

SOCIOCULTURAL COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT BASED ON ACKROYD'S BRIEF LIVES

*Burmistrova Anastasia
Master Student*

*Tula State Lev Tolstoy Pedagogical University
300026 Russia, Tula, Lenin pr., 25
b.tess@mail.ru*

The paper is devoted to the problem of developing students' sociocultural competence (SC). The paper focuses on the importance of teaching students all the components of SC. Special attention is paid to the peculiarities of English authentic texts and Ackroyd's Brief Lives, in particular, which can be used to develop SC in the classroom. Activities based on these texts emphasize SC development, facilitate the students' understanding of national and cultural diversity in the contemporary globalized world as well as communicative skills.

Key words: competence based teaching, sociocultural competence, intercultural communication, authentic materials.

It is widely known that when there appeared a necessity of communication than language emerged as a result. Each nation has developed its own language with its peculiarities, including the system of grammar, vocabulary, phonetics, etc. People have learnt how to arrange their thoughts in words and how to save and transmit information from generation to generation and all of it by means of language as well as for a variety of other functions. People have even used language as means of war, which has become known as the information warfare. People use the power of language in order to persuade, to praise, to criticize, to love, to detest.

Without doubt language is one of our major gifts and curses at the same time. But during the process of communication how can we avoid misunderstanding when people of various nationalities live together in cosmopolitan cities? We think that we should teach our young generation to be able to adjust to different multinational societies. We should do it starting at the kindergarten level and including universities. We should teach students how to communicate successfully without the influence of culture-based stereotypes and the lack of knowledge. One of the ways to achieve it is to develop what is known as sociocultural competence (SC).

According to scholars, SC is «the whole range of particular knowledge, skills, habits, abilities and qualities which are developed in the process of formal or informal language training to intercultural communication» [3].

Some scholars maintain that SC is «a component of foreign language communicative competence which goal is to learn cultural peculiarities of the country which language is taught. It is also the ability to act verbally and nonverbally according to those peculiarities» [4]. Essentially important is that SC is «a tool of training an international oriented person who is aware of interdependency, integrity of the world and the necessity of intercultural collaboration in the process of solving global issues of human society» [5].

If we turn to the official documents on language education we may see that according to CERF (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment) there are some things closely connected with culture which students should be taught. It is sociocultural knowledge, intercultural awareness, intercultural skills. All of these may be considered to be components of SC.

Sociocultural knowledge includes everyday living (food, holidays, hobbies), living conditions, interpersonal relations (between genders, generations, social classes), values, beliefs, attitudes, body language, social conventions (presents, dress, behavior), ritual behavior (birth, marriage, death, celebrations).

Knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities and distinctive differences) between the ‘world of origin’ and the ‘world of the target community’ produce the intercultural awareness. This phenomenon covers the awareness of how each community appears from the perspective of the other, often in the form of national stereotypes.

- Intercultural skills include:
- the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other;
- cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures;
- the capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between one’s own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations;
- the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships.

So we can say that by developing SC we teach our students how to decode a verbal or non-verbal message from the representative of the culture which language they learn and how to react verbally and non-verbally without misunderstanding.

To develop SC creating some principles should be followed. First of all, any information that is given to students must be objective and unbiased. The second principle is that students should compare their culture with the culture of people which language they learn. The third is the communicative principle of education when students are actively involved into oral and written communication. The fourth principle concludes connections between studying language and other disciplines by means of the English language because it favours the development of interdiscipline correlation.

Students whose SC is fully developed are able to differentiate true information from stereotypes and use relevant language means correctly. They are aware of the role of the target language in the world and a lot of information about the people and culture of the country which language they learn. In addition to that such students become more tolerant towards the people of other nations so they understand better the meaning of diversity.

Especially helpful in this respect are authentic texts because they are full of idiomatic expressions, words that have no equivalent in mother tongue, some cultural information, proverbs, description of historical events, catch phrases and other types of culturally laden information. Authentic fiction is written for native speakers and provides sociocultural information that is why it is used successfully in the development of competences including SC.

The importance of using authentic fiction is considered by many scholars who say that recently teachers have started to use it more frequently [2]. But in doing so one should remember that they need to pick out authentic fiction according to the students’ language level proficiency.

In this connection, let us consider the use of some of the novels created by the contemporary British writer Peter Ackroyd. Ackroyd is one of the British authors who attract readers by means of his unusual style of writing combining fiction and non-fiction. He is famous for his *Brief Lives*, a series of books dedicated to some important person or place in the British history. Ackroyd’s

works can be used as a material for development SC because they are full of culturally marked words (realias), cultural information and nationally-specific situations characteristic of Great Britain and British people. Ackroyd is very fond of British history, his obsession with this subject makes his books speak to his reader and tell them the stories of life and times of Shakespeare, Newton or even the river Thames or the city of London.

For instance, we use the book by Peter Ackroyd “Newton” to get to know how authentic fiction (biography) may be used to develop SC.

This book describes the life of a famous physicist, mathematician Isaac Newton. Reading the book we found 207 words which contain cultural information and concern geographical, ethnographical, social, political, onomastic information. This book can be used as a tool in sociocultural competence development.

We have made a series of activities based on P. Ackroyd’s “Newton” for the students to be able to comprehend and understand this authentic text. We have worked out exercises aimed at the development of some special skills in reading, speaking, listening.

For instance, in one of the tasks we offer the students to read an extract from “Newton” by P. Ackroyd about the appearance of Mr. X (I. Newton). If the students cannot guess who it is they are offered to look at the additional picture where I. Newton is shown to be sitting under the apple tree and the apple falls. Then the teacher divides the students into groups. Each group is given a part of the text from the book “Newton” with some missing pieces. Students should do the matching task or gap filling task. The parts of the text correspond to different timeframes of Newton’s life. For example, the first group is given the text about Newton’s childhood, the second group the text about Newton’s years in the university and so on. After doing the tasks the students are offered to make a collage based on the facts of the text and some pictures of Newton’s house, the university where he studied, the places where he worked etc. Then each group should present their part of Newton’s life in a first person narrative in the chronological order.

By means of these activities students have an opportunity to evolve their reading and speaking skills in the process of their sociocultural development based on Ackroyd’s Brief Lives.

A project about the great national scientist is a final task. It helps the students to be able to talk in English not only about British or American culture but about their own one because the ability to talk about one’s own culture is also a component of SC.

During our research we have convinced that it is extremely important in the contemporary world to develop the students’ SC. Sociocultural development ensures us of the equivalence of cultures and languages. It also means accurate use of knowledge to fulfill successful intercultural communication. Authentic texts are one of the best resources for teaching SC because of their lexical and cultural identity to the nation which language is learnt.

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