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IMPACT OF CULTURAL IDENTITY ON BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Effective business communication with people who belong to other cultures, apart from understanding those cultures, requires understanding oneself in the first place, i.e., one's own cultural identity. The term *cultural identity* is understood as an individual's sense of self derived from formal or informal membership in groups that transmit and inculcate knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions, and ways of life. Cultural identity changes over time and evokes emotions. It is intertwined with power and privilege [6].

Cultural identity is also understood as a feeling of belonging (as part of the self-conception and self-perception) to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality and any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture. It was broadly discussed on the basis of the cultural identity theory developed to build knowledge about the communication processes as used by individuals to construct their own cultural group identities and relationships in particular contexts [1].

This paper presents the findings of the research conducted over the period of 2015 through 2018 at the Belarus State Economic University (BSEU). It focused on analyzing the cultural identities described by 136 undergraduate and 26 graduate (MBA) students (out of the total 162 students, there were 130 from Belarus and 32 from other countries).

The goal of the survey based on the students' written answers was to analyze their ability to formulate their cultural identities, as well as their ideas of how it affected their communication with people of other cultures in general, and in the sphere of business communication, in particular.

Prior to the written task given to the students, they had studied and discussed the concept of cultural identity at seminars and workshops. This theme is included in the course «Theory of intercultural communication» for undergraduate students, as well as in the course «Cross-cultural communication in business» for MBA students.

During the course study, it was emphasized that culture can take numerous forms and change depending on circumstances and cultural area (Holliday, 2010), which is important in forming an individual's cultural environment and cultural identity.

In evaluating the general learning outcome of answers, it is noteworthy that the papers written by the Belarusian students significantly differed from those submitted by the international students. The main difference between them was as follows: *most of the Belarusian students, being representatives of the country's dominant culture, found it difficult to describe their personal cultural identity*. With a few exceptions (about 10 %), they mostly followed clichés and positive stereotypical statements about Belarusians being tolerant, hard working and open-minded, without any specifics of how exactly their cultural identity influenced their communication with people of other cultures.

In fact, the Belarusian students (mainly, undergraduate ones) at best were able to just mention their ethnic, social, religious and other identities. What concerns the Belarusian MBA students, apart from the ethnocentric stereotypes, they focused on the main difficulties they faced when performing the functions of junior managers. This was determined by a *large power distance index*, which, according to Geert Hofstede, means a high degree of inequality between top managers and their subordinates [3]. This dimension is reflected in the values of the less powerful members of society as well as in those of the more powerful members. In the organizations within large-power-distance cultures you find a greater centralization of power, great importance placed on status and rank, a larger proportion of supervisory personnel, a rigid value system that determines the worth of each job, and bypassing subordinates in the decision-making process [4].

Taking into account the above considerations, according to student D.M. (Belarus), they were hardly given an opportunity to put forward (let alone implement) their ideas, take part in the decision making process, and contact with their overseas partners in business trips abroad (which were mostly saved for senior managers). Some of the respondents explained this by the Soviet legacy which is still in place in Belarus.

In contrast, international students (from China, Ghana, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Namibia, and Turkmenistan) were more articulate and knew exactly what their cultural identity was and how it affected their communication with others. In this context, quite noteworthy are the key components of the Chinese cultural identity described by student X.:

- *Mian-zi* (literally: *face*) is the personal pride and the basics of a person's reputation and social status in any given situation; causing a person to lose face through public humiliation can damage relationships.

- *Guan-xi* (literally: *relationships* or *connections*) is a fundamental aspect of the Chinese culture, which helps to overcome hardships and frustrations; it is a network of elaborate relationships promoting cooperation and trust, and it is the main tool for achieving everyday goals.

- *Ke-xi* (literally: *guest behavior*) is a code of guests' conduct – always thoughtful, humble and refined; it demonstrates modesty and patience. Politeness is also part of this principle, but it is not the *politeness* understood by Europeans or Americans. The Chinese simply do not want to bother others even if they want something (X. shared his experience of being invited to his Belarusian friend's home when he refused to eat or drink. This “*guest follows the host*” policy, however, was changed when he realized that he was offending his Belarusian host. The Chinese become *flexible*, when difficulties in communication arise, and choose to change their way to communicate productively and effectively.)

- *Confucianism*, an ethical belief system based on the teachings of the 6th century philosopher Confucius; its focus is on the concept of relationships, with a total and complete respect for personal responsibility and commitment. These components of the Chinese cultural identity are aimed at preserving harmony and peace, and they are always in place in the process of intercultural communication, unavoidably affecting it.

The papers submitted by international students have substantially contributed to the enhancement of my awareness of their codes of conduct, cultural priorities, and business ethics. As the survey shows, they significantly differ in the content part from those written by the majority of the local students. I really appreciated the honest and very detailed answers provided by representatives of other countries that are pursuing a university degree at BSEU, all of them belonging to the *high-context cultures*.

In high-context cultures, people are very homogeneous with regard to experiences, information networks, and so on. High-context cultures, because of tradition and history, change very little over time. These are cultures in which consistent messages have produced consistent responses to the environment. As a result, according to E.T. Hall, for most normal transactions in daily life they do not require, nor do they expect, much in-depth, background information. Meaning, therefore, is not necessarily contained in words. In *high-context cultures*, information is provided through gestures, the use of space, and even silence. These

cultures tend to be more aware of their surroundings and their environment and can communicate without words. [2].

Some of the papers submitted by the international graduate students on their cultural identities and their impact on business communication were indeed a revelation in terms of the information they contained. Suffice it to mention that student L. from Iran emphasized that business partners from other countries should be very careful about trusting her countrymen when doing business with them. She warned against believing those Iranians who persistently try to persuade their business partners that their attitude to them is that of close relations, brothers and best friends. She also recommended to never accept the first price of goods offered by Iranians, but to be prepared for a long process of bargaining.

Student E. from Namibia stressed the role of age and social status, etiquette and gender in business communication with her compatriots. A younger business partner and the one of a lower social status will never oppose or contradict the older and a higher positioned one. A respect to business partners in negotiations is manifested in the total avoidance and banning of interrupting anyone involved in this process.

In case of a conflict, *a win-win situation* is achieved by *pretending to be naïve* and accepting the counterpart's arguments because, according to the local Namibian culture, there cannot be two «smart» parties in a conflict. Despite the high-context culture prevailing in Namibia, *eye contact* is a very important factor in communication. *Lack of eye contact* signifies a lack of interest in the other person, meaning that he/she can be perceived as deceitful and showing insincere and cunning behavior, which could result in serious mistrust problems. *Being a female* in Namibia is, by definition, a subordinate position, so women have to be aware of it and *never try to «play the first violin»*.

The passages from the above papers are very meaningful and far from containing clichés or stereotypes, as obviously is the case with the Information of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Consular Service for the Russian tourists traveling abroad posted on its website on March 23, 2017. This information was widely discussed in the social networks and aroused numerous critical and even sarcastic comments. It contains the recommendations that are far from being analytical, with a historical or cultural background, and are mostly limited to those of what to do what not to do [7].

The findings of the research should be of special interest for the University professors and instructors whose goal is to form and develop students' professionalism through enhancing their cultural identity awareness and ability to critically assess various life situations, be consistent and resist all kinds of manipulations they may encounter. They are also a source of analytical thinking for those who are going to do business with people of other cultures do to the fact that intercultural business communication is increasingly becoming an important issue in business activities throughout the world.

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КИТАЙСКИЕ ШАМАНСКИЕ ПРАКТИКИ ПО ДАННЫМ ПИСЬМЕННЫХ ПАМЯТНИКОВ И ФОЛЬКЛОРА

В мировой науке последние десятилетия отмечены возросшим интересом к шаманизму разных народов мира. Шаманизм мы определяем как форму религии, основанную на архаических верованиях, но с развитым психотехническим компонентом. Это древнее учение