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**МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНЫЕ РАЗЛИЧИЯ В ОБРАЗОВАНИИ:
ПРОБЛЕМА ИЛИ ВОЗМОЖНОСТЬ?**

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CROSS–CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATION: CHALLENGE OR OPPORTUNITY?

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Аннотация: В статье освещаются межкультурные различия и проблемы в преподавании английского языка в группах белорусских и иностранных студентов. Автор также обращает внимание на практические решения и дополнительные образовательные возможности, которые появляются в группах иностранных студентов, а также в смешанных группах.

Abstract: The article focuses on cross–cultural differences and problems of teaching English to international and local students in Belarus. Some attention is also paid to practical solutions and educational opportunities that arise in international and culturally–mixed groups.

Ключевые слова: межкультурные различия; смешанные группы; иностранные студенты; методы преподавания; коммуникация; решение проблем.

Keywords: cross–cultural differences; culturally–mixed groups; international students; teaching techniques; communication; problem–solving.

As far as modern education is concerned, it should be admitted that it is getting more and more multinational. When a Belarusian university instructor comes into the classroom, he (she) might expect to see people from different cultural traditions, mainly including China and Turkmenistan, sometimes Georgia, Azerbaijan, United Arab Emirates and others. The subject of this research is to analyze cross cultural differences in teaching in terms of their challenges and opportunities based on the practical experience of training students in culturally–mixed groups (Belarus, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia) and in international groups (China and United Arab Emirates).

Cross–cultural differences can be defined as any cultural implications that affect one’s behavior and communication patterns as well as other personal perceptions, views and beliefs. Since we are in education, these differences are more vivid in:

- student–teacher and peer–peer relationships;

- achieved results (diligence and performance, motivation and ambitions)
- key practical skills (grammar, speaking, writing, reading, listening)
- extra practical skills (creativity, critical thinking, analytical thinking)
- dealing with information (comprehension, reproduction and production)
 - discipline, punctuality, and pace
 - dealing with problems and initiative
 - homework productivity.

Before providing any comparative results, it is appropriate to mention the classification of cultures worked out by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall and described in his book *Beyond Culture* in 1976. [1, c. 68] He distinguishes between high-context and low-context cultures where the former is slow, collectivist and people-oriented, indirect, intuitive, and relational, whereas the latter is fast, individualistic, action-oriented, straightforward, logical, and linear. High-context culture holders value centralization of authority, non-verbal communication, observation before practicing, accuracy, and stability. Those who represent low-context traditions prioritize privacy and decentralization of authority, verbal communication, change, rational solutions, and achieving goals. As to the countries mentioned above, they all belong to a high-context tradition. [1, c. 69]

Knowing these peculiarities would be a real asset to an English instructor, but it is not as easy as it may seem. Since all the cultures in question belong to high-context classification, why not develop and successfully apply a “one-size-fits-all” strategy that will smooth out cross-cultural differences in the classroom? The fact is that using such a strategy, conversely, tends to escalate the problem. Firstly, it should be admitted that due to cultural assimilations, high-context values and behaviors get westernized, Europeanized, and Americanized. Secondly, at the stage of acculturation (getting used and adapting to a new cultural environment) [2, c. 180], including their instructor’s teaching style, international students often behave according to the saying *When in Rome, do as the Romans do*. For example, they don’t ask questions and often simply copy their home task without understanding because they want to be as productive as local students are. Thirdly, the teaching techniques and principles used by Belarusian instructors of English (communicative, problem-solving or situational learning theories) contradict with those commonly used in foreign secondary schools. For instance, in China teachers practice a reproductive method based on memorizing and repeating information; discussions are not common since teachers are

highly respected and obeyed (they address you as “teacher” without using any proper names). In Turkmenistan students are taught by lecturing and noting information, communication and problem–solving are hardly practiced in most schools. Fourthly, there are some gender issues involved as in Muslim countries teachers are typically men whereas women have other social functions.

Some research has already been done on the specifics of international students’ behavior abroad. It proves that ‘the majority of international students choose *surface* learning strategies rather than deep learning strategies’, they *lack* some *essential skills* and reveal ‘*cognitive deficiency*’ because ‘in their home educational background [...] they were not previously encouraged to think creatively and analytically, [...] they have not been trained to do so before’. [3, c. 6] Some facts on British universities say that ‘the large power distance manifests itself in educational settings creating a *passive* learning environment, with students accepting and respecting the teacher’s authority; [...] the teacher’s expertise is respected and never criticized and students do not normally speak without being invited to do so’. [3, c. 7]

Here are some basic findings on international students in Belarus compared to the local ones (total number of participants – 120 ESL students).

Table 1 – Cross–cultural differences of ESL students’ behavior in the classroom (BSEU, 2016–2019)

<i>Criteria/Country</i>	<i>Belarus</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>Turkmenistan</i>
Student–teacher Relations	close, informal	distant, formal	semi–formal, informal
Peer–peer relations	competitive – collaborative	collaborative	Collaborative
Diligence/performance	medium–high	low–medium	low–medium
Motivation/ambitions	medium–high	low–medium	low–medium
Key practical skills	Intermediate – Advanced	Intermediate – Upper–Intermediate	Pre–intermediate – Intermediate
Extra skills	yes	no	No
Dealing with information	productive	reproductive	Reproductive
Discipline/punctuality	medium–high	low–medium	low–medium
Pace	medium–high	low–medium	low–medium
Dealing with problems	active	passive	Passive
Initiative	yes	no	No
Homework productivity	yes	No	No

These average results highlight the problem of having to cope with cross-cultural differences in students' behavior within one lesson, within one curriculum, within one group of students. Of course, there are continuous attempts to work out appropriate lesson plans, textbooks, and methods to address the problems of international students in Belarusian universities and to improve their performance, but some of the issues are within the competence of administrations. Instructors can provide a differentiated approach, manageable tasks and culturally-based course books; they can even juggle tasks and activities within one lesson, but what both students and instructors need is a chance to choose the best possible content and framework in order to achieve their goals. The result of the survey conducted among ESL students of 2–3 years (30 participants) reveals the following information.

Table 2 – ESL students' perceptions in the classroom

<i>Belarusian students about international students (IS)</i>	
Negative	Positive
1.our lessons are slower because IS often need more explanations and more time; 2. we try to help IS, but it is not good for them; 3. IS don't take an active part in group work and discussions, so, they are inefficient partners; 4. sometimes IS argue, complain, or refuse to answer; 5. it is not easy for teachers to engage IS, they often need 'plan B' for IS;	1. IS can tell smth we don't know about their culture; 2. we often discuss cross-cultural differences; 3. IS can make us smile;
<i>International students about local teachers (LT) and local students (LS)</i>	
Negative	Positive
1.we have to talk and do a lot, but we can't; 2. LT give a lot of homework; 3. we feel very shy because LS are very fast and smart; 4. we don't know a lot of things LT and LS speak about; 5. before I speak, I need to write it, but I don't have time;	1. LS answer quickly, we can just listen; 2. when LT work with us face to face, we understand it better; 3. LS can always help us in class and with our homework;

The problems discussed above need a comprehensive approach including the level higher than teacher–student communication. The most important instruments of improving the efficiency of international students’ education are shown in Fig. 1. [4, c.11] They include human and non–human resources and involve different levels of the university hierarchy. As can be seen from Fig. 1, the focus is on meeting international students’ needs and using targeted and student–oriented materials, tasks and techniques which is only possible in small (and preferably, not mixed) groups. It also seems to be sensible to develop an applicable assessment system that would consider cross–cultural differences in the students’ cognitive activity.

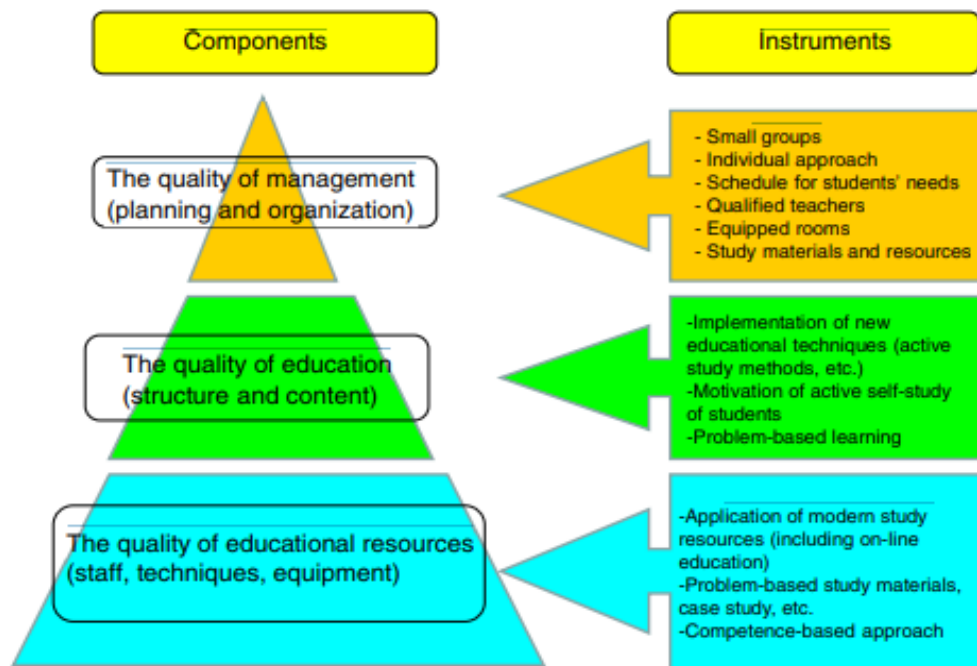


Fig. – The components and implemented instruments of TQM system to educational process for international students.

Although ESL instructors have to tackle a number of organizational, communication, and methodological problems, they should not neglect the opportunities coming from cross–cultural differences. If you work in culturally–mixed groups, you will always have plenty of ideas to discuss, to compare, to research and to argue about. It is likely to improve the skills of critical and analytical thinking and communication. If you work in international groups, you will have to get away from continuous reading and regular use of text books. The students have got used to accept the information provided by their teachers without judging it, so, use it as a hint and let your students obtain their personal experience through visualization, gamification, discovering and observing things with their own eyes. Cross–cultural differences also hide a great potential of out–of–

the classroom activities: cultural tours and decades, multicultural seminars, presentations and other sessions, etc.

It should be admitted that due to regular problems in teaching English to international students few teachers are able to spot and utilize the potential of these lessons. As such, the implementation of student-centered working procedures and the application of effective management are needed to optimize the educational process in international or culturally-mixed groups. This integration would help to eliminate the existing problems through meeting students' needs, developing reasonable academic plans and assessment criteria, optimizing supportive practices and, finally, increasing students' academic performance.

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