Intercultural Literacy and Foreign Language Teaching

Soltani Salima* [1] , Brakni Dalila [2]

[1] Laboratoire de recherche de français linguistique et sociodidactique du plurilinguisme. ENS. Bouzeréah lisodip

Department of English, University of Blida 2 (Algeria),
e-mail : Lima.soltani@gmail.com

[2] Department of English, University of Blida 2 (Algeria),

e-mail : dalila.brakni@gmail.com

Abstract: Culture channels the way we perceive the world while language embodies its most relevant vehicle. Possessing knowledge, beliefs, behaviours and attitudes towards various cultures paved the way to the promotion of an intercultural competence where every participant is actually the product of a specific culture with a specific mode of communication. The present paper explores the concept of intercultural literacy in EFL language teaching at the level of higher education and reflects into significant pedagogical strategies to teaching foreign languages through intercultural literacy, to enhance students' linguistic and intercultural comprehension. Similarly, the paper intends to raise EFL teachers' awareness to the need of developing their intercultural literacy in teaching a foreign language and gives suggestions for possible choices and materials to meet the contexts of the EFL classroom as far as intercultural literacy is concerned.

Keywords: Culture; Intercultural Competence; Intercultural Literacy; Foreign Language Teaching; EFL

Introduction

Globalization has brought more opportunities to individuals to engage in intercultural communication with speakers of different languages from different cultures. Effective communication in real life contexts depends on both linguistic and intercultural competence of the participants because language and culture are interrelated in a number of ways. Such circumstances made it challenging for EFL educational institutions to prepare students for viable EFL language use at the level of higher education. In this sense, efficiently applied intercultural literacy accelerates, increases, and expands the impact of effective teaching practices

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* **Corresponding author**

when it comes to language learning. However, educators need to have the knowledge and skills to take full advantage of an intercultural-rich EFL learning environments because promoting intercultural literacy places learners at the crossroads of multiple social roles and individual choice, and when the teachers' intercultural literacy is deficient, it will reflect on the EFL students' outcomes. Since the foreign language classroom speech may not reflect the language of the real world, EFL students usually have trouble with understanding language users outside the classroom in real life encounters where they might reflect the way their native language function on the foreign one. Accordingly, teachers are becoming more aware that one of the main finalities of language teaching is to enable EFL learners to communicate properly using real life language to achieve real life purposes with real life participants. From this perspective, English should be taught for use in the outside world rather being kept to be a vehicle used inside the walls of the foreign language classroom through promoting intercultural literacy because teaching EFL apart from its cultural traits is incomplete. The present paper will attempt to point up to what makes intercultural literacy, to remove some of the confusion around the term. Further, it will explore why it is important to build such a concept and finally suggests how to scaffold and integrate intercultural literacy in the EFL classes.

The Relationship between Language and Culture

The relationship between language and culture has always been the concern of foreign language teaching. However, it was only in the late seventies, that research was remarkably marked by the critical shift in teaching culture in the foreign language classroom as a result to the introduction of the communicative language teaching approaches. The shift was concerned with the form and structure to incorporate the communicative aspect of the language learning process. The communicative aspect includes not only the linguistic knowledge but also its appropriate use. In other words, it is the "cultural patterns, customs, and ways of life are expressed in language: culture specific world views are reflected in language … language and culture interact so that world views among cultures differ, and that language used to express that world may be relative and specific to that view" (Brown 1980:130 in Coyle, Hood & Marsh 2010:39). Here, knowledge does not only refer to whether it is something formally possible in a language, but also the knowledge of whether it is feasible, appropriate for communication and intercultural encounters (Richard et al, 2002).

Studies on the relationship between language and culture have been receiving extensive importance worldwide, and this is due to the continuous interaction of language and culture through daily use. Agar (1994) argues, "Culture is in language and language is loaded with culture" (28). This means that culture shapes our view of the world and language embodies its most representative element. Speakers of various languages do not look at the world with the same eyes, or even, do not see the same world. Culture assembles all material and moral products a society came up with throughout its history and existence to maintain resilience and continuity of its being because without them, societies will be mere voids. McCarthy and Carter (1994) define culture to be "the social knowledge and interactive skills that are required in addition to the knowledge of the language system" (151). Language should not be bound to speech and communication, rather, societies express through language about their culture, heritage and their history too. If a society is constructed according to particular criteria, mentality, values, or even identity for instance, a form of language emerges to reflect them. In terms of 'Linguistic Relativity', Sapir (1962) and Whorf (1956) came with the most exceptional theory in the world of research that referred to the idea of interconnection between language and culture. They suggest that, because of cultural differences, individuals perceive the world differently in terms of categories and distinctions in relation to native language and that what is found in a one language may not be found in another language as a result. It is like if every individual has his own lens to look at the world which reflects on his own attitudes and behaviours. In this sense, the structure of a given language influences the way of thinking which implies that individuals who speak different languages will think differently.

In the same vein, Claire Kramsch (1998) sheds light to the studies of the mechanisms of language for the need of the cultural arena. She talked about the important relationship between language and culture, since the Sapir Whorf hypothesis and the theory of linguistic relativity, which argues that the different cultural concepts and classifications inherent in a particular language affect our perceptions and views of the world around us. Thus, speakers of different languages think and act in different styles. Initially, Kramsch defines language to be the main technique by which we run our social life. Words and expressions used by individuals denote to shared experiences because they represent a sample to a warehouse of knowledge about the world that is shared by others. It also reflects their beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives. For instance, language expresses a living cultural reality; it is a pattern of culturally significant signs since the users of a given language express their identity and that of others through their use.

Therefore, it is critical to understand the role that culture and intercultural literacy play in the language classroom to ensure effective teaching and learning process to prepare foreign language learners for real life communicative and interactive encounters outside schooling institutions.

Intercultural Literacy Defined

On a broader scale, defined by the oxford dictionary, cultural literacy is "The ability to analyse and understand a particular society or culture; familiarity with the customs and characteristics of a culture." The coined expression gained popularity by the work of E.D. Hirsch (1987) of "Cultural Literacy: what Every American Needs to Know" where he described most of the shared knowledge needed for effective communication and denoted the ability to understand a given culture and participate freely in it. A cultural literate individual then is someone who can speak freely and understand other representatives of the target culture because he has enough knowledge about the language and the culture to operate (ibid). Meanwhile, exposing the oneself to different languages and cultures needs careful management, because despite of being well structured and prepared for intercultural encounters, confusion and misunderstandings may occur (Helm, Guth and Farrah, 2012). This is why Intercultural literacy is a crucial element in the creation of a more comprehensive international community. Contextually seen, Bennett considers the value of intercultural literacy, through its significance to be a competence that enables individuals to operate across multiple viewpoints and perspectives in order to comprehend culturally issues from more than one viewpoint appropriately (1993). However, if the intercultural literacy competence is not activated, the risk of cultural shocks and cross-cultural conflict between individuals and groups is expected to occur.

Intercultural literacy beholds the ability to interpret documents and artefacts from a range of cultural contexts, as well as to effectively communicate messages and interact constructively with interlocutors across different cultural contexts" Dudenney, Hockly and Pegrum (2014:34). Heyward(2002) argued that intercultural literacy, conceptually speaking, relates to engagements and relates to understanding, language proficiency, attitudes, interaction and identities for an effective citizenship in cross cultural settings (ibid:10). He adds that intercultural literacy should be scaffold to make learners discover how cultures operate, develop empathy and respect towards cultures and achieve language proficiency for successful intercultural communication (ibid, 16–17). As far as the EFL classroom is concerned, education institutions should work on raising awareness

of cultural aspects by incorporating real life situations that would genuinely engage learners in effective communication. It calls for a careful choice of topics, authentic tasks, materials, and assessment procedures. Thus, it is critical that educational institutions and teachers develop and use a range of teaching strategies, to effectively meet the needs of the EFL students. A sound teaching instruction should integrate a variety of teaching methods, intended to convene and develop their intercultural literacy so that EFL students will not transcend between languages as if one language is basically translatable into another. Additionally, EFL students should consider that voices relating to superiority and inferiority of cultures are nothing but old-fashioned generalisations, rising from lack of awareness and disregard to other world citizens with different worldviews.

Educational Views about Intercultural Education

Integrating intercultural education in the EFL classroom at the level of higher education has long occupied teachers and educationists and gained considerable validity as an equal share to linguistic knowledge acquisition. The transmission of facts about cultural knowledge like aspects of civilisation, literature and arts, do not make up a comprehensive sense of culture. In fact, an understanding of attitudes and values, beliefs, and mindsets denotes a more inclusive view. In EFL education, views about interculturality embody "the skill to cope with one's own cultural background in interaction with others who hold different linguistic codes and different sets of values and models of the world" (Lazar, 2004:9). These educational views involve language learners' capacity to accept other perceptions of the outside world and be aware of other peoples' differences and ways of seeing it (Byram 1997; Byram et al., 2009). Consequently, it makes them develop empathy and a genuine openness with other cultures. For instance, the Common European Framework (CEF) issued by the Council of Europe, pointed out the importance of developing intercultural dimension in foreign language learning. It aims to "facilitate and develop effective intercultural communication among European citizens of different languages and cultural backgrounds for the sake of promoting empathy, respect, tolerance, and mutual understanding of identities and cultural diversity through more effective international communication and to develop learners' ability "to communicate with each other across linguistic and cultural boundaries" (CEF, 2002:3). In other words, educational views about intercultural education involve developing knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relationship between the native home culture and the foreign language culture. Kramsch (1993:8, in McKay, 2001:329) goes on sharing the same stand where she emphasises the aim behind

learning and learning about culture to be a tool for making learners consider their own culture across the lenses of other cultures and consequently raise cross-cultural comprehension and awareness and achieve successful communication.

For similar reasons, Byram, Gribkova & Starkey(2002) emphasise that foreign language teaching should help and scaffold learning situations to help learners achieve both linguistic competence and intercultural competence that is required for communicating effectively and appropriately while using a foreign language. In addition, they will be more comprehensible when interacting with people from other cultures, avoiding prejudices and accepting the otherness to be individuals with distinctive perspectives, values, and behaviour. Hence, a lack of cultural knowledge of both home and foreign culture, may result in poor learning outcomes for EFL learners which might be seen when communicating in the real world with real language users for real contexts rather than school (ibid:10). In the same vein, Hawkins (1987) denoted that intercultural education "seeks to light fires of curiosity about the central human characteristic of language which will blaze throughout our pupils' lives. While combating linguistic complacency, we are seeking to arm our pupils against fear of the unknown, which breeds prejudice and antagonism. Above all we want to make our pupils' contacts with language, both their own and that of their neighbours, richer and more interesting, simply more fun" (Hawkins, 1987:6). The purpose of teaching EFL through its cultural lens is not to provide the learners with new or additional information about the target culture, rather, it appeals to help them acquire and successfully use a new type of knowledge necessary for the convergence of meaning in its most appropriate form.

Intercultural Learning and the EFL Classroom

Educationists should be mindful that teaching a language beyond its cultural aspect leads to meaningless codes, to which learners may attach the erroneous connotation. Essentially, they need to scaffold students' interest in the home and target culture, which makes them develop a certain intellectual objectivity essential for an intercultural analysis. As far as the EFL language teaching and learning is concerned, it is worth considering the role that the EFL classroom holds in raising learners' intercultural literacy. For Williams (2017:59), learning a language is "never merely a matter of acquiring verbal skills in order to conduct business; it can also involve a reaching out to other people that requires a form of cultural decentring that can often have moral and civic dimensions. It should be categorical for language teachers to direct learners towards curiosity

and openness to raise their awareness of the "culturally-determined nature of their basis for making judgements" without criticising them (Byram, 2002:36). The EFL language classroom should enable learners to develop skills, attitudes, and critical awareness, while working with their peers because it improves awareness of similarities and differences across cultures to make them safe from falling frustrated or threatened when intercultural encounters take place (Byram, 2002:33). EFL students should be aware that there is no such classification, as superior and inferior culture, and that differences exist among cultures where diversity makes the beauty of divergence. In order to integrate the foreign culture to raise learners' intercultural literacy, teachers should for instance, use contrast and balance in recognizing common ground or even differences within or between cultures (Morgan et al., 1994:43). However, in some contexts, teachers should be aware of addressing more cultural matters that might be viewed to be promoting the foreign language values and declining the local ones. When users of English as a foreign language operate through intercultural exchanges for effective communication, they should be motivated enough to adjust their acquired knowledge and skills and behaviours. They should be prepared to learn how they could make it. This is where intercultural awareness trainings come in, to make them experience new ventures in the most effective way.

Teachers' Awareness

At the level of higher education, developing intercultural literacy in a language classroom is a challenging task for EFL teachers and a crucial objective at the same time. It has become more significant than ever when teaching EFL learners, since they have more openness in today's globalised world to meet other cultures in real life, by either travelling or moving to other parts of the world, or just by interacting with international key pals using social media. Despite of the difficulties that might hinder the increase of teachers' intercultural communicative competence in the first place (Guo et al., 2009; Holmes, 2014; Pinho, 2015), one of the top issues to take into consideration when it comes to intercultural literacy is the teachers' proper understanding of the concept of intercultural communicative competence. It has been acknowledged that research has somehow neglected it in a way that it is less developed than it should be (Byram, Holmes, & Savvides, 2015; Durant & Shepherd, 2009; Guo, Arthur, & Lund, 2009; Sercu, 2006). In fact, the problem lies in the teachers' own consideration about the real significance of intercultural competence and its relationship to linguistic competence" (Byram, 2014:209). Difficulties in raising teachers' intercultural literacy are many (Holmes, 2014), mainly to make them teach about the same

issue that is not clearly defined for them (ibid). Some of these difficulties are the thin availabilities of materials including didactic and instrumental topics, texts and documents to be able to teach and develop learners' intercultural literacy appropriately (Byram, 2014; Sercu, 2006). This is mainly when it comes to the abstract aspects of the foreign culture which embodies the socio-cultural beliefs and assumptions that most of non natives of the culture in question are not aware of and thus cannot be examined thoroughly by those using the language to be a second and a foreign language (Hinkle, 2001). One of the actions to do is, for instance, an action research procedure that promotes EFL teachers' cognition to open larger horizons for developing their intercultural literacy (Byram et al. 2015; Holmes, 2014).

Bringing the state of language teaching beyond the realm of teaching approaches and methods, there is no one "right" method for teaching a particular lesson, but there are some criteria that pertain to each that can help an EFL teacher make the best decision possible. The quest for a better method has been or should be abandoned to lay out the territory to maximizing learning opportunities, promoting intercultural literacy, and integrating the language skills, so that teachers might, through reflection and practice, come to an understanding of where they fall in each of these areas in their particular teaching context.

Pedagogies and Teaching Procedures.

Developing teachers and learners' intercultural literacy is not about concrete cross-cultural knowledge. In fact, it is a composite of skills and competence including knowledge, skills and attitudes meaning that there is no one course to be accountable for the teaching of it, rather, intercultural literacy should be appropriately included in the design of all courses of the EFL curriculum. The aim should be to set up EFL students to challenge and reconsider their perspectives of the otherness and their own cultural identity as members of a particular social group different from other existing worldviews. However, developing intercultural literacy can be scaffold throughout a series of tasks and integration situations in which learners discuss, analyse, and reflect on their own experiences with the foreign language culture in question. If the purpose of an EFL program is "to prepare learners to cope with English outside the classroom" (Hafernik & Surguine, 1979:341), then teachers should avoid speech modification and/or simplification and provide them with the kind of language they are likely to encounter in real-life situations (Bacon, 1989; Robinett, 1978; Ur, 1984). In the same way, Nagle & Sanders (1986), Paulston & Bruder (1976) proposed consisting samples of unedited language form from different sources so that

learners will experience varieties of intercultural topics, contexts, and foreign language users. For instance, the foreign language classroom provides opportunities for students to reflect on their learning through authentic materials, contexts, and tasks, to enable real life contexts to reflect on. Another way to develop learners' intercultural literacy is through role-plays and simulations to activate their already acquired knowledge about the foreign culture in addition to the national one, using critical analysis and thinking to prepare them for real intercultural communication (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002:14). Such simulations help deep learning for possible real life intercultural encounters to transcend effectively and appropriately between different cultures (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010:39–40).

Another tool could be the use authentic materials in the university EFL classrooms since it is a great motivational tool, which helps learners recognizes that there exists a community where the English language is used in daily communication. Besides, exposure to authentic materials allows learners to get in touch with real-life language, customs, and way of life. Byram (2002) pointed to the importance of using authentic materials. Teachers should "ensure that learners understand its context and intention. Materials from different origins with different perspectives should be used together to enable learners to compare and to analyse the materials critically. It is more important that learners acquire skills of analysis than factual information" (2002:24). Gilmore (2004) also investigated the effectiveness of using authentic texts on communicative competence and resulted to the conclusion that it is a rich source of input for learners, providing them with information on grammatical, pragmatic and discourse features of natural conversations for instance rarely highlighted in language textbooks.

Conclusion

Teaching is inseparable from learning and learners are the throbbing heart of any educational process. One can be a good teacher only if he knows what is meant by learning because only then he can know what he expects his learners to achieve. Teachers' success and the satisfaction they derive from it depends largely on their mind engagement. One way of enhancing the quality of education is to recognize the importance of becoming intercultural literate because realising and becoming intercultural literate will pay off personally for educators. The more they understand about the basic notions and processes that play a prominent role in educational decision making when it comes to transcending between different

cultures effectively and appropriately, the more likely it is that they will opt for the best choice among those decision options they face. These more defensible decisions will benefit the learners too as a result. These decisions will make educators better educators. If an individual is intercultural literate, he will be regarded to be a successful educator because in fact he will be a successful educator per se. A solid understanding of intercultural issues should be part of every teacher's knowledge base, and teachers should be encouraged to equip themselves with this knowledge to be part of their ongoing professional development.

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