DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Tadjieva Mastura Fayzullaevna
Senior teacher of Termiz State University

Abstract: This article explores the significance of intercultural competence in teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The review examines the concept of communicative competence, the understanding of intercultural competence, highlighting the role of cultural knowledge, beliefs, and values in shaping cross-cultural interactions. It underscores the importance of preparing EFL students to navigate unpredictable multicultural situations, rather than solely focusing on familiarity with a single culture. Drawing on a comprehensive analysis of existing literature, the article identifies best practices, theoretical foundations, and practical approaches to integrating intercultural learning into EFL classrooms. The goal is to equip EFL educators with the necessary strategies to foster intercultural understanding and prepare their students for the complexities of a globalized society.

Keywords: Communicative Competence, Culture, Intercultural Competence, Intercultural Awareness.

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to communicate across cultures has become a crucial skill. This is particularly true in the field of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), where educators are tasked with not only imparting language skills but also fostering intercultural understanding.

The significance of intercultural communication and the integration of cultural dimensions into language teaching are therefore widely recognised and have prompted influential changes in foreign language teaching. This article explores the significance of intercultural competence in EFL teaching and provides strategies for educators to effectively integrate this important aspect into their teaching practices.

Methods

This review draws upon a comprehensive analysis of existing literature on intercultural competence in EFL education, encompassing scholarly articles, research reports, and pedagogical frameworks. The focus is on identifying best practices, theoretical foundations, and practical approaches to integrating intercultural learning into EFL classrooms.

Understanding Communicative Competence

The concept 'communicative competence' was developed by Hymes' critique of Chomsky. "Hymes argued that linguists wishing to understand first language acquisition, need to pay attention to the way in which not only grammatical competence but also the ability to use language

appropriately is acquired. He thus put emphasis on sociolinguistic competence and this concept was fundamental to the development of communicative language teaching, when Hymes' description of first language acquisition and communication among native speakers was transferred into the description of the aims and objectives of foreign language teaching and learning" (Byram, 1997, 8). The abilities we use to interact with others in various ways are called communicative competencies. These are skills that can be taught, which shape the language we use when communicating in different contexts and situations. It is communicative competence that is considered as a systemic competence, without which it is impossible to ensure the development of either informational, sociocultural, socio-political, compensatory or academic components of education in the modern sense (Tadjieva, 2021).

Nunn (2007, 41) considers the significance of several essential aspects for communicative competence at an international level, namely: multiglossic, in which it is necessary for speakers to be sensitive not only to diverse identities, but also to be capable of intelligibly conveying their own identity; strategic, communicative strategies are vital and cooperative factors in intercultural ELF interactions; pragmatic/discourse, being able to adapt language according to the situation and solving differences of background knowledge, therefore preparation is required; and lastly, intercultural, in the sense of being able to adjust to unpredictable multicultural situations, rather than being familiar with solely a single culture for effective cross-cultural communication, for instance. "Learners should acquire principles of intercultural communication and skills, such as the ability to de-center, postpone judgment and mediate between culturally different individuals in order to be able to cope with diversity effectively" (Byram, 1997, 8).

Understanding Intercultural Competence

According to Samovar and Porter (2003, 8) understanding of culture is "the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, social hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relationships, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving". Interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds means that each person's own cultural beliefs and values come into play. Therefore, it's important to strike a delicate balance to ensure there is a proper understanding between the speakers.

Intercultural competence is the ability to function effectively across cultures, to think and act appropriately, and to communicate and work with people from different cultural backgrounds – at home or abroad (Leung, K., Ang, S. and Tan, M.L. 2014)

Intercultural competence refers to the ability to effectively communicate and interact with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. In the context of EFL teaching, it involves going beyond language proficiency to include an awareness and appreciation of different cultural norms, values, and communication styles. By developing intercultural competence, students are better equipped to engage with people from various cultural backgrounds, both in their language learning journey and in their future endeavors.

Why Intercultural Competence Matters in EFL Teaching

In today's globalized world, proficiency in English is not sufficient on its own. Students need to be equipped with the skills to navigate cross-cultural interactions and understand the nuances of communication in different contexts. Intercultural competence fosters empathy, open-mindedness, and a broader perspective, which are essential for effective communication and collaboration in multicultural settings.

Therefore, it is crucial to understand that the selection of words by a speaker is influenced by their cultural background. This holds true for both native speakers and individuals learning a foreign language, as they attempt to articulate their thoughts.

Results and Discussion

Research suggests that foreign language learners who possess intercultural competence and have a good understanding of the target language's culture can effectively and appropriately communicate.

When a learner lacks intercultural competence and understanding of a foreign culture, they tend to apply their own cultural norms and behaviors to the foreign language. This often leads to misunderstandings.

In Uzbekistan, greetings frequently cause such misunderstandings. For example, when an English speaker in Uzbekistan says "Hi, how are you?" they expect the response "Fine, thanks. How are you?" However, Uzbeks might start discussing their own well-being and family without realizing that the question implies a brief response. Additionally, it is customary in Uzbek culture to inquire about an individual's family when greeting them, which can surprise foreigners who are not accustomed to this practice.

Cultural clashes often stem from differences in what is considered acceptable. For instance, questions about marriage, children, and salary are acceptable in Uzbek culture but may be considered taboo in American culture. Furthermore, privacy is less emphasized in Uzbek culture compared to American culture, and the concept of personal space is different.

Another example is the lack of cultural awareness between the guest and the host family. If both assume that their cultural norms are universally accepted and demonstrate little consideration for the values, norms, and traditions of the other side, it may cause misunderstanding in communication between interlocutors. For instance, in Uzbek culture, it is customary to extend hospitality to guests by providing them with food and care, whereas in British culture, guests may prioritize freedom and privacy over excessive attention. Additionally, the significance of social status differs between the two cultures, as it holds broader importance in various aspects of life in Uzbek culture compared to its more limited relevance primarily within the workplace in British culture. Moreover, topics of discussion diverge, with Uzbek culture often involving open conversations about family matters and income, while British culture tends to focus more on casual topics such as weather or sports. Family gatherings and social customs carry greater significance in Uzbek culture than in British culture. Furthermore, practices such as wearing shoes indoors vary, as it is common in Britain to keep shoes on inside the house, whereas in Uzbek culture, it is customary to remove shoes at the entrance.

Ignorance of these cultural nuances can lead to misunderstandings and even embarrassment for speakers.

Strategies for Developing Intercultural Competence in EFL Teaching

1. Incorporating Cultural Content: Integrate cultural elements into language lessons, such as literature, films, music, and traditions from English-speaking countries and other cultures. This exposes students to diverse perspectives and helps them appreciate the richness of global cultures.

2. Promoting Intercultural Dialogue: Encourage discussions on cultural differences and similarities, allowing students to share their own experiences and learn from their peers. This promotes empathy and understanding while providing opportunities for language practice.

3. Developing Intercultural Awareness: Raise students' awareness of cultural norms and practices, emphasizing the importance of adapting communication styles in different cultural contexts. Role-

playing scenarios from various cultures can help students understand how cultural differences impact communication.

4. Engaging in Intercultural Exchanges: Facilitate interactions with native English speakers or students from English-speaking countries through pen-pal programs, video conferencing, or collaborative projects. This provides authentic opportunities for cultural exchange and language practice.

5. Reflective Teaching Practices: Encourage educators to reflect on their own cultural biases and how these may influence their teaching. By being aware of their own cultural perspectives, teachers can better guide students in developing intercultural competence.

Discussion

Several challenges exist in developing intercultural competence in EFL teaching. These include:
- Limited Exposure: Learners may have limited opportunities to interact with individuals from diverse cultures outside the classroom.
- Cultural Stereotypes: Pre-existing biases and stereotypes can hinder learners' understanding and appreciation of cultural differences.
- Language Barriers: Communication difficulties can impede effective intercultural interaction and understanding.

Addressing these challenges requires:
- Creating Authentic Connections: Utilizing technology to connect learners with individuals from different cultures, fostering virtual exchange programs, and facilitating real-world interactions.
- Promoting Critical Thinking: Encouraging learners to question their own assumptions and explore diverse perspectives with an open mind.
- Building Intercultural Communication Skills: Explicitly teaching communication strategies, such as active listening, clear articulation, and non-verbal communication, specific to intercultural contexts.

While integrating intercultural competence into EFL teaching offers numerous benefits, it also presents challenges. Educators may encounter resistance from traditional curriculum structures or face difficulties in addressing sensitive cultural topics. However, by embracing these challenges as opportunities for growth and learning, teachers can create inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments that prepare students for global citizenship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, developing intercultural competence is an essential component of EFL teaching. By equipping students with the skills to navigate cross-cultural interactions and fostering an appreciation for diverse perspectives, educators play a pivotal role in preparing individuals to thrive in an interconnected world. Embracing intercultural competence not only enhances language learning but also cultivates empathy, respect, and understanding across cultures, ultimately contributing to a more harmonious and inclusive global community.

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