



Promoting Tolerance in the Language Classroom

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Introduction

This article introduces an integrated language and content EFL project devised in Tula, Russia entitled: “Bringing English teachers together to promote tolerance in the language classroom.”

The project involved research, training, networking and public outreach events aimed at introducing themes of tolerance into the teaching of English in Russia. The goal of the project was to define successful ways of teaching tolerance, introduce these into English language classrooms and show English teachers how to use these as ‘tools’ against nationalism and xenophobia.

Language Teaching for Tolerance

Teaching a foreign language always involves indirect contact with another culture. That’s why it’s most logical to use foreign language instruction to teach tolerance. According to Prof. Svetlana Ter-Minasova, “Language is a powerful social tool that forms a stream of people into an ethnos and constitutes a nation through preservation and transfer of culture, traditions, and social awareness of a given speech community.”¹

The importance of teaching tolerance through foreign language instruction has been emphasised by Doctor Kaganovich, doctor of philological sciences and head of the *Department of Theory and Methodology of General Education in the Novgorod Regional Center of Education Development*: “The content of different school subjects, especially foreign languages, literature and art, where aesthetic images influence values and emotions, provides multiple opportunities for addressing the problem of tolerance”².

Objectives

The objectives of the project were:

- 1) to determine cases of intolerance among school children, their reasons and their general attitudes towards people from other cultures and minorities by means of a survey;
- 2) to develop and publish English language study materials based on tolerance-related themes and to use these in experimental English classes;
- 3) to evaluate changes in students’ perception of other cultures and minorities after English lessons based on tolerance-themed materials;
- 4) to develop recommendations for teaching tolerance in English language classrooms and to incorporate

these into the EFL curriculum of teacher-training programs in the Tula region;

5) to conduct English teacher-training and advocacy activities on the theme of tolerance;

6) to hold cultural awareness seminars on these themes in a regional boarding school and at a rehabilitation center for orphans.

Steps in the Process

The following steps were taken to achieve the goals of the project, involving research, materials design, teacher training, advocacy and publicity.

(1) Research (Pre-teaching Survey)

Research on tolerance was conducted on students in 5 different high schools in the Tula region of Russia (Tula, Uzlovaya, Kimovsk). A total of 260 schoolchildren (age 14-17) were interviewed. Results of the survey showed that:

- half of the students said they feel hostile towards people of other nationalities and ethnic groups (4% very often, 8% rather often, 38% rarely)
- more than half (54%) said they witnessed conflicts involving people of different nationalities (5% very often, 15% often, 34% rarely)
- over a third (36%) said they would expect peer rudeness or disdain in their city or town towards people of other nationalities or ethnic groups
- one fourth (25%) said they would expect such peer rudeness or disdain in their school
- the amount of peer support expected by students was 21% (in their town) and 24% (in their school)

(2) Experiment (Teaching for Tolerance)

A number of experimental student groups were set up. These were exposed to a program of tolerance education. Each group included at least 10 schoolchildren learning English as a foreign language. They received content-integrated EFL lessons on tolerance for two school terms.

One of the EFL texts used for teaching was a specially written book: *State Exam: Preparation through Teaching Tolerance* (Khodokova, 2011). This consists of 4 units, each of which is culturally focused, titled: *Tolerance Snapshot*, *Stereotyping Traps*, *Diversity Corner* and *Cultural Shake*. Each unit is laid out in state exam format with 5 separate sections on listening, reading, vocabulary and grammar, writing, and speaking.

The audio CD that accompanies the book has materials for listening comprehension. All the texts

were recorded by English native speakers or by speakers of English as a second language. The speakers have different accents and comprise an international team from different parts of the world (Canada, the USA, Malaysia, Zimbabwe (Africa, the Netherlands and elsewhere). Thus, the students not only learn to understand the language in different situations but get used to a variety of dialects (through listening to authentic materials) while learning about issues of prejudice, cultural diversity, stereotyping and tolerance.

(3) Research (Post-teaching Survey)

After using these tolerance-related materials for two school terms with the experimental groups, we conducted another survey in May 2012 to measure changes in student attitudes. A total of 104 teenagers (aged 14-17) answered the following 5 questions:

- 1) Do you think you are tolerant?
- 2) Do we need to speak about tolerance in schools?
- 3) Has your attitude to other nationalities changed after learning about them?
- 4) Do you agree that Russia is a multinational country?
- 5) Do you agree that learning a foreign language helps us get to know other cultures and makes us more tolerant?

The results showed that almost half think it's necessary to speak about tolerance in schools. At the same time, the first question proved that students were a bit unsure of the notion of tolerance as the majority chose the "rather yes" answer. Altogether, after the lessons, about 80% considered themselves tolerant. More than half of the students said that learning a foreign language helps us to understand other cultures and make us more tolerant.

Given this, it's obvious that there's a need to develop and introduce local materials on the theme of tolerance. Language teaching is inseparable from teaching cultural awareness, and foreign language teaching is inseparable from teaching tolerant attitudes to other cultures. When choosing materials for lessons, EFL teachers should always keep in mind that they have the power to shape students' outlooks and form students' values.

¹ Ter-Minasova, S.G. *Language and intercultural communication*. Moscow: Slovo, 2000. (p. 15)

² Ways of forming cultural consciousness in the Russian school - S.L.Kaganovich // *Intercultural dialogue*. <www.tolz.ru/library/?de=0&id=393>

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**State Exam: Preparation
 Through Teaching Tolerance**
 by Anastasia Khodakova (2011)

Text available on-line at: <http://resourcecenter-UK.narod.ru/index.files/State_Exam.pdf> or from the website <www.tspu.wikispaces.com>

Sample Speaking Tasks

[1] SPEAKING TASK 

Give a short talk in English about youth exchange programs. Remember to discuss:

- what qualities exchange students should possess
- how youth exchange programs help to eliminate prejudice and teach tolerance
- what role tolerance plays in changing ideas
- explain whether you'd like to join this kind of program and give reasons why or why not

You will have to talk for 1.5 – 2 minutes. After your talk, the teacher will then ask you questions.

[2] DISCUSSION TASK 

ROLE PLAY

You and your friend want to make your school environment more tolerant. Discuss what you can do. You can choose from the following ideas:

- publish a school booklet on how to be tolerant
- create a tolerance counseling center at school
- give out pens, notebooks or T-shirts with messages promoting tolerant behavior
- make a tolerance billboard in your school

The teacher will play the part of your friend. Remember to discuss all of the options, come up with your own ideas, provide good reasons, find out your friend's attitudes, then come to an agreement.