Developing Intercultural Competence by Building up Awareness of Racism through ELT

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Abstract

Cultural understanding involves discerning that interculturality is not an unbiased entity and recognizing that cultural interactions are similar to a game of power, where one of the parties tends to impose its beliefs, frameworks, and prejudices. Since the development of intercultural competence has attained status as an essential target in ELT and given that one of the most significant sociocultural occurrences that arise in worldwide societies is racism, this paper portrays the results of an action research study whose objective was to build up cultural awareness of racism to contribute to the development of intercultural competence through a series of TBLT lessons. The participants were a group of students who were taking a B1-level English course at a university in Mexico. The data analysis was developed using qualitative analysis through descriptive coding and quantitative analysis. The outcomes showed that the intervention yielded positive results in building up awareness of racism and fostering intercultural competence. Similarly, the intervention produced advantageous outcomes regarding learning English, specifically acquiring a new vocabulary.

Keywords: *Intercultural competence, cultural awareness, awareness of racism, racism, TBLT.*

1. Introduction

The paper discusses how ELT can become an effective and helpful tool for promoting intercultural competence. It will highlight the importance of cultural awareness in shaping interculturally competent students and the use of TBLT to make this possible. Owing to that, this paper proposes an intervention involving six lessons targeting raising cultural awareness regarding race and enhancing language skills. To raise awareness of racism, students explored the concepts of internalized racism, interpersonal racism, institutional racism, and systemic/structural racism.

2. Statement of the Problem and Objective

Nowadays, the cultural dimension in which several teachers cover culture in English language lessons is insufficient to help students develop cultural awareness, which is necessary to build up intercultural competence. It cannot be overlooked that effective world language instruction merges language and culture [10]. Understandably, these topics may be avoided in classrooms, especially if they come with controversy, which could negatively affect the learning process. Bearing this in mind, the problem addressed in this study is that university students of English are not building up awareness of cultural and social issues when they learn English, hindering the development of intercultural competence.

3. Research Questions

The study addresses three research questions: 1) What is the impact of the intervention in building up awareness of racism to foster the development of intercultural competence? 2) What are the students' perceptions of the intervention as a means to learn about racism? 3) How do students perceive the intervention as a means to learn English?

4. Literature Review

4.1 Intercultural Competence and Its Importance in ELT.

"*Intercultural competence is defined as effective and appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural situations*" [3]. One of the primary purposes of learning English is cross-cultural

communication, so intercultural competence is a critical element in attaining an effective communicative performance. Moreover, it is essential to underline that some central aspects of intercultural competence are knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values [1]. Deardorff's Model of Intercultural Competence describes a process where individuals can modify their attitudes, raise their knowledge, and broaden their comprehension to acquire deep knowledge of culture, develop cultural awareness, and build up new skills when experiencing interactions in intercultural contexts [3]. Developing intercultural competence also involves 1) Fostering new attitudes that respect cultural diversity and value other cultures, being open-minded to intercultural learning, and developing curiosity and discovery. 2) Advancing new skills that allow learners to listen, observe, interpret, analyze, evaluate, and relate information, context, and reality. 3) Acquiring knowledge and comprehension about the cultural or social phenomena to develop cultural self-awareness, sociolinguistic awareness, and a deep understanding of culture, contexts, and roles. Instructors have a crucial role in fostering this group of knowledge, skills, and traits since improving students' intercultural competence is an essential aim of EFL classrooms worldwide [9].

4.2 Cultural Awareness and Its Gaps in Textbook Content

"Cultural awareness is a critical aspect of learning and development that focuses on understanding, appreciating, and respecting the differences and similarities among people from various cultures" [11]. Cultural awareness is also a vital element in developing intercultural competence [1, 3]. Furthermore, considering the contributions of some researchers [11, 14, 2], individuals who are considered culturally aware should be able to show the following knowledge, skills, and attitudes:

- Individuals can reevaluate their values and beliefs.
- Individuals know other cultures.
- Individuals adapt their behavior to respect cultural differences.
- Individuals can construct their cultural identity and reflect on its influence on other people's beliefs and practices.
- Individuals become curious and open-minded and show the willingness to ask questions.
- Individuals are conscious of their culturally shaped values, beliefs, perceptions, and biases.
- Individuals know about cultural differences and are willing to learn more about them.
- Individuals can recognize and change their prejudices towards certain cultures.
- Individuals can recognize how a specific culture influences interactions and perceptions.

The following are two former studies where investigators reflected on becoming learners culturally aware: 1) Vrbová accomplished research to find out how cultural awareness was being developed at a Czech primary school. The study concentrated on analyzing the cultural content of textbooks. The results indicated that materials were ineffective in constructing or informing cultural consciousness, and teachers must develop supplementary material and strategies [13]. 2) Takagi proposed integrating cultural elements in planning and an approach to facilitate critical cultural awareness in the classroom. Learners had to develop self-awareness while contrasting their lunch habits with American people's. The study successfully promoted knowledge, attitudes, and skills to address cultural awareness. The outcomes also emphasize that the role of critical cultural awareness in intercultural communicative competencies has significant implications for teaching English [12]. As was revealed in these works, the buildup of cultural awareness requires culturally aware educators, suitable materials, and efficient teaching strategies. On top of that, it is unknown how much of the content in English textbooks fosters cultural awareness and how much cultural awareness already exists among learners and teachers.

4.3 Racism as a Social and Cultural Phenomena in ELT

Racism is the *"Discourse, knowledge, and social practices that, using inferiorization, denigration, marginalization, and exclusion, construct and perpetuate unequal relations of power between groups of people defined by perceived racial difference"* [7]. It is widely recognized that ELT has shifted towards inclusion, equity, and intercultural skills in the last decades. When discussing inclusion and society, many cultural aspects may be essential, but race is one of the most crucial. Therefore, teachers must become competent in their intercultural skills to foster interculturally competent language learners [9], which implies having enough sensitivity and knowledge about the social-cultural phenomenon.

Concerning the role of racism awareness in ELT, the study by Pawlowski provided interesting outcomes that highlight the topic's relevance for language learners. In the lessons, students completed writing activities and discussed social and cultural issues like racism. The investigator concluded that

lessons that aim to build awareness of cultural phenomena are complex and challenging [8]. This work is vital for the present study because, even though the concepts of cultural awareness and intercultural competence were not included, the investigator certainly contributed to promoting not only awareness of racism but also cultural awareness in other fields, such as gender and sexuality, through an English class.

4.3 Intercultural Competence and TBLT

It is well-known that task-based language teaching focuses on learner needs and goals [6]. This methodology sets tasks at the center of language instruction, but one of the critical points of TBLT is contextualizing the language. Hence, TBLT has been proven effective in increasing learners' knowledge about cultures [4]. Moreover, some studies have shown this method to be quite effective in developing intercultural competence and bringing some potential to language learning [5].

5. Methodology

5.1 Type of Study and Context.

To develop intercultural competence through the creation of cultural awareness is essential to creating meaningful interventions that process of reflexivity and action. In this sense, the present study is action research. The study was developed in a class at a public university in Veracruz, Mexico. The exploratory intervention included 11 females and five males who were engineering students. It was a 4th class-level English, B1, in the CEFR. The participants were aged 20–24 years.

5.2 Description of the intervention.

The intervention of this study includes 1) a pre-survey, 2) a pre-class activity, 3) a class focused on historical facts about racism, 4) a class about internalized racism, 5) a class about interpersonal racism, 6) a reflection through a first essay task, 7) a class focused on institutional racism, 8) a class focused on systemic/structural racism, 9) a reflection through a second essay task, 10) a class about the modern history of racism, 11) class to develop a movie task, 12) a final quiz/survey, and 13) a final interview. In class sessions, students participated in various tasks. The tasks encompassed grammar practice, discussions, and assignments that promoted analytical thinking.

Table 1. Class session sample.

Class 5 Systemic/Structural Racism	
Stage 1	Students talk about a group of photos in pairs. They share their insights in pairs and with the whole class. (5 min)
Stage 2	Students watch a video about systemic racism and discuss in pairs: *What did you see in the video? Do you think those situations happen in your country?* Then, they share their opinions with the whole class. (5 min)
Stage 3	Students try to define systemic racism in pairs. Then, they share their ideas with the whole class. (5 min)
Stage 4	Students watch a second video about systemic racism and make a list of examples of systemic racism that appear in the video. (5 min)
Stage 5	Students read a text about systemic racism and work on a true/false exercise. Students compare answers. Students read again and work on questions about the same text. Students compare answers again. (15 min)
Stage 6	Students watch a third video and identify examples of systemic racism. Students share their examples. (6 min)
Stage 7	Students work in teams and give examples of systemic racism that they or someone they know have experienced. After listening to the experiences, students answer individually: What would you have done if you had experienced some kind of discrimination related to systemic racism? They must use the third conditional. Then, they share their answers. (15 min)

5.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedure.

Data was collected using six tools: a pre-survey, two essay tasks, a final survey, a movie task, and a final interview. The analysis procedure was developed according to the structured qualitative analysis method. In the first cycle, data was sourced from a pre-survey, with two tasks in the form of essays

and a movie task, the final survey and the final interview. The data was pre-sorted before the coding process took place, and some of the required analyses were descriptive, inferential, and qualitative for the various information the tools provided.

Pre-survey
The pre-survey had eight questions exploring four aspects: 1) Student's previous knowledge about racism. 2) Student's previous awareness of racism. 3) Importance and utility of knowing more about the phenomenon. 4) Frequency with which students talk about racism in their daily life.

Essay 1
Students had to work on this essay after class 3. This essay aimed to consolidate student's knowledge and awareness regarding internalized and interpersonal racism. Through this essay, students provided the following: 1) Definitions and examples of internalized and interpersonal racism. 2) Reflection on the causes of internalized and interpersonal racism. 3) Contrast internalized and interpersonal racism.

Essay 2
Students had to work on this essay after class 5. The second essay aimed to consolidate student's knowledge and awareness about institutional and systemic/structural racism. Through this essay, students provided the following: 1) Definitions and examples of institutional and systemic/structural racism. 2) Reflection of the reasons institutional and systemic/structural racism occur. 3) Contrast institutional and systemic/structural racism.

Movie task
Students had to work on this task after class 6. Through this task, students were asked to perform the following: 1) Watch the movie and identify situations that showed the four types of racism. 2) Categorize the situations in the four types of racism.

Final Survey
It was a 22-question survey; some questions were open, and some used a Likert scale. The questions were focused on: 1) Assessing the conceptual knowledge about racism, internalized racism, interpersonal racism, institutional racism, and systemic/structural racism. 2) Checking the competence of students to identify the types of racism in context. 3) Verifying the competence of participants to provide examples of the types of racism.

Final interview
The interviews had 11 questions to verify the following: 1) Conceptual knowledge about racism, internalized racism, interpersonal racism, institutional racism, and systemic/structural racism. 2) Competence of students to identify and provide examples of racism, internalized racism, interpersonal racism, institutional racism, and systemic/structural racism in context. 3) Students' perceptions of their knowledge about racism. 4) The competence of the participants to identify the phenomenon in their context. 5) The students' perception of the lessons and how they helped them improve their English proficiency.

6. Findings and Discussion

This study aimed to find out 1) the impact of the intervention in building up cultural awareness (awareness of racism) to make students more interculturally competent; 2) student's perceptions of the intervention as a mean to learn about culture and social issues (racism); and 3) students' perceptions on the intervention as a mean to learn English. After examining the essays, the movie task, the responses from the surveys, and the transcriptions of the interviews, the following assertions were derived.

6.1 Assertion 1: Students became more aware of racism by acquiring more knowledge.

Before the intervention, the student's knowledge of racism was minimal; 56% of the students could not give a correct and complete definition of racism, and none of the students identified types of racism. However, in the final survey, 94% of the student were able to provide a complete understanding of the term, and 81% were able to point out instances of racism seen during their day-to-day activities. Thus,

the analysis of the results obtained before the survey and in the final showed improved students' knowledge after the interventions. This improvement can be compiled for the final interview, where all the students could indicate that they had gained a further understanding of racism, particularly concerning types of racism and racism practices rampant in our daily lives.

6.2 Assertion 2: Most of the students became more aware of racism after the intervention by defining and distinguishing between various forms of racism.

Before the intervention, none of the students knew about the different types of racism. However, during the essay task, most of the students demonstrated competence in defining the concepts of racism, internalized racism, interpersonal racism, institutional racism, and systemic/structural racism. Students were also successful in explaining the ideas in the final survey. Moreover, most students provided accurate examples of each type of racism in different stages of the intervention (essays, final survey, final interview). 100% agreed to feel more aware of racism in the final interview.

Table 2. Percentages of participants who could provide correct definitions and examples in each case.

	Correct definitions provided			Correct examples provided			
	Pre-survey	Essays	Final Survey	Pre-survey	Essays	Final Survey	Final Interview
Racism	43.75%	100%	93.75%	62.5%	-	-	-
Internalized R	0%	100%	81.25%	0%	100%	84.37%	87.5%
Interpersonal R	0%	100%	50%	0%	83%	87.5%	68.75%
Institutional R	0%	100%	100%	0%	100%	90.6%	100%
Systemic/structural R	0%	83.33%	50%	0%	66.66%	78.12%	68.75%

6.3 Assertion 3: Students were able to identify racism in context and real-life situations after the intervention.

The data indicated that every student had completed the movie task to define an example where racism was present sufficiently. This liberalization of attitudes was also reflected in the final survey, whereby most students could identify racism and explain it. All the students interviewed stated that having, in one way or the other, developed a new positive awareness and consciousness of racism and racist actions, such as the ability to identify racism when observed. The following chart portrays student's ability to identify the different types of racism in context (pre-survey, movie task, final survey).

Table 3. Identification of racism and its types in context

	Pre-survey	Movie-Task	Final Survey
Racism	56.25%	-	81.25%
Internalized R	0%	55.55%	81.25%
Interpersonal R	0%	88.88%	62.5%
Institutional R	0%	100%	93.75%
Systemic/structural R	0%	100%	75%

Students demonstrated competence in identifying possible causes of each type of racism in their essays.

Table 4. Origins of the different kinds of racism according to students.

Causes	Internalized R	Interpersonal R	Institutional R	Systemic/structural R
Glorification of white people	33%	0%	0%	0%
Upbringing and family background	50%	50%	0%	0%
Society	33%	0%	33%	0%
Stereotypes, beliefs, and prejudices	16%	16%	66%	0%
Education and Culture	16%	50%	66%	66%
Normalization of racist practices	0%	16%	0%	0%
Institutional policies	0%	0%	33%	0%
Historical Heritage	0%	0%	0%	66%

In the final interview, 87% of the participants felt capable of identifying racism around them. Some of the comments were: *[I can identify if I am racist or if another person is racist with me, even if it's on*

purpose or not.] [I didn't see the racism in the street before; now I identify it better.] [Now I understand the context, and if I broaden what I know, I know that I can identify them, and I will be able to help in any situation.] [I deepened into each type of racism, and I was able to locate examples in my daily life from people who are close to me.]

6.4 Assertion 4: The intervention had a positive impact because the students changed their perceptions positively.

During the final interview, 14 of 16 students (86%) agreed that the intervention changed their insights about the phenomena. One expressed that he was unsure, and the other expressed that the intervention did not change his perspective on the phenomenon because he was already aware. Additionally, 100% of the students showed a positive attitude towards the lessons. Here are some opinions shared by the participants*: [The lessons are very educational because there isn't much information to make you aware of this topic.] [There should be more lessons of this kind because many people don't know about it; people just know that it is a phenomenon that happens abroad.] [The lessons gave me many things to reflect on because there are many concepts that we don't know, and now we can recognize situations, concepts related to racism, and actions that we didn't realize were racist.] [They were entertaining, and doing something different compared to a typical English class was interesting.] [They are necessary because not all people are aware or sensitive to the situation that still exists; some do not even know that they are committing racist acts. If they do it, at least they have to know about it.]*

6.5 Assertion 5. The students' perceptions of the intervention as a means to learn English were positive.

In the final interview, when participants answered the question: *Do you think that these kinds of lessons are helpful to improve your English skills?* The data showed that 100% of the participants responded that the lessons helped in language development, specifically learning new and relevant Vocabulary. The Vocabulary was considered valuable and practical, helping to fill the gap between theoretical knowledge acquired in class and real-life English. The following comments were made: *[Yes because everyday Vocabulary is used.] [Yes, many cases happen abroad, and much information is in another language, which brings you closer to real-life English.] [Yes, you learn words not included in general English courses.] [Yes, a lot because I think they expand our Vocabulary and go far beyond an English book because it feels more authentic.] [Yes, I learned new words and understood new concepts.] [Yes, the topic is more interesting, and you learn more words.] [Vocabulary, speaking, and reading comprehension.]*
The foregoing can be verified by the data collected through essays 1 and 2. The essays' analysis demonstrated that students used the Vocabulary learnt during the interventions in their writing. Further to this, most of the students performed the movie task successfully, in which they had to use some of the Vocabulary acquired.

7. Conclusions

The intervention demonstrated that using TBLT with social and cultural content can be an efficient tool for learning Vocabulary and building awareness of racism. The teacher's role, the materials, and the process were the three key points to build up cultural awareness systematically and to promote intercultural competence. (1) Teachers must be prepared in terms of knowledge of the cultural phenomenon and English teaching methodology. (2) The materials are necessary to complement the lack of content regarding cultural awareness in current textbooks, so there is an evident need for the authors of English textbooks to include more cultural topics. (3) The process requires a good setup for sensibilization to change students' insights and attitudes. Building up cultural awareness is just a part of achieving intercultural competence. However, this part of the process provides students with valuable tools regarding knowledge, attitudes, skills, and values, which are necessary to face intercultural interactions efficiently. Combining teaching strategies to promote language learning and developing intercultural competence may seem a thorough and complex process, but it is beneficial for the learning process.

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