

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract: *Language education should centre around the development of the intercultural communicative competence in learners as it enables them to appropriately interpret messages belonging to foreign contexts. It is not sufficient to be fluent and accurate in English for successful communication to occur if little attention is devoted to the intercultural communicative competence. Learners might interpret the message from their ethnocentric points of view and not value the otherness in the interlocutors. The article analyses the observation of a class in English C2 Level in which the learners failed to appropriately interpret the messages of the texts they had to deal with. It appeared that their intercultural communicative competence was poorly developed, although their fluency and accuracy in English were rather good. It becomes clear that language educators should prioritize the development of intercultural communicative competence, particularly at present when the global village has become a reality.*

Keywords: *intercultural communicative competence, language education, culture, ethnocentrism, otherness, cultural self-awareness, cultural being, communication.*

Introduction

Challenging as it is, the 21st century language classroom appears to encompass a variety of possibilities to develop not only the basic skills but also the 21st century skills in learners. It is the time when the EFL teacher should apply an integrated-skills approach to the language education process in order to enable the learners to become fluent and confident in English, on the one hand, and to successfully integrate in the 21st century globalized world, on the other. Adopting such a holistic perspective on the language education process will benefit both teachers and learners.

One of the major goals to pursue is the development of the intercultural communicative competence (hereafter, ICC) in learners. Scholars [4], [6] have argued that it is impossible to separate language from culture, moreover language **is** culture. Indeed, any act of communication is context bound, whereas the context is determined by the culture of the people involved in the process of interaction.

Understanding the main concepts

The term culture is rather problematic to define as it includes a variety of aspects that are difficult to summarize within one sentence. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Intercultural Competence* [2, p. 194] offers a straightforward working definition of culture by citing Matthew Liebmann: "Culture is that which is socially acquired." Indeed, culture is not something people inherit genetically, it is what they acquire throughout their lives by coming into contact with various contexts, where the family context is probably the first social context they interact with. It can also be noted that a person's culture cannot be defined in terms of a finite process that ends at a certain point. It is rather a continuous development in which the person is exposed to and interacts with other contexts that help shape their own culture. If the process is perceived as finite, there is a high probability of staying within the limits of a few contexts not allowing the person to fully understand the complexity of the existing cultural diversity. Consequently, this might result in communication failure and sometimes even conflict.

Lustig and Koester [9] identify five imperatives for intercultural competence: demographic, technological, economic, peace, and interpersonal. Indeed, living in a globalized world, the need to understand culture and the way it impacts communication is growing. Societies have never been more diverse and multicultural. Hence, people should be aware of this in order to achieve success in communication.

Quite often culture is erroneously perceived as something existing outside the person, whereas this is what makes a person. Hence, identifying oneself as a cultural being is crucial in the process of developing ICC [5]. One cannot appropriately engage in the process of intercultural interaction if they have not developed cultural self-awareness, i.e. their 'conscious ability to critically view and

understand the objective and subjective cultures to which the individual belongs' [2, p. 177]. This is why it is vital for the language educators to first develop this awareness in their learners.

Thus, the role of the English language educator becomes even more complex. On the one hand, they should foster cultural self-awareness in their learners, on the other, they should develop ICC so that they can successfully realize their communicative intentions while interacting in English. The two concepts are interrelated as a person's cultural self-awareness will impact their interpretation and understanding of another culture, leading to appropriate communication across cultures. Teachers become mediators bridging the possible intra- and inter- cultural gaps, helping learners appropriately interact in English.

The status of English as an international language poses an additional challenge to language educators as English cannot be solely associated with the cultures where it is a national language. People learning English as a foreign language are likely to use it as a means of communication between cultures other than American or British. This is why McKay [10] called for the reconceptualization of the English teaching pedagogy taking into consideration the status of English. In the scholar's opinion, learners should be exposed to international target culture materials alongside source culture materials and target culture materials. This is supposed to foster their ICC, enabling them to appropriately communicate in various contexts.

Factors influencing the intercultural communication

Selecting the materials that will foster ICC in learners can also be rather challenging. In this respect, Ur [14, p. 5] admits that it is impossible to teach our learners all the cultures of the world. Instead she suggests exposing learners to a sample through the materials prepared by the language educators, and increasing the learners' sensitivity to the kinds of differences from their own cultures that they may come across. By helping learners raise their cultural self-awareness, teachers help them develop their ICC, which will enable them 'to detach themselves from an ethnocentric point of view (which is perhaps inevitable in younger learners), see their own community as part of a worldwide mosaic, and to begin to learn about the differences and relationships between them' [14, p. 220].

Thus, the development of ICC should become a key priority to EFL teachers. ICC will inevitably contribute to the development of interaction skills, in general, enabling learners to communicate successfully in various contexts. Figure 1 has been adapted from Byram [4, p. 34] and shows the complexity of intercultural communication. It displays the factors involved in it as well as the existing relationships among them.

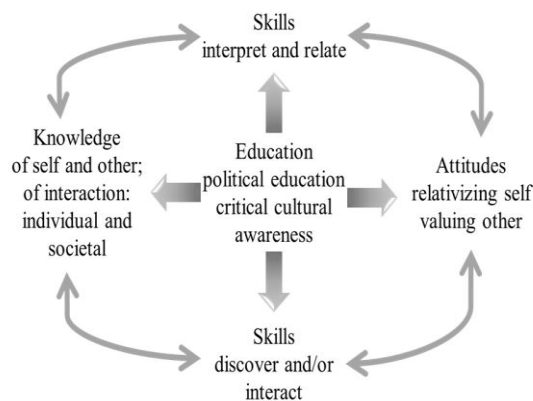


Figure 1: Factors influencing the success of intercultural communication

As seen, intercultural interaction is a complex process where the interlocutors should apply appropriate knowledge, use necessary skills, and display specific attitudes while negotiating the meaning of the message. Education is placed in the centre in this figure, and it is at the core of a person's identity. It can be obtained both formally and informally, and sometimes informal education prevails over formal education in the complex process of interaction when the acquired prejudices and stereotypes hamper the decoding process. This is when the person is not open and willing to discover and accept the otherness of the interlocutor. They refuse to step back from their own beliefs and understand those of the other person.

Hence the role of formal education is crucial in helping learners raise their awareness of this problem. The language classroom is particularly fit to serve this purpose. Teachers should take the opportunity to expose the learners to the otherness existing within and outside the boundaries of their own country, thus helping learners develop their interactive skills. They should foster curiosity in their learners, this willingness to discover new horizons and realize that tastes differ. Moreover, they should realize that this is how it should be, that diversity is beautiful and what is different does not necessarily mean that it is bad.

In the language education process learners should gain knowledge about themselves, identify themselves as cultural beings. They should learn about the others and how they differ. It is also important to expose learners to what is termed as national culture, what creates that unique cultural identity of a person. This knowledge will help learners adopt a positive attitude regarding the others. They will be able to acknowledge and value the otherness in people, whereas their own values and beliefs would be perceived as relative but not absolute truths.

The development of ICC in learners will only contribute to success in communication, enabling learners to appropriately interpret the conveyed messages. It is a key competence necessary not only in intercultural communication but also in everyday communication. Moreover, by acknowledging the existing differences within one's own setting, learners will only foster their ICC, being able to apply the same encoding and decoding strategies to foreign contexts.

Redesigning the teaching paradigm

The methods applied to the language education process are still traditional where the focus is predominantly on the formal aspect of the language. Undeniably accuracy holds an important role in the process of communication; yet, it is not the key factor contributing to success in communication. The primacy of fluency has been widely researched and scholars [1], [7], [11], [12], [13], [15] have thought of various ways of scaffolding namely fluency in learners. As a result, a variety of methods appeared within the communicative approach. It appears that the shift from accuracy to fluency was too extreme, scholars [3], [8], [14] have argued for the need of a more balanced approach that would put the development of accuracy and fluency on equal footing. This is how the principles of the post-method approach were formulated and it appears to be the optimal approach in language education.

Although fluency and accuracy are important in the process of communication, communication failure can still occur unless the learners have developed ICC. This is the main reason why the language pedagogy should be reconceptualized and designed in such a way that it will contribute to the learners' ICC development.

It is important to note here that simply exposing the learners to target culture materials is not enough. This will undoubtedly lead to the learners' gain of knowledge about some cultural facts that will facilitate the understanding of a certain message. Yet, culture is both tangible and intangible, and the latter is the most difficult to grasp. What language educators should do is to constantly monitor and scaffold the process of message interpretation, on the one hand, and to check the learners are open-minded and not letting their acquired prejudices influence the decoding process, on the other. Learners should have a positive attitude towards the *otherness* element present in the message that is communicated.

The most challenging task is probably to develop this awareness in learners and not to impose a point of view on them. By simply telling the learners that they have totally misunderstood the message in a piece of discourse and giving them the right answer will contribute little to the ICC development. Moreover, the aim of education is not to tell learners what to think, but how to think. Consequently, language educators should foster critical thinking in learners allowing them to draw the most appropriate conclusion by themselves.

Such a process might appear rather tedious as it is impossible to realize this goal during a few lessons. Language educators should realize that they should design their teaching in such a way that it focuses on ICC development at every lesson alongside the development of the four basic skills.

Observations regarding the ICC development in MA students

While having a class in English C2 Level with a group of 6 students in the spring of 2021, I could observe that learners could not detach themselves from their ethnocentric points of view. Moreover, they seemed to be unaware of the way their prejudices interfered with the interpretation of the messages from different types of discourse. They relied on their biases and stereotypes they had

got from the stories during their so-called informal socialization [4, p. 36]; whereas the formal education had contributed little in their ICC development.

Having the intention to cover a topical issue affecting mostly Europe and North America, and which started in the USA, I asked the learners to research what BLM is. What the learners did was to take the first source they found online and to make a presentation on that information without actually getting to the core of the problem. They did not consult various sources to do an in-depth analysis and then report on their findings. Instead, they interpreted the message from their ethnocentric point of view, relying on the information from that first source that popped up in their search. As they used the same search engine, all of them had more or less the same information, the only thing that differed was the way they presented it on their PPTs.

It appeared that they rather misunderstood the actual problem the black community is still facing. The students are not racists at all; all are empathetic people, ready to offer their help and support when needed. They also have a keen sense of justice. Yet, if we look at their interaction with the text, we can conclude that they failed to fully understand its meaning. What they did in the process of this kind of interaction was to apply their ethnocentrism in the decoding process. As slavery was not an issue in Moldova, at least not that they are aware of, it becomes challenging to see the other perspective.

They appeared to have been influenced by stories they had heard or seen on various social media channels which only increased their ethnocentrism. For example, they gave the quite common misleading view that was quite popular on social media that people were mourning the death of a criminal. They totally missed the point that they were protesting the injustice the black community is experiencing. Statistics show that black people are more likely to be arrested or even shot than the white people. Thus, they wanted to draw attention to this problem and make the society overcome their prejudices. They were fighting against racism. What is more, people of all races joined the BLM movement.

The short story *The Filipino and the Drunkard* by William Soroyan was interpreted similarly. The learners seemed to justify the behaviour of the American drunkard claiming there was no evidence in the text that he was really going to physically harm the Filipino. They totally overlooked the psychological bullying and stalking the Filipino had to suffer, whereas the racist discourse of the American was totally misunderstood. They did not side with the American, yet, they did not see him as someone who had done something horrendous. When it comes to the Filipino, his actions were strongly condemned. In their view, the Filipino should have found a better hiding place and stayed there.

What appeared interesting was the fact they completely ignored the third main character in the story, i.e. the crowd. It is a collective character, but it is the one which is central to the understanding of the message of the story. It is the silence and indifference of the crowd that led to that tragic event. They all saw that the Filipino was unjustly treated, yet, they did absolutely nothing to stop it. As a result, it was rather difficult for the learners to make the connections between the silence of the crowd from the story and the fight against the silence around police brutality that still persists in US society. The reason why the learners misinterpreted the messages is reflected in Figure 2.

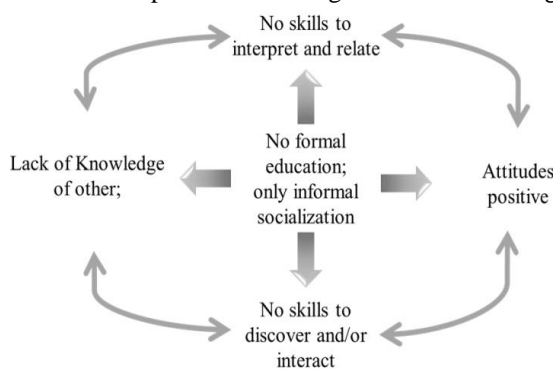


Figure 2: MA Learners' factors impeding the process of intercultural communication

As seen, although the learners had a positive attitude and a rather open mind, in general, this was not sufficient to understand and appropriately interpret the messages in the texts they were working

with. I would argue that their cultural self-awareness was developed, they were able to identify themselves as cultural beings. Yet, they failed to discover the otherness in the texts they interpreted.

They did not gain any formal education on the notions (e.g. it was a total surprise for them that racial segregation was outlawed in the 70s of the previous century). However, informal socialization only reinforced the prejudices against otherness. This lack of knowledge of the other hampered the interpretation process, and stopped them from discovering the core of the problem (they all used just the first source that appeared in their search results).

It can be concluded that it was an example of intercultural communication failure. It is quite surprising as the learners were adults and possessed quite vast knowledge of the world. Yet, they seemed to have their ICC poorly developed. It should be mentioned that their English language proficiency level varied from intermediate to advanced. Thus, it can be assumed that it was not the language hampering the process of interpretation but their poorly developed ICC.

Conclusion

ICC development should become a priority in the language education process. Language does not exist outside culture; the sooner learners are helped to raise their cultural self-awareness the better. Language educators should realize that this is the first step to be taken in the ICC development and foster it at every lesson. They should help learners discover the otherness and overcome their prejudices against it. It is not sufficient to tell them about it. Instead, they should expose learners to various materials that would challenge their preconceived biases and help them think critically whenever trying to interpret a culturally specific text.

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