

Incorporating Intercultural Communicative Competence in EFL Classes

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Abstract

In a rapidly globalized world, EFL teachers are increasingly urged to incorporate intercultural competence in language classes. This paper is concerned with the incorporation of the teaching of culture into the foreign Language classroom. The main premise of the present paper is that effective communication is not limited to linguistic competence and language proficiency and that apart from enhancing communicative competence, cultural competence can also lead to empathy and respect toward different cultures as well as promote objectivity and cultural perspicacity. In fact, teaching a foreign language carries a novel culture which includes one's religion, gender and a set of beliefs. Yet; though language and culture are so closely interwoven into each other that one cannot be conceived without the other, language is still taught as a separate phenomenon from culture and classroom activities are bereft of any instruction of foreign cultures. It is to be noted that much research into the incorporation of culture in language learning remains to be done so that the pedagogical principles of culture teaching may be articulated and applied effectively to the development of materials, and curricula. Thus, the purpose of this paper is first, to explain the ideas and theory which define what is involved in the intercultural communicative competence, and second, to demonstrate what intercultural competence would mean in practice for teachers and learners in language classrooms in an Algerian context and how to make it easily accessible in practical ways.

Keywords: cultural awareness, culture teaching, EFL, intercultural communicative competence

Introduction

Teachers/learners of foreign language (FL) have always faced a demanding task of learning/teaching FL culture, for teaching/learning a foreign language is not limited to linguistic competence, and language proficiency, but mainly incorporates, or should incorporate, some cultural elements, which are intertwined with language itself. In fact, teaching a foreign language carries a novel culture which includes one's religion, gender and a set of beliefs. Yet; though language and culture are so closely interwoven into each other that one cannot be conceived without the other, language is still taught as a separate phenomenon from culture and classroom activities are bereft of any instruction of foreign cultures and this decontextualized method of teaching has plagued the field for many years. Indeed, today, university teachers of foreign language (FL) face a pedagogical environment in which two camps have developed: one basing its emphasis on communicative competence, the other on the importance of exposure to culture. The purpose of this exposure is to help language learners to interact with speakers of other languages on equal terms showing mutual understanding and accepting difference. It also aims at helping the learner go beyond informative communication into developing relationships with other languages and cultures, showing awareness of their own identities and those of their interlocutors. This aim is in tune with one major innovation of communicative language teaching, namely that learners need the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways.

The need to integrate culture in language teaching is now firmly established. The debate about whether or not to include culture in a language classroom is long past; now the discussion points to matter of effective method. Many language educators have already presented a number of valuable methods for teaching culture such as "Using role play", developing a mental image of the target culture, "Celebrating a holiday or festival of the target culture", or Teaching culture through "nonverbal communication". Despite the fact that diverse methods have been proposed to teach FL culture in language classes, the difficulties have not been completely removed.

It is to be noted that much research into the incorporation of culture in language learning remains to be done so that the pedagogical principles of culture teaching may be articulated and applied effectively to the development of materials, and curricula. Thus, the purpose of this paper is first, to explain the ideas and theory which define what is involved in the intercultural competence, and second, to demonstrate what intercultural competence would mean in practice for teachers and learners in language classrooms in an Algerian context and how to make it easily accessible in practical ways.

1. Static vs. Dynamic view of culture

ICC, as terminology patently suggests, builds on a complex term, culture (see Williams 1983). Thus, it is of immediate relevance here to define the term. But it should be noted that it is not possible to arrive at one particular definition of the concept; for definitions are numerous. Kramsch (1993.P.10) describes culture as "membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings" Kramsch (1993) made another keen observation about the essence of culture, which should not go unnoticed:

Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making

evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.

(Kramsch, 1993)

(Liddicoat et al, 2003)(2003) define culture as:

...a complex system of concepts, attitudes, values, beliefs, conventions, behaviours, practices, rituals and lifestyles of the people who make up a cultural group, as well as the artefacts they produce and the institutions they create. (p. 45)

Earlier models (Brooks, 1975; Nostrand, 1974) behold culture as a relatively static entity made up of accumulated facts which are merely transmitted to the learner. This perspective focused on surface features of behaviour, and did not look at the underlying value orientations; it also ignores the interaction of language and culture in the making of meaning. In opposition to this traditional view, the dynamic view of culture perceives culture as constantly changing and variable. Being constructed through human interaction and communication, it requires learners to actively engage in culture learning, rather than only learn about factual information of the target culture in a passive way. Learners are encouraged to view cultural facts as a social construct situated in time and space and variable across time, regions, classes and generations. In this line of thought, a general rethinking of the teaching of language and culture as a social practice has taken place. (Kramsch, 2003). The dynamic view of culture also requires learners to have knowledge of their own culture and an awareness of their own culturally-shaped behaviours. For as Weaver (1993) argues, a large proportion of our own culturally-shaped knowledge is invisible and mostly subconsciously applied in our everyday interactions.

2. *Defining Intercultural competence:*

It is to be stressed that in a rapidly globalized world, FL teachers are increasingly urged to incorporate intercultural competence in language classes. Being interdisciplinary in nature, research into intercultural communication (IC) is conducted in a wide variety of academic disciplines as education, communication studies, cultural anthropology, and behavioural psychology, to name just few relevant disciplines. This wide range perspective adds another complexity to the term making it difficult to define and to delimit. Thus, the subsequent part embarks on an attempt to define what intercultural competence consists of and what are its goals? At the outset of this attempt, it is worth noting, that the views, concerning the understandings of intercultural competence and culture teaching that will be discussed here are strongly influenced by the writings of Byram (1988), Kramsch (1993) and Fantini (2000), all of whom have proposed models for integrating culture and language teaching. These works share a common conceptual framework regarding the teaching and learning of culture.

By integrating culture into language study, the concept of “intercultural communicative competence” (Byram, 1997) has brought culture to the fore of language education. Intercultural communicative competence is defined by Byram as “ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and [the] ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality” (Byram, 2002). On Byram’s account, an intercultural competent learner displays a range of affective, behavioural and cognitive skills which involve the following five elements (Byram, *ibid*):

Attitudes (*savoir être*): curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own. This means a willingness to avoid a self-righteous attitude,

i.e. not to assume that one's beliefs and behaviours are the only correct ones and to be able to see from an outsider's perspective; Byram (1997); Kramsch (1993) described this as 'decentring' from their own culture.

Knowledge: (*savoirs*) of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction. It follows that knowledge can be seen as having two major components: a sum of abstract knowledge of social processes and concrete knowledge of realisations of these processes in interactions.

Skills of interpreting and relating: (*savoir comprendre*): ability to interpret a document or an event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own.

Skills of discovery and interaction: (*savoir apprendre/faire*) ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.

Critical cultural awareness: (*savoir s'engager*) an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries.

Defined as such, this competency reflects the view that requires the EFL learner to gain insight into both their own and the foreign culture (Kramsch, 1993), to see relationships between different cultures and to critically analyse and adapt one's own behaviours, values and beliefs (Byram, *ibid*). To put it differently, this conception requires the EFL learner to act as a mediator who is aware of their own perspective and of the way in which their thinking is highly influenced by their own culture and thus does not look at others from the mirror of themselves, but rather from an external perspective.

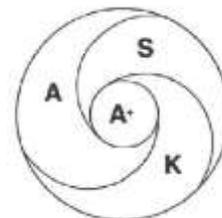
Discussing the dimensions of ICC in educational settings, Fantini (2000) writes the following: "In this construct of ICC, there are also five dimensions. These are awareness, attitudes, skills, knowledge (A+ASK), and proficiency in the host tongue..." This definition is graphically presented as follows:

A = attitudes (affect)

S = skills (behaviour)

K = knowledge (cognition)

A+ = awareness (*conscientização*)



Source : Fantini (2000)

Here, awareness and affect are addressed along with knowledge and skills. Yet, the placement of awareness in the centre of this graph is highly significant. Awareness appears to be a pivotal dimension in ICC, a foundation on which effective intercultural communication hinges. Awareness relates to the other three components in the A+ASK quartet in two ways: it leads to deeper knowledge, skills, and attitudes and at the same time it is also enhanced by their development. By way of analogy, Stevens (1971), among others, consider awareness as the most powerful component of the A+ASK quartet. Likewise, Paulo Freire (1998) sees awareness as

central to any successful cross-cultural interaction and clarifies it with the following important observations:

- It is awareness of selfhood.
- It is a critical look at the self in a social situation.
- It can produce a transformation of the self and of one's relation to others.
- It can lead to dealing critically and creatively with reality (and fantasy).
- It is the most important task of education.

2.1. Intercultural communicative competence and EFL teaching/ learning

The following part attempts at describing Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) as it relates to foreign language teaching. This will involve building up a view of ICC in relation to the existing FLT theory in order to elaborate a model of ICC capable of informing discussion of teaching in an EFL class. In any EFL class which places intercultural communicative competence at the core, any FL teacher would raise the following question: how to integrate the intercultural dimension in an EFL class and how to acquire ICC?

FL teaching which integrates an intercultural dimension combines between the two following objectives:

1. Helping learners to acquire the communicative competence needed to communicate in speaking or writing, to formulate what they want to say/write in correct and appropriate ways.
2. Developing the learners' intercultural competence i.e. their ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality.

As stated earlier, the teaching of culture will not be limited to the transmission of information about the people of the target culture and their general attitudes, as traditional thought in FL education suggests. Instead, drawing on Byram's model and Fantini's, already discussed; EFL teachers should be concerned with following goals:

1. To help learners see relationships between their own and other cultures
2. To help them acquire interest in and curiosity about 'otherness', and an awareness of themselves and their own cultures seen from other people's perspectives.
3. To help learners to understand how intercultural interaction takes place,
4. How social identities are part of all interaction,
5. How their perceptions of other people and others people's perceptions of them influence the success of communication,
6. How they can find out for themselves more about the people with whom they are communicating.

To achieve these goals effectively, FL teachers should try to design suitable activities that would prepare FL learners to communicate with open minds with other intercultural speakers and tolerate differences.

2.2. ICC as practice in an EFL Class

One question germane to the present paper is how can we incorporate culture into the foreign language class, with a view to fostering cultural awareness? There are many possibilities to follow to develop Intercultural communicative competences in our learners; relevant methods techniques are to be chosen. However, the subsequent practical part will not concentrate on this broad area, but present some specific techniques to be used in the classroom. Prior to considering some concrete techniques for teaching culture in the foreign language classroom, it is useful to provide some guidelines for culture teaching (the guidelines that ensue are mainly based on Lessard-Clouston, 1997).

- First, in tune with ICC and the dynamic view of culture, already discussed, receptive knowledge of cultural competence is not sufficient; learners will also need to acquire some skills in culturally appropriate communication.
- Second, to avoid what Lessard-Clouston (1997) calls ‘a laissez-faire approach’, when it comes to teaching methodology, and to deal with culture teaching in a systematic and structured way.
- Third, to include evaluation of culture learning as a necessary component of the foreign culture teaching, providing students with feedback and keeping teachers accountable in their teaching.

3. Teaching Methodological suggestions

3.1. Comparing cultures

Here, the FL learners are engaged in comparative analysis between their own culture and the target culture. In relation to different cultural topics, EFL Learners are encouraged to look for cultural similarities and differences with the target culture in comparison with their own culture. This comparison/ contrast analysis will lay the ground for a dialogue that could enhance EFL learners’ cultural awareness. This method draws on learners’ own knowledge, beliefs and values and leads to increased cultural knowledge, understanding and acceptance, which provide a basis for successful intercultural communication. Byram and Planet (2000, p.189) argue that “*comparison makes the strange, the other familiar, and makes the familiar, the self strange – and therefore easier to reconsider*”. In this process, it is hoped that learners will develop a third place that would enable them to make both an outsider’s and an insider’s view on their culture and the target one.

Practical Examples of comparing cultural values:

- *Family relations:*

The class is structured around a discussion, using the target language, about family relationships. Here, learners will be exposed to different family issues and develop an understanding of the family values in their own and the target culture. They are provided with reading narratives which communicate directly or indirectly family values in the target culture.

Reading Passage

Acculturation, which begins at birth, is the process of teaching new generations of children the customs and values of the parents' culture. How people treat newborns, for example, can be indicative of cultural values. In the United States it is not uncommon for parents to put a newborn in a separate room that belongs only to the child. This helps to preserve parents' privacy and allows the child to get used to having his or her own room, which is seen as a first step toward personal independence. Americans traditionally have held independence and a closely-related value, individualism, in high esteem. Parents try to instill these prevailing values in their children. American English expresses these value preferences: children should "cut the (umbilical) cord" and are encouraged not to be "tied to their mothers' apron strings." In the process of their socialization children learn to "look out for number one" and to "stand on their own two feet." Many children are taught at a very early age to make decisions and be responsible for their actions. Often children work for money outside the home as a first step to establishing autonomy. Nine- or ten-year-old children may deliver newspapers in their neighbourhoods and save or spend their earnings. Teenagers (13 to 18 years) may babysit at neighbours' homes in order to earn a few dollars a week. Receiving a weekly allowance at an early age teaches children to budget their money, preparing them for future financial independence. Many parents believe that managing money helps children learn responsibility as well as appreciate the value of money. Upon reaching an appropriate age (usually between 18 and 21 years), children are encouraged, but not forced, to "leave the nest" and begin an independent life. After children leave home they often find social relationships and financial support outside the family.

Discussions:

First, the students are asked to read the passage, in pairs, and to deduce which family relationship is being tackled? As the linguistic competence is part and parcel of ICC, Students are provided with vocabularies used in the passage and they are also made to think about related vocabulary to help them sharpen their linguistic proficiency.

Vocabulary Study

Child raising	Phrases and Expressions
Autonomy, generations managing prevailing self-reliance Instill	To cut the cord, To be tied to mother's apron strings, To look out for number one, To stand on your own two feet, To leave the nest

Possible vocabulary activities would be to ask students to first review the way the above mentioned words are used in the passage. Then to provide them with a text, of which some parts are left out and ask them to fill in blanks with the suitable word or expression from the above list.

Second, students are required to derive the family values communicated directly or indirectly in the passage and then to set these values of the target culture, in comparison/ contrast with their own family values:

United states Child raising	Cultural value What does this value mean to an American?	Algeria Child raising
Separate rooms for newborns	First step towards personal independence	Newborns are tied to their mothers
Children work for money (E.G delivering newspapers)	Financial independence from a very early age	Children are entirely dependent on their parents for financial support (except for necessity)
Making decisions	One way of establishing autonomy	Little or no decision making Decision making is usually in the hand of parents
children are encouraged to leave the nest (usually between 18, 21)	To foster independence and a sense of individualism	Children do not leave their families before marriage

Difficulties in intercultural communication arise when speakers show ethnocentric attitudes, assuming that what they believe is right. This can result in negative judgments of individuals from different cultures as the following students' responses to American family values demonstrate: When asked to voice their opinions about the American family values, students commented that they find it negative that in American family values, children leave their parents when they are so young. They could not understand how come that parent encourages their children to leave the nest. Depending on their own social and cultural background, Algerian students considered dependence on parents positive and protective. They even jumped to the conclusion that parental authority is not highly valued and respected in American families, and that parent-children ties are not cherished. To help students develop a third place that would enable them to make both an outsider's and an insider's view on their culture and the target one, students were asked to consider possible counter opinions, responses from an American's cultural perspective that would, for instance, consider self-reliance as positive and would take the Algerian family value negative as parents, who keep their children protected until the children get married, do not allow their children to become independent, grow responsible and discover about life.

3.2. Culture assimilators

Other insightful methods to culture teaching are proposed by Henrichsen (1998), namely, Culture assimilators which comprise short descriptions of various situations where one person from the target culture interacts with persons from the home culture. These exchanges are followed by possible interpretations of the meaning of the behaviour and speech of the

interlocutors. Students, then, are invited to think of the plausible interpretation of the situation. When every single student has made his guess, they discuss which options are valid. Culture assimilators are recommended for they 'are good methods of giving students understanding about cultural information and...may even promote emotional empathy or affect if students have strong feelings about one or more of the options' (ibid.). The following example would set the scene:

Practical Examples

Situation:

Michael is a graduate student in a foreign university. He is a good friend of Mr. Umm, who lives in the dormitory for graduate students. They share a similar sense of humour and enjoy many activities together. Since Michael is interested in architecture, Mr. Umm decides that it would be a good idea for Michael to meet his older friend Mr. Tahh, a professor of design at the university. First he tells Michael all about Mr. Tahh's architectural research. As it turns out, Mr. Tahh's research is exactly what Michael needs for his thesis. Michael is so excited that the next day he goes directly to Mr. Tahh's office, introduces himself, and briefly mentions Mr. Umm's name. The two men spend several hours discussing their research ideas. That evening Michael tells Mr. Umm how much he enjoyed meeting Mr. Tahh. Mr. Umm reacts coldly: "Yes, I heard you both met. I hope your research goes well." His serious tone tells Michael that something is wrong, but Michael has no idea what the problem might be.

Activity The Students are required to analyse, in groups, this situation and to try to fathom out what lies behind Mr. UMM's reaction towards Michael's behaviour.

3.3. Cultural problem solving

In this method learners are presented with problem-solving activities. This might include cultural dilemmas that can develop learners' awareness to cultural differences. For example, students can discuss dilemmas about parent's decision on career choice or dressing, say, through TV conversation or reading a narrative on marriage ceremonies, they are expected to assess manners and customs, or appropriate or inappropriate behaviour, and to employ various problem solving techniques. To illustrate the point, students are to be made aware that individuals in every culture have similar basic needs but express them differently. In daily life we all initiate conversation, use formal and informal speech, give praise, express disagreement, seek information, and extend invitations. Some of the verbal patterns we use are influenced by our culture. In this regard, students can be asked which verbal patterns are more common in their culture: directness or indirectness? Or how many times a host is expected to offer food or to extend invitations? Another frequently misunderstood area in American verbal interaction is that of extending, accepting, and refusing invitations. In English someone might say something that sounds like an invitation but that never results in an actual meeting. To gain insight into this area, students are required to observe the following two exchanges and to reflect on why the first invitation did not result in an appointment whereas the second did?

Exchange 1:

KATIE. It was nice talking to you. I have to run to class. DARLENE. OK, maybe we can meet sometime soon. KATIE. Yeah, love to. Why don't you drop by my house sometime?

DARLENE. Great. Gotta go. See ya soon.

Exchange 2

KATIE. Before you leave for your vacation can we get together and have lunch?

DARLENE. Sure. I'd love to.

KATIE. How about Friday? Say about 12:30 at my place?

DARLENE. That sounds good. See you then.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is worth stressing that FL teachers should be foreign culture teachers as well. For fundamentally, teaching a foreign language is incomplete without the study of the related culture. The topic of teaching and learning culture has been a matter of considerable interest to language educators and much has been written about the role of culture in foreign language instruction. The clear and unique indissoluble relationship between a culture and its language is based on the work of educators from various disciplines.

In the light of the above mentioned dynamic view of culture, culture learning is taken to be the process of acquiring general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is a dynamic, developmental process which engages the learner cognitively, behaviourally, and affectively, as observed with Byram's model. Incorporating intercultural communication in EFL teaching is an attempt to develop learner's cultural awareness and to help them transcend traditional ethnocentrism and explore new relationships across cultural boundaries.

Though many scholars have already presented a number of valuable models and definitions of ICC which lend themselves to the integration of language instruction and intercultural learning, there is often only a random exposure to culture in the EFL classroom. FL teachers cannot avoid culture teaching by rigidly holding to the traditional values of classroom behaviour, for culture is intimately bound to language. EFL teachers therefore need to shift from a traditional stance to an inter-cultural one to develop both linguistic and intercultural competences of learners. The approach the teacher engages in will depend greatly on his or her attitude towards the target culture and perspective on the teaching of culture in the language classroom. Yet one recommended approach is characterized by the treatment of cultural issues openly and directly in a comparative cross-cultural manner. Besides, FL teachers should avoid teaching culture as facts, but rather as cultural understanding, intercultural competence and an awareness of the importance of dialogue when trying to understand another culture. Central to the teaching methodology suggested here is to provide opportunities for interaction so that the students can impart their own way of seeing things. Meta-awareness and cross-cultural comparison lie at the heart of such culture pedagogy. This teaching methodology comprises fundamental learning processes as the learners' exploration of their own culture and the target culture and the discovery of the relationship between language and culture.

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