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**Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială**

ISSN: 1583-3410 (print), ISSN: 1584-5397 (electronic)

Selected by coverage in Social Sciences Citation Index, ISI databases

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HIGHER EDUCATION. THE CASE OF PYATIGORSK STATE  
LINGUISTIC UNIVERSITY, NORTH CAUCASUS, RUSSIA***

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Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială, 2013, vol. 43, pp. 255-265

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Published by:

Expert Projects Publishing House



On behalf of:

„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University,

Department of Sociology and Social Work

and

Holt Romania Foundation

REVISTA DE CERCETARE SI INTERVENTIE SOCIALA

is indexed by ISI Thomson Reuters - Social Sciences Citation Index

(Sociology and Social Work Domains)



# **A Call for Cultural Awareness and Tolerance in Higher Education. The Case of Pyatigorsk State Linguistic University, North Caucasus, Russia**

Tatiana SHYRYAEVA<sup>1</sup>, Lilia TRIUS<sup>2</sup>

## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the issue of cultural awareness and tolerance development in higher education system in Russia, at Pyatigorsk State Linguistic University (PGLU) in particular, and in the world in general. At first, we emphasize the main concern of the need for students' familiarization with national uniqueness and attractive sides of the local population's development and fostering intercultural understanding, awareness and tolerance. Then we present the analysis of the approaches and Russian experts' points of view on the ways of systematizing the study of culture and determine its relation with language learning. Subsequently, we concentrate on the PSLU undertaking – an educational technology and practical tools for students training and getting practical experience in the field of intercultural communication. The hypotheses of the approach based on ethno-lingua-didactic (nationality centered) methodology that assists in waking up students' interest to the home cultures, developing cross-cultural literacy in order to make them competent and competitive participant of cross-cultural communication. In order to offer the most reliable examples of the training strategies we have included some information regarding the university education in the English language learning in the North Caucasus, Russia.

*Keywords:* North Caucasus; tolerance; cultural uniqueness; local culture; intercultural communication; educational technology.

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## **Introduction**

In the modern practice of training intercultural communication specialists there is an acute need for their inclusion into the real professional field. Undoubtedly, a successful specialist, planning his career in almost any field, needs to know the peculiarities of historical and cultural development of his home region. It does not matter whether he prefers to stay in the region or to find a job in another part of the world. Nowadays standards dictate a new type of specialist's preparation. In modern society, an expert in the field of intercultural communication must not only speak a foreign language brilliantly, but also be able to familiarize foreign representatives with historical and cultural features of the native region - resorts of the North Caucasus, provoking their interest and desire to return to the region.

Historical and cultural peculiarities of the North Caucasus development formed its unique attractive image, on the one hand. However, on the other hand, in recent the world has been informed only about the negative events in the North Caucasus region. Most often, the world mass media report on the unstable economic situation and on the military-political clashes and terrorist attacks in Dagestan, Chechnya, Abkhazia. Hence, the initially positive image of the North Caucasus has been transformed in the least attractive. Currently, foreigners are not inspired to visit the region.

Thus, the system of higher education in Russia has one of the most difficult tasks that is the necessity of training highly qualified specialists in intercultural communication. Specialists with state-of-the-art competences should be able to present positive and strong features of the native region at the international level. In particular, the most urgent problem is the creation of favorable and positive image of the North Caucasus. This task is possible to achieve via shaping an up-to date understanding of the region. The world community should be familiarized with national uniqueness and attractive aspects of the local population's development. There is a great need to foster intercultural understanding, awareness and tolerance.

### **The issue of intercultural awareness and tolerance**

The process of creating the model of a holistic, dynamic, but contradictory world puts forward higher requirements to the future specialist's level of education and culture. A modern specialist in intercultural communication, initially, being a representative of a certain nationality and culture must possess knowledge of his own regional uniqueness, importance and value of historical and cultural heritage, accumulated by his ancestors for centuries and thousands of years. This necessity is also explained by the fact that at present time millions of people in the world are

willing to explore new destinations and unknown cultures. Tourism has become an integral part of modern life. More and more people have natural desire to discover the unfamiliar, the customs and traditions of the countries and peoples, deep cultural and historic heritage of tiny nationalities like Caucasian ones.

The North Caucasus is one of the most promising tourist destinations of the world. The Russian Federation government's State Program of Tourist-recreational Complex Development in the North Caucasus, primarily, is aimed at attraction tourists to the Caucasus resorts of Russia. There is no doubt that one of the main needs facing the region is a tourism infrastructure development. On the other hand, the increase of tourism in the region will result in constant demand in qualified specialists in the region. From the professional point of view, these specialists must not only be skilled in their direct responsibilities but proficient in global, national and regional peculiarities, in technology, management and marketing, and possess strong knowledge in the field of cultural heritage, history and linguistics as well. The modern challenge in education, from our point of view, is to prepare highly qualified specialist, who understands the historical and cultural characteristics of the native, the North Caucasus region in particular. It supposes the specialist's abilities to compile relevant material and inform a representative of another culture about regional uniqueness in the foreign language. On the other hand, this highly professional specialist while visiting other countries must manage establishing contact with representatives of foreign cultures and tell about the virtues and strong parts of his native region. Thus, there is no doubt that one of the major goals of modern education is to prepare a tolerant specialist in intercultural communication. In its turn, a tolerant specialist will be able to generate in his interlocutor tolerance, understanding and intercultural awareness of foreign the unique characteristics of the North Caucasus region (Trius, 2011).

Thus, one of the actual problems of modern higher education in Russia and in the world consists in the introduction of special disciplines of communication, primarily, the foundations of regional culture-historical studies. Culture provides tourists a dive into a different state of the society in which the people of another country's region live on this basis of the sharp changing of impressions. Only after the development of intercultural competence by means of a foreign language, the trainee acquires the ability to make meaningful choices of communicative language recourses in the process of any text production. Only this approach effectively helps to get the knowledge of culture and language concept and, as a result, successfully contributes to cross-language dialogue in the professional sphere (Petrenko, 2007).

The given approach is aimed to tackle the problem of Russian specialists' integration into the world community considering up-to date requirements of a particular trade market. Russian system of higher education has an objective to train students who will become professional experts in various spheres and competent participants in foreign trade activities. Students' professionalism today

directly depends on a level and quality of the communicative competence, because a modern specialist must be an expert in intercultural communication ready to enter a professional-business dialogue with representatives of other cultures.

Recent approaches to training the future experts in intercultural communication, for example, experts in tourism, should have a unified concept in their basis. Therefore, we share the opinion that under the circumstances, when the knowledge of a foreign language only has become not enough for the large number of specialists and modern professionals. A modern experienced employee cannot do without a certain level of language skill in professional communication, which requires a clear specification and update in the process of learning a foreign language for professional communication (Shiryaeva, 2008).

Presentation of regional culture at an international level now is extremely current for development of mutually beneficial international contacts. However, exactly the regional component in the system of foreign education is presented not fully enough, although its meaningfulness in the sociocultural context of the foreign languages education is very current. Consequently, a problem of scientific methodical ground for the regional material use and involvement into the process of education is essential (Fedotova, 2008). In addition, such values as national traditions, ethnic self-determination, culture originality, national features and mentality, identify every representative of any nationality. They make us special and one of a kind. Luckily, the phenomenon of ethnic self-representation that began popular at the end of XX - XXI centuries, in spite of globalization, integration and unitization, still determines the development of the modern society.

The culture of international communication based on the local uniqueness forming is particularly essential in such multinational region, as the North Caucasus. In perspective view of the Olympic Games in Sochi 2014, the interest of foreign tourists to this region is increasing considerably. Accordingly, the necessity of specialists in tourism training grows significantly. Local professionals in tourism have to acquire new knowledge and skills in order to be the experts in the Caucasus natural, climatic and balneological resources as well as in history and diverse cultures' peculiarities and features. For Russia, it is incredibly important to create a favorable, positive and competitive image of the North Caucasus. This objective can be easily realized due to the unique natural, historic and cultural features of the region. This verifies the necessity and actual importance to include a special subject into a higher-education curriculum – a regional study about the home area the North Caucasian mastering its history, nature, economy, culture, social life, and way of life in a foreign language.

## Methodology

Didactic and cognitive aspects of education with focus on intercultural communicative regional knowledge consist of the use of relevant and authentic material about the native region, area, town, village, district and country in the process of education. The students' ability to present their home region, their culture at an international level can help to initiate mutually beneficial cooperation with foreigners and other cultures representatives. Every student must possess communicative skills in order to be able to participate in intercultural contacts, discuss essential problems for job, or to cooperate successfully with foreign principals and colleagues.

Therefore, it is desirable for modern educational programs and textbooks to contain and use systematically comprehensive authentic material that will help the students to present their region on international level. In our opinion, there is a necessity to create educational programmes of local cultural awareness in a foreign language both for teachers and for students that will: (1) include particular relative materials in a foreign language that is not used in the basic studies, extending the students' knowledge and forming intercultural awareness; (2) contribute to the intellectual, creative and emotional development of students through active learning and research work; (3) form a racial, national and religious tolerance.

This demand is determined by the recent education policy introduced by Russian government. There is a call for the revival and development of ethnically oriented educational national and regional education systems. The national-regional education system is an original subject, based on certain federal laws and evolving in accordance with ethnic development and society. It is the most important structural element of the culture's recovery, preservation and promotion. Accordingly, nowadays in Russia a range of educational programmes is designed on the basis of ethnic culture peculiarities, historical experience of the ethnicity and its modern socio-demographic characteristics.

Moreover, the modernization of Russian higher education in the context of the Bologna process aimed at creating tutoring key competencies. Huthmacher gives the definition of five key competences introduced by the European Council, which "should be fit with young Europeans" (Huthmacher, 1997). The experts also focus on the competence, related to life in a multicultural society. In order to control the expression of racism, xenophobia and intolerance, higher education should develop intercultural competencies such as ability to accept differences, respect for others and the ability to live in peace with people of other cultures, languages and religions (Sinicrope, Norris, Watanabe, 2007). Accordingly, there is a call for intercultural literacy development as the "competencies, understandings, attitudes,

language proficiencies, participation and identities necessary for effective cross-cultural engagement” (Heyward, 2002).

Language and culture are often treated as inseparable constructs (Byrnes, 2002; Crawford-Lange & Lange, 1984; Kramsch, 1993). The role of the modern higher education is to train people to communicate effectively across cultural differences. Besides, trainees need to learn how to learn about cultural differences. Hence, there is a goal to help people recognize their own cultural assumptions, increase their level of cultural awareness, and learn how to learn about cultural differences. The purpose is to enable people to understand other cultures, shift their own cultural mindset, and create microcultures to sustain effective communication. To do this students “must be taught less-culture-specific skills by someone who understands their culture and the other culture(s) in question” (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000).

Thus, Russian experts find implementation of national and regional component in educational process as one of the main objectives of the modern system of education. They consider it to be one of the essential factors for students’ self-development and formation of their ideological and ethical qualities, traditions, customs, history and specific national language (Tuova, 2007). It is important to outline that the national-regional component of education almost universally implemented in terms of bilingualism, which is especially important for teaching foreign languages and cultures. One of the prominent examples of this practice in the educational process is given by A. Tuova. She introduced teaching practice of this type via a particular subject in the English language at secondary schools in the Republic of Adygea. Its aim is to master the features of ethnic culture, customs and traditions in the republic from early age. The process of the foreign language communicative activities is based on the authentic material, historic, economic and cultural knowledge about the home region, local nationalities way of life, traditions and mentality.

We consider this approach to be one of the fundamental ones in the students’ activity and project work organization as well. The students of Pyatigorsk State Linguistic University (PSLU) represent nearly 100 nationalities which home region is the North Caucasus (Chechens, Ingushs, Russians, Armenians, Greeks, Kabardians, Adyghes, Abhazias, Georgians, Jewries, Alanians, etc.). That is why a regional component in the higher education in Russia is crucial. Having considered the modern approaches and scientific perspectives on the problem from the point of view of the necessity of intercultural competence development, it should be noted that, primarily, there is a need in use of certain materials (particularly historical-cultural nature), based on proper methodology. Secondly, there is a need in the expansion of concepts and terms of categorical apparatus and system of professional terminology.

## **Systematizing the study of regional history and culture with language learning**

According to the mission, priorities, objectives and strategies of PGLU (Gorbunov, 2009) the University is developing as a peacekeeping and humanitarian center in the North Caucasus, the outpost of Russian statehood in the North Caucasus region. The goal of the University is stated in the program “Peace in the Northern Caucasus through languages, education, and culture” which is the unifying, enlightening, the peacekeeping mission in the North Caucasus region, a climate of interethnic and interfaith tolerance and international cooperation. In practice, the education of youth in the University is conducted in the spirit of humanism, peace, tolerance, inter-ethnic friendship and cooperation, respect for different cultures, religions, traditions and rites by extra-curriculum. Students, for example, take an active part in the annual Festival of the North Caucasian Nationalities (<http://www.pglu.ru>). This Festival is an event where students from different nationalities residing in the North Caucasus present the most vivid national characteristics of his people (cook traditional dishes and treat them, with national dances, songs and other participants of the Festival are other virtues and achievements of national culture).

The University coordinates the work of the language and culture centers. The Center of the North Caucasian languages and cultures was founded in the context of realization of the innovative programs and projects of PGLU in 2008. The center’s aim is to expand the lingua-cultural space in the North Caucasus, that implies strengthening and increase of integration of PGLU with educational, scientific and cultural organizations of the North Caucasus. The center leads cultural and educational work promoting achievements of the North Caucasus republics in education. A volunteer center “Profi-Soci-Lingua” is a new structure of PGLU, based on long-term traditions of volunteer work and mutual help. In 2011 the “Profi-Soci-Lingua” Center began actively to cooperate with volunteers over the world, realizing both local projects and getting along at the tasks put before the Volunteer center by the federal Russian organizational Committee “Sochi 2014”. In the threshold of the Olympic Games in Sochi 2014 the task of students’ communicative skills development is extremely actual. The key role of future specialists in intercultural communication is to contribute into positive brand image creation of the North Caucasus and to participate in the international cooperation in a foreign language.

As a result, an educative constituent must be supported by the correct use of a special educational technology. The technology should be based on a necessity to prepare a tolerant specialist able to produce a favorable image of the North Caucasus, to present its deep history and unique features of cultural development in a native language, Russian and English. The implementation of regional



component in the higher education in the sociocultural context in Russia and in the whole world is not presented fully enough, although there is a call for it, especially in regard of teaching foreign languages. The use of special educational technology introducing a regional component in the higher education will help to combine two basic didactic components: (1) activity practice and performance in a professional sphere based on the use of a foreign language; (2) dynamic use of regionally-historical materials in this activity.

In the system of Russian higher education, a practice of regional component application in the higher education technology may be found, but not frequently. Sequentially such situation can not fit the federal Conception of long-term socio-economic development of the Russian Federation until 2020, set forth by the Russian government in 2011. Therefore, the educational technology “Cognitive-Creative Workshop of Bilingual Tourism” worked out by the experts of PGLU is aimed at students’ professional competences development and intercultural awareness and tolerance expansion. This technology provides the students with the possibilities to get enough professional experience through activity and project work. This type of study includes creation such professionally oriented products for Russian and foreign travel agencies as a presentations, excursions, linguistic and activity quests, Sales Kit: leaflets and promo-videos, etc. in English or Russian.

This technology provides necessary skills development through research and analytical activity of future specialists in cross-cultural communication. It is based on a competence forming approach that supposes creation of steady motivation to the studied material with support on the active use of modern innovative technologies and professional communication. This technology allows to prepare a competitive and competent specialist able to decide intricate professional problems in the modern terms of foreign and regional tourist market in two languages simultaneously (English and Russian).

The cognitive aspect of this technology implies analytic activity of future specialists in intercultural communication in tourism. The students with Intermediate and Advanced level in English sort out and present actual material about the historic and cultural, ethnic and national features of the North Caucasus region. Their task is to study and explore advanced possibilities for modern types of tourism promotion in the region as well as the attractive image for foreign tourists willing to visit the area. Students take part in research work and problems solving, that helps to form the shape of market sales policies for the prepared product off-load and further strategies of work in tourist industry in the North Caucasus.

A creative constituent implies the students’ practical work and touristic products creation. This is an outcome of their intellectual hard work (search and decision-making) resulted in creation of the tourist products highly wanted in the modern industry. Now, this technology is actively used for training the specialists

in intercultural communication in tourism in PGLU. It is based on the use of students' project activity as basic means of developing communicative and professional skills. The scientific novelty of technology consists in the possibilities: (1) to introduce ethnographic, historic, cultural, traditional and mental peculiarities of the North Caucasus into the process higher professional education in a foreign language; (2) to orient students on the ways of regional national and cultural uniqueness representation on international level and potential competitive forms of tourism development in the area; (3) to offer the students' real professional activity work and experience in a foreign language, to reveal potential difficulties, drawbacks and strong sides in their future career.

In practice, this educational technology is also realized by means of students' work with the textbook *Caucasus Diversity* (Ermolenko, Kozhelupenko, 2012). The book is created for students with Intermediate level in English specializing in intercultural communication. The primary objective of the textbook is to include subjects of regional uniqueness into the studies, to wake up students' interest to the home cultures, to develop cross-cultural literacy in order to make them competent and competitive participant of cross-cultural communication. Via the foreign language learning (English in particular) the students work with especially collected authentic materials which help to develop the abilities to reproduce national and cultural values of ethnic communities' resident on the territory of the North Caucasus. The main feature of this textbook consists of the possibility to study in practice the culture of different Caucasus ethnic and national groups by means of the English language. The course book assists education in the dialogue of cultures context and forms the students' readiness to the cross-cultural contacts. The book is based on ethno-lingua-didactic (nationality centered) methodology. It helps to implement the strategies of intercultural awareness and tolerance development. Conceptually, the book has a distinct structure, determined by logical configuration of the process of the foreign language study. It is divided into 7 sections – units: Republic of Karachay-Cherkessia (Geography and nature), Republic of Dagestan (Industry and economics), Republic of North Ossetia–Alania (History), Republic of Kabardino-Balcaria (Religion and Toleration), Republic of Ingushetia (Cuisine), Republic of Chechnya (Sport), Caucasus mineral water Resorts (Arts).

Every unit includes interesting and up-to-date material. As a whole, the textbook introduces a lingua-cultural survey of the North Caucasus republics and areas. The books application in the process of the foreign language learning will assist in professional communicative competence generation. The students will practice to work with authentic material, prepare for different informative talks about their national uniqueness using up-to-date language and professional terminology. Experts from England find the textbook *Caucasus Diversity* interesting, informative and impressive. They particularly enjoy the sections on Art, Music and Architecture. Most of them are inspired to visit the places connected with

name or the great Russian poet Lermontov and some of the beautiful national parks of the Caucasus region. From their point of view, the book is geared to a University level target audience and the readers with academic level of English; with sentence construction, vocabulary and subject-specific terminology that is far beyond the scope of the average English-speaking person.

## Conclusions

The issue of intercultural awareness is universal. Most frequently, the subject is discussed by the international experts all over the world. Unfortunately, some regions politically or historically are regarded to be the areas where a call for intercultural awareness and tolerance is required the most. The North Caucasus has been in the list for several centuries. Russian experts and general society still hope that it is high time for the better understanding of the North Caucasus cultures and global insight on other cultures around the world. The aim of modern intercultural learning is to increase international and cross-cultural tolerance and understanding. We share the opinion that, perhaps the greatest challenge facing language teaching is how to systematize the study of culture and determine its relation with language learning. Rather than being an additional element which is dealt with and the opportunity arises in English classes, cultural studies should form an integral part of the syllabus (Moss, 2002).

Practical tools of this purpose realization can differ. Nevertheless, the essential role of the higher education concerning modern challenge is to help people to explore their own identities, the historic and cultural characteristics of the native region as well as to recognize the factors that have shaped and continue to shape the life of the foreign nationalities. Subsequently, the representatives of large national groups should desire to explore other ethnic groups' differences since it is the only way to enrich ourselves and enhance understanding of the intercultural challenges of the multicultural global society.

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