Developing Inter-Cultural Competence of EFL Learners

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A B S T R A C T

The rise of the borderless world and networked organizations, as well as, the almost irreversible phenomenon of increased movement of workers, students, visitors and retirees to overseas destinations, has made inter-cultural competence a compelling proposition. This article clarifies the definition of cross-cultural competence in the context of adult learning and discusses the essential elements of cultural competence. The paper also outlines the reason that requires teachers in adult education to be culturally competent themselves.

Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. It is essential for today's work force to be aware of the differences in communication across cultures at their workplaces. A major component of a culture is its systems of values, beliefs, and material products. First, culture includes belief systems that involve stories, or myths, the interpretation of which can give people insight into how they should feel, think, and/or behave. Second, culture includes value systems. Values are formed based on how we learned to believe things ought to be or how people ought to behave, especially in terms of qualities such as honesty, integrity, and openness. Third, culture is also defined by material products such as food, clothing, and music. Thus, culture provides people with a general cognitive frame work for an understanding of the world, and for functioning in it. Culture mediates relationships among men and between men and their environment. It is the primary determinant of how a person views reality both consciously and unconsciously. Moreover it provides the context which enables human beings to communicate. For these reasons, one's professional career can never be separated from his or her cultural habits. Cross-cultural training can put a negotiator in a beneficial position over his or her competitors. Though many companies feel reluctant to train their employees, it is absolutely essential and profitable in view of today's increasing demand for interaction in different global scenarios.

Inter-cultural competence refers to interpersonal communication and interaction across different cultures. This has become an important issue in our age of globalization and internationalization. Effective inter-cultural communication is concerned with overcoming cultural differences across nationality, religion, borders, culture and behavior. The term *inter-cultural* generally used to describe comparative studies of cultures.

Culture is the basic concept of inter-cultural competence. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines *culture* as *'the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations'*. Another usage in the same dictionary stresses the social aspect of culture and defines it as *'the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious or social group'*.

Kramsch (1993) also adds that culture forms itself around three axes;

> the diachronic axis of time,

> the synchronic axis of space,

> the metaphoric axis of the imagination. (p.2).

To explain difficult concept of intercultural awareness Kramsch claims:

"If...language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed as enabling language proficiency ... Culture in language teaching is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing." (Kramsch, 1993 p.27)

The teachers need to use techniques that promote cultural awareness and understanding. Role-play can be used to help students feel more comfortable with cultural problems. Besides a promotion of oral communication, role-play promotes cross-cultural dialogues among students. Role-play can also be employed effectively with students of any proficiency level. However, since culture is a sensitive issue, there are two major concerns about learning activities that are culturally sensitive: choices of the activities, and the adaptation and use of the activities.

1. Choices of activities

When choosing the activities, the teacher should consider the following:

> Logistics: time constraints, space limitations and materials.

> Aims and nature: objectives of the topic, risk level and balance with other kinds of activities.

> Students: language level, cultural adjustment stage, preferred learning styles, and classroom expectations.

> Teachers: teacher-student relationship, level of comfort with culture-learning activities and experience.

2. Adaptation and use of activities

After the selection of the culture activities, consideration of how to adapt and use them will be the next step. The following are the criteria:

> Instruction: Be clear and consistent, use clear language and give examples or models, check whether students understand the directions.

> Pacing: Reduce anxiety by having set routines, do the activity slowly and step-by-step.

> Teacher participation or intervention: Participate in the activity and help students as deemed necessary; however, this should be done in a balanced manner. Be patient with students' silence.

> Grouping: Be careful when assigning students into groups. In some cultures, people with different hierarchical levels do not work together. Let them organise their groups in case of uncertainty. This is a particularly effective guideline for teaching adult learners.

> Student participation: Some activities such as role-play and simulations contain high degrees of risk because of uncertainty. Solution can be obtained by having a small group take responsibility for the role or task rather than an individual student.

> Learning preferences: Use a variety of tasks to serve all learning styles of different students. Have them work alone or in group.

> Discussion: Use open-ended questions, not yes-no questions to promote discussion except with low proficiency level students.

> Student as information source: Value students' ideas and have them realise that by writing their ideas on board, copying and distributing them to the class.

➢ Teacher as information source: Be willing to take a more traditional role of teacher as a source of information at the beginning by giving short lectures, guidance and input; however, gradually reduce this type of role over time.

Having finished above analysis one can conclude that developing cultural awareness and to find suitable strategies to teach to EFL learners holds an immense value in a way that is irreversible factor in making them competent language learners. For this reason, this article has tried to draw some necessary points in creating a teaching environment that can facilitate to develop inter-cultural competence of EFL learners.

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