

Addressing Intercultural Communication Issue in Teaching English

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Abstract—Cultural assimilation and intercultural awareness have been an important hub of modern Language and Communication Studies, underlining a shift that reflects a greater significance of the inseparability of language and culture, and the need to prepare students for effective intercultural communication in order to ‘thrive’ in a global work environment. A thriving and culturally diverse global workplace requires effective communication skill in this digital era. Under the tutelage of such backdrop, this paper focuses on prioritizing intercultural awareness in teaching-learning English linking culture with language in pursuit of excellence in borderless effective communication. To this end, the research used a questionnaire device to receive some university teachers’ self-reported feedback. This paper maintains qualitative and quantitative research methodology. The research investigation shows that in teaching English, it is necessary to incorporate and develop aspects of cross-cultural awareness as a part of course curriculum to immerse students in effective intercultural communicative competence.

Keywords—Cross-Culturalism, Globalization, Intercultural Competence, Language and Culture

I. INTRODUCTION

THE focus on the purpose of learning any language is to develop a sustainable and successful communication in social, political, academic, professional or cultural contexts. The emerging trends in teaching/learning a foreign language do not require the merely teaching of linguistic skills like phonology, morphology, lexicology, and syntax, but also “...the vital component of cultural knowledge and awareness” [1]. In other words, learning a language effectively requires knowing something about the cultural aspects of that language. Communication that lacks appropriate cultural content often results in an odd/humorous situation, leading to misunderstanding and miscommunication. Consequently, the intercultural awareness to language teaching/learning is believed to be one of the many paradigms in this complex global perspective. Behind such global perspective, this paper strives to demystify the terrain of adopting intercultural communication issue in EFL context, especially in Jazan University.

For borderless and cross-cultural effective communication, it is important to incorporate intercultural aspect in EFL teaching to develop learners’ awareness of intercultural sensitivity and Intercultural Communicative Competence

(ICC). It is indeed, “Simple mastery of the linguistic forms of a language is not enough for learners to be considered competent in the target language” [2]. Here, cultural dimension is seen to play a critical role in successful communication. In many occupational contexts, professionals’ poor communication performance resulted in the loss of business which is closely connected to their lack of cross-cultural understanding of the customers’ affairs. This challenge emerges because of the gap between the needs of the learning and target situation/workplace. So, in a way or another, to address this existing gap, EFL learners need awareness of cultural dimension in language instruction through an intercultural approach because “...in any society which expects its education system to prepare people for living in an internationalized culture and globalized economy, and also for the interaction between people of different cultures within and across national boundaries, the process of tertiary socialization and the acquisition of intercultural competence are clearly desirable (p. 351)” [3]. Linguistic and cultural diversities are significant factors for communication with the people of diverse race, custom, and ethnicity. So, it is important for the language learners to understand the cultural context of language because language is viewed as a “culturally organized and culturally organizing dominion (p. xi)” [4].

A. Statement of the Problem

Saudi Ministry of education is highly concerned with the pursuit of excellence in effective English language teaching-learning for preparing skilled outstanding professionals in leadership level. Here, universities and colleges offer credit and non-credit English language courses namely, EFL, ESP, EAP or General English but they are not becoming so effective in developing students’ intercultural communicative competence in their real life career. In teaching scenario linguistic aspects of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax, etc. are taught but extra-linguistic aspects, i.e., socio-cultural aspects of language are very much absent in the classroom practices. In order to nurture learners’ communicative competence in English, EFL/ESP teaching in Saudi context as well as in many other countries still lacks the inclusion of intercultural issue. Consequently, the EFL learners, in general, commit cultural *faux pas* while communicating with people of other cultures. It leads to cause cultural conflicts resulting in misunderstandings or misconceptions let alone bridge a fruitful communication. From this perspective, it is vitally important for Saudi EFL/ESP students to learn and understand the culture and

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cultural context of language for meaningful cross-cultural communication.

B. Intercultural Communication

The issue of intercultural communication emerges as a result of economic globalization and *mass migration* of people or as a backlash to the crisis of multiculturalism. Cultural critic Edward Hall in his *Silent Language* termed *intercultural communication* as a new discipline in human sciences. Rapidly, this term ‘intercultural communication’ became the part of the Communication Studies in the mid-70s. In reality, Business, communication, traveling, , states negotiations and many more reasons people need to interact and communicate with the people of different cultures across the borders. In so doing, successful communication largely depends on the cross-cultural understanding. Here lies the value of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). In defining intercultural communication, Barnett and Lee (2002) term as the “...exchange of information about culture between two groups of people with significantly different cultures” [5].

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) “...involves the knowledge, motivation and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures (p. 208)” [6]. In fact, intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures. As an inter-disciplinary field, it is like culture plus communication (Culture + Communication=IC). Context is a very important concept in intercultural communication and in communication in general. Communication takes place in an enormous variety of contexts namely, psychological context, educational context, social context, or political context. It can be physical context, like the room in which we talk or an auditorium for a public lecture. In the intercultural communication process, adaptation with the new context or situation is a significant aspect. A human being has an innate capacity to adapt to environmental challenges through communication. “Adaptation is a complex and dynamic process that brings about a qualitative transformation of the individual (p.37)” [7]. In the emerging “global village” [8] all parties must adapt and move towards a greater awareness of intercultural issues [9]. So, adaptability is undeniably a certain focal point in intercultural communication as well as in cultural anthropology and communication studies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section of this paper reviews the related research and views underpinning of adopting intercultural awareness into ESP/EFL classroom teaching practices.

A. Linguistic & Non-linguistic competence in ICC

In the era of globalization, professionals, learners, and others are involved in meaningful interactions and negotiations with people of same or other discourse community. Negotiation is considered as a powerful device enabling speakers to engage in cross-cultural communication.

In this vein, Awicha Benabdallah suggests “...adapting an intercultural approach to ESP teaching might be of great valuable if the ESP practitioner is able to...(address) the learners' needs and requirements...with the needed linguistic knowledge, enhancing, their intercultural competence through analyzing texts and comparing them to their own culture” [10].

Both linguistic accuracy and sociolinguistic appropriacy are crucial for effective communication, indeed. “Inappropriate performance, even if it is perfectly accurate linguistically, can never be really effective as communication, not only because it does not produce the desired effect, but also because it sometimes produces the opposite effect” [11]. In global standpoint, the cultural and linguistic diversities are the specificities in language teaching. Students' intercultural awareness can lead to success in communication process in their real life situation. In cross-cultural encounters, learners' linguistic competence along with the knowledge of the culture of a given community is of great importance for successful cross-cultural communication. So, “In addition, to grammatical competence, a culturally competent learner must possess sociolinguistic competence, pragmatic competence, socio-cultural knowledge, and intercultural awareness (p. 11)” [11]. In this connection, Rod Ellis adds that *individuals who are motivated to integrate both linguistic and nonlinguistic outcomes of the learning experience will attain a higher degree of L2 proficiency and more desirable attitudes* [12].

B. Language and Culture

In portraying the interrelationship between culture and language, Hall (2008:45) points out that “No two concepts are more intimately linked than language and culture. In our interactions with others, we use language not only to refer to or represent our sociocultural worlds.... also...we bring our cultural worlds into existence, maintain them, and shape them for our own purposes” [13].

Needless to say, language is an inseparable part of what we call culture. In a similar tone, Peterson and Coltrane (2003) lay emphasis on “*language learners need to know what is appropriate to say to whom, and in what situations. Hence, the teaching of English as a second or foreign language should go beyond teaching the language as a linguistic skill to teaching the language in a way that incorporates intercultural awareness and understanding as well*” [7]. Teaching culture thus becomes a vital part of ELT as “language is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways” [11]. So, to construct a meaningful communication, according to Claire Kramsch, “Cultural awareness must then be viewed as enabling language proficiency....Culture in language teaching is not an expendable fifth skill... so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing” [14]. Because “A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture” [15].

C. Cross-Cultural Consciousness

“Promoting cultural awareness among learners in the target language is essential, so far as the cross-cultural factors are concerned. Cultural compatibility and adaptation to cross-cultural issues are motivating factors in L2 acquisition” [16]. In today’s world of globalization, learning the culture of the target language is a step ahead of effective intercultural communication. In this respect, Kumaravadivelu (2003: 271-272) argues that “Developing critical cultural consciousness enables one to learn and grow, to change and evolve, so as to meet the challenges of today’s emerging global reality” [13]. Such a cultural consciousness is often referred to as intercultural awareness. An instance in a conversation is listed below between a Chinese girl, Miss Chen and her American boyfriend, Mr. Steven.

Mr. Steven: Hey, Puppy, you look lovely today!

Miss Chen: What? Am I your pet dog?

Mr. Steven: Oh, I mean baby, please [17]. Here, the lack of knowledge about “Puppy” as a pet name in American culture obviously offends the girl, whose culture has attributed unfavorable meanings to dogs. Such misunderstandings occur because of learners’ lack of intercultural awareness. Behind such a perspective, it is essential to address culture and cultural differences in between the cultures of the target language and that of the learners.

“Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted....Culture ...is the foundation of communication” [18].

D. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Intercultural language teaching is intended to help learners avoid communication breakdown in their learning and workplace settings. The importance of developing intercultural communicative competence alongside linguistic competence has resulted from learners’ needs for acquiring intercultural competence for cross-cultural communication in which they may encounter linguistic and cultural barriers. The goal of intercultural language teaching under the umbrella concept of **Intercultural Communicative Competence** is to embrace: “Linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence, as well as intercultural knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness” [19].

Actually, Intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts [20]. “Intercultural competence must, therefore, be seen as a generic competence” [21]. So, the reason behind the teaching of culture “Is to help L2 learners develop the ability to use the target language in culturally appropriate ways for the specific purpose of empathizing and interacting with... speakers of the target language” [22].

III. METHOD

A. Research Context and Population

The study was conducted among teachers who were teaching ESP/EFL at Department of English (Abuarish) and English Language Centre (ELC) of Jazan University, Jazan as well as Najran University, Najran, Saudi Arabia. The participants were chosen on a random basis. A total of 29 teachers took part in this study.

B. Data Collection & Questionnaire

The mechanism of data collection for this study encompasses one page written research questionnaire (See **Appendix**). The researchers sent a questionnaire to 36 ESP teachers via *e-mail*, *Facebook* and *Skype* in between October and November of 2014. There were multiple choice questions as well as a question asking for short suggestions, offering the respondents a free rein. The pedagogical goal of the survey was explained in the appendix. They answered the questionnaire pretty willingly. Virtually, this type of research reflects ground reality concerning the issue discussed as “personal reflections are integral to the emerging analysis of a cultural group because they provide the researcher with new vantage points and with opportunities to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange” [23]. Out of 36, a total of 29 questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 81%.

IV. RESULTS

A. Data Analysis

The data of questionnaire were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The collected data of questionnaire were sorted out, and the percentage of teachers offering the same answer was computed. Typically, throughout the data analysis processes, the researcher attempts to “...describe patterns and themes from the perspective of the participant(s), then attempt to explain these patterns and themes” [24]. Figures are drawn below to sum up the frequency of responses (See figures). Here, the most striking and contributing data of questionnaires have been cited below:

The first question was set to determine teachers’ opinion regarding the importance of culture in teaching English. The majority of the teachers (69%+21%=90%) reported that current ESP/EFL course in use does not address the cultural issues related to learners’ future professional environment. The teacher participants’ concern over learners’ intercultural communication competence sounds very much positive.

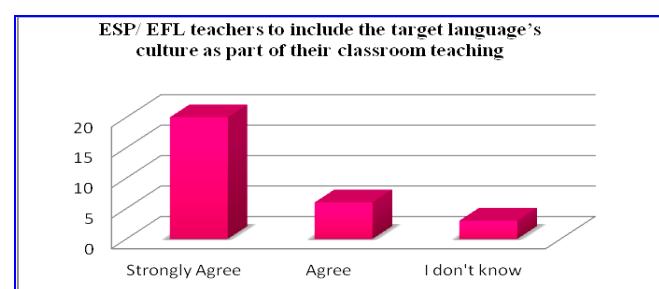


Fig. 1. Teachers’ To Incorporate Culture in Teaching Language

In intercultural communication, incorporation of culture of the target language in ELT classroom is highly suggestive because “our students’ comprehension is frequently impeded not by linguistic features, but by cultural ones...” [25].

The 4th question seeks to receive the teachers’ estimation on the learners’ needs of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC). The overwhelming responses of the participants ($55\%+38\% = 93\%$) show their awareness of learners’ real-life needs to develop effective intercultural communication skill. So, it is suggested that in teaching English, the course should cover and address the intercultural issue to develop learners’ both linguistic and intercultural competences in a complex network of interactions between people of different cultural perspectives, beliefs, values, and practices.

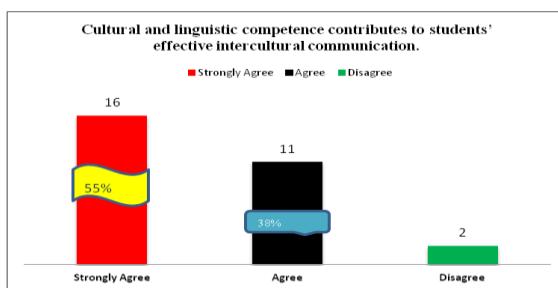


Fig. 2. Cultural & Linguistic Competence Needs

Finally, the 5th question offered a free reign to the participants to give a more self-reported opinion for formulating pragmatic course imparting intercultural issues. Teacher participants’ suggestions are reported into structured answers. In the **table-1** below, the rate of participants’ percentage and numbers are also jotted down:

TABLE I
TEACHERS’ REFLECTIONS & SUGGESTIONS FROM DATA ANALYZES

| Sl. No | Suggestions | Answer | Percentage (%) |
|--------|--|--------|----------------|
| 1. | Extra-linguistic aspects are absent in the text. Textbook must include a variety of world cultural information, not conflicting with learners’ own. | 23 | 77 |
| 2. | Integration of Linguistic & extra-linguistic issues in ESP/EFL classroom – a step ahead of teaching effectiveness. | 24 | 80 |
| 3. | Unavailable Intercultural communication practice options. So, the learners should be exposed to video-led lessons related to a variety of intercultural conversations. | 22 | 73 |
| 4. | Cultural artifacts such as food, clothing, music, art, or literature as well as a TV show, newspaper, movies can be used to incorporate cultural knowledge. | 25 | 83 |

V. DISCUSSION

This paper examined the diverse information on the terrain of *intercultural communication* awareness and issues based on statistical data analyses and revealed the following points of hypotheses:

A. Variable: The incorporation of interculturality of language teaching enables the learners to grasp the difference between their own cultural metrics and other cultures.

B. Issues of Problem

Unsuitability of the textbook: Existing ESP/EFL text does not address the intercultural communication issues related to learners’ future professional environment and contents of the course are not wholly learners’ culturally relevant. (Figure: 1& 2, 90% & 93%).

Learners’ adverse attitude towards Course Materials: 72% of the participants reported that EFL/ESP learners have an adverse reaction towards foreign cultural element in the text which is not relevant and compatible to their own cultural values.

Intercultural Communication Skill ignored: The current textual material fails to facilitate the learners’ intercultural communication practice option which is the crying needs of today’s digitalized global workplace (Table-1, 73%).

Extra-linguistic aspects totally unavailable: The existing EFL/ESP textbook only focuses on the linguistic aspects in the classroom and extra-linguistic issues are totally ignored (77%, Table-1).

A. Viable suggestions

In this section, some viable suggestions based on research results are cited and curriculum department of Jazan University & Najran University should be attentive to facilitate intercultural communication issues in the textual gallery.

Cross-cultural aspects of the text: Cross-cultural contents need to import in the existing EFL/ESP textbook to develop learners’ awareness of cultural differences as a positive catalyst and enhance intercultural communication skill (66%).

Intercultural communication practices: In the textbook, the learners should be exposed to a variety of cultural contents from home and abroad and video-led intercultural conversations to develop intercultural awareness and effective communication (Table-1, 73%).

Authentic course material: It is suggested that ESP/EFL course should cover cultural (Extra-linguistic) and linguistic components to widen learners’ knowledge of cross-cultural variations and improve their “intercultural communicative competence” through raising awareness of cultural differences (Fig: 2, 93%).

Pedagogical shift: Teachers need to shift from a traditional teaching stance to an inter-cultural one to develop both linguistic and intercultural competences of the learners (Fig-2).

VI. CONCLUSION

The present research divulges certain effective implications emerging from the findings of data analyzes. First, ESP/EFL course contents should address linguistic and cross-cultural components to create “intercultural situation” in classrooms to tackle the challenges that students may face like intercultural phenomena, such as- culture shock, cultural adaptation, cultural adjustment, and other cultural conflicts.

Secondly, cross-cultural contents relevant to the learners' own values and cultural background need to import in existing curricula for students' awareness of cultural differences in an intercultural situation to avoid cultural conflicts- as a result of misinterpretations, ethnocentrism, stereotypes, and prejudice. Thirdly and very importantly, teachers need to shift from a traditional teaching practice to an inter-cultural one. Finally, it is suggestive to supplement the textbook by extracting issues of cultural artifacts such as food, clothing, music, art, literature as well as a TV show, newspaper/magazine or movies to incorporate the idea of cultural awareness and variations. Hopefully, after all, these adaptations and incorporating intercultural issues discussed in this article will be a motivating and contributing drive to help our students being more culturally aware and confident in intercultural communication. This study, in the final analysis, suggests accommodating linguistic and non-linguistic aspects in teaching English what Kramsch (1993) terms this learning process as an attempt of establishing a "sphere of interculturality" [14].

APPENDIX

Dear Participant, this survey is designed to determine the issue "**Addressing intercultural communication issue in teaching English**". Here, teachers' perceptions and reflections are vital for academic innovations and effectiveness. The sincerity of your answers is highly important for the accuracy of the research. We appreciate your cooperation with thanks.

TEACHERS' QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you think it is important for EFL/ESP teachers to include the target language's culture as part of their classroom teaching?
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. I don't know
 2. Do your students react adversely when they come across the foreign cultural element in the text?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
 - c) I don't know
 3. Cross-cultural issues should be a major integrated part of EFL/ESP curriculum.
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 4. Do you believe that cultural and linguistic competence contributes to students' effective intercultural communication?
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 5. Please write down your comment and reflection (if any).
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