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Interculturality in ESP Classrooms: A Contributing Strategy to Meet the Job-Market Expectations

Fatma ZAGHAR

University of Oran 2 – Mohamed Ben Ahmed –
Faculty of Foreign Languages
Department of English
Oran, Algeria

Abstract

In the present time's globalized atmosphere, the need for intercultural communicative competence in the workplace runs high. Accordingly, in the area of foreign language education, English teachers need more than ever to incorporate intercultural awareness and cross-cultural understanding in their syllabi. This article reports on a case study that involves the use of many research instruments including questionnaires, classroom observation, and assessment of assignments and exam sheets. This paper tends to suggest a cultural teaching based on standards for intercultural learning elicited from related literature in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) setting, addressed to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Master students approaching the end of their course of study and getting ready to enter the world of job-market. It proposes ways of instilling multicultural awareness into these language learners through the implementation of intercultural activities, helping them better understanding diversity and developing positive attitudes in the workplace. The research goals comprise increasing students' intercultural global awareness, promoting their tolerance, and helping them remedy negative attitudes towards the target culture and other alien cultures. Findings of the study show that the proposed intercultural approach stimulates students' thinking, helps them better comprehend how to immerse in diverse perspectives on complicated international issues, and how to become global citizens able to deal effectively with multiculturalism in the work environment.

Keywords: ESP teaching, intercultural communicative competence, master students, multiculturalism, workplace

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Introduction

Today, universities all over the world are characterized by a variety of competing internal and external agendas. Teaching programmes are being broadened and updated in response to imperatives as globalization and economic growth. In this climate of international exchanges, academic relationships and fast travel, it is impossible to function in isolation but through interaction with each other for survival. The success of all these organizations and the people involved in these areas depends on effective cross-cultural communication.

As far as foreign language instruction is concerned, the principles of intercultural language education are strongly implemented in the Common European Framework of Reference of Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (Council of Europe, 2001). The aims are recapitulated as follows:

In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language learning to promote the favourable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture (p. 1).

For a long time, teachers have been focusing on strategies that may help students to have an immaculate command of English and a 'native-like' accent, but for many learners, this is a distant goal. In an immensely multicultural world, where English is used as a lingua franca, it appears sensible to accept that it is more necessary for a language learner to be able to genuinely communicate with and understand people in a range of various contexts, than to mimic native speakers.

For this purpose, decision makers in the field of education throughout the world stress the need for integrating intercultural teaching in the curricula. This need appears clearly in Rozbicki's (2015) statement:

This is why educational systems are increasingly recognizing the fact that exposing students only to their own kind does not encourage a deeper acceptance of cultural diversity, and are introducing appropriate changes (p. 19).

Theoretical Standpoints

Due to its eminence, the conception of intercultural competence has been elucidated by a lot of scholars, but a valuable definition is well echoed in Fantini's (1997) words:

A concern with cross-cultural effectiveness and appropriateness – coupled with second or foreign language development – will, I hope, lead beyond tolerance and understanding to a genuine appreciation of others. For this to happen, we need to develop the awareness, attitudes, skills, and knowledge that will make us better participants on a local and global level, able to understand and empathize with others in new ways. Exposure to more than one language, culture, and world view, in a positive context, offers such a promise (p. 13).

Distinctly, intercultural exploration helps the learners better discover their own culture and the cultures of the others. Through intercultural activities, students can have deeper insights into

their home culture's practices, beliefs and behaviours and can therefore explain them to individuals whose values and practices run counter to theirs. In ESP teaching contexts, where the topics dealt with include learning a variety of skills such as giving a business presentation, making deals, attending worldwide conferences, reading scientific papers, chairing international meetings, and so on, issues may and do arise. This is why ESP teachers are urged to promote clear lines of constructive communication to minimize the risks of misunderstandings and breakdowns, and to facilitate the building of tolerance and respect among their learners.

In a practical and sensible way, this signifies that they have to teach their students how to manage their behaviour since it is the apparent manifestation of a whole system of beliefs and feelings that needs to be comprehended in order to refine one's cultural awareness and manage intercultural worries. In our increasingly interconnected planet, where technology provides a global platform where individuals explore ideas and cultures without restriction, experts in the area of interculturality are claiming that language learners' horizons have to be widened through a sound intercultural instruction because: "people may share a current nationality, place of birth, a language, a religion, a profession or a neighbourhood and still be very different from one another" (Holmes & Dervin, 2016, p. 8).

These interculturalists do insist that it is the job of the teachers to find out and explore the problems surrounding similarities and differences between human beings: "people might share similar values, opinions, interests and so forth across borders; for their part, researchers must investigate these elements" (Holmes & Dervin, 2016, p. 9). These teachers are also required to heighten the learners' awareness of how to develop positive attitudes and manage one's own behaviour in order to achieve a better understanding and control over behaviour (Armstrong & Frith, 1984; Koziol & Burns, 1985).

The suggested intercultural approach in this study tries to incorporate some intercultural activities in an ESP environment to help the students fulfil three elemental aims: cognitive, affective and behavioural, and would therefore allow them to springboard into the job market. These three basic goals are recapitulated by Bennett (1986):

- Cognitive, which means, adding to the learner's stock of knowledge and skills.
- Affective, which implies, changing the trainee's attitude by developing openness, tolerance, acceptance and awareness.
- Behavioural, in which the trainee learns and grasps better the 'dos and don'ts' of the new environment.

Although leading authorities continue exhorting teachers to bring interculturality into EFL classrooms, there is still an inadequate attention that is paid to intercultural content in ESP courses. In this respect, Omaggio (2001) explains the absence of culture in ESP settings by presenting three fundamental imperatives. According to her, many teachers have an overcrowded curriculum to be covered and thus lack the time to deal with cultural issues. She expounds her views on this subject by stating that other teachers do not have a mastery of the target language and therefore, they feel almost reluctant to approach it. Lastly, she continues asserting that some instructors are thrown into total confusion about what cultural facets to include in their ESP lessons.

This research attempts to help the learners better perform academic and occupational requirements through the inclusion of an intercultural teaching in ESP classes where meaning has to be given sense and dissimilarities have to be negotiated. Accordingly, Ouakrime (1992) points out some major objectives of including culture in ESP programmes among which we can sum up the following:

- To understand the forms of organizations, concepts, customary beliefs and patterns of behaviour of members of the target culture community.
- To understand individual and institutional aspects of the culture.
- To acquire enough knowledge and understanding of the target culture with the purpose of developing a tolerant attitude towards its community.

Defending this view and highlighting the role of attitudes as cultural beliefs in the work environment, and how they can affect people's behaviours and decisions, Robbins and Judge (2007) suggested the example of an employee who might be dissatisfied with his job, and then decides to quit it.

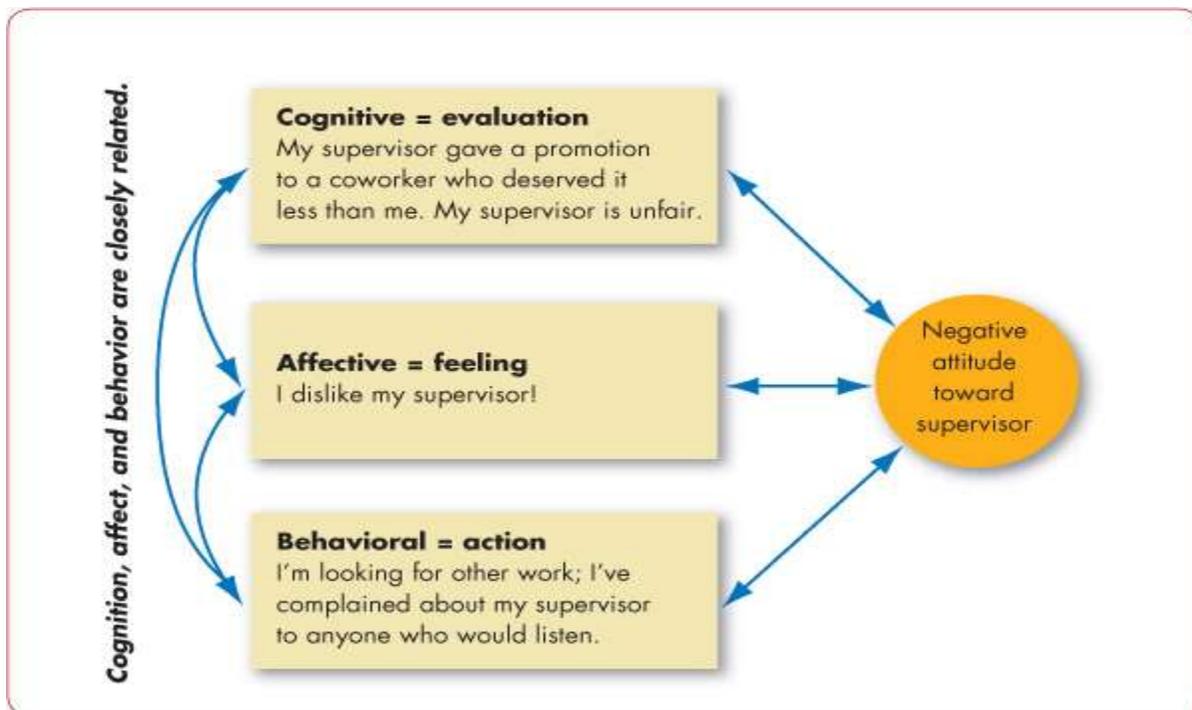


Figure 1. The Components of an Attitude
(Robbins & Judge, 2007, p. 75)

They explained his attitude as follows:

- Cognitive (the employee thought that he deserved to be promoted)
- Affective (the employee feels the energy and many efforts he puts into his work are not acknowledged)
- Behavioural (after departure, the employee is hunting for a new job)

In the workplace, these three facets are linked to work policy and organizational structure as well as the staff and all the people who are concerned with the organization. Being aware that today people face real challenges in the workplace where “professional life in organizations has become immeasurably more complicated by the encounter with the unfamiliar and dissimilar values and practices of foreign organizations, colleagues and clients” (Barmeyer & Franklin, 2016, p. 1), this work seeks to suggest a proposal that helps alleviate misunderstandings and misconceptions and thus, develop intercultural abilities among our present learners and would-be workers.

Why Intercultural Activities?

The researcher believes that an ESP classroom is the appropriate space for initiating change to encourage students learn better by carrying out useful tasks than by being passive, taking notes, and relying on the teacher as the main source of knowledge.

The suggested activities will have the following characteristics:

- Short explanation.
- Division into pairs and groups for discussion.
- Discussion and feedback.
- The key role of the teacher is to present the activities, explain the instructions, and clarify some viewpoints.

To develop an advanced level of intercultural awareness and competence, the emphasis will be put on two principal aspects:

- Cultural knowledge: which implies the understanding of cultural distinctions
-and-
- Cultural skills: it signifies the ability to act and behave appropriately in a myriad of cultures. These capacities include mutual comprehension, acceptance, tolerance and dealing with conflicting situations.

Activity One:

This activity is labelled ‘exploring the term culture’

Objectives:

- To examine the concept of culture.
- To develop an awareness of the major elements of culture.

Procedure:

- Ask students to give a short definition of culture.
- Explain the instructions of the activity.
- Ask the students to work in pairs or small groups.
- Ask volunteers from each pair or group to present and comment on their group’s reflections as openly as possible allowing time for comment and discussion.
- Encourage discussion and contrast between the different definitions to enrich the debate about the constituents of culture.

Outcomes:

The significant element in the activity is to produce, compare and enlarge ideas. It will be helpful to mention that each of the provided definitions stresses diverse features:

- A sum of beliefs and values in addition to the idea of collectivity.
- Behaviours and practices.

- Large amount of experiences and knowledge passed on from generation to generation.

Activity Two:

The main emphasis of this task is ‘cultural briefing’

Objectives:

- To explore the utility of cultural briefing for people doing different purposes (studying, spending holidays, doing business outside their homeland).
- To discover the fundamental components in cultural briefing.

Procedure:

- Verify students’ understanding of the word ‘cultural briefing’. If needed, explain that it consists of collecting information about a particular culture or country you are about to visit or to do business with.
- Ask for examples of what it might be important, such as a research work on a given culture, or a first trip to a certain country, etc. Invite the students to give their views on some additional elements which they see could be comprised in a cultural briefing. Check that students understand the proposed ideas. Comment on these viewpoints and compare results.

Outcomes:

Make students aware of the fact that some constituents are practical (for example: British are not very talkative), while others are more abstract (British are conservative).

Activity Three:

This activity addresses the issue of ‘stereotypes’

Objectives:

- To present the idea of the existence of stereotypes.
- To examine what could influence national stereotyping.

Procedure:

- Ask the students about the notion of stereotype and ask for examples.
- A wide range of opinions could be expressed by students and discussion should be encouraged. Usually, the examples given by the learners will not really portray the group they cite. However, it could be possible to find some truth in some of them.
- Introduce the task and discuss to what extent the national stereotypes are justified and to what degree they are inexact.
- Form pairs or small groups to propose some examples of stereotypes. Ask a volunteer from each group to recapitulate the feelings of their group. Encourage a class discussion.

Outcomes:

The basic point is that the students should form a clear idea about the risks of stereotyping and to what extent it makes respect and cooperation difficult between different individuals, communities and nations.

Activity Four:

This activity is concerned with ‘cultural influences’

Objectives:

- To get students to reflect on the main elements that can influence a home culture.
- To highlight the differences between describing one’s own culture and describing somebody else’s.

Procedure:

- Ask students to present ideas on some important elements which can determine various national cultures.
- Provide a list that contains a variety of strands that may shape a culture including structural (economic system, political system, educational system), social (social values, time value, importance of relationships) and physical aspects (greetings, public distance, gestures), plus other additional behavioural characteristics.
- Explain to the students that they should use the list as a support, adding or removing any aspects.
- Encourage students to identify the importance of the provided or their suggested cultural influences.

Outcomes:

It should be possible for the students to be able to show the distinction between describing elements of their own culture and those of another. Ask them about the degree of difficulty that the students face when performing this task. Also, ask them to mention some differences between how they see their own national culture and how others view it. Is one view more critical than another? What were their impressions of the (in) exactitude of other individuals' opinions? Many different outcomes are possible to promote discussion.

Activity Five:

This task focuses essentially on 'cultural dilemmas'

Objectives:

- To explore varying communication styles within multicultural groups.
- To learn how to deal with these varying styles.

Procedure:

- Ask students to describe a meeting they have attended or a situation they have experienced when, in a multicultural group, they have been surprised by what someone has said or how he/she has acted.
- Write on the board some examples of predicaments that may occur when being with multicultural groups and some appropriate behaviours that should be developed to overcome cross-cultural issues.
- Ask the students to read the examples and to see if they agree on some of them. Gather their replies, and discuss the benefits and drawbacks of each.

Outcomes:

Learners should develop a more sensitive approach to the behaviour of diverse people in multicultural environments. Different obvious behaviours will be proposed. Another chief outcome is that students should grasp how these characteristics and behaviours can enhance good relationships, tolerance, and mutual understanding, even if they seem hard to achieve.

The Study

The academic work reported in this article lasted one academic semester involving the researcher and 59 second year Master students in the department of English at the University of Mostaganem in Algeria.

Data Collection and Interpretation

At the University of Mostaganem, covering the cultural content in ESP courses seems to be hindered by some pedagogical obstacles that prevent its effectiveness. As a possible remedy, this research proposes a rethinking of this instruction and aims to address the following research question:

- How can the implementation of intercultural activities in an ESP context contribute to the improvement of learners' performance?

We hypothesize that through incorporating an intercultural approach, ESP teachers can help their learners up their intercultural awareness, improve their language abilities most importantly speaking and writing, and acquire an appropriate management of their own behaviours.

Given its value as a profitable instrument that enables a thorough approach to research (Dyer, 1995) and because it is viewed as an analysis of a real-life situation or occasion that learners might face in the work environment (Van Der Ham, 2016), a case study was carried out through the triangulation of data from questionnaires administered to the students, classroom observation, and assessment of assignments and exam sheets. Throughout many years and before including the new intercultural approach in the teaching of ESP to Master students, classroom observation reveals that ESP practitioners do include very little or no cultural ingredients in their courses. Therefore, the classes tend to function within the boundaries of a routine and are teacher-driven. An itemized analysis of the findings shows that the results can be presented under the following headings:

1- Ample Practice Opportunities for Learners to Engage in Reflective Intercultural Interventions:

It was observed that the students learn better through activities and making them aware about intercultural issues and barriers seems to raise their enthusiasm and motivation. By including these tasks in ESP syllabi, a range of dissimilarities between various cultures is offered to the students. As a result, they will be able to examine their own practices and assumptions and to build meaningful bonds with members of other cultures.

As a reply to a query of the questionnaire, one of the students declared:

“This new teaching method really helped me develop my oral and written skills. It has been a very helpful and interesting experience. Honestly, I enjoyed the new different atmosphere of being acquainted with cultural issues in ESP classes and being involved in the learning process”

2- Learners' Acquaintance with Large Amounts of Oral and Written Language Input:

The researcher recorded that the provided exercises present possibilities in which high-frequency terms could be employed which can contribute to the promotion of students' proficiency in English. Moreover, the analysis of the learners' written exams and assignments demonstrates a number of observable features such as varied sentence structure, effective word choice, and coherent ideas. This reveals that participating in the many debates launched in the classroom during the activities and answering the questions related to the course through written forms, then providing feedback after each exercise led the learners to acquire sound communicative and writing knowledge and to develop a supportive learning climate.

3- Development of Intercultural Competence in the Workplace:

Learning about cultural content, and gaining knowledge about people's values, lifestyles, and social and economic structures through classroom discussions and intercultural tasks prove to be useful for equipping the learners with a thorough understanding and effective communication with people from dissimilar cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, this specific learning makes intercultural awareness capital to optimize satisfying outcomes of cross-cultural interactions and to lessen possible cultural faux-pas in the work environment.

4- Changes in the Learners' Beliefs and Attitudes:

The findings indicate that the students' learning potential increased when the intercultural tasks were integrated in their ESP programme. They revealed that their non-participation and lack of interest in their previous classes could be due to the limited content knowledge and the absence of cultural content. They also contended that being involved in the learning process helped them form a better understanding of intercultural communicative competence and the differing contexts in which it operates and this according to them led to their emerging role as 'agents of change'.

By way of illustration, a student reflecting on her viewpoints about traditional ESP courses prior and after the inclusion of the new intercultural approach, she asserted that:

"I learnt how basic and beneficial the things we hadn't dealt with were, and I learned that we should always try out such practical and motivating ideas"

Overall, many implications can be drawn that shed light on the introduction of intercultural activities in ESP teaching milieu. This study can be considered as a critical source that can offer scaffolding for teachers to help them meet the challenges they face when dealing with cultural obstacles. Further, it emboldens other teachers from corresponding and disparate contexts to embark on the role of reflective and innovative trainers.

Concluding Reflections

As the processes of intercultural encounters, facilitated mobility, and technological advancement continue to shape ways of existing and staying in touch, there has been an increasing recognition of the rudimentary importance of promoting intercultural competencies into English Language Teaching (ELT) spheres. Consequently, ESP teachers are entreated to design programmes based around the refinement of their learners' intercultural aptitudes and managerial skills that will serve them in the long run and help them grow into successful learners, efficient workers, and global citizens. Ultimately, this study has but offered an alternative to the development of the learners' language level and intercultural capacities and has done so in a quest for collaboration, innovation and further research.

About the Author:

Dr. Fatma ZAGHAR is a senior lecturer at the University of Oran -2- in Algeria. She earns a PhD in Didactics. Her research and teaching interests lie in the areas of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Teaching, Intercultural Studies, and Educational Psychology. Her current research interrogates classroom practices in EFL settings.

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