



Addressing intercultural language teaching issues in EFL settings

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Abstract

Globalization has made intercultural competence essential for EFL learners, yet traditional approaches like grammar-translation and communicative language teaching remain prevalent in Algeria. These methods focus primarily on language mechanics, lacking a foundation for developing intercultural skills. This study advocates for adopting an intercultural language teaching approach in Algerian EFL classrooms to better prepare students for effective communication in multicultural contexts. Through literature analysis and classroom observations, the study finds that current practices inadequately address students' intercultural needs. In contrast, ILT fosters critical cultural awareness, empathy, and adaptability, providing a more comprehensive framework for building intercultural communicative competence. It is recommended that policymakers and educators support ILT integration, especially in oral expression classes where students actively engage. Emphasis on teacher training and curriculum reform would help embed this intercultural framework in the classroom, thereby developing EFL learners who are both linguistically skilled and culturally adaptive communicators.

Keywords: Communicative competence; English as a foreign language; intercultural; language teaching

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1. INTRODUCTION

In middle school, whenever one faced difficulty writing a paragraph as an activity, one resolved to use the ultimate sentence starter: "The Internet turned the world into a small village." A few years later, in secondary school, we would laugh with our peers about how we used this sentence almost every time and got away with it. Ironically, here we are today, in higher education, years after middle & secondary school, still using the same sentence starter in this article. However, this time we had a deep analysis of what this sentence means and its impact on foreign language teaching.

In today's age of globalization, people of different cultures have come into contact with foreign nations (Chen & Hu 2023). Governments worldwide are now emphasizing individuals' attitudes of tolerance, respect, and understanding of others, as it is crucial for coexistence and mutual understanding between different individuals for a country to function inclusively. This is echoed in Byram (2008), wherein a call for the task of "living together amid growing cultural diversity while respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms has become one of the major demands of our times and is set to remain relevant for many years to come". This implies that the educational system should play a significant role in focusing on these skills and attitudes to prepare better learners who can decentre, think critically, observe what is going on around them, and to be able to question their beliefs and way of living to function as global citizens in a global world.

Today, the literature on intercultural communication and intercultural language teaching is promising, as it is evident that researchers around the globe have already begun shedding light on the importance of educational intuitions in creating competent and humane citizens. Countries such as the United States of America and Canada, which have a total of 500,000 international students, at least in the United States, emphasize international campuses' development. This is because culturally mixed groups on international campuses are believed to be an appropriate opportunity for learners to acquire intercultural skills and attitudes by engaging in meaningful conversations with culturally diverse individuals (Volet & Ang 1998). The question remains unanswered: Does creating international campuses guarantee that students will willingly interact with other students of diverse cultures, or will they avoid them, resulting in a negative experience and reinforcing stereotypes? Moreover, are intercultural skills and attitudes acquired and enhanced solely by interaction and social contact with people of different cultures, or are there other requirements to make this contact a learning opportunity? International campuses may raise cultural stereotypes and create unnecessary clashes and misunderstandings between people of different cultures. This article will consider these issues as they are fundamental problems that should be taken seriously as they might hinder what we have been trying to build for years now: competent and humane citizens.

Unfortunately, the issues we raised above are concerned mainly with countries, or rather, universities, that have already established ground and are concerned with intercultural language teaching. As of Algeria, Mostaganem mainly, there are still many steps to be accomplished before discussing how international campuses work. Teachers-researchers such as Ghaffour (2022) have already highlighted and discussed what we lack in terms of intercultural language teaching in the Department of English, ranging from teacher training to teacher assessment. This goes without saying; if teachers are not adequately prepared to use the intercultural language teaching approach, learners are not expected to be competent (Tavassoli & Ghamoushi 2023; Żammit, 2021). However, those who willingly learn and enhance their skills and attitudes may present an exception. There is also an issue of attitudes rather than training or capacities; we shall further discuss this point.

1.1. Purpose of study

The present paper is aimed as a reminder to policymakers and teachers of English as a foreign language at Mostaganem University and other universities worldwide towards the merits of adopting an intercultural language teaching approach and the necessity of doing so to train not only EFL learners that can communicate in English correctly but also provide society with humane and civilized individuals that can solve today's global issues and partake in politics. Today's foreign language teaching is argued to be not limited to acquiring communication skills & mastery of language, but there is also a need to train learners to become global citizens through Byram's intercultural pedagogy (Byram, 2008; Nigar & Kostogriz 2024).

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

This study employed a qualitative research design focusing on a literature review and classroom observations to assess the current state of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in Algeria, specifically at Mostaganem University. The objective was to evaluate whether existing teaching approaches sufficiently address the intercultural communicative needs of learners and to determine the viability of implementing an Intercultural Language Teaching (ILT) framework in this context.

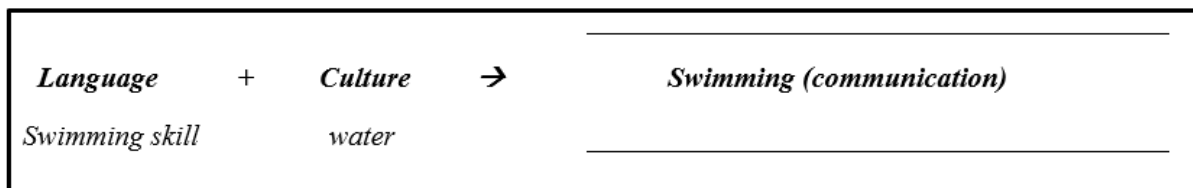
3. RESULTS

3.1. Traditional approaches to culture teaching

There is somehow a consensus among scholars that any discussion related to language teaching should be strictly concerned with the teaching of culture as well. Scholars in the field of foreign language teaching have also tackled the existent relationship between culture teaching and language teaching, such as Kramsch (2013). Foreign language teaching is foreign culture teaching, and foreign language teachers are foreign culture teachers (Morady Moghaddam, 2023; He et al., 2024). On the other hand, scholars like Byram (19) have been particularly interested in cultural dimension integration within the process of foreign language teaching. The methods and the means necessary to incorporate culture are where scholars differ, but in general, there is consent among scholars that the integration of culture is more than feasible; it is a must. Yet, in this article, we are taking Jiang's (2000) communicative view of the relationship between culture & language, which is demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Jiang's (2000) communicative view



As Figure 1 shows, Jiang's (2000) communicative view considers communication as the act of swimming, language is the swimming skills a swimmer possesses, and culture is water. This means that without water, swimming skills are useless and of no value, whereas a person who cannot swim will not be able to communicate without culture, as culture represents water. What is important to note here is that water is the initial reason swimming skills appeared. In other words, culture influences language and is, perhaps, the reason why it exists in the first place.

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This conversation was irrelevant in the field of foreign language teaching (FLT) until the past century, as Risager (2007) asserts that “culture pedagogy arose as a subject for debate and theoretical reflection in the last decades of the 19th century.” The pedagogy of culture witnessed these alterations as a response to societal needs & the development in linguistics during each period. For instance, the 19th century was marked by the emergence of nation-states as a political dynamic in Europe, in a diplomatic context, during the industrial age of modernism. During this era, Kramsch (2013) argues that since culture played a role in building the nation-state, the big C culture, or what is known as the visible culture to the foreigner, has been promoted by the state and its institutions as the national patrimony. Thus, educational institutions resolved to teach big C culture, following the principles of the grammar-translation method of teaching foreign languages.

3.2. Grammar translation method

In today's age, it is understandable to find the “Grammar translation method” in the syllabus of certain classes; however, it is problematic when the principles of this approach are still practiced by teachers in 2022. The five main principles that are distinct between the GTM & other approaches are: the use of mother tongue, the use of translation to convey & understand meanings, learning grammar first, then talking later, rigid materials, and finally, the main goal of GTM is not to communicate but rather to translate literature. The discussion above can be handy to understand this point, but in short, the grammar-translation method worked well back in the traditional approach to culture teaching era because “cultural competence, in foreign language education, is viewed as control of an established canon of literature, which can be measured in terms of the breadth of reading and knowledge about the literature” (Crozet et al., 1999). Therefore, learners were perceived as competent and were meant to understand the literature rather than understand the people who made the literature and what the literature in itself means.

This is familiar to a tourist visiting, for instance, Mekkah in Saudi Arabia. A person who has no solid background in Islam or the history of Saudi Arabia would find a hard time understand why Kabah is precious to Muslims. They might think of it as a house of bricks, a big one, but still, that would not do justice to them. It is only after doing research and understanding why Muslims glorify the Kabah that a tourist would understand the history behind it.

What the Grammar Translation Method essentially did back in the day was to use the mother tongue to understand the literature of another culture in the hope of forming competent learners who can maintain a conversation with a person of the target culture. It was not until the last decades of the 19th century that “an interest develops in certain places in parts of the content of language teaching that goes beyond literary education.” (Crozet et al., 1999).

3.3. Communicative language teaching

Crozet et al., (1999) argue that the most traditional approach to culture teaching was found in literary education, as discussed above, and the GTM allowed learners to memorize information that they might come across in the future. This approach grew old quickly as it has become evident that literature is not enough, and literary works do not portray reality as it is, nor do they help learners communicate in a given language properly. During the last decades of the 19th century, there has been an interest in literary education, as argued by Crozet et al., (1999).

The culture studies approach emerged in the 1970s, followed by the emergence of the communicative turn in language pedagogy as well as the anthropological understanding of culture. Here, interest has been shifted towards the everyday life experiences of other people, or what we oftentimes come across in the literature as the small c culture. It was believed that if learners can move beyond literary texts and acquire

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a set of information about a country and culture, then they can comprehend that language and can ultimately communicate with native speakers of said culture.

This model was criticized as well, as it relied heavily on the teacher to have erudition, which includes knowledge and information about cultures. Moreover, information by itself is merely a portion of swimming skills; without proper attitudes and tolerance, communication, or what we might refer to here as the act of swimming, it cannot happen unless a person is willing to get into the water and have contact with water. Unless learners are trained to openly and actively engage with cultures, cultural information by itself might not only have null results but also hinder intercultural interaction and cause more stereotypes and prejudice.

It is noteworthy to mention that the culture studies approach did not fully deal with the small c culture, but a small portion of the small c. Learners had to deal with information about geography & history more than they had to deal with everyday life practices, habits, and lifestyles. According to our observations and experience as a student in higher education in Mostaganem, we argue that our practices are somewhere between the culture studies approach and the later culture as practice paradigm, which focuses mainly on the small c of culture, wherein teachers had to rely on modeling and storytelling, to teach sociolinguistic competence as they would teach linguistic competence. Here, the native speaker model is put on a pedestal and the main objective of FLT is to create native-speaker-alike EFL learners. This is arguably an untrainable goal to achieve as a non-native speaker can never be a native speaker.

The 1990s were marked by the emergence of the postmodernist perspective. The culture as a practice paradigm was the end of the modernist perspective of culture research in the field of applied linguistics. This era overall encompassed the three aforementioned three approaches to culture teaching, which were all concerned with the content-oriented culture pedagogy, which became old with the emergence of technology and multiculturalism. All three approaches were still tied up to "the convention 'one language = one culture'" (Kramsch, 2013) and thus failed to adequately prepare learners for real-life situations wherein cultures and languages are as diverse within nations.

The convention "one language = one culture" is deemed to reinforce stereotypes & prejudice. Scholars from the essentialist view of culture school perceive culture as a homogenous group that is static & bound wherein identities are fixed & non-negotiable. This cultural determinist view reinforces national stereotypes & might hinder intercultural encounters (Holliday, 2011).

3.4. Intercultural language teaching

With the emergence of post-modernism and internalization, there was a new orientation in language education wherein culture teaching became an integral part of foreign language teaching. This intercultural dimension of foreign language learning and teaching focuses on learners' exploration of their own and the target culture by trying to spot stereotypes and understand the history and reasons behind different social conducts. Crozet et al., (1999) explained the goals of intercultural language teaching as "it aims at supporting the development of intercultural competence through the learning of foreign languages and by extension through the learning of how language and culture connect in one's first and target language."

We can append that intercultural language teaching used the older approaches, such as the grammar-translation method and the communicative language teaching approach to become a more complete and holistic separate approach that serves today's needs. It should also be noted that intercultural language teaching also deals with the teaching of the four fundamental skills of language: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, the intercultural language teaching approach also pays attention to learners' personal growth and helps them simultaneously become competent learners and better citizens. This is

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echoed in the fact that "it is a complete and versatile tool available to understand and to experience how language and culture shape one's and others' worldviews, which is the essence of intercultural communicative competence" (Crozet et al., 1999).

What we find fascinating about intercultural language teaching is how wide and aspirational it has become during the past few years. We shifted from issues related to how we can make our learners communicate in better English to how we can make our learners deal with global issues such as racism and social injustice around the world.

4. DISCUSSION

So far, we have extensively tackled the traditional and modern approaches to culture and language teaching. Despite the fact 'modern' approaches were discussed around twenty years ago, in Algeria it seems that we are still stuck somewhere in the modernist era. In this discussion, we will tackle two main issues. First, the hows and whys we need to embrace the principles of the ILT approach. Second, a need to consider English as a lingua franca and what possible impact it might have on the field of foreign language teaching. Despite we considered the University of Mostaganem as a case study in the discussion, we believe this argument could be beneficial for readers interested in the field of foreign language teaching.

At Mostaganem's University, the syllabus seems not to permit any room for intercultural language teaching apart from oral expression classes (Ghaffour, 2022). One may ask why classes such as British civilization or literature are not appropriate for intercultural language teaching, and that is answered in two points. First, British civilization and literature modules usually deal with history or novels, which do not entirely reflect today's society. Despite the fact knowing history allows one to understand better the people of a given community, but still, we cannot base our understanding of another human being based solely on events of the past. The second point is the fact communities have presently changed. It is even arguable how to use and what words such as British person mean in the first place. Many people still consider the typical white man named John or the perfect image of James Bond to be a Brit. Yet, nowadays, it is hard to affiliate people based on skin shades, places of birth, or nationality.

We believe the only place where intercultural language teaching can truly take place is in oral expression and similar settings classrooms. This is due to many reasons; first, oral expression syllabi are more open and flexible. Teachers are given full freedom to choose whatever approach or topic to discuss. Moreover, oral expression classes are where students interact the most, whereas the teacher is usually listening & managing the conversation from afar, with minimal interaction with students. And third, students love oral expression classes and are motivated the most there. After a long day of studying linguistics & grammar, students finally have the chance to sit down, relax, let their guard down, and discuss issues with their peers.

Perhaps what has been said so far only a teacher from Algeria can relate to, but we believe to a certain degree, other teachers from different contexts and backgrounds do get the intended message here. You need to find the most suitable context where intercultural language teaching can happen based on the approach principles set by scholars such as Liddicoat (2004). Moreover, it is essential to build a peaceful & interactive teaching atmosphere if we have to discuss sensitive issues as a means of intercultural citizenship education & integration of 'troubled content'.

What seems to be lacking on our behalf is whether intercultural language teaching can be applicable in other modules such as grammar, linguistics, and so on. This is perhaps a question that demands a thorough examination or even research on its own. Given this fact, it is rather tricky to give a half-baked opinion on the matter.

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What is problematic as of today is the fact researchers from Mostaganem University reported that teachers do not understand the basics of intercultural language teaching. Some seem to consider still the traditional approaches, whereas others consider culture as a static entity and apply the convention 'one culture equals one nation' (Ghaffour, 2022). Therefore, teachers should take an active role in learning and researching intercultural language teaching to be able to apply it in the classroom. Moreover, Boudjelal (2014) asserted with evidence that intercultural mistakes, such as prejudice, etc., are not taken into consideration in the assessment. We still do not know whether it is due to the fact intercultural competence is completely neglected or the lack of time that is causing these issues.

Considering English as a Lingua Franca also has to do with attitudes. Ghaffour (2022) believes that at Mostaganem's University, there is an attitude of over-glorifying and emphasis on the British culture or the American culture, rarely, if not never, non-native speaking countries. In the current context of globalization and the emergence of English as a Lingua Franca, it is a must to deemphasize the native-speaking countries and focus more on non-native-speaking countries. In a paper published a few months ago, Ghaffour (2022) shed some light on the merits of adopting other Muslim and Arab cultures in language classes, as students from Algeria would have more in common with other Muslims and are most likely inclined toward learning more about these cultures. Another point raised in the paper is to make use of the available socio-cultural diversity within the classroom by encouraging students to embark on discussions and role-plays with their peers from different cultures. To us, an Algerian should learn more about his classmate from Mali and their culture rather than focusing too much on the British culture, as it is a matter of priority rather than superiority.

5. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, embracing intercultural language teaching begins first by motivating teachers and bringing to their attention the merits of adopting the intercultural turn to foreign language teaching. Teachers should be able to apply this approach and to be able to assess the progress made as well. As suggestions for policymakers, we suggest tackling oral expression classes differently and taking the opportunity of this chance to enhance our learners' intercultural communicative competence. This enables them not only to be competent English speakers but also humane and civilized individuals who can solve problems and conflicts in their local area as well as on a global scale.

The present paper tackled issues related to hackneyed approaches that have been long used in Mostaganem's University at the Department of English. We suggest relying on an intercultural language teaching approach as of today, to meet today's needs of the EFL learners at Mostaganem's University. Policymakers should encourage and motivate teachers to research intercultural language teaching and focus on providing accurate and reliable assessments. We also discussed issues related to how and when to apply the intercultural language teaching approach, alongside other key issues such as considering English a lingua franca.

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