellenistic ethical philosophers, the Epicureans and Stoics, who were the first to study systematically the relations between cognition and emotion, as ways of understanding their implications for self and society, and among the first to show how unwanted passions might be controlled.

Factors that predict successful intercultural communication and adjustment

Intercultural communication refers to communication between interactants coming from different cultural backgrounds. There have been many attempts to identify the factors that influence successful intercultural communication as well as intercultural adjustment and adaptation (Matsumoto, 2001). Selmeski points out no fewer than eleven different terms with some equivalence to intercultural communicative success. Abbe emphasizes 'a set of cognitive, behavioral, and affective/motivational components that enable individuals to adapt effectively in intercultural environments' (Abbe et al, 2007).
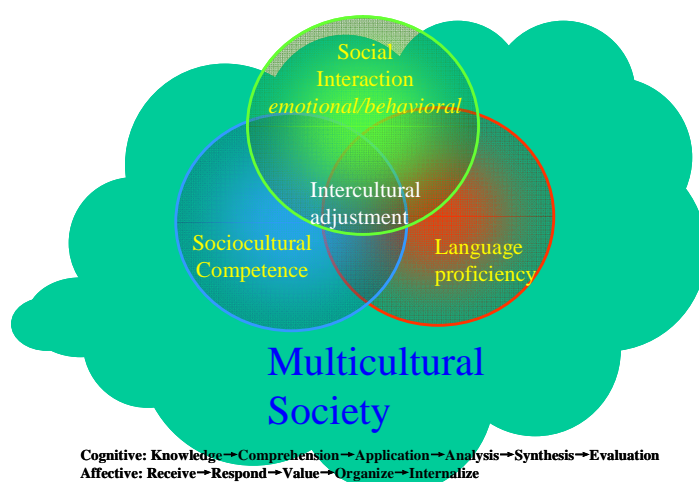

Cognitive: Knowledge→Comprehension→Application→Analysis→Synthesis→Evaluation
Affective: Receive→Respond→Value→Organize→Internalize

Figure 1. A growth model of successful intercultural communication and adjustment.

We believe that effective and successful intercultural communication (which is associated with intercultural adjustment and adaptation) is a well-balanced integration of three components: 1) language proficiency; 2) sociocultural competence; 3) interactive competence, the core of which is emotion regulation, that is, it refers to the process of altering one's behavior to fit into a different cultural environment or circumstances (Fig. 1).

In educational settings, Bloom's affective and cognitive taxonomies provide a comprehensive framework to describe the overlap area among the three disciplines (Fig. 1): at the initial stage of language acquisition (the receiving and knowledge levels) the three domains can operate with near independence (Bloom, 1981). But as one reaches the stage of a high-level language proficiency ensuring communicative competency and sociocultural knowledge (the internalizing and evaluation levels) the overlap area approaches totality, demonstrating predisposition to intercultural adjustment. As we can see from the model, success or failure in intercultural communication and the degree of adjustment will depend almost entirely on interactants' behavioral character and the ability to control emotions.

Many linguists agree with Benjamin Whorf that 'the language we speak largely determines our way of thinking and behaviour'. Latvians, Russians and English behave in a certain manner because the way they think is governed by the language in which they think. A Latvian, a Russian and an English see

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the world in different ways because one is thinking in Latvian, the other is in Russian and the third is in English. They may share a common experience, but the mind organizes their impressions largely by means of language. That language helps to structure thought is known as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Over the past few decades, research has shown considerable support for this hypothesis (Abbe, 2007; Bloom, 1981; Matsumoto, 2001).

However, the development of linguistic unity in Europe and the widespread understanding of the English language today does not mean a corresponding understanding of different countries' cultures and, consequently, a different mind set. Bringing English language studies based on transdisciplinary synthesis of academic disciplines into higher education classrooms, we have a way of getting into a different mind set, of helping our students understand the world better and acquire specific knowledge and interests.

We cannot ever know exactly what it is like to be someone else; nor can someone else ever feel exactly as we do, or exactly as our neighbour does, or even exactly as someone as close to our background as our own sister or brother feels (for a variety of reasons). People very often find it difficult to empathize with outsiders or even with people very close to them. But to empathize we need to understand, and to understand we need to have communicated to us the ideas, thoughts, feelings and assumptions of other people.

Language is perhaps the most effective and major method of communication. Consequently, a person with a high level of the English language proficiency, who can most effectively use the language to communicate not only ideas and facts but also feelings, emotions and assumptions, is potentially predisposed to successful intercultural communication and adjustment as well as long-term relationships.

Fostering positive intercultural adjustment and effective communication across cultures requires the development of effective communicative language competence which employs skills, talents and strategies in which we engage in order to exchange thoughts, feelings, attitudes and beliefs among people of different cultural backgrounds.

But cultures differ considerably not only in their distinct languages, symbol systems, their function of pragmatics and communication styles. Cultures are also characterized by their nonverbal behaviours. Although facial expressions of anger, fear, disgust, sadness, happiness, and surprise have a universal basis (Matsumoto, 2001), cultures differ in the Cultural display rules of expression management that dictate the appropriateness of emotion display depending on social circumstances.

Therefore, sociocultural competence is another important factor associated with successful intercultural communication and adjustment. It demands to be well conversant with some cultures, the ability of effective communication with people from other cultures and, as a consequence, the ability of altering one's behaviour to fit in with a changed social environment or circumstances, or as a response to social conditions. We relate sociocultural competence to a personal subjective experiences resulting from attempts at intercultural adjustment and also motivating further adaptation into a different culture.

As ERASMUS student exchange practice proves, adapting to a new culture can have both positive and negative adjustment outcomes. On the one hand, positive consequences include gains in language proficiency, self-esteem, intercultural awareness, self-confidence, positive mood and positive thinking, good interpersonal relationships and stress reduction. When intercultural experiences go well, when students have successful relationships with people from other cultures, when they feel that interactions are warm and cordial, respectful and cooperative, when they are able to accomplish tasks in an effective and efficient manner, students report evolving in many qualitative, positive ways so that they are different and better individuals. These include the development of multicultural identities and multiple perspectives with which to engage the world.

On the other hand, negative consequences include emotional distress, culture shock, dysfunctional communication, depression, anxiety, diminished school and work performance, difficulties in interpersonal relationships, and, as a result, early return to the home country. As students report, they have not experienced this whole gamut of psychological and physical health problems, but most of them have experienced some of these problems at some point in their stay/sojourn abroad.

Sociocultural competence develops through personal experience of continuous adjustment and adaptation to the differences with which ERASMUS students engage every day. This engagement is not easy because of inevitability of tension, mental strain and misunderstandings due to the existence of

cultural differences. Our stereotypic ways of thinking make it easy for us to create negative value judgments about those differences and misunderstandings due to negative emotions which are associated with these judgments. These negative reactions make it difficult for us to engage in more constructive ways of interacting with people and keep us from adequately appreciating those differences and integrating with people who are different. Therefore, our concept of successful intercultural communication and adjustment is to develop social interaction strategies that minimize stresses and negative adjustment outcomes and maximize positive ones as important motivators for continued intercultural relationships. This concept is rooted in the notion that emotions are motivational and that they fuel cognitive development (Tomkins, 1991). The adoption of strategies will help resolve potential misunderstandings, conflicts and reduce nervous tensions occurring due to cultural differences. One strategy would be to become thoroughly conversant with a culture, recording the cultural similarities and differences and creating one's own 'positive cultural dictionary'. This is not an easy task, since it is difficult to condense so much about cultures to be learned into personal time frames and physical resources available. Still, this approach is not without merit, and some students develop such manuals in their minds about a small number of cultures with which they become familiar through travels, studies, summer work or professional practice, student exchange programmes and the like.
But none of us can create such a dictionary for all the cultures and peoples that we might encounter some time in our lives. Therefore, the majority of us will need to rely on a growth model of successful intercultural communication and adjustment in order to produce effective long-term sociocultural interactions and relationships, the core of which is emotion regulation.

Thus, another major strategy for building up successful long-term intercultural relationships and for effective and efficient accomplishing tasks in social interactions is the ability to control negative emotional reactions when dealing with cultural differences. Those who can cope with the task will then be able to engage in a more constructive intercultural relationship and open the door to more successful social interactions. Those who cannot will have that door closed to them. Emotions, therefore, are central to this process and hold the key to success or failure in intercultural experiences.

Emotion-focused way of thinking
Emotions, in fact, are a large part of our lives. They colour our life and our experiences, giving them meaning and relevance to ourselves and the world. They, ultimately, determine our well being.

Positive emotions – joy, happiness, satisfaction, interest, pleasure – are very important emotions in that they give us essential information about our relationships with others and the world. Negative emotions – anger, fear, envy, disgust, sadness, frustration, shame and guilt – although all unpleasant and unattractive – are also important in that when we feel these emotions, they tell us something very significant about ourselves and our relationships with other people, events or situations. Inferred from this is the idea that emotions are 'personal internal readable sources' because they provide information to us about our status in relation to other people, the surrounding environment and the world.
Emotions are important because they motivate behaviours. Joy, happiness and interest are motivational and reinforce behaviours, while anger, fear and frustration are demotivational and destroy behaviours. The father of the modern theory of emotion in psychology, Sylvan Tomkins, has suggested that emotions are amplifiers and motivators and if you want to understand why people behave the way they do, you have to understand their emotions (Tomkins, 1991).

Thus, in understanding cultural differences that might be provoking and laden with negative emotions, as well as, in adjusting to different cultural viewpoint, a major determinant of intercultural communication success or failure is the ability to cope well with negative reactions and effectively deal with resolving conflicts. Individuals who can regulate their negative feelings, who can somehow put them on hold and not act directly upon them or not allow them to overcome their way of thinking, acting or feeling, will be able to engage in some aspect of critical/positive thinking about the origins and causes of those differences. Once this type of critical/positive thinking can occur, these individuals will have an active choice of accepting or rejecting alternative hypotheses concerning the causes of those differences, and hopefully will have the openness and flexibility to accept rival hypotheses if it turns out their initial reactions were inaccurate.
By engaging in critical/positive thinking about cultural differences and being open and flexible to new ways of thinking, people continually add new cognitive structures in their minds to represent the world. The expansion of cognitive structures adds complexity to the ability to interact with diversity, creating new expectations and greater awareness of similarities and differences. This is a growth model. This is possible only when emotions are regulated and negative emotions are not allowed to be acted upon.

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If negative emotions overcome us and dictate how we think, feel and act, we cannot engage in critical/positive thinking about those differences. People revert to a more primitive way of dealing with and understanding their world (the concept known as 'regression'). This is a non-growth model.

Thus, the five main components to personal growth in relation to dealing with cultural differences in our model are Emotion Regulation (ER), Critical Thinking (CT), Empathy (EM), Openness (OP) and Flexibility (FL). Of these ER is the key component as it is the 'safety valve' of the growth process. If we let out our negative emotions, we are not able to engage in higher order thinking about cultural differences – positive ways of thinking, person perception and positive worldview, which is crucial for intercultural communication and adjustment.

It does not matter how much information about host or home culture one may possess or the degree of language proficiency one may have: if one cannot regulate emotions, think critically/positively about people, events and situations, or have the openness of mind and flexibility to adopt alternative positions to what one is familiar with and accustomed to, it is hardly possible to develop intercultural empathy and sensitivity. If, however, one has these attributes, that will allow one to use knowledge and language in order to overcome stormy waters of intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts, to rise above them, become stronger, wiser and more multicultural person, able to really integrate with people of different cultures.

Developing Successful Communication Emotional Potential Scale

Because there were no ready-made measures to assess individual emotional potential to predict successful communication, we opted for creating our own, which resulted in the development of Successful Communication Emotional Potential Scale (SCEPS).
The aims of such a scale were to:
- Identify and quantify different types of emotional processing styles (positive, neutral, negative).
- Provide a conceptual framework to develop positive emotional processing styles.
- Predict educational response and successful intercultural communication.
- Assess the contribution of language learning and multicultural awareness to the development of positive emotional processing style.
- Measure changes in emotional processing as a result of language acquisition based on traditional and innovative methodologies.
- Provide a questionnaire-based research tool for experimental paradigms exploring emotion.
- Assist subject teachers in incorporating an emotional component into their formulations of the educational process.

The first step in the development of SCEPS was to compile an item pool. We examined a number of valid and reliable personality inventories on the interactive nature of cognition and emotion (Dalgleish & Power 1999), on assessing psychological constructs related to emotion regulation, critical thinking, openness and flexibility (Personality Test of General Emotional Intelligence and The Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale (BEES), Mehrabian, 2000; The Intercultural Adjustment Potential Scale – ICAPS, Matsumoto 2004; Abraham-Hicks Emotional Guidance Scale, 2007). We also included other skills such as autonomy, interactivity (as willingness to interact, to communicate), sociability, tolerance of 'otherness' and empathy. These skills were hypothesized as necessary in allowing students to cope with stress and misunderstandings that are inevitable in intercultural communication, while at the same time allowing for personal growth in understanding, tolerance, acceptance of cultural differences and identity development. This resulted in the development of 55 items.

The item pool was informed by research interviews, discussions, observations of role plays, case studies and problem solving undertaken with students learning the English language on the basis of innovative Linguo-didactic model 'Learning Curve' supported by Competence-Oriented Modular Programme for Autonomous Students (COMPAS) – an experimental group of 29 students, and those who study the language according to the traditional methodology – a control group of 29 students.
The factor analyses using normative data (n=58) suggested that five factors underlay the SCEPS – Emotion Regulation (ER), Critical Thinking (CT), Empathy (EM), Openness (OP), and Flexibility (FL). We created scores for each of these scales (3-high, 2-average, 1-low) and computed correlations between them and various adjustment variables in the TOEIC test, which our students take at the end of the English language course. The aim was to examine the level of students' emotional potential to

predict successful intercultural communication and adjustment and the degree of the language learning contribution to the development of such a potential.
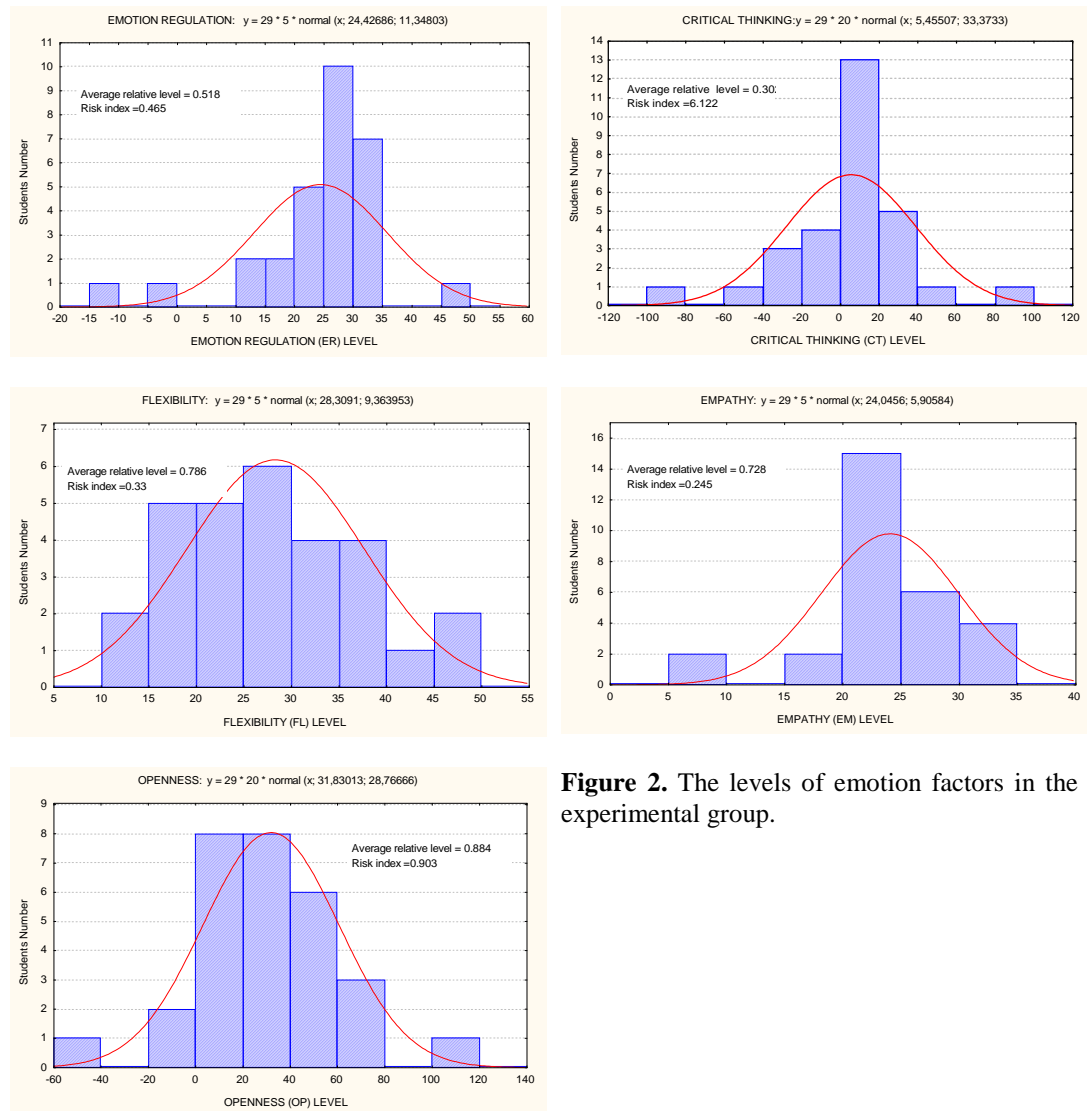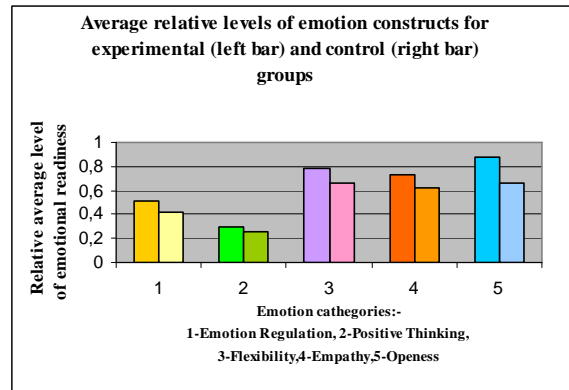

Figure 2. The levels of emotion factors in the experimental group.

The research findings have proved that 56% of students possess a rather high level of ER and CT, 17% have demonstrated an average level of these emotional factors and 27% have shown a low level of ER and CT (Fig.2).

At the same time the strongest findings for OP, FL, and EM (Fig.2) do not argue against the importance of ER and CT. On the contrary, these skills make sense in understanding successful outcomes of intercultural adjustment and suggest optimistic perspectives in the emotional potential of the students, provided a more personality-oriented approach in education is implemented. Thinking out of the box and analyzing rival opinions to understand uncommon behaviour, which is necessary in cross-cultural interaction, cannot occur without OP and EM. Adaptation of new cognitive structures in the mind cannot occur without OP and FL.

The pilot study has shown that students of the experimental group have scored about 18%-20% higher on the SCEPS scales than students of the control group (Fig. 3), which reveals the advantage of the innovative methodology over the traditional one.

Figure 3. The average relative levels of emotion factors in the experimental and control groups

ERASMUS student exchange programme students were more successful in building relationships with their peers, since they were able to predict the expected emotional reactions and were able to deal with them in a positive way, keeping in check their emotions. They were more successful in finding jobs and establishing good relationships with their bosses, which resulted in their faster promotion and increase in salary. As a consequence, they had greater subjective well-being in their adjustment, higher language scores, better grades, more tendency to work and higher life satisfaction.

Conclusion

Communication is a complex process that involves multiple forms of information transmitted via multiple verbal and nonverbal messages. Culture has a pervasive influence on the encoding and decoding of those messages. As a consequence of this influence, intercultural communication often results in emotional stress, cultural shock and misunderstandings. The key, therefore, to achieving successful intercultural communication is the qualitative expansion of a personal growth model where ways of thinking, person perception, and worldview are constantly updated by the new and exciting cultural differences with which we engage in our emotional expressions.

Those who can control emotional reactions will then be able to engage in a more constructive intercultural communication (due to openness, flexibility and positive/critical thinking about cultural differences).

The European context is a stage for developing new relationships, new ideas, and new people. It is the stage for European-wide cultural exchange and success for those individuals who can engage their positive emotions in communicative skills and strategies, talents for openness and flexibility in order to exchange thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs among people of different cultural backgrounds.

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