

KNOWING, BEING AND DOING – TOWARDS THE INTERCULTURAL APPROACH IN ELT

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Abstract: *Intercultural language education has redefined the agenda of modern languages all over the world. It has also begun to impact on English Language Teaching. An intercultural approach prioritizes the need for a critical, multicultural curriculum, which actively educates and facilitates the construction of learners' personal and social identities in the process of developing their language skills. Its major influences in ELT refer to intercultural competencies, academic and social benefits of intercultural learning, the use of ethnographic research to implement ELT, issues in adapting curriculum to situational learning needs, and designing tasks in an intercultural classroom. The aim of the present paper is to prove that the development of intercultural skills in foreign language teaching becomes more effective through careful instruction and the gradual process of raising learners' awareness of multiplicity of perspectives. By handling a selection of language tasks students can experience diversity and will eventually analyze their behaviour in order to adjust their language roles to new circumstances. The materials designed for proper intercultural training included essays, projects and portfolios.*

Keywords: *intercultural approach, intercultural competence, skills, knowledge, essays, projects, portfolios*

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural language education has redefined the agenda of modern languages all over the world. It has also begun to impact on English Language Teaching. An intercultural approach prioritizes the need for a critical, multicultural curriculum, which actively educates and facilitates the construction of learners' personal and social identities in the process of developing their language skills. Its major influences in ELT refer to intercultural competencies, academic and social benefits of intercultural learning, the use of ethnographic research to implement ELT, issues in adapting curriculum to situational learning needs, and designing tasks in an intercultural classroom (Holmes and O'Neill, 2012). The intercultural curriculum utilizes ethnographic methods and critical thinking to develop culturally contextualized knowledge. It motivates learners by making topics and activities more complex, thereby challenging them to build higher levels of intercultural competencies. Needless to say that the so-called *five savoirs* provide a framework for developing analytical, reflective and critical thinking skills as they are supposed to help English language learners acquire and negotiate intercultural experiences in new social environments and position their social identities through critical analyses and self-reflection.

2. KNOWING, BEING AND DOING

The purpose of this article is therefore to discuss what is necessary for a learner to become an intercultural speaker. It also investigates what activities foreign language teachers need to integrate into their practices so as to direct their teaching more towards the development of intercultural communicative competence. The model which might be proposed to clarify the intercultural approach in ELT is composed of 'knowing', 'being' and 'doing' of our learners. 'Knowing' is defined in terms of learners' knowledge which they bring to an interaction. 'Being' is understood as being skillful in interpreting, relating, discovering meanings and behaviours. Finally, 'doing' has to be perceived as an exemplification of attitudes among learners, which are exhibited towards other interlocutors.

Guilherme (2002) implicates that the knowledge learners have at their disposal in an interaction consists of two layers: knowledge about social groups and their cultures in their own country, and similar knowledge of the interlocutor's country (more or less refined and present in some degree) on the one hand and knowledge of the processes of interaction, on the other hand. It involves the following:

1. historical and contemporary relationships between one's own and one's interlocutor's country;

2. the types of cause and process of misunderstanding between interlocutors of different cultural origins;

3. the national definitions of geographical space in one's country and how these are perceived from the perspective of other countries;

4. the processes and institutions of socialization in one's own country and one's interlocutor's country;

5. social distinctions and their principal markers, in one's own country and one's interlocutor's;

6. institutions, and perceptions of them, which impinge on daily life within one's own and one's interlocutor's country and which conduct and influence relationships between them;

7. the national memory of one's own country and one's interlocutor's country and how they are perceived;

8. the processes of social interaction in one's interlocutor's country.

Within skills, as Sercu (2001) stresses, it is imperative to distinguish those of interpreting and relating, and of discovery and interaction, to be acquired through experience and reflection with or without the intervention of teachers. The skills of interpreting and relating draw upon existing knowledge. They are defined as abilities allowing us to interpret documents or events from another culture, in order to explain and relate them to the ones typical of our own culture. The objectives are the following:

1. identify ethnocentric perspectives in documents or events and explain their origins;

2. identify areas of misunderstanding and dysfunction in an interaction and explain them in terms of each of the cultural systems present;

3. mediate between conflicting interpretations of phenomena.

The skills of discovery are perceived as abilities to recognize significant phenomena in a foreign environment and to elicit their meanings and their relationship to other phenomena. The skills of interaction help us to manage the constraints of time, mutual perceptions and attitudes. Thanks to their presence interlocutors acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and operate it together with attitudes under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction. The objectives include:

1. identify significant references within and across cultures and elicit their significance;

2. identify similar and dissimilar processes of interaction and negotiate an appropriate use of them in specific circumstances;

3. use in real-time an appropriate combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes to interact with interlocutors from a different country and culture, taking into consideration the extent of difference;

4. identify contemporary and past relationship between one's own and the other culture and country;

5. use in real-time knowledge, skills and attitudes for mediation between interlocutors of one's own and a foreign culture.

Lubecka (2003:46) recognizes the attitudes observed among speakers, which according to her observation, vary across interactions. The distinctive feature refers to cultural meanings, beliefs and behaviours exhibited by certain social groups. The most desirable attitudes typical of intercultural speakers are curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about our own and other cultures. The objectives are the following:

1. willingness to seek out or take up opportunities to engage with otherness in a relationship of equality;

2. interest in discovering other perspectives on interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in one's own and in other cultures and cultural practices;

3. readiness to experience the different stages of adaptation to an interaction with another culture;

4. readiness to engage with the conventions and rites of verbal and non-verbal communication and interaction.

3. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AS A PREREQUISITE OF INTERCULTURAL APPROACH IN ELT

Many researchers postulate that the aim of the intercultural approach in language teaching is to develop intercultural communicative competence since it is vital for language instructors to create an efficient intercultural speaker who would exhibit certain skills, competences and knowledge (Risager, 1998; Byram and Fleming, 1998; Kramsch, 1998). The most comprehensive model of what intercultural communicative competence is comprised was presented by Chen and Starosta (2000:6-7). It integrates the following three features: awareness, adroitness and sensitivity. Each dimension consists of a set of components. For example, intercultural awareness is the cognitive dimension of intercultural communicative competence, which concerns a person's ability to understand similarities and differences of other cultures. It includes self-

awareness and cultural awareness. Intercultural sensitivity, being the affective dimension, refers to the emotional desire of a person to acknowledge, appreciate and accept cultural differences. Six components, such as: self-esteem, self-monitoring, empathy, open-mindedness, non-judgementalness and social relaxation are involved in the dimension. Ultimately, intercultural adroitness as a behavioural dimension, is understood as an individual's ability to reach communication goals while interacting with people from other cultures. It consists of four elements, namely: message skills, appropriate self-disclosure, behavioural flexibility and interaction management.

In foreign language instruction, teachers should focus on subjective culture which includes beliefs, values, assumptions and patterns without which it is not possible to understand the impact of it on communication (Bennett 2004:64-65). These are the most difficult aspects to be taught and learnt as they account in particular for the speaker's intercultural awareness to be clearly distinguished from intercultural know-how. Whereas intercultural awareness refers generally to the learner's awareness of him-/herself as a member of a global community, intercultural skills and know-how refer rather to the individual's way of dealing with cultural differences.

Furthermore, both knowledge and skills develop in students a special kind of sensitivity manifested as their own need to sustain certain self-conceptions and self-image, their degree of anxiety and their avoidance tendencies engendered by strangers. The role of the teacher consists in making students understand who they are, reinforcing their self-confidence and overcoming their anxiety (Gudykunst and Kim, 2002: 338). When communicators are threatened, they often become defensive and can no longer think clearly or access the knowledge and skills needed to communicate effectively. Their sensitivity experienced as anxiety hinders their ability to gather information that could reduce uncertainty and their sense of alienation from other cultural groups. All the factors decrease their motivation to communicate further and make them avoid intercultural interactions in the future (Brislin 1999:152).

4. INTERCULTURAL APPROACH IN ELT

The intercultural dimension in ELT aims to develop learners as intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity

and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity (Byram *et al.*, 2004). It is based on perceiving the interlocutor as an individual whose qualities are to be discovered, rather than a representative of an external identity. The intercultural dimension is concerned with: 1) helping learners to understand how intercultural interaction takes place, 2) how social identities are part of all interaction, 3) how their perceptions of other people and other people's perceptions of them influence the success of communication, 4) how they can find out for themselves more about the people they are communicating with.

Intercultural training in language education requires the application of three different approaches: experiential learning, ethnographic approach and comparative approach. According to Kohonen (2001) experiential learning is an educational orientation which aims at integrating theoretical and practical elements of learning for a whole person approach, emphasizing the significance of experience for learning. The approach is well-known in various settings of informal learning, such as internships in business and service organizations, work and study assignments, clinical experience, international exchange and volunteer programmes, etc. However, the principles and practices can be used both in formal learning (institutional) contexts and in informal learning. Experiential learning techniques include a rich variety of interactive practices whereby the participants have opportunities to learn from their own and each others' experiences, being actively and personally engaged in the process:

- personal journals, diaries
- portfolios, projects
- reflective personal essays and thought questions
- role plays, drama activities
- games and simulations
- personal stories and case studies
- visualizations and imaginative activities
- empathy-taking activities
- discussions and reflection in cooperative groups.

The ethnographic approach concentrates on observation and description of behaviours among representatives of a particular culture. From the point of view of ELT the most interesting aspect to be investigated refers to human communication. Corbett (2003) points out that a communicated meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed

by the participants of an interaction embedded within a context. It does not depend on the intentions communicated by a speaker. The role of ethnographic methods in foreign language teaching was indicated by Damen (1987:53). The supporters of the intercultural approach are positive about the possibility of using ethnography in integrated culture and language teaching and developing mediating competences. A learner who is showing ethnographic skills can:

1. use their own experiences;
2. observe culture phenomena;
3. be a participant-observer of their own and the other's culture;
4. question in order to obtain information about culture;
5. search for the most useful sources of information;
6. take notes during field trips;
7. collect, analyze, present, evaluate and distinguish qualitative from quantitative data;
8. restrain from assessing the other's culture.

Zawadzka (2004) and Pulverness (1999) notice that learning about the other's culture provokes comparisons with our own culture. Thus we tend to understand and compare new phenomena with the application of categories employed by our language and culture community. The comparative approach should be applied in teaching only with the presence of a teacher who will be responsible for preserving an objective glance at the new phenomena so as not to falsify the newly-learned reality. Unfortunately, comparing two cultures does not lead to the development of intercultural awareness and empathy. Byram and Zarate (1997) claim that only critical cultural awareness achieved through the critical analysis of cultural phenomena and their deconstruction contributes to general education and development among learners. Constant comparative analysis remains undoubtedly a crucial element of action conducted by intercultural mediators. The comparative approach in teaching culture helps to:

1. make learners reflect on how their own language, linguistic and cultural identity are perceived by others;
2. analyze stereotypes and distinguish individual traits;
3. discuss tolerance, xenophobia, acculturation and sustaining one's identity;
4. activate previously gained knowledge and experience;
5. distance from one's own cultural norms;
6. shape one's curiosity and critical attitude instead of developing prejudices.

By emphasizing the role of the comparative approach in intercultural training, Kramsch (1998) recommends various tasks, which require accepting worldviews different than one's own. Similarly, analyzing things from a different perspective allows learners to compare those aspects of their culture, which they are unaware of. To fulfill the expectations of the comparative approach, they need to engage their knowledge and experience indispensable for making comparisons. As a result students will be able to strengthen their cultural identity (Bandura, 2007:78).

5. INTERCULTURAL CLASSROOM – SELECTED ACTIVITIES

The aim of the present paper is to prove that the development of intercultural skills in foreign language teaching becomes more effective through careful instruction and the gradual process of raising learners' awareness of multiplicity of perspectives. The study was conducted at university level among adult learners of English. By handling a selection of language tasks students experienced diversity and analyzed their behaviour in order to adjust their language roles to new circumstances. The activities designed for proper intercultural training included essays, portfolios and projects. All the classroom practices enabled the learners to improve their linguistic abilities, become more competent language users and develop proper attitudes necessary for efficient intercultural communication exchanges.

For the purpose of understanding how the model of "knowing", "being" and "doing" functions, it seems vital to analyze the chosen activities seen as indispensable in creating an intercultural speaker. Because through essays students can demonstrate their understanding of cultural phenomena, they are viewed as the most reliable technique or activity meant to broaden their knowledge and check their language competence. Under certain circumstances they can also be treated as a record of individual's intercultural experiences, qualifications and specific competences. It goes without saying that thanks to planning, reviewing and reflecting on their own learning, learners will give an account of linguistic and cultural experiences gained in and outside formal education. Byram (2000: 12-13) enumerates the following advantages of essays in the process of development of effective intercultural speakers: (1) interest in other people's way of life; (2) ability to change perspective; (3)

ability to cope with living in a different culture; (4) knowledge about another country and culture.

On the other hand, one of the many effective means of checking learners' skills is the project work. A project is usually regarded to be a long-term task undertaken by learners outside school in which they have to collect information, organize it, draw conclusions and later present their findings in class. As noted by Klimowicz (2004:35) projects are ideal in the intercultural approach as they conform to the principles of learner autonomy, affective and intellectual stimulation of a learner and are interdisciplinary. The topic of the project is chosen under the teacher's guidance while the rest of the work is done either individually or in small groups. As Komorowska (2005: 156) states, school projects help to train and assess the skills of searching for specific information, comparing and contrasting information originating from different sources, differentiating facts from opinions, interpreting retrieved data, formulating and justifying critical judgments, the skills of linguistically accurate project presentation, and the skills of coherent and cohesive project presentation.

Bandura (2009:187) adds that projects are the most suitable form of developing the learner's ethnographic skills, which are an important aspect of the intercultural approach. Through becoming a participant-observer of native and foreign culture, a student learns how to use their own experience, observe cultural practices, find out new information about the culture studied, specify the most reliable sources of information, gather, analyze, present, assess and distinguish qualitative and quantitative data, consciously participate in native and foreign culture, and refrain from judgmental statements.

Finally, the portfolio, considered as most useful by Byram (1997) and Lázár *et al.* (2007), is the tool for the development and observation of learners' attitudes through involving them in the process of collection, analysis and presentation of information on a selected topic. A portfolio can include the recording of interviews conducted by the learner in a foreign language accompanied by their commentary and reports of their intercultural contacts. It creates the possibility of new ways of assessing the learners' language and intercultural competencies. As a result, it encourages the lifelong learning of foreign languages, increases the learner's awareness of their competence and promotes intercultural learning. Thus, it is also viewed as a means of support in the development

of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism. The idea of adapting portfolios is reported to be very beneficial among language teachers and learners as it contributes positively to the growth in the learners' self-esteem, and by focusing on their abilities they have a stronger feeling of success. A change was also observed in the teachers' approaches to their learners. In place of focusing on their shortcomings, the teachers concentrated more on what the learners can do, i.e. on their competencies. The learners' parents also provided a positive feedback on the use of portfolios since they felt better-informed of their children's progress.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In the current intercultural approach, the emphasis has been clearly shifted towards reflecting on the personal, emotional and social elements inherent in authentic communication. Whereas communicative competence related primarily to the individual's knowledge and skills in communicative situations, intercultural competence also focuses on the learner's personal identity, social abilities and attitudes such as respect for cultural and individual diversity. It further emphasizes the importance of a reflective awareness of language use and cultural elements in intercultural settings. Therefore, it should be argued that the frame of 'knowing', 'being' and 'doing' is a concept suggesting the necessity to integrate the required skills, knowledge and competences for the purpose of developing successful intercultural encounters. As intercultural communication is a question of attitudes and emotions, becoming an intercultural language user highlights the central role of the affective elements in foreign language education. It entails an element of personal growth as a human being and a language user – all indispensable and ubiquitous under certain circumstances.

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