

**The Need of Intercultural Competence in EFL
Teaching
ZAGHAR Fatma**

(Université Abdelhamid Ibn-Badis, Mostaganem)

Abstract :

Every serious account of the major forces transforming our world today includes the word globalization. The advent of the global economy is changing the fundamental nature of our governments, educational systems, businesses, and populations.

Modern communication has developed to a point that it is possible to communicate more than ever before with people anywhere in the world.

Today, we have all become part of an interdependent international network. One of the key changes this has triggered is the need to communicate effectively with different people in different languages and from different cultures.

Nowhere is this need felt more keenly than in educational institutions, which must play a pivotal role in helping prepare our students for the cosmopolitan world that awaits them, a world in which they are bound to interact with foreign nationals and different ethnic groups.

This paper intends to reconsider the definition of intercultural competence and its importance in the EFL teaching profession. It shows how it is vital for the EFL teachers to be culturally competent to help their learners develop critical cultural awareness as well as the skills and attitudes to understand and successfully interact with people from other cultures.

Key-words: English as a foreign language (EFL) - EFL education – Communication – Intercultural competence.

Résumé:

L'étudiant est un être humain qui vit en société, s'inscrit dans une continuité historique et assume des droits et responsabilités de citoyen.

L'université doit le préparer à cette vie de société en lui procurant des repères permettant de comprendre la réalité sociale et son fonctionnement, surtout dans un monde complexe et diversifié.

Cette initiation à la vie en société peut être acquise dans des cours qui lui sont dédiés en langues étrangères. En effet l'enseignement des langues étrangères et spécialement l'anglais fait appel à des connaissances et à des compétences de toute sortes.

Dans un monde devenu plus multiculturel que jamais, l'enseignement de l'anglais comme langue étrangère cherche de plus en plus à améliorer la compétence interculturelle de l'enseignant afin de former des générations capables de faire face aux divers conflits existant entre les différentes nations.

Cet article discute l'importance de la compétence interculturelle et les divers avantages que peut acquérir l'enseignant des langues étrangères s'il est bien formé dans ce domaine.

Introduction:

In this era of consolidation and trying to unify various aspects of life, English can be described as a common language of the world like the common currency of various nations.

The World Wide Web has grown into the largest market of communication statistically known to mankind. Whether it be for studies, for research, for job inquiries, or basic web surfing, it's extremely important to have control in the English linguistic process.

With the increase of global communication brought about by the World Wide Web and the increasingly interdependent global economy the way leaders and organizations approach different areas of life has dramatically changed. While intercultural competence was once viewed as something only necessary for those engaged in direct international relations,

today educational institutions face a need to equip their staff and learners with intercultural competence.

For language teachers, teaching a foreign language is mainly about being able of dealing with the change in their learners' attitudes towards their own or another culture. At any rate, foreign language teaching is foreign culture teaching.

This paper focuses on providing an overview of intercultural competence in the EFL context and its critical importance for EFL teachers.

The interrelationship between language and culture:

Culture has always been characterized as a symbolic meaning in which language is one of the most important ones. The relationship between language and culture is then deeply rooted. Kramsch's observation should not go unnoticed:

"Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them." (Kramsch, 1993:1)

Language is viewed as a verbal expression of culture. It is used to maintain and convey culture and. It is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. Language is a major component and supporter of culture as a primary tool for transferring messages and giving access to another culture. Learning a foreign language involves learning a foreign culture to varying degrees and gives the ability to communicate and to exchange views with people all over the world. Yet, Cross-cultural misunderstandings and conflicts may arise in the area of teaching foreign languages. Therefore; foreign

language teachers and learners should be equipped with the skill of intercultural competence.

Intercultural competence:

What is meant by intercultural competence? This question has been debated by specialists for decades and definitions have cited some general components such as empathy, flexibility, and managing stress. Other scholars have used a myriad of terminology including cross-cultural competence, global competence, intercultural effectiveness, intercultural sensitivity, global competence, to name a few.

Let us sum up this with Fantini's words:

*"A concern with cross-cultural effectiveness and appropriateness—coupled with second or foreign language development—will, I hope, lead beyond tolerance and understanding to a genuine appreciation of others. For this to happen, we need to develop the awareness, attitudes, skills, and knowledge that will make us better participants on a local and global level, able to understand and empathize with others in new ways. Exposure to more than one language, culture, and world view, in a positive context, offers such a promise.
(Fantini 1997, 13)*

It is a fundamental truth that Intercultural competence is based on understanding intercultural differences, this will ultimately promote clearer communication, breaks down barriers, opens horizons, builds trust, strengthens relationships and yields tangible results.

Intercultural competence in foreign language teaching:

In a globalized world characterized by international links, intercultural skills are crucial. Intercultural competence in language teaching aims at developing learners as intercultural

speakers or mediators who are able to engage with multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity. In foreign language teaching, intercultural competence is mainly based on communication competence in an intercultural context. This specific communication is based on respect for individuals and equality for human beings to ensure a shared understanding with people of different social identities and a successful social interaction.

In the educational community, there is ample opportunity for misunderstandings and poor communication. Intercultural competence is now increasingly being recognized as a critical element in succeeding on the global stage. Foreign language teachers are supposed to be dedicated to working with learners to help them attain the skills, knowledge and experience to allow them to succeed in the international stage.

Competence is the final stage of intercultural understanding and signifies the foreign language ability of the language teacher to work effectively across cultures to create cultural synergy within his classroom.

Benefits of intercultural competence for EFL teachers:

In an advanced industrial society in an increasingly interdependent world, the knowledge of foreign languages has become indispensable and has created a more urgent need than ever before for language learners to develop intercultural understanding and an ability to live and work productively and harmoniously with other people having different values, beliefs, and habits. The challenge is then ahead for foreign language teachers.

The main aim of the intercultural dimension in foreign language teaching is not only the transmission of information about a foreign country but mainly helping learners to understand how intercultural interactions take place, and how their

perceptions of people and other people's perceptions of them influence the success of the intercultural communication. Thus, an appreciation of the target language and its cultural nuances is necessary for foreign language teachers to consider how culture may affect their teaching. The benefits of being interculturally competent in the foreign language teaching profession has endless benefits, some of the most critical ones include:

5-a) Opening horizons:

Intercultural competence helps language teachers think outside the box which will offer their learners a broader outlook on their surroundings as they are able to be open-minded and to look at issues with a broader perspective. This confirms that open-mindedness is one of the most likely characteristics associated with successful cross-cultural adjustment (Van Der Zee and Van Kooten 2001).

5-b) Self-awareness:

Teachers will learn about their own strengths, weaknesses, prejudices, and preconceptions and teach them to their students.

5-c) Avoiding stereotypes:

Stereotyping can happen when false and exaggerated characteristics of a group are attributed to the individual, but sociotyping involves an accurate generalization about cultural groups as a whole. Thus, to promote effective teaching, teachers need to plan suitable curriculum and instruction which demonstrate good judgments through selecting the most appropriate interpretations in cross-cultural situations, because "if students are uncomfortable in class, they may become bored, unresponsive, or test poorly" (Felder and Henriques, 1995).

5-d) Building confidence and trust:

Intercultural competence promotes self-confidence in individuals and teams which encourage autonomous learning. Chuprina (2001) found that cross-cultural competence was posi-

tively correlated with the willingness to engage in self-directed learning. It leads to dialogue which leads to understanding which results in trust.

5-e) Motivating:

Through self-analysis, an intercultural language teacher will help the learners recognize areas in which they need to improve and become motivated to develop and consequently deal with different peoples with sensitivity and empathy.

5-f) Career development:

One of the prime benefits of an effective intercultural teaching is that it enhances learners' skills and therefore future employment opportunities.

6. Considerations for effective intercultural foreign language education:

Some considerations are to be taken to create an effective foreign language education for intercultural understanding:

6-a) The learning environment:

Providing a positive, sensitive, conducive learning environment to intercultural understanding in the educational institutions are key factors which ensure that teachers will feel comfortable and therefore offer efficient intercultural learning context.

6-b) Curriculum:

Providing curriculum subjects and units which reflect the principles and values which address principles and values of intercultural understanding.

6-c) Teaching materials:

Offering learning, library resources, and textbooks that are culturally sensitive and do not convey discriminatory or racist attitudes.

Conclusion:

In a world in which some international boundaries are eroded and where cultural diversity experienced within nations as much as between them, the ability to manage and to work in multicultural teams is becoming ever more important. There is no doubt that we are living in times of great change. As we educators prepare our students for the 21st century challenges, we are aware of many changes occurring globally.

Employers increasingly want their employees to acquire English and to be interculturally competent. They want them to be skillful negotiators in increasingly intercultural work situations.

It is worth noting that in different parts of the world, the presence of ethnic and linguistic minority learners in universities is becoming an everyday phenomenon. Policy makers include intercultural objectives in curricula, and teachers find themselves faced with the challenge of promoting the acquisition of intercultural competence through their teaching. This is definitely true for EFL teachers who are now urged to develop intercultural communicative competence in their learners.

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