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**Communicative Strategies for Conflict Resolution**

**in a University EFL Classroom**

This article focuses on typical behavior in conflict situations in the university EFL classroom and on the actions that a teacher can undertake to prevent and resolve a conflict effectively. It presents a checklist of such actions, which can be used for reflection or peer assessment purposes, and discusses the ways of evaluating the effectiveness of teachers' behavior in conflict situations. Finally, it describes the procedure and examines the results of a pilot study conducted with the aim of evaluating the usefulness of the case method in teaching conflict resolution to future language teachers.

*Key words:* conflict resolution, effective teacher behavior, case method, teacher education.

***Introduction***

A conflict is a type of social interaction which is widespread in many spheres, including education. According to A. Petrovsky and M. Yaroshevsky, a conflict is ‘the collision of oppositely directed, incompatible tendencies or of a single episode in conscience, interpersonal interactions or interpersonal relationships of individuals or groups of people, which is usually associated with negative emotional experiences’ [Petrovsky, Yaroshevsky, 1985: 153]. The American Psychological Association defines conflict as ‘the occurrence of mutually antagonistic or opposing forces, including events, behaviors, desires, attitudes, and emotions’ [American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology; URL: https://dictionary.apa.org/conflict]. Both Russian and international researchers highlight the semantics of ‘opposition’ and ‘confrontation’.

Our research focused on gathering information on reasons for conflicts, ways of behavior in a conflict situation and the possible resolution strategies in the university EFL classroom through the analysis of the existing works and conducting interviews with teachers and students. We also considered the necessity of educating future teachers in the field of conflict resolution.

***Literature review***

Having studied the works of the Russian and international authors, we have outlined the following most common reasons for conflict in a university EFL classroom: inadequate evaluation and self-evaluation; poor discipline; indelicacy; failed mutual expectations; teacher’s insufficient professional competence; lack of precise rules and regulations; personality traits and inner problems (Kozyrev, 2001; Sheynov, 2014; Smith, 2006).

Among the most advisable conflict prevention measures researchers enumerate the teacher’s friendly attitude, his/her delicacy, precision of instructions, aims and expectations, reinforcement of students’ unity, control of emotions, smiling, taking interest in students’ personalities, using roleplay in class and being consistent (Buskist, 2001; Meyers, 2003; Nikolic, 2000; Richmond, 2001).

However, it is not always possible to prevent a conflict from occurring. In such a case, according to the Thomas-Kilmann Model (Thomas, Kilmann, 1974), conflicting parties are likely to encounter one of the following models of behavior of their opponent (or a combination of several of them):

1) competing (the person pursues his/her own interests, demonstrates power and assertiveness and does not care about the opponent’s interests or feelings);

2) collaborating (the person tries to find a solution which can satisfy both him/her and the opponent: he/she values the interests of both parties),

3) compromising (the person also tries to find a mutually beneficial solution but he/she cares less about the interests of both parties and agrees to sacrifice),

4) avoiding (the person shows little concern about the interests of any of the parties and is not willing to contribute to conflict resolution),

5) accommodating (the person values the interests of the opponent more than his/her own and hence is likely to give in) (Thomas, Kilmann, 1974).

Similar behavior models can be found in the works of other researchers. Overall, it can be concluded that generally models of behavior in conflict can be represented by two oppositions: activeness – passiveness (with activeness meaning willingness to solve a conflict and passiveness meaning indifference to its outcome) and hostility – cooperation (with hostility meaning demonstration of authoritarianism or aggression towards the opponent and cooperation implying benevolence and tolerance). It is worth mentioning that these oppositions can be applied to different types of interpersonal conflicts, including educational conflicts. It seems reasonable to get future teachers acquainted with at least a minimal number of models of behavior in order to get them more aware of their own actions and more ready to interpret and predict students’ actions.

It is impossible to single out one strategy as the most effective one for three reasons: firstly, all active strategies aimed at cooperation are likely to be more effective than passive ones aimed at hostility; secondly, there is no unique strategy which is bound to work in all conflict situations; thirdly, there has not been created a single instrument of measuring the effectiveness of a teacher’s behavior in a conflict situation.

The latter leads us to the following question: how can we assess whether the teacher undertook the right steps to solve a conflict or not? We assume that today there are three major ways to assess the effectiveness of a teacher’s behavior: self-assessment (reflection), peer assessment and student assessment. All three ways have their advantages and disadvantages; therefore, it would be advisable to use a combination of all of them to make the assessment more objective.

Even though there is no single instrument of assessment, some researchers provide the possible indicators of a conflict’s constructive solution. For example, the ones suggested by I. Kuznetsov, can be used as a basis for the assessment of teachers’ effectiveness in conflict situations:

1) elimination of objective and subjective reasons;

2) harmonization of communication based on positional convergence of the parties;

3) increase in the effectiveness of interaction through an increase in positive motivation (Kuznetsov, 2008).

These indicators can help assess the effectiveness of behavior through the outcome of the conflict. For more convenient use in assessment they can be rewritten as questions:

1) Have objective and subjective reasons for conflict been eliminated?

2) What emotional background have we achieved? Has harmony been restored in our communication?

3) Has the student’s motivation been increased/sustained?

Questions for reflection proposed by Rudolf and Katleen Verderber can also serve as pillars for assessment: What went wrong? Whose assessment can be biased? Have I used the wrong conflict resolution strategy? Have I made sure he/she understands my point? Were we too interested in the desired outcome? (Verderber, 2003)

However, these indicators and questions can only help to reflect post-factum. This is why we decided to create a check-list for teachers which can be used in the course of conflict resolution.

On the basis of the analysis of different conflict resolution strategies (particularly those discussed by W. Busksist (2001), D. Crowford (1996), G. Kozyrev (2001), S. Meyers (2003), V. Sheynov (2014), H. Smith (2006), R. Verdeber (2003) and S. Yemelyanov (2009)), at this point of our research it is possible to provide the following check-list of teacher’s behavior in conflict:

- Do not ignore the conflict;

- Do not criticise the student’s opinion;

- Do not finish the student’s sentences;

- Do not lose control of emotions;

- Do not use your authority to put pressure on the student;

- Do concentrate on the opponent;

- Do show willingness to cooperate;

- Do formulate your point of view in a clear and reasoned way;

- Do postpone the talk until after the lesson;

- Do make sure you understand the student’s point of view;

- Do show empathy;

- Do use non-verbal communication means;

- Do let students ‘cool down’ and express their discontent in writing.

It should be noted that despite the apparent simplicity of these conflict resolution strategies, many of them require the development of a special skill, and, as a result, a teacher might be unable to implement them without special training. In addition, an unprepared teacher might read students’ intentions incorrectly or get confused and puzzled and unintentionally aggravate the conflict.

***Research methods***

Consequently, it seems reasonable and useful to educate future teachers in the field of classroom conflict resolution. Five teachers who have encountered conflicts in their teaching practice and who have been interviewed in the course of the research also unanimously confirm the usefulness of teaching a relevant module to future teachers.

It is assumed that the module will consist of blocks of theory with mandatory practical tasks after each of them. The practical tasks are supposed to help students put their knowledge into practice and develop certain skills. We believe that the case method can serve as a basis for practical tasks.

In the New Dictionary of Methodological Terms, Azimov and Schukin define case study as ‘a method of situational learning, based on reality and real problems, requiring a student to make an expedient decision in the proposed situation’ [Azimov, Schukin, 2009: 93]. Y. Surmin suggests the existence of several types of cases depending on the type of need embedded in him: the case ‘Choice’, the case ‘Crisis’ and the case ‘Conflict’. Surmin sees the purpose of the case ‘Conflict’ in ‘developing students' skills of behaving in a conflict situation, as well as the ability to make decisions, including decisions on how to prevent or overcome conflicts’ [Surmin, 2002: 36].

K. Harling and J. Akridge introduce the following typology of cases:

* Anecdotes (such cases illustrate how complicated facts can be displayed in a simpler form and present a solution which has been proposed earlier);
* Technical problem solving cases (the solution of cases of this type is based on a specific tool or model that a student needs to apply. Attention is paid to transforming complex ideas into simpler ones rather than to evaluating actions);
* Short structured cases (the student knows what type of response is expected from him/her but he/she does not have instructions regarding its achievement. Such cases usually take from 1 to 10 pages and have 1-2 applications);
* Long structured cases (cases of this type occupy from 10 to 50 pages and contain a large number of details but do not include resolution instructions);
* Groundbreaking cases (these are the cases which open up new areas for study; additional research might be required to solve them) (Harling, Akridge, 1998).

Depending on the goals, different types of cases can be used for teaching pedagogical conflictology. Short cases or anecdotes will probably be the most suitable options for the module under discussion, since firstly, they can cover and reflect much relevant information, and secondly, future teachers need to learn how to structure information and extract the main meaning from long descriptions. Owing to their volume, such cases are convenient to solve and discuss during the lesson, working in a group or in pairs; they can also be put to self-study as homework or included as an element of control during or after the course.

On the basis of the descriptions of real conflict situations gathered during the interviews, several cases have been created. One of them has been approbated during a part of the lesson with 3rd year students of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies of Moscow State University.

***Discussion***

At the beginning students were asked to brainstorm ways of resolving conflicts that were known to them. This task caused difficulties which can be explained either by lack of knowledge or by students’ hesitance to participate in a research project. Then students were shown and asked to write down the checklist presented above and divided into two groups (4 students and 5 students). Group 1 was asked to do further reading about strategies of behavior in a conflict situation while students in group 2 were supposed to solve a case. The discussions of the reading and the case were also held in mini groups, so that students from different groups were not familiar with the information known to students from the other group. Finally, students from both groups were asked to roleplay a conflict situation and reflect on their readiness to do so.

The case itself was formulated the following way: ‘the teacher has asked the class to answer in turns. One 20-year-old student cannot answer a single question. When the teacher asks him/her again, the student raises his/her voice to say ‘you shouldn’t be asking me this often’ and gets personal. The teacher answers: ‘Do not interrupt our work. Leave or I will leave’. Is that a good strategy and what could have been done instead?’

The case has no ‘right answer’ but the most desired answer was letting the student sit back for a while and asking him/her to raise a hand whenever he/she is ready to continue participating in the lesson. Since the main purpose of the pilot study was to evaluate the effectiveness of solving a case as of a teaching method, it is necessary to analyze the students' actions during the roleplay and their personal opinions on how useful the tasks given to them were in the preparation for the roleplay.

The participants of the roleplay were determined at random (all members of both groups pulled out pieces of paper, two of which were marked as ‘student’ and ‘teacher’). The ‘student’ was given a guideline: ‘I don’t want to fulfill the teacher’s task because I don’t have time for that’. In order to minimize the impact of worry and due to the lack of clear criteria for evaluating the teacher’s behavior in a conflict situation, the actions of students participating in the roleplay were evaluated post-factum (without notifying students of the results).

The participant from group 1 reached the resolution of the conflict in an authoritarian way (by pointing out that the teacher should be listened to and not leaving the student an alternative); non-verbal reactions of the ‘student’ and his/her tone expressed dissatisfaction with the conflict resolution. The participant from group 2 tried to reach a compromise with the ‘student’ and generally showed more friendliness and interest in resolving the conflict situation; the ‘student’ expressed his/her satisfaction with the proposed solution. In this regard, it can be concluded that the behavior of participant 2 in a conflict situation was more effective.

As for the participants’ reflection, the participant from group 1 expressed the opinion that the list of actions that should or should not be taken in a conflict situation was useful, however ‘there was not much opportunity to penetrate into them and remember them’. The reading task seemed boring and non-practicable. The participant suggested leaving it for homework.

The participant from group 2 was pleased with the way he/she performed. He/she also noted the usefulness of the checklist and expressed the idea that "solving the case turned me on, I started to think from the position of a teacher, it was great."

***Conclusions***

Based on the opinions of the participants of the pilot study, it can be concluded that solving the pedagogical problem did turn out to be an effective method of preparing for resolving conflict situations, since it can give students the opportunity to feel themselves in the teacher’s position and not act according to a template. In addition, the content of the case itself introduced the future teachers to what they might encounter in their teaching practice.

In general, the pilot study can be considered successful. Nevertheless, it had a number of limitations. First, the sample was not sufficient to make a conclusion about the effectiveness of this case. Secondly, the success of the students in resolving conflicts during the roleplay could have been influenced by their previous experience, character, emotional and psychological characteristics and mood. Thirdly, the case study method as a method of teaching pedagogical conflictology in this case was compared with the method of additional reading, which means that the result was obtained indirectly, through comparison.

Overall, it can be concluded that conflicts are not a rare case in the field of education. However, despite much research into this issue, many teachers might still struggle with resolving conflicts due to the lack of both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Hence, it seems reasonable to teach pedagogical coflictology to future teachers, and the case study method has been proved to be an effective source of practical tasks.

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