

Shirin Eskalieva

Master's degree 2nd year student, Faculty of Foreign Languages, specialty: English Language and Literature, Nukus State Pedagogical Institute. Uzbekistan, Nukus

TEACHING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES

Abstract: In a rapidly globalized world, EFL teachers are increasingly urged to incorporate intercultural competence in language classes. This paper is concerned with the incorporation of the teaching of culture into the foreign Language classroom. The main premise of the present paper is that effective communication is not limited to linguistic competence and language proficiency and that apart from enhancing communicative competence, cultural competence can also lead to empathy and respect toward different cultures as well as promote objectivity and cultural perspicacity. In fact, teaching a foreign language carries a novel culture which includes one's religion, gender and a set of beliefs. Yet; though language and culture are so closely interwoven into each other that one cannot be conceived without the other, language is still taught as a separate phenomenon from culture and classroom activities are bereft of any instruction of foreign cultures. It is to be noted that much research into the incorporation of culture in language learning remains to be done so that the pedagogical principles of culture teaching may be articulated and applied effectively to the development of materials, and curricula. Thus, the purpose of this paper is first, to explain the ideas and theory which define what is involved in the intercultural communicative competence, and second, to demonstrate what intercultural competence would mean in practice for teachers and learners in language classrooms and how to make it easily accessible in practical ways.

Key words: cultural awareness, culture teaching, EFL, intercultural communicative competence.

Introduction

Teachers/learners of foreign language (FL) have always faced a demanding task of learning/teaching FL culture, for teaching/learning a foreign language is not limited to linguistic competence, and language proficiency, but mainly incorporates, or should incorporate, some cultural elements, which are intertwined with language itself. In fact, teaching a foreign language carries a novel culture which includes one's religion, gender and a set of beliefs. Yet, though language and culture are so closely interwoven into each other that one cannot be conceived without the other, language is still taught as a separate phenomenon from culture and classroom activities are bereft of any instruction of foreign cultures and this decontextualized method of teaching has plagued the field for many years. Indeed, today, university teachers of foreign. language (FL) face a pedagogical environment in which two camps have developed: one basing its emphasis on communicative competence, the other on the importance of exposure to culture. The purpose of this exposure is to help language learners to interact with speakers of other languages on equal terms showing mutual understanding and accepting difference. It also aims at helping the learner go beyond informative communication into developing relationships with other languages and cultures, showing awareness of their own identities and those of their interlocutors. This aim is in tune with one major innovation of communicative language teaching, namely that learners. need the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways. The need to integrate culture in language teaching is now firmly established. The debate about whether or not to include culture in a language classroom is long past; now the discussion points to matter of effective method. Many language educators have already presented a number of valuable methods. for teaching culture such as "Using role play", developing a mental image of the target culture, "Celebrating a holiday or festival of the target culture", or Teaching culture through "nonverbal communication". Despite the fact that diverse methods have been proposed to teach FL culture in language classes, the difficulties have not been completely removed. It is to be noted that much. research into the incorporation of culture

in language learning remains to be done so that the pedagogical principles of culture teaching may be articulated and applied effectively to the development of materials, and curricula.

Defining Intercultural competence: It is to be stressed that in a rapidly globalized world, FL teachers are increasingly urged to incorporate intercultural competence in language classes. Being interdisciplinary in nature, research into intercultural communication (IC) is conducted in a wide variety of academic disciplines as education, communication studies, cultural anthropology, and behavioural psychology, name just few relevant disciplines. This will involve building up a view of ICC in relation to the existing FLT theory in order to elaborate a model of ICC capable of informing discussion of teaching in an EFL class. In any EFL class which places intercultural communicative competence at the core, any FL teacher would raise the following question: how to integrate the intercultural dimension in an EFL class and how to acquire ICC? FL teaching which integrates an intercultural dimension combines between the two following objectives:

1. Helping learners to acquire the communicative competence needed to communicate in speaking or writing, to formulate what they want to say/write in correct and appropriate ways.
2. Developing the learners' intercultural competence i.e. their ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality.

As stated earlier, the teaching of culture will not be limited to the transmission of information about the people of the target culture and their general attitudes, as traditional thought in FL education suggests and EFL, teachers should be concerned with following goals:

1. To help learners see relationships between their own and other culture
2. To help them acquire interest in and curiosity about 'otherness', and an awareness of themselves and their own cultures seen from other people's perspectives.
3. To help learners to understand how intercultural interaction takes place.
4. How social identities are part of all interaction,
5. How their perceptions of other people and others people's perceptions of them influence the success of communication,
6. How they can find out for themselves more about the people with whom they are communicating.

To achieve these goals effectively, FL teachers should try to design suitable activities that would prepare FL learners to communicate with open minds with other intercultural speakers and tolerate differences.

ICC as practice in an EFL Class

One question germane to the present paper is how can we incorporate culture into the foreign language class, with a view to fostering cultural awareness? There are many possibilities to follow to develop Intercultural communicative competences in our learners; relevant methods techniques are to be chosen. However, the subsequent practical part will not concentrate on this broad area, but present some specific techniques to be used in the classroom. Prior to considering some concrete techniques for teaching culture in the foreign language classroom, it is useful to provide some guidelines for culture teaching.

First, in tune with ICC and the dynamic view of culture, already discussed, receptive knowledge of cultural competence is not sufficient; learners will also need to acquire some skills in culturally appropriate communication.

- Second, to avoid what Lessard-Clouston calls 'a laissez-faire approach', when it comes to teaching methodology, and to deal with culture teaching in a systematic and structured way.
- Third, to include evaluation of culture learning as a necessary component of the foreign culture teaching, providing students with feedback and keeping teachers accountable in their teaching.

Teaching Methodological suggestions

Here, the FL learners are engaged in comparative analysis between their own culture and the target culture. In relation to different cultural topics, EFL Learners are encouraged to look for cultural similarities and differences with the target culture in comparison with their own culture.

This comparison/ contrast analysis will lay the ground for a dialogue that could enhance EFL learners' cultural awareness. This method draws on learners' own knowledge, beliefs and values and leads to increased cultural knowledge, understanding and acceptance, which provide a basis for successful intercultural communication. In this process, it is hoped that learners will develop a third place that would enable them to make both an outsider's and an insider's view on their culture and the target one.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is worth stressing that FL teachers should be foreign culture teachers as well. For fundamentally, teaching a foreign language is incomplete without the study of the related culture. The topic of teaching and learning culture has been a matter of considerable interest to language educators and much has been written about the role of culture in foreign language instruction. The clear and unique indissoluble relationship between a culture and its language is based on the work of educators from various disciplines. In the light of the above mentioned dynamic view of culture, culture learning is taken to be the process of acquiring general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is a dynamic, developmental process which engages the learner cognitively and affectively. Incorporating intercultural communication in EFL teaching is an attempt to develop learner's cultural awareness and to help them transcend traditional ethnocentrism and explore new relationships across cultural boundaries. Though many scholars have already presented a number of valuable models and definitions of ICC which lend themselves to the integration of language instruction and intercultural learning, there is often only a random exposure to culture in the EFL classroom, FL teachers cannot avoid culture teaching by rigidly holding to the traditional values of classroom behaviour, for culture is intimately bound to language. EFL teachers therefore need to shift from a traditional stance to an inter-cultural one to develop both linguistic and intercultural competences of learners. The approach the teacher engages in will depend greatly on his or her attitude towards the target culture and perspective on the teaching of culture in the language classroom. Yet one recommended approach is characterized by the treatment of cultural issues openly and directly in a comparative cross-cultural manner. Besides, FL teachers should avoid teaching culture as facts, but rather as cultural understanding, intercultural competence and an awareness of the importance of dialogue when trying to understand another culture. Central to the teaching methodology suggested here is to provide opportunities for interaction so that the students can impart their own way of seeing things. Meta- awareness and cross-cultural comparison lie at the heart of such culture pedagogy. This teaching methodology comprises fundamental learning processes as the learners' exploration of their own culture and the target culture and the discovery of the relationship between language and culture.



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