

Intercultural Dialogue and Globalisation in the Euro-Mediterranean Area: What is the Role of English?

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Abstract:

L'objectif de cet article est de réfléchir à la question de la place de l'anglais dans le dialogue euro-méditerranéen entre les orateurs du nord et du sud de la Mer Méditerranée. Nous observons tous les jours que l'anglais global est utilisé par des personnes qui partagent la même langue maternelle et qu'il envahit de plus en plus la culture des jeunes et les médias des deux côtés de la Méditerranée. Cette utilisation de l'anglais à des fins interculturelles se développera de manière exponentielle au cours des prochaines années, compte tenu du temps passé par les jeunes sur les réseaux sociaux à acquérir divers types de connaissances et à connaître l'Autre. Une enquête menée auprès de 114 étudiants de maîtrise en anglais, français, allemand, italien et espagnol à l'Université d'Alger 2 a révélé que l'anglais «global» est utilisé pour tous les types d'interactions. Cette domination de l'anglais peut être préjudiciable aux langues locales ayant une riche tradition culturelle, mais un « anglais académique global » et une plus grande intégration de thèmes interculturels dans les programmes d'études d'anglais devraient contribuer à promouvoir de meilleures relations et compréhensions culturelles et favoriser un dialogue interculturel plus profond des deux côtés de la Méditerranée.

Mots-clés: Dialogue interculturel ; Euro-Méditerranée ; anglais global ; programmes d'anglais

Résumé:

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the issue of the place of English in the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue between speakers north and south of the Mediterranean sea. We are observing everyday that global English is used by people who share the same mother tongue and invading youth culture and the mass media a little more on both sides of the Mediterranean. This use of English for intercultural purposes will probably expand exponentially in the next few years given the amount of time young people spend on the social networks to get various types of knowledge and know 'the other'. A survey conducted with 114 Master students of English, French, German, Italian and Spanish at the University of Algiers 2 has revealed that "global" English is used for all types of interaction. This dominance of English may be detrimental to local languages with a rich cultural tradition, but "global literate English" and more integration of cross cultural themes in English curricula should contribute to promote better cultural relations and understandings, and foster a deeper intercultural dialogue on both sides of the Mediterranean.

Key words: intercultural dialogue; Euro-Mediterranean; global English ; English curricula.

I. Introduction

Although English is not a language officially spoken in the Euro-Mediterranean countries, we are of the opinion that it should be included in the discussions of this forum for the very reason that the language is present as a foreign or additional language in all Mediterranean countries. As such, and given its status both as subject in many school curricula and medium of communication, it is bound to affect this dialogue ,in one way or another. And we wonder whether interculturality is not being expressed more and more through English and less and less through the people's first language(s) which may be perceived as neither sufficiently functional nor relevant to today's people's needs and concerns.

What seems of equal interest to us, here, is to examine the extent to which the English being taught today is not going into something more than a global language , into a global culture. And we are of the position that English should contribute to establishing an intercultural dialogue in the Mediterranean region rather than serving "global" purposes.

This paper attempts to answer three questions:

1. Where does English stand in the intercultural dialogue between the countries south and north of the Mediterranean sea?"
2. To what extent do students of foreign languages (English, French, German, Italian and Spanish) use English rather than other languages to communicate?
3. Can education in Algeria enhance learners' awareness of English as a language for building bridges between the cultures of the Mediterranean countries?

II. English In The Mediterranean Intercultural Dialogue

In order to answer the first question("where does English stand in the intercultural dialogue between the countries south and north of the Mediterranean sea?") one needs to define culture and interculturality ,then discuss the role and the position of English in the intercultural dialogue .

Culture is generally defined as what a group of human beings have in common or share. This common core is made up of the things and artifacts they use in their everyday life as well as the ways they perceive them and use them (practices)and what they believe it to be

right or wrong. In a less general sense, Nunan and Choi(2010: 127) refer to culture as

“...the membership in a discourse community that share a common social space and history, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating and acting”

Such definition assumes the existence of human groups or communities that live in different places, share past and present life, and have developed a “common” view of life in general.

We may be tempted to refer to the way(s) different communities meet and interact—exchange ideas and views—on their respective Cultures as interculturality but it seems that there is more to it especially from a pedagogical view point. In the pedagogical context of ELT(English Language Teaching), interculturality seems to be understood as referring to a set of abilities: and knowledge. This then involves using the target language (henceforth TL), interacting with the speaker of that language(here English) and knowing as well as being aware of what attitudes, values, goals, practices are shared by the TL speakers (Rollings-Carter 2010).

What further defines interculturality is that learners are expected to respond in, at least, three ways:

1. reflect on their reactions to the culture of other speakers
2. know and understand their own culture
3. be tolerant on differences and negotiate common grounds .

While such a view of interculturality is not in conflict with that held by scholars who are straightforwardly involved in Euro-Mediterranean matters, it seems highly simplified when assessed against Pace (2005) and Malville(2005)’s assumptions briefly discussed below.

According to Pace(2005), a dialogue involving the cultural dimension is expected to be based on a will to come to an agreement about shared grounds .Conditions for this to happen are highlighted in an interpretation by Pace (opcit).of the Bakhtinian model. Such a model has three components: “the speaker, the “other”/listener and the “relationship” between the two.

At a preliminary level, the “speaker” must reveal “unity of the self”; a reconciliation of self is required prior to interacting with the “other”, “the listener(as the second element of the model). At a subsequent level, the “other” must be accepted in the dialogue and a relation be established between the two (third element of the model).

In brief, dialogue, as here perceived, presupposes three conditions: 1) self-understanding and readiness to listen to the "other"'s language; 2) understanding their response before and 3) establishing a relationship and foreseeing a "conceptual horizon".

Pace's view seen from Bakhtinian lenses does not seem in conflict with Malville (2005)'s view in that the latter (reflecting Habermas's model) also interprets dialogue to depend on a set of conditions among which 1) "empathy" of the one who listens and who must not in any case stick to pre-held positions, 2) readiness to get rid of personal "beliefs" and "interests" leading the participants to 3) being/becoming in favour of "the better argument".

It appears that in both models, for dialogue to take place there should be a set of conditions: respect, equality and mutual understanding. They are made explicit by Malville (op.cit) in the following;

" The participant actors are expected to be open to and to learn from the Other. They are to respect the Other's cultural and religious diversity, and not to try to change the Other in accordance with specific values or beliefs. The interlocutors are to meet one another with curious minds, striving to reach a better understanding and knowledge of each other rather than trying to persuade each other to accept the superiority of certain values or certain identities" (op.cit.2005: 352)

Despite the great similarity of both models, the Habermasian model highlights "authenticity" as a specific feature. This seems essential in the discussion to be taken up again.

Notwithstanding their difference, these two views contribute to defining intercultural dialogue as an end-product of a self-mediation, self-educational process which prepares one to meet with and listen to "the Other" with an open mind sharing equal views and reaching common grounds. What seems to be taken for granted is that the attitudinal dimension is very much dependent on the linguistic prerequisite. Malville's emphasis on an "ideal speech situation" is not fortuitous. Dialoguing inevitably involves language speech and a capacity to communicate at large about what one is and what one knows, without restriction in relevant situations which is reminiscent of the need for authenticity in Malville's view of intercultural dialogue.

Communication which has been known for long to involve a face-to-face situation is nowadays possible through electronic devices of all sorts. What seems worth highlighting is that English, which is a subject in the school/university curricula in countries north and south of the Mediterranean, has now become the medium of internet communication and gained the status of a "global" language (Cameron 2002, Gray

2002, Block 2002, Kumaravadivelu 2005). This then renders focus on English unavoidable and one just wonders about the extent to which interculturality has been addressed by current educational programmes for if it has, one can assume that the way towards an intercultural dialogue has been already paved.

Mediterranean countries are users of Arabic (in the South) and European languages like French, Greek, Italian, Spanish, Maltese, Portuguese (in the North). However active these languages may be in smoothing the way to an intercultural dialogue, they are likely to be overshadowed by the predominant status of English as an international language. A further assumption is that given today's youths global needs and wants, communication may evolve around topics other than the ones in favour of an intercultural dialogue as above defined, due to the phenomenon of globalization and the narrow link that exists between English and Globalization. To this we now turn.

Gray (2002) insists on the unavoidable "conjunction of globalization and English" which is due to a speedy development of international businesses and the influence of the internet. In its general sense, globalization refers to a process of interaction and integration of countries and people of the world. Such process also facilitates businesses across countries and regions and owes its existence to technological development of which internet and alike connections.

More pedagogically oriented definitions of globalization view it as an increasing demand of English for study and professional purposes (Gray 2002, Ke 2015). This seems to establish the status of English as the (only) language through which scientific and technological knowledge in various domains is spreading through journals, reviews and other communication modes/media.

English has not been denied the belonging to a global culture or an intimate link with globalization. The point is emphasized by Dumitrescu (no date) in what follows: "English is the language of science, technology, academic youth culture, mass media and business to name a few of the most common fields". This also seems to integrate English within globalization of which it cannot be separated. And Gray (opcit) presents three major arguments in favour of the use of English for globalization purposes; they are briefly mentioned below:

1. Business and production companies spread all over the world and remain in touch through English, which then involves staff training in using English for such purposes

2. International academic events , publishing of scientific work, international banking and tourism are all conducted in English or at least using English translation

3. A predominance of English use on the internet.

Such great demand for English and consequently the production of materials to develop the users' English competence to operate in different fields, seems to have affected educational practices. Besides, English learners are getting younger every year and a number of textbook writers support the idea that the ELT book production should follow the winds of globalization.

Gray(opcit), for instance, notes that due to the expansion of English for international communication, the book industry has proliferated and content has varied a great deal ,shifting to the representations of characters and situations that convey a "framed" view of life and the world.

Block (2002) also observes that communicative approaches are addressing aspects of language use which are likely to contribute to a "reframing and restructuring communication" towards the needs of globalization. In other words, language use, here English, is rethought to meet specific standards characterized by a "taylorized, technologized and stylized" (Block 2002: 119) communication and that even the so-cherished negotiation for meaning (a target competency in ELT classroom interaction) runs the risk of serving what is referred to as "McCommunication" very much constrained within "the five key tenets: efficiency, calculability, predictability, control and standardization" towards a greater rationalization and uniformisation of human interaction.

When such reshaping of communication has contributed to making human conversational exchange probably effective, time saving and to the point, it is equally believed to be a kind of one- way discourse which limits itself to professional purposes and immediate problem- solution. As such, exchange through the medium of English will probably fail to capture a number of sociolinguistic considerations that might encourage users of a foreign language to have genuine interaction and one that is not deprived of what Malville (op.cit.) refers to as "authenticity".

We are, here, hinting at present and future learners (of English)'s general aims to acquire the abilities to use English naturally and spontaneously and the risk that they may be supplanted by a developing trend very much related to globalization and its "cultural hybridization effect" (Vittachi 2002).

Despite evidence (in both real life and the literature) of an increasing “hybridized” use of English, the tendency does not seem to meet approval and it faces criticism in favour of a “return” to literate English, a variety that is more likely to foster the seeds of an intercultural dialogue.

But this is by no means meant to undermine the beneficial outcomes of studying a FL or to stigmatize ELT for not contributing towards the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue, or even delaying or slowing down this dialogue, far from it; the aim here is to emphasize the necessity to give back to ELT the noble role of broadening learners’ scope and developing intercultural competence.

III. Use Of English By Students Of Foreign Languages

To what extent do students of foreign languages (English, French, Spanish, German and Italian) use English rather than other languages to communicate? As stated earlier, English is becoming a basic skill everywhere in the world and holds a key role in the labour market. In countries of the BRIC group (Brazil, Russia, India and China), English is the dominant language for international business. It is becoming extremely demanded in the emerging north African countries like Algeria and also in many countries around the Mediterranean sea.

But does English has ‘potential rivals’ in this area? What role do other languages such as Arabic, French, Italian or Spanish play in the intercultural dialogue? Are they used to communicate or do young people use English only for exchanging culturally in this part of the world?

A survey was conducted with 114 students enrolled in the Master courses of three different departments where English, French, German Italian and Spanish are taught as foreign languages. The aim was to elicit information on the following questions:

- How often and in what situations do students use English at university?
- How often and in what situations do they use English outside university?
- When they use English through social networks, what topics do they discuss?
- What are the most demanded working languages in Algeria?
- When they use English, what other language(s) do they tend to mix it with?

- What is the best/most useful language for intercultural communication?

The students' responses have revealed the following:

a) A majority of students state English is an important tool for communication at their disposal and seem to appropriate its use according to their own purposes: to write emails, to communicate through social networks (Facebook, twitter, Viber, what's up) and chat with other multilingual speakers to share information, values, worldviews, etc. Some of them (professionals) use it at work. They also use English with their friends, and even at home with their parents, sisters and brothers, family members, etc. They discuss on the net and exchange ideas on everyday life, studies, culture, travel, holidays, sport, videogames, cooking, films, music; they discuss everyday problems, talk about their future, etc; they say this exchange enables them to know one another and develop friendly relationships; however, fewer responses were about writing texts in English.

b) But unlike the students of English who have a good level of English language proficiency, and can communicate easily with other English speaking people, the students of foreign languages such as French, Spanish, Italian and German confess their limited knowledge of English sometimes does not allow them to discuss abstract ideas or have deeper interactions with other speakers of English. They say they use 'simple' English to exchange general information or talk about daily routines, but this exchange nevertheless helps them to practise the language and to greatly improve it. Most of them are not afraid of making mistakes, and despite their language weaknesses, admit that English helps them communicate and exchange views and ideas. It is clear that these students do not hesitate to "customize" their English to fit their particular contexts and needs and to appropriate it.

As one can see from this survey, English is the language of not only the youth and youth culture for all types of interaction (internet, cultural artefacts, etc), but also of students (their age ranges from 22 to 32 years old) who are increasingly interconnected through English and eager to exchange with other students/people on all types of topics. The fast technological developments (smart phones, what's up, twitter, etc) have enabled them to develop an interconnectedness which seems to transcend national boundaries and can certainly be beneficial to an intercultural dialogue, although one would expect more use of languages other than English.

This use of English for intercultural purposes will probably expand exponentially in the next few years given the amount of time they

spend on the social networks to get various types of knowledge and know 'the other'.

IV. English In The Educational System

Can education in Algeria enhance learners' awareness of English as a language for building bridges between the cultures of the Mediterranean countries? There is no doubt that English education in Algeria has something to offer in terms of intercultural competence to build bridges between different cultures and a dialogue between the people/learners living south and north of the Mediterranean. But do the present English curricula and textbooks favour the expression of such dialogue?

The current Algerian curricula for English and the locally-produced Algerian course books for English have tried to integrate local cultures and a cross-cultural component to develop learners' intercultural competence at all levels of education (middle and secondary school). For eg, the official syllabus for the secondary school includes topics such as "intercultural exchanges", 'diversity', 'peace and conflict resolution', 'poverty and world resources'. All these topics are meant to foster discussion, openness, tolerance and avoid bias and preconceived ideas, through classroom activities involving pair work, group work or whole class work. As Ke (2015: 68) rightly remarks,

"People speaking the same language, particularly a global language, increasingly have different cultural experiences and values. Language differences used to be blamed as the cause of intercultural conflicts, but conflicts also come from differences in values, beliefs, worldviews, and people's interpretation of the meaning of life"

Teachers are also invited to deal with language and culture as two sides of the same coin. For instance, the comprehensive list of guiding principles of teacher competencies issued by the Ministry of National Education(MoNE 2009: 8) provides thirty teacher competencies, among which:

"The teacher chooses topics and tasks that allow learners to develop skills in learning and communicating about themselves and their community, and about their country and the world"

"The teacher introduces a variety of topics of interest to the learners that are related to other cultures , comparison of cultures and international issues"

Teaching English in Algeria is therefore meant "to reinforce access to academic, technological and cultural networks around the world" (MoNE 2009). Our educational system should celebrate and value difference to make intercultural discourse more fruitful and more

powerful. Comparing perspectives and processes can generate creativity. However, the Algerian ELT curricula and textbooks should include more local cultures and different world views. It is important to adopt comparative perspectives and describe/ refer to local historical facts and events within a perspective of dialogue and tolerance in order to avoid perspectives that foster hatred and violence, or that regard oneself as the wisest or the best, and all the rest as inferior.

However, if the English school curricula and textbooks have tried to incorporate the notions of dialogue and intercultural exchange through the themes proposed to teachers and learners, as stated earlier, the way these are treated in class is an issue as there is generally little debate or critical discussion in the classroom. Some teachers discourage or even forbid critical discussion of controversial issues. In class, both teachers and learners tend to focus on the "right" answer to any question, while complex, deeper questions that do not find "easy" answers are simply ignored. For eg, it is difficult to enter into a class discussion about multiple or conflicting interpretations of some historical events because knowledge is perceived as "absolute".

It is also important to mention that some educational materials (textbooks), not produced locally, are rather biased and tend to over-emphasize western /American consumerist values and to reflect the 'New World Order' to the detriment of national values. Consider the following text:

"Bill Gates is the richest private citizen in the world. There is nothing he can't afford. Every morning, when his alarm clock goes off, the software tycoon is \$20 million richer than when he went to bed. His wealth is based on his company, Microsoft, of which he owns 39% of the shares. He has a personal fortune estimated at £18 billion, which is more than the annual economic output of over a hundred countries"(Soars & Soars, *New Headway: Upper- Intermediate*, 1998: 59. Cited in Gray 2002 p.151)

These "global English coursebooks", largely used in private language schools in Algeria, carry a "pervasive neoliberal orthodoxy"(Gray 2002: 153) and cultural messages of globalisation which could have negative effects on learners. Such textbooks fail to incorporate cultural multiplicities and might lead students to see themselves as spectators not actors, or even feel inferior. As a Catalan teacher of English stated in reaction to the authors of this textbook,

"...they do this a lot...they, they take people, maybe Americans more...and then they kind of glorify it a bit, and they are not very critical" (cited in Gray 2002: 151)

Revisiting basic texts on Anglophone literatures and cultures both at school and university to foster dialogue is also worth considering. Discussing basic texts within an intercultural perspective, addressing a variety of genres and artefacts (fiction, poetry, drama, historical documents, art, painting, cinema, architecture, music, dress, photography, etc) and adopting a multimodal approach can help broaden the students' horizons. It is also important to emphasize that teaching 'literate English' will aim to fight the 'technicist, skills-based view of literacy' (Wallace 2002: 102) and develop an awareness of

cross-cultural literacy practices that focus on differences and enable students to 'write back' or 'talk back' in English.

Wallace proposed a "shift from embedded, primarily oral language towards disembedded, written or literate-like language". Global literate English or "the kind of English we admire for its elegance and eloquence" (Wallace 2002: 106) is a supranational global English used as a "Secondary Discourse" which is more powerful when used "discursively rather than experientially" (op.cit: 106). This transnational English should be used not as a simplified lingua franca but as a more elaborate form of language which will take into account "its expository function in formal settings" and shared knowledge associated with "transcultural exchanges".

Developing an approach to intercultural dialogue also means reflecting on local pedagogies to integrate local ways of learning, understanding and knowing. We are faced with two supposedly opposed types of pedagogies: traditional memory-based pedagogy, largely inherited from Islamic ways of teaching and learning, and progressive problem-solving pedagogy, largely inspired by western pedagogues such as John Dewey. But are these pedagogies that distant from each other? Good teachers certainly know how to use them in a symbiotic way to produce good learners, open to dialogue and ready to exchange views and ideas with others.

V. Conclusion

Is English contributing or intruding in this dialogue? English is certainly enabling people living south and north of the Mediterranean to get closer to each other, but the hegemony of this language might interfere with other languages, depriving them from the opportunity to participate in this dialogue where English appears to have the lion's share. The results of the survey conducted in the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University of Algiers 2 demonstrate that a large number of students are keen to dialogue and exchange culturally with other people in English, even if this means no use or little use of the language(s) they are learning.

English can help young people ,who are tomorrow's citizens, exchange their views and opinions on the historical and contemporary underpinnings of their society and the issues of its complexity. This may lead to peace and stability, but it may also lead to conflict as the globalized world is far from being homogeneous. It is also important to stress that computer culture has invaded the world, embedding digital skills in many cultures at many levels, formal education and profession . More and more people are aware that it is digital culture that is imposing them to speak "digitalese as the lingua franca across all frontiers"(Battro 2004). This dominance of English may be detrimental to local languages with a rich cultural tradition. But English can serve other purposes too. Viewed as a "supranational global English", this language will be more powerful when used "discursively rather than experientially"(Wallace 2002: 106) and contribute to promote better cultural relations and understandings, and foster a deeper intercultural dialogue on both sides of the Mediterranean.

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