Towards an Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching and Learning: Implications for English as foreign Language Classes

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Abstract:

The aim of this research paper is to highlight the importance of shifting the focus from linguistic competence to intercultural communicative competence in teaching English as a foreign language classes. Communicating appropriately and effectively is often emphasized as an ultimate objective for language education. However, concepts related to learners' competences are not always clarified. This research paper has reviewed the concepts related to the issue of cultural and intercultural dimensions of foreign language education, and raised the importance of focusing on intercultural communicative competence as an ultimate goal for foreign language teaching.

الملخص :

الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تسليط الضوء على أهمية تحويل التركيز من الكفاءة اللغوية إلى الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة الأجنبية. بالرغم من كون التواصل بشكل مناسب و فعال في كثير من الأحيان الهدف النهائى لتعليم اللغة إلا أنه لتوضح المفاهيم المتعلقة بمهارات المتعلمين. استعرضت هذه الورقة البحثية المفاهيم التى ترتبط بالأبعاد الثقافية لتعليم اللغة الأجنبية ،مع التركيز على الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات باعتبارها الهدف النهائي.

Introduction:

The history of language teaching reflects the continuous development of understanding of the nature of language from a theoretical point of view in one hand, and attempts to adapt these developments to the language classroom by integrating new methods and objectives for language education on the other hand. These developments are the result of a change in the paradigm overlapping linguistic theory as a whole, and led to a shift in the overall aim of foreign language instruction.

I. *The Concept of Culture and Language Teaching*

I.1. The Concept of Culture

The concept of culture has been approached from multidisciplinary perspectives; anthropologists generally look at culture as a very broad concept (a complex whole), as described by Tylor (1971), embracing all aspects of human life that shape the whole way of life of a particular group of people. Culture has a broad meaning that seems to cover and touch all aspects of human life as confirmed by Summers et al. (2006), "the customs, arts, music, and all other products of human thought made by a particular group of people at a particular time." p. 336).

Culture is at the heart of any social activity as seen from a sociologist perspective; sociologists insist on the social role of culture, they argue that culture is the framework to everyday way of life of a particular society, and that shapes its members' behaviour. Culture

for them is the social constructs that evolve within a group, the ways of thinking, feeling, believing, and behaving that are imported to members of a group in the socialization process (Hinkel, 1999, p.3). The sociological perspective towards culture is shared by scholars of other fields including that of Linguistics; Lyons (1990) confirms that culture cannot be thought separate from its social value, he wrote, "culture maybe described as socially acquired knowledge: i.e. what someone has by virtue of his being a member of particular society." P. 302).

The value of culture for any society cannot be denied; according to Sylee (1997), "culture provides the software of the mind without which most behaviour would be random, unpredictable, and meaningless to other people; it tells us how to behave within our in-group." p. 23. However, taken from another perspective, it is more productive for us to ask which definition of culture is more useful for language teaching.

I.2. Definition of Culture in Language Education

As a matter of fact, coming out with a workable definition for culture, as far as foreign language education is concerned, is a necessity for the field. Accordingly,Richards and Schmidt (2002) in their dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics offer the following definition:

"The set of practices, codes, and values that mark a particular nation or group: the sum of a nation or group's most highly thought of works

of literature, art, music etc. A difference is sometimes made between 'high' culture of literature and arts, and small 'c' culture of attitudes, values, beliefs, and everyday lifestyles. Culture and language combine to form what is sometimes called 'discourse', i.e. ways of talking, thinking, and behaving that reflect one's social identity" p. 138).

Two main aspects of culture are highlighted by the above definition: one is referred to as "high culture" which is synonymous with knowledge of literature and art; and the other as "small c culture" which is synonymous to everyday lifestyle.

Kramsch (2006, p.323) represents a similar perspective when pointing out that there are two main ways of looking at culture in foreign language education. She put them into two main categories:

A Humanistic Concept:

As a humanistic concept,culture is the product of a canonical print literacyacquired in school; it is synonymous with a generalknowledge of literature and the arts. Also called 'bigC' culture, it is the hallmark of the cultivated middleclass.Because it has been instrumental in building thenation-state during the 19th century, 'big C' culture,as the national patrimony, has been promoted by thenation state and its institutions, e.g., schools anduniversities. It is the culture traditionally taughtwith standard national languages.

Teaching aboutthe history, the institutions, the literature and thearts of the target country embeds the target languagein the

reassuring continuity of a national communitythat gives it meaning and value. In the 1980s, with the advent ofcommunicative language teaching, the humanisticconcept of culture gave way to a more pragmatic conceptof culture as way of life. But the prestige of bigC culture has remained, if only as lieux de me´moirein Internet chatrooms named, for example, Versailles,Madison Avenue, or Piccadilly – cultural icons ofsymbolic distinction.

A Sociolinguistic Concept:

With the focus now oncommunication and interaction in social contexts, themost relevant concept of culture since the 1980s hasbeen that of 'little c' culture, also called 'small cultures'(Holliday, 1999) of everyday life. It includesthe native speakers' ways of behaving, eating, talking,and dwelling, as well as their customs, beliefs, andvalues. Research in the 1980s was deeply interestedin cross-cultural pragmatics and the sociolinguistic appropriatenessof language use in its authentic culturalcontext.

To study the way native speakers used theirlanguage for communicative purposes, the Herderianequation one languageone culture was maintained,and teachers were enjoined to teach rules of sociolinguisticuse the same way they taught rules ofgrammatical usage (functional-notional syllabi ofthe 1970s), i.e., through modelling and role-playing.Teaching culture has meant teaching thetypical, sometimes stereotypical, behaviours, foods,celebrations, and customs of the dominant group. Striking in this conceptof culture

is the maintenance of the focus onnational characteristics and the lack of historicaldepth.

The sociolinguistic concept of culture takes on variousforms depending on whether the language taughtis a foreign, second, or heritage language. In foreignlanguage (FL) classes taught outside of any directcontact with native speakers, culture is mostly of thepractical, tourist kind with instructions on how to getthings done in the target country. In second language(SL) classes taught in the target country or in nativespeaker run institutions abroad (e.g., British Council,Goethe Institute, Alliance Française), culture can alsotake the form of exposure to debates and issues ofrelevance to native speakers in the target country, orof discussions about living and working conditionsfor immigrants.

The different levels and aspects of culture outlined from various perspective here show that our understanding of what culture means in FL education is varied . This provides the possibility for language teachers and learners to stress various dimensions of culture at different levels of language proficiency. It is worth noting here that as far as foreign language education is concerned, culture should be also viewed in terms of interculturalcommunication, that is as "the ability to enter other cultures and communicate effectivelyand appropriately, establish and maintain relationships, and carry out tasks with people of these cultures" (Moran 2001, p. 5). Concepts like "intercultural awareness"

and "interculturalcommunicative competence" are especially important for FL learners.

II. Intercultural Communicative Competence and Foreign Language Teaching

II.1.From Communicative Competence to Intercultural Communicative Competence

During the period between the 1930's and 1960's, which was dominated by a stucturalist mode of thinking, the sociocultural context for the understanding and acquisition of the language was not given much importance. Students were expected to understand and use the language correctly when they master its rules of phonology and grammar, i.e., linguistic competence was the overall aim of foreign language instruction.

It was not until the 1970's that the sociolinguistic paradigm entailed a shift of focus from linguistic competence to communicative competence as an overall aim of language instruction. At that time, there was a growing dissatisfaction with the predominant grammar-based approaches such as the audio-lingual method. The problem was that students, who have received several years of formal teaching, frequently remain deficient in the ability to use the language effectively and appropriately when communicating (Richards et al., 2003).

The realization that students' mere mastery of grammatical rules does not ensure for them the ability to communicate in real-life

contexts led to a consideration of communicativecompetence in FL instruction as a major aim of the teaching/learning process. Accordingly, the notion of cultural competence was also reconsidered, because interpreting the communicative meaning of linguistic behaviour requires knowing the cultural meaning of the context in which it occurs (Saville-Troike, 1996).

The relevance of cultural instruction in developing learners' CC is highly important; as in teaching English for communication and neglecting culture, learners may be given access to an impoverished means of communication effective for survival and for routine transactions, but lacking the cultural reference that makes it fully meaningful for native speakers (Pulverness, 2003).

Byram (2002) argues that language teaching should have as one of its principal aims the development of learners' ability to communicate with those who speak another language, and to introduce learners to a different way of life, the cultural products of speakers of another language. He further explains that the notion of CC lacks the factors of culture since it is based on the native speaker model as he noted, "the problem with the notion of communicative competence is that it is based on a description of how native speakers speak to each other. It does not take into account what is required for successful communication between people of different cultural origins, who have different social identities" (Byram, 1997, p. 94).

II.2.The Concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence

The efforts made by eminent researchers in the fields of language education and intercultural communication (IC) have resulted in a shared gaol, that is the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). A concept made popular by Byram (1997), and his colleagues (Byram and Zarate, 1997; Byram and Fleming, 1998; Fantini et al., 1997). This concept was developed as an extension of the concept of communicative competence, and represented a guiding concept for overall aim of FL education (Hall, 2002).

Intercultural communication, in its broad meaning, refers to communication between people from different cultural backgrounds; Beneke (2000, p. 108) maintains, "Intercultural communication in the wider sense of the word involves the use of significantly different linguistic codes, contacts between people holding significantly different statements of values and models of the world" (quoted in Lazar, 2001, p.19).

As far as foreign language education is concerned, intercultural competence has been described by Meyer (1991) as, "the ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures" (quoted in Cortazzi and Jin 1999, p. 198). It has also been referred to as: "the ability to enter a other cultures and communicate effectively and appropriately, establish and maintain

relationships, and carry out tasks with people of these cultures" (Moran, 2001:5 quoted in Lazar 2003: 41). Byram and Zarate (1997) emphasized that the outcomes of teaching languages should be the ability to see how different cultures relate to each other in terms of differences and similarities, and to act as mediators between them. Learners should be able to reflect on their own cultural identity, question taken for granted values and beliefs and compare their own culture with that of the interlocutors' (Byram, 1998, p.4).

Comparison forms a basis for understanding and helps learners to perceive and cope with differences; therefore, the learners' own culture is highly valued and treated on equal bases since any comparison should be built on the learners' background knowledge.

The common European framework of reference for languages CEFRL (2001) maintains that language learners should not be regarded as individuals who abandon their social identity in favour of another, but as social agents whose whole personality and sense of identity are respected and enriched through the experience of otherness in language and culture.Following the above arguments, ICC has become a key concept in directing language teaching objectives leading to a better understanding of the role of culture in language education.

II.3. Components of Intercultural Communicative Competence

As mentioned previously, the work of Byram played a prominent role in introducing and elaborating the concept of ICC; his

conceptual framework is worth mentioning as it clarifies well what this concept entails and how its different components work together to form the comprehensive model of ICC. According to Byram (2002, p. 7), the intercultural speaker possesses four competences: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and intercultural. This latter overlaps the five 'savoirs' consisting of attitudes, knowledge, skills, and abilities complemented by the values one holds because of one's belonging to a social group, these values are part of one's social identity. As can be seen from figure below, the five 'savoirs' are identified as follows:
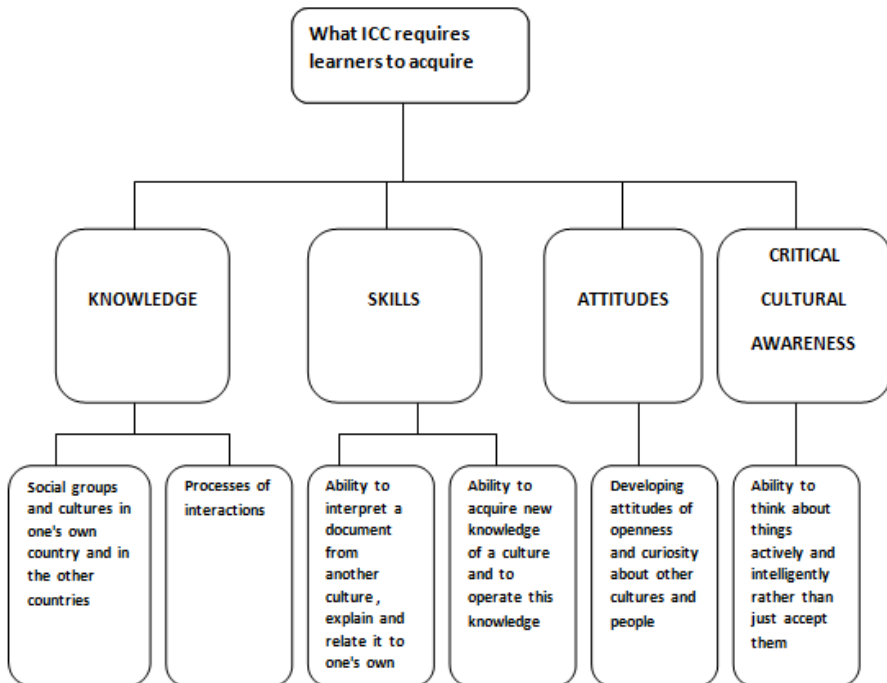

Figure 1: Components of Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 1997)

1-Attitudes (Savoir être): this refers curiosity and openness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and beliefs about one's own. This means a willingness to relativize one's own values, beliefs and behaviours, not to assume that they are the only possible and naturally correct ones, and to be able to see how they might look from an outsider's perspective; who has a different set of values, beliefs and behaviours. This can be called the ability to ' decentre '.

2- Knowledge (Savoirs): includes knowledge 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.

3- *Skills of Interpreting and Relating (savoir comprendre)*:this refers to ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own.

4- *Skills of Discovery and Interaction (savoir apprendre / faire)*: this refers to the 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.

5- *Critical Cultural Awareness (savoir s'engager)*: this refers to 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 .

Consequently,Byram (1997) indicates that the role of the teacher is to develop skills, attitudes and awareness of values just as much as to develop a knowledge of a particular culture or country. Hence, the ' best' teacher is neither native nor the non-native speaker, but the person who can help students to acquire interest in and curiosity about otherness, and people 's perspectives. He concludes:

" developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching involves recognizing that the aims are: to give learners intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence; to prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures; to enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours ;and to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience". P.71).

On the basis of the above figure, it is quite clear that ICC is a complex concept that consists of a number of interrelated elements. And since not all objectives can be attained within classroom work, Byram places intercultural learning in different contexts: the classroom, fieldwork (pedagogically structured visits abroad), and independent learning which places the responsibility on the learners for reflection on their learning experiences and personal growth.

3.4. Implications for English as Foreign Language Classes

On the basis of the aforementioned, one can assume that developing learners' communicative competence requires the vital component of cultural knowledge. Hence, it has become obvious that the study of language cannot be divorced from the study of culture (Fantini et al., 1997). However, implementing culture learning activities in language classrooms means much more than just adding them to a lesson plan; to maintain the focus on culture/intercultural dimensions of language teaching, it is necessary to adopt a process approach framework that would help to design course syllabi, and even the individual lesson plan.

Accordingly, Ryffel (1997) points out that culture learning activities can be used more effectively by paying attention to two important areas: structure and strategies. She further explains that concerning structure; well and carefully structured activities are important to ensure that they are more than just fun (or meaningless games), and that meaningful learning occurs. As far as strategies are concerned, these are important to decrease the learners' discomfort, reduce anxiety, and provide safe environment by more closely conforming to what students expect as appropriate classroom behaviour. Therefore, two main concerns regarding the successful implementation of culture based activities are identified.

First, the teachers' choice of the activity should be based on the following considerations:

1. Logistics: that is time constraints, space limitations, and material required

2. Aims and nature: for example, the objectives, the topic, the risk level, and the balance with other types of activities planned.

3. Students: their language level, stage of cultural adjustment, preferred learning style(s), expectations for the classroom, and level of trust among the group and with the teacher.

4. The teacher: the relationship with the students, comfort level with culture learning activities, and experience.

Second, to adapt the activity to the context in which it is used, the following criteria should be used:

1. Instructions: the teacher should be clear and consistent when giving instructions; by using clear language, providing examples, s/he can also ask students to restate their understanding of direction to ensure that they have understood.

2. Pacing: the teacher should avoid anxiety by proceeding slowly in a step by step manner. He may allow extra time to introduce new procedures.

3. Teacher participation or intervention: teachers should balance between the students' needs for directions and help with their desire to be the source of their own learning. Students' silence may not be always a sign of lack of understanding; they may need more time to formulate responses to the task.

4. Grouping: in case of group work, students may be allowed to form their groups themselves to ensure working comfortably.

5. Students' participation: to reduce students' anxiety of failure or exposure in some tasks, the teacher can design small group work rather than having an individual be responsible for a role or task. A volunteer group reporter can help take burden off others unprepared for this task.

6. Learning preferences: teachers should vary the tasks so that all style preferences are acknowledged; he can alternate group work with individual work, s/he can also mix oral, reading, and writing tasks.

7. Discussion: teachers can promote discussions using open-ended questions rather than yes/no questions (except in groups with very low levels of English proficiency)

8. Students as source of information: teachers should elicit students' information in order to help them realize that they are also valid sources of information.

9. Teacher as source of information: teachers should maintain credibility and acceptance as a source of information, by offering short lectures, guidance, and input, and then adjust teacher-students roles gradually over time, introducing more parcipatory type activities.

Conclusion:

This research paper has focussed on the issue of cultural and intercultural dimensions of foreign language education. The discussion included accounting for the controversy over the conceptualisation of culture in language education. It is also argued that the aim of foreign language education should be to give the learners opportunity to develop cultural knowledge, competence and awareness in such a way that might lead to a better understanding of the foreign culture, the target, as well as the learners' own culture. Teachers are supposed to encourage their students to raise awareness for cultural context of day-to-day conversational conventions. Besides, it is worth noting that integrating culture in EFL classes should be in context where learners should not be regarded as individuals who abandon their social identity in favour of another, but as social agents whose whole personality and sense of identity are respected and enriched through the experience of otherness in language and culture.Nonetheless, this shift remains a challenge that both EFL teachers and learners have to deal with to meet the needs and goals of language education in this globalized world.

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