Chapter 8

A Cognitive Style–Inclusive Approach as a Means of Learner–Centered EFL Teaching Mode Implementation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a methodology for developing English as a foreign language (EFL) communicative skills with respect to students’ cognitive styles in the context of intercultural communication. A cognitive style-inclusive approach is now considered one of the most efficient ways to tailor teaching frameworks to the needs of each student. The chapter explores a number of psychological and pedagogical conditions that contribute to the efficient implementation of a learner-centered paradigm in the context of EFL education at the university level. Such aspects as students’ involvement in the intercultural context, modelling the conditions of intercultural dialogue, the variability of content types and forms of learning activity, the complexity of information processing strategies, and polymodal cognitive experience are described, and their potential value for the developed methodology analyzed. Ways these can support students’ communicative and cognitive development in EFL courses, in addition to teachers’ efforts to create a rich and effective learning environment, are explored.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the system of education in general and language education in particular puts forward the interests of learners as the cornerstone of all educational processes (Obdalova, 2009, 2014a, 2014b). The humanistic nature of education proclaims the priority of universal human values, human life and health, and freedom of personality development (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Soboleva & Obdalova, 2013a, 2013b, 2015a, 2015b). The contemporary understanding of education interprets it as a process of up-bringing a human by providing all the necessary conditions for developing their personal, professional,
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and social skills with respect to individual unique abilities to promote their social self-identification and self-assurance. These conditions should create a student-centered responsive educational environment (Jones, 2007; Obdalova, 2009, 2015; Wright, 2011). According to Obdalova and Gural (2012), a conceptual framework for creating a supportive learning environment should be tailored to the objectives of foreign language teaching in modern Russian universities. However, this does not mean simply adding on technology, which obviously provides tremendously extended opportunities for the ongoing and more individualized learning process. Rather, it deals with the exploration of many factors that influence learning and brings them together in a model based on new approaches to learning, culture, language nature, and pedagogy (Obdalova, 2015).

The humanization of education exists in the learner-centered paradigm that defines almost all modern approaches to teaching, including teaching foreign languages. According to Elizarova (2001, pp. 5-6), the pedagogical process in foreign language education must have such an impact on an individual that it transforms them into a self-developing, emotionally and intellectually mature person capable of coping with unexpected intercultural communicative situations by turning to, or creating, unique tools for finding out, processing, and applying information. This impact might be achieved only if the learning process focuses on a student as the subject of education, and on their intellectual and ethical development. This means that all of a teacher’s methodological decisions “must be refracted through the prism of a learner’s individuality – his needs, motivations, abilities, activities, intelligence and other individual psychological characteristics” (Zimnyaya, 1991, p. 65). Subsequently, much attention has been paid to the development of cognitive and learning strategies that are taken into account to improve students’ learning performance and to develop their metacognitive abilities and awareness of the learning processes (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994; Cross, 2011; Field, 2000; Oxford, 1990).

Thus, the focus of higher foreign language education in training specialists who are ready to participate constructively in the dialogue of cultures gains a vector of personal determination, expressed through the functioning of an individual’s cognitive processes that underlie their communicative behavior and cognitive activity. However, the organization of the teaching process that implements this direction creates a very difficult task for a teacher whose educating activity is restricted to a very small number of classroom hours devoted to foreign language at non-linguistic faculties at the universities.

One means of facilitating EFL training and increasing EFL learning efficiency is a cognitive style-inclusive approach (Soboleva & Obdalova, 2013a, 2013b). On the one hand, this approach engages the integrated student's personality resources into the learning process by taking into account cognitive processes involved in EFL acquisition, such as learners’ background knowledge, linguistic experience, personal experience, and metacognitive experience. It allows for consideration of the learning uniqueness and abilities of each student as the subject of their speech and cognitive activity in addition to the individualized cognitive and learning styles involved in the learning process. On the other hand, a cognitive style-inclusive approach implies taking into consideration the cognitive processes underlying intercultural communication and drawing students’ attention to the cognitive and socio-cultural differences in perception of the world that exist by focusing on the representatives of other cultures and ways of overcoming intercultural dissonance that can occur due to cross cultural differences.

This paper introduces a methodology of implementing a cognitive style-inclusive approach into an EFL teaching mode aimed at the development of intercultural competence in university learners. This methodology suggests meeting the demand for training students to perceive, process, and interpret cross-cultural information in order to equip them with the necessary abilities and techniques to integrate in intercultural dialogue and to develop intercultural communication skills (Obdalova & Minakova, 2013).