

TEACHING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN A MULTICULTURAL COUNTRY: THE EXAMPLE OF UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is analyzing the role of intercultural communication during the process of language learning. After providing a definition of intercultural communication, this work will focus on the importance of this subject inside language courses in universities and schools. Living in a globalized world, intercultural communication plays a major role in language teaching, which, in some cases, surpasses other more canonical topics such as grammar and vocabulary. Culture, in human interactions, is often the key to have a successful communication among people and, in my experience, it is often underestimated in the academic environment. This paper, which will mainly deal with teaching Italian in Uzbekistan, will show how grammar, vocabulary and phonology plays a minor role compared to intercultural communication and how an effective interaction can be pursued knowing and respecting each other's cultures. The last paragraph will open a theme which, I hope, will be discussed in future articles: Uzbekistan is a multicultural and multilingual country and, teaching intercultural communication in Uzbekistan should also consider the cultural background of the student, since the reaction of the learners could change according to their cultural environment. However, the real question is: should we analyze the reactions and difficulties from a cultural or from a mere linguistic point of view?

Key words: intercultural communication, teaching languages, culture, Uzbekistan, italian

doi: <https://doi.org/10.2024/dqrhgt85>

Introduction:

When we think about language teaching, we always focus our attention on the language in the strict sense, that is a set of grammatical rules, be they morphological, phonetic, syntactic, long lists of words in which, with any luck, we can insert into a practical context and, eventually, some texts or videos that explain the culture of the chosen language. Although I am not here to disagree with the importance of the above-mentioned aspects, personally I believe that learning about how Italians celebrate Christmas or how they cook real pasta Bolognese, however, is not part of what can be defined as communication. Communication in fact does not require detailed knowledge of the history of geography or some cultural aspects, but it rather constitutes that human aspect of exchanging messages, a process which is not limited to grammar and vocabulary. However, the aforementioned messages are often conveyed, by language learners, only and exclusively through the language. In fact, in many schools and universities it is thought that in order to communicate with a person who speaks a foreign language, it is sufficient to create a meaningful sentence with well-respected grammatical rules and with matching words, the so-called collocations in order to have a correct sentence. Teaching institutions tend to encourage the students not to deal with some “accessory” issues and topics, such as

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intercultural communication, preferring to place emphasis on the achievement in exams related to a pure language content or international certifications such as CEFR, IELTS, CILS etc.

Although grammar and vocabulary fill a fundamental and unquestionable role in language learning, they lose their importance during human interactions.

When two or more people communicate, the messages conveyed by the language spoken constitute a small aspect of the communication analyzed as a whole.

I would like to make a small premise: I intentionally used the verb “to speak” and “to communicate” in the above sentence. Whenever we investigate intercultural communication, we have to be careful about the use of these two words. A language (*lingua* in Italian) is spoken and it is often used as one of the means of communication together with other aspects such as body language, facial expression, interpersonal distance, gesture and even some cultural phenomenon involved in the language. These aspects create a “language” (*linguaggio* in Italian), a polysemic term in English which has a clear separate definition in Italian.

The above-mentioned points will be analyzed in the following paragraph.

Intercultural Communication in a multicultural environment

Balboni and Caon (2015:32) affirm that intercultural communication cannot be taught, a statement that I feel to agree with. Among the several reasons why many scholars share this opinion is due to the numerous variables that have to be kept in mind: learner background (language, culture, religion, social status) and target background, which includes similar aspects. The factors to consider are many and they may vary rapidly and without a fixed scheme, leading to difficulties in teaching intercultural communication. One may think that teaching intercultural communication to Uzbek students who are learning Italian may be easier since the learners have a common background and a shared target language, but such a situation never exists and, even more so, it cannot exist in Uzbekistan.

First of all, even Italian “culture” is such a wide concept which encompasses 20 regions with regional languages, traditions, cuisines and economical differences implying that not always what is accepted in the countryside of Southern Italy is automatically accepted in the city center of Milan. Nevertheless, I dare to affirm that differences in Italy are pretty minimal compared to Uzbekistan, a country which deserves to be briefly analyzed from a social point of view.

Uzbekistan is a multilingual country (Italy as well, but Italian is spoken fluently by almost every Italian, no matter what their native regional language is): Uzbek is the official language, Russian is the language of intercultural communication (yes, Russian was, and still, is thought to be the *lingua franca* of the region, and this definition fits better rather than the one officially used). Apart from these two languages known at a national level, Tajik is still the dominant language in cities like Samarkand and Bukhara as much as Karakalpak is in the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan. Languages are expression of a culture in some cases since Tajik is mainly spoken by “Tajik” population¹, Karakalpak by Karakalpaks, but in other situations, such as Russian and Uzbek, languages do not belong to a specific ethnic group. While Uzbek is still spoken mainly by Uzbeks, even if the number of Tajik who are fluent is increasing day by day, Russian is a language spoken by different ethnic groups. It is in fact not only the main language of Russians in Uzbekistan, but it is

¹ There is a tendency raised since the Independence of Uzbekistan to register Tajiks of Samarkand and Bukhara as Uzbek in their documents. In this paper, with the term Tajik I will refer to Uzbekistani Tajiks who mainly speak Tajik at home and in the community (mahalla) where they live.

also the main language at home of other groups such as Greeks, Armenians but also Tatars and Tajiks. It is not uncommon (I would even say that it is a more common trend) for Tajik families to chose Russian education for their children with the common result of having families using Tajik as the family language and Russian as the language they can talk about history, philosophy, mathematics since the whole education process has been done in this language.

That being said, it is also important to notice that some non-Uzbeks, who had their whole education in Russian, are often not able to speak Uzbek fluently and, although Russian is compulsory in Uzbek school, it is not uncommon to find many Uzbek speaking Uzbeks not able to communicate in Russian. The main issue is due to the loss of the status of *lingua franca* of Russian which has not been substituted by Uzbek yet, leading to some paradoxical situations where two Uzbekistanis are not able to communicate.

To conclude the topic related to the Russian-Uzbek coexistence in Uzbekistan, it is fundamental to provide the reader with some daily facts: Russian is still used by the government in official communication and even on social network together with Uzbek, often in its Cyrillic form even if the official spelling should be Latin, and it is still considered the *élite* language, the language spoken by citizens especially in Tashkent and Samarkand. In my daily life in Samarkand, in every *oshxona* (tavern) you only find menu in Uzbek and often a monolingual staff while in every European *café* or restaurant (including all places where alcohol is sold) it is barely impossible to find an Uzbek menu which is replaced by the Russian (and even English) one. In restaurants, the staff will greet and address the customers in Russian and they switch to Uzbek only after hearing an answer from the customer in this language.

Getting to the main point of this article, what is the relation between this official linguistic situation plus the more informal, status-related one and the intercultural communication discussed at the beginning?

In my experience as a teacher in Uzbekistan - and previously in Kazakhstan where many aspects are pretty similar - I am still wondering if the above-mentioned situation is really culture-related or it is more language-related. I noticed that introducing some aspects of intercultural communication to students provokes different reactions depending on the language they had an education with. Obviously, *ça va sans dire*, exceptions are numerous but my experience led me to the conclusion that differences in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are mainly due to the language rather than the ethnic group.

The following points have been welcomed as “weird”, “uncommon”, “impolite” or “inappropriate” by the Uzbek speaking people I asked to but in a less “shocking” way by the Russian speaking ones.

Interpersonal distance, gestures and facial expressions

Once I asked my students what their parents would have thought if they were in my class attending my lesson without understanding Italian. The answer was pretty similar and many students agreed with the fact that probably they would think that I am angry or upset, scolding my students.

First of all, what is interesting in their answer is that they all thought that there would be a communication between us even if I am speaking a language that they do not know, confirming the definition that the communication does not happen only with the language but also with gestures and body language. The last two, together with the loud voice, are the reason why I look angry in front of them. Italians are known for being loud, we are taught since our childhood to talk loudly to express our ideas. A characteristic quite common for Italian women too who never have to lower their voice, which is a typical Uzbek feature. Moreover, Italians are always stereotyped for their excessive use of gestures and

body language, a stereotype that happens to be quite true especially if compared to Northern European or East Asian.

Thanks to the feedback of my students, I realized that my Italian behavior may lead to misunderstandings in Uzbekistan and taught me how to interact with them. At the same time, my “mistake” helped my students understand a typical Italian attitude.

A different aspect that I was aware of before coming here is the interpersonal distance and physical contact. Italians tend to talk to people keeping a distance shorter than an open arm. It is a Mediterranean feature shared by other cultures which may result as an invasion of personal space for people who are not used to it. In Uzbekistan, people tend to keep a further distance when talking, a distance which increases if the two speakers belong to different genders. Although it may appear quite weird, Italians shake hands, kiss each other’s cheeks if we are acquainted or friends and we keep everybody close to us, no matter the age or the gender.

As it can be inferred, numerous cultural incidents may happen when an Uzbek and an Italian meet, and in this situation knowing intercultural communication may help both sides. First of all, being able to communicate effectively with someone belonging to different ethnic groups is possible (and must be done) without losing each other's cultural features. For example, a woman who does not want to shake her hand with a man does not have to do it because it would imply to lose one’s identity but, knowing that she should avoid an embarrassing situation of the man who is waiting for a shake, she could anticipate his intentions greeting him with a movement, such as placing her hand(s) on the chest as a symbolic and commonly understood greeting; doing this, she makes it clear to the other person that she does not feel comfortable in shaking her hand.

Xudo xohlasa

Whoever visited Uzbekistan must have heard the expression “Xudo xohlasa”, the Uzbek version of the Arabic *ʾIn shāʾ Allāh* (God Willing). This form is usually used when a future action is expressed. Whenever learners are asked to translate a text from Italian in the future, they do not use this expression which appears regularly in their written and oral production. The use of “God willing”, which tends to be quite uncommon in Italian, may lead to a misinterpretation when said, since an Italian may interpret this sentence as a no. Italians tend to acknowledge their responsibilities in future actions: if something does not happen, it is because we did not want it to happen.

When a “yes” is a “no”

A typical misunderstanding that happens to any Italians in Uzbekistan is the answer *Ha* (yes). Uzbeks are very warm and welcoming and if you ask them a favor, they will answer “Ha”, nobody will say “yoʻq”. Will they, do it? *Ha*, I mean, no. Uzbek will never reply negatively to a question because it is considered impolite and offensive.

In Italy, as stated by Balboni and Caon (2015:46-47), Italians tend to answer “No, but...” if they are not sure of being able to satisfy someone’s request.

Conclusion

The above points are just a very small list of issues that have to be considered every time we have an interaction with people belonging to different cultures and many other points should be analyzed in detail.

Intercultural communication is a fundamental part of the language learning process and it should never be forgotten or neglected when we teach languages.

Teachers and professors, while teaching intercultural communication, should always underline the fact that knowing and respecting other cultures does not aim to change

anybody's culture but it will enrich one's own culture with new aspects never considered before.

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