

## An Investigation into the Effectiveness of Intercultural Awareness in Improving Foreign Language Learners' Communicative Competence

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### Abstract

The present study aims at identifying the effectiveness of intercultural awareness in improving EFL learners' communicative competence. The main concern in the present paper is to help learners develop their communicative skills by increasing their intercultural awareness. It is hypothesized that if intercultural competence is raised in learners, then they will have their communicative skills enhanced. A descriptive research design is opted for to tackle the present research theme. A questionnaire was devised for second year students at the department of English, Batna2 University. After analysis and interpretation of the learners' answers, the hypothesis was confirmed and few suggestions are put forward for teachers as far as intercultural awareness is concerned

**Keywords:** EFL learners, Communicative competence, Intercultural awareness.

### الملخص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تحديد فعالية الوعي الثقافي في تحسين الكفاءة التواصلية لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. نسعى من خلال هذه الورقة لمساعدة المتعلمين على تطوير مهاراتهم التواصلية عن طريق زيادة وعيهم لأدراك أهمية الثقافة. فرضيتنا هي أنه إذا تم رفع كفاءة الثقافة لدى المتعلمين ، فسيتم تعزيز مهاراتهم التواصلية. تم اختيار تصميم بحث وصفي لمعالجة موضوع البحث الحالي. كما تم استعمال استبيان لطلبة السنة الثانية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة باتنة 2. بعد تحليل وتفسير إجابات المتعلمين ، تم تأكيد الفرضية وطرح بعض الاقتراحات للأساتذة فيما يتعلق بالوعي بأهمية الثقافة

الكلمات المفتاحية: متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، الكفاءة التواصلية ، الوعي الثقافي

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## Introduction

Foreign language learning is becoming a necessity for many people with the growth of globalisation. Communication and interaction with foreigners attracted many people who became more and more eager to develop their understanding of speakers of another language and holders of a different culture. In this new context English gained prominence as an international language of communication and exchange. People from different cultural backgrounds, are increasingly motivated, not only to learn the linguistic component of the language (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation), but also, the cultural dimension to ensure a full mastery of that language. The cultural awareness is becoming a necessary component to be mastered by students to facilitate their total grasp of the foreign language. Learning how to communicate among speakers of different languages and possessing different cultures. This intercultural awareness is very essential to provide these language speakers or learners with a better mastery of the language and more importantly, it equips them with the necessary tools to bring meaning and value for the communication process, because when a language is isolated from its cultural dimension, it becomes meaningless. (Krauss & Chiu, 1998)<sup>1</sup>.

## Statement of the Problem

A foreign language classroom is a setting where two different cultures co-exist and the teacher's role is very important to help the learners transcend this stage of facing a foreign culture brought to them via the foreign language. Resistance to the unknown is common between many learners and there is an urgent need to raise the students' awareness that difference should not always be seen as a negative aspect. Rather, it needs to be made of a very positive effect on the learners' progress when it is inappropriately handled by the teacher and the students. The students' communicative competence can be

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<sup>1</sup>Krauss, M. R., & Chiu, C. (1998). Language and social behavior. In Gilbert, T. D., Fiski, T. S., & Lindsey, G. (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (4th ed.), Vol. 2. (pp. 41-88). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

enhanced if they are helped to develop a more positive view of the other. This can only be done, if the common features between the two cultures are highlighted as well as the points of difference are explained and negative attitudes towards them are eliminated.

## Research Question and Hypothesis

The present paper seeks to answer the following question:

-To what extent does intercultural awareness contribute to the improvement of the students' communicative competence?

And the following hypothesis is set:

-If EFL learners are aware of the intercultural dimension, their communicative competence will be enhanced.

## 1. Literature Overview

### 1.1 Intercultural Awareness and Competence

Language and culture are closely related and it is agreed among many scholars that language learning and intercultural awareness cannot be separated (Kramsch 1993)<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, the importance of integrating the cultural element in the foreign language classroom cannot be denied because the mastery of a foreign language is not limited to grasping the linguistic component of that language, but should allow the learners to appropriately communicate in this language.

### 1.2. Culture

Culture is a term that contains many aspects of human life and the way of living of people. It covers religion, food, clothing, marriage, music, how we greet visitors. Moreover, culture as Brown (2000)<sup>3</sup> suggests, can also be defined as the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and

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<sup>2</sup>Kramsch, C. (1993). Language study as border study: Experiencing difference. *European Journal of Education*, 28(3), 349-358.

<sup>3</sup>Brown, D. H. (2000). *Principles of language Learning & Teaching*. (4th ed.). New York: Longman. (pp. 176-200)

tools that characterize a certain group of people in a given period of time. Culture is often viewed as a set of behaviours, values, and assumptions that affect thoughts of the members of the social group. Culture is both socially and psychologically distributed in a group, and so the delineation of the cultural features will always be fuzzy. Furthermore, Spencer-Oatey (2012)<sup>4</sup> points out that:

Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influences each member's behaviour and his /her interpretations of the 'meaning' of the other people behavior.

Culture is a set of attitudes, practices, beliefs, experiences, and values shared by the members of the society and influence the individual's mind (Schwartz 1992)<sup>5</sup>. In their definition of Culture Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963: 132)<sup>6</sup> said that:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action.

### 1.3. Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness is a term derived from cognitive psychology. It is related to the cognitive and behavioural changes. It was considered as the basis of communication and an important tool for

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<sup>4</sup>Spencer-Oatey, H. (2012). What is culture? A compilation of quotations. Global PAD Core Concepts. Retrieved from:

<https://www.warwick.ac.uk/globalpadintercultural>

<sup>5</sup>Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the content and structure of values: Theory and empirical tests in 20 countries. In M. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 25, pp. 1-65). New York: Academic Press.

<sup>6</sup>Kroeber, A. L., & Kluckhohn, C. (1963). *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. New York: Vintage Books

teaching and learning a foreign language. It involves the ability of being conscious and able to recognise that people have various values, perceptions, and beliefs that result from their diverse cultural backgrounds in order to communicate and avoid conflicts and misunderstanding. It is related to consciousness of the similarities and differences between cultural groups which leads to showing respect towards the others and accepting their opinions, feelings and rights even if they are different to our own culture. Byram (1997: 24)<sup>7</sup> claimed in his model of teaching culture: 'cultural awareness is concerned with the non-linguistic dimension of culture and more focused on the question of change from mono cultural to intercultural.' Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004)<sup>8</sup> claimed that cultural awareness helps learners widen their minds, increase tolerance and achieve cultural empathy and sensitivity. On one hand, they gather knowledge about different cultures and on the other hand, they learn how to develop their empathy to deal with the cultural diversity.

Winkelman (2005:9)<sup>9</sup> states that cultural awareness includes recognition of one's own cultural influences upon values, beliefs, and judgments, as well as the influences derived from the professional's work culture.

#### **1.4. Intercultural Awareness**

In a multicultural world, people need to have at least some intercultural awareness which means possessing knowledge about their own culture and the other cultures. The intercultural awareness helps them recognize and make the distinction between the similarities and differences between both cultures. In the foreign language classroom, intercultural awareness refers to the activities connected with behaviour

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<sup>7</sup>Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon Multilingual Matters

<sup>8</sup>Tomlinson, B, and Masuhara .H (2004) *Developing Cultural Awareness* *Modern English Teacher*, 2004, 13(1), 5-11

<sup>9</sup>Winkleman, M 2005, *Cultural Awareness Sensitivity and Competence*. Eddie Bowers Publishing.

and speech patterns such as appropriate choices for conversation topics, opening and closing a conversation, criticizing and complaining, stereotyping, reacting to culture shock, personal space restrictions and non-verbal communication. Intercultural awareness appears when people meet others from different cultures and start to interact with them in order to build productive relationships and operate effectively in a world of globalization.

According to the definition proposed by (Byram, 2000: 297)<sup>10</sup>, the term intercultural awareness implies a restructuring of one's own attitudes and worldview. In other words, it involves awareness and consciousness of different values, attitudes, and behaviours of the 'others', as well as skills in order to deal with them in a non-judgmental way. Nevertheless, intercultural awareness from a cognitive perspective emphasizes the changing of personal thinking about the environment through the understanding of the distinct characteristics of our own and others' culture. So, in general possessing an intercultural awareness is being competent in a global society where people of different cultural backgrounds come to depend on one another in order to accept and understand the cultural differences. The latter may lead to have a good connection in the intercultural relations. There are four levels of intercultural awareness according to Hanvey (1987)<sup>11</sup> as shown in the following figure:

Level	Information	Mode	Interpretation
Level I	Awareness of superficial visible cultural	Tourism, Textbooks	Unbelievable i.e. exotic bizarre

<sup>10</sup>Byram, M. and Planet, M.T. (2000). *Social Identity and European Dimension: Intercultural Competence Through Foreign Languages Teaching*. Graz : Council of Europe Publishing

<sup>11</sup>Hanvey, G. R. (1979). Cross-cultural awareness. In Smith, C. E., & Luce, F. L (Eds.), *Toward Internationalism: Readings in Cross-cultural Communication* (pp. 46-56). Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, INC.

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	traits – stereotypes		
Level II	Awareness of significant subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with ones' own	Culture conflict situations	Unbelievable i.e. frustrating irrational
Level III	Awareness of significant subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with ones' own	Intellectual analysis	Believable cognitively
Level IV	Awareness of another culture feels from the standpoint of the insider	Cultural immersion living the culture	Believable because of subjective familiarity

Levels of Intercultural Awareness (Hanvey, 1979: 53)

**1.5. Communicative Competences**

The term communicative competence was first used by the American sociolinguist and anthropologist Dell Hymes in contrast to Chomsky's linguistic competence. Hymes (1972) defined communicative competence not only as an inherent grammatical competence but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in a communicative situation. He stated that 'there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless' (Hymes, 2001: 60).

Savignon (1972 :8)<sup>12</sup> describes communicative competence as ‘the ability to function in a truly communicative setting that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors. According to her ‘the nature of communicative competence is not static but dynamic, it is more interpersonal than intrapersonal and relative rather than absolute’.

Taylor (1988) proposed to replace communicative competence with the term “communicative proficiency”. At the same time, Bachman (1990)<sup>13</sup> proposed the term “communicative language ability” arguing that this term unites in itself the meaning of both language proficiency and communicative competence. He defined communicative language ability as “a concept comprised of knowledge or competence and capacity for appropriate use of knowledge in a contextual communicative language use”. Bachman dedicated special attention to the aspect of language use, which means the way how language is used for attaining a specific communicative goal in a specific situational context of communication.

Widdowson (1978)<sup>14</sup> defined communicative competence in terms of Usage and Use; where “Usage” refers to one’s knowledge of the linguistic rules, and “Use” refers to one’s ability to use his knowledge of the linguistic rules for effective communication. In the other hand, Widdowson (1983)<sup>15</sup>, made a separation between competence and capacity, he defined competence, i.e. communicative skills, in terms of understanding of linguistic and sociolinguistic conventions. He recognized the ability to use information, which he also referred to as functional or communicative skills as means of creating meaning in

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<sup>12</sup>Savignon, S. J. (1972). *Communicative Competence: An Experiment in Foreign-Language Teaching*. Philadelphia: Center for Curriculum Development

<sup>13</sup>Bachman, F. L. (1990). *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Walton Street, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>14</sup>Widdowson, H.G.(1978) *Teaching Language as Communication*. London: Oxford University Press.

<sup>15</sup>Widdowson, H.G 1983 *Review. Learning purpose and language use*: Oxford University Press.

language. According to him, ability is not a part of competence. He gave more attention to performance in his reflections on the relationship between competence and performance.

Krashen and Terrell (1983: 15)<sup>16</sup> have defined communicative competence as the use of language in social communication without grammatical analysis. They linked communication skills to communication, and did not concentrate on grammatical skills. It ensures that the communication qualities are embodied. They argued that the primary objective of language learning was to develop the communicative skills. They arrived at the idea that “language is best taught when it is being used to transmit messages, not when it is explicitly taught for conscious learning”

So, communicative competence is defined as one of the most important language notions in specific context of communication, it depends not only on speakers, but also on their interlocutors, sequence of events, and comes under the heading of performance. Communicative competence means possessing communicating skills, that skill may be oral, written or even nonverbal. It is an inclusive concept referring to the possession of language skills as well as the capacity to use the language in real-life circumstances for fulfilling communicative needs.

### **1.6. Barriers of Intercultural Communication**

Intercultural communication may be faced by misunderstanding between people from different cultures. This misunderstanding is usually the result of barriers or blocks such as: anxiety, assuming similarities instead of differences, ethnocentrism, prejudice, language and stereotypes(Laray M. Barna 1997)<sup>17</sup>. Anxiety refers to the fear or stress of someone who feels himself out of his comfortable zone, or when he is placed in a situation not familiar to him which may cause the feeling of unease and nervousness. Another barrier is assuming similarities instead of differences, which happens when people are not

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<sup>16</sup>Krashen, S.D. & Terrell, T.D. 1983 *The Natural Approach: Language acquisition in the classroom.* Oxford: Pergamon

<sup>17</sup>Laray, M. Barna 1997. *Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication.*in Samovar Larry A., Porter Richard E. *Intercultural Communication: A Reader.* 8th ed. Wadsworth, CA, USA

aware about the cultural diversity and assume that cultures are similar in their nature., which may cause misunderstanding when the person interacts with people that have different cultures. Ethnocentrism is a perception that an individual has for someone else's culture and heritage as being inferior to his or her own culture and heritage (Coopman and Lull, 2015)<sup>18</sup>. Another barrier is related to stereotypes which are the perceptions one maintains about people who belong to a particular race, sex, or social class. They are closely related to prejudice which refers to a negative perception created by individuals on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion (Samovar and Porter, 1991)<sup>19</sup>. Language may also be a barrier to intercultural communication. It often causes misunderstanding between individuals when they speak different languages.

## **2. The Study**

### **2.1. Research Method**

In order to determine to what extent, the intercultural awareness represents an important source for boosting the learners' communicative competence, the descriptive method is opted for. This method 'aims at casting light on current issues or problems through a process of data collection that enables them to describe the situation more completely than was possible without employing this method'. (Fox and Bayat, 2007)<sup>20</sup>

### **2.2. Population and Sampling**

The population selected for the present study comprises second year students of English at Batna2 University during the academic year

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<sup>18</sup>Coopman, S. J. and Lull, J. (2015) *Public Speaking .The Evolving Art* 3rd ed. Cengage Learning USA  
Ember, C.R 1999 *Cultural Anthropology* Pearson NY.

<sup>19</sup>Samovar, L.A., & Porter, R.E., (1991). *Communication between cultures*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

<sup>20</sup>Fox, W, & Bayat. S. M. (2007). *A guide to Managing research*. Cape Town: Juta.

2020-2021. The choice of the students was random. And their number is 50 out of 250 second year students (20% of the whole population).

### **2.3. Data Collection Tools**

To gather information about the present topic, a questionnaire was administered to students after it was piloted. It is divided into three main sections, the background information section, the communicative competence section, and the intercultural awareness and competence section. The questionnaire was validated after piloting. This latter allowed us to add some items and remove others, because they were not yielding the required information, or were not understood by the students.

### **2.4. Data Analysis and Interpretation**

The majority of the respondents are aged from 20 to 23 (42 students), while only 2 are aged less than 20 and 6 more than 24. Which indicates that we have a more or less homogeneous population. As for their gender, the great majority are girls 40 females and only ten males, which reflects the overrepresentation of girls in the department of English. They have the same experience with English language learning, and do not vary significantly in their level of proficiency in English. When asked about culture, its definition and significance in the foreign language classroom, the majority of the respondents seem to agree that culture refers to traditions, customs, beliefs, language, and religion. Some relate culture to behaviour, life style, food, clothes, music, and art. The students agree on the importance of teaching the cultural aspect in the foreign language classroom because it helps overcome all kinds of misunderstanding between speakers of different language and people with different cultural backgrounds. The majority of the respondents consider intercultural awareness as a necessity, because it affects their way of thinking in a positive way and helps them broaden their horizons and improve their understanding of the other. When asked about their own evaluation of their intercultural competence, the students expressed their regret for its being too low because they have never had the opportunity to deal with people from different cultures and all they know about English speaking people was taught in the classroom or seen in movies or documentaries.

When asked about the chances they are offered to communicate in the classroom, they said that they have a little opportunity to express

themselves, in the normal situation, let alone the special circumstances with advent of the Covid- 19 pandemic where time allotted to the different courses was reduced and communication opportunities alike.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching a foreign language is considered as a mission where the teacher has to work on the development of the students' competences to improve their learning outcomes. For that reason, the present study emphasizes on the effectiveness of intercultural awareness in improving EFL learners' communicative competence; ensuring that being such a competent speaker in a language is related to the mastery of its cultural values, attitudes, situation ...etc as it is mentioned earlier. Another conclusion through this study was that teaching culture as a fifth skill will give the opportunity to students to be more involved in culture-based talks where there is exchange between people from different cultural backgrounds. This exchange can be virtual or face-to-face. In either case, foreign language learning can be fostered and learners' fear from engaging in classroom talk or every day conversation can be reduced.

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## Appendix: The Students' Questionnaire

Dear Students,

I invite you to answer this questionnaire that aims at collecting data for a research project about the effectiveness of intercultural awareness in improving EFL learners' communicative competence. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

1. Age: .....

2. Gender:

Male

Female

3. How would do you describe your level of proficiency in English?

Weak

Average

4. What is according to you the difference between linguistic competence and communicative competence?

.....  
.....  
.....

5. Do you think that communication is neglected in the classroom?

Yes

No

Why?

.....  
.....  
.....

6. Do you think that you can run a conversation with a native speaker?

Yes

No

7. What does the term 'Culture mean for you'?

.....  
.....  
.....

8. Does developing awareness about cultural differences minimize misunderstanding between people of different cultures?

Yes .....

Why?

.....  
.....  
.....

9. Is intercultural awareness important for communication?

Yes  No

If yes,how?

.....  
.....  
.....

10. How does intercultural awareness affect your way of thinking?

.....  
.....  
.....

11. Do you think that the English department should include linguistic trips in the curriculum for the aim of raising learners' intercultural awareness?

Yes  No

12. Do you think that culture should be added as a fifth skill?

Yes  No

Why?

.....  
.....  
.....

13. Do you think that learning a foreign language without learning cultural information is complete?

Yes  No

14. What kind of materials would enhance your cultural competence?

Audiovisual materials (videos).

Written materials (books).

Others .....

15. When communicating with foreigners, you may face several barriers, which ones affect you?

- a. Anxiety (worry)
- b. Prejudice (harm)
- c. Ethnocentrism (racism)
- d. Cultural relativism
- e. Nonverbal communication
- f. Assumption of similarity instead of differences

Thank you for your cooperation