

The Problem of Teaching Students to Reveal and Understand Non-verbal Signals in the Works of English Literature

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Paper received 27.04.17; Accepted for publication 05.05.17.

Abstract. The article deals with the problem of teaching 3rd year students majoring in English to reveal and understand non-verbal signals in the works of English literature. It is outlined that the importance of forming intercultural competence which helps to establish and maintain the “dialogue of cultures” depends on the usage in the communicative process of both verbal messages and non-verbal signals (cues). The latter are believed to bear even more information than verbal messages. The article is aimed at generalizing methodic approaches to teaching students to comprehend non-verbal signals in English fiction and to specify the difficulties of such teaching connected with the particularities of the process of understanding in general and the process of understanding of fiction in particular, non-verbal signals (cues) as the object of understanding and the characteristics of the 3rd year students majoring in English as the subject of understanding. The author generalizes the main features of the process of understanding, characterizing it as multi-layered and multi-dimensional. The process of decoding the meaning of a non-verbal signal (cue) represented in the text by means of a nomination becomes even more complex. A reader has to consider first the double form of a non-verbal cue (its nomination and the very form of the sign) and then the information it implies. The article proves that it is necessary to develop the ability to identify a non-verbal cue in an excerpt of text it is investigated within and to link it with the rest of the events of the whole text, the ability to deduce the implicit information represented by a non-verbal cue (to match the existing background knowledge concerning a non-verbal signal with all its possible meanings in context and to compare the meaning of a non-verbal signal with the context). The author suggests the idea of using frames while teaching students to understand non-verbal signals in texts. The model of the notion of a non-verbal cue is visualized in the article identifying the spheres a non-verbal sign can be associated with. The problem of acquiring background knowledge is touched upon in the work. The types of background knowledge necessary for grasping the meaning of non-verbal signals are singled out, among which psychological knowledge, historical and cultural knowledge and biographical knowledge of the author. The article also overviews the influence of fragmentary “clip thinking” on students’ real ability to read the text in detail, to elicit the main thoughts of the text, to meditate on its ideas and topics, to comprehend it, to evaluate and later use the information received.

Keywords: *understanding, non-verbal signal (cue), text of fiction, clip thinking, background knowledge*

At present Ukraine actively participates in all the global processes. Thus the problem of raising language learners’ intercultural competence, which presupposes getting knowledge, facilitating skills and abilities to communicate effectively and appropriately with the representatives of other cultures appears to be up-to-date.

The aim of learning foreign languages is specified as a possibility to succeed in the so-called “dialogue of cultures”, i.e. to turn “the language barrier into a source of mutual enrichment of cultures”. Establishing of the “dialogue of cultures” generally aims at facilitating the processes of cultural interaction, which cannot take place without acquiring certain types of knowledge, which include the knowledge of the source culture, the knowledge of the target culture and the ability to use the language of both.

It is important to mention that the effectiveness of intercultural competence or the “dialogue of cultures” depends not only on the usage (transmitting and interpreting) of verbal messages by the members of communication process, but also on their ability to comprehend the implicit messages suggested by non-verbal signals (cues).

Non-verbal signals (cues) are commonly defined as meaningful perceptual information communicated in a social exchange with the help of signs – gestures, mimicry, pantomimics, personal space, voice variations and also such static situational details as clothes, hairstyle, accessories, jewelry, tattoos, etc. The whole amount of non-verbal signals (cues), which imply physical states of a person, his/her attitude to a partner or the communication process in general comprise the non-verbal behavior of a person.

Non-verbal signals are an inseparable part of the com-

municative process and the information they convey can sometimes be more important / valuable than the verbal messages they accompany [4].

Given this fact, the problem of teaching students to comprehend non-verbal signals (cues) in all types of verbal activities and in reading the works of English literature in particular becomes really acute.

Thus, **the aim of this article** is to generalizing methodic approaches to teaching students to comprehend non-verbal signals in English fiction and to specify the difficulties of such teaching connected with the particularities of a) non-verbal signals (cues) as the object of understanding; 2) the process of understanding in general and the process of understanding of fiction in particular and 3) the characteristics of the 3rd –year students majoring in English as the subject of understanding.

Lots of methodologists nowadays agree that the aim of teaching reading is not the ability to vocalize the text in a foreign language but actually to elicit the main thoughts of the text, to meditate on its ideas and topics, to comprehend it and to evaluate and later use the information from it [2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 14].

The scholars define understanding differently: 1) as a positive outcome of the process of meaning-making in a verbal act which comes as a sequence of decisions or an on-the spot insight decision [6, p. 5–6]; 2) a psychic act of thinking - inductive reasoning aptitude, analysis of different phenomena in related to the context qualities and the ability to combine the constituent elements of separate material or abstract entities into a single entity (synthesis) [12, p. 118]; 3) the cognitive process of grasping the meaning and understanding the context [1, p. 203]. Many scholars [2, p. 17; 9, p. 126] equal the process of under-

standing with the acquiring by a receiver the information s/he is trying to understand. Thus, as the result of understanding this newly acquired knowledge adds to the whole complex of knowledge a person has already received, which starts influencing his/her further activity.

A. A. Brudny [2, p. 14] suggests that understanding is the individual realization of cognitive abilities of a person. The capacity to grasp the meaning is the basis of human consciousness. One should take into account that the results of understanding process can be different depending on the reality a person decodes in the process of grasping the main idea. According to A. A. Brudny [2, p. 17], the positive outcome of the understanding process is when a person acquires certain new knowledge which reflects the essence of things under consideration and combines this new knowledge with that already existing.

A. A. Zalevskaya [7, p. 253] believes that while investigating the process of understanding one should take into account the particularities of 1) the object of understanding; 2) the subject of understanding and 3) the very process of understanding of a verbal message.

It is thus important to comment on the specific features of a non-verbal signal as the object of understanding.

The scholars generally agree that non-verbal signals are always meaningful as they suggest more than the movements they are expressed by. By their nature they are the messages which should be decoded and interpreted [6, p. 37]. Deciphering the message of a non-verbal signal starts with the understanding of its denotation with the further understanding of what it implies (connotation).

The process of decoding of the form and the meaning of a non-verbal signal becomes even more difficult in the text as there it is introduced with the help of its verbal code (certain nominations). This way a nomination of a non-verbal signal (cue) becomes an additional form, which encodes the form-context of a particular non-verbal signal in the text. Picture 1 shows the model of a non-verbal cue verbalized in the text.

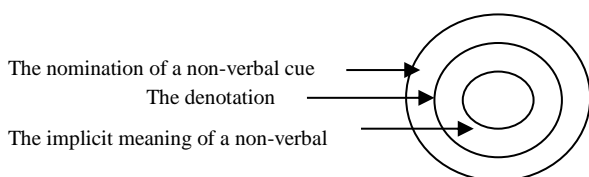


Fig. 1. The model of a non-verbal cue verbalized in a text

As we see, a nomination stands for “signaling the first stimulus accompanying a meaningful situation” [4, p. 84]. So, perceiving of a verbal sign (cue) which nominates a non-verbal signal in a text is the first step to the whole understanding of the meaningful information encoded in it.

Given the above mentioned, in the process of forming linguosociocultural competence teachers should take into consideration the interrelations of their double form (nomination + denotation) and content (the meaning). of non-verbal signals.

Analyzing the process of understanding of a text message in general, it is important to characterize it as multi-layered and multi-dimensional [3, p. 61; 6, p. 8; 11, p. 312–314; 15, p. 7-13]. The problem of multilayer perception was first described by N. N. Lange [6, p. 8], who claims that the process of perceiving and understanding

the information undergoes several stages.

A. R. Luria [11, p. 373–374] writes about two layers of perceiving of a text message: 1) the process of decoding of verbal signs received by a reader and 2) the process of understanding the deep meanings suggested by the messages of the first layer.

According to J. Ch. Alderson [15, p. 7–13] there exists 1) the layer of literal understanding of the text and 2) the layer of understanding the meaning / the main implications of a text.

Regarding the above-mentioned characteristics of non-verbal signals, the stages of understanding them in fiction were singled out. The first stage presupposes identification of a non-verbal signal (cue) as a nomination in the text according to its certain features. These can be the nominations of non-verbal cues, which comprise the names of parts of the body, movements, type or quality of clothes, personal names and the syntactic particularities of non-verbal cues (e.x. when the writer uses them after the direct speech of characters in dialogues or describes the characters’ appearances).

The next stage is when a reader works with the meaning of the lexeme being ruled by such psychological mechanisms as: 1) apperception (“the process by which new experience is assimilated to and transformed by the residuum of past experience of an individual to form a new whole”); 2) equivalent replacements (simplifications) and 3) predictions based upon previous experience [7, p. 223–225].

While teaching understanding non-verbal cues in fiction it is also important to form students’ skills in finding 1) usual meanings of non-verbal cues (to teach them grasp all the possible meanings a non-verbal cue bears or is associated with regardless of the context it is used in) and 2) occasional meanings of non-verbal cues (to teach students to correlate the meanings of the non-verbal cue under analysis with the meanings of other language units which surround them, to find the connections between them and as the result to reveal the meaning of the non-verbal cue in context).

Thus the problem of teaching revealing and understanding non-verbal cues in texts of literature is closely connected with 1) students’ possessing certain background knowledge which correlates with that of an author and 2) the ability to perceive a non-verbal cue in context.

While reading a person correlates the information suggested by the author of the work with his/her own information base. Consequently, understanding comes if activating his/her knowledge a reader, can reveal the implicit meaning of the word and as the result the motive of the writer.

The existing knowledge of a person is considered to be stored in memory as a system and has a certain structure. A person, interacting with the outside world, actively interprets the consequences of such interaction. According to the principles of cognitive science, person’s experience is structured with the help of different mental representations that make up an extensive conceptual system, the elements of which are connected by certain interrelations. This system is the result of conceptual idealization of person’s experience.

In the process of perceiving of any message a reader is thought to activate some knowledge schemes s/he relies

on to understand and respond to events concerning the world around, which are usually defined as frames, scripts or cognitive maps. People build the so-called “mental filters” through biological and cultural influences and use these filters to make sense of the world.

According to Teun A. van Dijk [5, p. 16 – 17], frames are knowledge units organized around a certain concept, which unlike a set of associations contain the essential, the typical and the possible information associated with such a concept. He claims that frames seem to have a more or less conventional nature, and thus should specify what in a certain culture is characteristic or typical.

Being innovative in the field of pedagogics, the usage of frames can definitely help intensify the learning process. In the research we believe it to be acutely important to imply “frame technologies” which teaching reading and understanding texts. Thus, the ability to actualize the whole system of background knowledge about a particu-

lar non-verbal cue will enhance the chances to teach students interpret correctly the implicit meanings a non-verbal cue can bear or the particularities of its usage by the author. As the result the reader will at least recollect all the associations connected with a non-verbal cue, which then may become even more understandable when observed within the context.

The frame of a “non-verbal cue” is represented in Pic. 2.

In methodology of teaching languages and cultures the problem connected with the existence of background knowledge was described in the works of L. G. Kozhedub [10], S. I. Safaryan [13], etc.). They defined “background knowledge” as the knowledge from communicants’ cognitive system that is activated in the process of socialising and is necessary for understanding. In terms of methodology background knowledge is often associated with the informational and cultural knowledge.

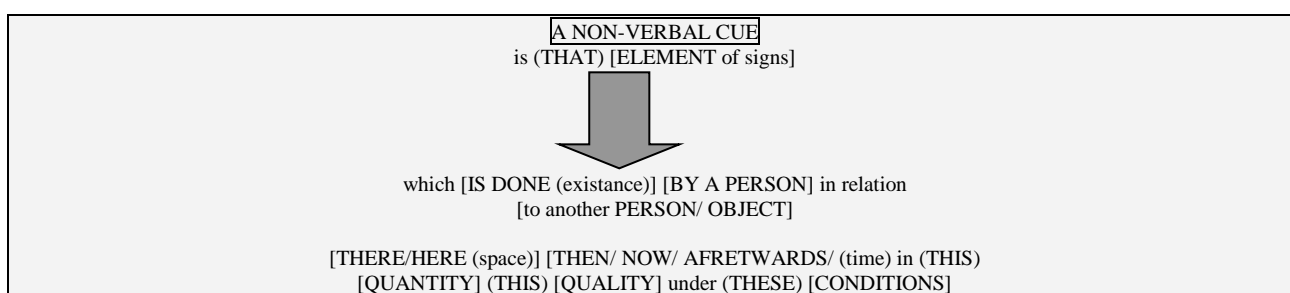


Fig. 2. The model of the notion of a “non-verbal cue”

Background knowledge is known to be non-static. In the process of a person’s life it is constantly changing both in its content and its functions. Its perceiving depends of a person’s age, individual and general psychological features of recipients [13, p. 11].

In accordance with the general particularities of a non-verbal cue as a sign, we have developed the following classification of background knowledge the students can refer to in attempts to grasp the meaning of the non-verbal cue:

1. Psychological knowledge (1. The knowledge of interpersonal relations and the particularities of expressing emotions. 2. The knowledge of non-verbal signals typology. 3. The knowledge of transmitting and perceiving non-verbal signals in the communicative process: a) the particularities of using kinesthetic signals; b) the particularities of using prosodic signals; c) the particularities of using procsemic signals; d) the particularities of static situational details – clothes, jewelry, hairstyle, tattoos, etc.)

2. Historical and cultural knowledge (1. The information about the historical period within which a non-verbal cue is used: a) the information about political conditions; b) the information about social conditions; c) the information about economic conditions. 2. The information about geographical places where a non-verbal cue is used. 3. The information about culture in which a non-verbal cue is observed: a) life of the depicted era; b) education; c) traditions and customs; d) ethical standards; e) religion; e) cultural phenomena)

3. Biographical knowledge of the author (1. The life of the author. 2. The outlook of the author. 3. Socio-political activity of the writer.)

The other problem mentioned above concerns teaching understanding of a non-verbal cue within a context. Some authors believe that context is the prerequisite for understanding of the text. According to T. M. Dridze [6, p. 48], “a text is the system that provides semantic units of different types of complexity and importance functionally (for specific purposes) combined within a single semantic concept of a common semantic structure (the author’s intention, the basic idea).”

Thus, the adequate understanding of a non-verbal cue necessitates considering the situation in which it is observed as this situation helps to reduce significantly the number of alternative interpretations of the meaning of a non-verbal cue in the process of its understanding [4, p. 95].

The next important factor, which influences the effectiveness of understanding of non-verbal cues in fiction is the subject of understanding. In our research the 3rd year students majoring in English are the subject of understanding.

On the one hand, it is generally recognized that studenthood is the first stage of mature age. I. A. Zimnyaya [8, p. 183] believes that in comparison with other socio-psychological groups students can be characterized by their high educational potential, the most active participation in all cultural processes and a good level of cognitive motivation.

Psychologists believe that the students who are 18-20 years old tend to actively develop the abilities to analyze, synthesize, compare, specify, systematize, generalize, etc. But despite the positive prerequisites existing at this stage of psychological development students fail to use these abilities being under the influence of fragmentary or so-

called "clip thinking".

The term "clip thinking" signifies the process of grasping a huge amount of qualities of an object or phenomenon not considering the links and interrelations between them. It is characterized by a dissimilar flow of information, illogicality, rapid speed of switching from different parts of information and, to crown it all, the absence of the homogeneous view of the world around. The most negative feature of this type of understanding is its fragmentary character, when the world around turns into a mosaic of disconnected parts.

In comparison with "clip thinking" real understanding means the reflection of a coherent image of the object or a phenomenon in a person's cognition, which stands for the highest level of understanding which, when got by students, enables them to deal with the essence of some language units (and not their definitions, which is the characteristic of fragmentary partial understanding).

Among the main reasons why the problem of "clip thinking" could occur the scholars name: 1) the fast pace of life and the increase in the speed of the information flow each person receives and has to interpret every day; 2) the ongoing need of getting the most current information as soon as possible; 3) the growth of the variety of information; 4) the increase of the quantity of things a person is busy with at a time.

It stands to reason that 3rd year students nowadays are the people, whose life is closely connected with TV, smartphones, personal computers and other Internet access devices, suffer greatly from the "clip thinking"

problem. Thus, in lots of cases the decoding of non-verbal cues in the texts of fiction which is difficult because of the specific features of the object of understanding (a non-verbal cue verbalized in the text with the help of a nomination) is made even more difficult considering the "clip thinking" problem connected with the subject of understanding (3rd year students).

Summing up, we can claim that despite the positive prerequisites for teaching students understanding of non-verbal cues, which seem to appear at this stage of their socio-psychological development, the influence of "clip thinking" restrict their real ability to delve deep into the text, to analyse it, to think about it creatively.

In order to resolve the above-mentioned problem it is necessary to further develop the following abilities / skills of the 3rd year students majoring in English:

1) the ability to identify a non-verbal cue in an excerpt of the text it is investigated within and to link it with the rest of the events of the whole text;

2) the ability to deduce the implicit information represented by a non-verbal cue: a) to match the existing background knowledge concerning a non-verbal signal with all its possible meanings outside the text (context); b) to compare the meaning of a non-verbal signal with the context.

The perspective of the research is the development of the system of exercises and assignments of teaching teaching 3rd year students majoring in English to reveal and understand non-verbal signals in the works of English literature.

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Проблема обучения пониманию невербальных средств коммуникации в произведениях английской литературы

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается проблема обучения студентов 3 курса, изучающих английский язык как специальность, идентифицировать и понимать невербальных средств коммуникации в произведениях английской художественной литературы. Отмечается, что эффективность формирования межкультурной коммуникативной компетенции, которая помогает устанавливать и поддерживать «диалог культур», зависит от использования в коммуникативном процессе как вербальных, так и невербальных средств коммуникации. Известно, что последние несут даже больше информации, чем вербальные средства коммуникации. В статье представлены общие методические подходы к обучению студентов восприятию невербальных средств коммуникации в английской художественной литературе и выявлению трудностей такого обучения, связанных 1) со спецификой процесса понимания в целом и процесса понимания художественной литературы в частности, 2) спецификой невербальных средств коммуникации как объекта понимания и 3) характеристикой студентов 3-го курса, изучающих английский язык как специальность, как субъекта понимания. Автор обобщает подходы к определению понятия «понимания» как многоуровневого и многогранного процесса. Процесс декодирования информации, которую несут невербальные средства коммуникации, представленные в тексте с помощью определённых номинации, характеризуется как еще более сложным. Читатель должен сначала изучить двойную форму невербального средства коммуникации (ее номинацию и саму форму невербального средства как знака), а уже затем проинтерпретировать информацию, которую этот невербальный знак подразумевает. В статье говорится о необходимости развивать у студентов умение идентифицировать невербальные средства коммуникации в определённом фрагменте текста, в которой они находятся, а потом связывать этот элемент с остальными событиями целого текста; умение понимать имплицитную информацию, которую подразумевает вербализированное в тексте невербальное средство коммуникации (умение сопоставить это невербальное средство со всей базой знаний, имеющейся у реципиента, умение найти всю сумму его значений вне зависимости от контекста и умение понять его в контексте параграфа и далее в контексте всего произведения). В статье представлена модель понятия «невербальное средство коммуникации». В работе затрагивается проблема формирования фоновых знаний. Выделяются типы фоновых знаний, необходимых для понимания смысла, который несут невербальные средства коммуникации, среди которых: психологические знания, исторические и культурные знания и биографические знания об авторе. В статье также анализируется влияние так называемого «клипового мышления» на реальную способность студентов детально читать текст, извлекать идею произведения, понимать его, оценивать и использовать полученную информацию в дальнейшем.

Ключевые слова: понимание, невербальное средство коммуникации, художественный текст, клиповое мышление, фоновые знания.