The Importance of Intercultural Communicative Competence in English Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract: While the use of appropriate linguistic items is essential for successful communication in any language, sociocultural factors also play an important role. Intercultural communicative competence is one dimension of sociocultural awareness that has been recognized as integral for communicative competence, but its practical application remains a challenge, possibly due to the fact that language educators tend to have more knowledge about the target language than its related cultural aspects.

Keywords: Intercultural communicative competence; Identity and language learning; English Language Teaching; Communicative competence.

INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) began to address linguistic and cultural diversity; rather than focusing on teaching aspects related only to the English language, ELT includes sociocultural factors acknowledging how language and culture are related to one's identity.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Although the field of linguistics is relatively new, it has witnessed several attempts to conceptualize what it means to communicate effectively in a given language. In its early years, with generative linguistics, the concept of competence was theorized as the knowledge of language items (e.g., grammar, phonology, morphology, etc.) that refers to what one knows about language, regarding the 'native-speaker' who is part of a monolingual community as the ideal speaker-hearer of a language [1]. Reactions to this purist theory began to burgeon with Hymes drawing from anthropology to redefine the concept of competence and arguing that social factors play a key role in communication. For Hymes, knowing how to use a language reflects knowing how to use it appropriately in different social contexts. Since then, the concept of communicative competence has gained significant attention and has been reconceptualized over the years, moving away from the native speaker model [3].

Any discussion of communicative competence in recent years recognizes the importance of the use of the language in social contexts, also referred to as pragmatics. Bachman uses pragmatics as an overarching term that includes sociolinguistic competence and its related elements: sensitivity to differences in dialect or variety, in register, naturalness, cultural references, and figurative language. For example, a competent speaker is one who has awareness that a language can be used distinctively in certain geographical locations and/or within different social groups, and that certain linguistic features carry cultural meanings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One way to promote intercultural dialogues is to watch and carry out projects that invite students to reflect on the beliefs, values, and issues of people from diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. Several projects have been used in the English language classroom to address the cultural dimension. In the 2000s, digital

literacies, more specifically video projects, have been a helpful way to cross geographical barriers, allowing contact with different cultures and exploration of people's cultural identities easily accessible [4]. Below is a description of three sample video projects that can engage students in applying Byram's five knowledges of ICC in the English classroom, while expressing their identities (digital samples of these projects can be found at www.breakingtheinvisiblewall.com under the tab *Identity Projects*):

1. **My multicultural identity:** Students are asked to reflect on their life trajectories and include all cultural backgrounds that might have shaped their identity: heritage (culture of the parents/family); the country/city/neighborhood in which they were born; culture practiced at home, school, work; cultures learned when traveling (to other cities, regions, countries); media (including music, TV, movies, art, etc.); beliefs; and others of their own. The aim is to encourage students to reflect on the many cultural orientations they may possess by moving away from an ethnocentric view of cultures;

2. **Your accent is funny:** The provocative title of the project is aimed at stimulating students to reflect on power relations associated to socially constructed notions of prestige related to accents. Students are invited to recall situations in which people discriminated against or were discriminated against because of other types of accents. They may be required to think of accents used in their mother tongue or any other language they know and move towards English. Although stereotypical views may be discussed, the reflection should go beyond stereotypes; the discussion should be a critical evaluation from a social justice viewpoint that includes factors that contribute to an imbalance of power. This is also an opportunity for students to teach their peers about different accents of languages they know and learn about and appreciate the diversity of accents in many languages;

3. **Why don't you think they way I do?:** Students are invited to recall misunderstandings they have had when communicating with people from other cultures, why such misunderstandings happened, and invite them for a reflection that includes beliefs, values, and cultural orientations from both the students and his/her interlocutor. Examples could include differences in opinions related to what constitutes a family (e.g., single parent; couples with no kids); number of hours that should be dedicated to family, study, or work; views on social issues (e.g., homelessness, security), among others. It is important to note these differences may not be limited to a country as this could happen in different geographical and social contexts within the same country.

The video projects suggested above could be made available online for other students to watch and reflect on the issues raised during their peers' intercultural encounters. These videos could be shared publicly (e.g., YouTube or Vimeo) or privately (e.g., VoiceThread). As part of the project, the videos could be played during class time and students could complete a written or oral reflection on the stories told by their peers. For example, the reflection could ask students to consider whether they had experienced a similar story, how they dealt with the situation, and how mutual understanding could be reached between the people from different cultural backgrounds. It is important to note that the intercultural reflections suggested should move away from ethnocentric views of cultures and adopt cultural relativism, so understanding and mutual respect can be major goals [6]. Also, the main goal is to encourage dialogues from different cultural viewpoints rather than adaptation to only one cultural orientation. In this sense, respect rather than tolerance is a salient aspect of ICC: the ability to understand other cultural perspectives and accept cultural relativism is necessary.

CONCLUSION

English language teachers need to provide opportunities for students to reflect on and express their and others' identities and cultural views. The ultimate goal is to open up possibilities to explore the

use of English in different contexts (e.g., English and non English-speaking countries) and cultures and allow students to affirm their identities while respecting linguistic and cultural diversity.

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