

EXPLICIT COMPARISONS IN DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract

Since English is claimed as lingua franca among nations, intercultural competence (ICC, henceforth) becomes a new enterprise in English Language Teaching (ELT). The teaching of English should put forward to capturing target culture, but unnecessarily neglect the local culture. It should embed not only the target culture, but also other non-native cultures of periphery nations. Responding to the emergence of non-native varieties of English and to the fact that people from non-native countries of English communicate in English, teaching-learning materials and activities should also cover the non-native cultures of English. This paper attempts to offer an alternative mode to develop the learners' ICC. The explicit comparisons, then, consequently comprise both cultures, i.e., learners' cultures and cultures applied by other non-native speakers. Emphasizing on developing learners' ICC seems more promising than those of developing communicative competence (CC), though it is hard to put into practice.

Keywords: *explicit comparisons, intercultural competence*

Introduction

The increasing numbers of *periphery countries* (Canagarajah, 2002) grouped in *outer-and expending-cycle countries* (Kachru, 1985) has offered a shift of English teaching goal, i.e. from enabling the learners to possess CC to bringing up the learners with ICC. Language teachers and applied linguists in periphery countries have attempted to construct methods and materials that are appropriate to their learners' needs, i.e. to communicate not only with people from native-speaker countries, but also with those from other nations positioning English as an L2 and FL.

The term or slogan 'English as an International Language (EIL) seems to deconstruct the terms English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Since English has become an international language, teaching for linguistic competence cannot be separated from teaching for ICC (Hoa, 2007). As EIL assuming English as *lingua franca* among nations is going global, the ICC is becoming a new common place in Asia. Many experts and ELT practitioners consider it as

an alluring topic to discuss in conferences and publish their articles in both printed and e-journals.

At this juncture, the teaching of English should put forward to capturing target language culture and other non-native cultures, but unnecessarily neglect the local culture. The ICC enables learners to (1) develop and maintain relationships, (2) communicate effectively and appropriately with minimal loss or distortion, and (3) attain compliance and obtain cooperation with others (Fantini, 2000). This paper attempts to offer an alternative mode of teaching ICC in the context of EFL in Indonesia. It deals with the rationales of teaching ICC in Indonesia, what and how to teach ICC in classroom teaching.

The Rationales of Teaching ICC in Indonesia

English has been claimed as an 'International Language (IL)', one used by people of different nations. It is assumed that its learners do not need to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of that language, the ownership has altered to international community, and learning it is to enable learners to communicate their ideas and cultures to others (McKay, 2002). The learners are required to learn the cultures of others in order to have mutual intelligibility. When communicating with Chinese background speakers, for instance, they share the cultures. Indonesian learners of English express ideas and cultures to the Chinese and, *vice versa*, the Chinese encode their ideas and cultures to Indonesian. In this context the target language is used as a medium of communication and culture sharing.

The uses of English as an IL is also supported the great emergence of non-native varieties of English. It happens due to multiple numbers of L2 and FL speakers of English and the needs to use shared language in all fields of life. It is estimated that there was 329 million speakers use English as an L1, 430 million use it as an L2, and 750 million as a FL in between 2000 and 2002 (Crystal, 2003). The great numbers of people who speak English as an L2 and three-quarters of all as FL speakers also stipulate the emergence of English as an IL. In addition the acceptance of inner cycle speakers to non-native varieties of English, especially to spoken language, strengthens the phenomena of English going global.

Conserving the native varieties in English instructions in Indonesia sounds fruitless. Communicative syllabus used in the 1994 Indonesian curriculum in which the learners were taught English to possess the CC showed unsatisfactory results. Huda (1999) did a survey to find out stakeholders' responses to the communicative syllabus. The results indicated that teaching English aiming at making students own CC was unsuccessful and the respondents expected the syllabus to be changed. Obviously, there were some factors contributed the 'failure'. I

considered the objective that enables the learners to possess the CC, namely: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences (Canale, 1983) referred to native speakers' competence was one of the causes. In fact most learners are lacks of exposure to communicate with native speakers.

Due to the appearance of EIL and the failure of making learners possess CC, promoting ICC is more realistic and challenging. The learners will recognize various cultures from nations in which English is used as L1, L2, and FL. In addition, they can express their cultures to others. Then, the teachers are challenged to teach English as a means of communication and of sharing cultures. The contents of teaching materials are possibly derived from varieties of cultural backgrounds. The cultural diversities embedded are transferred through the target language.

What to Teach In Promoting ICC: Intercultural Understanding

Though emphasis on language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—tend to replace the grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods of ELT in Indonesia, intercultural communication has not receive sufficient attention as it needs. The teachings of English seemingly focus on enabling learners to understand others' ideas and express ideas to others in both spoken and written modes. Some teachers claim that they have been on the right track. Some further claim that they have enabled their learners to communicate with native speakers of English, i.e. those are from in inner cycle nations. In fact, with its standardized native speaker norms, the model is found to be utopian, unrealistic, and constraining in relation to an EIL (Alptekin, 2002).

Utopian view of communicative competence: It was the concern with meaning which gave rise to attempts to take issue with Chomsky's construct of linguistic competence. The ideal native speaker-listener was considered to be a non-existent abstraction, and emphasis was placed instead on the real native speaker-listener in relation to language use or language performance. Hence, it became necessary to integrate the linguistic code with culture, referring to daily customs and ways of life, and mainstream ways of thinking and behaving. Languages, English included, often have several dialects. One cannot claim that there is one correct and appropriate way to use English, in the sense that one set of language patterns is somehow inherently superior to all the others. Who then is the 'real' native speaker-listener typically accurate and proper language use, if not another abstraction, or an idealization?

Unrealistic view of communicative competence: Social and economic globalization has necessitated the use of an international means of communication in the world. English has become the language of international communication. Given the lingua franca status of English, it

is clear that much of the world needs and uses English for instrumental reasons such as professional contact, academic studies, and commercial pursuits. In this context, much communication in English involves (and will increasingly involve) nonnative speakers-nonnative speaker interactions. How relevant the target cultures to this sort of interaction? It points to the need for a radical rethink in terms of modified and expanded definition of the traditional notions of CC.

Constraining view of communicative competence: The idea that the language presented in the classroom should be as authentic as possible, so as to represent the reality of native speaker (NS) language use, has been one of the tenets of the communicative approach. Real communicative behavior in this context is defined strictly in terms of the parochial milieu and the fuzzy notion of the NS. As such, the multiplicity of uses of English around the world involving encounters between not only native speakers and nonnative speakers, but also nonnative speakers and nonnative speakers, is not even recognized.

The use of EIL triggers the teachers of English to shift paradigms in ELT, from teaching for CC to ICC. They have to be creative in finding culture-content materials. It is not necessarily those from the target language nations. They are actually challenged to broaden the perspective in cases of what various cultures to be transferred while teaching English. They should teach not only target language cultures, but also other cultures from different nations.

As lingua franca among nations English becomes 'de-nationalized' (Smith in McKey, 2002). English speaking nations become greater in numbers. Simultaneously, the speakers who claim the ownership of its language also increase. So focusing on exposing one target cultures does not really assist the learners to communicate effectively to others. To respond to these phenomena, they require not only ability to decode and encode ideas, but also others' cultures. This sort of ability is called *intercultural understanding*, as a general ability to understand otherness and to be aware of one's own values (Lundgren, 2005).

Intercultural understanding is essential in communicating with others, especially to those whose different cultural backgrounds. Misunderstanding and breakdown of communication because of the different assumptions or unwritten rules potentially occurs. For examples, in terms of high-and low-context cultures (see Guirdham, 1999), in high-context cultures (HCC) as often found in the east, there is much reliance on contextual factors that provide meaning to the communication. In the low-context cultures (LCC) more closely associated with the west, there is more of an emphasis on the explicit verbal content of the communication (Thompson, 2003). In HCC, roles

tend to be formal and more ritualistic. In LCC, by contrast, there is more emphasis on personal styles, and the communication tends to be less formal. The distinction of both cultures should be transferred to learners. For examples, the teachers teach how politeness is realized by speakers of different cultures. They need to teach that speakers of Asian cultural backgrounds, Indonesians as one of the instances, tend to realize politeness in the pattern of negative politeness in query preparatory (e.g. "Can you help?") rather than positive politeness such as "Help me!" (Syahri, 2007).

To promote learners' intercultural understanding, teachers should facilitate learners to learn various cultures from various nations. They teach the learners communication and cultural awareness. The former aims at providing learners with communication skills while the latter at installing them with the underlying programs in which the knowledge of various cultures give frames to whom and what circumstance they communicate. For instance, when communicate with Japanese they do not need to underlie the communication with the English native cultures. They even share the cultures. Since the issue of global English has been a common enterprise all over the world, the speakers from outer and expanding circles learn cultures of not only English native cultures while learning English, but also other non-native cultures. Ultimately, the learners can avoid miscommunication and increase the intelligibility when they acquaintance with others from different nations.

How to Teach ICC: Explicit Comparisons

Some experts and ELT practitioners propose ways of teaching ICC or Intercultural Understanding. Bennet (1997) claims that language teachers can be more deliberate in helping students learn to experience reality using a "culture-contrast" approach, including the following stages:

- (1) Inform students about how their native language is related to the basic values, beliefs, thought patterns, and social action in their own cultures.
- (2) Compare native language-culture patterns to those of the target language-culture.
- (3) Assess achievement not just in terms of vocabulary and grammar but also in the pragmatic dimensions of culturally appropriate social judgment and decision making.

The stages have shown evidently help the students in two ways i.e. to encode the learners' own cultures and to decode target language cultures. I recommend that the teachers or lecturers of English do some

adaptations for enriching the learners with other non-native cultures. They can supply the students with some texts describing other non-native speakers' basic values, beliefs, thought patterns, and social action. The comparisons are done not only between native (e.g. of Indonesian) and target language culture (e.g. of American), but also among some cultures of different nations, for instances, Indonesian, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic and American cultures. The topic "breakfast" can be discussed interestingly. The triggers possibly used are 'What do Indonesians usually have for breakfast?' 'How do Indonesians prepare breakfast?' 'How do Americans prepare breakfast?' Then, they are asked to find other sources in some information on how other people from other nations, e.g. Chinese, Japanese and Arabian prepare breakfast.

To develop the learners' ICC, the teachers of English should be resourceful. They must have sufficient and adequate knowledge of both native and target cultures. They can use native cultures as prior references. They can also elicit general warming up questions, for instances, "Do you usually have breakfast?" and "What do you usually have for your breakfast?" before teaching *preparing breakfast* as the topic. For sure, the teachers must have target culture knowledge. They should be knowledgeable about ways of native speakers to prepare cereals, for example. As the further stage, classroom activities deal with comparisons. The learners are simulated to identify the similarities and differences between their native ways and target ways of doing communicative acts. This is the core activity of explicit comparisons which I assume can enable the learners to possess ICC.

In short, responding to the emergence of non-native varieties of English and to the fact that people from non-native countries of English communicate in English, classroom materials and activities should also cover the non-native cultures of English. The explicit comparisons, then, consequently comprise among cultures, i.e., learners' cultures, native cultures and those applied by other non-native speakers.

Concluding Remarks

Culture is clearly a very powerful factor—as also stated by Thompson (2003) —when it comes to communication, as it provides reservoir of meaning from which people make sense of day-to-day communication interactions. It can be an underlying factor and a motive why people need to communicate to one another. Knowledgeable to interlocutors' cultures can make interactions meaningful and avoid misunderstanding and communication breakdown. Conversely, ignorance them potentially destroys communication.

The ELT focusing on developing learners' ICC seems more promising than those of developing CC, though it is hard to put into practice. The learners will be competent to communicate with others

from various countries around the world. They, then, will be ready to face the global arena in which the people use English as the instrument for them to interact and transact with others. Having knowledgeable teachers of English, explicit comparison teaching is legibly conducted. The materials used in class can be taken from several sources. The teachers/lecturers and learners can visit some websites to browse easy and instant materials. What they have to do is to create contexts in which the learners feel the needs to compare cultures happen in different nations.

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