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COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Подгорецькі Йозеф, Ропські Януш. Комунікативні компетенції.

У статті представлені найбільш значущі фактори, які впливають на міжособистісні та групові комунікації в полікультурному середовищі в галузі освіти. Тут підкреслено як основні теорії міжкультурної комунікації та їх ефективність, так і ті теорії, які вирішують проблеми подолання конфліктів у міжкультурному середовищі. У наш час, коли необхідно працювати в мультикультурному середовищі, комунікативні навички стають все більш важливими. У роботі викладача культурна обізнаність та усвідомлення відмінностей між націями і культурами має важливе значення. Ці навички особливо потрібні тоді, коли є необхідність уникнути або подолати можливі проблеми, конфлікти. Автор показує значення цих факторів. Стаття завершується рекомендаціями та порадами, що стосуються ефективного міжкультурного спілкування.

Communication is the basis of teacher's work – not only as a means of transferring information, but also as a way to cooperate with students, mutual understanding and positive influence when it comes to the upbringing. It is not easy to communicate effectively within environment set in one culture and even harder in the environment which is multicultural. However, there are many ways in which we can lower our fear triggered by this challenging situation and learn how to avoid conflicts and overcome problems that might occur. Not only can we expand our knowledge about the other cultures, but also develop our communication competence.

According to E. Hall – the father of the intercultural communication science – there is a direct relation between communication and culture. One of the main functions of discourse is to create meaning. People obtain meanings from culture and the meanings are created through discourse. The production and reception of meaning between members of society or group is one of the main objectives of culture. People learn meanings while participating in discourse. “By saying that two people belong to the same culture we mean

that they interpret the world in more or less the same way and are able to express their feelings and emotions intelligibly for themselves”.¹ Different cultures use different meanings and symbols. According to researchers E. Sapir and B. Whorf the world is perceived through the language structures that serve to express it. In consequence, there are differences in perceiving the world by users of different languages.² Considering the fact that culture influence our way of perceiving world, cultural context of communication may be a source of barriers in communication.³ In order to communicate effectively with members of other cultures we have to increase our cultural awareness and open to new meanings and symbols.

Meaning is conveyed not only through words and verbal communication, but first and foremost by non-verbal communication. Hall points out that full communication act comprises verbal input and such non-verbal communication elements as: kinesics (body language), proxemics (distances and spatial relations between people), chronemics (aspect of time), haptics (the sense of touch), eye contact or paralanguage (vocal aspect). This non-verbal aspect of communication is deeply set in culture. It is culturally determined and should be decoded against the background of particular culture. The chance of congruent decoding non-verbal cues decrease with

the increase of intercultural distance.⁴ Consequently, it is necessary to know and understand culture of our interlocutor to be able to decode his message accurately and correctly.

According to Hall, there are two categories of cultures in terms of touch: contact and non-contact cultures. People from contact cultures tend to exchange the touch more often, keep proximate distance and eye contact, use relatively loud tone of voice. They are: Arabs, Southern Americans, Southern Europeans (e.g. Spain, Italy). Non-contact cultures are characterized by rare touching, remote distance, rare eye contact, lower voice. These are Northern Europeans, inhabitants of Indian Peninsula and East Asia.⁵

Taking these factors into consideration would surely help teachers to avoid possible misunderstandings and conflicts during their work with students. Cultural science, anthropology and other social sciences provide many interesting clues for us in order to increase our cultural awareness and open-mindedness in the intercultural communication. There are several dimensions of cultures, presented by some researchers and practitioners specialized in international and intercultural relations.

Firstly, in order to communicate intelligibly with representatives of other cultures the aspect of context should be taken into consideration. The distinction between culture of high context and low context cultures is widely known and quoted in the intercultural communication science. The code, the context and the meaning are all aspects of communication act. Some cultures are more dependable on context than others. High context communication is characterized by the fact that most of the information is present in the physical context or is initialized in the person whereas low context one is when the most information is included in the explicit code.⁶ The characteristics are presented in table no 1.

[Table 1. Characteristics of high context and low context cultures]

High context cultures are: Far East countries, Arab countries, Southern Europe, while low context cultures are: Northern Europe and Northern America. Central and Eastern Europe could be placed in the middle of high-low context continuum.⁷

The integral and crucial part of every culture are values. The main values of culture integrate society and set the most significant

and desirable objectives and rules of behaviour. Consequently, they strongly influence the process of communication as well. Based on certain values, researchers give descriptions of cultures referring to some cultural aspects or factors.

Geert Hofstede distinguished five dimensions of culture which help to classify national cultures.

1. **Power Distance** – the extent to which less powerful members expect and accept unequal distribution of power. High Power Distance cultures usually have centralized control. Low power distance means greater equality and empowerment. Malaysia, Panama, and Guatemala are placed the highest in this dimension. The USA was 38th on the list of the countries.

2. **Individualism and Collectivism** – Individualism is an environment where the individual person and its rights are more significant than groups that they belong to. In a collective environment people belong to strong extended family or tribes. There are strong group loyalties. The USA was first in respect of the individualism; Australia and Great Britain followed USA.

3. **Masculinity and Femininity** – focuses on the degree to which traditional gender roles are set in culture; e.g., men are expected to be aggressive, competitive, whereas women are considered to be gentle, affectionate and home and family oriented. Femininity means that social roles of genders merge with each other. Japan was the first on the list, followed by Austria and Venezuela as the most masculine countries. The USA was 15th.

4. **Uncertainty Avoidance** – defines how much a culture appreciate predictability. Cultures of high uncertainty avoidance have strong traditions and value formal, bureaucratic structures and rules. Greece was the first, followed by Portugal and Guatemala. The USA was 43rd.

5. **Long-term and Short-term Orientation** – the trait which focuses on extent to which the group invests for the future, is persevering and wait patiently for results. China was on the top of the list, Hong Kong and Taiwan followed. The USA was 17th.⁸

Florence Kluckhohn and Fred Strodtbeck distinguished six dimensions of cultures:

— **The attitude to nature** – what people think about nature and what is their relationship with nature. Some people live in harmony with nature, fight for preserving it. However some people treat nature as their supplier.

— **Mode of activity** – the primary mode of activity in a society. In some societies, who you are is more important than what you do. Other are action-oriented and what has been achieved accounts, not an ascribed status.

— **Temporal orientation** – the importance of past, present or future. Some societies focus on the past and tradition, others concentrate on today, whereas others plan for the future.

— **The nature of people** – the basic nature and beliefs about other people. Other people may be considered to be good, bad or be a mix of the two ideas. 'Good' means in the traditional way, being socially oriented. A 'bad' person is considered to be selfish. The perception of others have significant effect on how you respond to them as well as a person think about him- or herself.

— **Duty towards others** – the obligation towards other people. To put it simply, some people support others, some just focus only on themselves.

— **Privacy of space** – one approach claims that space is owned by individuals and privacy is very important. Meetings are held behind closed doors and are by invitation only. The other approach means open ownership, where people can go where they want, meetings are open to all eager to attend⁹.

Identification of these dimensions is very useful as it enables us to perceive the culture not as a homogenous object but as a miscellaneous set of factors that influence people's behaviour, including communication. Owing to this way of perceiving culture, we avoid simplified and stereotypical attitude to people from other cultures. Consequently, the communication is more effective.

Furthermore, conscious interlocutor should take into consideration non-verbal aspect of communication as well. The most basic division is the one that distinguish two styles of communication: expressive and reserved. The style of non-verbal communication is also culture-dependent. The main characteristics are presented in table no 2.

[*Table 2. Styles of non-verbal communication*]

Extended experience leads to better communication not only in case of people from other cultures, but generally with people who are "strangers" to us, also from our culture. If we communicate with someone we do not know, we are uncertain about his/her behaviour, we cannot predict easily his/her actions, which leads to anxiety. According to the Gudykunst theory, this characteristic of meeting a stranger is valid in a multicultural and one-cultural environment alike. He distinguished the concepts of uncertainty and

anxiety as two important factors influencing effective communication.

Anxiety and uncertainty depends on three factors: motivation, knowledge and skills of an individual. People tend to reduce their uncertainty and anxiety in contacts with strangers by using stereotypes and categorial thinking. However, it does not lead us to effective communication and can often end in misunderstandings. Better way to reduce our uncertainty and anxiety is to learn the interlocutor's values, customs etc. We can communicate in more mindful way as well. It can be characterised by openness to new perspectives, values, opinions, and willingness to create new concepts and categories.¹⁰ The more people communicate with strangers the more confident and self-assured they become.

According to William Howell we can distinguish four types of communication competence:

- Unconscious incompetence,
- Conscious incompetence,
- Unconscious competence,
- Conscious competence.

As the author points out, effective communication means minimizing misunderstandings, which is more likely to happen when we take a position of conscious competence. In our daily life, in our native culture we can use our unconscious competence and we usually cope with most of the communication challenges, because we know what to expect and we don't necessarily have to be very cautious.¹¹ However, in multicultural environment, we shouldn't expect that rules of our culture operate in other circumstances. Our competence, without proper awareness and open-mindedness may mislead us and cause a conflict.

Considering the fact that it is not possible to know and understand all possible diversity of cultures, it is advisable to practise some general communicative skills and qualities in order to avoid possible misunderstanding or conflicts. With certain attitude to the act of communication people are able to understand each other without prejudices and resentments.

First and foremost, a desirable quality is openness towards others. It includes being attentive to the state of our interlocutor and conscious of the context of communication. Moreover, we should have high ambiguity tolerance. In intercultural communication we cannot expect that every aspect of conversation is predictable and well known. People with low ambiguity tolerance may be insensitive to information which is contrary to his/her expectations and initial established convictions. Another important trait is empathy. Although it is an inborn ability, we can enhance it by trying to empathize and understand other people's situation and thoughts. Next characteristic is adaptation, which means adjusting to

a new situation, conditions and people with whom we communicate. It excludes ethnocentric attitude, prejudices or conviction that own culture is better or superior. Respect and confidence is the best way to cooperative communication.¹²

Apart from competence mentioned above, there are also some useful rules in terms of perception. We can minimize mistakes in perceiving, interpreting and evaluating received information. Firstly, assume that there are differences till the moment that similarities occur. If we assume that other people differ from us, the possibility of making a mistake or misunderstanding decrease. Secondly, emphasise the describing rather than interpreting or evaluating when you communicate. The latter is strongly culture-dependent. Thirdly, use empathy. Make an attempt to recognize the values, experiences and attitude of your interlocutor. Finally, treat your interpretation

as a working hypothesis. When you start to realize what is the meaning of the situation or a message in context, treat your impression not as a certainty, but as a hypothesis requiring confirmation.¹³

Considering reflections mentioned above, the conclusion is that communicative competence is not a simple, one-sided skill. It consists of cognitive, emotional as well as behavioural aspect. In order to communicate intelligibly and effectively teachers should extend and practise all elements of the communication competence. To avoid misunderstandings and possible conflicts, hurting students' feelings teachers are advised not only to extend their knowledge of other cultures and their values, norms or customs, but also how to increase and exercise their own communication awareness and conscious communication competence. In any case, *repetitio est mater studiorum*.

Table 1. Characteristics of high context and low context cultures

Source: own study based on Hall E.T., *Poza kulturą*, PWN, Warszawa 2001, Hall E.T. *Bezgłośny język*, PIW, Warszawa 1987

HIGH CONTEXT CULTURE	LOW CONTEXT CULTURE
Less is verbally explicit, written or formally expressed, covert messages	Rule oriented, people act according to external rules, overt messages
More internalized understandings of what is communicated	More knowledge is public, external, and accessible
Knowledge is situational, relational	Knowledge is more often transferable
High commitment to long-term relationships	Low commitment to relationship.
High use of non-verbal elements; voice tone, facial expression, gestures, and eye movement	Message is carried more by words than by non-verbal means.
Decisions and activities focus around personal face-to-face relationships, often around an authoritative and competent person	Task-centered; activities focus around what needs to be done
One's identity is rooted in groups	One's identity is rooted in oneself and own achievements

Table 2. Styles of non-verbal communication

NON-VERBAL SIGNS	EXPRESSIVE STYLE OF COMMUNICATION	RESERVED STYLE OF COMMUNICATION
Paralinguistic acts	Talking a lot Talking loudly Interrupting others Not accepting the silence	Talking little Talking quieter Interrupting regarded as a sign of bad manners Silence as a natural part of conversation
Proxemics	Small (20-30 cm)	Large (40-60 cm)
Gestures	Intensive A lot of gestures	Limited Not many gestures
Facial expression	Intensive	Limited
Haptics	Frequent, accepted	Rare, less accepted

Eye contact	Frequent, direct	Rare, avoiding looking in the eyes
Examples of countries	Roman European countries Other Mediterranean countries Latin-American countries	East Asian and South-East Asian countries Nordic and other European countries

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Подгорецкий Йозеф, Ропски Януш. КОММУНИКАТИВНЫЕ КОМПЕТЕНЦИИ.

В статье представлены наиболее значимые факторы, которые влияют на межличностные и групповые коммуникации в поликультурной среде в области образования. Здесь подчеркнута как основные теории межкультурной коммуникации и их эффективность, так и теории, которые решают проблемы преодоления конфликтов в межкультурной среде. В наше время, когда необходимо работать в мультикультурной среде, коммуникативные навыки становятся все более важными. В работе преподавателя культурная осведомленность и понимание различий между нациями и культурами имеет важное значение. Эти навыки особенно нужны тогда, когда необходимо избежать или преодолеть возможные проблемы, конфликты. Автор показывает значение этих факторов. Статья завершается рекомендациями и советами, касающимися эффективного межкультурного общения.

Ключевые слова: межкультурная коммуникация, образование, конфликт, культура, коммуникативная компетентность