Cross-Cultural Communications

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This column will deal with cross-cultural issues. Topics covered will include teaching culture through language, cross-cultural communication in business environment and cross-cultural communication in academic settings. Any suggestions are welcomed. Please contact Elena Denisova-Schmidt (elena.denisova-schmidt@unisg.ch)

Many westerners are often confused by different gender roles in Russia. This paper will explain them and give some recommendations on how to work on these differences in the classroom.

Professional identity and gender identity are closely connected with one another in Russia. One's competence is usually judged at first by his or her gendered appearance and behavior. Female appearances include, but are not limited to make-up, perfume, manicured fingernails, hairstyle, figure-hugging dresses, sometimes décolleté, high heels, jewelry, and furry coat in the winter. Female behaviors include, but are not limited to, a melodious voice, delicate gesture and mimicry, light step and dainty bearing. Moreover, Russians tend to 'flirt' at the workplace. Men make way for women, help them to put on their coats, and make compliments. This Russian 'flirt' is very close to the western 'small-talk', so many western visitors are very confused with Russian 'flirting' and judge it incorrectly. Russians certainly flirt, too. Unfortunately Russians do not say something like 'Now it is not small-talk anymore. I flirt with you'; they just do it and feel it, when and how to switch from 'flirt/small-talk' to 'flirt/flirt'.

One of the textbooks I use in my classroom *is Ruslan Russian 1: A Communicative Russian Beginners Course for Adults and Teenagers*. John Langran and Natalya Veshnyeva. Ruslan Ltd (Birmingham, UK), 2001. 3rd edition. With CD-ROM, cassette, and audio CD. One storyline in this textbook involves communication between a Russian lady (Ludmila) and her three admires. One of them (Peter) is a British guy who makes many cross-cultural 'mistakes'. Below are instructions for Peter on how to attract a Russian woman. Each of these areas can serve as the basis for class assignments.

1. *Call a woman by her 'real' name*

Please be aware of the use of Russian first names. Calling a Russian woman by her full first name (e.g. Ludmila) seems to be very formal and distant. This is appropriate for official communication or for women over the age of 50. In social situations the most common form of address is to call a woman by her short first name (e.g. Luda). Unfortunately Russians do not introduce themselves by saying 'My name is Ludmila Kisina. Please call me Luda'; they just feel it, when and how to switch from Ludmila to Luda.

Additionally, Russians use a lot of familiar variants of their first names (e.g. Ludočka) for many purposes, such as for creating a positive atmosphere within a team, for rebuking someone, for asking somebody to do something, and certainly for flirting.

2. *Make more compliments*

Do not be stingy with your compliments. Your compliments should range from 'neutral' to more 'pressing':

'Neutral' compliments:

У Вас такое красивое имя!	You have such a wonderful name!
Вы сегодня хорошо выглядите!	You look very nice today!
У Вас новая причёска!	You have a new hair cut!
новый костюм!	a new suit!
новое пальто!	a new coat!
новые серьги!	new ear-rings!

'Pressing' compliment:

Она [юбка] короткая, но это Вам очень идёт!
It [the skirt] is short, but it suits you very well!

Be aware that Russians tend (consciously and subconsciously) to use compliments with a double meaning. If a man says to a woman something like: «У Вас очень грустные глаза. Я могу Вам чем-нибудь помочь?» (English: ,You have very sad eyes. Could I help you?') it could be a) really just a careful question about her well-being or b) a coded invitation for starting an affair. In the last case the woman has to choose to 're-code' the message or not.

3. *Make more gifts*

Do not be stingy with your gifts, either. In choosing a present, Russians (of all social strata!) emphasize price, prestige and luxury. A present in Russia is more just a gesture. By selecting flowers, remember 1) yellow is the color of separation 2) an even number of flowers is only given at a funeral.

4. *Invite for a dinner*

Take a chance and invite her to dinner! It is rather uncommon for a Russian woman to take the initiative and ask the man out. On the date, it is important for a man to be in time, but less important for a woman. In general, dating rituals are the same as in other western countries (dinner and a movie). Be aware, however, that Russian women are not 'liberated' in the feminist sense; they expect a man to pay for everything!

5. *Russian superstitions*

Young and old, well educated and less educated, male and female Russians are very superstitious. This could influence their behavior in professional and social situations. One very common superstition is not to talk about plans for the future (English equivalent: Do not count your chickens before they are hatched). So for example, a young Russian lady may not introduce her own boyfriend to her friends so as 'not to put the evil eye' on him and their relationship.