

An Analysis and Interpretation of Intercultural Approaches to English Language Teaching

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the impact of English language teaching (ELT) with a global perspective while recognizing the role of intercultural approaches in second language instruction. Recent concerns about the influence of English as a global language and linguistic imperialism in ELT resulting from the widespread instruction and use of English as a second language for communication have initiated interest in the adoption of culture learning and the development of intercultural awareness in second language education as a way to reduce linguistic and cultural dominance by encouraging attitudes of cultural tolerance and linguistic diversity in language teaching. This paper analyzes the implications surrounding the implementation of intercultural practices in second language teaching to reduce hegemonic tendencies, reviews approaches to ELT that have roots in traditional language teaching theory reflecting a tendency toward linguistic imperialism and colonization, and suggests ways of approaching English language instruction that promote cultural tolerance, intercultural awareness and cultural diversity.

Keywords: global education, English language teaching, culture learning, linguistic imperialism, linguistic diversity, intercultural communication

Introduction

The popularity of English and English language teaching (ELT) worldwide has created a need for diversity in instructional processes and teaching methodology that recognizes how language is situated in use and acknowledges how language is located within “larger discursive frameworks” that make up “the cultural and political moments of the day” (Pennycook 34). Changes to the global environment and the influence of English worldwide have affected the practice of ELT, creating “a tension between the wish to preserve European linguistic and cultural diversity and the practical needs of people to

interact with each other within the newly emergent social and political structures” (Byram, 2002, p. 2). The spread of English as a global language and the effects of a technological and modern society with the insistence placed on practicality and uniformity have created ideological shifts in educational practice that lean toward pragmatism and conformity, neglecting the significance of addressing the cultural diversity of second language learners and the importance of developing intercultural skills in second language education. In a broad sense, instructing second language “means connecting learners to a world that is culturally different from their own” (Sercu, 2005, p. 1). Therefore, developing cultural awareness and intercultural skills is essential to understanding and working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As linguist Noam Chomsky states, languages represent complex “systems of knowledge” that determine how the world is viewed by a collective group of individuals (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006, p. 119). As a result, understanding and accepting cultural implications of language inherent in these systems of knowledge are key to successful second language instruction.

Introducing culture learning and developing intercultural awareness

Language researchers and practitioners interested in culture learning and the development of intercultural awareness in second language education have recently begun to take stock of issues in ELT stemming from its practice on a global level. With the transition to a postmodern society, multilingual attitudes are starting to re-emerge where new and more accepting attitudes of diversity in language, culture, and lifestyle are portraying ideals of global individuality. Adopting educational practices that reflect these global views of social tolerance and respect is becoming increasingly necessary for survival in today’s economic and social climate. If language is perceived as a mechanism of cultural transmission, then advocating highly structured means of communication and language teaching such as those found in traditional language teaching methods have the potential to destroy linguistic and cultural diversity, going against the goals of intercultural communication and the needs of a global economy. Consequently, new attitudes that embody a global perspective must become the focus of second language learning, with the hopes of transforming second language classes from traditional, structured environments to spaces that reflect openness to the diversity of second language learners and seek to achieve an integration of cultural norms and knowledge.

Traditionally, approaches to second language instruction in North America and worldwide have focused on the exclusive learning and use of the second language in foreign language classes, resulting in the establishment of practices such as the “English only” rule in many ELT situations. However, current studies in second language education indicate the need to link previous linguistic and cultural knowledge in order to

present learning as way to bridge gaps in understanding and encourage cultural diversity in the second language class. To ensure that the instruction of English holds this “additive feature” in language development (Lambert, as cited in Phillipson, 1992, p. 306) that incorporates previous student knowledge and experience, there “must be a paradigm shift in the study of the diffusion and impact of English” (Kashru, 1996, as cited in Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999, p. 30), which would be less ethnocentric and do justice to linguistic and cultural pluralism. The preference for “English only” in the classroom and within the learning process often stands in opposition to attitudes reflecting intercultural tolerance, which emphasizes cultural awareness and transference in language learning. Rather than serving primarily as a bridge to assimilation into the English language and culture, raising intercultural awareness in second language learning creates a convergence of cultural attitudes with the goal of creating an outlet for the interests of diverse cultural groups to be observed (Ricento & Burnaby, 1998, p. 43).

Yet, complexities involved in developing and accessing teaching methods and materials that are socially constructed to reflect the social, cultural, economic, and political forces present in the specific ELT context (Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 1) have often deterred individual instructors and program developers from traversing this tricky educational terrain. “Cultural norms so completely surround people, so permeate thought and action, that few ever recognize the assumptions on which their lives and their sanity rests” (Barnlund, 1985, p. 13). Because of the recent interest in providing cultural orientation in second language instruction and the difficulties involved in integrating cultural elements into second language education, questions have been raised about current ELT practice and the cultural appropriateness of teaching materials and use that tend to demonstrate hegemonic tendencies of placing priority of one culture over another (Johnson, 2005, p. 1). As a result, the task of implementing cultural practices that serve to weaken hegemonic tendencies in second language instruction presents additional challenges for second language instructors who wish to establish critical or intercultural approaches to language teaching.

Tension in the role of English teacher

One of the major challenges facing ELT providers in past decades has been the worldwide expansion of second language learning, especially in English, and the need to train a large number of teachers to meet the current demand. The popularity of English as a global language and the increased requirement for English language instructors have created a sense of “professionalism” (Phillipson, 1992) and pragmatism (Block, 2001) that has dominated ELT, originating from organized English-speaking centres such as Britain and North America to periphery areas where English is taught (Phillipson,

1992, p. 53). In an effort to maintain uniformity in English language instruction, English language teachers are often trained to achieve specific goals that are focused primarily on the linguistic aspects of language learning while cultural aspects of language acquisition are ignored (Block & Cameron, 2001, p. 119). This method of training ELT instructors risks putting second language instructors in the position of being “technicians” as opposed to “cultural workers” (Briton, 1996, p. 33) because it lacks the scope to train people from a variety of backgrounds to work as language teachers in international and multi-ethnic settings. The result is an over focus on efficiency and uniformity, which creates instructional situations in which English language teachers have not received training in the larger areas of policy formation or intercultural relations that would reflect their positions as aid workers in addition to ELT providers (Phillipson, 1992, p. 302). Choosing to generate conformity and uniformity among individual instructors and ELT programmers has, in a sense, lessened the teacher’s task of working along cultural lines in language classes by refusing the challenge to develop more critical perspectives and reflective stances in teaching while allowing narrow views to permeate the practice of ELT globally.

Approaching language teaching from an overly pragmatic standpoint reflects a “positivist view of language that suggests that all languages can be free of cultural and political influences” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 12). This attitude perpetuates situations of linguistic dominance in English language instruction, or in the instruction of any second language. Because of the popularity of English and the marketability of English language proficiency, there is the additional assertion that “by its international status English is even more neutral than other languages” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 12). The global focus on efficiency and pragmatism, the constructs of modernism, structuralism, and international business has reinforced a need for communication skills in a common language, English, in order to ensure success in a technological society (Rannut, 1999, p. 100). The result is that English has now become synonymous with modernization. Nonetheless, choosing not to address political influences and contextual paradigms in English language teaching reinforces the belief that “ELT is non-political (and) serves to *disconnect culture from structure*” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 67). Viewing English language training as an activity that is “neutral” and holds no political scope is contrary to the precepts of applied linguistics (Phillipson, 1992, p. 306) and adult education in general. “Like it or not, choose we must, for to refuse to do so *consciously* is to support the existing ethico-political order *unconsciously*” (Briton, 1996, p. 55).

Defining culture learning and intercultural awareness

Culture learning can be referred to as the “fifth dimension” (Damen, 1987) of language learning, complementing the four language skills that comprise the foundation

for traditional communicative language teaching. “Culture here refers to people’s ways of making sense of their lives, where such sense-making is understood in terms of productive signifying practices that are organized in various conventional ways” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 66). Since culture is encoded into the everyday conceptual linguistic metaphors that are often taken for granted (Byram, 2002, p. 1), and language communities are made up of “people who *regard themselves* as using the same language” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 27), developing an awareness of cultural behaviour must therefore include the recognition of language and behaviour involved in daily exchanges and routine behaviour in the appropriate social context of the second language. Culture is commonly defined according to the upper case *C* usage that describes the broad aspects of traditional and historic behaviour attributed to the dominant group, including topics such as how major holidays are celebrated or the accepted political history of the cultural group. However, a small *c* reference to culture (Johnson, 2006, p. 6) that explores the particularities of group behaviour, habits and thought that are reflected in speech and writing is more relevant to the practice of developing cultural attitudes and awareness in second language education.

An intercultural approach to second language learning aims to develop *an understanding* of how a community or language group uses language and how the values and beliefs are articulated and negotiated within the particular language group (Corbett, 2003, p. 19). By endeavouring to create learning situations that acknowledge the cultural aspect of language learning, second language instruction becomes more meaningful and makes a positive contribution to society by cultivating learners who appreciate cultural similarities and differences and can identify with experiences and perspectives of culturally diverse language groups. In other words, appreciating a plural linguistic environment encourages respect and tolerance for cultural diversity both inside and outside the classroom. Applying intercultural approaches to the study of language reinforces an active recognition of cultural and linguistic elements of language by focussing on developing the ability to “see” oneself as an active participant (Barer-Stein, 1993, pp. 165-166) in the culture of the second language. Based on the premise that developing cultural awareness is a learned behaviour (Damen, 1986, p. 88) that can be transferred from one situation to another, culture learning also supports the view that once people recognize that they are products of their own cultures, “they are better prepared and more willing to look at the behaviour of persons from other cultures and accept them non-judgmentally” (Corbett, 2003, p. 25).

Adapting intercultural approaches to second language instruction

Effective intercultural communication is based on the assumption that there is an honest and sincere desire to communicate and seek *mutual* understanding (Porter &

Samovar, 1985, p. 30). In an intercultural learning environment, language instructors encourage learners to develop a cultural understanding of the second language group through observation, discussion, and dialogue based on experiences and comparison with previous cultural, educational and social practices. The fact that few second language learners ever achieve native speaker linguistic competence indicates that a technicist approach to language learning may not be the best solution to teaching second language. In fact, the differing levels of linguistic proficiency in second language learning in addition to degrees of integration into communities within the second language groups demonstrates the exists a variety of purposes for learning a second language (Ricento, 2005, p. 897), which can be more readily addressed by teaching language learners how to navigate and negotiate meaning through the second language rather than focussing on learners achieving native-like proficiency in a second language. Through an intercultural approach to learning, students attain a cognitive and experiential understanding of the link and impact of culture on linguistic behaviour. Approaching cultural communication in this way involves a teaching process that would “endeavour to work through the contradictions of culture and language” (Phipps, 2004, p. 38), requiring both students and teachers to take a critical stance in analyzing cultural behaviour and linguistic reproduction. Rather than focussing on an acquisition of standardized English, the goal of implementing intercultural approaches to second language education is to train learners to become diplomats in the differentiation of cultures “from a perspective of informed understanding” (Corbett, 2003, p. 2).

The Challenge of Intercultural Learning for Teachers

“The current challenge for language instructors is to position teachers as knowers and to position their ways of knowing” (Johnson, 2006, p. 243) in ways that can support a learning environment that includes transferring contextual information to specific language learning situations. To accomplish this, teachers must undertake a conscious reflection to the thought that underlies their actions (Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 3), as well as that of the larger community outside the classroom setting. This practice encourages the language students themselves to develop their own specific “ways of being” (Hill, 2005, p. 357) in using a second language for communication. Presenting contextual situations in a meaningful learning environment situates the learning process while providing opportunities to recognize cultural practices in relevant social interactions. The complexities involved in establishing meaningful learning situations requires students to examine their attitudes and behaviours in the “restructuring of one’s relations to the world” (Friedman, as cited in Welton, 2005, p. 79) by the implementation of teaching methods that include both experiential and formal learning. Allowing the opportunity for students to develop skills of human judgment and

negotiation in culturally appropriate contexts (Hill, 2005, p. 359) can be achieved through reflection about behaviour and by questioning thoughts that may be attributed to certain cultural specific attitudes or actions. Discussions concerning particular cultural behaviour or reasoning behind actions that reflects language invokes a conscious curiosity about the link between language and culture in students. Based on the argument that “knowledge entails lived practices, not just accumulated information” (Johnson, 2006, p. 237), presenting learning situations that reflect reality outside the classroom while encouraging the examination of the connections between language and socio-cultural relationships provides a valuable opportunity to recognize the role of language in culture and society.

Reflective of Dewey’s model of education, incorporating “attitudes of open-mindedness (seeking alternatives), responsibility (recognizing consequences), and wholeheartedness (continual self-examination)” (Johnson, 2006, p. 248) is necessary. These are required to facilitate intercultural learning in addition to the ability to reconsider and reconstruct social identities and previously held ideas and beliefs about language and cultural groups to develop new ways of thinking. This task often requires stark honesty on the part of the teacher and active curiosity on the part of the student. To realize the complex goal of analyzing cultural norms and behaviours in the language class, language instructors must be willing to become reflective in their approach to second language learning, to examine critically the life they are “living in the midst of the doxae,” and come to understand their innermost selves, “the theory of whose limits and functions is among the doxae” (Briton, 1996, p. 34). This is what Hegel refers to as “dialectic” thinking, emanating from reflective action instead of depending solely on outside ideologies (Briton, 1996, p. 35) for instructional insight. Indicative of the capacity to facilitate an intercultural approach to second language instruction is the ability to see the world through the other’s eyes, cope with uncertainty, act as a cultural mediator, evaluate others’ points of view, read the cultural context, and develop an understanding that individuals cannot be reduced to their collective identities (Sercu, 2005, p. 2).

In order to achieve intercultural connection, second language instructors must also have either some knowledge of, or at the very least an active interest in, the constructs of culture and how cultural identity and ideals influence individual and group behaviour (Barer-Stein, 1993, pp. 164-165):

If teachers are to pass on culture-specific and culture-general knowledge to their pupils, demonstrate to their pupils how they can relate and compare cultures, prepare pupils for intercultural contact situations and help them to better understand their own cultural identity, they will need a thorough understanding

of the (second language) cultures..., next to some understanding of foreign cultures in general. (Ryan and Sercu, 2005, p. 39)

In certain situations, focusing on learner requirements in larger sociopolitical and cultural settings even presents a need to “shuttle between cultures and communities” by encouraging the use of reflexivity in planning and teaching to develop a “meta-cultural awareness of codes and conventions” (Canagarajah, 2001, p. 146). Since language use implies “a position within the social order, a cultural politics, (and a) struggle over different representations of the self and other” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 34), the inclusion of cultural attitudes in the teaching of English is important to successful language development, contributing to higher levels of understanding and language proficiency (Johnson, 2005, p. 2). In general, the task of integrating cultural knowledge into the second language class may be demanding for both the teacher and the students; however, the rewards are evident in students’ ability to navigate successfully within and among cultures.

How Can ELT Providers Reflect on Their Role?

Part of the dilemma involved in integrating cultural aspects into second language instruction is drawing the fine line between the definition of the English instructor as being authoritarian or a guide. This is especially true in language situations where students are required adopt certain cultural norms in the second language in order to achieve some kind of success in the society outside the language classroom. For example, a student who is a recent immigrant adjusting to life in Canada may truly need a solid cultural orientation to help in the transition from a previous lifestyle to achieving success in the new community. Providing direct linguistic and cultural information about the new culture and society would, in this case, ensure added success in adapting to the larger society.

Still, the choice of adopting these cultural behaviours and to what extent they will be practiced in everyday communicative settings remains the student’s prerogative. In general, teachers must make some difficult decisions in terms of looking out for what is best for the students as opposed to giving them full rein as adult learners. When teachers approach second language learning insightfully while considering the teaching context and the student population, they can foster a positive view of and access information from the native culture of second language learners. This permits adaptation to cultural norms and behaviours in a new language, which encourages progress in second language learning. Contextualizing the learning process by making reference to the socioeconomic environment requires educators to progress from a “mentalist” mindset to a “culturalist” (Guile & Young, 1998, p. 181) ideology. Addressing the political and social climate surrounding the learning environment by encouraging a

critical mindset toward language learning allows students to discover how organizations structure power; this enables them to perceive hegemonic structures that may be present in learning situations and outside organizations, and empowers them to challenge “dominant cultural codes” that may be operating (Hall, 2006, p. 19). In doing this, second language learners will also improve their own skills in social observation and explanation (Corbett, 2003, p. 3), which is of particular use in educational situations. Finally, if learners obtain cultural knowledge in their particular classroom setting, they will be more able and likely to navigate effectively using the second language outside the learning environment.

Conclusion

Essentially, the learning context, including student purpose in learning, must be addressed to achieve culture learning and to develop intercultural awareness in the ELT. Without the insight gained from recognizing student purpose and requirements for study, culture learning will seem irrelevant, unimportant or even unnecessary, which all lead to failure in addressing cultural issues. Teachers who foster intercultural learning in second language education should have themselves developed a cultural awareness that promotes an open mind and “a positive disposition towards the unfamiliar” (Sercu, 2005, p. 20) to serve as a guide in aiding students increase their ease and ability in functioning locally with a second language or on a global level. Allowing students to develop their own cultural cognition in a second language based on a practice of developing cultural awareness in language learning will, in the long term, help to develop the sense of confidence and adaptability necessary to approach and use language for communication in diverse global settings.

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