

The Role of Intercultural Interaction in EFL

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, it is a widely known fact that teaching and learning a foreign language cannot be reduced to the direct teaching of linguistic skills like phonology, morphology, vocabulary, and syntax. The contemporary models of communicative competence show that there is much more to learning a language, and they include the vital component of cultural knowledge and awareness. In other words, to learn a language well usually requires knowing something about the culture of that language. Communication that lacks appropriate cultural content often results in humorous incidents, or worse, is the source of serious miscommunication and misunderstanding. Throughout multiple regions around the world, waves of migrants and refugees search for better and safer living conditions. As a consequence, audience are becoming increasingly multicultural and multilingual, with many teachers feeling challenged when faced with this different reality. Being English the most commonly shared language around the world, the English as a Foreign Language audience can be a right place where intercultural communication is fomented. Intercultural interaction, or engagement with members of different ethnolinguistic groups, plays an important role in shaping one's language-learning experience. In EFL contexts, where English is rarely used in daily communication, intercultural encounters with English speakers are novel but can be a powerful stimulus for motivational change and a rich source of input for developing language skills.

Introduction. Intercultural communication is the study and practice of communication across cultural contexts. For instance, they can better understand their own identity in relation to others, the cultural context a language is used in, and other essential lessons for language learning.

The significance of Intercultural Communication is to try and prevent miscommunication and the role of cultural communication is fundamental because cultural and social contexts are constantly changing, and therefore essential to the planning, design and implementation of foreign language lessons. For this reason, intercultural competence makes the process of foreign language acquisition more meaningful, as students will have a more culturally informed and critical position in their studies. Through raising awareness of this through training, it helps promote more successful communication. Intercultural Communication is something that is researched, read about and taught for many reasons.

For starters, understanding how culture impacts communication helps us understand more about the areas of culture and communication. On top of that, it helps us understand more about

ourselves as people and as a species. On a personal level, Intercultural Communication can help us understand our own preferences, strengths and weaknesses when it comes to communicating and how these can help or hinder us when communicating across cultures.

Intercultural Communication can help us understand all manner of things about ourselves as human beings from how we create meaning to the mechanics of the brain (neuroscience) to the use of language(s) for social cohesion. Intercultural interaction ‘the purpose’ for us is to help professionals understand how culture impacts their effectiveness when working abroad or in a multicultural workplace.[1]

Furthermore, it is important to mention that in the EFL classroom there are spaces where students, apart from acquiring a new language, will become aware of intercultural communication, making cultural factors relevant to the learning process. However, this situation is not present in all these spaces, since intercultural awareness is affected by the promotion of superficial activities subordinated to stereotypical concepts. This can make their understanding very basic and not very meaningful, which affects how both language and culture are understood by both participants: teachers and students.

In an EFL class, students are usually monolingual and they learn English while living in their own country. They have little access to the target culture and therefore a limited ability to become culturally competent. Importantly, their aim for learning English is not only to communicate with native speakers of English but also with non-native speakers of English, which is why EFL learners are typically learners of English as an International Language (EIL). By learning English, EFL students are enabling themselves to become users of international, or rather intercultural, communication—thus, the target language becomes a tool to be used in interaction with people from all over the world, where communication in English takes place in fields such as science, technology, business, art, entertainment, and tourism.[2] It is obvious then, that in order to successfully function in a culturally diverse environment, our learners need to develop intercultural communicative competence.

Clearly, if EFL learners are to become successful intercultural communicators, it is essential to provide them with a thorough and systematic intercultural training, and not only of the culture of the main English-speaking countries. EFL students will benefit by gaining solid knowledge of the different world cultures, and they must also develop the ability to compare their native culture to other cultures, to evaluate critically and interpret the results of such comparisons, and to apply this knowledge successfully in both verbal and non-verbal communication, for both transactional and interactional purposes. Since “culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, it is of paramount importance that the cultures, not simply chosen cultural aspects, are dealt with during EFL lessons.[3] Successful international communication is reason enough to introduce the intercultural approach into EFL classrooms.” However, there is another good reason is that in many countries, there is still much intolerance towards and prejudice against other nations and cultures.[4] Intensive intercultural education seems to be a good way to sow the seeds of tolerance, acceptance, understanding, and respect.

This competence is said to help learners acquire the knowledge they need to learn in given any field of human knowledge. Thus, cultural awareness and expression are needed for the creative expression of ideas, experiences and emotions. It is worth mentioning that this study focuses mainly on the last competence according to the European Council learner competencies list outlined above. According to Kiet Ho, Intercultural language learning is the stance on language teaching and learning that emphasizes the interdependence of language and culture and the importance of intercultural understanding as a goal of language education. It is increasingly being promoted as a way to develop learners’ ability to negotiate meanings in different languages which will ultimately prepare them to live in a multicultural world.[5]

In some EFL settings, classes consist of students of different cultural backgrounds; in others, classes are culturally homogeneous. In the former case, learning about diverse cultures and developing intercultural awareness are often not new issues - in multicultural classrooms, students learn about each other's cultures through various activities, and not only during English lessons. Classes of learners in culturally homogeneous settings, on the other hand, do not present a pressing need to raise cross-cultural awareness, so multicultural education is absent from school content. We can use this understanding to help us recognize what is being communicated to us and how we communicate with others. EFL teaching-learning situation, it goes without saying that teaching English as a foreign language is not only related to the teaching of linguistic facts of the target language such as phonology, morphology, vocabulary and syntax. The contemporary models of communicative competence demonstrated that learning a foreign language brings together the vital components of cultural knowledge together with awareness, favorable attitudes to the target language and its culture and the motivation to learn them. To put it differently, the learning of English as a foreign language requires, in addition developing adequate cultural awareness and understanding in the EFL context can be a tall order particularly in situations where the FL culture and L1 culture are quite distinct.

Furthermore, it has to be born in mind that EFL learners do not have much access to the target language culture and therefore their ability to become culturally competent in the FL is very much reduced particularly if the materials and syllabuses they are using are not tailored to enhancing their socio-cultural competence in the FL. What was found to be working in building EFL learners' cultural awareness and understanding is time and adequate exposure to the skills and mechanics of the language, a knowledge of some socio-cultural aspects of the target language.[6]

Conclusion. Successful culture and intercultural EFL classrooms determined by consciously address the growing need for healthy and democratic interaction among students. Therefore, institution, especially English Department needs to consider on revising the EFL plan in order to meet the students need on cultural and intercultural competence. Teaching language as a component of foreign language learning has long been the concern of many scholars and researchers for decades, thus, different approaches to culture teaching have been put forward. Some of these approaches focus only on the culture of the country whose language is learned and is considered inadequate nowadays because it does not consider learners' understanding of their own culture.

By way of summarizing, the role of Intercultural Communication in work life is in helping people understand how culture shapes the different ways we communicate, collaborate and coordinate.

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