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Enhancing Intercultural Communicative Competence in ESP through Cultural Exchange: The Case of Students at INATAA

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Abstract:

Globalization and technological advancements have reshaped the role of culture in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. Similarly, this construct has received scholar's attention in teaching English for specific purposes. Cultural exchange is believed to have a significant role in the development of the students' intercultural communicative competence. This paper explores how intercultural exchange—particularly Virtual Exchange—can be integrated into ESP programs, with illustrative examples from Nutrition education. Through CE, students can communicate with their fellow students of a different culture in different platforms freely without any logistical challenge. The study focuses on the incorporation of intercultural dimensions into ESP programs and project-based assignments where cross-cultural views are shared. Exposing students to dialogues on cultural practices develops their intercultural awareness and critical thinking. The study recommends Incorporating Virtual Intercultural Exchange in ESP Programs as well as Designing Collaborative Intercultural Projects that engage students in discussions about cultural differences and similarities.

Keywords: cultural exchange, virtual exchange, intercultural communicative competence, ESP, project-based assignment

Introduction

Globalization and technological advancements the world is witnessing nowadays have reshaped the role of culture in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. The issue of culture has also drawn the attention of ESP research in English for specific purposes. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has proved to be essential for effective communication in global academic and professional domains. Similarly, Cultural exchange is believed to foster ICC by exposing learners to diverse perspectives and norms, which enhances adaptability and cultural sensitivity.

In ESP courses for Nutrition and Agri-Food Technologies, intercultural exchange can bridge gaps between global dietary practices and scientific communication. For instance, students might explore how cultural traditions influence nutritional guidelines across countries, preparing them for multicultural workplaces. This study explores how cultural exchange enhances ICC in the context of ESP for Algerian students. While this paper does not present empirical data, it proposes a framework for integrating intercultural exchange into ESP Nutrition courses, supported by theoretical models (e.g., Byram, 1997) and prior VE research (e.g., Helm, 2015).

1. Definitions

1.1.Intercultural communicative competence

Byram (1997) defines intercultural communicative competence as to the ability to effectively communicate and interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, demonstrating sensitivity, flexibility, and adaptability in intercultural encounters.

1.2.Intercultural exchange

Intercultural exchange refers to interactions and communication between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, involving the sharing of perspectives, values, and experiences.

Noam Chomsky (1965) Introduced the concept of linguistic competence as the idealized knowledge of grammar and syntax in a native speaker.

1.3.**Communicative Competence**:

Dell Hymes (1972) developed the idea of communicative competence, emphasizing the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980) expanded communicative competence into four components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence.

1.4.**Intercultural Competence**:

Michael Byram (1997) pioneered the model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), highlighting attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness as essential components for effective intercultural communication.
Having outlined the theoretical framework of intercultural communicative competence, the next section examines the shift from communicative to intercultural approaches in ESP pedagogy.

2. The Shift from communicative to intercultural communicative

Communicative competence was used by Canale and Swain (as a reaction to Chomsy's linguistic competence) to refer to the ability to use language effectively in communication. This included grammatical competence (knowledge of language rules), sociolinguistic competence (understanding social and cultural norms), discourse competence (knowing how to organize and structure language), and strategic competence (using strategies to overcome communication barriers) (Canale & Swain, 1980). The primary focus in EFL teaching was on linguistic proficiency and the ability to communicate fluently and accurately in various contexts.

Byram (1997) model highlights the importance of developing intercultural competence alongside linguistic proficiency for effective communication in diverse cultural contexts.
ICC incorporates intercultural awareness, sensitivity, and adaptability. It emphasizes not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural competence. Byram proposed a widely cited model of ICC:

- knowledge of other cultures,
- attitudes towards other cultures,
- intercultural skills (e.g., interpreting, relating, discovery, and interaction), and critical cultural awareness.

The insufficiency of communicative competence in addressing the complexities of global interactions increases need for intercultural competence in diverse cultural contexts in the globalized world.

3. The Shift from traditional ESP to intercultural ESP

Traditionally, ESP teaching ignored cultural aspects, and learners primarily focused on achieving specific professional goals in relation to ESP like English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). Early ESP emphasized addressing immediate language needs, and was mainly interested in developing specific skills and vocabulary relevant to particular fields. Here needs analysis increased popularity. Therefore, language and culture were perceived as separate entities, and ESP teachers neglects the cultural nuances required for effective communication. However, in the 1970s, the integration of cultural proficiency into ESP began, after recogizing the role of the latter in TEFL, acknowledging that language and culture are inseparably linked (Byram, 1997). As multicultural workplaces became more prevalent, intercultural communication awareness training emerged as a crucial component of ESP. For example, in specialized fields such as nutrition and agri-food technologies (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021; FAO, 2020), understanding cultural contexts is essential for effective professional communication and global collaboration. One cannot neglect that Needs analysis remains pivotal in designing content and materials that are both linguistically and culturally relevant to learners' specific goals.

4. Types of intercultural exchange

4.1. **Exchange with Native Speaker** :

Interacting with native English speakers enriches language learning by providing exposure to authentic usage, colloquial expressions, and idioms. It contributes in improving

comprehension of accents and enhancing pronunciation through natural intonation and rhythm. Additionally, it offers cultural insights, which helps learners understand nuances in communication, humor, and social etiquette, and fosters more authentic and effective language use.

4.2. **Exchange with Non-Native Speaker** :

Meaningful interactions during student exchanges often occur with non-native speakers. This type of exchange fosters socialization and a balanced communication dynamic that accepts language errors. Exchange with non-native speakers exposes students to diverse ideas and practices, which hence encourages intercultural understanding and mutual learning. Such interactions reduce anxiety and align with the concept of Global Englishes, that embraces diverse English forms as valid and enriching.

4.3.**Virtual Exchange (VE)**:

This type of exchange is cost-effective, flexible, and globally accessible through tools like Skype, social media, and blogs.

For Nutrition students, Virtual Exchange (VE) platforms could facilitate collaborations on culturally relevant tasks, such as comparing Mediterranean and East Asian diets or analyzing how socio-cultural factors impact obesity rates. Such projects align with Problem-Based Learning (PBL) by addressing real-world health challenges

4.3.1. **Global Englishes**

Global English (GE) challenges the idea that English usage is standardized and uniform. Instead, it recognizes the reality of variability and multilingualism in global communication involving English, as observed in various contexts (e.g., Baker & Ishikawa, 2021). This perspective aligns with research on English as a lingua franca (ELF) and English as a multi-lingua franca (EMF) communication, where English serves as a contact language but may not always be the chosen language (Jenkins, 2015a). For example, exchange students may interact with local English native speakers, emphasizing 'standard' language use. However, in other programs, students may study and socialize with international peers, using

ELF/EMF in communication. It requires recognizing and accepting the diversity and variability in English language use, as well as incorporating ELF/EMF in communication.

4.3.2. Why virtually?

The widespread use of the internet nowadays as an integral part of our daily lives, has significantly influenced various fields, including education. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, Skype, and Viber play a prominent role in our interactions, which urges instructors to adapt these tools for teaching practices. This is particularly relevant for fostering intercultural communication, which is often hindered by the lack of opportunities for learners to travel abroad. As an alternative, online intercultural communication—also referred to as virtual exchange or telecollaboration—has emerged as an alternative solution. This approach incorporates instructional practices such as collaborative tasks, and social interaction between internationally connected partner classes. Using internet-based communication tools like e-mail, chat, blogs, and videoconferencing, virtual exchange enables learners to engage in meaningful intercultural dialogue without the financial burden of travel abroad (Helm, 2015; Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016).

4.3.3. ERASMUS PROJECT an example of virtual exchange

The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (VE) project, launched by the European Commission in January 2018, use virtual synchronous sessions and online activities to promote intercultural dialogue and develop soft skills among participants aged 18 to 30 from Europe and the Southern Mediterranean. As an intercultural dialogue initiative, the program places a strong emphasis on enhancing language proficiency and fostering teamwork. Teachers play a pivotal role in guiding these sessions, ensuring a safe and inclusive online environment where all participants feel heard and respected. Their responsibilities include facilitating constructive discussions, maintaining clarity, and encouraging equal participation. The platform actively engages participants through various components, such as weekly synchronous sessions, video content, response journals, and collaborative projects. Participants are also rewarded with online badges recognizing their achievements in digital and intercultural competencies, which can be shared on social media or downloaded and printed for personal use.

4.3.4. Virtual Exchange and Problem-Based Learning

Integrating Problem-Based Learning (PBL) into Virtual Exchange (VE) provides a dynamic and immersive learning experience. PBL encourages students to engage in collaborative problem-solving tasks that mimic real-world challenges, promoting critical thinking and creativity. In the context of VE, students work with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, which enhances their intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as they navigate different perspectives and communication styles. Additionally, this approach helps develop digital literacy skills, as students use various online tools and platforms to collaborate. By addressing authentic, context-driven problems, PBL in VE not only strengthens subject-specific knowledge but also prepares students for effective teamwork and problem-solving in globalized professional settings.

4.3.5. PBL in VE for an ESP course

In a hypothetical ESP Nutrition course, VE could engage students in tasks like comparing traditional dietary customs and their health implications across cultures; collaborating on case studies about malnutrition, considering local beliefs and global solutions. These activities would foster ICC by requiring students to negotiate cultural differences while applying discipline-specific language skills. For instance, in ESP for Nutrition, PBL tasks could involve comparing dietary habits across cultures (FAO, 2020) or analyzing how cultural norms influence food security policies (Baker & Ishikawa, 2021). Such collaborations align with Byram's (1997) ICC model by fostering critical cultural awareness.

Through VE, students might research and discuss nutritional challenges unique to each culture, such as malnutrition or obesity, and propose solutions tailored to these contexts. Through this collaborative approach, students not only improve their language skills but also engage in authentic, context-driven problem-solving, which deepens their understanding of both the subject matter and intercultural differences.

Conclusion

In an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, fostering intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become an indispensable objective in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education. This study underscores the significant impact of cultural exchange-especially virtual exchange-in promoting ICC among students at INATAA. By integrating intercultural dimensions into ESP courses through collaborative projects, dialogues with native and non-native speakers, and problem-based tasks, students develop not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural awareness, adaptability, and critical thinking. Virtual exchange proves to be a powerful and inclusive pedagogical tool, offering rich intercultural experiences without the logistical constraints of travel. These practices equip learners with the communicative and cultural skills essential for successful academic and professional interaction in diverse global contexts. As such, ESP programs must continue to evolve, embracing technology-enhanced intercultural engagement to prepare students for the demands of multicultural environments.

Recommendations:

This study would suggest the following pedagogical recommendations:

- Incorporate intercultural elements into ESP courses.
- Encourage online cultural dialogue with native as well as non-native speakers where travel isn't feasible.
- Foster international teamwork on culturally relevant problems.

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