**INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND TEACHING LANGUAGES**

*Уайтсайд Р.*

My mother-tongue is English, having been born and raised in rural Canada. At present my teaching sphere is in assisting Russian-speaking students to become more proficient in English as a Second Language (ESL). It has been a very rewarding opportunity to see several students gradually become more polished in their individual communication and comprehension abilities.

An initial transition for me was to immerse myself in the cultural and social elements of my eager students. The need for this was quickly apparent and imperative for an accurate understanding of my Russian-speaking students. My previous background in education circles had prepared me for such an undertaking, and has assisted me in becoming adept in taking appropriate actions.

It became quite clear, from the outset that most Belarusian students learning English have been taught by a Russian-speaking native. In all probability this teacher was also trained by a native Russian-speaking teacher. This cycle from the past has often led to a repetition of innocent errors, unknowingly perpetuated by each succeeding generation of teachers and students. One common example of such an error is the misplacing of stress and accents in English word pronunciation. Syllable divisions may be similar in both languages, but stress and accent seldom share a common syntax position.

Another interesting observation has been the ability of some students to speak English without a Russian accent. This requires a very concerted effort and much practice. Perhaps there is a correlation between one’s initial learning environment (be it home, school, district, region, etc.) and their ability to sound like an English native. Many of these examples no doubt deal with the mechanics of language, and the necessary skills learned and developed thereby enabling one to speak as a native.

A major cultural hurdle in learning English is the ability to transform one’s thinking into that of a native. For example, humor in dissimilar cultures is often quite different. A joke, funny story or anecdote in English usually makes no sense to a Russian-speaking native. And the opposite is true for an American or Canadian experiencing Russian humor for the first time. The same holds true for idioms and figures of speech. There are obvious differences in the cultural backgrounds of each language group which requires time and diligence to appreciate and to respond appropriately to such cross-cultural differences.

One final example of such a difference is in the volume and tone of the spoken word by many Belarusian natives. To the casual observer, most Belarusians, regardless of gender, speak with what appears to be a very strong, harsh and demanding tone. This is especially noticeable when observing telephone conversations. Native English speakers tend to be much quieter in such circumstances. The intense volume and voice pitch in such conversations is quite unnatural to many foreigners and takes some time to understand. English teachers therefore have an extra responsibility to correct this overpowering demonstration, for this tendency is often carried over into the new language.

These are weighty issues to navigate as we improve our mutual understandings and commitment to non-native English language development. One immediate remedy for these conditions would be to recruit/engage the services of a full-time native English educator or speaker. Such a person should be invited to join the faculty of English Linguistics to serve either in a full-time or part-time position. It is imperative that these issues be addressed speedily and judiciously so as to correct the present teaching conditions and techniques with a view to a brighter English-speaking future for Belarusian youth.