

# Intercultural competence development and cultural integration: a case of regional leadership

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**Abstract** This paper focuses on the intercultural competences and cultural integration as a case of building a leading position of a region. The paper uses Saint Petersburg region as a specific case study.

In Saint Petersburg, the proportion of citizens who positively assess the state of inter-ethnic relations is growing every year. Positive trends in the process of achieving cultural integration are promoted by the support of programs for the development of tolerance and intercultural competence. One of these programs was devoted to the elaboration of training on the technique of cultural assimilator. The purpose of the applied research was to study cultural differences for the further construction of cultural assimilators. The following target groups of foreign citizens were studied: personnel of foreign, joint and Russian companies and organizations; undergraduate and graduate students; foreign citizens married to the residents of Saint Petersburg; and international tourists. Study participants were divided by region: Western cultures; Eastern cultures and representatives of the CIS countries. The training on the technique of cultural assimilator, compiled as a result of the research, allows to expand the cultural outlook of the intercultural contacts participants, eliminates excessive ethnocentrism and contributes to the successful implementation of professional and everyday tasks.

## 1 Introduction

Saint Petersburg has been a multinational city since its foundation. In the period from 1869 to 1910 (during regular urban censuses) the share of Russians in Saint Petersburg was consistently 82-83 %. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the most numerous ethnic groups, apart from Russians, were Belarusians, Poles, Germans, Finns, Jews, Estonians, Latvians, Ukrainians. In 1897, the Census included 60 ethnic groups in the composition of the inhabitants of the Russian capital in total (Tangalycheva et al. 2010). It should be noted that, according to international standards, a city is considered multinational if, in addition to the main nationality, the total population of all other residents is at least 5 %. In Saint Petersburg, Russians always numerically dominated, but the presence of representatives of dozens of other nationalities was equally constant (from 6 to 23 % of the population). Since 2000, non-Russian peoples constitute at least 15% of the city's population (Tangalycheva et al. 2010).

Since the 1990s, Saint. Petersburg gradually began to acquire the features of a global city: the number of consulates general of foreign countries increased. Foreign and joint companies, cultural centres, institutions, representative offices of governmental and non-governmental funds and organizations, international educational programs, etc. were opened. Only in 2018 Saint Petersburg was visited by 8 million tourists (UNDP 2018b). It should be added that Saint Petersburg, like other European cities, faces the problem of aging and the replacement of local workers by newcomers. According to official economists' forecasts, by 2020 in Saint Petersburg migrants will occupy four out of ten jobs. The city is increasingly losing local flavour. Already, a quarter of the two million workers are migrants. Basically, they come from CIS countries and Russian regions. According to experts, the share of migrant workers will only grow, and by 2020 will reach forty %. That is, four out of ten jobs will be occupied by visitors who work primarily in the service sector, transport, trade and construction (UNDP 2018a).

In the context of the further internationalization of Saint Petersburg, as well as the aging of the city's population and the demographic crisis, the formation of the intercultural competence of citizens, including migrants, is of particular relevance. The main purpose of this article is to review the procedure for developing a training program on the basis of cultural assimilator technique, which was proposed in 2010 to one of the districts of the Saint Petersburg to solve the problems of adapting temporary migrants to life in the city. Nowadays, the training program is used to work with students of international courses and those in the target audiences that will be described further in this paper. In general, this training contributes to the establishment of effective intercultural communication between representatives of different cultures in socio-cultural environment of a large Russian city.

## **2 The concept of intercultural competence**

Intercultural competence is understood to mean behaviour appropriate to a specific context and effective in this context (Samovar and Porter 2004; Sadohin 2007; Pitts and Harwood 2015). However, in the literature one can find a more specific definition of intercultural competence. Thus, the American researcher Kim (1991) defines intercultural competence as an individual's internal ability to cope with the challenges of intercultural communication, namely: cultural difficulties, uncertainty, the position of local residents, as well as the accompanying stress and cultural shock (Kim 1991).

According to experts in the field of intercultural communication, such communication can be recognized as successful (effective), in which reasonably motivated people with the necessary cultural knowledge and communication skills take part (Hannigan 1990). A sufficient level of motivation means that the participants of communication strive to cope with all the goals set for them, that is, they internally form a positive image of upcoming events and make maximum efforts to obtain the necessary result. Cultural knowledge is connected with the idea of what needs to be done or said at a certain time and in a certain context.

A general cultural approach to the formation of intercultural competence was first proposed by the American researchers Cushner and Brislin (1996) and is intended for people "crossing cultural boundaries". It is assumed that all people, regardless of their initial characteristics (ethnic, subcultural, age, status, etc.), undergo similar stages of adaptation to the host cultural environment. Thus, it becomes possible to develop training programs of overcoming cultural shock and acculturation, which are effective in any cultural context, for all participants of intercultural contacts (Cushner and Brislin 1996).

## **3 Cultural assimilator technique as a tool for intercultural competence**

One of the most effective methods of such training is elaboration the cultural assimilator technique, the purpose of which is to put a participant in intercultural contact in the place of the host culture, to familiarize newcomers with the norms, values and rules of behaviour in a foreign culture. Thus, it becomes possible to compare and analyse cultural differences between one's own, native and new cultures and develop the ability to notice these differences and give them special attention in the process of intercultural interaction. For this, conflict situations are studied, and recommendations are made for their effective resolution.

The training, as a rule, has two goals: firstly, to acquaint the audience with cultural differences by simulating situations that are characteristic of different cultures; secondly, to acquaint training participants with typical behavioural manifestations of carriers of different cultures, and on this basis to prepare them for the use of their knowledge in a new cultural environment.

Cultural assimilator is a small story based on communication between carriers of two different cultures (Triandis 1984). In the course of such interaction, communication partners face a problem that impedes the positive course of their interaction. 4-5 possible solutions to the problem are offered to this story, from them it is necessary to choose only one, the most correct one. In addition, expert interpretation is attached to each possible solution to the problem.

Training on the technique of cultural assimilator consists of 100 to 150 such stories. It is recommended for individual work with a computer program or group work in the classroom under the guidance of a trainer. After training on this methodology, people are able to better understand the subjective culture of representatives of another country and, consequently, to more successful intercultural contact.

It should be noted that when developing (designing) assimilators, it is necessary to prepare significantly more stories than will remain in the final version of the training, since some of them will not contain actual cross-cultural differences and, therefore, they will have to be abandoned.

Designing cultural assimilators is based on interviewing individuals who have extensive experience and knowledge regarding two cultures. Any measure of cultural difference can be included in the training. With regard to the above, Cushner and Brislin (1996) suggested 18 topics for constructing common cultural assimilators: anxiety; unconfirmed expectations; affiliation; uncertainty; opposition to prejudice; communication and language skills; roles; individualism/collectivism; rituals/superstitions; social hierarchy/class and status; values; work (problem solving; focus on task performance or interpersonal relationships; decision-making practices); orientation in time and space; categorization; differentiation; the difference between insiders and outsiders of the group; styles of assimilation of cultural knowledge; and attribution (see Cushner and Brislin 1996).

This form of training develops a cognitive breadth of thinking among the participants. Cognitive complexity, in turn, helps to consider the subjective culture of another group as "suitable", therefore, in relation to it, the level of prejudice and stereotypical judgments decreases. At the same time, training on the basis of cultural assimilators does not always stimulate sympathy for another cultural group or reduces social distance towards it. The emergence of sympathy depends on the positive experience of interaction with another group. Knowing how the other group thinks and perceives the world around us does not change the emotional attitude

towards it. Social distance often depends on the norms of our own group. If group norms encourage us to form friendly relations with another group, we will be more inclined to contact than when they prevent it.

Another limitation of cultural assimilation training is that it does not change the behaviour itself. It's one thing to know how to behave, and quite another to really behave correctly. To achieve this, it is necessary to undergo training on behaviour modification, in other words, acquire the skills of a “new” behaviour.

#### **4 Training on the cultural assimilator technique for adaptation to life in a large Russian city**

The object of the applied research was foreign citizens residing in Saint Petersburg for at least three months. We identified the following target groups of foreign citizens who are adapting to life in the Russian large city:

- personnel of foreign, joint and Russian companies and organizations;
- students, undergraduates and graduate students;
- foreign citizens married to residents of Saint Petersburg;
- international tourists living in the Russian metropolis for at least three months.

The participants of our study were also divided into several groups by region:

- representatives of Western cultures (USA, Western Europe, including Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia);
- representatives of Eastern cultures (countries of North-East Asia);
- representatives of CIS countries;
- newcomers from African countries.

The subject of the study was the intercultural communication of foreign citizens from various countries with residents of Saint Petersburg, as well as the problems and difficulties faced by participants in international cooperation.

During the study, qualitative methods of collecting and processing information were used - semi-structured interviews of experts with communication experience and knowledge in the field of two clearly shared cultures, a series of focus groups and interactive video shooting.

The study involved 70 people representing five regions - East, West, Africa, CIS, or 32 countries. The largest number of participants - foreigners from Western countries (27 people). Foreign participants were represented by 44 men and 26 women. Age of participants ranges from 17 to 59 years. The study involved employees of foreign, joint and Russian companies and diplomatic services, teachers of foreign languages, students, graduate students, persons married to foreign citizens, as well as labour migrants who came to Saint Petersburg to search for better living conditions and earnings.

Almost all of them spoke Russian more or less well. The only exceptions were some high-status employees of foreign companies (they were interviewed in English) and several young migrant workers from Central Asia who graduated from school after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

As experts with extensive communication experience in different cultures, highly qualified employees of foreign companies and diplomatic services, as well as some graduate students were involved. 10 foreign lecturers working in various educational institutions of Saint Petersburg and teaching their national languages were interviewed. The method of individual interviews has certain advantages compared with the group method - the organizers of the study themselves came to the informants at a convenient time and place. In addition, some informants, despite the fact that they lived in Russia for several years, did not speak Russian, so in the course of individual conversations could use English. A total of 25 expert interviews were received.

The most contrasting patterns of interactions were recorded in the contacts of citizens with representatives of Western and Eastern cultures. It can be noted that the acculturation strategies of representatives of these cultures vary greatly. Foreigners from Western Europe and the United States tend to associate the difficulties of their adaptation with the lack of culture of local people, while foreigners from eastern countries make maximum efforts to understand the motives of the behaviour of Saint-Petersburg citizens and adapt to them.

#### **5 Designing cultural assimilators**

As a result of the field research (collection and processing of the obtained data), a large number of cases, stories and plots of intercultural interactions of foreign citizens with residents of Saint Petersburg were collected. The tasks of the authors of cultural assimilators were as follows:

1. Select specific situations for constructing assimilators.

2. To state each specific situation in literary Russian, without stylistic and grammatical errors.
3. Identify the main communicative problem in each specific situation.
4. Think over and write four possible solutions to the identified problem, only one of which is most true, from the point of view of representatives of the local culture.
5. Prepare an expert interpretation of each of the four answers, each of these interpretations should immerse foreigners in the context of the local culture.

The “Business” section contains situations related to the peculiarities of doing business in Russia - distribution of profits, hiring employees, negotiating, the role of informal relationships, attitudes to work, communication errors, etc.

The “Education” section reflects the relationship between teachers and students, the organization of the educational process, communication failures associated with a misunderstanding of the meaning of words and grammatical structures, lack of knowledge of the rules, norms and expectations of representatives of different cultures in education, etc.

The theme “Space of the city” includes stories devoted to the peculiarities of the functioning of the urban space: the problems of politeness of citizens, “fathers and children”; transport, road conditions; smoking, drinking alcohol; a variety of behaviour styles of Saint Petersburg dwellers and others.

The theme “House, Family” covers situations such as the culture of feasts, food culture, home improvement, relations with neighbours and family members in which foreigners live, signs, superstitions that guide local people at home, etc.

The section “Leisure, Entertainment” contains descriptions of episodes from intercultural interactions in your free time - during shopping, visiting museums, restaurants, cinemas, celebrating birthdays, etc.

The last section “Services, maintenance” deals with situations related to medical and educational services, as well as servicing people in stores, banks, repair shops, restaurants and cafes.

All of these rubrics include differences in verbal and non-verbal communication, in roles (gender, age, status), differences in rituals, holidays, superstitions, values and expectations. In addition, great attention is paid to differences in the perception of space and time, in relation to collectivism/individualism.

## **6 Conclusions**

All in all, the results of our research that constituted the cultural assimilators were provided to all research participants: employees of foreign companies, diplomatic services, teachers of their national languages working in Saint Petersburg, and graduate students. According to their estimates, after independent work with difficult situations of intercultural interaction and expert explanations, they were able to improve their understanding of the behaviour and attitudes of the local population. As a result of this work, they found for themselves many previously unknown nuances of intercultural communication.

The training materials are also used to work with students in Russian-speaking and multicultural audiences in the process of teaching a number of Saint Petersburg State University courses on intercultural communication, sociology of culture, methods of sociological research, etc. After getting acquainted with the situations from the training, students are invited to independently gather material episodes with original stories. It is worth noting that the greatest difficulties in the work of students are caused by the requirement to formulate the main problem of the selected situation, as well as the requirement to identify 4-5 possible options for resolving a difficult situation. For this it is necessary to have a sufficiently rich imagination and a certain personal experience of intercultural communication. Often, students also do not have sufficient cultural and specific knowledge about representatives of other cultures. At the same time, such classes can significantly expand the cultural outlook of students, give them an idea that the culture of the host country should be assessed on the basis of its own assessment criteria, saving them from excessive ethnocentrism. They are beginning to understand that one can get satisfaction and pleasure from intercultural contacts, that these contacts can be effective and lead to the successful fulfilment of professional tasks.

As the experience of several years of promoting training in cultural assimilation techniques in the context of a large Russian city, has shown, the main target groups for such work in addition to students and university professors should be:

- journalists who cover inter-ethnic, intercultural relations in the Russian socio-cultural space;
- leaders of diasporas of various national and ethnic groups in Russian cities;
- law enforcement officials who are called upon to regulate these relationships in their daily and professional practice;
- religious figures and ministers of religion, who are authoritative leaders of many national and ethnic communities in large cities

- employees of social services, local governments and non-profit organizations engaged in the regulation of inter-ethnic and intercultural relations.

Further scientific and practical work on the technique of cultural assimilator should be associated with the development of cultural-specific situations of interaction in different settings and cultural groups. Since the most significant in recent years for many large cities in Russia and for the country as a whole is the problem of labour migration from Central Asia, one probably needs to concentrate on solving this problem.

At the same time, it is not the labour migrants who should be trained according to this method, but first of all the moderators. Labour migrants in modern Russia are primarily concerned with survival and earnings for living and sending home. In addition, the level of proficiency in Russian of representatives of the younger generation of migrants who graduated from school after the collapse of the USSR does not allow them to not only get training in the technique of cultural assimilator, but also adapt to the most basic requirements of the host society. In order to help them to fully adapt to a new socio-cultural environment, purposeful training of moderators from the above target groups might be required.

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