

Intercultural Language Teaching: Techniques to Enhance Intercultural Competence in an EFL Classroom

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Abstract

The acquisition of intercultural competence requires contact with members of the target language in an as active and direct a way as possible. In this article, therefore, a rather selective ‘broad brush’ approach will be adopted, which will attempt to highlight techniques which might be most helpful to teachers involved in intercultural language teaching. In ordinary classroom teaching, attempts can be made with the traditional techniques such as cultural asides, culture capsules, culture assimilators, role playing and classroom decoration. An ensemble of in-class techniques, have been put forward to address cultural behaviour while teaching language skills, that is, to link ‘the teaching of language to that of culture’ (Kramsch 1991). The proposed techniques contain practical ideas for developing cultural awareness and cross-cultural understanding. They also provide guidance for teachers on adopting traditional techniques to create activities suitable for intercultural learning. The activities can be done with the minimal of resources, and do not need special artistic expertise on the part of the teacher. The examples offer insights and practical guidance on designing cross-cultural activities.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, Intercultural language teaching, In-class activities, Cross-cultural understanding

1. Introduction

To keep the lines open to wider conception of language in relation to culture in a world characterized by an on-going process of global integration at various levels, the time has come for language teachers not only to focus on the conceptual schemes, but also to investigate the different ways in which intercultural competence can be achieved. It is interesting, in this respect, to recall that communicative and cultural competence can be too general terms. Today they are being strongly called into question in the pedagogical debate, mainly because they rest upon a concept of society and culture that does not include the context of other cultures. Damen argues that, “The current dedication to the development of communicative competence of language learners mandates the development of intercultural skills and an understanding of the processes of culture learning on the part of the teachers and students alike” (Damen, 1987 p. xvi). On the other hand, Cortazzi and Jin (2009) propose the extension of Canale and Swain’s list (1980) of competences by adding intercultural competence.

Originally, the concept of intercultural competence has been widely used in social psychology and studies of communication. In the former it refers to social effectiveness, i.e. the ability to achieve instrumental and social goals, in the latter it denotes appropriateness, i.e. suitable communication in a given situation in a particular culture. In foreign language learning, however, it has been defined as “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, p. 137).

2. Techniques of Interlanguage Teaching

In a rather practical way, the two main facets of intercultural competence are (1) to gain insights into one’s own culture and (2) to find reasons for similarities and differences from within the target cultures. Therefore, in-depth understanding of otherness implies trying to understand from within. The following techniques aim at inculcating in EFL learners the notion of an understanding of otherness on a pedagogical basis:

2.1 Cultural Asides

By definition, cultural asides are items of cultural information offered by the teacher as they present themselves in the course of language work (Stern, 1992). Most writers on culture teaching recommend the use of cultural asides. Rivers talks about them as experiencing the culture through language use (Rivers 1981), and Allen and Valette make suggestions for incorporating culture in language learning activities stating that, “in presenting new vocabulary and new structures, the teacher can often incorporate aspects of the target culture” (Allen and Valette, 1977, pp. 334-5). What is more, it is highly recommended to use the same cultural material several times throughout the course. In this way the students increase their familiarity with items associated with the target culture. Of the various cultural asides, the following will be dealt with:

2.1.1 Magazine Pictures

The use of magazine pictures increases the effectiveness of learning by helping the learner to assimilate in a more meaningful and interesting way. To teach about food in Britain, for example, the teacher cuts and mounts pictures from magazines. These may be contrasted with pictures representing Algerian cuisine. An instance of this, could be the English breakfast of orange juice, fried eggs, bacon, toast, corn-flakes and coffee visually contrasted with the Algerian breakfast of *café au lait*, jam, butter, and bread. At the same time, these visuals can be used to introduce the students to the new vocabulary items.

2.1.2 Maps

The teacher can use geographical maps to practise specific linguistic items, for example, the four cardinal points as nouns: north, south, east and west, adjectives/nouns: northern(er), southern(er) eastern(er), and western(er) and adverbs: northward, southward, eastward, and westward, or northerly southerly, easterly, westerly and up north/down south. The use of maps also allows students to engage in meaningful language practice while developing a greater familiarity with the geography of the target country. In our context, emphasis is to be put on the regional divisions of the United Kingdom.

2.1.3 Brochures

An instance of the use of brochure would be to divide the classroom in groups, each group writes a letter to the British Embassy asking for travel/holiday brochures of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Later in the year, when students begin getting responses, the material received may be used to show differences in forms (for example, lay-outs between the English way and the Arabic/French way) or for other language activities (for example, in formal/informal letter-writing).

3. Culture Capsules

The culture capsule is regarded as one of the most influential devices for developing cultural awareness and cross-cultural understanding. This technique was elaborated by Taylor and Sorenson (1991). It is a short verbal presentation that discusses characteristic differences between the target culture and native culture. The culture capsule may be accompanied with photographs or magazine pictures, and other aids. The presentation is generally followed by discussion. The culture capsule technique suits better intermediate-level students. The following topics are culture capsules par excellence:

Christmas in Britain

Christmas is the most important annual festival in Britain. On December 25, Christmas day, Christians celebrate the birth of Christ. In many towns, open-air carol services are held round a Christmas tree in the town centre. Children at school often perform nativity plays commemorating the birth of Christ. Church attendance on Christmas day is higher than at many other time of the year. Churches are decorated and carols are sung. Many weeks before Christmas, the first sign of its approach is usually the appearance of Christmas cards

for sale. Millions of cards are sent by individuals and firms. Many people use them as a way of keeping in touch with friends and relatives.

Christmas is a time for giving presents, especially to children. Small children believe that Santa Claus, or Father Christmas, a white-bearded old man dressed in red, rides through the air on a sleigh pulled by reindeer and delivers presents to each child, coming into the house by the chimney. Children hang stockings up on Christmas Eve and find them filled with presents on Christmas morning. On Christmas day itself there is usually a celebration with family and friends, which includes a special Christmas meal of roast goose or turkey followed by a Christmas pudding. The table is specially decorated, usually with Christmas crackers, containing paper hats, riddles and other novelties. Port and nuts are often served after the meal. Other Christmas foods are mince pies and a special Christmas cake, a fruit cake covered in marzipan and icing. Many people listen to the message broadcast by the Queen to people in Britain and the Commonwealth on Christmas day.

The following day (26 December) is called Boxing day. It was formerly the day when servants were given their Christmas box, a gift or money from their employer. Many households still give Christmas boxes to the people who deliver their mail, milk, newspapers, etc.

(Adapted from OALED)

Wedding Ceremonies in Britain

In Britain, most young couples spend some months getting to know each other before settling down to a life together. Some couples meet through one of the many agencies that offer to find suitable partners, but couples may meet at college, at work, in a club or society, or on holiday. Engagements to marry are often officially gazetted. A typical announcement in a local newspaper might be headed.

The engagement is announced between John Martin, son of Mr. and Mrs. B. R. SMITH, of Ealing, London and Susan Jane daughter of Mr. and Mrs. W. J. BROWN, of Oxford.

Weddings usually take place on a Saturday and traditionally in spring, and especially Easter. There are two types of wedding ceremonies: a religious wedding in the Church of England and wedding without religious ceremony in a registry office. Many couples prefer a religious wedding because they want a 'white wedding', a ceremony in church, with the bride dressed in white, often with a veil and carrying flowers. The bride is normally taken to church by her father, who 'gives her away', while the bridegroom is accompanied by a 'best man'. The bride often has attendants, called bridesmaids, and sometimes small boys act as pages. A typical religious wedding announcement might be as follows:

Clergyman: Mr. SMITH, do you take this woman for your lawfully wedded wife?

Mr. SMITH: Yes I do.

Clergyman: Miss BROWN, do you take this man for your lawfully wedded husband?

Miss BROWN: Yes I do.

Clergyman: I publish the banns of marriage between John Martin SMITH and Susan

Jane BROWN. If any of you know cause, or just impediment, why these two persons should not be joined together in holy matrimony, ye are to declare it.

After the marriage service and the ritual of the wedding ring exchange, to which family and friends have been invited, there is a reception, called a ‘wedding breakfast’, where traditionally the bride’s parents are the hosts. It may be held at the bride’s home or at a hotel. There will be drinks, a meal, and in due course, speeches by the bride’s father, the best man, and the bridegroom. There is also a wedding cake, a cake with white icing. The bride is usually photographed cutting the cake. Photographs or videos of all stages of the ceremony are taken including several in front of the church after the ceremony. After the reception, the couple usually leaves for a short holiday called their honeymoon. The car in which they drive away often has old tin cans or old boots and shoes tied to it and trailing behind it with a notice that reads “Just married”.

(Adapted from the OALED)

Superstitious Beliefs in Britain

In Britain, certain objects are believed to bring good or bad luck. For example, seeing a white horse, a four-leafed clover, two magpies together, a ladybird or a horseshoe is supposed to bring good luck, whereas it is regarded as bad luck to look at the new moon through glass or see a single magpie. When a black cat crosses one’s path, it can mean either good or bad luck. A horseshoe upside down is unlucky, because its luck is ‘running out’.

Certain actions are also believed to bring bad luck. These include walking under a ladder, breaking a mirror, and killing a spider. If someone spills salt he should immediately throw a pinch of it over his left shoulder. On the other hand picking up a pin from the ground brings good luck. Relics of superstitious actions like these have been preserved in phrases like ‘touch wood’, for avoiding bad luck, or ‘keep your fingers crossed’. Some people accompany such sayings with actions, for example by touching wood when saying ‘touch wood’. Among the strongest superstitious beliefs are those concerning lucky and unlucky numbers. The number 13 is generally regarded as unlucky. Some hotels even have no room of this number, some buildings have no 13th floor, and airplanes often have no 13th row of seats. When the 13th of any month is a Friday it is regarded as particularly unlucky.

Fortune-telling or prophesying the future can range from seeing in tea-leaves or in the flames of a fire, or in a crystal ball to having one’s palm read by a palmist or one’s fortune told by a fortune-teller. Almost all the popular newspapers and magazines print horoscopes, which foretell the future according to person’s ‘stars’, the sign of the zodiac under which he was born.

Schoolchildren and students sometimes take a ‘mascot’ or lucky charm into an examination room with them. It may be a pet toy, the figure of an animal, or any small object that they feel

brings them luck. In Britain old houses and castles are sometimes said to be haunted by the ghost of someone who died violently or mysteriously in the house.

(Adapted from the OALED)

These three culture capsules reflect the characteristic differences between the British culture and Algerian culture at various levels: social, psychological, religious etc. In practice, following the presentation, the teacher leads to a discussion on differences and similarities between a typical wedding ceremony in Britain and in Algeria, the superstitious beliefs in the British and Algeria societies, and the way Christmas as a religious festival is celebrated in Britain and El Mawlid Ennabaoui¹ in Algeria. This activity incites students to investigate not only some aspects of the target culture, but also aspects of their own culture. As part of their written assignment, the students will be asked to write a description of a wedding festivity in their region, an account of the differences and similarities between the British and Algerian superstitious beliefs, and a portrait of the celebration of the El Mawlid Ennabaoui in Algeria. It is particularly noteworthy that one of the fundamental objectives of the technique of culture capsules is to increase cross-cultural awareness, and ultimately to develop tolerance for cultural differences.

4. Culture Cluster

The technique of culture clusters has been proposed by Meade and Morain (1973). The culture cluster is a short unit which consists of three or four conceptually related culture capsules. According to the originators, the cluster should be concluded by some sort of activity, for example, questions for discussion and role playing. During the dramatization the teacher acts as narrator and guides the students through the simulation. Here is an example:

Explain that Fatiha (Faty) is an Algerian student on a study tour in England. She is living with an English family. It is the first time she has been served an English breakfast.

First scene

Landlady: What's the matter Faty? You aren't ill, I suppose.

Fatiha: No, it's all right.

Landlady: But why aren't eating your breakfast. It's been a quarter an hour since you ate nothing.

Mid-discussion

The students try to identify the source of the clash and develop explanatory hypotheses out of the following questions:

- What's wrong with Faty?

¹ Day on which Muslims annually celebrate the birth of the Prophet Mohamed MPBUH (the 12th of Rabie el Aoul in the Hegira calendar. .

- Why did she refuse to have breakfast?

Second scene

Fatiha: Well, actually I'm not used to having a big breakfast in the morning.

Landlady: But, Faty, breakfast is a very important meal of the day. You must eat, and then to school.

Fatiha: Yes, but why do we have to eat so much in the morning?

Mid-discussion

- *Is she accustomed to eating so much in the morning?*

- *What is the difference between an English and Algerian breakfast?*

Last scene

Landlady: Well, because at midday, you'll have only a sandwich.

Fatiha: Yes, now I understand better.

5. Culture Assimilator

The technique has been elaborated by Fielder *et al.* (1971). In this cultural problem-solving activity, the learner is confronted with a culturally significant situation that contrasts with his own culture. For example, a situation in which one of our students interacts with an Englishman. During the course of this interaction, we notice a misunderstanding. What is, then, the source of this misunderstanding? The teacher reads/writes four plausible explanations and asks the students to select the one they think is the correct answer. Here is an example:

Ali, an Algerian student reading for a B.Sc. in mathematics in England, is invited by his English classmates to a party. He is very happy as it is the first time he has been invited to a party. He puts on his jeans, and goes to the party. He arrives on time but as he enters the house, he has the feeling of being coldly welcomed. He wonders why his hosts seem less friendly than usual.

A. He was dressed inappropriately for a party.

B. He didn't bring flowers or a small gift.

C. He didn't bring food and drinks.

D. He came too early.

Explanations

A. (Wrong) English people, especially students, do not pay attention to the way people are dressed.

B. (Wrong) You are not expected to bring flowers or a gift to a party. In Britain, it is

customary to offer flowers when you are invited to a house for a tea or meal. Gifts, however, are offered on the occasion of a birthday party or wedding ceremony.

C. (Correct) You are expected to bring some food and drinks to a party organized by students. It is impolite or even rude to come to a party empty-handed. It is customary in Britain to bring cakes, biscuits, and drinks when you are invited to a student party.

D. (Wrong) Obviously, British people are very punctual and observe time limits very carefully. Our guest, as it is said in the text, was neither early nor late, he was on time.

This type of activities, in which the student is provided with a set of alternative situations illustrating only one appropriate target culture behaviour, reflects some misunderstanding between the language learner and the native speaker. The source of misunderstanding is traced back to the fact that the student has “struck the false note”. The explanation of the correct solution as well as the reason why the other distracters are wrong, supply additional useful cultural or cross-cultural information. Consequently, through such cultural problem-solving activities or cross-cultural encounters, students progressively build up an understanding of behaviour within a cultural framework. This understanding is carried out through cultural adjustment.

6. Role Playing

This technique also proved very efficient in making points about culturally appropriate or inappropriate behaviour. Role playing, or simply, role play refers to drama-like classroom activities in which students take the role of different participants in a situation. In this way, the teacher creates situations that provide opportunities for the students to play roles and simulate some situations which reflect everyday language use. In addition to the language practice activities, the role-play technique contributes to an understanding of the cultural aspects underling the role-play activities. Let's have a look at the following examples:

Informal Greetings

Susan: Hello, Liz.

Elizabeth: Hi, Sue, How are you?

Suzan: Fine thanks. And you?

Elizabeth: Not bad. It's good to see the sun again.

Susan: It makes a change, doesn't it?

Elizabeth: Let's hope it keeps fine for the week-end.

Susan: Well, here's my bus. Bye, Liz.

Elizabeth: Bye, Sue. See you.

Formal Greetings

Mr. Johns: Good morning Dr. Blake. How are you?

Dr. Blake: Oh, good morning Mr. Johnson. I'm very well, thank you. And you?

Mr. Johns: I'm fine, thank you. Nice and bright this morning. Isn't it?

Dr. Blake: Yes, much better than what we've been having.

Mr. Johns: Good-bye Dr. Blake, and have a nice day.

Dr. Blake: Good-bye Mr. Johns.

At first sight, the two dialogues illustrate aspects of language use in greetings, ranging from formal to informal style depending, obviously, on the participants. Many social events require the use of conversational routines as do the majority of speech acts. These conversational routines help define speech situations, and their appropriate use is a vital component of social competence². Pawley and Syder (1983) argue that the ability to use routines contributes to the sense of naturalness and nativeness about a person's speech.

Conversational routines also involve other formulized uses of language such as social formulae: *good morning, good afternoon, good evening, good night, thank you, you're welcome, don't mention it*, and the like, as well as ritualistic uses, for example, *bless you, happy birthday, Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, congratulations*, etc. The only difference between the social formulae and the ritualistic expressions lies in the fact that the former refers to communication between people which is not intended to seek for or convey information but has the social function of establishing or maintaining social contact, in sum, what the British-Polish anthropologist Malinowski calls 'phatic communion'³. The latter, one might say, are used on special occasions and ceremonies. Besides the focus on the appropriate use of conventional routines illustrated through the use of formal vs. informal style and pet names, the dialogues also include in their content weather information. The deliberate introduction of such cultural element could be justified on the basis that Britons are constantly talking about the weather. Unlike many others, this stereotype is actually true to life.

² *Social competence* is defined not with reference to the sentence, but to the utterance. This refers to the speaker's knowledge of how speech acts are used in social situations (see Richards 1991: 129-130).

³ Malinowski (1923) defines the term *phatic communion* as '*a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words*'.

7. Classroom Decorations

This technique has always been implemented in classroom as an aid to memory for slow learners. Teachers in primary schools still exploit this technique by decorating classroom with multiplication tables, verb declensions, proverbs and other educational and pedagogical material. In culture teaching, “classroom decorations afford an unobtrusive way of initiating students to the foreign culture” (Allan and Valette, 1977, p. 332). Most educational psychologists agree that this technique provides a form of learning resulting from the relationship between the individual learner’s mind as his eyes wander around the classroom and the depiction. In our context, the language learner will unconsciously be developing images of the country and its culture. The technique of classroom decorations falls into five instructive categories: geographical, historical, scientific, artistic, and moralistic. It is obvious that this technique can only touch on very few aspects of culture instruction. Indeed, the breadth of the subject calls for an entire handbook. These categories will be dealt with under the following headings:

Dates and Events

The dates-and-events posters provide an opportunity to introduce some cultural information on important historical events. In this way, the students increase their familiarity with the major events of the target culture.

Historical Personalities

The display of pictures portraying historical personalities, past and present, with their biography and annotations is particularly important in foreign language setting. The learner is provided with additional opportunities to get to know the persons who ruled the country and moulded its history. In this way, these posters provide a sound basis for the development of a historical background that is so important in culture teaching settings.

Arts and Science

The material covering the Arts-and-Science board should depict the great writers and their works, as well as the other scientists and their achievement. Here again, we seek to provide the learner with a knowledge that the native speakers normally possess on the basis of their own experience. For methodological convenience, it would be wiser to split this category into two sub-headings: British Writers and Their Works and British Scientists and Their Achievement.

8. Proverbs

The proverb has had a long-standing tradition in language education. Ridout and Witting (1977) note that as early as the tenth century proverbs were used in England for the teaching of Latin. Posters can then be made of them and hung around the classroom. Allan and Valette (1977) recommend the grouping of proverbs thematically. Here are some examples:

1) To show the English emphasis on the sense of privacy:

- There is no place like home.

- East or west home is best.
- An Englishman's home is his castle.
- Home sweet home.
- A hedge between keeps friendship green.

2) To show the English sense of perseverance, patience and determination:

- Constant dripping wears away the stone.
- If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.
- Where there is a will there is a way.
- Little by little and bit by bit.
- Rome was not built in a day.

3) To show the English sense of prudence:

- Catch your bear before you sell it.
- Don't count your chickens before they are hatched.
- Don't halloo till you are out of the wood.
- Never spend your money before you have it.

In addition to this, students may be assigned the preparation of "The Proverb of the Week". A proverb a week might amount to as many as thirty in a year's course. As an assignment students will be asked to provide equivalent proverbs in Arabic and/or in French. This cross-cultural activity incites learners to establish the universal morals of human values. In what follows, we suggest four other pedagogical ways to deal with proverbs:

A. To rewrite the proverbs in the right order, for example:

1. glitters not that gold all is
2. the child burnt fire dreads
3. policy honesty the is best
4. means the justifies end the
5. wisdom mother experience the is of

B. To link the two parts of the proverb, for example:

1. A bird in hand a. flock together.
2. Don't cross the bridge b. is his castle.
3. Every cloud has c. till you come to it.

4. Birds of a feather d. is worth two in the bush.

5. An Englishman's home e. a silver lining.

C. To supply the missing word in the proverb, for example:

1. Where there's a there's a way.

2. East home is best.

3. There is no like home.

4. speak louder than words.

5. While there's there's hope.

D. To provide the final part of the proverb, for example:

1. All roads lead

2. Charity begins

3. Better late

4. All's well that.....

5. The eye is bigger than.....

Ideally, a conversion table covering the imperial and metric systems could be added to classroom decoration. From the pedagogical standpoint, the table in question may be a useful aid for learners when confronted with items of the imperial system, and can be used to practice reading decimal fractions. On the other hand, it enriches the learners' general knowledge. To this end, the following table is proposed:

Imperial System	Metric System	Imperial System	Metric System
1 inch	2.54 cm	16 ounces (1 pound)	0.456 kg
12 inches (1 foot)	30.48 cm	4 pounds (1 stone)	6.38 kg
3 feet (1 yard)	0.92 cm	1 pint	0.568 litres
1760 yards (1 mile)	1.609 km	2 pints (1 quart)	1.136 litres
1 ounce	28.35 gr	8 pints (1 gallon)	4.546 litres

It is noteworthy that the in-class techniques we have made use of in this section converge on one point: the creation of an authentic-like classroom environment. They include probing questions which raise issues, develop ideas and ultimately extend the intellectual boundaries of the discourse. In the present context, this is particularly important as the reality of life and language use in the target speech community is both physically and psychologically far removed from the classroom. These hands-on-techniques have been implemented with the intention of informing the language learners of cultural facts and patterns, and ultimately drawing their attention to cross-cultural differences in order to tackle stereotypes and cultural barriers through reflection, critical thinking, and a questioning attitude. In sum, their

implementation is geared towards a double-fold aim: to increase their cultural awareness and to develop inter-cultural competence.

From the pedagogical standpoint, the techniques are devised to ease the burden of large-sized classroom management and overcome the problem of mixed-ability classes and reluctant learners. In this sense, they bring pupils closer together, improve confidence and motivation, encourage cooperation and remove fear and inhibition. Novice teachers can make use of these techniques for practical, step-by-step guidance. Experienced teachers, however, may find new teaching applications of the many principles they already value to stimulate further explorations and introduce new ideas.

Writers on the methodology of intercultural teaching have drawn our attention on some factors having a bearing on the content of culture teaching. These include the learners' age, their level of maturity, their previous language learning experience. In this very specific context, the teacher, as a practitioner and researcher, should know what his pupils need, what their interests are, and what should be done to adjust his teaching to the requirement of the situation. In sum then, the soundness of a technique is highly dependent on skillful teaching.

9. Conclusion

In so far, then, we have seen that the intercultural approach to foreign language teaching is, largely explicitly, based on not only the target cultures, but also the mainstream culture. Here, the process of contact/comparison with otherness is at the very core of this approach, and it is this process which helps learners to establish a relationship between their own and other cultures, and ultimately cope with the differences. This approach has been interested in attitudinal issues relating to learner's development of tolerance and understanding of other cultures as well as in the degree to which the study of other cultures enhances cultural self-awareness. In this regard, curriculum planners and policy makers will find it a necessary aid to exploring the pedagogical alternatives, hence, a compromise solution.

On the other hand, one might argue that teaching material and in-class techniques can widen the bond of communication beyond the mainstream culture. From a pedagogical standpoint, they give teachers, teacher trainers and trainee-teachers guidance in key aspects of intercultural language learning. This is why the teacher and ELT textbook may be a powerful force in representing a frame of reference for developing sensitivity to cultural differences and inciting learners to acquire the needed skills to discover and interpret other cultures. Hence, language learners are called upon to be amateur ethnographers. From this wealth of methodological ways it is clear that cross-cultural contact can be constructed. What makes intercultural language learning especially valuable is that from the potentially "unwanted side effects" of language learning several benefits may accrue, not least the mechanisms underlying many aspects of the native culture. Evaluation of intercultural differences will allow the learner to develop his own identity in the light of cross-cultural understanding.

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