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Establishing a cross-cultural awareness at business foreign language courses

A neglected area in the education of business foreign language students is the development of their sensitivity to the cultural factors underlying the development of economic systems and to individual business transactions. This aspect of their education is particularly important in Ukraine, where the insular society so often produces students with little global awareness. Students who are interested in business and related professions often come to higher educational establishments non-prepared to enter careers in the international arena. Thus, if students are to lead successful careers in international business, it becomes the task of the business foreign language instructor to introduce students to cultural factors affecting the business environment of the target language.

Considering the serious lack of international awareness in our students, on the one hand, and the overwhelming importance of cultural understanding to the success of international business dealings, on the other, it is essential that every thematic unit covered in the business English classroom reflect a sophisticated cross-cultural analysis component that goes beyond the handshake syndrome. . This component should be an important part of the course syllabus and should be justified to the students early in the course. Students must learn that simply learning the language is not sufficient for proper communication in a foreign country; the culture itself is a means of communication that they must master if they wish to be successful in social intercourse of any kind.

As foreign language teachers we are fully aware that intimate knowledge of a foreign culture can only come through direct and prolonged contact. Within the classroom setting we can only hope to raise the students' level of consciousness to the point that they become more receptive to cultural cues. Whereas stereotypes are relatively easy to deal with because they result from rigid notions that admit no individuality, the concept of culture is far more difficult to define. A definition frequently used in "culture and civilization" courses includes the music, art, literature, and philosophic systems of a particular people. The definition used by those writing introductory and intermediate language texts, however, frequently goes beyond these more formal categories to include the level of familiar customs, such as store hours and shopping habits, from the everyday life of the average person. Both levels belong to the sphere of "culture" in the broadest sense, but how are the two to be integrated and what aspects of such an integrated view of culture are particularly important for the Ukrainian business environment? It is possible to raise students' consciousness sufficiently to allow them to deal effectively with even the most complex cultural situations. The first step in that process of consciousness-raising can be to discuss stereotypes and their formation; the second step should involve a presentation of the nature and complexity of culture itself. The third and final step is to apply this knowledge to the environment of foreign business and economics, using manifestations of culture appropriate to the chosen thematic units.