

## THE INTERCULTURAL APPROACH TO EFL TEACHING AND LEARNING

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### **Rezumat**

*Topica interculturalității a apărut în ultimele decenii, ca răspuns, în plan educațional, la fenomenele de creștere a interconexiunilor și a globalizării. Obiectivul principal al educației interculturale rezidă în pregătirea persoanelor pentru a percepe, accepta, respecta, a experimenta alteritatea. Educația interculturală vizează o abordare pedagogică a diferențelor culturale.*

Nowadays, it is 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. The contemporary models of communicative competence show that there is much more to learning a language, and they include the vital component of cultural knowledge and awareness [2, p.67]. 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, is the source of serious miscommunication and misunderstanding. According to Kramsch, culture” is always in the background, right from day one ,ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them”.

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) settings, 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 the 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 International Language(EIL). By learning English, EFL students are enabling themselves to become users of international, or rather intercultural, communication-thus ,the target language becomes a tool to be used in interaction with people from all other the world, where communication in English takes place in fields such as science, technology, business, art, entertainment, and tourism. It is obvious then, that in order to successfully function in a culturally diverse environment, our learners need to develop intercultural communicative competence [1, p.78]

The true complexity of what it means to know a language is revealed in the useful list of learner competencies produced by the Council of Europe [3, p12] In addition to grammatical competence, a culturally competent learner must possess sociolinguistic competence, pragmatic competence, socio cultural knowledge, and intercultural awareness.

As can be seen, culture is a very good 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, on the other hand, comprises a wide variety of aspects, many of which are interconnected, including attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, perceptions, norms and values, social relationships, customs, celebrations, rituals, politeness conventions, patterns of interaction and discourse organization, the use of time in communication, and the use of physical space and 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., celebrations and rituals). 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.

Clearly, if EFL learners are to become successful intercultural communicators, it is essential to provide them with a thorough and systematic intercultural training, and not only of the culture of the main English speaking countries. EFL students will benefit by gaining solid knowledge of the different world cultures, and they must also develop the ability to compare their native culture to other cultures, to evaluate critically and interpret the results of such comparisons, and to apply this knowledge successfully in both verbal and non-verbal communication, for both transactional and interactional purposes. Since "culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill. Tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing" [3, p. 1], it is of paramount importance that the cultures, not simply chosen cultural aspects, are dealt with during EFL lessons.

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 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.

### **Conclusion**

Implementing the intercultural approach is a challenging, demanding task for the language teacher, who must possess at least some intercultural knowledge and very often keep developing it alongside his or her students. What must not be overlooked is that 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 [2, p.129]. Therefore, the EFL teacher must implement the intercultural approach in a tactful, skillful, and conscious way.

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.

### **References**

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