

# Developing students' sociocultural competence in foreign language classes

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**Published in Training, Language and Culture** Vol 1 Issue 2 (2017) pp. 22-39 doi: [10.29366/2017tlc.1.2.2](https://doi.org/10.29366/2017tlc.1.2.2)

**Recommended citation format:** Vetrinskaya, V. V., & Dmitrenko, T. A. (2017). Developing students' sociocultural competence in foreign language classes. *Training, Language and Culture*, 1(2), 22-39. doi: [10.29366/2017tlc.1.2.2](https://doi.org/10.29366/2017tlc.1.2.2)

*The study examines some topical issues associated with the quality of vocational training of future language educators. It highlights the role of new technologies in teaching foreign languages as an effective means of facilitating efficient communication of specialists of various spheres in a multicultural environment. The authors analyse the factors that contribute to the relevance and necessity of cross-cultural ideas in the field of language education. Particular attention is paid to the description of specific features of teaching foreign languages built on an intercultural basis. The article demonstrates the need for and the objective nature of transformation of the linguistic and educational paradigm – from communicative to intercultural. Considering the importance of professional and speech culture, special attention is also paid to professional-focused technology in intercultural communication teaching.*

**KEYWORDS:** foreign language training, intercultural communication, intercultural approach, teaching technology, verbal means, non-verbal means, conflict of cultures



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern services market, the ever-evolving business cooperation with foreign companies increases the demand for specialists in translation, intercultural communication, and foreign language training. All this emphasises that the training of future specialists in management, economics, and law is an important and relevant issue. Teaching 'business language' as the main means of communication and improving professional competence is of particular importance for specialists in the field of economic management.

The nature of business contacts significantly affects the efficiency of professional activities. Students of these specialties acquire business communication skills in the course of comprehensive training in a variety of disciplines, both general professional and special.

Training linguists and philologists is about mastering communicative and strategic skills of business communication, and developing linguistic skills that enable them to tackle communicative tasks.

The development of communicative competence is recognised as the main educational goal across the board. This training goal is quite clearly defined in both international and Russian documents. According to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2001), a set of communicative competences includes:

- linguistic competence (awareness of the language system);
- sociolinguistic or speech competence (the ability to formulate thoughts using language means);
- sociocultural competence (acquaintance with the national and cultural features of social and communicative behaviour of the native speakers);
- social or pragmatic competence (the desire and ability to initiate communication with other people);
- strategic or compensatory competence (the ability to refine one's speech, improve other types of competences, and close up communication gaps);
- discursive competence (appropriate implementation of strategies used to construct and interpret a text);
- subjective competence (the ability to navigate the content of the information available).

Thus, language training procedure should include several basic components: language units that

form the language competence; roles, stereotypes, strategies, and tactics of communication, which constitute the pragmatic competence; speech material presented in the form of monological and dialogical texts in oral and written form and intended to develop the speech competence; as well as the obligatory country-specific material that represents the features of communication in a given culture or subculture.

The study examines some topical issues associated with the quality of vocational training of future language educators. It highlights the role of new technologies in teaching foreign languages as an effective means of facilitating efficient communication of specialists of various spheres in a multicultural environment. The authors analyse the factors that contribute to the relevance and necessity of cross-cultural ideas in the field of language education. Particular attention is paid to the description of specific features of teaching foreign languages built on an intercultural basis.

The article demonstrates the need for and the objective nature of transformation of the linguistic and educational paradigm – from communicative to intercultural.

Considering the importance of professional and speech culture, special attention is also paid to professional-focused technology in intercultural communication teaching.

*'It seems that time is no less important for communication than words and gestures, postures and distance'*

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION**

One of the important components in terms of teaching business speech is the development of socio-cultural and discursive competences. Intercultural communication in the business sphere involves exchange of information orally or in writing.

At the present time, business cultures are being scrupulously researched and analysed.

Similar to the processes of scientific data exchange, business culture can be actualised within the framework of both oral and written discourse. Oral business communication is realised in various forms, such as interviews, negotiations, business conversations and business discussions.

It should be noted that each culture has its own system of time, which is very important for intercultural communication because, in order to understand our communication partner, we should know the way time is being perceived in his or her culture.

It seems that time is no less important for communication than words and gestures, postures and distance. The criterion of time perception in different cultures is the duration of acceptable delay. Thus, for example, in the US being late for an important meeting can be interpreted as lack of interest and an insult to the partner. In Latin America, on the other hand, being 45 minutes late may be considered a norm. In this regard, the meeting of business people from the United States and Latin America can fail due to ignorance of the peculiarities of time perception inherent in another culture (Conway III, 2004).

In monochronic cultures, it is acceptable to be 10 or 15 minutes late for a meeting, although such a holdup will normally require an apology. In monochronic cultures, time is constantly monitored, simply because time is money. In polychronic cultures, on the other hand, a more relaxed attitude may be observed. This refers, for example, to Latin American, Italian, and other cultures worldwide.

Another very important point must be taken into account in the process of intercultural business communication. Different cultures (and different people in different cultures) use expressions distinguishing between a formal and informal attitude to time. Informal time is associated with an indefinite count: *after a while, later, in the afternoon*, etc. Formal time, on the other hand, is

measured very accurately: *by two o'clock, tomorrow at 1.30 pm*, etc. It is not uncommon for business partners to reach an impasse just because the types of time used (formal vs. informal) appear to differ. The first one comes to the meeting by two o'clock in the afternoon, while the other comes around later that day, that is if he or she shows up at all (Dmitrenko, 2013).

A cultural parameter called 'uncertainty avoidance' is also quite strongly associated with this criterion (Hofstede, 1993). The state and sense of uncertainty is an integral part of human existence, since it is impossible to predict events in the immediate or distant future. People do their best to reduce the level of uncertainty by resorting to various technologies, laws or religious principles. Strategies used to overcome uncertainty vary from culture to culture, depending on the degree to which the culture accepts or limits uncertainty.

In cultures with a high level of uncertainty avoidance, the individual experiences stress and a sense of fear in a situation of uncertainty. A high level of uncertainty, according to Hofstede (1993), doesn't only trigger excessive stress, but contributes to the release of a large amount of energy. That is why it is necessary to adhere to the norms and rules adopted in the business community to regulate the way international conferences and meetings are supposed to be

held. All participants should be informed about various regional peculiarities of the host country and be familiar with the rituals, customs, and traditions associated with the event being held. This will help avoid stress and misunderstanding, and encourage further cooperation and joint activity.

Avoidance of uncertainty is associated with the recognition of permissible deviations from the set of standards and values, which is people's response to the threats and risks related to incomprehensible or uncertain situations. This process of risk evasion implies avoidance of contact in dealing with a specific group of people, where communication conceals a hidden or immediate danger or threat. In cultures with a high level of avoidance of uncertainty, a rather high level of aggressiveness may be observed. Representatives of these cultures try to avoid unclear situations, securing themselves with a lot of formal rules and rejecting deviation from accepted standards of conduct. They may be intolerant of people with a different type of behaviour, resist any changes, and be more risk averse. High uncertainty avoidance communities may be characterised by a higher level of anxiety, strict observance of security and safety issues, and a preference for written instructions, rules and laws that bring stability and certainty to their lives.

Business partners belonging to such communities

*‘In cultures with a low level of uncertainty avoidance, business partners are often more risk embracing in unfamiliar circumstances, because they are characterised by a lower level of stress and fear’*

often prefer clear goals, detailed tasks and fixed work schedules and timetables. Communities of this type include the business cultures of Belgium, Germany, Greece, Portugal, France, Japan, etc. (Hofstede, 1993). For example, it has been suggested that one of the unwritten rules of French conversation is that the French do not like to address the issues that interest them the most immediately in a negotiation. They approach it gradually after a long conversation on neutral topics and as if casually, without pressure, often at the close of lunch or dinner. To act in an opposite way is considered a sign of bad taste. Once you demonstrate your interest, you may seem to be asking for something, and if you receive a negative answer, you may put people in an awkward spot or even humiliate them and yourself (Dmitrenko, 2013).

In cultures with a low level of uncertainty avoidance, business partners are often more risk embracing in unfamiliar circumstances, because

they are characterised by a lower level of stress and fear. In this case, it is easier to perceive the unpredictability of life and not to be frightened by the incomprehensibility of human actions and the novelty of ideas. In such low anxiety uncertainty communities initiatives and the willingness to take risks, may be highly valued. Communities of this type may include the cultures of Denmark, India, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Singapore, the USA, Finland and Sweden (Hofstede, 1993).

Knowing these cultural differences greatly simplifies awareness and understanding. Naturally, this allows business negotiators to react flexibly to unexpected actions by partners due to differences of style in intercultural communication and avoid possible conflicts in the course of business communication with representatives of other cultures (Dmitrenko, 2013).

In the process of communication at conferences, during business trips and internships, a representative of another culture may enter into various informal contacts with both colleagues and other members of the new ‘alien’ culture. In this situation, all the factors that regional studies experts have highlighted are fully manifested. One of the elementary examples of such differences is the ‘distance’ factor, or the ‘personal space’ factor, which is pretty extensively covered in research papers on psychology. The sense of personal space is established as we grow up, and its dimensions

are most commonly regulated unconsciously. They are intuitively supported when communicating with representatives of the native culture and, as a rule, do not hinder communication. However, when communicating with representatives of other cultures, the distance factor may obstruct interaction, since the attitude to space in each culture is predetermined by its accepted behaviour patterns and may be incorrectly perceived by counterparts from a culture with different behaviour.

In different communities, the use of personal space can vary, and the accepted distance changes slightly in one direction or another, depending on the level and type of relationship. For example, many Americans prefer to communicate within the personal and social zones, as we might describe them, and inhabitants of the Middle East and Latin America mostly communicate in the personal zone. The borders of these zones, however, may differ in various cultures, which obviously presents a communicative issue. Therefore, in the process of intercultural interaction we may sometimes feel that our intimate zone is being invaded in an impertinent and interfering way, while our interlocutors might perceive our comfort zone of distance as showing coldness or arrogance.

Each person subconsciously establishes the boundaries of his or her personal space. The scope of these boundaries depends not only on the

person's cultural background, but also on the attitude toward their interlocutor. Obviously, friends are always closer to each other than strangers. Thus, changing the distance between people in communication is part of the communication process.

Studies have shown that for personal communication, the British and Americans use more space than the French and Italians. Ignoring the boundaries of the personal zone in the process of intercultural interaction during a business meeting can trigger intercultural conflict, because representatives of different cultures experience discomfort during communication because of ignorance of the personal distance preferences of their interlocutor. For example, Latin Americans usually communicate within their personal zones, while North Americans prefer interaction within their social zones. That's why Latin Americans often consider North Americans reserved and cold (Beaulieu, 2004).

Business oral and written communication employs the same strategies that are implemented in scientific speech. When teaching students, it is imperative to know the basic characteristics of written business communication: restrictedness, i.e. adherence to established rules and restrictions; strict commitment to the participant's role, i.e. the need to behave in accordance with the requirements imposed by the specific situation and

the communicative roles assumed; increased responsibility for the outcome of the interaction on the part of business communication participants; more scrupulous and elaborate choice of verbal means. The defining principle here is the strategy of completeness, which requires precision, ultimate clarity, and logic. At the lexical level, this is achieved by choosing terms that ensure unambiguous statements. In business written texts, the implementation of this strategy is based on the pursuance of standardised speech, which is achieved through the use of clerical clichés, as well as the composition of genres, which has a strict form. Many business documents (a business plan, an application for internship (job or grant application), business information, an application for conference participation, a meeting or conference resolution) have specific strict forms of completion with an accepted order of components (Malyuga et al., 2016).

For the author of a business text, it is important to follow the information quality strategy, which is implemented both at the lexical and syntactical levels. The politeness strategy is realised with the help of the means used in business speech to express positive and negative evaluation. Business discourse has special modal means of expression and is dominated by such subjective modality as obligation, desirability, and necessity.

Another important component of business culture

### *‘The politeness strategy is realised with the help of the means used in business speech to express positive and negative evaluation’*

is speech etiquette. Following the rules of speech etiquette maintains the positive reputation of the whole organisation. Lack of necessary knowledge of speech etiquette, which constitutes a kind of background in a communicative act, can lead to misunderstanding in the process of communication between speakers of different languages and cultures. Speech etiquette in the narrow sense of the word can be described as a system of linguistic communication in which etiquette relations manifest themselves. Elements of this system can be implemented at different language levels. Consider this in an example from the German language.

At the level of vocabulary and phraseology – special words and fixed expressions (*Danke, Bitte, Entschuldigen Sie, Mit herzlichen Grüßen*, etc.), specialised forms of address (*Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren*, etc.);

At the grammatical level – plural forms of politeness and address (*wir, Sie*), interrogative sentences instead of imperative (*Können Sie mir helfen?*);

At the stylistic level – the requirement to use literate and cultural speech devoid of words that directly designate obscene and shocking objects, etc.

Adhering to speech etiquette and rules of politeness in written speech, unlike oral communication, is transmitted exclusively by linguistic means. The etiquette of a business letter tends to be more formal than the etiquette of oral business communication.

Communication in German between representatives of the Russian and German business communities reflects two aspects: first, differences in business culture (the system of values) and second, differences in the national character of the communication partners.

The Germans appreciate specific, detailed, and realistic information and do not comprehend vague statements. A good partner should keep all the important data in mind or be able to quickly retrieve it in the documents. Business potential has to be backed by a detailed presentation, a serious list of demonstrated objectives supported by data, and competent answers to questions.

The Germans are inclined to openly express their disagreement, while diplomacy is not considered compulsory. They appreciate the ability to criticise and tend to perceive their partners' criticism in a

most constructive way. The Germans' straightforward manner presents a rather unusual phenomenon in international business, but this style is more appealing to Russians, although it is considered impolite in many nations. In Germany, it is not customary to disguise routine inquiries and orders in the form of endless eloquent words and wishes. On that score, the Russians and Germans are very much alike.

German partners value competence. Their predilection for academic titles is an outward manifestation of deep respect. An expert can criticise anyone, even those higher in status, but it would be preferable to keep away from the topics that are beyond the scope of your competence. An important role in intercultural business meetings is played by the styles of verbal communication, which vary significantly in different cultures. Examples of such styles of communication are direct and indirect; ingenuous (elaborate) and brief (concise); and instrumental and affective.

Direct verbal style implies expression of true intentions and therefore relies on a rigid style of communication that excludes convention and understatement. This communicative style is characteristic, for example, of American culture, where it is customary to use clear and unambiguous words in communication. Americans may try and force the interlocutor to



## *‘Indirect verbal style allows hiding and camouflaging one’s true desires, goals and needs’*

commit to a direct and frank conversation, which acts as an indicator of honesty and conviction, while hints may be associated with dishonesty and insecurity. Therefore, American speech is saturated with such statements as *Tell me what you mean;* *Let’s get to the point,* etc. (Carbaugh, 2014).

Indirect verbal style allows hiding and camouflaging one’s true desires, goals and needs. For example, this style is typical for the cultures of Japan and Korea. Since the Japanese are committed to preserving both interlocutors’ ‘face’, they appreciate vague and ambiguous words and expressions. Usually, the Japanese do not allow the possibility of openly saying ‘no’. If you do say ‘no’ directly, they might pretend they do not understand you or didn’t hear what you had said, or just try to change the subject by throwing in a lot of meaningless phrases (Tsui & Tollefson, 2017).

The second category, ingenuous (elaborate) and brief (concise) styles of verbal communication also have their own special characteristics. Each style uses expressive means of communication, pauses, silence, etc. in varying degrees. The ingenuous (elaborate) style involves the use of a rich,

expressive language in communication. This style is widespread in the cultures of the Arab peoples of the Middle East, where the ‘face’ of the speaker and the interlocutor is preserved thanks to vows and reassurances. In Arabic speaking cultures, a refusal of refreshments must necessarily be accompanied by assurances that the guest is indeed full. In dealing with Arabs, one may have to speak more and louder than usual although the loudness of some foreigners may irritate some Arab listeners (see below). The volume of the voice, the heightening of the pitch and the tone – all of these may indicate sincerity (Dmitrenko, 2013).

A brief (concise) style of communication is the opposite of the ingenuous (elaborate) style. It is mainly about using the necessary and sufficient minimum set of statements to convey information. This style is characterised not so much by laconism and restraint, but is rather marked by evasiveness, the use of pauses and expressive silence. Pauses and understatement in a conversation allow a business partner not to offend an interlocutor while negotiating without causing him or her to lose ‘face’. Usually this style dominates in cultures, the main purpose of which in the process of communication is the preservation and maintenance of group harmony.

For example, the Japanese and the Chinese often use silence in conversation, especially with the

uncertain status of the participants in the conversation. For representatives of these cultures, silence becomes a way of controlling the process of communication.

The third category, instrumental and affective styles of verbal communication, is distinguished by the orientation of the process of verbal communication to a specific participant.

The instrumental style of communication is focused mainly on the speaker and the purpose of communication. This style of communication dominates in cultures that are characterised by a high degree of individualism (Malyuga, 2016). For example, in European cultures and the United States, people tend to present themselves through verbal communication, through speaking, to show and affirm their individual self. This style of communication is especially widespread in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

The affective style is marked by the opposite orientation of the communication process. This style is focused on the listener and the process of interpersonal interaction. With the affective style, it is imperative to take care and avoid speculative statements and stances. To this end, business partners make extensive use of vague expressions and avoid direct affirmations or denials. If both partners in intercultural communication during the business meeting adhere to this style, then

*'Gestures and movements often indicate a person's cultural background, even if he or she is fluent in a foreign language'*

there are always situations of misunderstanding and interpretation of what has been said. The affective style of verbal interaction is typical of the Japanese style of communication. Its main goal is to achieve mutual understanding, partners should show intuitive sensitivity to the meanings hidden between the lines.

Following the research of Mehrabian (1981) into non-verbal communication in the 1970s it is common knowledge that using words alone people transmit as little as 7% of information to their interlocutors. The rest of the data is transmitted through non-verbal means of communication, which are very important in the process of intercultural business communication.

Gestures have a social origin, and so intercultural differences appear to be most pronounced in gestures and other manifestations of body language, making up 55% of communication. For example, expressing their approval in public places, the Germans do not applaud, as is customary in the cultures of other nations, but knock their knuckles on the table top and even whistle or shout on occasion.

Most gestures are culturally determined, they are symbols and are contractual in nature. Gestures and movements often indicate a person's cultural background, even if he or she is fluent in a foreign language. This is one more factor to be considered in the process of intercultural business communication. For example, in American culture, several gestures are used to indicate a desire to change the topic of the conversation, speak out or finish the conversation: lean forward, stop looking your interlocutor in the eye, change the posture, often nod. These subtle hints have a practical effect and change the nature of communication.

Inappropriate use of gestures can trigger serious misunderstandings. An accident with an American politician visiting one of the countries in Latin America might serve as an indicative example. In his speeches, the politician continuously stressed they wanted to help, showed his amicable attitude and sympathy towards others. However, his trip started unsuccessfully.

His mistake was that, descending from the airplane, the politician joined his forefinger and thumb in the well-known A-OK gesture. Unfortunately, he did not realise that in parts of Latin America this gesture is considered rude, or even indecent (Axtell & Fornwald, 1998).

During business negotiations, special attention is

paid to eye contact, since communication of people begins with visual communication, which for this reason is the main element of non-verbal communication. Eye contact is a specific form of human communication, because through the eyes a person can express an extensive range of emotions.

For example, specifying the price of the goods or the value of the contract, Chinese and Turkish business partners focus on the pupils of their interlocutors: if the price is satisfying, the pupils tend to expand. In Western cultures, 'direct look' is considered an important communicative indicator: if a person avoids eye contact, he or she might be considered insincere and unreliable. So, Americans usually do not trust someone who does not look them in the eye; the use of visual contact facilitates trust between people. If a person fails to establish direct eye contact, this can be a cause for concern. Deliberate refusal to establish eye contact can be part of a manipulation technique to leverage a dependent partner. This way the speaker manipulates his or her communication partner into a secondary position so that the object of manipulation perceives himself as a burden in the interaction process. However, it should be noted that an Asian subordinate will not look his or her boss in the face, as this would be considered bold and disrespectful behaviour.

In addition to the above features of non-verbal

*'Deliberate refusal to establish eye contact can be part of a manipulation technique to leverage a dependent partner'*

intercultural communication, touching culture can be very different. One may speak of high contact culture (permitting tactile interaction), and low contact or distant (restricting tactile interaction) culture. When conducting business negotiations, one should take into account the generally recognised fact that Latin American, Eastern and Southern European cultures are classified as high contact cultures.

The Germans and British rarely resort to tactile feedback in the process of communicative interaction. In Germany and the US, men usually communicate at a reasonable distance from each other and hardly ever touch each other, although the United States tactility is more common than in Germany. Italian men stand close to each other and are much more likely to resort to tactile interaction compared to women. One integral part of meeting is a handshake, especially on first meetings.

The Germans, like all Europeans, consider shaking hands an integral part of the greeting ritual. They shake hands not only during the first greeting, but also at the end of the conversation.

Western Europeans and Americans tend to avoid 'soft' handshakes, since in these cultures athleticism and energy are very much appreciated. A firm handshake tends to indicate sincerity. They should shake hands vigorously and strongly.

Specialists in non-verbal communication argue that the most aggressive kind of handshake is stretching the hand with the palm down (McNeill, 2000). A 'glove' handshake is sometimes referred to as a professional politician's handshake. The initiator of such a handshake tries to create an impression of openness, honesty, and trust in the interlocutor. The so-called 'dead fish' handshake is unpleasant for the interlocutor, especially if the partner's hand is cold and wet. A 'soft' slippery handshake may indicate the weak character of the owner of a cold and damp hand. The 'bone cruncher' handshake is a typical sign of an aggressive, tough interlocutor, it is almost impossible to neutralise this style. The main purpose of this handshake is to keep the interlocutor at a distance, away from the intimate zone of the aggressive partner (Dibiase & Gunnoe, 2004).

Nonverbal behaviour in the process of business communication supplements and enriches speech, and strengthens the impact of the message. Therefore, foreign language teachers should be able to recognise and comprehend both universal non-verbal means of expression, and those that are

culturally and nationally marked, and pass this knowledge to the students. Therefore, the teacher needs to be aware of the 'communication pantomime' typically used by the representatives of various cultures.

If the non-verbal means of communication are ignored in the process of intercultural communication, the contradictions between verbal and non-verbal behaviour may be interpreted as evidence of insincerity, anti-social behaviour or poor upbringing. The use of gestures associated with speech promotes better perception of information, creates positive images and good memories of the encounter.

When it comes to training specialists in intercultural communication, there is one more point to be highlighted. Establishing contact with the representatives of other peoples and cultures, people naturally tend to take a narrow view of their behaviour and judge people by their own yardstick. More often than not, misunderstanding of a different language, gestures, facial expressions and other elements of communicative behaviour causes misinterpretation of actions which, in turn, generates negatively charged emotions (even hostile at times). For example, Europeans who first came into contact with the Japanese were and are still shocked by the fact that in this strange culture it is customary to keep smiling while speaking of illness or the death of a close relative. This

induced a stereotype propagating the heartlessness, cynicism and cruelty of the Japanese. However, in such cases, a smile should not be perceived in the context of European conventions, but should be interpreted through the lens of Japanese tradition, for in Japan it symbolises commitment to secure others against one's personal sorrows (Wierzbicka, 1999).

In the process of intercultural business communication, a pivotal role is played also by paraverbal or paralinguistic features that accompany oral speech, supplementing it with secondary meanings. The meaning of a statement may vary according to the intonation, rhythm, timbre, phrasal and logical stresses used to transmit it. Mehrabian's (1981) research indicated that up to 38% of communication depends on this.

Using our voice, we can convey a number of basic emotions (such as anger, joy, surprise, etc.), and emotional states (kindness, anxiety, confidence, interest, etc.). Paraverbal means are deployed in the process of interaction to express appropriate emotions, feelings and experiences in order to achieve certain communicative goals and intentions.

In Egypt, Americans are sometimes criticised for their manner of speaking too loudly, despite a recognition that volume may convey sincerity and passion in Arabic speech. Part of this perceived

loudness is due to the sociability of many Americans, who may adopt a loud and confident tone of voice to demonstrate their competence and openness.

Silence takes on enormous importance in the process of communication. In different cultures, the idea of how much silence is necessary for adequate communication has its own national features. For example, Americans tend to dislike long pauses and often try to 'fill the void'. Therefore, when foreign journalists or businessmen visit the US to find out information, they are instructed to take long pauses so that their American counterparts have time to explain their thoughts (and maybe reveal more information).

Another means of paraverbal communication is the manner of speech. While some cultures are marked by a prominent propensity to converse, in others people don't speak too much and tend to be laconic. This fact must also be taken into account in the process of intercultural interaction. In a number of cultures, the content of what has been said is often of secondary importance. For example, in Arabic language and literature, the content and meaning of what is said is not necessarily the main thing. Importance is given to word-play. Different words can be used with the same meaning. Arabs tend to express the same thought in different ways and using different words.

### *'In terms of the silence criterion, there is a perceived difference between Eastern and Western cultures'*

In terms of the silence criterion, there is a perceived difference between Eastern and Western cultures. In Eastern cultures, it is traditionally believed that silence should be prolonged, since it is treated as a manifestation of sincerity. In western-European cultures on the other hand, silence tends to be used to give 'thinking time'. Attentive listening may be considered an integral part of etiquette, and the ability to pause and use silence appropriately is considered an indicator of education and upbringing.

When it comes to intercultural communication, the ability to understand your partner's silence, gestures, or pauses is one of the components of professional competence.

One of the greatest experts in intercultural communication Bennett (1998) believes that in order to prepare for intercultural interaction one should first of all develop intercultural sensitivity, i.e. sensory perception and interpretation of cultural differences. According to Bennett (1998), it's not the similarity people need to be aware of, but the difference, for all the challenges of intercultural communication result precisely from

the rejection of intercultural difference.

In the case of intercultural communication, in order to understand the communicative behaviour of representatives of another culture, it is necessary to consider it within the framework of a new culture, and not the native one, i.e. one should show an empathic attitude towards one's communication partner. In order to establish productive relations with the representatives of other cultures, one should learn to understand them on an emotional level. To do this, one needs to know what emotional statements and reactions are acceptable, because in every society there is a criterion of sentimentality and emotionality.

As a psychological notion, the term 'empathy' was introduced by the American psychologist Edward Titchener 100 years ago by drawing an analogy with the term 'sympathy'. Titchener (1926) interpreted empathy as a person's ability to understand the emotional state of another person through ingression into his or her subjective world. Psychologists have identified three levels of empathy. The first (low) level represents disregard of the feelings and thoughts of others. The second (average) level implies episodic disregard of the feelings and thoughts of others and is most often encountered.

The third (high) level implies constant, deep and accurate understanding of other people, mental

reconstruction of their experiences, and a deep tact. This third level should become the cornerstone of the sociocultural competence developed in foreign language classes. In today's society, competence in the sphere of communication has become one of the main components of a high level of professional expertise.

A modern specialist will have to efficiently interact with a large variety of people and act promptly, registering the ever-changing information. Professional and business communication has become more flexible, mobile and less predictable.

Mastering the culture of speech behaviour characteristic of native speakers will allow students studying a foreign language to:

- exhibit appropriate communicative conduct in intercultural communication;
- critically assess communicative settings;
- treat national etiquette rules and peculiarities of the national character with dignity and respect;
- show interest in the cultural, historical, and regional unique features of the target language countries;
- adopt the most valuable information in the field of cognitive interests and transfer it to the field of national experience (Dmitrenko, 2013).

Maintenance of efficient intercultural communication will obviously require more than just foreign language proficiency. In order to forecast and avoid misunderstanding, one will have to master the whole complex of behavioural, psychological, cultural, and communicative patterns. Whenever cultural differences are ignored, there emerges a threat to intercultural communication which hinders cooperation and obstructs comprehension.

Firstly, pretending that all people are the same will not eliminate the existing differences.

Secondly, the ability to decode background information about the interlocutor places communication partners on a more equal footing.

Thirdly, this knowledge allows improvement in the course of communication. It allows negotiators to choose the right tone of communication, choice of topics, avoid discussion of painful issues, and better understand the partner's psychology (Lewis, 1999).

When dealing with a different culture, it is advisable to act in accordance with the norms, customs, and traditions of this community, avoid imposing your own religion, values or way of life, as the system of values of each culture develops over a long time and remains unchanged over many generations.

The behaviour of people with a different cultural background is not something unpredictable, it can be studied and forecast, but this requires special training.

Learning to interact with the representatives of other cultures poses two major challenges:

- through the playback situations that take place differently in different cultures, introduce students to intercultural differences in relationships with the representatives of other cultures;
- having familiarised the most characteristic features of a foreign culture, ensure the transfer of this knowledge to other situations.

Although ultimately we are dealing with individual whose values and attitudes, communication and management styles may or may not conform with the culture they represent, knowledge or ignorance of cultural characteristics plays an important role in achieving mutual understanding in intercultural communication. Being armed with this knowledge, students will be able to differentiate between permitted actions and taboos which is ultimately one of the key competences developed in foreign language learning.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The diverse practice of intercultural communication has proved that even profound



knowledge of a foreign language does not exclude misunderstanding and even conflict situation in the process of interaction with native speakers. In this regard, there is an urgent need for students to prepare for effective intercultural contacts at the level of everyday interpersonal communication. This involves supplementing language mastery with cultural proficiency, understanding the nature of intercultural misunderstanding and developing the practical skills and conduct that together allow for comprehensive understanding of the representatives of other cultures and adequate perception and comprehension of business partners' both verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

The ability to successfully communicate

interculturally is not innate in a person who exists in only in the framework of his or her native culture. It is acquired and formed by conscious comparative study of native and foreign cultures. To implement professional and business communication at the intercultural level, future specialists need extensive training that will ensure effective intercultural interaction. That is why such great importance is given to the development of the socio-cultural competence among students in foreign language classes. When we learn a foreign language, we get acquainted with a foreign worldview and try to combine it with our conventional perceptions. This combination is one of the major challenges in foreign language learning and teaching.

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