Problematising Intercultural Communicative Competence in Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

In light of students' international mobility, learning modern languages has become the key to unlocking new opportunities. Within this global mobility, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become a new buzzword in language teaching and learning. Generally, it is defined in terms of knowledge, attitudes and skills which supply language learners with "the ability to interact effectively with people from cultures that we recognise as being different from our own" [1]. Despite several attempts in contemporary literature to establish an encompassing model of teaching ICC, a coherent understanding of how this concept relates to classroom pedagogical practices is still lacking [2]. This paper, therefore, addresses two interrelated facets of teaching ICC. First, the theoretical framework underpinning ICC models in foreign language learning is critically discussed. Secondly, the practical facet of teaching ICC will be further examined through discussion of findings from teachers' interviews. In this respect, teachers' perspectives about ICC are explored to highlight the challenging nature of teaching ICC and the pedagogic issues it raises given the inconclusiveness of existing teaching models. Finally, practical considerations are suggested for teachers to implement the intercultural dimension into their language classroom.

Keywords: *Intercultural communicative competence, language and culture teaching.*

1. Introduction

Kramsch and Zhu contend that foreign language leaning is inevitably "an interpersonal and intercultural process whereby learners come into contact with teachers and other learners of diverse personal histories, experiences and outlooks" [3 p 40]. This denotes that the fields of language learning and intercultural communication are closely interrelated. Despite the bulk of research studies reviewing this connection, conclusive teaching models have not been offered yet for foreign language teachers to guide their language classroom. This paper aims to discuss English language teachers' perspectives on current ICC teaching models in a quest for practical pedagogical suggestions.

2. Review the literature

"The intercultural language teaching and learning is not simply a new way of doing teaching and learning but a new way of understanding what teaching and learning is". [4 p 26]

Language learning is mainly a sociocultural endeavour by which learners' develop their schematic knowledge of interpreting and meaning-making through active engagement in social interaction. From this perspective, the intertwined relationship between language and culture has become one of the most controversial topics in the field of language teaching leading to divergent approaches to defining the notion of culture and its relation to language learning. As several existing definitions of this notion are problematic and need to be treated with caution, scare quotes are used with the word 'culture' to indicate scepticism toward the way and the purpose for which it is used. This section will briefly discuss current approaches to implementing the intercultural dimension of language teaching and learning.

2.1 Intercultural approach to language learning

Can culture be taught? To what extent does learning about other 'cultures' help language learners to communicate effectively? Several attempts to find answers to similar questions are identified in Byram's seminal work. Byram first suggested a model to use in language classrooms which involves developing the following aspects in learners:

- Attitudes (savoir être).
- Knowledge (savoir) of self and others.
- Skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre) when interacting in intercultural encounters.
- Skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire).
- Critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager). [5]

Throughout these five 'savoirs', Byram maintains that learners are guided toward a higher level of thinking in which they are put in situations where they need to reflect, analyse and evaluate perspectives, practices and products in ones' own and the others' cultures. Although this model seeks to promote learners' understanding of the cultural diversity in the world, it homogenises people and ignores the existing diverse identities they possess. Furthermore, the systematic development of skills that this model assumes is also questioned.

2.2 Problematising current approaches to ICC

One major contribution brought by Byram's work, is transcending the 'native speaker' model and perceiving learners as intercultural speakers with their own linguistic and cultural profiles which they bring to communication. Despite the fact that Byram's model and others with similar aims have been extensively used, a raised concern relates to the way they put into practice the objectives sought to be achieved. According to Dervin, Byram's model is paradoxical [2]. Although the model aims to draw learners' attention to the diversity and flexibility of intercultural communication, the five 'savoirs' are mainly concerned with learners' cognitive skills and focus less on external factors such as the actual situational context. Consequently, they place learners in non-interactive systematic stages where they are supposed to acquire these components progressively. As a result, this perception of moving from a low to a high level of intercultural competence is controversial.

The lack of actively engaging learners in interactive situations as they would normally do in real life communication is another weakness. Existing ICC models do not highlight the way meaning in communication is jointly constructed by both subjects involved in communication. As such, the model overlooks that communication breakdown and misunderstandings are not entirely a consequence of learners lacking cultural knowledge and their negative attitudes they hold towards other 'cultures', but other factors play a vital role in such situations such as the context (both prior and actual).

The model also overemphasises knowing, accepting and critically interpreting the other's 'culture' in which 'the other' is always someone from another foreign country. This indirectly conveys that individuals possess a single rigid identity which is to a great extent ascribed to them by their national culture, whereas the way individuals' identities are represented in communication is dependent on specific context, thus, it can never be predicted.

Overall, the majority of current models of teaching ICC are based on a comparative approach between learners' national cultures and that of others with a particular focus on differences. This approach might lead to generalisations and the promotion of stereotyped ideas [2]. Therefore, these ICC models are seen as problematic in the way they simply prescribe a ready-made recipe for achieving idealistic successful intercultural communication.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative approach through which a case study was undertaken in an Algerian institution for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). One part of the EFL curriculum accentuates the importance of developing learners' ICC. Therefore, the case of this institution seemed relevant to the purpose of this paper. Data was collected through interviews with ten EFL teachers. Braun and Clarke's [6] thematic analysis was used as an analytical framework to develop themes relevant to the research questions. These themes are discussed below.

4. Findings

One theme identified within the analysed data is discussed in this paper. The theme relates to EFL teachers' perspectives about teaching ICC and the pedagogic issues they are facing given the inconclusiveness of the existing teaching models. Furthermore, practical considerations are suggested as alternative teaching techniques when implementing the intercultural objective into the language teaching classroom.

4.1 EFL teachers' perspectives of ICC models

The relevance of ICC in teaching any language was emphasised by all the interviewed teachers on the basis that language use always carries socio-cultural embedded meanings that learners need to be aware of. However, what these teachers found challenging is the implementation of ICC as a learning outcome. There are two challenges that frequently arise; firstly, the EFL teachers find the ICC models broad and confusing in the sense that they merely concentrate on cultural knowledge transmission and often fail to highlight the dynamic and the interpretive nature of communication for learners. Secondly, teachers also perceive these models as problematic since they present a static

approach to teaching language and culture. They also questioned the appropriation of English language to a specific national 'culture' such as the 'Anglophone culture' as a point of reference notwithstanding that English learners are expected to communicate internationally and use English as a lingua franca. Consequently, these teachers opted to concentrate on developing their learners' attitudes towards language and its use in different contexts to encourage them to engage in lifelong learning. Furthermore, they emphasised the importance of experience as one teacher maintained "*culture cannot be taught, it has to be lived*".

4.2 Teaching culture as a discourse

Given the problematic nature of the current ICC teaching models, this paper postulates teaching culture and ICC following a discourse approach. The latter considers 'culture' as a verb rather than fixed ascribed cultural identities related to a particular group or a nation [3]. Furthermore, a discourse perspective considers any language "as a social semiotic system that mediates global form and local thought, national and transnational interpretations of history, collective and individual apprehensions of reality" [3 p 48]. In other words, the global use of a particular language unavoidably undergoes inflections brought by speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, this entails critical consideration of 'meaning' in language teaching and learning which needs to be treated from a sociolinguistics and pragmatics perspective. Therefore, raising learners' awareness of the nuances of meaning expressed by people with different social affiliations and identities (gender, age, profession… etc.) becomes the core of intercultural language learning. A discourse approach suggests raising learners' awareness of the impact of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds on communication rather than teaching them how to interact with specific people such as Americans or Egyptians. Teaching culture as a discourse approach also emphasises the vital importance of raising political and historical awareness.

Along the same line, this approach calls for a cosmopolitan methodology which reflects learners' expectations. The term cosmopolitan refers to the contributions of learners and all their linguistic and cultural resources they bring along that can revolutionise and enrich the teaching methodology by crossing the cultural boundaries imposed by national paradigms of teaching languages and cultures. These contributions are local but they serve global communication [7]. Within this approach, teachers are advised to engage critically with teaching materials, which might often be imposed on them by their teaching institutions, especially those materials dealing with 'cultural' differences. Stated differently, they should usher their learners to go beyond the surface level of just taking things at face value and encourage them to seek critical explanations, appreciate complexity and avoid preconceptions and overgeneralisations that are detrimental to real life communication.

5. Conclusion

Despite its ubiquity, ICC teaching has been subject to criticism. The global spread of modern language across cultures and the increasing complexity of defining what culture is, have led many research works to re-examine the practicality of ICC teaching models. A concern raised in this paper relates to the danger of falling in the trap of national homogeneity, reductionist and essentialist understanding of language and culture relationship. Alternately, this paper attempted to shed light on the co-constructive nature of intercultural communication in which both interlocutors negotiate meaning in an actual context. Consequently, ICC cannot be prescribed in terms of a set of fixed skills. Additionally, successful communication is somewhat contingent on speakers' linguistic and social backgrounds. Therefore, language teachers need to develop their learners' critical awareness of language and culture.

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