

Moving Beyond Essentialism: Cultivating EFL Learners' Intercultural Communicative Competence through a Non-Essentialist Paradigm of Culture

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Dep. Day : 18/1/2024

Acc. day: 27/2/2024

Pub. day: 2/6/2024

Abstract:

The pace of change in today's globalized world is unprecedented. Boundaries between nations and cultures are increasingly blurred. This change requires resilient and adaptable individuals with a heightened awareness of global dynamics. Thus, foreign language education has shifted attention from traditional pedagogies promoting linguistic competence to pedagogies training learners to be intercultural competent communicators. Nonetheless, there is a hot debate on which paradigm of culture to adopt when cultivating EFL learners' intercultural competence: the essentialist or non-essentialist paradigm. This paper is then an attempt to explore the suitable cultural paradigm for promoting intercultural communicative competence in EFL settings. Consequently, it is found that an intercultural pedagogy demands a non-essentialist paradigm which views culture as a dynamic, complex, and fluid entity, unlike the essentialist view which delimits culture to its national boundaries causing national banalism, stereotypes, and generalizations.

Keywords: Intercultural Pedagogy; Essentialist Paradigm; Non-Essentialist Paradigm; Intercultural Communicative Competence.



1. Introduction

Accrediting globalization, the world is witnessing a massive wave of social mobility, immigration, and frequent international contact. The salient reasons for these displacements and changes are many, a few to mention are: tourist visits, the global open market, educational exchange programmes, and many more (Ward et al., 2001). Hence, international opportunities and immigration are nearly accessible to everyone (Trumbull et al., 2001). These modern changes demanded an international language to facilitate and foster

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international contacts. This role has fallen on the English language to be the language of internationalisation. In Heller's perspective (2003), globalization has turned the English language into a marketable commodity; that is, a global inevitable coin which raised people's interest, motivation, and desire to learn it (Block & Cameron, 2002). Globalization has reframed the current goal of educational programmes to prepare learners to be effective and competent individuals in class and out of class, i.e., to prepare them to be global citizens. To attain this goal, learners are prepared for encounters outside of their geographical boundaries in highly pluralistic and multicultural societies (Rosen et al., 2000). Possessing only communicative competence in such settings is inadequate because of the interconnectivity of language and culture which affects communication. The possibility of an accompanying risk of misunderstandings, raised conflicts, and stereotyping is likely to happen when people find themselves in diverse sociocultural milieu (Hewstone & Giles, 1986; Bennett & Castiglioni, 2004; Brewer, 1986).

For effective communication in pluralistic and multicultural communities, intercultural education for foreign language learning has been set to make learners critically aware, open, empathetic, and tolerant towards cultural differences. This is achieved through developing learners' cultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills that would help them to act fitly in intercultural encounters (Byram, 1997; Byram, 2008; Guilherme, 2002; Feng, 2009). Intercultural learning, however, is problematic as there is a hot debate over which paradigm of culture to adopt. Essentialism proponents favour teaching the culture of the foreign language being taught- the Anglophone culture in the case of EFL- while essentialism opponents advocate a non-essentialist paradigm embracing diverse cultures. This paper is a deliberate attempt to shed more light on the intercultural dimension in foreign language learning by stressing the promising role of intercultural communicative competence. Most importantly, it attempts to delimit which paradigm of culture is suitable to adopt in the EFL context to cultivate learners' intercultural communicative competence.

2. Intercultural Learning in EFL Settings

The interconnectedness between language and culture conditions the integration of culture in EFL classes. Culture teaching penetrated the EFL pedagogy for the first time in the late 1950s. Back at that time, culture was taught explicitly as declarative knowledge before settling temporarily as a means of intercultural communication (Chen & Le, 2019). In a multicultural and plurilingual world, learners must be prepared to be global citizens where they understand the behaviours of people from other cultures, behave fitly in

intercultural encounters, and develop a sense of empathy and tolerance towards others (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1994). Language learning is no longer restricted to the mastery of linguistic competence, instead, it also demands intercultural competence because interaction is a sociocultural, fluid, and complex process that calls for more than linguistic resources (Krasner, 1999). This view challenges the idea of language being purely a codified system and goes beyond this frontier to embrace other elements, namely, beliefs, ideologies, and expected behaviours in a given sociocultural setting (Kramsh, 2009; Risager, 2007; Liddicoat, 2020).

The role of teaching culture is assigned to EFL teachers who, too, must be interculturally competent (Moran, 2001). Teachers are supposed to play diverse roles in their classes to ensure a successful, healthy, and focused cultural learning process. The ultimate aim of cultural pedagogy is to raise learners' awareness of the diversity of cultures and language use variability (Holliday, 2011). Language-culture nexus was incarnated into four perspectives in the EFL classroom. The first perspective dictates the mastery of sociolinguistic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). The second one is through making learners intercultural competent communicators (Byram, 1997). The third is through preparing learners to be global citizens (Byram, 2008). The last concerns the generation of a Third Place, i.e., making learners cross-cultural mediators (Kramsh, 1993; 1998). The mutual aim between these perspectives is to develop learners' linguistic, pragmatic, and sociocultural competencies to socialize and communicate properly when diverse cultures come into contact.

Even though the intercultural dimension is unescapable in EFL settings, it remains a challenging task for teachers. The pedagogy of culture demands highly contextualized and objective materials and instructions to not unintentionally help learners generalize some stereotypes and prejudices about others and/or fuel already existing ones (Lewald, 1963). Teachers are faced with the dilemma of preserving learners' cultural identities from distortion and blind imitation of the taught culture(s), lack of agreement over what culture(s) to teach, and how to embody their understanding of culture in their classes (Zhang, 2022). Following the same line of thought, teachers' set of beliefs and understanding of culture affect their practices. While some teachers view culture teaching as a mere supplementation of cultural facts added to lessons to motivate learners, others go beyond this superficial view to embrace a critical and focused view of culture to attain the objectives of language learning to the fullest (Yang & Chen, 2016).

The concern of how to teach culture has been solved by moving towards a critical intercultural perspective where learners are engaged and supported to go beyond mindless memorization of cultural knowledge to a more critical perspective of negotiating, analyzing, reflecting, and questioning cultures mindfully and objectively (Baker, 2022). However, the concern of which culture to teach is still problematic, especially in the EFL context. The upcoming section is an attempt to delimit which paradigm of culture to adopt in EFL classes: the essentialist vs non-essentialist paradigm of culture.

2.1 Essentialist vs Non-Essentialist Paradigm of Culture

The model of native-speakerism has been blindly followed by EFL teachers for a long time. The latter claimed its authority over language and culture teaching/learning. Imitating the way the English language is used by natives is a debatable topic for many language educators. EFL learners have always tried to imitate natives' use of the English language, particularly their accents and lifestyles. In EFL contexts, culture teaching has been restricted to the Anglophone cultural elements. Nonetheless, romanticizing the native-speakerism model has been harshly criticized for including only the Anglophone culture (Gray, 2010), and discarding the existence of other English-speaking communities '*World Englishes*'. This essentialist view of culture presents culture simplistically and stereotypically where erroneous generalizations are made about the culture of speakers of a given language (Holliday, 2011).

The essentialist view perceives culture as a static and rigid entity where all its members share the same cultural identities, whereas diversity is surpassed (Holliday, 2013). Within this scope, culture is taught comparatively, i.e., learners' culture is compared to the culture of the foreign language (Baker, 2022). This practice narrows the scope of culture teaching to teaching national cultures along their languages causing a banal nationalism (Billing, 1995). In the case of the English language, teaching the Anglophone cultures. In this matter, Liddicoat (2004) argued that effective intercultural learning can never prove successful if culture teaching is framed upon presenting only information about the culture of the target language. On this argument, teaching the Anglophone culture in EFL classes seems to be perplexing because it questions the ownership of English as a lingua franca which is no longer possessed only by natives (Baker, 2012; 2015).

Essentialists view culture as a pure homogeneous entity where particular cultural practices are generalized over a certain state and taught as predetermined categories. This structured view of culture negatively helps learners to fix stereotypes about others (Holliday, 2010; Baker, 2011). More

so, this view does not allow learners to question the belongingness of members of a certain community to one culture (Holliday et al., 2017). A case in point, instructing learners that all British people overconsume tea and have cooked beans for breakfast is a simplistic and stereotypical view. Different British people may have different patterns of living and eating despite belonging to the same cultural community.

Teaching culture as a fixed entity possessed by a particular national, ethnic, or religious group means giving it a little context. The essentialist view neglects the role of globalization, social mobility, and unprecedented immigration waves causing a complex, fluid, and dynamic world (Holliday, 2011). This perspective resembles teaching the visible aspects of culture and generalising them to embrace all members identified within this culture. As noted by Gounari (2020), teaching visible aspects of culture, namely, food, customs, national symbols, heroes, and more, is like a tourist's gaze on culture. It does not provide learners with insights into the day-to-day social experiences and identities of its members.

Having harshly criticized the essentialist view of culture for its shortcomings, the non-essentialist view of culture was validated by ethnographic scholars. This paradigm views culture teaching as a complex and scrutinized process which requires reflection and engagement with different culture(s) and sub-culture(s) (Holliday, 2010). This view is boundaries-free. It does not narrow the complex and dynamic nature of cultural identities into a particular homogenous social and cultural community where everyone shares the exact culture, instead, it promotes heterogeneity (Holliday, 2011). Cultural groups are dynamic and cannot be nationally bound to certain cultures as their practices and identities are in constant change. The change pertains to many spheres, a few to mention are economic, social, and historical. In addition to frequent international contacts causing remarkable cultural influence (Barrett et al., 2014).

The non-essentialist view embraces the diversity of cultures and the existing variability among the same cultures, and subcultures. Contrary to the previous paradigm, it acknowledges the external influence on the culture and identities of members of a particular community (Holliday, 2011). In EFL settings, this paradigm promotes a flexible pedagogy which incorporates different cultures and not only the Anglophone culture. This helps learners to develop a critical eye and a holistic overview of how different people perceive the world and act upon it.

3. Towards an Intercultural Citizenship: The Need for Intercultural Communicative Competence

Globalization, social mobility, frequent international contacts, open markets, tourist visits, immigration, media interaction, and many more, mark the growing need for international communication. Nonetheless, establishing a fixed and unified pattern of communication is far-reaching given the cultural diversity of people across the globe. Consequently, intercultural communication comes into existence (Martin & Nakayama, 2018). The latter, in common parlance, stands for the act of communication which takes part when two interlocutors from different cultures meet. It stems its value from the language-culture nexus as the cultural knowledge of interlocutors, which is mainly influenced by social, political, economic, and religious reasons, interferes with the way they behave in encounters (Baldwin et al., 2014). Given cultural diversity, different people have different worldviews, perceptions, and norms of interaction, not knowing and tolerating these differences has a great potential to impede and block the line of intercultural communication (Lusting & Koester, 2010).

Mastering intercultural communication requires a set of skills and competencies one must acquire. In this quest, different scholars have developed different models, yet the most acknowledged one is Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The ICC model is enjoying popularity in intercultural and international communication studies and foreign language teaching. ICC as proposed by Byram, is the effective use of the foreign language when interacting with people from different cultures. Its ultimate aim is to generate intercultural speakers who can adequately act as intercultural citizens in wider social contexts, instead of mindlessly imitating the model of native-speakerism. The term intercultural speaker was first introduced by Byram and Zarate in 1994 to replace the concept of 'native-speakerism' which has faded away; speakers need to be acquainted with social and cultural factors controlling communication and not only linguistic resources (Aguilar, 2002).

The multiculturalism of modern communities echoes the growing need for intercultural citizens who have sufficient knowledge, attitudes, and skills to effectively participate in such demanding communities (Barrett & Golubeva, 2022). Subsequently, pedagogies are positioned to generate intercultural speakers who can easily adapt to communication across cultures by establishing and maintaining its effectiveness. For one to attain this goal, he has to have ICC which calls for the mastery of a set of factors 'saviours' usually framed in the form of learning objectives. Byram (1997; 2021)

accentuated these factors to be used by FL teachers to go beyond the frontiers of promoting only communicative competence, to a more critical and focused pedagogy of accustoming learners to different varieties of language, World Englishes in the case of the English language, and how to act fitly in cross-cultural encounters (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022). Byram's saviours are explained as follows:

- *Savoir être (attitudes)*: having curiosity and openness towards people from other cultures, and willingness to establish and maintain relationships with them.
- *Savoir être (knowledge)*: having sufficient cultural knowledge about one's culture and other cultures.
- *Savoir comprendre (skills)*: it includes skills of interpreting and relating, i.e., interpreting events from lenses of other cultures and relating to them, spotting causes of cultural misunderstanding, and solving intercultural conflicts.
- *Savoir apprendre/faire (skills)*: it includes skills of discovery and interaction, i.e., learners use their acquired knowledge to communicate effectively in intercultural encounters.
- *Savoir s'engager (education)*: this saviour includes both critical cultural awareness and political education; that is, to objectively and mindfully have the ability to reflect, analyze, question, and evaluate cultures (Byram, 1997; 2021).

Byram's ICC model combines elements of intercultural competence and communicative competence; that is, it revolves around the following set of competencies: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and intercultural competencies which allow foreign language learners to act fitly in intercultural encounters. ICC is distinct from intercultural competence (IC) as the latter denotes having the ability to communicate effectively with people from different cultures, yet using one's own language. For ICC both interlocutors are assumed to use a foreign language (Byram, 1997). The ICC model is purely educational as it aims primarily to prepare foreign language learners for the 21st century. ICC is devised for foreign language teachers and learners because it was engendered in a set of learning objectives deemed to be teachable and assessable (Byram, 2021). Throughout this model, teaching practices are encouraged to move from mindless imitation of native-speakerism to preparing learners to be intercultural citizens.

4. Cultivating Intercultural Communicative Competence in EFL Settings: Moving Beyond the lense of Essentialism to Non-Essentialism

Given the dynamic world we live in, ICC is needed more than any time before. Although Byram's ICC model (1997) is widely acknowledged and adopted in EFL classes, its application is sometimes called into question. In his model, Byram delimited the concept of 'culture' to 'country', i.e., culture cannot go beyond the boundaries and national flag of the country it pertains to (Hoff, 2020; Matsuo, 2012; Risager, 2007). This view of culture is deemed to be oversimplified and views cultural groups homogeneously; that is, members of a particular cultural community hold the same cultural practices (Belz, 2007; Dervin, 2016). This implies Byram's essentialist view of culture which neglects the heterogenous nature of modern societies and the nature of cultural identities which are fluid and dynamic.

In this regard, Piller (2017) has criticized the essentialist pedagogy of culture claiming its promotion of banal nationalism by fueling stereotypes and othering. Hence, cultivating ICC demands a critical intercultural pedagogy which surpasses a simplistic view of culture and rather embraces cultural diversity. A case in point, instructing learners that all British are polite and all Japanese are shy. This generalization creates stereotypes about the national culture of those people and links politeness and shyness only to them. Stereotypes and generalizations are often made when people do not have enough information and experiences about the matter. Making such generalizations impedes effective intercultural interactions (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021). As an alternative, Holliday proposed non-essentialism.

Cultivating EFL learners' ICC calls for critical intercultural pedagogy which views the language-culture nexus as variable, negotiable, and evolving through interaction and not pre-established. Culture is a process, not a product, and so is intercultural communication (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021). In simple terms, both language and culture are dynamic constructs which constantly change and evolve. Adopting an essentialist paradigm when promoting ICC would detriment the effectiveness of the process. In the EFL classroom, some teachers position their cultural lessons on Anglophone cultures assuming it is the norm. This shadowed practice creates a sense of superiority vis-à-vis inferiority in the minds of learners and neglects the current position of the English language as a lingua franca and international language (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021).

On this argument, Braj Kachru (2003) pioneered a model which classifies the use of the English language into three major circles. The first circle 'the inner circle' represents the community where English is used as L1

(USA, UK, Canada, New Zealand). The second circle 'the outer circle' represents communities characterized by language varieties and English is a second language (Philippines, Singapore, India). The last one is 'the expanding circle'. It represents communities where English is used as FL (Algeria, Turkey, Qatar) (Schmitz, 2014). The number of speakers within the outer and expanding circles is outnumbering the number of those in the inner circle which demonstrates that the English language is no longer possessed only by its natives. Having said this, intercultural communication run by the English language is no longer taking part between a native vs a non-native but the possibility of both interlocutors being non-natives is more likely as English use is globally extending and becomes the common means in intercultural encounters (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021).

By adopting the aim of making learners global citizens through cultivating their ICC, teachers have to take learners to spheres beyond the national borders to discover and experience the diverse and globally connected world. In addition to participating in communities other than theirs, and value and respect cultural differences (Byram et al., 2017; Gaudelli, 2016). The educational sphere is a fertile context to attain this aim because it aids learners in knowing more about 'others' in a healthy manner (Porto et al., 2018). Byram (2008) defines intercultural citizenship education as learning which facilitates intercultural learning through analyzing and reflecting upon cultural experiences which results in a change in learners' cognitive, affective, and behavioural properties. The reliance on an essentialist conception of culture, therefore, does not satisfy this aim.

To foster ICC through a non-essentialist view of culture, a set of pedagogical implementations is suggested. (1) incorporating a zone of interculturality has to be systematic and consistent, and not haphazard and occasional. (2) multilingual and multicultural cooperative works are recommended, especially at the level of higher education. (3) adopting a critical approach to interculturality which embraces interactive engagement, negotiation, analysis, and reflection on materials and experiences, instead of mere dictation of factual cultural information. (4) learners must be aware of the pivotal relationship between language and culture, and the global variable use of the English language (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021). (5) teachers, too, have to undertake intercultural training where they can develop their set of competencies to effectively promote ICC (Boualli & Hamadouche, 2022).

5. Conclusion

Keeping pace with rapid changes in the world has become the ultimate aim of educational programmes. Today's classroom is no longer a place

where learners receive declarative knowledge to be tested in exams only. Instead, a more complex and futuristic perspective is adopted. Learners have to acquire some skills and competencies they need in the wider social context, among these competencies is the intercultural communicative competence. The latter is a vital skill for navigating diverse social contexts and fostering empathy and mutual understanding in a globalized world. Cultivating a zone of interculturality in EFL settings is a goal teachers must fulfil as modern communities demand people who are intercultural competent communicators. To attain this goal, educators have to evolve beyond essentialism, which delimits cultural teaching to the model of native-speakerism, and embrace a non-essentialist paradigm to delve deeply into the multifaceted, fluid, diverse, and dynamic nature of cultures. This paradigm empowers learners to be global citizens by preparing them to engage in appropriate cultural encounters, debunking stereotypes, and promoting constructive dialogue.

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