

The Importance of Teaching Intercultural Communication in the English Language Classroom

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The question of teaching culture in the language classroom has been discussed extensively in recent years; however, much of this discussion has been about what culture to teach and the problem of language imperialism imposing foreign values on learners. Most linguists and language teachers would accept the idea that language and culture cannot be separated but question how culture can be taught in the context of the English language classroom. One issue inherent in this question is the need to identify the goal of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. If the goal is to prepare students to communicate in English, then the issues become who they will be communicating with and what skills students will need in addition to language ability to effectively communicate.

The reality of the world we live in is that there are more nonnative English speakers than native speakers and that there are many varieties of English spoken around the world. If students are only taught the vocabulary, syntax, and semantics of English, it may not be enough for them to effectively communicate. Even if nonverbal and other paralinguistic aspects of language are taught, an important question to ask is whose English should be described as the standard? Would it not be better to give the students general intercultural communication skills and awareness?

The purpose of this article is to propose that general intercultural communication skills and awareness of general cultural concepts should be taught in the English language

classroom. These general skills and concepts will more adequately prepare students to actually communicate than would culture-specific knowledge or isolated language knowledge.

What is Intercultural Communication?

Intercultural communication is the process of two or more culturally different individuals communicating together. The process of communicating can be broken down into formulating, transmitting, and receiving a message, but successful reception of the intended message can be effected by both verbal and nonverbal factors. Verbal factors include language choice, clarity and volume of speech, and comprehensibility of vocabulary. Nonverbal factors include body language, facial expression, and proximity of the speaker and listener. Each of these may be influenced by culture.

A culture is a group of people who share certain common values, beliefs, and practices. A cultural group may be based upon many different factors including socioeconomic status, geographic origin, occupation, education, religion, gender, ethnicity, or language background. Cultural differences between groups include many different factors, both visible and invisible. Visible culture is what people often think of as culture, for example, music, dance, and dress. Usually it is the invisible factors, such as values, expectations, and concepts of time and space, however, which interfere with successful communication.

Why Intercultural Communication and not English Culture?

The argument for teaching intercultural communication instead of one target culture is most easily supported by recognition of English as an international language. Currently,

many language programs choose either to focus on one English culture (e.g., American English or British English) or to expose students to various English cultures by employing native-speaking teachers from different countries (US, Canada, Britain, Australia, New Zealand). However, rarely are Indian or other varieties of English taught. In reality, students may have many more opportunities to communicate with other nonnative speakers in situations where English is the common language (Schnitzer, 1995). Although a culture-specific emphasis may be appropriate for students preparing to study in a specific foreign country, even then general intercultural communication skills are valuable considering that much of their contact may be with other foreign students. Certainly, students going to the United States cannot be taught one all-encompassing US cultural norm appropriate for interacting with all people living in the United States.

The Need For Intercultural Communication Skills

The need for intercultural communication skills is becoming more and more apparent with the ever-increasing impact of technology on the world. In today's world, students of English have opportunities to communicate with individuals from many different cultures. Even those who study in primarily homogeneous countries will probably encounter other cultures via television, video, radio, and perhaps, the Internet. The presence of multinational corporations and the increase in international tourism also provide opportunities for intercultural communication and the need for appropriate skills.

Even those individuals who choose to avoid interaction with individuals and media from other countries will have

opportunities to communicate with other subcultures. In many ways, communication with individuals from other subcultures can be classified as intercultural communication. For example, rural and urban dwellers often have differences in dress, slang, and even values. Men and women from the same ethnic culture often have differences in values and perceptions, as well as verbal and nonverbal communication (Tannen, 1990). Other intercultural differences exist between people of different generations. In addition, most countries have increasing numbers of ethnic minorities as a result of conflicts in their home countries and migration for economic reasons.

In addition to the fact that intercultural interaction will occur at some level for most individuals in modern society, there is also a need to prepare students to reduce anxiety about these encounters so that communication can occur. Krashen (1981) has hypothesized that one factor affecting the comprehensibility of input is the lowering of the affective filter. The affective filter is comprised of the learner's level of anxiety and confidence. If anxiety is low, language acquisition is facilitated. The teaching of intercultural communication can help to build confidence in the students and reduce their level of anxiety in intercultural situations.

The Goal: Developing Sensitivity and Skills

One commonly accepted goal of teaching intercultural communication in the classroom (Seeyle, 1993) is to increase students' awareness of and sensitivity to culture. Milton Bennett's developmental theory of intercultural communication sensitivity (1983) is an excellent model to follow. His theory identifies six stages of ethnocentrism and ethnorelativity along

a continuum. In the foreign language classroom, consideration of the first three stages is particularly important because many people are at these stages.

Bennett identifies three ethnocentric stages in which individuals utilize their own cultural values and concepts as a measurement of other cultures. The first stage is *denial* which is characterized by ignoring other cultures, often as a result of geographic or social separation. The second stage is *defense*. Negative stereotyping of other cultures and the perceived superiority of one's own culture are both facets of this stage. Individuals at this stage have their perception of cultural superiority threatened as a result of coming into contact with other cultures and perceive cultural differences negatively. In contrast, some individuals (often those living in a foreign culture or members of minority groups) adapt to the values of their host culture, and as a result, criticize and negatively stereotype members of their own culture. The third ethnocentric stage is *minimization*. Minimization is the downplaying of cultural differences in favor of human universals.

Bennett distinguishes the three ethnocentric stages from the three ethnorelative stages because of the shift in perspective that occurs between them. The ethnorelative stages are characterized by recognition that one's own culture is only one of many valid cultures. The ethnorelative perspective includes the last stages of *acceptance*, *adaptation*, and *integration*. Acceptance is the stage where cultural differences in values and behaviors are accepted and respected. Adaptation is the stage where skills (e.g., empathy) are developed. Such

skills allow individuals to have multiple frames of reference. The last stage is integration in which individuals integrate their sense of being part of a culture (or cultures) with their individual, independent frames of reference. This internalized frame of reference allows evaluation of situations based on context rather than cultural expectations.

Bennett's framework can be used as a guide for educators in providing students with appropriate experiences and processing these experiences in a constructive manner so that the students' sensitivity can increase. Once intercultural sensitivity has been developed, a second goal of teaching intercultural communication is to develop intercultural communication skills. Intercultural communication skills include general good communication skills, developing the ability to judge situations based on cultural standards other than one's own, and developing tolerance for ambiguity. These skills are often developed by using critical incidents or case studies as well as devising exercises where students can have real experiences with individuals from other cultures. Often these exercises are culture specific but can be presented as examples, rather than as a list of cultural restrictions.

Methodological Issues

Many theories of second language acquisition and methods of teaching foreign languages exist. Intercultural content can easily be combined with most language teaching methodologies. Intercultural communication vocabulary can readily be combined with reading, writing, and speaking activities (Mearns & Ewing, 1996). This content is also appropriate for activities addressing all learning styles and modalities. For example,

dialogues can be written by the students based on intercultural themes, meaningful encounters can be discussed, and role plays can be used. One very useful tool is Barnga (Thiagarajan & Steinwachs, 1990), a commercially prepared culture shock simulation game.

Commercially prepared textbooks exist combining English language learning and intercultural communication (Levine & Adelman, 1993; Levine, Baxter, & McNulty, 1987), yet as these textbooks are designed for the English as a second language market, they emphasize American culture rather than general cultural information. However, teachers can easily integrate intercultural content into other texts or class activities.

Again, Bennett's (1993) model can be helpful in the appropriate sequencing of activities. Bennett states that it is important to assess participants' intercultural sensitivity prior to beginning teaching or training. Activities at an inappropriate level can potentially lead to a decrease in sensitivity. Although any group of individuals will be at a variety of levels at a given time, sequencing activities through the ethnocentric stages, and from less threatening to more challenging, will have the potential to help them progress towards the ethnorelative stages. For example, for students at the denial stage, interest in and awareness of other cultures can be increased by involving them in nonthreatening activities like foreign food tastings and fashion shows. At defense stage, activities that emphasize the commonalities of all cultures help students evaluate all cultures in a more positive manner. Students at the minimization stage benefit from activities that increase their awareness of how culture influences their own

behavior and cultural differences in the interpretation of behavior. By sequencing activities through these three stages, most students' sensitivity levels can be gradually increased as their language skills are improved. These types of activities can then be followed with more specific intercultural skill-building exercises.

Conclusion

If the goal of English language teaching is to prepare students to actually communicate in English, they must be prepared to communicate with individuals from other cultures. This includes more than just mastering the linguistic code but also developing the sensitivity and mastering the skills needed to communicate interculturally. Educating teachers in intercultural communication theory and appropriate teaching methods will also be necessary. This will take effort on the part of English language teachers and administrators but will result in producing students who are more ready and able to constructively interact in the world and able to successfully communicate in English with a variety of speakers.

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