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Developing intercultural communication competence of operating staff within corporate training program

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Abstract. Global integration and globalization processes forced numerous companies in non-English-speaking countries, including Russia, to enter foreign markets and establish joint ventures. Such state of affairs stimulated companies' reliance on English as the language of corporate discourse and international cooperation as concepts, terminology and legal documentation in English have already been shaped and do not cause discrepancies. Therefore joint ventures began to pay special attention to advanced training of production personnel in terms of mastering intercultural professional competence. The current paper deals with the ways of improving efficiency of production personnel within corporate vocational training. The paper is an attempt to present a multi-faceted model of mastering intercultural professional competence and describe its implementation in three modules converging sociocultural knowledge, linguistic skills and ability to cooperate effectively in English. The paper emphasizes the corporate program learning content, technologies of mastering sociocultural, lexico-grammatical and communicative components of intercultural competence. The paper presents the results of experimental teaching and confirms a greater efficiency of the developed model.

1. Introduction

Professional development is improving theoretical and practical knowledge of operating staff, enhancing their skills to meet the ever-increasing requirements. Advanced training can be implemented:

- within the framework of long- and short-term programs with profound study of innovations and modern problems of professional activity of the staff;
- through thematic and problem seminars, distance interactive programs, master classes, individual internships and workshops on scientific, technical and socio-economic problems aimed at accelerating the acquisition of skills, vital for successful performance in new conditions;

Corporate training in joint ventures appeared as a result of integration and internationalization of the world economy in the 21st century, which caused the use of English as the language of international cooperation and contributed to the emergence and development of this area of training in methodology of teaching foreign languages.

The choice of English as language of international cooperation is not accidental, since the global character of English is evidenced by its status in non-English-speaking countries. Hence, English is currently the leader among languages studied being a compulsory subject at all stages of education in more than 100 countries (Russia, Germany, China, Spain, Brazil, Egypt, etc.).

Integration and globalization have forced many companies of non-English-speaking countries, including Russia, to enter the foreign market and establish joint ventures in both English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries, which implies the use of English as "lingua franca", because conceptual and terminological apparatus and legal documentation in English have been already shaped and do not cause discrepancies or disagreements. This explains the fact that joint ventures gradually and voluntarily began to use English as language of "corporate communication", which to some extent proved to be a practical solution to the problem of "language barrier" [1, p. 380]. D. Crystal gives a number of reasons of historical, political, practical, intellectual and economic nature contributing to



the strengthening of the international status of the English language [2, P. 106-107]: the Industrial revolution in England in the 18th century, the country's fast technological development and scientific progress in the 19-20 cc. turned English into the language of international intercourse, which conventions and rules, reflecting the structure, thesaurus, rhetoric and multilevel peculiarities of business language penetrated into the European languages, including Russian.

Pervasiveness of English as a result of world economy and business globalization is confirmed by the following facts:

- record keeping, sales and marketing require close interaction with other subsidiaries or affiliates of joint ventures, so their staff must be fluent in the language;
- technology transfer or exchange in joint ventures is often in English, especially with the development of the global network and electronic communications;
- the growth of joint ventures has spurred the need for hotel services, international transportation and all related services, which imposes certain requirements for the level of language proficiency among the staff of the hotel and tourism business of these countries [3, P.32].

2. The specificity of teaching English within in-company training

In this regard, in joint ventures, special attention is paid to improving the skills of personnel in terms of mastering their English-speaking skills and intercultural professional communication, i.e. intercultural competence. As the efficiency of the advanced training in English has increased significantly due to corporate programs, corporate language training offered mainly by private educational institutions, language schools and centres. Key aspects of the corporate training, its specificity and problems have triggered a response both among specialists in the field of teaching a foreign language, and in the business environment, namely among middle and senior managers responsible for making decisions about personnel advanced training and education, as well as the strategic development of companies and organizations.

The emerging demand for corporate training in a foreign language accelerated the intensive development of the private sector of Russian education. And while in the late nineties corporate foreign language teaching as a direction in the Russian methodology was in its infancy [4], at present, it has become one of the most sought-after and profitable directions of language learning for adults. Starting their work in a joint company, Russian production personnel faces the notion of a corporate culture, which is understood as "the set of norms of behaviour that the organization acquired in the process of adaptation to the external environment and internal integration that have shown their effectiveness and are shared by the majority of the company members"[5].

The undeniable advantage of corporate training is the focus on the needs of its staff, differentiation between the learning process and its regular monitoring. This is achieved by choosing the content of training and its intensity, depending on the specific needs of the joint venture. If it is necessary to improve the general level of language knowledge, the standard course of business English is chosen. If getting highly specialized knowledge in the shortest possible time is a priority, an individual training program is developed for each department. For example, managers are taught the art of making presentations and negotiations in a foreign language, the secretariat is studying the rules for business correspondence and clerical work, accountants master the financial terminology in a foreign language, while the legal department is getting acquainted with the English sublanguage of law.

The business English course is based on modern effective techniques, including interactive programs and language games. This enables not only quick mastering the language, but also strengthening team spirit and boosting the prestige of the enterprise in the eyes of partners, customers and potential employees. Depending on the needs, the most appropriate teaching methodology is selected. If the employees need to develop conversational skills, communicative methodology is advisable, for the purposes of drawing up contracts and conducting business correspondence the grammatical approach is more reasonable to use: "grammar → vocabulary → writing". If the goal is to increase the overall level of English, then it is better to combine grammar exercises, simulations, case studies, watching movies, and so on.

The company management can regularly receive reports on the attendance and performance of its operating staff. This makes it possible to take timely measures to improve the professional competence of the staff, since the entire training process is under control. As corporate training is commonly conducted at the company office, it saves time due to flexible schedule caused by heavy workload of staff during the periods of tight deadlines.

However, access to the international market of national enterprises is not only associated with overcoming the "language barrier", but also a "cultural barrier" that presses to be overcome in order to effectively interact in the production sector. This implies the need to acquire information about the differences and similarities of norms, values, behavioural conventions in different cultures, patterns of understanding another discourse and construction of utterances in a foreign language. This leads to the development of ethno-cultural pluralism, adaptation to a foreign culture without abandoning one's own and damaging its values, thus forming and developing intercultural communication [6].

The model of developing intercultural competence of operating staff

Intercultural communication is traditionally considered as "a combination of various forms of relations and communication between individuals and groups belonging to different cultures" [7, p. 142]. The efforts of higher education institutions have been directed to intercultural competence for half a century, but the results in this direction frequently leave much to be desired, since a linguistic competence at universities is formed on the basis of a universal lexico-grammatical code, usually without a cultural component. As a result, cultural lacunae, empathy, ethno-cultural pluralism and the ability to perceive the "alien" are not part of the traditional communicative competence and pose additional challenges for the staff of joint ventures.

This fact confirms the need for advanced training on intercultural communication, which are designed to fill this gap in the framework of personnel training programs to improve professional intercultural competence: courses in English, training in intercultural communication and adapting to another culture, etc. Large joint ventures demonstrate a positive and serious experience of corporate development and training programs: in some of them corporate universities have been established and are actively functioning. Their training programs take into account foreign language needs of personnel in the critical sectors of economy and business in order to increase its competitiveness outside Russia.

The study of the basic parameters that form the lingua-semiotic conceptual sphere of the compared cultures helps to prevent failures in intercultural communication. These parameters are reflected in:

- "communicative grammar" by E. Hall and his classification of cultures according to the time and information parameter (polychronous / monochronous, oriented to the present / past / future, high / low-context cultures, etc.) [8];
- "mental mapping" by G. Hofstede and his classification of cultures according to interpersonal and gender parameters (individualism / collectivism, vertical / horizontal cultures, feminine / masculine cultures, etc.) [9];
- the typology of business cultures by F. Trompenaars according to parameters of universalism / particularism, specificity / diffusion, affectivity / indifference, etc.) [10].

The analysis of the problems encountered in the course of acquiring an "alien" culture, cultural shock and acculturation raises the issue of targeted training of staff for the purposes of intercultural communication in the professional context, for successful performance in joint ventures, transnational companies and even in a foreign culture [11]. For this purpose it is not sufficient to develop only the knowledge of the language in trainees but also their "cross cultural sensitivity / empathy" [12]. The development of curricula for corporate training in English assumes, on the one hand, the preliminary selection and organization of training content, and, on the other hand, constant discussion with trainees and adjustment of the program to the specific needs of trainees [13, p. 83]. In this case, the content of training is considered as a unity of three components: linguistic, intercultural and professional, each of which affects the formation of the corporate training content.

These components are included in the multi-faceted model for acquiring intercultural competence of operating personnel, which is implemented in three modules / stages of training aimed at integrating "alien" cultural knowledge, language competence and ability to cooperate in the professional context:

- 1) acquiring "alien" sociocultural knowledge (mutual cognition),
- 2) developing mutual understanding (rapport),
- 3) mastering professional interaction (cooperation in a foreign language) .

At all stages of training the development of language skills and communicative competence occurs along with the socio-cultural aspects of professional interaction [14].

At the first stage trainees receive primary knowledge of sociocultural universals, according to which cultures are distinguished: the attitude to the environment, time, space, communicative styles, power distance, types of thinking, emotions in social interaction, decision making, strategy implementation, etc.

The second stage of training is aimed at enhancing the lexico-grammatical phenomena necessary for successful information exchange in different situations of professional interaction, discussing the conditions of production activity, summing up the results, agreeing on terms of contracts in English.

The third stage focuses on consolidating language knowledge, mastering communicative skills acquired by personnel at the previous stages of training. Additionally, trainees develop skills of interpreting hidden information. Thus, when approaching an agreement, partners often change the "grammatical tone" of the utterance, namely, an unreal condition changes for the real: *If the details were worked out, we would be prepared to ...* (at the beginning of the discussion) and *If you accept ... we shall ...* (at the end of the discussion). The hidden information in the statement *That is our standard price* is interpreted as *Ask for a discount*; *We do not normally deliver* is interpreted as *We sometimes do*, etc. Particular attention is also paid to wording rhetorical strategies, balance of interests, the comparative analysis of socio-cultural traditions, styles and peculiarities of communicative behavior of a foreign ethnos, that are "as important in teaching a foreign language as other components □ reading, writing, speaking, comprehension and translation "[15: p. 107; 16].

The analysis of the results of the experimental training was carried out at its final stage and consisted of control tests and communicative tasks, the purpose of which was to assess the level of intercultural competence of trainees. The obtained data confirmed the effectiveness of the advanced training model. Qualitative indicators of the formation of intercultural professional competence components in trainees in group G1, where training was implemented within the developed model, is significantly higher than in group G2, where training was carried out according to the traditional methods (see Tables 1-3).

Table 1. Formation of *socio-cultural and behavioral knowledge*, aimed at mutual knowledge of partners.

Criteria for assessing formation of socio-cultural and behavioral knowledge	Placement test		Final test	
	G ₁	G ₂	G ₁	G ₂
(First module)				
Acquisition of knowledge of sociocultural universals relevant for foreign-language interaction	4%	4%	9%	6%
Recognition of language markers of behavioral strategies in cooperation and conflict	2%	1%	8%	2%
Clarification of a partner's intention through metacommunication signals	2%	1%	7%	4%
The general indicator of socio-cultural and behavioral knowledge acquisition	8%	6%	24%	12%

Table 2. Development of *language skills* aimed at mutual understanding of partners in the professional sphere.

Criteria for assessing language skills formation necessary for mutual understanding of business partners (Second module)	Placement test		Final test	
	G ₁	G ₂	G ₁	G ₂
Ability to correctly apply concepts and terminology of the professional sphere	2%	3%	20%	6%
Skills to correctly structure and share information	4%	5%	7%	6%
Skills to verbalize intentions and strategies of cooperation	2%	4%	5%	4%
The general indicator of the developed language skills aimed at mutual understanding of partners in the professional sphere	8%	12%	32%	16%

Table 3. Mastering *integrated skills of intercultural communication* aimed at interaction in the professional sphere.

Criteria for assessing integrated skills of intercultural professional communication (Third module)	Placement test		Final test	
	G ₁	G ₂	G ₁	G ₂
Skills to integrate lexico-grammatical skills, communicative and behavioral tactics	6%	4%	10%	7%
The ability to use rhetorical strategies of persuasion and positivity	4%	3%	9%	3%
The ability to achieve communicative and practical goals	4%	3%	9%	4%
The general indicator of developed integrated skills of intercultural professional communication	14%	10%	28%	14%

The results of training in each module are presented in the following diagrams reflecting the dynamics of developing components of intercultural, professional communication (Figures 1–4).

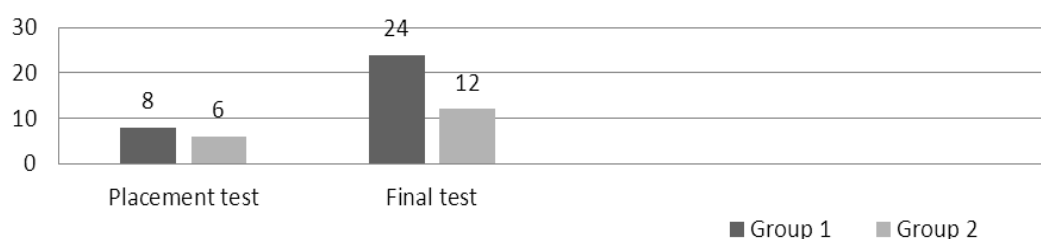


Figure 1. General indicator of acquired socio-cultural knowledge (Module 1)

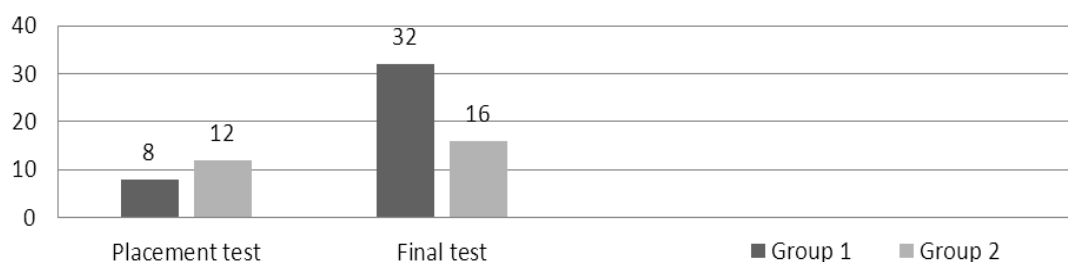
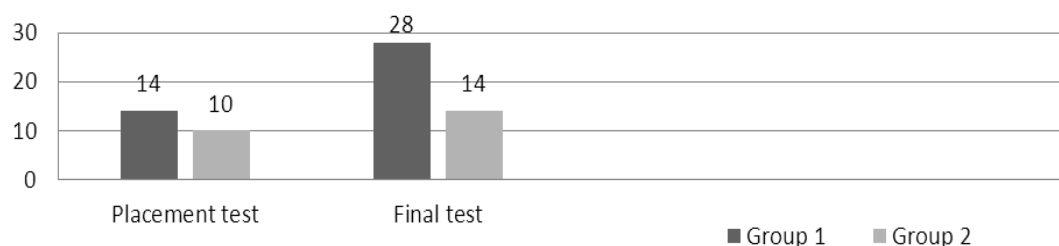
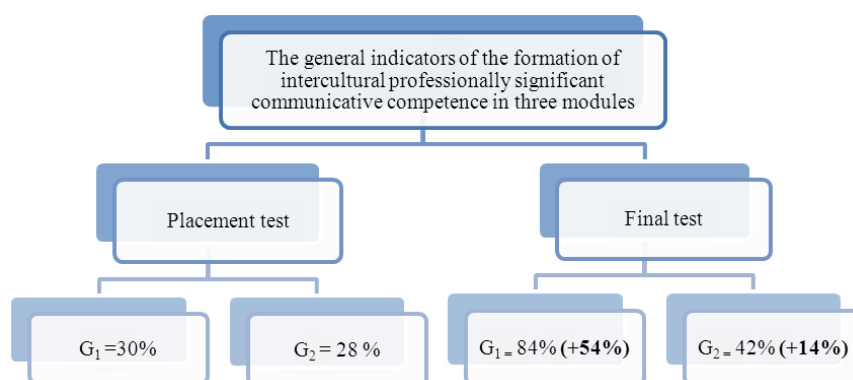


Figure 2. General indicator of acquired language skills (Module 2)**Figure 3.** General indicator of acquired integrated communicative skills in intercultural professional communication (Module 3)**Figure 4.** General indicators of acquired communicative competence in three modules

3. Conclusion

Integration and globalization of world economy entailed entering foreign markets and establishing joint ventures in non-English speaking countries, including Russia. This resulted in employing English as language of "corporate communication", since the terminology and legal documentation in English have already been fully formed and do not cause discrepancies or disagreements. Consequently, joint ventures special attention has been paid to mastering English-speaking skills, development of intercultural professional communication of their personnel, i.e. their intercultural competence.

The effectiveness of the educational process has increased significantly due to corporate English training programs aimed at meeting the needs of operating personnel, differentiating between learning process and its regular monitoring. However, development of intercultural professional competence is associated not only with overcoming the "language barrier" of personnel, but also with the "cultural barrier" that hardly creates serious errors in the process of intercultural interaction and is associated with a lack of information of socio-cultural, behavioural and lingua-semiotic character.

In this respect, it is particularly relevant to develop a multi-faceted model of corporate training in intercultural communication, implemented in three modules and focused on convergence of sociocultural knowledge, linguistic competence and ability to communicate effectively in English in professional situations. The analysis of the results of experimental teaching confirmed the advantages of the presented model for further development of intercultural professional communicative competence of operating staff.

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