

THE CROSS – CULTURAL ASPECT IN EFL TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Summary

Articolul în cauză este legat de aspectul intercultural în procesul de predare-învățare a limbii străine. Articolul propune atât activități interculturale, cât și modalități de stimulare a studenților. Educația interculturală duce într-o măsură oarecare la adoptarea unor valori, credințe care pot să nu corespundă societății Dstră. Activitățile interculturale sistematice reprezintă o precondiție pentru învățarea noii generații, car nu va fi doar tolerantă față de oamenii altor culturi, dar va înțelege, accepta și respecta alte culturi ale lumii.

It is a widely known fact that teaching and learning a foreign language cannot be reduced to the direct teaching of linguistic skills like phonology, morphology, vocabulary, and syntax. In other words, to learn a language well usually requires knowing something about the culture of that language. Communication that lacks appropriate cultural content often results in humorous incidents, or worse, in the source of serious miscommunication and misunderstanding [4. p. 53].

However, when writing or talking about „teaching culture”, theoreticians and practitioners often restrict themselves to the specific culture of the target language. In English as a second language (ESL) contexts, where students live and are immersed in the culture of the English speakers, this may be a satisfactory approach. But in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) this is a very narrow view.

In an EFL class, students are usually monolingual and they learn English while living in their own country. They have little access to a target culture and therefore a limited ability to become culturally competent. Importantly, their aim for learning English is not only to communicate with native speakers of English, but also with non-native speakers of English, which is why EFL learners are typically learners of English as an International Language (EIL).

Culture is a very broad concept, so to get to know a given culture means to gain extensive knowledge. It seems useful to make a distinction between the so- called big-C culture and small-C culture. The big-C part of a given culture is usually easy to study, as it constitutes factual knowledge about the fine arts such as literature, music, dance, painting, sculpture, theatre and film. Small-c culture comprises a wide variety of aspects, many of which are interconnected, including attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, perceptions, norms and values, social relationships, customs and celebrations, politeness conventions, body language. Needless to say, language is also part of what we call culture, and it also reflects and interprets culture.

Some of the small-c cultural aspects are directly observable, and hence easy to grasp and learn (e.g. rituals and celebrations). However many dimensions of a given culture are hidden from the eye. Here belong the small-c cultural aspects that, being imparted to us from birth, are deeply internalized and subconscious and are often noticed only in contrast with another culture. It is mainly these non-tangible cultural aspects that have an enormous influence on people’s way of thinking and their linguistic behaviour and that determine the expectations and interpretations of other people’s linguistic behaviour. A person who encounters an unfamiliar culture will lack knowledge of such behaviours, which may lead to amusing situations, and even conflict, caused by miscommunication. This happens because these culture aspects are unspoken rules created by a community. Because these cultural rules are full of meaning and allow people to anticipate events, they often acquire a moral rigidity that engender stereotypes and even prejudices.

Let us consider a few examples of unsuccessful cross-cultural encounters. Such misunderstanding of verbal or non-verbal messages often leads to a distorted picture of another society and its culture.

A Moldavian person in the United States, after being offered a meal and refusing politely, could be unpleasantly surprised to be given nothing to eat, and might even think that Americans are stingy with food. The American host would not realize that refusing food is a sign of modesty and the person offering a meal should insist.

A Briton might be amused if a Moldavian person on hearing the conventional greeting „How are you?” started complaining about her health, the Moldavian on the other hand, would wonder why her interlocutor was amused.

There are innumerable examples of similar cross-cultural communication and what they clearly illustrate is that the knowledge of the small – culture of a given community is of great importance for successful cross-cultural communication. Even if the participants in the above described situations spoke English fluently and were well informed about cultural facts such as famous works of art and religious celebrations, this knowledge would be of little help to avoid the misunderstanding.

Successful international communication is reason enough to introduce the intercultural approach into EFL classrooms. However there is another good reason. In many countries there is still much intolerance and prejudice against other nations and cultures. Intensive intercultural education seems to be a good way to sow the seeds of tolerance, respect, acceptance and understanding.

In this respect the teachers should focus their attention on the students’ own culture, which has always been taken for granted and is as natural as breathing and which should be seen as one of the many diverse world cultures and part of the world cultural heritage.

So the teacher can introduce the following activities.

Activity 1. The students observe carefully various aspects of their native culture and look at the given data objectively as if from the position of a representative of another culture. For example: „In Moldova you have to take off your shoes when entering somebody’s house. We think this is silly, because it means you have to walk around the house in your socks.”

Activity 2. Students invent alternatives to existing manifestations of their own culture – their ideas may be the following-.E.g. instead of shaking hands with people, you might jump three times, or – nodding the head could mean “no” instead of “yes”

Activity 3 The students are asked to discuss in groups the following question: Which aspects of my own culture may seem weird to a foreigner? Then they read or listen to descriptions of their native culture given by representatives of other cultures, which can be printed out from the internet or recorded from a TV program. Aspects as seen through someone else’s eyes provide a totally new perspective. What has always been obvious and often subconscious may be perceived differently for the first time- and sometimes noticed for the first time.

For example one can read that in Moldova business people shake hands each morning even after years of working together, as if they were meeting for the first time. In Moldova men usually shake hands when they meet and take leave of each other and this is not a formal gesture, but a customary greeting, exchanged even by closest friends. Reading this info Moldovan students may realize that in different cultures a handshake may have different level of formality. Thus such info serves a double purpose: informing about some people’s habits and informing about other people’s misunderstanding of those habits.

On the next stage of activities the aim of a teacher is to widen learner’s perspectives by getting them to know the cultures of the English-speaking countries and to compare those cultures to their own. Since students have already learned to view their own culture from an objective point of view, it should be easier for them to view another culture objectively, not as a curiosity, but simply as an alternative. And here a teacher should start with British and American cultures

Activity 1. The teacher prepares copies of excerpts from literature. Students read the excerpts in groups and decide what would be different if a given novel was written by the author from their native culture. For example, while reading *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* Moldavian students might point out the cultural contrasts about cupboards under stairs, having bacon and eggs for breakfast, and a letter being put through a slot in the door to fall on the doormat. When all the ideas have been discussed, students rewrite the literary excerpts so that they are in agreement with their native culture.

Teachers wishing to implement the inter-cultural approach in the EFL classroom must consider possible problems and ways of dealing with them.

The final stage is one of true intercultural education. Here, students expand their cultural knowledge by learning about all cultures of the world. Obviously, this stage is the longest and most difficult one. However, having studied the native- and target-language cultures, students should already know how to look for and recognize different cultural aspects of other societies.

A few EFL textbooks contain texts and activities providing information about world cultures. Their main advantage is that they are written at a language level appropriate for the learners. Their serious drawback is that they typically present information about foreign cultures with no initial preparation of the students (a foreign culture is very often just a topic suitable for the introduction of some language aspect, such as the function of giving advice). In addition, the cultural facts are usually presented in a very superficial manner. The result is that students perceive such information as a curiosity, not as an important piece of knowledge. Therefore, textbook-based exercises can only play a supporting role in the intercultural approach. To supplement the textbook, a wide range of activities from other sources can be applied.

It is possible that not all students will be interested from the start in learning about foreign cultures. The teacher's task is to convince them that intercultural training is in fact an indispensable element of modern education. The teacher may use accounts of real-life situations where the lack of intercultural awareness led to amusing, embarrassing or even dangerous situations.

It is vitally important that students do not treat the info about the world's cultures as a curiosity, or even worse ridicule it. The teacher's task is not to convert the students to other cultures; the role of the teacher for the EFL is to help students get to know and understand different cultures because this knowledge and understanding are indispensable for successful cross-cultural communication.

Systematic intercultural training is a precondition for educating a new generation of young people who will not only tolerate, but also understand, accept and respect people from different world cultures, will communicate with them successfully, and will learn from them through that communication.

It is vitally important that students do not treat the information about the world's cultures as a curiosity, or, even worse, ridicule it. The teacher has to see to it that students make a serious attempt to get to know and understand other cultures (even if they may not agree with some aspects of those cultures). Both the teacher and the students have to fully understand that intercultural knowledge is indispensable for successful communication all over the world. Stereotyped views and prejudices will pre-vent students from developing intercultural competence. The teacher must help students understand that there can be different sets of behaviors, beliefs, and values, and the fact that we represent just the one that we have been "born into" is pure coincidence. As Kramsch writes, "breaking down stereotypes is not just realizing that people are not the way one thought they were, or that deep down 'we are all the same.' It is understanding that we are irreducibly unique and different, and that I could have been you, you could have been me, given different circumstances" [4, p. 82].

Of course, there are aspects of some cultures that students need not accept, such as inequality between men and women or an inhuman attitude toward animals. The teacher's task is not to "convert" the students to other cultures; the role for the EFL teacher is to help students get to know and understand different cultures because this knowledge and understanding are indispensable for successful cross-cultural communication.

The intercultural approach is certainly easiest to implement with adult learners, as they will see its usefulness clearly, and so will be motivated to learn. Adolescents will perceive the purposefulness of intercultural education less vividly, and for children it will be too abstract to comprehend. Teaching these younger age groups is certainly a bigger challenge for an EFL teacher. On the other hand, intercultural lessons can be easily made learner-centered, interesting, and fun, and for this reason they may be successful with all age groups.

Conclusions:

1. Intercultural training is an indispensable element of modern education.
2. Intercultural education leads, to a certain extent, to the acceptance of values, beliefs, and behavior that may conflict with one's own. „The language teacher, in guiding the learner to new

perspectives and new identities, is tampering with fundamentals of human identity” [6, p. 220]. Therefore, the EFL teacher must implement the intercultural approach in a tactful, skillful, and conscious way.

3. Systematic intercultural training is a pre-condition for educating a new generation of young people who will not only tolerate, but also understand, accept, and respect people from different world cultures, will communicate with them successfully, and will learn from them through that communication.

4. Successful international communication is reason enough to introduce the intercultural approach into EFL classrooms.

5. In many countries, there is still much intolerance towards and prejudice against other nations and cultures. Intensive intercultural education seems to be a good way to sow the seeds of tolerance, acceptance, understanding, and respect.

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