



FOSTERING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE EFL ORAL COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM

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Résumé : Ce document de recherche a porté principalement sur la contribution didactique à l'amélioration de la compétence interculturelle des apprenants dans la classe de communication orale en anglais langue étrangère. S'appuyant sur la théorie de la compétence communicative interculturelle de Byram, l'étude a reconnu l'importance de la compétence culturelle et interculturelle. Ensuite, le sens concret de la compétence interculturelle a été fourni dans le cadre de la communication orale en particulier, en mettant l'accent sur la prise de conscience et l'opinion positive à l'égard des cultures étrangères. L'étude s'est terminée par quelques suggestions visant à améliorer efficacement la compétence interculturelle des apprenants pendant les cours de communication orale.

Mots clés : Culture, Compétence Interculturelle, Communication orale

FAVORISER LA COMPÉTENCE INTERCULTURELLE DANS LA CLASSE DE COMMUNICATION ORALE EFL

Abstract : The main focus of this research paper was on the didactic contribution for the improvement of learners' intercultural competence in the EFL oral communication classroom. Relying on Byram's theory of intercultural communicative competence, the study acknowledged the importance of both cultural and intercultural competence. Then, the concrete sense of intercultural competence was provided within the framework of oral communication particularly, with stress on awareness and positive opinion regarding foreign cultures. The study was closed with some suggestions for effective enhancement of the learners' intercultural competence during oral communication classes.

Keywords: Culture, Intercultural Competence, Oral Communication

Introduction

In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, learners may be differentiated according to various perspectives such as their origin, their personal knowledge, their experiences, and their cultures. These variables are to be taken into account in order to ensure effective learning among learners. Concerning culture, Byram (1997), Cortazzi and Jin (1999), and Hu and McKay (2012) inform about the necessity to include culture-related content in foreign language teaching. They argue that cultural content can

foster communicative competence and intercultural understanding. In the same orientation, Ting-Toomey (2012), Abrams (2020), and O'Dowd (2020) highlight that oral communication can play an important role in the development of learners' intercultural competence. As a consequence, the EFL oral communication classroom appears as one of the best places to cultivate intercultural competence among individuals. This means that the teaching of oral communication in EFL can highly contribute to the improvement of the learners' intercultural competence. Therefore, this research paper is interested in finding out the extent to which the EFL oral communication class can help construct interculturally competent individuals.

The main research question reads as follows: How can learners' intercultural competence be developed through EFL oral communication class? This main question arouses the following subsidiary ones: 1. What does intercultural competence refer to? 2. What does it involve in oral communication? 3. What are the didactic implications for the development of learners' intercultural competence in the EFL oral communication classroom? The main objective of this research paper is to scrutinize the extent to which the teaching of oral communication can impact the development of learners' intercultural competence. This objective is ramified into three subsidiary ones: 1. describe intercultural competence in EFL, 2. examine its implications in oral communication, 3. identify the didactic strategies to facilitate the development of learners' intercultural competences through the oral communication class. This paper includes three main sections. The first one, the conceptual framework, presents the theoretical framework and sheds light on other relevant concepts. The second part deals with the significance of intercultural competence in the context of oral communication. The third and last suggests some clues for the improvement of learners' intercultural competence during the EFL oral communication class.

1. Conceptual framework

1.1. Intercultural communicative competence theory (ICCT)

Intercultural communicative competence theory (ICCT) dates back to Michael Byram (1997). This author develops a new perspective regarding the understanding of language. For him, language and culture are two faces of a same coin. As a consequence, language is not concerned only with linguistic issues such as vocabulary, grammar, and phonetics just to name a few, but it also incorporates the culture of the community that speaks the language. Here, culture includes but is not limited to norms, values, beliefs, habits, and practices. Applied to the living and communication habits of a language-speaking community, culture also relates to the specific idiomatic expressions they may use in given contexts. ICCT appears as a contribution to a more inclusive consideration of the language by involving other non-linguistic points into the understanding of the language.



ICCT is rooted in three main principles. The first principle suggests that intercultural competence lies on attitude, knowledge, and skills. Attitude is concerned with one's curiosity, interest, respect and obedience in front of another culture. Knowledge has to do with the awareness of cultural backgrounds. Skills relate to the ability to successfully manage communication situations within different cultural contexts or environments. The second principle posits the deep understanding of the foreign language culture. According to Byram, language use actually mirrors the culture. As a result, having an in-depth comprehension of the cultural habits, norms, and values can help the user or learner of the language to develop appropriate and successful communication behaviors. Clearly speaking, the understanding of the culture leads the user of the language to the use of culturally-accepted gestures, social practices and conventions. The third principle highlights critical reflection on both one's and others' culture in order to grasp the fundamental differences between both so as to develop empathy and tolerance towards other's culture.

In the field of language education, ICCT implies that foreign language teaching and learning must not be limited to linguistic aspects only, but must extend to cultural issues such as religion, art (music, painting...), food and beverage, literature, hobbies, and sport. This means the learning process should make it possible for the learner to acquire knowledge, demonstrate behaviors and skills that value the foreign language culture. This increases the likelihood for the learner to communicate effectively within the environment and culture of the foreign language. ICCT inspires the integration of classroom content that is relevant to foreign cultures including the one paired with the language one is learning. Such a practice encourages exposure to and discovery of foreign cultures. This could be possible through the inclusion of relevant scenarios, materials (pictures, audio tapes, videos, texts...), themes, and vocabulary items (famous collocations, and idiomatic expressions) that can develop the learner's awareness and knowledge about foreign cultures while learning the language.

1.2.Culture in foreign language learning

The concept of culture has been addressed under various perspectives in the literature. These perspectives include anthropology, sociology, cognitivism, and language studies just to name a few. Originally, in the anthropological view point, Tylor (1871) came up with the definition of culture that stresses knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morals, custom and many other behaviors demonstrated or performed by individuals being part of a given society. Later on, Hofstede (1984) explored the concept of culture in a cognitivist dynamic, highlighting the extent to which human mind can be influenced within the social area. The cognitive perspective focuses on the mental similarities and differences among people across societies by analyzing how cognitive components or processes such as memory, perception, and problem-solving are shaped under the control of human practices.

By analyzing culture under the social scope, Bourdieu and Passeron (1964) develops the concept of cultural capital. According to them, the cultural capital represents a heritage transmitted by parents to their children. In other words, the children in a given family will generally inherit their parents' ways of doing, values, and behaviors. This influence of the cultural capital also expands to the sphere of education. For instance, the authors explain that most of the children whose parents were able to reach highest educational levels are more likely to achieve the same educational levels. Reversely, parents with lowest educational background result in up-springs with low educational level. This idea demonstrates how well the family and society the individual belongs to can shape their cultural knowledge. The issue of inherited cultural capital makes it possible to understand educational differences among individuals, for as elicited by Bourdieu and Passeron, what people are and do is the result of what their parents were and did.

Culture also incorporates religion. Smith and Denton (2005) try to examine how religion impacts people's sense of identity. The authors came to the conclusion that religious beliefs exert great influence on some people. This influence is generally visible through their moral values, their life choices or decisions, and their sense of purpose in life. For instance, in communities with high religious commitment, the choice for a job, a wife or a school will be very often guided or inspired by religious considerations.

In the field of language learning, Kramsch (2013) reveals the importance of the cultural dimension by relying on the role it can play in the language acquisition process. The author argues that the effective use of the language requires an understanding of the cultural aspects associated with politeness and idiomatic expressions. The researcher also adds that the meaning of words and expressions can be influenced by the cultural context. In line with this idea, Bardovi-Harlig (2017) pinpoints the importance of cultural awareness in the language learning process, which allows the learners to use the language in compliance with the cultural norms in force. This justifies the opinion of researchers like Vygotsky (1986), and Lantolf and Thorne (2006) who claim that language and culture cannot be dissociated in the learning process given that language appears as a carrier of the culture.

1.3. Intercultural competence: definition and importance

Intercultural competence represents an essential competence to be demonstrated by foreign language learners, hence the attention it enjoys among researchers. This competence makes the learner able to communicate in a quite right and effective way so as to avoid misunderstandings due to cultural misjudgments or erroneous considerations.



1.3.1. Definition of intercultural competence

As stated before in this paper, according to Byram (1997), intercultural competence refers to the ability a person has to start and close interaction with another person from a different cultural background. In line with Byram, Deardorff (2006) argues that intercultural competence refers to the ability to make demonstration of knowledge, skills and attitudes conducive to appropriate behavior and effective communication in any intercultural interactions contexts or situations. Deardorff's cyclical model presents intercultural competence as a set of five elements (attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, skills, internal outcomes, and external outcomes). This process-oriented model describes intercultural competence as an ongoing process, which means that it is a competence that is not static but that constantly goes through change and development. With Deardorff, the dynamic nature of intercultural competence results in the progressive ability of individual to know, comprehend and adapt to foreign cultures and communicate appropriately with them.

Risager (2006) comes up with a more global view of intercultural competence. For him, intercultural competence should be analyzed beyond the scope of knowledge regarding other cultures. In his view, the concept also incorporates the ability of the individual to make sense of very subtle changes from one culture to the other. In fact, Risager argues that although each people has their own cultural specificities that make them different from others', the interpretation of some cultural practices that seem obvious to others may be misleading. Moreover, the author believes that for every language, the words, sounds, sentence structures, and grammatical rules generally reflect the thought, cultural values, and principles of the native speakers and users of that language. Additionally, although some cultural facts may look like one's own culture, the meaning they convey can be very different from the expected, requiring a meticulous interpretation for appropriate understanding and suitable reaction or feedback. As a consequence, the intercultural competence has to do with the comprehension of the guiding principles of the linguistic system that supports the different languages one uses for communication.

1.3.2. Importance of intercultural competence in foreign language learning

Intercultural competence is important in many respects. First of all, considering social relationship, it helps the language learner be open-minded to other culture, making them tolerant and respectful despite the great differences they may notice in comparison with theirs. Discovering and understanding others' culture may lead the language learners to abide by it when necessary. This facilitates the construction and development of relationship between the learners and native speakers of the foreign language to the extent that the learner knows their mentality and their reasoning. For instance, knowing the values of English people may help the EFL learner identify and

choose relevant conversation topics so as to maintain communication or keep relationship with native speakers of English (Cuartas-Álvarez, 2020; Boudouaia et al., 2022).

The intercultural competence also impacts the cognitive development of the learner. In line with this idea, Gordon (2014) found out that exposition to different cultures increases the critical thinking abilities such as reasoning, analysis, evaluation and interpretation just to name a few. In the same vein, Sercu (2005) suggested that the development of critical thinking abilities by the learners through intercultural competence enables them to evaluate cultural practices and beliefs so as to avoid prejudices and have positive opinions about foreign cultures.

In the perspective of sustainable development, intercultural competence among learners appears as a non-negligible tool that prepares the learners to become good global citizens in many respects. A survey by World Economic Forum (2020) revealed that intercultural competence is crucial for the development of negotiation skills among leaders who are involved in global initiatives. In the same dynamics, a report by the European Commission suggests that the contact with different cultures has the advantage to result in more creativity and innovation. Moreover, the awareness of multiple cultures can help the foreign language learner to understand the impact his words and gestures can generate upon others. This may help them be more effective in communication situations with people from different cultures. In so doing, the learners can also develop good conflict resolution skills and become effective peace makers.

the importance of intercultural competence extends to the learners' academic results. In fact, Deardorff (op. cit.) argues that intercultural competence develops the feeling of belonging among international students who live in foreign countries. It actually helps them accept and be accepted by their fellows in the classroom, which reduces anxiety and creates a conducive atmosphere for learning. As a consequence, the learners' motivation is increased, which positively impacts their school performances and results.

1.4.Oral communication in EFL

Oral communication generally refers to the oral process during which people are engaged in the exchange of ideas or thoughts in order to have themselves understood. This process allows the individuals to externalize their feelings, needs and emotions by means of the mouth. This externalization of feelings is done through the production of meaningful vocal sounds via words and sentences. For Bayley and Schecter (2003), the demonstration of linguistic skills allows the users of the language to have interactions with each other, which helps them build strong relationships. As a consequence, they suggest that the ability to initiate, maintain and close conversations



through well managed turn-taking also matters in the process of oral communication because this ensures the adaptation to diverse social contexts.

Researchers such as Long (1983), Ellis (2003), Gass and Mackey (2007) report that oral communication is an active process. Being so, it involves individuals in meaning negotiation which calls for oral communication strategies like clarification request, comprehension checks and rephrasing. For EFL learners, these strategies are very important to the extent that they contribute to the development of the pragmatic competence which has to do with the ability of using the language appropriately in various social contexts.

2. The meaning of the intercultural competence in the context of oral communication

Oral communication in the intercultural perspective suggests that the language user demonstrate some behaviors during the communication situation. Relying on its theoretical foundation embodied by Byram's theory of intercultural communicative competence, this study has listed five behaviors that reflect the intercultural competence of the language user particularly in oral communication.

2.1.A positive state of mind toward foreign cultures

People generally grow up with preconceived ideas in mind about foreign cultures. These conceptions may happen to be false. Besides, language learners, be they children or adults, may start learning with a lot of intercultural prejudices or misconceptions in mind. Such a state of mind can turn into an obstacle to their learning process. This can unavoidably affect the learners' ability in oral communication by demotivating them, by reducing their will to create relationship with people from foreign cultures and engage communication with them. It is therefore recommended that people, be they foreign language learners or not, have a positive opinion about others.

2.2.Awareness and sensitivity to other cultures

A successful oral communication is impossible when the speaker and their co-speaker are not aware and not sensitive to their potential cultural differences and communication norms. Awareness means that both communication actors should be informed of the cultural norms and conventions that regulate oral communication in each one's culture. As a matter of fact, although many societies and peoples share common oral communication habits and practices, they may differ in many respects. Therefore, in order to avoid cultural shocks or conflicts, the individual engaged in oral communication should be well informed about the cultural differences and similarities of the people with whom they are communicating. In addition to awareness, they should demonstrate sensitivity and acceptance to their culture and other's.

Intercultural sensitivity can help individuals be more tolerant and be able to adapt and incorporate the cultural differences.

Intercultural awareness also includes a wide range of aspects such as history, sport, religion, food specialties, and geography just to name a few. The awareness of these aspects facilitates oral communication in so far as it gets the learners in suitable cognitive conditions to discuss such issues orally.

2.3.The right linguistic and communicative choices

On the one hand, linguistic choices include the words, sentence structures, grammar, intonation and also oral communication strategies used for the management of oral communication situations. Since each culture has their own norms in terms of communication, it is necessary not only to know these norms, but also to make use of them appropriately. As part of the aforementioned, the completion of some communication goals requires the full respect of some cultural norms. In oral communication, this aligns with the words or expressions one should use in order to be effective. The right word in the right situation can result in an effective communication whereas the contrary is likely to cause a communicative failure. Therefore, in the intercultural perspective, it is highly recommended that the foreign language user watch the words they use.

On the other hand, communicative choices refer to the topics that are addressed in the oral communication situations. From one culture to the other, due to different sensitivities, some topics may deserve more attention and receptiveness unlike others. That issue requires the speakers to avoid controversial, offensive, or embarrassing topics in oral communication situations.

2.4.Ability to communicate with people from different English-speaking backgrounds

Using English for communication in an intercultural context means that the learners should be able to communicate effectively with people from a wide range of origins. English is actually a language spoken worldwide and each people has their own accent, which makes it challenging for EFL learners to understand. The different accents from one place to another appear as a very complex phenomenon to be dealt with by learners. Being able to manage various English accents breaks communication barriers among individuals. Moreover, the interculturally competent learner English should be able to make himself understood in diverse communication contexts with English speakers from all horizons be they native or not.

2.5.Demonstrating appropriate non-linguistic behaviors

In addition to linguistic codes such as words and sentences, oral communication incorporates non-linguistic signs like gestures. Therefore, demonstrating appropriate



non-linguistic or non-verbal behaviors also matters in an oral communication situation with people from different cultural backgrounds. In the intercultural perspective, this point requires the learners to be acquainted with the gestures that are/aren't admitted so as to avoid misunderstandings, confusion and also unwilling tensions due to wrong interpretations.

3. The didactic implications for development of learners' intercultural competence in the EFL oral communication classroom

3.1. Getting the learners aware of multiple cultures

Teaching EFL oral communication aimed at the development of the learners' intercultural competence requires relevant classroom content. That content should incorporate aspects of the learners' own culture and foreign ones as well. In other words, the oral communication class should get the learners exposed to facts and information about local practices, and life and realities from other countries. This can be done through the use of authentic materials in the classroom. Such materials include news-paper articles, movies, songs, real interviews, audio records with accents from different English-speaking countries when focusing on English-speaking countries.

In the EFL oral communication classroom, these materials are intended to many purposes: first of all, they allow the learners to be engaged in cognitive actions that prepare them for actual oral communication. The cognitive actions include but are not limited to evaluation, analysis, interpretation, reflection, remembering and comprehension. Before being involved in concrete oral communication situations in classroom, the learners need to have some experience with content that are in close connection with cultural aspects. secondly, the exposure to the aforementioned materials allows the learners to interact with new information in a way that gets them familiar to the information they receive.

The cultural discovery stage facilitated by the use of authentic materials can also help enrich the learners' linguistic knowledge. In fact, the cultural information received by the learners could be paired with the discovery of new vocabulary related to the cultural data or facts. All in all, the discovery step is important as it prepares the learners for the true communication process.

3.2. Discussing local and foreign cultures

The teaching of EFL oral communication for the development of the learners' intercultural competence is meant to make the learners able to discuss various cultural issues in English. The discussion can involve the learners into identifying the differences and similarities between their own cultures and foreign ones. As stated before, the discovery phase comes as a preparation for the true oral communication stage. After the discovery of facts or information related to climate, geography,

religion, food specialties, music or literature, the teacher can take the learners to the very stage of oral communication in various ways.

One way can consist in the learners presenting the facts or information they have received previously. This may be done through description activities. For example, the teacher can have the learners report about what they have discovered, or he/she can just conduct question-answer sessions with the learners so that they can highlight the most attractive points they have noticed. Such activities may be done individually or in pairs depending on the number of learners.

Another way would consist in arousing interactions among learners through group work. The goal of such activities is to have the learners discuss the differences and similarities. On the one hand, the cultural differences could be discussed in terms of things that are or look new to the learners, what they have never seen or heard before, what they enjoy having in their country, what impresses or attracts them the most, what has changed, or what they find surprising. On the other hand, the similarities would be discussed with a focus on likeliness, what is done almost local-like, what looks or is known to the learners, or what does not surprise them.

3.3. Training the learners to the use of oral communication strategies

Intercultural competence also relates to the individual's ability to communicate effectively with English speakers from different backgrounds. These background differences mainly result in different accents, and ways of managing oral communication situations. English language learners are likely to encounter the difficulties when dealing with such different accents and that can prove to be problematic for the natural flow of communication. In that respect, oral communication strategies appear as an undeniable resort. These strategies, be they direct, indirect, or interactive, help keep the track of communication.

According to Dörnyei and Scott (1997) taxonomy of oral communication strategies, direct strategies make it possible for the learners to solve communication breakdowns due to insufficient linguistic knowledge. This group of strategies include paraphrase, circumlocution, and approximation. Indirect strategies are necessary to keep the flow of conversation and gain time. Part of these strategies are strategies like the use of fillers, topic avoidance and self-rephrasing strategies. Interactive strategies engage both the speaker and their partner in research for finding the appropriate words to keep the conversation on-going. This set of strategies comprehends appeal for help, clarification request and comprehension check.

Given the importance of intercultural talks, it is advised that the teacher prepare the learners for such challenges. These tools can help solve and catch up for the linguistic



problems that occur in oral communication. They can facilitate the interaction process with people from different origins.

Conclusion

This study was interested in examining the contribution of the EFL oral communication class for the enhancement of learners' intercultural competence. It was divided into three main parts. The first one attempted to present Byram's theory of intercultural communicative competence as main theoretical foundation. This theory actually highlights the necessity to incorporate diverse cultures in foreign language classroom contents, namely those intended to oral communication. The next section aimed at providing more insight onto the significance of intercultural competence when applied to oral communication. The study explained that the intercultural competence in oral communication starts with a positive opinion and awareness about foreign people and their life practices. The aforementioned make individuals able to communicate with people from different cultural background by helping them perform appropriate linguistic choices as well as non-linguistic behaviors. The study ended up by suggesting three ideas for the improvement of the learners' intercultural competence during the EFL oral communication class. Firstly, this research paper recommended that the teacher use authentic materials to get the learners informed about other cultures. Secondly, the study suggested practical oral communication activities about local and foreign cultures. The third suggestion was concerned with the integration of oral communication strategies in oral communication classes to equip the learners with the necessary tools to face any challenge in communication with people from all cultures.

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