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Intercultural Language Teaching: What Skills are Needed to Cope with a 21st Century EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to enrich EFL teachers' understanding of the re-considerations involved in the nature of language learning with respect to the increasing process of global economic, political, linguistic and cultural integration. Needless to say, the globalization process tends to blur national boundaries, and this has already started with the European Union. What is more, the use of computer-assisted learning devices and other ICT tools, which have reduced the world into a village-like planet, have tremendously affected the field of foreign language pedagogy. All this, virtually creates a need for greater cross-cultural knowledge. The language learning communicative ends of the 70s and 80s have been re-moulded on intercultural grounds to give birth to a new concept: inter/cross-cultural competence. This intercultural scheme, one might argue, ensures the link between teaching language and learning culture, hence the intercultural language teaching or 'teaching-and-learning language-and-culture' approach (hereafter written TLLC), a term coined by Byram et al. (1994).

Key words: Intercultural Language Teaching, globalization, integration process, interculturalschem

The term '*intercultural approach*', though known to many educationalists such as Rivers, Lado, and Mackey, to name just a few, did not become current in books for some little while. The theory was still in the process of being clarified, and the terminology was incomplete. It has been the object of scrutiny in several works written in the 1990s (Byram and Morgan 1994; Byram and Fleming 1998; Kramsch 1998; Risager 1999). However, the work of Buttjes and Byram (1991) has played a prominent role; they approach the teaching of language and culture as integrated and advocate intercultural mediation to serve as a source of "causal knowledge about culture" (Buttjes 1991:9). Since the mid-1990s TLLC has been the dominant paradigm within

foreign language education in many Western countries. Traditional pedagogies have been for many years predicated, among other aims, on the development of a sympathetic orientation towards the target culture and its users. In recent years, however, the notion of empathy has somewhat lost its intrinsic value in the language learning process, and so has acculturation in other respects. It is no more "desirable for learners to identify with the other, nor to deny their own identity and culture" (Byram and Fleming 1998:8).

One of the basic tenets of the TLLC is the development of intercultural communicative skills; in this regard, intercultural competence becomes *de facto* the rationale underlying foreign language

pedagogy. Consequently, learning a language is no longer assessed in terms of a continuum whose endpoint is the native speaker's construct, but rather as the ability to become intercultural speaker. Here construct, as one might interpret it, is being used in its broad sense and wider interpretation to include a cluster of ideas, a set of beliefs, an ensemble of attitudes, etc., which altogether contribute to the shaping of one's behaviour in various conventional ways; hence the shift from the native-speaker-norm-oriented model to the intercultural speaker model.

This deliberate shift is due in part to the new configuration of today's world order – linguistic and cultural integration – resulting from large-scale migration, tourism, business and other cross-cultural encounters, namely the formation of multicultural corporations as a result of changes and internationalism, and partly to the linguistic and pragmatic differences among speakers of the same language, which have some bearing on the appropriateness of the notion of native speakership (Kramsch 1998:16). It was not until the late 1980s that research on cross-cultural communication has started deeply questioning and critically examining the construct of the native speaker. In countries like the USA, Britain and France where multiculturalism has become the hallmark of American, British and French schools, efforts are oriented towards making classroom discourse more explicitly intercultural and various classroom activities are devised in this regard. This educational aim has a socio-cultural dimension; it aims, through schooling, at developing a form of amity among the various ethnic groups. The Brixton riots of August 1981 were partly due to the exclusion of the Black and West Indian cultural behaviour from school; "l'affaire du foulard" (the headscarf scandal) in France and Belgium in 2009 and in which schoolgirls were excluded from school because of their wearing of a distinctive religious garment.

To keep the lines open to wider conception of language in relation to culture in a world characterized by an on-going process of global integration at various levels, the time has come for language teachers not only to focus on the conceptual schemes, but also to investigate the different ways in which intercultural competence

can be achieved. It is interesting, in this respect, to recall that communicative and cultural competence can be too general terms. Today, they are being strongly called into question in the pedagogical debate, mainly because they rest upon a concept of society and culture that does not include the context of other cultures. Damen argues that "The current dedication to the development of communicative competence of language learners mandates the development of intercultural skills and an understanding of the processes of culture learning on the part of the teachers and students alike". (Damen 2007:xvi) On the other hand, Cortazzi and Jin (2009) propose the extension of Canale and Swain's list (1980) of competences by adding intercultural competence.

Originally, the concept of intercultural competence has been widely used in social psychology and studies of communication. In the former, it refers to social effectiveness, i.e. the ability to achieve instrumental and social goals; in the latter it denotes appropriateness, i.e. suitable communication in a given situation in a particular culture. In foreign language learning, however, it has been defined as "The ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures" (Meyer 1991:137). In a rather practical way, the two main facets of intercultural competence are (1) to gain insights into one's own culture and (2) to find reasons for similarities and differences from within the target cultures. Therefore in-depth understanding of otherness implies trying to understand from within. Traditional methodology to the teaching of foreign languages assigns specific educational aims, and which are familiar to the language teaching profession. These aims are oriented towards three dimensions: linguistic, cultural and conceptual:

Linguistic, i.e. that dimension which focuses on learning skills and on an understanding and awareness of the target language, or grammatical competence.

Cultural, i.e. that dimension which offers insights into the target culture and focuses on the

development of practical communication skills, or cultural competence.

Conceptual, i.e. that dimension which encourages positive attitudes towards the target culture and its speakers, or empathy.

What is new in the TLLC approach is the inclusion of comparisons between the learners' own culture and the target culture, thereby "inviting learners to develop a reflective attitude to the culture and civilization of their own country"(Risager2008:244). This 'reflective impact' (Bryam and Fleming 2008) refers to the process which turns learners' attention back onto themselves and their way of life. This aim was, in fact, clearly stated in the National Curriculum for England and Wales: *To develop pupils' understanding of themselves and their own way of life* (DES 1990:3). This innovation can be traced back to the 'Assumption-and-Values' approach advocated by the Scandinavian educational aims of modern foreign language teaching, and which views the conceptual scheme, as a way to raise knowledge above the collection of mere facts (*Landeskundeteaching*), and consequently to enhance "pupils' international understanding and understanding of their own culture" (Risager 2008: 245), i.e. an understanding of themselves and the world around them, as well as their interrelationship. Indeed, a better understanding of the other culture or cultures requires putting that or those cultures in relation the learner's own culture. Ladson-Billings (1992) makes a similar point when she advocates culturally relevant pedagogy or "the kind of teaching that is designed not only to fit the school culture to the students' culture but also to use student culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge" Ladson-Billings 1992:314). In this regard, the reflective impact operates through a four-fold process:

- 1- Contact with otherness
- 2- Comparison of similarities and differences
- 3- Interpretation of similarities and differences
- 4- Understanding of the taken-for-granted nature of the target culture.

In addition to this, what is interesting in this approach is the use of findings in educational psychology to investigate the nature of the learning process. It starts from the fact that foreign language learning usually takes place just half-way between the primary and secondary process of socialization, and the discovery of new sets of practices, beliefs and values – otherness – leads to reflection on and questioning of the learners' native way of life. Consequently, the contact-comparison process with otherness provides answers and explanations to many aspects of the mainstream culture, and the interplay between the different processes contributes to the development of intercultural competence.

It is not surprising that the notion of reflective impact turns to the application of ethnographic investigative methods and practices for developing cultural awareness and intercultural understanding in foreign language learners. This new educational perspective serves a three-fold purpose: for one thing it aims at modifying negative perceptions and stereotyping, for another at facilitating positive impressions and attitudes, and thirdly, it aims at establishing a sphere of interculturality which helps learners perceive the similarities and cope with the differences. One may add for the purposes of this argument that the TLLC approach revisits the concept of culture. Thus it is that Moerman's definition seems to go along with the TLLC schemes. "Culture is a set – perhaps a system of principles of interpretations, together with the products of that system" (Moerman, cited in Cortazzi and Jin, 2009:197). In this respect, culture can be seen as the framework of assumptions, ideas and beliefs that are used to interpret other people's actions, words and patterns of thinking.

As regards the Algerian context, there is a need for a radical change; language mastery is still the overwhelming issue, the culture is often never dealt with, and worse still, culture is naively indexed in the Official Ministry Guidelines, and finally, the establishment of cultural references and landmarks, which help learners to build up vivid pictures and valid perceptions of the target culture, are seen as a potential threat to national culture and identity. This is another way of saying that the teaching of culture

often represents an aspect of language teaching that is unfamiliar to most Algerian English language teachers whose professional training largely focuses on linguistic aspects. We reach the conclusion that given the extraordinary transformations which have taken place in the world, we confront a design change. In what follows, we propose a model for curriculum development projects through which we attempt to focus on the different ways to accommodate the cultural dimension in ELT settings for developing cross-cultural competence on a principled TLLC methodology.

The vastness of the concept of culture would lead us to adopt a 'selective-focusing' approach, differentiating the areas of culture teaching on the basis of humanistic and anthropological orientations. The scholarly literature on culture teaching has strongly focused on the combination of the anthropological and humanistic approach, i.e. the Olympian culture to use Brooks' term. In this respect, three broad topic areas: 1) People and Places, 2) History and Institutions and 3) Arts and Major Achievements will be dealt with. It is important to note that the proposed topics are by no means exhaustive and can be extended to cover other related aspects. The language learner should be aware of the most common geographical expressions used and how they are perceived by the native speakers. For example, Britons tend to think of their country as an island nation, separate from the rest of Europe and consequently, people in Britain often talk about "travelling to Europe" or "taking a holiday in Europe", or simply "going on the continent". More surprisingly in Cornwall, in the south-east corner of England, some Cornish people still talk about "going to England" when they cross the county border. Besides the geographical division of England into areas such as the Midlands, the Downs, Yorkshire etc. and Scotland into mainly the Highlands in the north and the Lowlands in the South, there are nicknames used to refer to specific areas, cities or towns. For example, the south-eastern area surrounding London is often called the "Home Countries". The word "Home" in this context highlights the importance attached to London and its domination of public life.

It is clear, however, that culture denotes the total set of beliefs, customs and way of life a particular community. In culture teaching, we shift focus away from the individual towards the people who speak the language. Nevertheless, the student can gain a sense of cultural reality through personal contact with native speakers. This source of cultural information is the expatriate language teacher. By observing his behaviour and asking questions about it, the student gets an entry into some aspects of the target culture and progressively gets attuned to some habits of the target community. Unfortunately, for the time being the Algerian educational institutions in their quasi-totality are suffering tremendously from the lack of expatriate teachers; this is due, in part, to a large-scale Algerianization of the teaching staff and, in part, to security reasons. What is more, the language learner should be led to identify members of the target community on the basis of social and regional differences, and adjust his linguistic and cultural behaviour accordingly. Yet, class distinctions in Britain, are less marked today than they used to be. The student should be aware that the tendency of the upper and working classes to merge into the middle class has been accelerated since the triumph of the Labour Party over the Conservatives.

The old pattern of old Britain is breaking up. However, regionally it is generally recognized that the people of northern England are thought to be less refined than their southern neighbours, but more energetic. The people of the south are kind and courteous. On the other hand, "Dai" or "Taffy" the typical Welshman, is renowned for his singing ability. Whereas, "Jock" the Scotsman is supposed to have red hair and freckles on the face, and to be addicted to golf, whisky and endless argumentation. When he does not go to the church gloomily dressed in black, he wears the kilt and plays the bagpipe. "Jock" also has the reputation of being very careful with money. To the average Englishman "Paddy" or "Mick" is supposed to be a great talker, a fellow full of unexpectedness proud of his Irish culture and Celtic origin, friendly but bloodthirsty. These are some stereotypes which are commonplace in Britain and which form the seeds of anecdotal jokes in Britain.

The language learner should be aware of the main historical events of the country, including the historically significant symbols, dates and the main historical personalities. For example, the Union Jack, the national flag of the UK, provides a wonderful illustration of the identifying symbols of the British nations represented through the cross of St George (England), the cross of St Andrews (Scotland), and the cross of St Patrick (Ireland). On the other hand, the Norman Conquest (1066) provides a useful linguistic explanation to the many borrowed French words and expressions that have been adopted by the English language. The historical personality, who swept away the power of the Roman Catholic Church in England, is Henry VIII. All these historical events, or hard-and-fast facts, can be studied in a scholarly fashion, i.e. the way books of history present them. However, some of the most important aspects of British life cannot be described in terms of hard-and-fast facts, they can easily be incorporated in some teaching materials.

On the other hand, the learners should familiarize themselves with the dominant institutions in the target speech community. This does not require a scholarly approach based on thorough knowledge of the various British institutions and their functions; what matters most of all is to provide the learner with insights about the topic area, and be acquainted with the terminology used. To illustrate the main idea of this point, let us examine the following sentences:

- *The Algerian position on was warmly welcomed by 10 Downing Street.*
- *Buckingham celebrated Queen Mother's hundredth Birthday.*
- *The church service celebrated at St Paul's Cathedral was a memorial to the disaster victims.*

These frayed sentences unintentionally, yet undeniably convey cultural information:

10 Downing Street, i.e. the British Prime Minister

Buckingham, i.e. the royal family

St Paul's Cathedral, the religious centre of London

Note that the deep structure of basically simple sentences carries much hidden information where no such hints are intended.

These aspects denote a heritage of common literacy, thereby constituting the common knowledge in a speech community. In the field of culture teaching, they provide another source to cultural awareness-raising. "The learner should be able to acquire knowledge about and an appreciation of artists, musicians, and writers and their works" (Stern 1992:221). Allen and Valette (1977:336-8) subsume under the Arts: music, painting, sculpture and dance. Folksongs and folkdances, however, are dealt with separately. It is particularly noteworthy that in Algeria the choice to study English as a foreign language in Middle Schools is mainly motivated by the popularity of the language created through pop-music. On the other hand, knowledge of the major discoveries made by British scientists in the field of science and technology, for example Newton's law of gravitation, Watt's revolutionary invention of the steam-engine, Jenner's discovery of the vaccination process and the many other famous achievements constitutes imperatively, among others, the basics of the student's general cultural repertoire. However, an exhaustive survey of all the cultural features would be impossible; learning to know a culture is, in effect, a life-time process. Many natives come upon some aspects of their own culture of which they are completely unaware. Yet, there are cultural aspects which form part of a British person's general knowledge and can, therefore, help us understand the British approach to life in general.

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