

INTERCULTURAL IMPRINTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that teaching and learning a foreign language are interdependent with the socio-cultural contexts in which these processes occur. Integrating an intercultural approach in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms, however, presents a significant challenge, as teachers must facilitate the understanding and acquisition of values, beliefs and patterns of behaviour that may differ or even conflict with their own. Therefore, when translating theoretical insights into practical teaching, intercultural strategies should be implemented thoughtfully, competently and sensitively, in order to provide an effective means for cultivating – among others – tolerance, respect and understanding among students. This movement from theory to classroom practice requires experimentation with new methods and often invites teachers to explore unfamiliar territories in EFL education. This also involves the selection of those teaching strategies, activities and materials that respond to the students' needs, proficiency levels and abilities, and that address issues of context and culture or foster cultural awareness.

By exploring the sociocultural challenges in EFL teaching and learning, this study seeks to contribute to both the theoretical framework and practical strategies that enable the integration of context and culture into EFL classrooms. It also investigates effective classroom procedures and principles for addressing sociocultural challenges in contemporary EFL education, in order to make English classes more engaging, and enable students from diverse cultural backgrounds to internalize, apply and transfer new knowledge in meaningful ways, and interact harmoniously.

Keywords: interculturality, language teaching, EFL/ ESL, sociocultural challenges, cultural awareness

Introduction

As far as the interest in intercultural communication is concerned, one can say that it emerged in the early 1970s and it was underlain by previous studies in several fields such as anthropology, international relations and

social psychology. Almost two decades later, the term “intercultural” gradually permeated debates centred on the principles, strategies and techniques employed in foreign or second language teaching, being also fuelled by globalization. Phrases such as “intercultural communication”, “intercultural competence” and “intercultural understanding” became regular occurrences.

This suggests that the emphasis does not fall anymore on the target culture, but on the language learner, who should become acquainted with a new culture. Thus, the encounter of various cultures entails the creation of a third space, envisaged as a free area destined to meaning negotiation, which is needed especially in case of contradictions and even conflicts triggered by interactions between members of different communities worldwide. Based on these ideas, the literature pinpoints that intercultural training is preoccupied with the development of receptivity to other cultures, the advocacy of cultural diversity and the assistance furnished in the fight against cultural bias and ethnocentrism. Moreover, according to Buzarna-Tihenea (Galbeaza) (2024:156), the benefits of intercultural education also encompass the promotion of “*critical thinking, inclusion and open-mindedness*” and the enhancement of international communication; it also “*prepares students for the global labour market; develops learning experiences*”.

Literature review

Having in view the different intercultural issues (e.g., comprehension problems, confusion or even conflict), foreign language teaching has been concerned with a series of goals – such as offering learners the opportunity to grasp and tackle intercultural differences, boosting their openness, empathy and respect towards other cultures– that also contributed to the enhancement of communicative skills. In this context, a great emphasis is placed on the ability to communicate in an adequate manner, often suggested by concepts such as “*intercultural competence*” (seen as englobing attitudes, values and skills connected to foreign cultures), “*intercultural communicative competence*” and “*intercultural speaker*” (Byram and Zarate, 1997; Sercu, 2002).

The innate connection between language and culture is widely acknowledged in the literature, and it is also made evident in foreign or

second language education, where it has usually been seen as a customary practice (Stern, 1983). Kramsch (1995) traces this connection back to the practices implemented in the teaching of Latin and Greek, which was aimed not only at the development of the learners' language skills, but also at the enrichment of their universal cultural knowledge, as (future) members of the European educated elite. Moreover, in some situations, culture studies have motivated people to learn foreign languages (Risager 1989).

Kramsch (1997) explains that culture was also taught by allowing cultural elements to permeate foreign language education disguised as lexical items employed by speakers in everyday, common settings. This triggered several issues about the genuineness of the language and even behaviour patterns infusing the teaching materials which supposedly referred to neutral, universal environments. In other words, it was thought that learners were taught generic language and behavior items that could be employed in adequate interactions in various foreign cultural contexts. However, when English has acquired the status of *lingua franca*, criticism of its imperialistic effects (i.e., of imposing Western values and behaviour patterns on English language learners) has emerged, spawning fears of cultural, political and economic manipulation and control (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook 1998). This criticism is reinforced by the idea that language use in authentic contexts is inherently shaped by a wide array of factors specific to a certain culture (usually the dominant one), and overlooks the means of organizing and understanding the discourse typical of other cultures (Phillipson 1992).

Kramsch, (1997) notices that, in the 1960s, foreign language education integrated the cultural dimension in novel and various means, with more focus on the enhancement of learners' practical language competencies, which can be implemented in daily contexts. According to the literature, two main ideas fuelled the need to include cultural elements in foreign or second language teaching, i.e. cultural content supports appropriate learning and language use (Lado, 1964), and cultural insight is tightly connected to learners' ability to boost their cultural understanding and communication skills in various target contexts (Seelye, 1984). It is noteworthy that these elements were connected to the target culture and to the native speakers' daily life, which entailed novel challenges regarding the choice of the cultural aspects to be taught (Stern 1983).

For instance, Brooks (1964: 89) proposed a list of 60 topics connected to various fields such as customs, rituals, and personal relations, and militated for their introduction at the beginning of each lesson via a short presentation in the target language (not longer than five minutes), in order to familiarize learners with “*identity, similarity, or sharp difference in comparable patterns of culture*”. In his turn, Nostrand (1974: 277) also endeavoured to design a sociocultural teaching inventory including various themes; this scholar saw each theme as an “*emotionally charged concern, which motivates or strongly influences the culture bearer’s conduct in a wide variety of situations*”. He identified, for example, twelve themes as being characteristic of the French culture: individualism, intellectuality, the art of living, realism, common sense, friendship, love, family, justice, liberty, patriotism, and traditionalism.

Therefore, a review of the literature in this area revealed distinct perspectives on the incorporation of intercultural issues into EFL/ ESL education. For instance, in Byram and Zarate’s opinion (1997), the enhancement of learners’ intercultural competence, requires teachers to employ isolated intercultural questions. The scholars underline that these questions should be seen as components added to and not included in EFL/ ESL teaching, because intercultural competence can be associated both to foreign language use and to cultural encounters in the learners’ native language. According to Byram and Zarate (1997), intercultural communicative competence results from the interweaving of intercultural competence and communicative competence, while other scholars employ the two types of competencies interchangeably.

Based on the assumption that language plays a significant role in increasing the opportunities to reach success beyond cultural borders, Duranti (1997) militates for the direct connection of cultural and intercultural questions, on the one hand, and work with the language itself, on the other hand. Consequently, he supports EFL/ ESL learners’ exposure to cultural manifestations and differences, so that they could explore and tackle them.

Claiming that the concept of culture is blurred and too broad as far as the exploration of the differences in language use are concerned, other scholars, among which Scollon and Scollon (2001), employ the notion of discourse system, which is inspired by discourse analysis. They explain that every discourse system is characterized by a distinct communicative style,

and by different communication ways, ideas and rules; nevertheless, this entails difficulties when it comes to the interpretation of the components of other systems, and when speakers – as members of various groups – are compelled by different circumstances to vacillate between discourse systems. Speakers usually adapt subconsciously when they navigate between discourse systems, especially since the systems they are familiarized with are endowed with a self-evident character. Challenges arise particularly when they are faced with completely new discourse systems. Scollon and Scollon (2001) explain that these challenges are similar, to some extent, to those tackled by speakers when they encounter and communicate with individuals from various cultures. They also profess that since individuals switch from one discourse system to another on a daily basis, juggling with a wide array of values, rules, methods and practices, all communication – including the one carried out in one's native language – can be viewed as interdiscursive communication.

Therefore, the interactions between the members of distinct segments of the same society can be extremely useful in the exploration of cultural differences. Moreover, it can also assist researchers in their quest for solutions to support foreign language learning, since those learners who face difficulties when vacillating between discourse systems will certainly find it even harder to tackle a foreign language and foreign situational and cultural settings.

A foray into the connection between language and culture

Rose (n.d.) envisages culture as “*a way of life, a set of social practices, a system of beliefs, a shared history or set of experiences*”, and, consequently, a certain culture may be seen as “*synonymous with a country, or a region, or a nationality or it may cross several countries or regions*”. According to Day Translation Team (2022), the correlative and complex connection between language and culture is inherent:

“The two are intertwined. A particular language usually points out to a specific group of people. When you interact with another language, it means that you are also interacting with the culture that speaks the language. You cannot understand one's culture without accessing its language directly.”

Moreover, according to Rose (n.d.), individuals may perceive themselves as belonging to more than one culture, and speaking more than one native language. Since these two elements (i.e., language and culture) “developed together and influenced each other as they evolved” (Day Translation Team, 2022), the process of language learning stretches beyond linguistic rules, as it also encompasses the cultural elements of its native people. Due to this interdependence, language and culture should not be addressed separately; on the contrary, language learning should also extend to the culture associated with the respective language.

Scholars from all over the world support this innate connection. For example, Körber (2018) explains that culture emerged when speech was present, and the enrichment of either triggered the evolution of the other. Culture sprang from human interactions and the manifestations of culture within a specific group are, in fact, communication acts. Moreover, the behaviour patterns exhibited by individuals are usually modelled by the norms, beliefs, attitudes and common perspectives typical of the group they belong to. The speech domain includes all the messages transmitted and received by individuals in a certain language, and that their society is the one that initially educates its children, conveying knowledge about its native language and culture; thus, these two elements communicate via each other, being interconnected. Since language cannot be separated from the society that has shaped it and from its speakers, Kramsch (2009a; 2009b) cannot conceive the language learning process without culture.

This underlines the idea that every community has its own (unique) perspective upon the world, emphasizing the direct connection between linguistic and cultural knowledge, as language shapes the perspectives shared by the group speaking it and vice versa. Issues emerge from the interactions between the members of different cultures – which nowadays are very common, due to globalisation – and, in such situations, communication becomes the vital ingredient of mutual understanding and discovery of the others’ culture.

Rose (n.d.) also supports the idea that individuals cannot be competent speakers of a certain language if they do not comprehend the culture that models it. Thus, he perceives second language learning tightly connected to the learners’ awareness of the respective culture and of the ways in which it

can be related to their native language and culture. Gao (2006) stresses the idea that learners' cultural competence can lead to intercultural competence. This happens when language is employed as a continuous socialization instrument, requiring both language and culture learning.

Therefore, it is highly recommended that educators, school principals and decision-makers take into account the Council of Europe document on "plurilingual and intercultural education", especially its "founding principles", as main guidelines for teaching languages in cultural contexts ("recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity"; "everyone's right to use their language varieties as a medium of communication"; "every learner's right to gain experience and achieve a command of languages"; "the centrality of human dialogue"). Its main purpose is represented by the implementation of a holistic approach in the teaching process centered on various subjects. Since language competence is envisioned as one entity – although separated across various school subjects – this involves the determination and systematization of their transversal links and convergence points. It also aims at outlining – in a consistent and explicit manner – the teaching objectives and the required competencies so that learners can succeed in their academic tasks and that the learning process is evaluated impartially and clearly.

Language skills influence to a great extent the learners' access to education and academic success. For instance, certain students may unfortunately face downsides from the very moment they begin school as their skills do not align with the school's standards and expectations. Such students usually come from underprivileged settings, have migrant families or speak a regional language as their mother tongue. Nevertheless, regardless of their language repertoire, they are compelled to learn how to communicate efficiently in the school environment in order to access the path towards academic accomplishment and social and personal development. Therefore, all education systems face the same key challenge, i.e., finding the best ways for developing learners' language and intercultural skills that will allow them to function as efficient citizens, gain knowledge, enhance understanding and foster openness towards cultural diversity. This approach to language and culture teaching is known in the literature as *plurilingual and intercultural education*.

The development of intercultural awareness

Intercultural competence involves certain skills: to observe, identify and recognize various similarities and differences among cultures; the capacity to compare and contrast distinct cultures; meaning negotiation; the ability to tackle ambiguity; the skilful and efficient interpretation of messages; the capacity to restrict the likelihood of misinterpretation; the aptitude to defend one's standpoint while acquiescing the validity of others; the capability to tolerate and respect difference (Rose, n.d.). The aforementioned skills should be a requirement in language teaching and the design of materials tackling cultural and intercultural topics should contribute to a more rapid acquisition of intercultural communicative competences.

EFL teachers should act as mediators of cultural relativity by utilizing in their teaching activities their rich backgrounds in various disciplines, the rich experiences they have accumulated, and their vast knowledge and comprehension of different cultures (Rose, n.d.).

Scholars debunk the erroneous association of cultural awareness with advanced language learning, which deemed cultural awareness as mere exercise employed in order to extend ordinary lessons. This association is partly based on the idea that cultural notions cannot be properly understood by beginner language learners, disregarding the fundamental role played by intercultural awareness in language acquisition regardless of the proficiency level.

As far as the incorporation of culture in language teaching is concerned, Liddicoat (2011) identifies two orientations, i.e., cultural (which does not involve the modification of learners' perceptions, attitudes or values, as it involves only the pursuit of knowledge of other cultures) and intercultural (which is endowed with a transformative nature, as learners are required to detach themselves from their own perspectives and acquire novel intercultural identity patterns via the exposure to other cultures).

As far as EFL/ESL learning is concerned, in the context of Liddicoat's orientations to culture teaching (2011), one should take into account that English – as a *lingua franca* of the contemporary world – is employed by millions of speakers from a wide array of cultures in their (daily) interactions. In this regard, research shows that the number of EFL/ ESL speakers is greater than the number of native English speakers (Galloway, 2017). This transforms English into a language of intercultural communication, i.e., “*the language of globalization and internalization and the prerequisite to effective*

communication in intercultural communities” (Baker and Feng, 2020: 13). This can create confusions when it comes to the exploration of culture in language classes, as issues arise about the cultural aspects that should be tackled, and the solutions to these issues are connected to language learning goals (Kramsch, 2009a; Kramsch 2009b; Bal and Savas, 2022). In this context, the acquisition of intercultural skills becomes vital, as they enable learners to communicate efficiently in various cultural settings (Byram and Wagner, 2018; Nindya et al., 2022).

Moreover, based on the idea that internalization also encompasses intercultural dimensions, the literature states that intercultural awareness should stretch beyond English instruction and should be underlain by experience and practice (Bal and Savas, 2022).

The intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is outlined in the literature as follows:

“The communicative ability to understand and negotiate the linguistic and cultural differences with people of other cultures appropriately using a language as well as the capacity to relate to otherness effectively.” (Nindya et al., 2022: 300).

It is also the ability to understand others’ views (Odağ et al., 2016), and aims at training learners to communicate in an effective and adequate manner with individuals from other geographical areas characterized by different cultural elements (Tran and Duong, 2018). Furthermore, it supports individual and social progress via the broadening of cultural awareness and insight and the improvement of cross-cultural comprehension (Fitriyah et al., 2019).

The literature suggests that the acquisition and expansion of intercultural communicative competences depends on a series of vital factors such as multicultural proficiency and understanding, linguistic and communicative abilities, personal attitudes, self-consciousness, and knowledge of the others’ values, perspectives and norms (Baker, 2016).

EFL/ ESL classes are labelled by scholars such as Vo (2017), Hoff (2014), and Galloway (2017) as key instruments in the promotion of intercultural communicative competencies, by providing learners a wide array of opportunities to engage in intercultural dialogues against various multicultural backgrounds. In addition, one of the main purposes of EFL/ ESL

learning is represented by teaching and understanding cultural diversity, strengthening of cultural awareness and the development of certain types of values.

The materials used in EFL/ ESL teaching are of utmost importance as their main goal is to support language learning. However, as Skopinskaja (2003: 39) notices, textbooks “*cannot simply do that since language learning is inseparable from its cultural context*”, because learners should be prepared to employ language in real world contexts, as well. After reviewing the literature on teaching materials, Skopinskaja (2003: 39) notices that foreign language education focuses mainly on developing learners’ communicative competence in real life settings, raising their awareness of the respective foreign language, fostering the understanding of, and stimulating positive attitudes towards other languages and the people speaking them. Therefore, the teaching materials should be permeated by cultural elements of the foreign language, in order to ensure both linguistic development and cultural awareness.

Case study

This section is dedicated to a case study proposal designed to contribute to the improvement of strategies employed by EFL teachers to foster intercultural communicative competence.

The participants in this case study proposal will be EFL teachers who work in secondary and high school institutions across Constanta County. Their participation in this research will be voluntary, and all responses will be collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality and encourage the provision of honest answers.

The main research method employed in this case study proposal is the survey aimed at gathering data regarding the EFL teachers’ attitudes and practices with regard to intercultural communicative competences. The teachers will be invited to provide anonymous responses to a questionnaire in order to provide data and information about communicative competence, the teaching strategies, techniques and activities that they implement in order to develop it among their students and the additional support they need in order to improve their activities.

The case study will be designed to gather as much information as possible about ways of defining intercultural communicative competence, strategies that can be implemented in order to develop intercultural

communicative competence in class, challenges, resources, additional support and forms of professional training, how intercultural communicative competence can be assessed in the classroom.

By investigating teachers' comprehension of intercultural communicative competences, better insight of its status quo and implementation in EFL education will be provided. This information is essential for the identification of possible gaps and misconceptions that may affect their teaching strategies.

The examination of the strategies that teachers already use will allow the identification of effective or underutilized approaches and will also furnish vital information about possible enhancements. Moreover, the investigation of practical, contextual or institutional challenges will offer valuable insights into the elements that hinder efficient practice and will pinpoint to the areas that require support or improvement.

Since teachers' knowledge and access to adequate resources influence the efficiency of intercultural communicative competence instruction, the information about the existing training and materials will contribute to the identification of professional development needs. It will also provide data that will contribute to the design of more relevant support initiatives.

The teachers' perceptions of student engagement will furnish information about the efficiency and impact of the activities they implement to enhance the students' intercultural communicative competence. This will also contribute to the design of more impactful activities at a time when the necessity for intercultural communicative competences is irrefutable.

Teachers will also have the opportunity to specify what support would be necessary to improve their practice. The comprehension of their needs will ensure the alignment of future strategies, training and resources to real classroom conditions, increasing thus the efficiency of intercultural communicative competence activities.

The implementation of interculturality in EFL classes places "*both learners and teachers as key actors that employ language to solve a variety of tasks*"; it encourages them "*to make connections and compare source and target languages and cultures*", and to employ critical thinking skills in order to comprehend "*concepts of cultural differences and cultural diversity*" (Buzarna-Tihenea (Galbeaza), 2020: 306). The case study is expected to

furnish a comprehensive understanding of how EFL teachers in Constanta County perceive and implement intercultural communicative competences in their classrooms. It will also identify effective strategies, highlight challenges and impediments, and pinpoint the gaps in their knowledge and training. The study will also examine how teachers evaluate student engagement and select their additional resources or support. Therefore, the findings will contribute to the development of targeted strategies and teaching materials focused on intercultural communicative competences; it will also encourage teachers' professional development initiatives centred on the promotion and implementation of intercultural communicative competences in EFL teaching and learning processes.

Strategies for the promotion of intercultural communicative competence

According to the literature, the promotion of the intercultural communicative competence can be achieved through a wide array of strategies, including the design of language programs; fostering cultural insights and sensitivity aimed at boosting the efficiency of the communication process; incorporating cultural elements into teaching materials and activities through the employment of authentic resources. By interacting in authentic communication contexts, "*a vast range of linguistic and cultural elements*" are triggered, boosting a wide array of EFL skills and soft abilities, enabling students "*to interact in a meaningful way, express and argue their viewpoints on different subject matters*" (Buzarna-Tihenea (Galbeaza), 2023:195).

Scholars have noticed that, although some programs attempt to address intercultural communicative competencies, many still do not furnish enough training in the skills necessary for an efficient exploration and comprehension of cultural differences. As noted by Alvarez et al. (2008), language courses frequently place emphasis on linguistic proficiency, often neglecting the integration of cultural and intercultural learning strategies into the teaching process. Thus, learners lack the competencies required for the successful communication and interaction with individuals from various cultural settings. This highlights the vital key role played by the development of a holistic language program that supports learners in their endeavours to

comprehend their own cultural perspectives and their perceptions of “otherness” (Achieng, 2023: 22).

In their turn, Byram et al. (2002) argue that grammar lessons, in particular, and textbooks in general, should be approached through intercultural and critical lens rather than as fixed authorities. In this regard, teachers can use textbook content as a start line for questioning, comparison and deeper cultural exploration. These scholars warn against choosing topics that reinforce stereotypes or prejudices; they encourage the promotion of more inclusive cultural understanding. This approach supports language development and helps learners reflect on their attitudes and better comprehend other cultures.

Another key strategy that could foster intercultural competence in foreign language teaching is represented by the development of learners’ cultural insights and sensitivity. Fantini (2009) argues that intercultural competence involves active exploration, first-hand experience, and reflective analysis of personal assumptions and values. Teachers must recognize how their own cultural backgrounds influence their interactions with students; they should remain open to their diverse perspectives as well. Although this can be challenging due to ingrained beliefs and stereotypes, intercultural competences can be strengthened via self-reflection and collaboration.

Teachers can efficiently incorporate cultural elements into foreign language teaching by employing authentic resources, encouraging engagement with native speakers and promoting (inter)cultural exchanges.

Teachers should perceive intercultural competence as a lifelong learning process and actively immerse learners in multiple cultural backgrounds. By exposing them to a wide array of cultural perspectives, they can promote a dynamic classroom atmosphere (Achieng, 2023). The advantages of this approach are numerous, as it broadens learners’ understanding, enhances their tolerance and respect towards other cultures, and boosts their academic success.

Conclusion

The examination of the intercultural communicative competence performed in this paper was focused on challenges and strategies. It highlights the difficulties in fostering this competence and the need for holistic

approaches, beyond the traditional methods. The paper also emphasizes the importance of teacher training and calls for further research on practical implementation. While centred on language teaching, intercultural communicative competence is relevant across educational contexts and should be valued by all the professionals who carry out activities in the educational field.

The case study proposal has the potential to illustrate the vital part played by EFL teachers in promoting intercultural communicative competences and evidences the intricacy of implementing it in an efficient manner in secondary and high school classrooms. The exploration of EFL teachers' perceptions, strategies, challenges and professional development necessities highlights the idea that knowledge and resources are key factors to the gateways of intercultural education.

The expected findings will shed light on the current status as far as the implementation of the intercultural communicative competence is concerned in Constanta County secondary schools and high schools. They could also furnish evidence-based guidance for the improvement of teaching approaches, practices and materials, via relevant training programs, and the creation of supportive classroom resources. Moreover, the enhancement of EFL teacher's capacity to integrate intercultural communicative competences into their lessons can trigger meaningful student engagement, improve learning outcomes and boost the appreciation of cultural diversity in education.

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