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A Sociocultural Approach to Updating the Teaching of Reading and Listening in English

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Abstract

For many years ELT methodology has given considerable attention to the questions of teaching reading and listening /R & L/ in English as communicative language activities, focusing mostly on how to develop students' comprehension skills that are necessary for their effective communication with native speakers. But what is still badly needed right now is to develop R & L pedagogy with a cross-cultural or pluricultural dimension that would help to create step-by-step relevant information basis for developing students as active intercultural listeners and readers. The paper argues that it is a good time to make a methodological shift in ELT from teaching R & L simply as language activities to teaching cross-cultural and/or pluricultural reading & listening for the purposes of helping students become positive (though not naïve), confident and flexible partners in intercultural communication in today's though globalized, but still culturally diverse and turbulent world. The paper gives an overview of what has been done in the ELT field under consideration and outlines some key postulates of the sociocultural approach to teaching international languages and comments on how they can be applied to R & L in the context of the dialogue of cultures and civilisations. It discusses some basic principles of selecting aural, visual and audio-visual texts for creating an appropriate cross-cultural or pluricultural space in the English classroom (the principles of didactic appropriateness, communicative & sociocultural values for students' as potential intercultural speakers). Besides, it also offers a set of ELT principles of teaching the art of R & L for the purposes of students' intercultural communication worldwide.

Keywords: *Teaching English as a Lingua Franca, Intercultural Communication, ELT Principles of Teaching Cross-Cultural/Pluricultural Reading & Listening.*

Introduction

An intensive search for effective approaches to the development of receptive and productive skills has always been at the core of modern language methodology, and, though both, receptive and productive skills are of equal importance within the communicative approach, still we do understand that it is listening, watching and reading activities that always help any person get information s/he needs most of all in various fields of knowledge (including cultural knowledge) and it is with the help of these human activities that a language-and-information and language-and-culture environment is usually created in the English classroom that is so much needed for developing productive intercultural skills in a foreign/second language. In language methodology it is common knowledge that receptive skills include listening and reading comprehension skills. Some ELT specialists not only identify essential differences between listening and reading as language activities, but also focus on those characteristics that these activities may have in common when a person is dealing with texts (Harmer, 1991: 181-232; Harmer, 2015: 302-306; Gower et al., 1995: 87-98; Scrivener, 2011: 249-268; Council of Europe, 2001: 65-72). As once noted by Harmer, receptive skills are the way in which people extract meaning from the discourse they see or hear. There are generalities about this kind of processing which apply to both reading and listening, but there are also significant differences between reading and listening processes too, and in the ways we can teach these skills in the classroom (Harmer, 2001).

According to Harmer, reasons for both reading and listening can be divided into two broad categories: instrumental and pleasurable (Harmer, 2001: 199). As comprehension skills are at the bottom of all listening and reading activities performed for instrumental reasons, traditionally, much attention in ELT is usually given to developing students' listening and reading comprehension skills and receptive strategies. In other words, this listening and reading methodology is often oriented towards developing language learners' receptive skills and strategies to cope with texts produced by native speakers.

However, bearing in mind that the English language is a lingua franca in the modern world, we cannot ignore the fact that in today's multicultural and multilingual globalized world, a world of many Englishes (Kachru, 1992; Jenkins, 2006), any person who speaks English is often involved in intercultural situations in which s/he is expected to understand texts produced not only by native speakers, but by non-native speakers as well. And in connection with this world situation, a number of questions arise: Should we have a broader look than before at today's purposes of developing learners' reading and listening skills, because English as a lingua franca is widely used in a variety of intercultural settings where non-native speakers of English communicate with each other? Should we support a broad, intellectually and interculturally or even transculturally driven approach to teaching listening and reading in English? How much do we really need to change traditional listening and reading pedagogy in order to help English learners become active listeners and readers in intercultural settings around the world? Can we bring any changes in listening and reading pedagogy only within the framework of the communicative approach or should this

approach be somehow integrated with any of culture-oriented FLT/ELT approaches discussed many times in the works of Barro, Jordan & Roberts (1998); Byram, (2016), Corbett (2003), Holliday, (1994), Safonova (1991, 1996, 2017), Vikulova & Tareva (2017) and in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001; Council of Europe, 2016)?

This paper focuses mostly on developing upper-intermediate and advanced students' receptive skills in the context of sociocultural approach to teaching English as a lingua franca for communication purposes in pluricultural settings.

Literature review

Within the communicative approach much has been done in developing reading and listening pedagogy. And among many important ELT contributions to teaching reading and listening as communicative language activities are such as:

- methodological classification of texts for reading and listening in the English classroom (see, for example, Ek van & Trim, 1998, 2001; Hedge, 2000; Nulan, 1991) and some criteria for their selection (see, for example, Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2003; Gower et al., 1995; Safonova, 2011);
- goal-oriented reading & listening methodology in FLL (CEFR, 2001), listening as comprehension and as acquisition;
- basic types of classroom activities and procedures recommended to be used for developing students' reading and listening skills (see, for example, Ur, 1991; Hamer, 2015; Scrivener, 2011);
- methodologically appropriate stages in teaching listening & reading comprehension, their correlation with a particular set of tasks (see, for example, Richards, 2002; Scrivener, 2011);
- different types of reading & listening strategies that may be applied for different communicative purposes and in different communicative contexts, and a variety of ways of developing these strategies in ELT & ELL (see, for example, Gower et al., 1995; Hedge, 2000);
- classification of common listening and reading difficulties experienced by non-native speakers and 'uncertainties' existing for FL learners (Hedge, 2000);
- criteria for assessing language learners' listening and reading proficiency and illustrative scales for measuring receptive skills & reception strategies in FLT & FLL (Council of Europe, 2001), including the recent updates to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2016; North, 2017).

However, as pointed out by Stern in 1983, a simple classification of proficiency as the "four" skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing is inadequate, particularly for curriculum development and testing (Stern, 1983: 347). This methodological statement has been given full support in the CEFR (2001) in which stresses that communication is an integral part of tasks where participants engage in interaction, production, reception or mediation, or a combination of two or more of these (Council of Europe, 2001). As later emphasized by North & Coodier, FLT professionals should start thinking in terms of teaching four modes of communication (reception,

production, interaction, mediation), not simply four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) (CEFR, 2001; North & Coodier, 2017).

And what comes out of the CEFR statement above is that not only should ELT professionals be able to use effective teaching strategies in developing listening and reading skills one by one, but as well they should start concentrating on appropriate teaching strategies for developing reception as a communication mode, taking in the consideration the fact that there may be a more integrated approach to develop learners' aural, visual and audio-visual reception skills, that might help him/her communicate in different cultural contexts. The latter makes us think over such key concepts, lying at the core of anthropological transcultural paradigm of contemporary language education as the dialogue of cultures (Kagan, 1988) or intercultural dialogue (White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, 2008).

From Kagan's point of view: the dialogue of cultures is such relationship between cultures when their representatives demonstrate a mutual intention to develop a cultural understanding, positive cultural interaction and orientations towards mutual cultural enrichment (Kagan, 1988:215). The concept of the dialogue of cultures is closely related in its meaning to the concept of intercultural dialogue introduced in the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue «Living Together As Equals in Dignity». The White Paper's definition of the concept under consideration is as follows: *intercultural dialogue is understood as a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It requires the freedom and ability to express oneself, as well as the willingness and capacity to listen to the views of others. Intercultural dialogue contributes to political, social, cultural and economic integration and the cohesion of culturally diverse societies. It fosters equality, human dignity and a sense of common purpose. It aims to develop a deeper understanding of diverse worldviews and practices, to increase co-operation and participation (or the freedom to make choices), to allow personal growth and transformation, and to promote tolerance and respect for the other* (White Paper on Intercultural dialogue, 2008:17). And what does it imply for modelling reception as a communication mode in the English classroom?

Firstly, it is listening and reading materials in English that may be very helpful in creating cross-cultural learning spaces (at least in the B1-B2 language classroom) or pluricultural learning spaces (at least in the C1 language classroom). And these spaces are meant to be created in order to deepen learners cross-cultural and pluricultural knowledge about essential characteristics of intercultural communication (everyday communication, and/or business communication, and/or academic communication, and/or professional communication) and to provide an up-to-date basis for culture-oriented speaking and writing.

Secondly, teaching materials for aural, visual and audio-visual reception at the post-reading and post-listening/watching stage (if properly designed) can involve university students in:

- discovering and comparing assumptions, values, and attitudes that underlie utterances and behaviors in their own cultures and other cultures (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2003);
- developing sensitivity to cultures (Holliday, 1994; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2003);

- adopting the dialogue of cultures as a communicative style (Safonova, 1996, 2017);
- identifying communicative barriers between intercultural speakers and think over how to overcome them;
- resisting to falling under the influence of different types of stereotypes and learn how to destroy ethnic or national, or ideological, or geopolitical stereotypes;
- developing observation powers and critical thinking skills;
- constant and systematic enriching their pluricultural repertoire on their way to being able to act as a cultural mediator (Council of Europe, 2016).

Thirdly, language-and-culture-oriented listening and reading (with native – and non-native speakers of English) are to be included into students' traditional listening and reading activities in the classroom and out of it, if learners have achieved high proficiency level of the English language.

Fourthly, the development of students' listening and reading powers in English should go hand in hand with their intellectual developments and the step-by-step development of their sociocultural competence (Ek van & Trim, 1998; Safonova, 2011).

And finally, language students with high language proficiency are to become *active and powerful intercultural listeners and readers* and this leads to a gradual methodological shift from the teaching of perception skills and strategies for communication with native speakers to the teaching of the art of listening and reading for intercultural purposes in multicultural/pluricultural settings.

In connection with the above, it may be of interest to say that in Russia the art of listening and reading, in other words, developing the culture of reception and perception (Safonova, 2011) is being explored in methodological researches within the theoretical framework of the sociocultural approach to teaching English as a lingua franca (Safonova, 1991, 1996, 2017; Vikulova & Tareva, 2017). The sociocultural approach under consideration is a language-and-culture oriented approach that appeared in Russia at the beginning of the 1990s and since that time have been implemented in English coursebooks for upper-secondary school students and for upper-intermediate and advanced university students (first and second cycles of Higher education). The key ideas, underlying this approach, are the following:

1. The modern paradigmatic shift from teaching English as a means of communication in the authentic English-Speaking environment to teaching it as a lingua franca to communicate across borders and cultures has been necessitated by dramatic political, geopolitical, economic and cultural changes which modern human civilization has been witnessing for at least the last twenty five years.
2. ELT teaching and learning approaches are to be developed with a view to global perspectives in providing intercultural language education and to preserving the local educational heritage, both of them need to be balanced in the theory and practice of language pedagogy.
3. Any FLT methodology can be successfully implemented into communicative language practice only in case that it is appropriate for being used in a particular sociocultural context of teaching / learning languages (Stern, 1993; Safonova, 1996) in this or that country.

4. The analysis of *the sociocultural context of learning* a FL aims at clarifying: a) the social potential of a particular FL to be used as a means of intercultural communication and, thus, its instrumental values for language learners' every day, and/or academic, and /or business, and/or scientific communication, b) the language educational policy that is formulated in European educational documents and local educational standards, curriculum and syllabuses, c) the cultural heritage of a particular foreign language used in native and non-native environment and its importance for students' positive socialization as intercultural speakers and writers, d) the types of bilingualism/trilingualism practised in a particular country or its region(s)/part(s) and educational bilingualism/trilingualism introduced into schools or universities and e) the scope of a particular FL used by representatives of a particular country/region/continent as a means of cross-cultural or pluricultural communication.

Whereas the *sociocultural analysis of teaching a FL* in a particular country is used by FLT specialists in order to find out about: a) an existing balance (or lack of it) between international perspectives in global language education and the local educational priorities in teaching a particular language as a school and/or university subject in this or that country; b) the students' possibilities to have an easy access to the internet resources and ICT in a foreign language and how rich these Internet resources are for being used in FLT and FLL for linguo-didactic purposes; c) the distribution of traditional and new foreign languages in a particular region, country/counties or its/their parts (the map of teaching a particular language as a school/university subject); d) the degree of consensus on the social status of intercultural education, that has been achieved in a particular pedagogical community; e) appropriate assessment and self-assessment means that have been already developed or are to be developed for measuring students' cross-cultural or pluricultural competences.

5. The most important outcomes of learners' intercultural language education through a foreign language are believed to be, on one hand, students' cross-cultural or pluricultural competences (skills, abilities and social characteristic) as effective intercultural speakers (Kramsch, 1998), and, on the other hand, their abilities to act as facilitators and mediators in cross-cultural and pluricultural settings. Language students should be taught how to present other cultures in their mother tongue in their local environment and how to present students' own culture (in a FL) in a new cultural environment (Safonova, 1996).

A Sociocultural Approach to Developing Students' Listening and Reading Powers in ELT and ELL

The establishment of guiding principles for developing students' listening and reading powers within the sociocultural approach is an important stage in conducting a research in the ELT field under consideration. So what principles are of vital importance here? From my point of view, these methodological principles may be subdivided into two groups: a) the principles of selecting and evaluating texts for aural, visual and audio-visual perception and b) the principles of modelling receptive activities in the context of dialogue of cultures and civilizations.

Traditionally, the first group of guiding principles include such ones, as: 1) exposing to a rich, meaningful and comprehensible input, 2) engaging both effectively and cognitively, 3) achieving communicative competence, 4) benefiting from noticing salient features of the input and discovering, 5) opportunities to use language for communicative purposes (Tomlinson, 2011: 7). Fully supporting Tomlinson’s view on this group of guiding principles, however, within the sociocultural approach some other guiding principles can be offered, such as:

- the principle of didactic appropriateness,
- the principle of communicative values (partly it correlates with Tomlinson’s principle of giving students opportunities to use language for communication purposes);
- the principle of sociocultural values (Safonova, 2011).

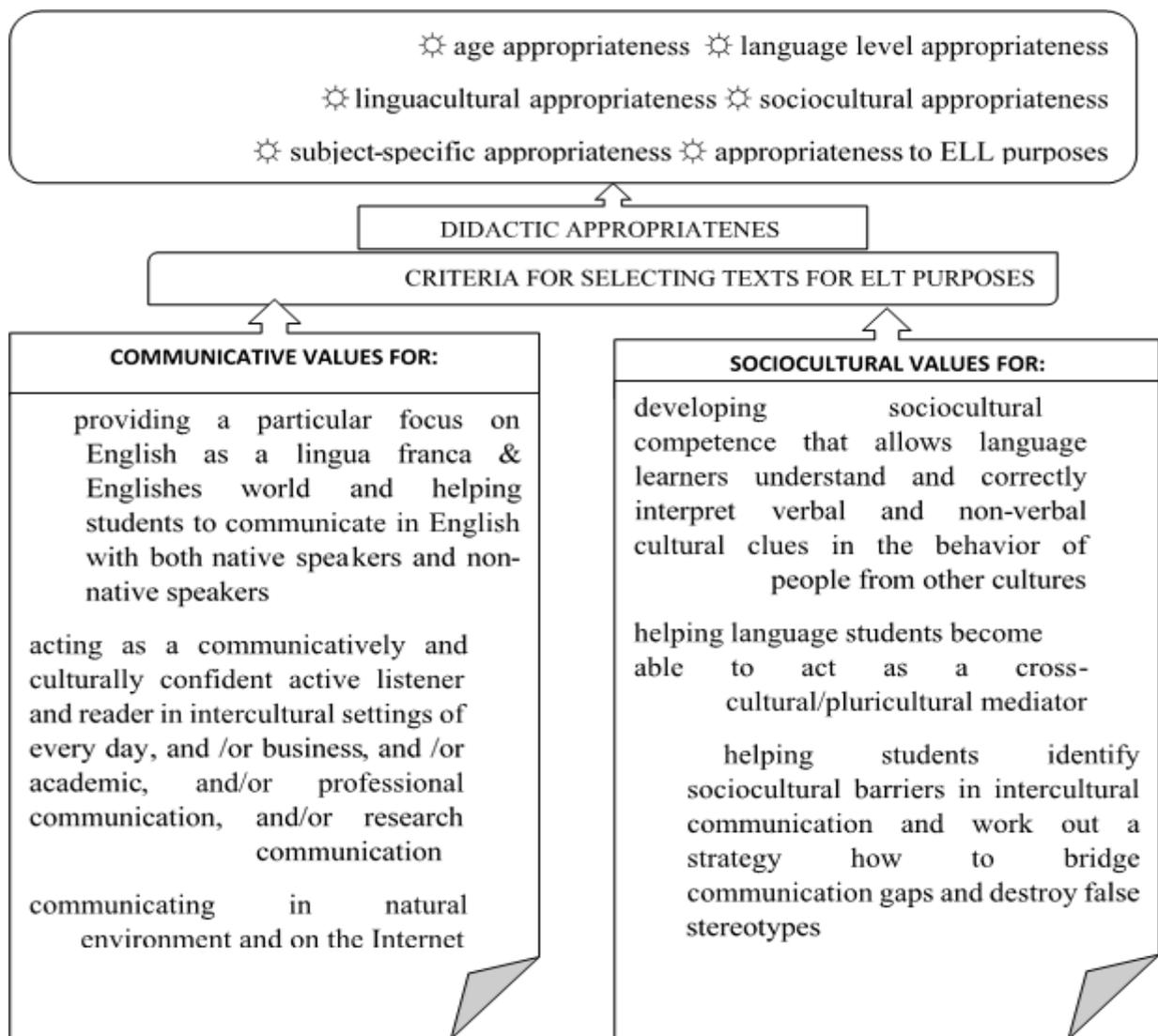


Fig.1 Criteria for selecting texts for ELT Purposes

Fig.1 generalizes what is meant by each of these principles. The principles of didactic appropriateness, communicative values and sociocultural values do not contradict Tomlinson's set of principles (having been cited before), but they are specific just for the ELT field under consideration when the latter is oriented towards the introduction of an intercultural dimension of language education in developing listening and reading skills in the English classroom. And it is more than desirable to follow them, because they help ELT professionals identify and select appropriate English texts for teaching learners' with different levels of language command and in different didactic contexts.

The second group of guiding principles (the principles of modelling receptive activities in the context of dialogue of cultures and civilizations) focuses on how teachers can create cross-cultural and/or pluricultural space in the English classroom by incorporating culture-and-language-oriented listening, watching & reading activities into ELT, after they have selected appropriate cultural texts produced by educated native and non-native speakers for teaching reading and listening/watching with intercultural perspective. It is suggested that these texts would be used to involve students into thought-provoking and problem-solving activities aiming at:

- developing students' knowledge about world cultural heritage, cultural memories embodied in ethnic/national/continental cultures and cultural bridges between linguacultural communities reflected in their languages, cultural behavioral regularities & rituals in communication, cultural values reflected in the scenarios/schemata of their cognitive & communicative patterns of behavior;
- helping them observe 1) verbal and nonverbal behavior demonstrated by people from different ethnic/national/regional/religious communities & representatives of different geopolitical communities, different social strata and social subcultures in a particular type of communication (formal/informal everyday communication, business communication, academic interaction, research work & cooperation), 2) cultural practices in different countries, regions and continents, 3) intercultural interactions and identifying sociocultural verbal and non-verbal barriers & ways of battling them in intercultural communication by cultural mediators;
- developing learners as amateur anthropologists in exploring different areas of modern intercultural communication (everyday communication, academic communication, business communication, research communication), exploring cultural transmission & intercultural infusion;
- creating theme-based information bank for developing students' cultural observation powers, cultural awareness (Tomlinson, 2001), cultural sensitivity (Holliday, 1994), including linguo-cultural sensitivity, sociocultural/intercultural competence, culturally appropriate and unbiased behavior;
- developing communicative, intellectual and mediating powers on the basis of cross-cultural or/and pluricultural theme-based critical reading and listening;

- developing learners' awareness of an interrelation between global/world and local cultures;
- developing and assessing learners' sociocultural competence within their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1997) with the help of their academic or professional language portfolio.

What kinds of tasks is the learner expected to do when s/he is involved in these cultural activities? Russian practices of implementing sociocultural approach to develop students as active intercultural readers speak in the favour of setting such sociocultural tasks as to involve them into:

- 1) collecting, systematizing, interpreting & evaluating sociocultural information on people and places, their verbal and non-verbal communication;
- 2) turning verbal cultural information into visual cultural information, and vice versa – visual cultural information into verbal information;
- 3) finding cultural clues in communication schemata and values reflected in students' own culture & other cultures, collecting and classifying cultural clusters;
- 4) offering a cross-cultural interpretation of communicative behavioral patterns in a particular intercultural setting;
- 5) solving cultural puzzles & reading, listening to, watching and playing culturally specific games;
- 6) creating A-Zs of a) cultural identity related to different cultural groups and linguacultural communities, b) students' own cultural identity and their compatriots, 3) intercultural communication etiquette;
- 7) writing essays and making presentations on cultural transmission, intercultural infusion and an interrelation between global/world and local cultures in contemporary societies;
- 8) reading, listening to and writing poetry in English;
- 9) reading, listening to, watching and acting as an intercultural facilitator and/or a cultural mediator;
- 10) staging and performing culture-bound drama.

It is worth mentioning that many of the task types listed above stimulate students' creative activities, integrating reception, interaction and production as modes of communication. And of special interest is the last one that blends listening, watching, reading and speaking with mediating activities.

As sociocultural listening and reading tasks are not so easy to do, as many even advanced students admit, methodologically, it is preferable to design a certain hierarchy of them, to create, so to say, a kind of an ELT road map of doing listening, watching and reading tasks in the following sequence:

- from cross-cultural and then pluricultural observations to cultural understanding and cross-cultural/pluricultural awareness,
- from collecting, systematizing cultural information to its cross-cultural and then pluricultural interpretation,

- from cross-cultural interpretation of English verbal, visual and audio-visual texts to pluricultural interpretation of verbal, visual and audio-visual materials,
- from interpreting cultural activities to evaluating cultural activities in terms of cultural diffusion,
- from cultural self-observation to cultural self-assessment.

Conclusions and implications for future research activities

The Sociocultural approach opens quite new perspectives in updating the teaching of listening and reading in English in the context of the dialogue of cultures and civilisations in accordance with the social status of the English language as a powerful lingua franca and in consideration of the contemporary sociocultural context of learning and teaching English as a school/university subject in a particular country/region/continent. The implementation of the principles discussed in this paper into practices of developing students listening and reading powers provides an interdisciplinary basis for helping them to become confident and flexible intercultural speakers & writers, to act as intercultural facilitators, cross-cultural or pluricultural mediators. However, the establishment of the principles of modelling culture-related listening and reading activities is only a beginning stage in developing intercultural listening and reading pedagogy, though it is quite promising for ELT. The next step is to design graded teaching materials for developing university learners' sociocultural capacities, intellectual powers and communication flexibility through an integrated teaching of the art of listening, watching and reading related to intercultural academic and professional communication. Such multi-level teaching materials are now being developed by MSU Research & Innovation Group within the area of EAP for three cycles of university language education. The piloting of these materials is expected in 2017-2020.

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