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Training of Communicative Competence in Giving Presentations

The research has been carried out at the Business Foreign Languages and Translation Department of the NTU «Kharkiv Polytechnical Institute»

The paper analyzes some dimensions of cultural differences and ways of training cultural and communicative competence skills in giving oral presentations to university and post-graduate students. It emphasizes the need for introducing cross-cultural courses in the curriculums of Ukrainian universities.

Key words: communicative competence, presentations, cross-cultural communication, cultural differences.

Царьова С. О. Формування навичок комунікативної компетенції під час проведення презентацій. У статті проаналізовано деякі вимірювання культурних відмінностей і розглянуто шляхи формування навичок комунікативної та культурної компетенції під час проведення презентацій у студентів та аспірантів ВНЗ. Підкреслено необхідність уведення курсів крос-культурної комунікації у навчальні програми з іноземних мов українських університетів.

Ключові слова: комунікативна компетенція, презентації, крос-культурна комунікація, культурні відмінності.

Царёва С. А. Формирование навыков коммуникативной компетенции при проведении презентаций. В статье анализируются некоторые измерения культурных различий и пути формирования коммуникативной и культурной компетенции в проведении презентаций у студентов и аспирантов вузов. Подчеркивается необходимость введения курсов кросс-культурной коммуникации в учебные программы по иностранным языкам украинских университетов.

Ключевые слова: коммуникативная компетенция, презентации, кросс-культурная коммуникация, культурные отличия.

We are in the midst of the process when Ukraine is forging ahead to democracy, market economy and integration into the European and world community. More and more companies enter the global market place, do business with people from other cultures and give presentations internationally. The awareness of cultural differences and communicative competence is vital for their success. With this in view there is an urgent need in training specialists who not only possess knowledge of foreign languages, but also have communicative and cultural competence that helps them to achieve excellence and efficiency in their work.

So the objective of the paper is to analyze some dimensions of cultural differences and ways of training cultural and communicative competence skills in giving oral presentations to university and post-graduate students. All of them are eager to become successful professionals in their field and the knowledge of cross-cultural differences will improve their speaking competence and enable them to function effectively for the benefit of their countries. The skills of making effective presentations internationally will be necessary for them in their future careers.

The analysis of recent research and publications in the field of cultural leadership, management and communication technologies shows that one of the central themes of effective work culture is transformation, i.e., professional and creative development of personality, information exchange and effective business communication [7].

Cultural competence is an integral part of effective business communication. Cross-cultural awareness will equip our university graduates with useful strategies to employ when giving presentations and taking part in negotiations internationally.

Cross-cultural researchers, sociologists, anthropologists, and other communication scientists look at cross-cultural communication as a system of rules which involves interdisciplinary approaches [1]. Besides world culture studies, these approaches include psycholinguistics studying psychological and neurobiological factors that enable people to obtain, use, understand and produce language.

They also include pragmatics studying how the transmission of meaning depends not only on the language skills (grammar, lexicon, etc) of the speaker and listener, but also on the context of the expression, knowledge about the status of those involved, the alleged intentions of the speaker, and so on.

These approaches further involve sociolinguistics studying the influence of context, cultural norms and expectations in the society on the use of language and language influence on the society. They also require

the study of how language varieties differ between groups divided by ethnicity, religion, status, gender, education level, age, etc.

The differences in communication styles occur, first of all, in the result of historical development. During its historical development Ukraine has had the influence of individualistic low context Western Europe with its Magdeburg law which was one of the most advanced law systems of the 13th and 14th centuries, and up to the 17th century Ukraine was developing in harmony with the European philosophical principles. On the other hand, due to different paths of the historical development over the past 350 years it had the influence of collectivist and totalitarian cultures, and has features of progressive tribalistic societies with their feeling of a strong cultural and ethnic identity.

The Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede conducted one of the most exhaustive research into cultural differences among different nationalities. He outlined his conclusions in the form of four dimensions: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity. Later he added the fifth dimension, long-term orientation, to distinguish the difference in thinking between the East and the West [3].

However, Hofstede's research has some weaknesses in a number of important respects. First, he assumes there is a one-to-one correspondence between culture and the nation-state, but many countries have more than one culture. Hofstede's results do not take this distinction into account. Second, the research may have been culturally biased. The research team was composed of Europeans and Americans. The questions they asked of IBM employees and their analysis of the answers may have been shaped by their own cultural stereotypes and concerns.

Hofstede created an index score for each of these four dimensions that ranged from 0 to 100 and summarized his data into a table. However, Hofstede's analysis doesn't include Ukraine and in this paper we are going to try to find its place on his scale. For the sake of brevity we are going to focus our attention on such dimensions as uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity.

A strong uncertainty avoidance culture is one in which people feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations, and have a need for written and unwritten rules. People in these cultures prefer to avoid ambiguous situations, and like structured situations with precise objectives, detailed assignments and strict timetables.

In weak uncertainty avoidance cultures people dislike too much structure, or too many rules, and are happy with more open-ended situations, which give the possibility of creative problem-solving. Uncertainty avoidance in the USA is relatively low. The US scores a 46 compared to the 65 of the German culture.

To some extent, Ukraine might be referred to high uncertainty avoidance cultures which try to minimize risks by strict laws and rules, safety and security measures. They tend to be more cautious and conservative than, for example, Americans. The history has taught Ukrainians to value stability, security and predictability. This is the heritage of the communist past and the philosophical and religious belief in «absolute truth» – a singularity of truth in which there is no room for a pluralism of opinion.

Communication training courses and communication handbooks pay great attention to conducting presentations. Introductions should include some background to the presenter and to the problem. The purpose of the presentation, a summary of the points to be made and question timing strategy is to be stated right at the beginning. The ideas should be presented as directly as possible [2].

However, different cultures expect different things from a business presentation. Low uncertainty avoidance cultures may be pleased to hear predictions for the future and figures, but people from high uncertainty avoidance cultures will probably be pleased to learn more about the presenter's credentials, achievements and experience. Some cultures, such as Europeans, and Ukrainian, prefer that the information is supported with thoroughly convincing arguments. People in these cultures prefer to avoid ambiguous situations, and would like to hear clear objectives, detailed tasks and strict schedules. On the other hand, some low uncertainty avoidance cultures, such as the U.S., are likely to prefer a much faster pace of presentations aimed at the final result. They might not like too much structure or too many rules, and are completely satisfied with creative problem solving tasks and more open-ended situations.

There are cultures where presenters may never directly state their point as in their culture the point is only directly given when speaking to children. They assume that the adult audience will be able to deduce what the objective of the presentation is.

Besides, in every culture the style of a presentation can vary greatly from speaker to speaker. Both in high and low uncertainty avoidance cultures a lot of people may believe that the presenter should be direct, impersonal and logical, but some may prefer a more indirect and ambiguous style.

However, cultures are constantly evolving and transforming, and people in the group and the context around them are continuously changing. Depending on the type of relationship, situation, and the goals of communication, they may be more or less ambiguous or direct, self-centered or cooperative [5].

Hofstede defines a masculine culture as one in which ambition, drive for and recognition of achievement, concern for high earnings are important. Masculine traits include assertiveness, material success, self-centeredness, power, strength and individual achievement. Masculine cultures excel in manufacturing, especially, where things need to be done efficiently, well and fast.

A feminine culture is one in which interpersonal relations, cooperation and search for consensus are more important. Feminine cultures are more successful at service industries like consulting and transport, making things to meet customer specifications.

The USA scored a 62 on Hofstede's scale, so we can refer the USA to masculine cultures. Ukrainians might be regarded as more feminine in this respect. In business they often pay more attention to emotional aspects of communication and prefer arranging meetings in person to discuss business and make joint decisions. Ukrainians rely on a close network of family, friends and co-workers against the risks and unpredictability of a daily life. Friendship and communal spirit are treated very seriously.

The most common communication goals in conducting presentations contain, according to American researchers, five basic functions of human communication: to declare yourself as a person; to build a single community; to formulate your vision of the problem; to attract supporters; and to open new knowledge and understanding [6].

When conducting a presentation, especially in feminine cultures, the purpose of which is declaring oneself as a person, the disclosure of the presenter's identity, values, beliefs and experiences is of paramount importance. Singling out some of your personal qualities you are helping your audience understand you and do the same in response, thus creating an atmosphere of trust and respect, which in turn will help you and your audience work and think together, to learn from each other, to develop and improve. In some situations, the communicative goal of a presentation is to create a single community. The presentation built on the basis of this goal invites members of the audience to transformation, reminding them of shared values and experiences, helping to use those strategies that unite them in order to take collective actions, strengthen social ties, maintain harmony in the team or re-establish order, to rally the team around common interests and neutralize obstacles, leading to perfection. The choice of communication means in this case depends on the degree of harmony and consensus in the team [4].

Formulating goals is inextricably linked with the definition of the character and cultural peculiarities of the audience. Presenters should ask themselves whether they will be giving a presentation to a multicultural audience? Will they be interested, friendly or skeptical? Will they care? In case of doubt, a presenter should find out the extent of their awareness and understanding of the problem, experience, and take into account all of the potential problem areas. Cultural awareness will help them succeed and improve business relationships across cultures.

To create interest and attract the audience, a presenter may include some interesting statistics and unusual facts, examples from real life and present them so that it was easier for the audience to perceive. For example, «one in four» is more easily perceived than «25% of the population.» Use such words as «you» «you», «us» «our,» which makes the audience feel involved in the presentation; or ask them to do something, for example, to raise their hands; ask the audience rhetorical questions; use speech inversion, repetition of key words and main ideas, quotes, links to famous people, etc.

We hope that this analysis can contribute to the further research into cultural and communicative competencies in giving oral presentations. Ways of developing effective strategies in structuring presentations, communicating ideas and involving the audience need special attention and require further investigation. This research will serve as a basis for the development of Business English intercultural courses for university students.

The introduction of cross-cultural communication courses in the curricula of training Ukrainian specialists is an urgent task, because the knowledge of communication strategies will arm them with an effective system of communication, both in their organizations and external contacts with foreign partners.

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