Culturological Aspects of Concepts: Experiment and Practice at Tertiary Level

Ekaterina Petrova, Angelica Nikitina*

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Saint Petersburg State University, St. Petersburg, Russia
*Corresponding Author

Keywords: concept, cultural awareness, communication.

Abstract: The paper is devoted to cultural concepts and the importance of understanding and handling the concepts in the right way. Being a culturally determined unit of communication the concepts play an extremely important role in learning the mental content of a foreign culture. Introducing the analysis of the concept structure into foreign language teaching will help future specialists to integrate into their multicultural professional community. Different approaches are used when studying concepts at tertiary level. At the first stage, it is important to find out the learners' level of understanding the concepts, then they are introduced to the history of the concept and exposed to authentic texts explaining or illustrating it. Completing different tasks helps the learners to acquire the skill of using the concept. As the experiment showed the Russian-speaking students have certain difficulties in understanding concepts of other cultures. Analysis and discussion of concepts as well as a number of tasks are helpful to improve students' cultural awareness.

1. Introduction

Culture encompasses religion, art, language, social behavior, norms, customs, traditions and social values, therefore it is the subject of study of a number of sciences – philosophy, history, psychology, linguistics, pedagogy, economics, etc.

The relationship between language and culture was emphasized as early as in the 18th century in the studies by W. von Humboldt, E. Sapir, F. Boas and B. Whorf [1]. In the era of globalization developing intercultural contacts and mutual understanding between nations have brought to the fore the importance of coming to grips with cultural meanings elaborated by other nations.

Concept theory is becoming an autonomous interdisciplinary field of study. Concepts have been widely studied in the works of such outstanding cognitive linguists as R. Langacker (1987), G. Lakoff (1996), L. Talmy (2000), W. Croft and A. Cruse (2004), D. Geeraerts (2007), V. Evans (2006, 2007, 2009), P. Chilton (2007), D. Glynn (2010), etc.

There are many different approaches to concepts. Linguistic approaches can be divided into cognitive and cultural. The representatives of the linguistic cultural approach to understanding concepts, which is more relevant to our research, agree that the concept is a basic unit of culture.

2. Linguocultural Conceptualism

The relationship between language and culture has attracted the scholar's attention since the 18th century [1]. However, cultural linguistics appeared as a new field of academic research due to Palmer's monograph "Toward a Theory of Cultural Linguistics" (1996) in which he brought together the ideas of cognitive linguistics and anthropology to create a new theory. As a multidisciplinary area cultural linguistics concentrates on the relationship between language, culture and culturally constructed conceptualization [2]. A number of English-language scholars, such as M. Cole (1996), R. D'Andrade (1995), E. Hutchins (1994), B. Shore (1996), C. Strauss and N. Quinn (1997) explored the relationship between cognition, culture and language.

2.1 Approaches to Cultural Concepts

In the book "Cultural linguistics: cultural conceptualizations and language" (2017), F. Sharifan explored the relationship between language and cultural conceptualizations including the whole range of human experience. The author pointed out that the theoretical basis of cultural linguistics was developed from such disciplines as psychology, anthropology, distributed cognition and others. It is also applied to such areas of applied linguistics such as intercultural pragmatics, world English, political discourse analysis and teaching English as an international language. It offers a framework for exploring the cultural conceptualizations underlying the use of human languages [1].

Linguocultural conceptualism as a separate school of thought has been mostly developed by Russian scholars, such as Yu. S. Stepanov (1997), G.G. Skyshkin (2004), V.I. Karasik (1997, 2002, 2017), S.G. Vorkachev (2016, 2017), N.F. Alefirenko (2002, 2016), G.V. Tokarev (2003), etc.

Yu. S. Stepanov's definition of culture as an aggregate of concepts and relations between them appears to be topical for our research. The researcher believed that every person was imbued with culture, the concept being an attribute of culture, "conglomeration of cultural environment in the human mind" [3]. It is a multidimensional global structure consisting of notions, emotive and evaluative block, condensed history and etymology. The concept is objective and historically determined; if it exists constantly or for a long time it can acquire a status of a cultural constant [3].

One of the definitions of a concept is "a multidimensional semantic structure including evaluative, image and notional aspects" [4]. The evaluative aspect reflects the value of this mental formation for a person and the society; the image aspect - the relevant signs of practical knowledge like visual, kinesthetic, gustative characteristics of objects; the notional aspect – the language fixation of an object [4]. According to the producing subject there are several types of concepts: ethnic cultural, socio-cultural and individual cultural [4].

In his work "Approaches to Understanding Linguistic Cultural Concepts", the scholar pointed out that according to their language representation concepts could be divided into mental formations that got language expression in the lexical and phraseological systems of the language and those represented grammatically or on the phonetic level [5].

The description of the term system of linguocultural conceptualism was given by S.G.Vorkachev (2017). He revealed the interdisciplinary nature of the concept as a scientific category through four constituents: the notional constituent reflects the rationality of the meaning representation, and goes back to logic; the image constituent reflects metaphoric and emotive character of this representation and goes back to psychology; the value, or axiological constituent goes back to philosophy and the meaningful one (the quality of being verbalized) is defined by the semiotic system of a particular language [6]. The image constituent is the most important one for linguistic conceptology.

2.2 The Concept Theory in Linguodidactics

In the last decade the concept studies have been enriched by applied linguodidactic research. This school of thought is developed by such Russian researches as N.L. Mishatina (2009, 2017), L.P.

Tarnayeva (2014), L.P. Khalyapina (2006), N.I. Kurganova (2008), I.F. Savelieva (2009), S.S. Vasilenko (2013), etc.

According to L.P. Tarnayeva, it was linguistic cultural school of thought that gave rise to using the concept theory in linguodidactics. Introducing the concept into the nomenclature of linguodidactics was caused by the researchers' attempts to find new ways of solving the problem of teaching a foreign language as means of intercultural communication. G.G. Slyshkin reckoned that the theory of cultural concepts led to the understanding the communication process as a set of appeals to different concepts [7].

Tarnayeva pointed out that introducing contrastive analysis into the learning process could facilitate the translation of culture-specific language units. This kind of analysis can be applied to language units of any level, however, it is likely to be the most effective in translating culture-specific lexis [7]. According to R. Langacker, it is the lexical units that provide access to concepts and concept systems, as the domain of the mental sphere activated by this or that lexical unit fully reveals the content of the given concept [8]. By analyzing all the constituents of the compared concepts students will be able to reveal both universal and culture-specific concepts. This analysis will reveal the verbal representation of all the layers of the concept, which will help to find the adequate variant of translation.

The research monograph "Methodological Linguoconceptology: Results and Development Prospects" (2017) represents the modern state of a new interdisciplinary direction of the scientific methodological knowledge. N.L. Mishatina proved the fruitfulness of the methodological linguoconceptology for the theory and practice of modern Russian language teaching. She worked out the terminology and provided rationalization for the basic methodological principles of concept modelling. This school of thought was developed within the framework of educational anthropo-cultural paradigm. Linguoconceptology is based on the idea that it is impossible to study the language without a person with their ideas and feelings, evaluation and intuition. This way of research is connected with mastering the basic concepts [9].

The language brings people together into a nation through concepts. It is the concepts that form the mindset of a growing personality. Targeting the triad "language – person – culture", the language and the concept are regarded as a unit of mind and mentality, linguoconceptology focuses on the problem of molding the national cultural-linguistic personality of a student.

The central premise is that there is a linguistic persona behind every concept; a personality's world outlook is formed by the concept as an "archiver of cultural sense". Concept approach, being the category of the world outlook crosses the disciplinary boundaries [9].

2.3 The Theory and Practice of Teaching Concepts

Further development of methodological linguoconceptology is the development of theory and practice of teaching the means of introduction into culture represented by a set of its basic concepts [10]. A human being thinks by concepts which form the learners' mentality.

The concept is regarded as means of realizing the integrative worldview function of education. Being aware of the concept structure and realizing that one concept can exist in different types of mentality and discourse, the teacher purposefully models its content. As a result the learners develop the ability to correlate and synthetize the notions from different spheres of the human culture and the skills of independent critical thinking [11].

The concept study does not only help to master foreign language concepts but also to become aware of their representation in their native language. The study of concepts of a foreign culture facilitates understanding in the situations of intercultural communication and encourages respectful and tolerant attitude to foreign people and cultures [12].

Since the structure of a concept contains the information, both verbal and non-verbal, about the reality of a certain national cultural entity, cultural concepts can be selected as basic for acquiring knowledge when teaching foreign languages.

The communicative approach in foreign language teaching should not only focus on the mastery of language forms, but also on the psychological content of learning foreign culture and the cultural dimension. Learning a foreign linguistic culture should be regarded as a process of constructing cultural concepts developing students' competence in the sphere of concepts. Constructing concepts as a way of mastering the mental content of a foreign linguistic culture involves the students' active learning image, notion and value components of the semantic content found in a foreign word, which is determined by a complex and multilayer concept structure.

Having acquired multicultural conceptual competence, a person is aware of the concept spheres of their own culture and is able to define the content of the concepts used by his or her interlocutors.

3. Experiment and Practice

The focus of the study was on a group of Russian students who study Business English (29 students). The research has been conducted at St. Petersburg State University, the Faculty of Economics. All activities were aimed at increasing understanding of cultural concepts. To achieve the objectives of the study, complex research methods were used (analysis, comparing/contrasting, interpretation). In order to consolidate the skills of using concepts, the students were encouraged to perform writing tasks that enabled them to use their own language resources to arrive at insights into the given concepts.

3.1. The Analysis of the Students' Level of Understanding Cultural Concepts

An experiment designed to find out whether the students understand the concepts correctly was performed in several groups of students studying economics at Saint Petersburg State University. First, the students were offered tasks aimed at revealing their understanding of the concepts of "sustainability", "efficiency", "understatement" and "challenge", and then they were assigned tasks aimed at raising their cultural awareness.

The tasks on different concepts were offered successively. At the beginning the students were given a short presentation on concept theory, defining the notion of "concept" and highlighting the difference between a concept and a notion on the one hand and between a concept and a word on the other hand.

The first task aimed at finding out the level of the students' understanding of a particular concept was to draw the mind map of the concept and to give its definition. The discussion that followed the task showed that the students have different degrees of understanding different concepts.

For example, the learners had a rather vague understanding of the concept "understatement". They provided descriptions based on the following notions: "diminishing, underestimating, small". Some of them even associated the concept with "a mistake, something that is not wise and tactically incorrect". The students wrote the following definitions of "understatement": "a situation when people say less or smaller than they know or have to say", "ignoring the facts which are inconvenient for you", "something that is underestimated", "the fact of diminishing some of the qualities of the object".

When the students completed and discussed their mind maps and wrote their definitions of the concept "efficiency", it was clear that approximately half of them confused "efficiency" with its synonyms – productivity, time economy, effectiveness, and the other half of the students showed a limited understanding of "efficiency", defining it as "education, special skills, personal experience, rationality, and profit". These are some of the students' definitions of "efficiency": "the ability of a worker to do their job properly", "ability to complete the task successfully", "putting less work into something and getting more result".

This situation can be explained by the fact that the concept of "efficiency" has no adequate correspondence in the Russian language and can only partly be conveyed/described by a combination of words: skill, quickness, lightness, and productivity.

Most students' idea of sustainability was limited by such associations as "stability" and "protection of environment", and a smaller part also noted "reliability", "efficiency", "economic growth", and "energy efficiency". This task and the discussion that followed it showed that the students had a limited understanding of the given concept, and some of them had a rather vague idea of it ("something we can destroy and create again", "working without breaks"), associating sustainability with development, consumption and efficiency.

The analysis of the students' mind maps of the concept "challenge" indicated that all the students were aware of the meaning "an invitation to someone to compete", as this was the first meaning of this word provided by the English-Russian dictionary. Almost all the students also noted down "problem" and "difficulty". This task and the discussion that followed it showed that the students had a limited understanding of the given concept. They pointed out that it implied something difficult but none of them added that it involved something stimulating and motivating, requiring special effort; they were also unaware of the meanings "a refusal to accept someone's authority", "an action or idea that questions whether something is true, accurate or legal". Some of the students mistakenly added such meanings as "resources", "result", "competition", and "hard times".

The students were introduced to the history, background and structure of the concept of challenge. "Challenge" is one of the key concepts reflecting the national American character: it emphasizes such traits as ambition, courage, the spirit of adventure and competitiveness, the willingness to take risks and achieve. The core semantic feature of the concept is approaching a difficult problem as a motivation to take action and to succeed – something that needs energy, skill and effort, something interesting and stimulation, the problem itself being unimportant. Challenge is regarded as a verbal "guide to action", based on the idea of challenge and response developed by A. Toynbee, a British philosopher and historian. According to this theory, a difficult environment can unlock some inner sources of creativity and energy and enhance the development of a civilization [13]. This brief insight helped the students to understand the deep implications of the concept under study and they found it very interesting.

3.2. Developing Skills of Using Cultural Concepts

Since the experiment was conducted within the program "Business English" and was aimed at raising the students' understanding of concepts, the students were offered a number of tasks developing the skill of using concepts correctly.

The learners were exposed to authentic texts (extracts from literature, journal and newspaper articles) being given the task of analytical reading. For example, in order to illustrate the concept "understatement" the students were offered an extract from the book by G. Mikes "How to Be Decadent" describing the situation which demonstrated the contrast between a young man from the continent and a typical representative of the English race during the declaration of love. Unlike the continental youth, the Englishman tried to sound calm and restrained without displaying strong emotions while maintaining the code of honor of a gentleman. The Englishman preferred to use neutral vocabulary [14].

The reading task was followed by a lively discussion of the example of understatement illustrated by the text. Then the discussion was focused on British culture and British humour in all areas of life, often combined with understatement. The students' attention was drawn to the fact that understatement is not only the hallmark of English humor, but also their lifestyle, national character of the British people.

The students' attention was also focused on the intonation patterns showing changing the meaning of a phrase depending on the tone. For instance, "It's very interesting" can actually mean "That's nonsense" and might be understood by foreigners as appreciation [15].

More profound understanding of concepts can be gained by completing a number of other tasks, for example, discriminating between different meanings of one word, finding Russian equivalents of the meanings, comparing the difference in meanings of synonyms, identifying the meaning of the concept from the context.

The final task was to write a short story (100-140 words) to illustrate the word "efficiency" and give their arguments (40-60 words) - why they think it is a good illustration of the concept. The students used a creative approach while doing the tasks and came up with interesting pieces of work describing situations from their private life, situations connected with their studies, ecology, everyday life and economy.

Some of the students also showed their professional interest and presented works expressing efficiency as a percentage of the result:

"For example, we have an enterprise of car production and we want to understand an effect of inputs. So, if we produced 10 000 cars per a year, which cost 1 000 000$, and we used equipment that costs 500 000 $, it is available to calculate economic indicator of efficiency: 2$ of revenue on 1$ of costs for used machines. If this indicator increases, it means that our equipment is used in an effective way, maybe because of more intensive using."

The student also explained why she thought it was a good illustration of the word "efficiency":

"Efficiency is primarily an economic term that characterizes enterprise work. For this reason, description of a common simplified productive situation can reveal this important concept and help to understand its main features. Besides, an instance of using the term always gives the understanding of its sense. It allows us not to confuse this word with other economic terms, such as productivity, effectiveness, performance and economy."

Another final assignment set for homework was to write an argumentative essay (200-250 words) on one of the three topics ("The importance of environmental sustainability", "The concept of Sustainable Development", "The importance of sustainable consumption").

Here is an extract from the student's essay, topic 3:

"I strongly believe that everyone can switch to the idea of sustainable consumption even in our country where the infrastructure is not developed enough, because it depends on level of ecological awareness. Nowadays the market gives us alternatives such as ecological food, cosmetics and clothes which are made from natural components and plants, goods from recycled materials or in eco-friendly packaging. These kinds of goods are more expensive than usual ones, but the question is what kind of lifestyle we want for ourselves. For example, we can buy less food (there is a tendency to overeat worldwide), but higher quality one; we may not follow one-day fashion trends and invest in higher quality clothes which we will be wearing for a long period of time; we can also rid of using disposable plastic and paper things; there are even some grocery stores in Russia where you can buy food without packing (one in Saint Petersburg) and it would be cheaper."

This extract demonstrates the student's deeper understanding of the given concept.

4. Results

On the whole, the students demonstrated their deepened understanding of the concepts under study (at first, over 60% of the students had a vague understanding of the concepts). As a result of the completed tasks and practice, both speaking and written, the students learnt how to handle the concepts and started using them in appropriate situations (more than 90% of students started using the concepts correctly).

5. Conclusion

Learning foreign language concepts contributes to increasing a person's cultural awareness, which is of the utmost importance in today's globalized world. Our experiment proved the effectiveness of teaching cultural concepts by gradually exposing the students to their complicated structure and semantics.

References

[1] Sharifan, F. (2017) Cultural linguistics: cultural conceptualizations and language. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam / Philadepphia. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Professor_Farzad_Sharifian/ publication/313714518_Cultural_Linguistics/links/59b20b51aca2728472d146b5/Cultural-Linguistics.pdf

[2] Palmer, G. B. (1996). Toward a theory of cultural linguistics. University of Texas Press, Austin.

[3] Stepanov, Yu. S. (1997) Constants: the dictionary of Russian culture. Shkola "Yazyki russkoj kul'tury", Moscow. (in Russian)

[4] Karasik, V. I. (2002) Linguistic circle: persona, concepts, discourse. Peremena, Volgograd. (in Russian)

[5] Karasik, V.I. (2017) Approaches to understanding linguistic cultural concepts. In: Methodological linguo-conceptology: results and prospects of development: monograph. Mishatina N.L., Ed. Knizhnyj Dom, St.Petersburg, pp. 27-39. (in Russian)

[6] Vorkachev, S.G. (2017) To apology of Russian anthropological linguistics. In: Methodological linguoconceptology: results and prospects of development: monograph. Ed. by N.L.Mishatina. St.Petersburg, Knizhnyi Dom, pp. 18-27. (in Russian)

[7] Tarnayeva, L.P. (2014) Concept theory in the light of linguodidactic problems in Philological sciences. Theoretical and practical issues. №7 (37). Gramota, Tambov, pp. 208-212. (in Russian)

[8] Langacker, R. W. (2002) Concept, image, and symbol: The cognitive basis of grammar. Mouton de Gruyter, New York.

[9] Methodological linguoconceptology: results and prospects of development: monograph. Mishatina N.L., Ed. Knizhnyi Dom, St.Petersburg. (in Russian)

[10] Mishatina, N. L. (2009) Methodology and technology of schoolchildrens' speech development: monograph. Saga, Nauka, St.Petersburg. (in Russian)

[11] Mishatina, N. L. (2017) Methodological linguoconceptology and modern Russian studies. In: Methodological linguoconceptology: results and prospects of development: monograph. Mishatina N.L., Ed. Knizhnyi Dom, St.Petersburg, pp. 49-67. (in Russian)

[12] Vasilenko, S.S. (2013) Concept competence as the aim of teaching a foreign language to students of linguistic specialities in Pedagogical education in Russia. Theory and practice of linguistic education. № 5, pp. 151-155. (in Russian)

[13] Toynbee A.J. (1935) A study of history. Oxford University Press, London.

[14] Mikes, G. (1984) How to Be Decadent. In Mikes G. How to Be a Brit. Clays Ltd, London, pp. 185-264.

[15] Ball, W.J. (1970) Understatement and Overstatement in English in English Language Teaching, V.XXIV, №3, pp. 203-208.