

“RELIEF”! It is Just a Way to Lessen the Discomfiture in Intercultural Situations

العنوان : "إرتياح" إنها مجرد وسيلة لتقليل الانزعاج في التواصل بين الثقافات.

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Abstract:

Globalization in different countries, institutions and among individuals promotes English language as the most important and widely used language in the world. Cultural knowledge can be gained through careful study of function patterns within the cultural system of the language. The study of cross cultural communication is central to the study of the language. Across the globe, the fate of all people depends upon negotiations and communication with different cultural assumptions and patterns of behavior. Moreover, In order to accomplish any public or private goals, people need to talk to one another, and in most cases; the people who are communicating come from different cultural backgrounds. In intercultural communication, however, expectations about how paralinguistic signals are used to indicate what is meant by what is said are not shared and despite all the good will in the world, miscommunication and misunderstanding is likely to happen particularly when there are significant cultural differences between communicators. As far as the teaching process is concerned, one of the main duties of teachers of English is to foster the learners' awareness of cultural aspects of English speaking countries and other parts of the world as well to avoid cultural shock. This presentation reveals the major effects, importance, barriers and other issues related to cross cultural and intercultural communication like the development of culture learning in language teaching and a suggestive model of teaching culture in an English class through a model named “RELIEF” which aims at reducing the discomfiture that one may encounter when dealing with “the other” who is usually unknown.

Keywords: Cross cultural communication, cultural shock, foster cultural awareness, Globalization, and teaching culture.

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ملخص:

تعتبر دراسة التواصل بين . يمكن اكتساب المعرفة الثقافية من خلال الدراسة الدقيقة لأنماط الوظائف داخل النظام الثقافي للغة افتراضات لم مع الاوتواص في جميع أنحاء العالم ، يعتمد مصير جميع الناس على المفاوضات . الثقافات أمرا أساسيا في دراسة اللغة علاوة على ذلك ، من أجل تحقيق أي أهداف عامة أو خاصة ، يحتاج الناس إلى التحدث مع . الثقافية المختلفة وأنماط السلوك ، في التواصل بين الثقافات . بعضهم البعض ، وفي معظم الحالات ؛ يأتي الأشخاص الذين يتواصلون من خلفيات ثقافية مختلفة ية استخدام الإشارات شبه اللغوية للإشارة إلى المقصود بما يقال غير مشتركة وعلى الرغم من كل حول كيف التوقعات ، ومع ذلك من المحتمل أن يحدث سوء الفهم وسوء الفهم خاصة عندما تكون هناك اختلافات ثقافية كبيرة بين ، النوايا الحسنة في العالم بات الرئيسية لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في تعزيز وعي المتعلمين بالجوانب دى الواجتمثل إحفيما يتعلق بعملية التدريس ، المتصلين يكشف هذا العرض عن التأثيرات . الثقافية للبلدان الناطقة باللغة الإنجليزية وأجزاء أخرى من العالم أيضا لتجنب الصدمة الثقافية لثقافات والثقافات مثل تطوير تعلم الثقافة في تدريس اللغة صل بين لة بالتوا الرئيسية والأهمية والحواجر والقضايا الأخرى المتعلقة والذي يهدف إلى الحد من الانزعاج الذي "إرتياح" ونموذج موحى لتدريس الثقافة في فصل اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال نموذج يسمى الذي عادة ما يكون غير معروف "الأخر" قد يواجهه المرء عند التعامل مع.

الكلمات المتاحة: . التواصل عبر الثقافات ، الصدمة الثقافية ، تعزيز الوعي الثقافي ، العولمة ، تعليم الثقافة

1- Introduction

Owing to the tremendous changes that may be brought about by technology in a swiftly globalized world, English language teachers are recommended to incorporate intercultural components in their syllabi, for the reason of fostering students' awareness and gaining familiarity with "the other". "The other" which symbolizes a different culture, age, material situation, set of beliefs and educational situation. Frequently, the other creates a continuous pressure on "us" because they remain unknown. Foreign language (FL) teachers should recognize that the task of integrating culture in their syllabi is highly demanding and will never cease. Since culture and language are ultimately intertwined, foreign language teaching, in addition to learning, does not constitute of linguistic competence and language proficiency only, but should incorporate, some cultural elements as well that may assure the students' full grasp of the language.

Recently, the debate about whether or not to include culture in language curriculum was firmly established since one of the most significant changes in language learning and teaching has been the recognition of the cultural dimension as a key component and as an extension of the communicative competence. Therefore, the objective of language learning is

no longer defined in terms of the acquisition of communicative competence or having eloquent speakers of the foreign language, which refers to a person's ability to act in a foreign language in linguistically, socio-linguistically and pragmatically appropriate ways (Council of Europe, 2001). A hot topic of discussion may be over the use of effective methods for teaching culture for the reason that despite the various methods available, the daunting task of the teacher is still prevailing.

2- Intercultural competencies

With rare exception, our daily lives are typically identified by our acts of communication. We are communicating all the time: beyond face-to-face communication, reading newspapers, making phone calls, writing mails, making presentations or even speaking to ourselves are all forms of communication. The process of communication goes beyond the exchange of meaning because it is multilayered, dynamic and highly complex, according to Adler (1997). This is due to the fact that communication is constantly dependent on the perception, interpretation and evaluation of a person's speech which includes linguistic versus paralinguistic features as well as consciously versus unconsciously sent messages, Adler (1997).

The terms "intercultural communication" and "cross-cultural communication" are used when the sender and the receiver of a message belong to different cultures, Adler (1997). It is defined in terms of the intercultural competence, which is *"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 (1991:138). This definition, in fact, adds to the notion of communicative competence and enlarges it to incorporate intercultural competence. As stated by Byram (1997:42) the success of interaction implies not only an effective interchange of information, as was the goal of communicative language teaching, but also the *"the ability to decentre and take up the other's perspective on their own culture, anticipating and where possible, resolving dysfunctions in communication and behavior"*.

Intercultural communicative competence is defined by Byram as *"ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and [the] ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality"* (Byram, 2002:10). Moreover, the intercultural competencies required in the fulfillment of such communications are formulated by Rakotomena (2005) as a set of competencies essential for a successful interaction among a group of persons from different cultures. These

competencies are displayed in a range of affective, behavioral and cognitive skills. It is worth noting that the intercultural dimension in foreign languages emphasizes effective cross-cultural communication based on the acquisition of a key set of competences as suggested by Rakotomena (2005) and based on Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, which is as follows:

- Knowledge (savoirs) of social groups' culture including the beliefs, the artifacts and the practices in one's own and in the *other's* country. It follows that knowledge can be seen as having two major elements: a sum of abstract knowledge of social processes and concrete knowledge of realizations of these processes in interactions.
- Capacities including skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre) and skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire) behavior, adaptation, conflict management, negotiation capacities, ability to interpret a situation from another culture, explain it and relate it to situations from one's own.
- Attitudes such as openness, empathy, readiness, and curiosity about cultural expressions that may be similar or quite different from one's own. Also flexibility and intelligence, empathy, interdependence, optimism and tolerance
- Psychological and emotional resources: motivation, pleasure of risks and stress management capacities.
- Critical cultural awareness is defined as the ability to evaluate critically the perspectives and practices in one's own and other cultures.

Following the same trend of thought, Freire (1998) beholds awareness as a fundamental stance to any successful cross-cultural interaction and clarifies it with the following important observations:

- It is awareness of selfhood.
- It is a critical look at the self in a social situation.
- A transformation of the self and of one's relation to others can be produced.
- It can lead to dealing critically and creatively with reality.
- It should be the most important task of education.

Intercultural competency for Taylor (1994) is considered as a process, not a result of an activity. The developmental model of intercultural sensitivity was created by Bennett (Bennett 1986, 1993) as a framework to explain the reactions of people to cultural difference. Using concepts from cognitive psychology and constructivism, he pointed out six stages of increasing sensitivity to cultural difference. The first three stages are ethnocentric which

means that one's own culture is experienced as central to reality in some way; the second three stages are ethno- relative, indicating that one's own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures. These stages are:

- Denial of cultural difference appears when only one culture is experienced as the only real one and the other cultures are isolated from differences.
- Defense against cultural difference appears when one's own culture is considered as superior to others, *"the world is organized into "us and them", where "we" are superior and "they" are inferior. These people tend to be highly critical of other cultures"*, Bennett (1993:3)
- Minimization of cultural difference appears when the components one's own cultural worldview are experienced as global. People in this case tend to modify the others' behavior to meet their own expectations.
- Acceptance of cultural difference is the equilibrium state, when one's culture is perceived as equal to other cultures. *"People reaching this level are curious about and respectful toward cultural difference, but this doesn't mean that the observed cultural differences may not be judge negatively"* Bennett (1993:4)
- Adaptation to cultural difference is reached when people are able to look at the world from other perspectives and modify their behavior to fit in another culture.
- Integration of cultural difference is revealed when one's view of his culture is expanded to comprise other cultural worldviews.

Having such stages might point out that misunderstanding in intercultural communication is inevitable. Misunderstanding or even non-understanding in communication is so common that it is hard to be ignored even by ordinary people. Here are three main causes for problems that make an intercultural communication goes awry.

Misperception: as Adler (1997:72) claims that *"perceptual patterns are culturally determined and inaccurate"*, which signifies that what we perceive is firstly influenced by a person's cultural background or prejudice and secondly need not meet the real meanings. This indicates that perception is highly disposed to cultural misunderstandings. Ultimately, everyone has had the experience of being misunderstood or of misunderstanding others. Responses as "That is not exactly what I meant!" "You completely misunderstood me" "She did not understand it", etc, are usually heard by interlocutors. Other elements like when and where the communication occurs also convey the speaker's meaning. A call from a familiar person like a sister seems very reasonable but a call equated with long ring at 02:30 pm

sounds as an emergency or in indication of danger rather than an ordinary call, simply this may imply a mistaken call!

Misinterpretation: The second cause for intercultural misunderstandings is misinterpretation. According to Adler (1997:73), interpretation occurs “*when an individual gives meaning to observations...*” In other words, interpretation describes the process of decoding, which was described earlier. Evidently, Arabic and English are distinct languages which are genetically unrelated but which are increasingly in contact. The salient aspect of this contact is misinterpretation, this basically occurs when different cultural backgrounds interfere in the interpretation of the same message. An example of this may be the following: if an Arab receives an invitation from an American ended by a note like “come if you want to” he might undergo a difficulty in understanding the message that may make him feel hurt and uncertain about the sincerity of the invitation. Another example is the case of an Algerian, some Algerians are by nature generous but they were taught to refuse an offer of the host for the first time. As a guest, an Algerian may say no for an offer of something to eat or drink but he likes to be insisted at to take it. If an American or a European does not repeat the offer, then the Algerian would be left hungry and confused all the time. Malaysians feel that offers of food or drink are inappropriate. As a result, a host should serve something whether the guest wants it or not.

Misevaluation: According to Adler (1997: 87), evaluation is the process of judging whether something is good or bad. People usually use their own culture as a basis when it comes to deciding. In the example given above, Austrians will, without thinking, tend to approve of the formal Austrian norm rather than the informal American norm.

3- Low and high cultures

As human communication is based on learned traits, cultural backgrounds are taken as important factors to understand why people communicate the way they do. Much of the work that deals with the differences between high and low context cultures has been proposed by the anthropologist Edward Hall (1976). According to Hall, the difference depends on how much meaning is found in the context versus the code, or the verbal behavior. The role of the context is undeniable in the flow of any communication. According to Hall (1979:86) “*context carries varying proportions of the meaning.*” In other words, meaning that is not encoded into words by the message sender is supplied by context. In low-context communication systems, people translate a large part of the meaning into explicit code, Hall (1979). As a result, “*the spoken word carries most of the meaning*” Storti (1999:87). People

explicitly say what they want to convey without beating around the bush. Their goal is to get and give information when communicating with other people. As a result, low context communication styles show less intuitive understanding, which makes them slow and less efficient, Hall (1979). Hence, American and German cultures are instances of low-context.

In contrast to low-context communication systems, high-context communication systems exhibits a certain amount of complexity the speech behaviors. Hall (1979) upholds that in high-context communication a large part of the meaning lies in the physical context, which includes facial expressions, tone of voice and gestures which are ways of communicating with others and conveying feelings. As a result, the message itself carries less information. People do not explicitly say what they want to convey. Instead, they beat around the bush until their interlocutor decodes the message correctly. The reason for this is that their primary goal is to preserve and strengthen relationships by saving face and ensuring harmony.

In a low context culture, such as the American culture, people tend to place more meaning in the language code and very little meaning in the context. Therefore, communication “*tends to be specific, explicit, and analytical*”. Zaharna (1995:241). That is, unlike exchanges in low context cultures, in high context cultures the meaning is inferred rather than directly interpreted from the communication. Because people in high context cultures already know and understand each other quite well, they have established a more indirect style of communication which seems to foreigners unclear. They are less explicit and they rely on symbols to convey meaning. Zaharna (1995) concluded that the Arab culture is high-context and the burden of meaning falls on the listener and American culture is low-context and the burden of meaning falls on the speaker. Zaharna notes the power of language in the two cultures. Arabic is a language of poetry and metaphor, a religious language, and a language associated with contemporary nationalism that both defines and distinguishes Arabs. English, meanwhile, epitomizes Americans as people of action who favor directness, accountability and efficiency.

The next table shows differences between the two contexts:

Hall, 1959

High-context & low-context cultures

High-context	Low-context
Most information resides in receiver and setting.	Most information resides in explicit messages.
Emphasis on relational aspects of the message.	Emphasis on direct, unambiguous messages.
Receiver must 'intuit' meaning of the message.	Sender must make the message clear.
HR decisions based on maintaining stability of cultural patterns.	HR decisions based on skills and rules only.
Cultural patterns slow to change.	Culture is receptive to change.

Adapted from UBC Centre for Intercultural Communication 2005

Table 1: A Comparison between High Context and Low Context Cultures according to Hall 1959

4- The Role of the Teacher in Fostering Cultural Awareness

In the past, it was believed that illiterate people were those who did not know how to write and read, gradually, and with the advances of science and technology, illiterate people become those who do not know how to run a computer. Nowadays, it is affirmed that illiterate people are those who do not master more than three languages.

A language, which is a defining feature of people that can be expressed through rasping, whistling and all sorts of vibrating sounds emanating from our mouths and noses when we talk, can be deciphered as meaningful language by interlocutors. These language signs can be interpreted differently from one person to another and from one culture to another. For this reason, the need for understanding others' cultures and the necessity of being aware of others' cultures is mainly the teachers' crucial role.

The development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) context has become a requirement rather than a choice in our contemporary societies. The process of globalization created an amalgamation of distinct communities across the globe that demands language learners and teachers to develop cultural awareness. This reveals that the main mission of foreign language teaching is not only to prepare students to learn linguistic structures and to speak another language fluently, but to instruct them to become aware of cultural boundaries, misunderstandings, and life patterns of a foreign culture. Moreover, fostering global awareness and international collaboration in our classrooms are so beneficial to our students. Schools and universities should understand this and must encourage the need to put learning into context. The history trips, the cultural visits,

and foreign language assistants who bring a little bit of abroad into our classrooms are just a few of the many examples of contextualized learning that can make our students aware of other cultures.

5- A Suggested Model of Teaching Culture in Language Classes “RELIEF”

In this section, a model is proposed that is referred to by an acronym RELIEF. Each letter in this word “Relief” reflects the initial of the stages that the researcher suggests to include in language classes (they are written in red). In the six stages, the teacher may foster cultural awareness of the students of the language being studied for the aim of widening the spirit and gaining insights into distinct spots from one’s place to arrive at the ultimate goal of teaching which is securing the student in any cross cultural communication.

a- **Reduce the Stress**

Cultural differences appear to be an important anxiety-producing factor. Anxiety can dramatically influence the process of language learning and teaching. It may be a result as well as a cause of insufficient command of the target language. Therefore, it is necessary that language teachers not only recognize that anxiety is a major cause of students’ lack of success in the new language and in new situations but also assist them to tackle the feelings of unease and discomfort. The more uncertainty or unfamiliarity with the target language culture, the more it is likely to be anxiety provoking, Tanveer (2007). The use of the term ‘losing face’, by the participant supports the view that language anxiety is a concern of face in different cultures. Similar to Jones’ (2004) findings about culture as a causal factor in Asian context, an experienced female teacher stated, “It is not anxiety just about language but differences in cultural practices.

Here are some activities that may reduce the discomfort. Think of culture as an onion, Hofstede (1991). Many layers make up an onion. Culture is similar, in that our values and behaviors have many different layers. Draw a diagram (basically a circle inside another) on the board then ask participants to draw a mind map that describes their own layers, e.g. inner layer: cultural identity, second layer: race, gender, religion, ethnicity, social class, age, mental and physical ability, the third layer: communication, motivation, perceptions, attitudes, personality and the fourth layer: occupation/career, religion, education, citizenship, language, political ideology, region (province), urban/rural...

Another example may be by showing example of some gestures and give meanings in different cultures.

b- **Exemplify**

Cultural Traditions: Explore the holidays and traditions celebrated by different countries and cultures. How are they different from those you celebrate? When are they celebrated? Are you familiar with this holiday or is it completely new to you?

Cultural Foods: Explore culinary traditions from other countries and cultures. Have each student make a recipe from another culture and bring it to class to share. Discuss other culinary traditions and how they are similar or different to your own.

Decorating Traditions: Explore decorating traditions from other cultures and countries. These decorations can be made and used to decorate the classroom. Take the time to discuss which culture uses this tradition, for example how important origami is to people in Japan, as in the source below.

Priorities of Cultural Values



<u>United States</u>	<u>Japan</u>	<u>Arab Countries</u>
1. Freedom	1. Belonging	1. Family security
2. Independence	2. Group harmony	2. Family harmony
3. Self-reliance	3. Collectiveness	3. Parental guidance
4. Equality	4. Age/seniority	4. Age
5. Individualism	5. Group consensus	5. Authority
6. Competition	6. Cooperation	6. Compromise
7. Efficiency	7. Quality	7. Devotion
8. Time	8. Patience	8. Patience
9. Directness	9. Indirectness	9. Indirectness
10. Openness	10. Go-between	10. Hospitality

15

Cross-Cultural Management



Table2 : Examples of some Cultures

Source: <https://www.slideshare.net/MingLi1/cross-cultural-management-14532203>

c- **Lessen the differences between different cultures**

The learners are engaged in comparative analysis between their own culture and the target culture. In relation to different cultural topics, EFL Learners are encouraged to look for cultural similarities and differences with the target culture in comparison with their own culture. This comparison/ contrast analysis will pave the way for creating dialogues and writing comments that could enhance EFL learners' cultural awareness. This method is based on learners' own knowledge, beliefs and principals and leads to increased cultural knowledge, understanding and acceptance, which provide a basis for successful intercultural communication. Byram (2000:189) argues that "*comparison makes the strange, the other familiar, and makes the familiar, the self strange – and therefore easier to reconsider*".

An example of that may be assigning students to comment upon the following pictures:

E.g. How would you interpret value of superman statue in the American culture? And What does the statue of El Amir Abd-el-Kader reveal about the values of Algerian culture?



The statue of Superman, Metropolis, Illinois. His pedestal reads “*Truth—Justice—The American Way.*” (Photo courtesy of David Wilson/flickr)



The statue of El Amir Abd-el-Kader in the center of Algiers.

d- **Improve awareness**

Consider the following dialogues; we can see them in many textbooks:

- 1- A: What's your name?
B: My name is Linda.
A: How old are you?
B: I'm twenty.
A: Where are you going?
B: I'm going to the university.
- 2- A: Are you writing a letter?
B: Yes, I am.
A: To your friend?
B: No, to my parents?
A: How often do you write to your parents?
B: Once a week.

All the above dialogues sound unnatural as far as the English language is concerned. They are roughly the combination of Algerian thinking and English form. Although such forms are correct, they are not culturally appropriate. Except for friends, immigration offices

and such places, it's unimaginable for someone to ask a string of questions like: "What's your name?" "How old are you?" The natural reaction of English-speaking people to the greetings like: "Where are you going?" would mostly likely be "Why do you ask?" or "It's none of your business." Questions like "Are you writing to your parents?" would be thought to intrude on one's privacy. Our teaching materials, teachers sometimes don't pay enough attention to differences between cultures, so students are usually ignorant of the factor of culture and they can only mechanically copy what they have learned.

e- Enhance comprehension

In order to do so, the students can research a particular country for a period of time which can be two weeks for instance. Each student is given a large cardboard cutout for that purpose. Students can decorate their cardboard countries on the basis of their research of that country. Therefore, they will practice what they have already learnt. For instance, a student researching Switzerland might place cheese or chocolate on their cardboard to represent where those products are usually found. On the day of the cardboard representations also, the students can dress like someone from that country. Hence, the teacher can display all the projects together during one session or in a ceremony to see them all.

f- Familiarize with the other

Enable the students to deal with different situations without being embarrassed or being inhibited and forward attention towards widening the understanding and an acceptance of the other. This cultural awareness can be promoted in different types of classroom discussion, group discussion, writing assignments, and presentations of assigned readings selected by teachers or students themselves.

6- Conclusion

Universality of misunderstanding urged teachers to handle such critical situations in class. Understanding another culture encompasses understanding another beliefs' system and not just the spoken language. Similarly, Banks (2004) argues that the citizens of this globalized society need to acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes in order to coexist with other cultural communities and cultural borders. Banks also affirms that critical cultural awareness means to support human rights and equality, as well as to accept the inclusion of minority groups into the mainstream society. This competence reduces the proliferation of stereotypes, prejudices, and misrepresentations of others, and allows learners to see the deeper aspects of culture. These views of ICC become a relevant epistemological notion for those EFL learners who are preparing to become EFL teachers.

In this paper, the researcher suggested a model that he called “RELIEF” that aimed at decreasing discomfiture in various cross cultural contexts. Simply because, learning a language without the cultural framework in which it exists is like cooking ethnic food without the spices of the region. By doing so, both teachers and learners, simply will remove the entire flavor from the language. If you are lucky enough to be able to travel or live in a country for a while, it will be beneficial, otherwise, try to learn as much as you can by reading books and magazines from the country and watching its television programs so that you can get a feel for how the people think, act and speak. Don’t just be bilingual, be bicultural. Further research is highly recommended to test the efficiency of the previously suggested model.

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