INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS A CROSSOVER BETWEEN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION A CHALLENGE FOR TEACHERS AND LEARNERS OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: Today foreign language education and teaching 'culture' have become part of the English language training offered to our learners for an improved communication competency in the globalized world around us. Practitioners can teach their learners how to become more culturally-sensitive and mind the important role cultural factors play in communication. The vast number of intercultural activities and techniques that are available provide not only the opportunities for cultural awareness raising but also an increased motivation for language and 'culture' learning. The current paper looks into the arguments that support this statement. To exemplify some of the points, we have selected 'critical incidents' as a 'culture' and language learning activity that will be analysed from this perspective.

Considerations on Teaching 'Culture

The field of Intercultural Communication Training (ICT) is a relatively new area of professional practice and academic research that acknowledges the already wide acceptance of the fact that intercultural communication is a dynamic phenomenon which affects the way in which

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modern world societies communicate. One of the main reasons is the rapidity of societal changes – economic, social, political and cultural – that mirror the theme of the famous Future Shock[1], and increase the likelihood of mixed experiences across cultures:

"World trade has grown from 51.4 billion US dollars in 1948 to more than a trillion in 1980; world tourism has grown many fold in the last five decades; and the numbers of diplomatic missions, multinational companies, and international students have grown more rapidly than anyone could ever have imagined. All this has increased the probability of a person from one country having extensive interaction with a person from another country."[2]

Integrating 'culture' within foreign language education programmes has become a 'must' owing to the inseparable link between culture and communication. Based on Hall (1959)[3], it could be said that culture is communication and communication is culture since all cultural behaviour (i.e. verbal and non-verbal) communicates, and since all communication is subject to cultural norms. For instance Peck[4] clearly emphasizes that "Without the study of culture, foreign language instruction is inaccurate and incomplete." Therefore, the language teachers who wish to accommodate 'culture' into their teaching should be well familiar with the implications of this kind of teaching.

In order to teach a 'culture', teaching needs to address not only the observable phenomena but also the unobservable, subjective aspects of 'culture', such as the ideas, beliefs, values and norms shared by the members of a community. At this point the question of how teachers can 'teach' ideas and values, of how they can deal with the hidden aspects of a

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[1] Toffler, A. *Future Shock*. New York: Bantam Books, 1971.

[2] Bhawuk, D.P.S.. Cross-cultural orientation programs. In R.W. Brislin (Ed.), *Applied crosscultural psychology* (pp. 325–346). Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990.

[3] Hall, E.T. *The Silent Language*. New York: Doubleday, 1959.

[4] Peck, D. *Teaching Culture: Beyond Language*. http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1984/3/8 (retrieved 12 April 2014), 1998.

culture will obviously arise. In order to help their learners enter into the assumptive component of another culture, teachers will need to enrich the traditional 'cultural knowledge' approach, which only gives factual information about a culture, with a deeper kind of insight – intercultural awareness. In other words, intercultural training aims to provide learners with the ability "… to function within a social system that is foreign but no longer incomprehensible" [5] to them.

Teachers should also consider the fact that their learners have their own cultural identity which cannot be annihilated during the process of acquiring a new communication competence. The learners have a personal history, a background, their own views and attitudes which form the 'cultural baggage' the learners carry with them whenever they communicate verbally or non-verbally. Intercultural competence should by no means mean that students are obliged either to behave in accordance with the social conventions of a particular community or to imitate all sorts of linguistic and behavioral patterns. The example of the Japanese student of English who bows to her professors illustrates this point. When one of her professors tried to teach her a sociolinguistic rule in English culture, i.e. bowing was not appropriate, the student felt offended and replied that she knew that, but bowing was her culture and if she stopped doing that, she was not 'respectful and a good person'. From this example Saville-Troike concludes that "the sociolinguistic rules can be talked about, but it should be left to the learners' own decision to adopt them or not for productive use."[6] Such a viewpoint does have interesting implications for teaching 'culture' as it highlights the fact that the individuals' decisions about their subsequent cultural performance are as important as their awareness that people and cultures are different.

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[5] Barnlund, D., *Communication in a Global Village*. In Samovar & Porter (eds. 1994), 26-35, 1994.

[6] Saville-Troike quoted in Kramsch, C. *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 44.

What is Intercultural Competence anyway?

People do, interpret and evaluate things in different ways. What is considered an appropriate verbal or non-verbal behaviour in one culture may be totally inappropriate in another. It is this difference of 'codes' that produces misunderstandings, i.e. miscommunication, when meanings from one culture are employed to make sense of another culture. Becoming aware of cultural dynamics is quite a challenging task because we are not conscious of the cultural boundaries that define our identity as cultural beings. Thus, intercultural awareness means our capability of stepping outside our own culture and make the effort to realize that culture has an impact on our and other people's behaviours and mindsets. To be able to do this, learners should first become aware of who they are from a cultural standpoint. Thus, before exploring the 'unknown territories' of culture, learners must become acquainted with their own culture. Understanding their own culture, i.e. discussing and interpreting the traditions, customs, behaviours and values they unconsciously cherish, learners will be trained to reflect on the traditions, expectations and values of others with increased intellectual objectivity.[7]

If we adopt Geertz's definition of culture as "*the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action*"[8], then the concept of cultural competence can be looked at from both a narrower perspective and a broader one: 'culture specific' and 'culture general'. Culture-specific competence describes the ability to communicate within a particular social group.

Given the fact that English has become 'a lingua franca', few of our learners are likely to function in bicultural settings. Most of them will need to interact with people from very diverse cultural backgrounds who use English

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[7] Straub, H., Designing a Cross-Cultural Course. In *English Forum*, vol. 37, July-September, 1999, 2-6.

[8] Geertz, C., *The Interpretation of culture*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 83.

as a means of international communication. Therefore, learners should develop a culture-general competence that will enable them to use a range of knowledge and communication skills to cope with cultural issues in practice.

'Critical Incidents' - A Resourceful IC Technique and Activity

Accommodating a deliberate cultural element into the teaching of English as a foreign language involves the use of various IC activities ranging from the short 'icebreaker' to lengthy simulations, role plays, critical incidents, culture assimilators or case studies.

For the ELT practitioner, the choice of 'critical incidents' as a teaching technique and culture-learning activity brings the reward of 'a considerable reflective potential'[9] and the learners' engagement at a meaningful, personal level in examining other culture's attitudes and behaviours.[10] Critical incidents can provide a set of interactive 'tools' for developing the students' knowledge of other cultures, communication skills and cultural awareness. The presentation of real life situations involving cultural misunderstandings will prompt students not only to think about how native speakers would behave and see the situation but also to turn towards their own culture for comparison. This is likely to develop the students' (inter)cultural awareness.

The beginnings of the 'critical incident' technique can be traced back to the late 19th century, but the theory itself entered the field of cross-cultural training in the early 1960's.

As defined by Wight[11], a 'critical incident' is a brief description of a situation in which there is a misunderstanding, a problem or conflict

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[9] Dant, W., *Using Critical Incidents as A Tool for Reflection*. In Fowler, S. & Munford, M. (eds. 1995), 141-146.

[10] Wight, A. R., *The Critical Incident as a Training Tool*. In Fowler, S.& Munford, M. (eds.1995), 127-139.

[11] Idem 11, pp. 128-130.

arising from cultural differences. Each incident gives only enough information to set the stage, describe what happened and possibly provide the feelings and reactions of the parties involved. The learners read the 'story' and are asked to interpret the parties' actions and behaviour. The input does not offer any explanation for the cultural differences that the parties bring to the situation. The explanation is discovered or revealed as part of the learning activity.

Given the fact that a critical incident focuses on problematic and culturally-challenging situations based on people's real life experiences, on behaviours and attitudes that may be specific to a particular culture, it is the type of learning input which is likely to impress and stay in the learners' minds. Moreover, critical incidents present a high reflective potential in relation to a great variety of cultural issues such as eye-contact, personal space, asking for things, etc. The opportunity given to students to think deeply, thoroughly and analytically about a critical point promotes cultural awareness and fosters motivation for learning about culture-based behaviour while communicating with other people. Tripp[12] claims that 'critical incidents' appear to be 'typical' rather than 'critical', but are rendered critical through the analysis which seeks for the meaning to the incident. Tripp as well as James[13] believe that the learning value of critical incidents arises from the questions that the learners are going to ask and answer in the process of analyzing the incident, i.e. *What, Who, Where, When, How* and *Why*.

On the one hand, intercultural 'incidents' provide opportunities for a number of learning activities in terms of both language and 'culture'. They can be used in role plays, structured discussions and creative writing. All the steps that may be taken in approaching this type of input, such as brainstorming, factual knowledge about a culture and actual exploration

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[12] Tripp, D., *Critical Incidents in Teaching. Developing Professional Judgement.* London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 24-25

[13] James, P., *Teachers in Action. Tasks for in-service language teacher education and development.* Cambridge, CUP, 2001

of the 'critical incident' can lead to fruitful and prolific communication activities whose value resides in the combination of linguistic, cultural and personal elements into one activity. What is more, the activity lends itself to initiating the learners' reflection on culture-based behaviour and, consequently contributes to the development of certain skills conducive to intercultural competence. As Byram[14] points out, the concept of intercultural competence includes, among other skills, the skills of interpreting and relating to 'otherness' as well as the skills of exploration and self-discovery. Other authors like Brislin and Yoshida[15] state that 'cultural awareness' opens the way to becoming 'competent' through knowledge, emotional challenges, subsequent behaviour and gained consciousness of your own identity.

Byram[16] enumerates some components of intercultural competence that must be developed, namely, intercultural attitudes (curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own); knowledge (of social groups, of products and practices); skills of interpreting and relating; skills of discovery and interpreting.

Hanley[17] is of the opinion that to build intercultural competence, we need some "ingredients", namely: self-knowledge (i.e. introspection and self-understanding), experience (i.e. unmediated experience, encounters with other cultures) and positive change.

Searching for cultural clues is most likely to develop the learners' skill to see multiple perspectives which is an important part of someone's cultural competence. Looking for a sensible and reasonable explanation,

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[14] Byram, M., *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence,* Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 1977

[15] Brislin & Yoshida, *Intercultural Communication Training: An Introduction.* London Sage, 1994

[16] Byram M., In Byram, M., Nicholas, A. & Stevens, D. (eds. 1997) *Intercultural Competence in Practice.* Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 1977, pp. 5-7.

[17] Hanley, J.H. Beyond the tip of the iceberg: Five stages toward cultural competence. In *Reaching today's youth.* Volume 3 No. 2, 9-12, 1999

the learners will develop a complex rather than oversimplified thinking about another culture. In this way, they actually increase a 'world-mindedness' because such exercises allow earners to understand aspects of the other culture without imposing their own cultural standards.

The Critical Incident: An invitation to dinner

Maria is a young Romanian teacher of English. She is attending an IATEFL[18] conference in Vienna. There she meets Maureen, an Irish teacher with whom she has worked for two years as part of the leading committee.

One afternoon Maria runs into Maureen in the hotel lounge. Maureen asks her whether she was going to attend the 'Viennese Experience' that evening, a dinner in one famous Austrian restaurant. Since Maria had not allocated any funds for the conference's optional events, she was hesitant in expressing her wish to go. Then, Maureen simply said:

−*Why don't we have dinner together*?

Maria agrees and goes back to her room wondering whether Maureen had invited her to dinner or not.

On leaving the hotel that night Maria is joined by another teacher from the Netherlands. Together they arrive at the restaurant, find Maureen's table and sit down. Both Maria and the Dutch teacher smoke and, when they produce their packets of cigarettes, the other ladies at the table have a sudden reaction of strong disapproval. Immediately, the Dutch teacher asks Maria to move to another table. They both stand up and quickly move to another table.

During the dinner party, Maria returns to Maureen's table to talk but she is surprised to see that Maureen is very upset with her. When the dinner is over, Maureen pays for Maria's meal and beer but she is still angry.

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[18] IATEFL=International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language

Returning home, Maria writes to Maureen several times but there is no reply. Maria wonders: *What happened? What did I do wrong?*

Discussion

This incident is based on a pragmatic failure which shows Maria's "*...inability to understand what is meant by what is said*" (Thomas, 1983:91)[19] More specifically, Maria, the decoder of the message missed the intended pragmatic force of Maureen's utterance. Influenced by the way she communicates in her own language and cultural environment, Maria perceives Maureen's utterance as a suggestion while Maureen intended that Maria should perceive it as an invitation. The misunderstanding was caused by an inappropriate transfer of the speech act from L1 to L2[20]. As a decoder, Maria failed to assess her position relative to her interlocutor in terms of position (e.g. role, status) and relation (e.g. partnership). In fact, the incident reveals a sociopragmatic failure due to a cross-culturally different perception of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour.

In English, '*why don't we ..... ?*' is an informal way of inviting people. Considering the parties' relation and established positions as well as their properties (e.g. gender, age) and functions (e.g. members on the same committee), Maureen's way of extending an invitation in this context, i.e. informal, is fully acceptable and appropriate for native speakers of English.

Suggested Lesson Activities

1. Students should be introduced to the notion of cross-cultural misunderstanding.

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[19] Thomas, J. Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure. In *Applied Linguistics 4/2,* 91-112, 1983

[20] L= Language, L1 is English and L2 is Romanian.

Teacher elicits sources of possible misunderstanding when communication takes place between people from different cultures. It is best to illustrate the concept with examples from cultures that are familiar to learners. Students should also be invited to give examples of misunderstandings from their own experience, e.g. travels, movies, stories from friends or family, etc.

Ideally, a text about cross-cultural communication and miscommunication could be used as an introductory input.

2. Teacher reviews the vocabulary used to describe feelings, e.g. excitement, confusion, annoyance, anger, etc. An activity in the form of a quiz could also be provided, e.g. *What makes you feel annoyed/ embarrassed, etc*. This will relate human feelings to particular situations. Certainly, the teacher should design this stage according to the level of proficiency of the learners.

3. Students are divided into groups. They are provided with the 'critical' incident story to read and discuss. They need to bring arguments for their interpretations.

They may be also asked to rate the suggested interpretations of the story.

4. Teacher elicits answers from groups: a spokesperson presents the group's interpretations. A whole class discussion follows. Teacher serves as a 'cultural informant and guides the discussion. It is at this point that a review of how to express suggestions and invitations can be done. The solution to the critical incident is revealed. A subsequent discussion on how learners would have themselves reacted to such circumstances as the ones in the input should be initiated.

5. Other directly or indirectly related cultural aspects could be considered:

- group dynamics, e.g. social identity versus personal identity;
- tolerance to differences, e.g. some people smoke, other don't.

6. As follow-up, students may be asked to come up/find/search for another critical incident to be shared in class during the next session.

They can be asked to turn in a written version of their new story, as well as to present it orally.

Conclusions

One of the main ideas put forth in this paper is that 'culture' must be part of foreign language programmes. The world we live in has become 'a global village' in which people from different cultures interact and communicate. Teaching about 'culture' should be all about developing the students' awareness of the sociolinguistic and sociocultural differences that might exist between their own language and culture and the target language and culture.

Such awareness train learners to successfully cope with potential breakdowns in communication in the sense that they might find it easier to understand and find a remedy to the situation.

'Critical incidents' is a teaching activity that is easy to conduct with learners of mixed proficiency; it can be adjusted to encompass pre-intermediate to advanced levels of language ability. The activity encourages exploration, discovery, contrasts and comparisons and thus, it is likely to engage learners at a meaningful level. Besides, critical incidents are inspired from real-life situations and this brings a welcome touch of authenticity to tasks.

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