

From cultural awareness to intercultural awareness: culture in ELT

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Cultural awareness (CA) has emerged over the last few decades as a significant part of conceptualizing the cultural dimension to language teaching. That is, L2 users need to understand L2 communication as a cultural process and to be aware of their own culturally based communicative behaviour and that of others. However, while CA has provided a vital base of knowledge in relation to the cultural aspects of language use and teaching, it is still rooted in a national conception of culture and language. This is problematic given that English is now used as a global lingua franca. Intercultural awareness (ICA) is presented here as an alternative 'non-essentialist' view of culture and language that better accounts for the fluid and dynamic relationship between them. Key components of ICA are discussed along with their relevance to ELT practices and suggestions as to how they can be translated into classroom pedagogy.

Introduction

The cultural dimension to language has always been present in language pedagogy (Risager 2007), even if it is not always explicit. Given the closely intertwined nature of culture and language, it is difficult to teach language without an acknowledgement of the cultural context in which it is used. Indeed, culture has been a component of our understanding of communicative competence from early conceptions with Hymes' (1972) emphasis on the importance of sociocultural knowledge. More recently, intercultural communicative competence, underpinned by the notion of critical cultural awareness (CA) (Byram 1997), has extended the role of culture in successfully preparing language learners for intercultural communication. However, with the English language now used as a global lingua franca in a huge range of different cultural contexts, a correlation between the English language and a particular culture and nation is clearly problematic. This paper argues that while CA has been important, it needs re-evaluation in the light of the more fluid communicative practices of English used as a global lingua franca. In its place, intercultural awareness (ICA) is proposed as a more relevant concept for these dynamic contexts of English use.

Globalization affects all English language teachers from their choices of what materials to use, to which variety of English is most appropriate. As Block (2004) highlights, the role of English in globalization is multifaceted and neither exclusively benign nor evil. Furthermore, the extensive use of English in such a diverse range of global settings calls into question our understanding of the ownership and forms of the English language. In particular, the growth in the use of English in the 'expanding circle' (Kachru 1990), in which it is neither an L1 nor an official L2 within a country, problematizes native speaker-based conceptions of English use. Crystal's (2008) figures suggest that English is now most extensively used in this expanding circle and it thus follows that the majority of ELT classrooms will also be in this circle. English is therefore used most commonly not by native speakers but as a contact language between interlocutors with different languacultures (linguistic and cultural backgrounds). As Kramsch (2009: 190) argues in relation to foreign language teaching, this has fundamental implications:

the goals of traditional language teaching have been found wanting in this new era of globalization. Its main tenets (monolingual native speakers, homogeneous national cultures, pure standard national languages, instrumental goals of education, functional criteria of success) have all become problematic in a world that is increasingly multilingual and multicultural.

This is even more so for ELT in environments where English functions as a lingua franca with no native speakers.

The use of English globally as a contact language has been addressed extensively, and at times controversially, in the field of ELF (English as a lingua franca) research (see for example, Seidlhofer 2005; Jenkins 2007).¹ While the native speaker is generally not considered to be excluded from ELF communication, the norms of such communication are not driven by native speakers. Rather ELF communication is seen as emergent and situated with common features negotiated by the participants. For users of English to communicate effectively, they will need a mastery of more than the features of syntax, lexis, and phonology that are the traditional focus in ELT. Equally important is the ability to make use of linguistic and other communicative resources in the negotiation of meaning, roles, and relationships in the diverse sociocultural settings of intercultural communication through English.

To address communication in these kinds of multilingual and multicultural settings, the skills of multilingual communicators are needed. These include the role of accommodation in adapting language to be closer to that of one's interlocutor in order to aid understanding and solidarity. Negotiation and mediation skills are also key, particularly between different culturally based frames of reference, which have the potential to cause misunderstanding or miscommunication. Such skills result in the ability of interlocutors to adjust and align themselves to different communicative systems and cooperate in communication.

adequate for successful intercultural communication through English. This needs to be supplemented by an understanding of the sociocultural context in which communication takes place and an understanding of the sociocultural norms of one particular native-speaker community, for example the United Kingdom or United States, is clearly not sufficient for global uses of English. A more extensive treatment and understanding of the varied cultural contexts of English use is necessary (see for example Porto 2010; Suzuki 2010).

However, we are faced with a difficulty. If, as has been suggested above, the global uses of English detach it from the traditional native-speaking countries, how are we to make sense of the cultural contexts of English communication? Is English inevitably linked to these native-speaker contexts even when used in very different settings, as in the strongest forms of linguistic relativity where our world view is determined by linguistic boundaries? Alternatively, is English as a lingua franca a culturally neutral language? Neither of these views is adequate for explaining the relationship between the English language and its sociocultural settings in global lingua franca uses. The diverse forms, meanings, and uses of different Englishes, as documented by World Englishes studies (for example Kachru *op.cit.*), have demonstrated that English is not restricted to the linguistic or sociocultural norms of the traditional native-speaker countries. Furthermore, language, even used as a lingua franca, can never be culturally neutral. Language used for communication always involves people, places, and purposes, none of which exist in a cultural vacuum.

To understand the sociocultural contexts of English as a global lingua franca, we need to approach culture in a non-essentialist and dynamic manner. It should be seen as an emergent, negotiated resource in communication which moves between and across local, national, and global contexts (Baker 2009b). One way of conceiving of this relationship is the influential notion of a 'third place' in L2 use (see Kramsch *op.cit.* for a discussion of its influence and current relevance), in which communication takes place in a sphere that is neither part of a first language/culture (L1/C1) or a target language/culture (TL/TC). Rather culture is something freer and more fluid in the sense of creating something new and different. Importantly though, Kramsch also recognizes the continued influence and pull of the L1/C1 and TL/TC. This results in a tension between established fixed forms of communicative practice and the more situated dynamic communicative practices of an L2.

In specific relation to the English language, Pennycook (2007) has described the manner in which both linguistic and cultural forms and practices of English exist in global flows. They move through both local and global environments being influenced and changed by both. The importance of being able to negotiate these complex and dynamic cultural references in communicating successfully across cultures underscores the need to incorporate this into our understanding of communicative competence and subsequently ELT.

Cultural awareness

An approach to conceptualizing the kinds of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to undertake successful intercultural communication, which explicitly recognizes the cultural dimension of communicative competence,

has been CA (see for example Tomalin and Stempleski 1993; Byram 1997). At the most basic level, CA can be defined as a conscious understanding of the role culture plays in language learning and communication (in both first and foreign languages). The details of CA are conceived of and implemented in teaching practice in a number of different ways. Nevertheless, many of the approaches agree on the importance of a systematic framework for teaching culture and language together, in which the relationship between them is explicitly explored with learners. Conceptions of CA also stress the need for learners to become aware of the culturally based norms, beliefs, and behaviours of their own culture and other cultures. Furthermore, all share a goal of increased understanding of culture and language leading to successful intercultural communication.

The most detailed account of CA is that offered by Byram (*ibid.*), as part of a framework of intercultural communicative competence. The crucial component of this 'critical CA' is an understanding of the relative nature of cultural norms which leads to 'an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries' (*ibid.*: 101). Moreover, in examining the learner's culture and foreign cultures, as well as different perspectives of them, Byram highlights the need to understand the multi-voiced 'diglossic' nature of culture, which contains conflicting and contradictory views. Finally, CA, as conceived here, rejects the monolingual native speaker as the ideal model and instead proposes the intercultural speaker and intercultural citizen as an alternative. This alternative acknowledges the importance of identity and affiliation in the negotiated communication of intercultural communication, with no one interlocutor providing the norms or ideal model to which the other has to conform. Most importantly, what Byram's and many other accounts of CA share is a notion of CA as knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be developed by the language learner, which can then be utilized in understanding specific cultures and in communicating across diverse cultures.

Perhaps the most significant limitation to CA, as it has just been described, is that it has commonly been conceived in relation to intercultural communication between defined cultural groupings, typically at the national level. This can be seen for example in Byram's association of CA with 'one's own and other *cultures and countries*' (*ibid.*: 101, *my italics*). Thus, CA is most usually related to developing an understanding of and comparisons between a C1 and a C2 or a number of C2s, for example, the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. This is not an appropriate aim in expanding circle environments. Given the variety and heterogeneity of English use in such settings, a user or learner of English could not be expected to have a knowledge of all the different cultural contexts of communication they may encounter and even less so the languacultures of the participants in this communication.

Therefore, while many of the attributes associated with CA may be relevant, they need to be developed in relation to intercultural communication and an understanding of the dynamic way sociocultural contexts are constructed. Knowledge of specific cultures may still have an important role to play in developing an awareness of cultural differences and relativization.

However, knowledge of specific cultures has to be combined with an awareness of cultural influences in intercultural communication as fluid, fragmented, hybrid, and emergent with cultural groupings or boundaries less easily defined and referenced. Thus, what is needed for successful communication through English in expanding circle lingua franca contexts is not just CA but ICA.

ICA

ICA is best conceived as an extension of the earlier conceptions of CA that is more relevant to needs of intercultural communication in expanding circle and global lingua franca contexts, in which cultural influences are likely to be varied, dynamic, and emergent.

A basic definition of ICA, as envisaged here, is as follows:

Intercultural awareness is a conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices, and frames of understanding can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in real time communication.

To better understand this definition and what it entails, a number of features of ICA can be identified and are listed below (Figure 1). These 12 components attempt to build on the previously discussed features of CA, especially those highlighted by Byram (op.cit.), and extend them to the more fluid conceptions of intercultural communication through English in global lingua franca settings.²

Level 1: basic cultural awareness

An awareness of:

- 1 culture as a set of shared behaviours, beliefs, and values;
- 2 the role culture and context play in any interpretation of meaning;
- 3 our own culturally induced behaviour, values, and beliefs and the ability to articulate this;
- 4 others' culturally induced behaviour, values, and beliefs and the ability to compare this with our own culturally induced behaviour, values, and beliefs.

Level 2: advanced cultural awareness

An awareness of:

- 5 the relative nature of cultural norms;
- 6 cultural understanding as provisional and open to revision;
- 7 multiple voices or perspectives within any cultural grouping;
- 8 individuals as members of many social groupings including cultural ones;
- 9 common ground between specific cultures as well as an awareness of possibilities for mismatch and miscommunication between specific cultures.

Level 3: intercultural awareness

An awareness of:

- 10 culturally based frames of reference, forms, and communicative practices as being related both to specific cultures and also as emergent and hybrid in intercultural communication;
- 11 initial interaction in intercultural communication as possibly based on cultural stereotypes or generalizations but an ability to move beyond these through:
- 12 a capacity to negotiate and mediate between different emergent socioculturally grounded communication modes and frames of reference based on the above understanding of culture in intercultural communication.

FIGURE 1
Twelve components of
ICA

These 12 elements of ICA delineate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that a user of English as a global lingua franca needs to be able to successfully communicate in these complex settings. They are presented in an order which builds from a basic understanding of cultural contexts in communication, particularly in relation to the L1 (Level 1: Basic CA, Figure 1), to a more complex understanding of language and culture (Level 2: Advanced CA, Figure 1), and finally to the fluid, hybrid, and emergent understanding of cultures and languages in intercultural communication needed for English used in global settings (Level 3: ICA, Figure 1).

However, it is recognized that learners of English may not develop these elements in this exact order. For example, it may well be that learners of English who have grown up in multilingual environments may be unconsciously or consciously aware of the later elements of ICA. Furthermore, the elements of ICA are deliberately general in nature since the details will inevitably depend on the particular contexts of English learning and use.

As with CA, knowledge of specific cultures and the influence this may have on communication is still a part of ICA (see Levels 1 and 2, Figure 1), and there is a recognition that participants may initially begin communication by making use of nationally based cultural generalizations (Figure 1, Feature 11). Crucially though, there is also an attempt to go beyond single cultural frames of reference in intercultural communication. The features of Level 3 (Figure 1) proposes that, in parallel to knowledge of specific cultures, an understanding of emergent cultural references and practices is needed and that this needs to be combined with the ability to negotiate and mediate between these dynamic resources in intercultural communication. Such abilities and awareness enable users to cope with the diversity and fluidity of intercultural communication in which cultural frames of reference cannot be defined *a priori*. ICA should thus be of direct relevance to users of English in global contexts, especially in expanding circle and ELF settings, both as an attempt to conceptualize the cultural dimension to communication and also as a set of pedagogic aims.

This emphasis on skills and the ability to view cultures as dynamic, diverse, and emergent raises a dilemma though. To develop ICA learners need to have an in-depth understanding of culture, and to achieve this, it is necessary for learners to have cultural knowledge, even if that knowledge is no longer the end product of learning. Choosing the content of that cultural knowledge brings us back to the problems already raised in settings associated with English in global contexts. Yet, if the final outcome is to develop skills in and an awareness of intercultural communication, then cultural knowledge and content more appropriate to those skills and the components of CA identified earlier can be selected.

It is not necessary to focus exclusively on one culture, for example the typical focus on the United States or United Kingdom in English; instead cultural content appropriate to the variety of intercultural interactions a learner may encounter in their environment can be selected, which highlight the different components of ICA. In particular, it is necessary to focus on intercultural encounters themselves and examine the different ways in which culturally influenced behaviours are manifested in such

communication and the way these are negotiated by the participants in the exchange.

None of this denies the importance of knowledge of other cultures or rejects the idea that detailed knowledge of a specific culture is valuable in developing ICA. Rather, it recognizes the limitations of this kind of knowledge and incorporates the need for a more wide ranging understanding of culture for intercultural communication in the expanding range of contexts in which it occurs for global languages such as English. Thus, the knowledge, awareness, and skills associated with ICA will be constantly under revision and change based on each new intercultural encounter and as such are never a fully formed complete entity but always in progress towards a goal that is constantly changing.

Applying ICA in classroom teaching

While, as indicated above, the manner in which ICA can be made relevant to different learning contexts will depend partly on that context, there are a number of broad areas, which can be used to develop ICA within the ELT classroom. These are presented here as a set of suggestions, not all of which will be relevant in all settings. Equally, there may be other opportunities not presented here which can be used to develop ICA in specific settings. These proposals can be divided into six strands as follows.

Exploring local cultures

This begins with learners exploring the diversity and complexity of different local and national cultural groupings. This should lead to an awareness of the multi-voiced nature of cultural characterizations. It should also highlight the manner in which cultural groupings can cut across national cultures and the way in which local communities may connect with global communities, whether it is religious or ethnic groups, identifying with other learners and users of English or groups such as music or sports fans. A discussion between the students within any class, even in supposedly monolingual and monocultural settings, often reveals a surprising diversity of linguistic and cultural influences.

Exploring language-learning materials

These can be used to critically evaluate images and descriptions of cultures in locally produced textbooks and images of other cultures in local and imported ELT textbooks. For instance, learners can explore how well the images of their own culture presented in their textbooks (if there are any) match their own experiences.

Exploring the traditional media and arts through English

This can include film, television, radio, newspapers, novels, and magazines and can be used in a similar manner to the second strand to critically explore the images of local and other cultures. For example, literature has been extensively used for such purposes, although English language literature should clearly extend beyond that produced in the inner circle countries.

Exploring IT/electronic media through English

The internet, email, chat rooms, instant messaging, and tandem learning can be used in a similar manner to the previous two strands to explore cultural representations. Furthermore, these resources can be used to engage in actual instances of intercultural communication, enabling students to develop ICA and reflect on its relevance to their experiences.

These may include asynchronous email exchanges and synchronous chat room-type communication with language students and teachers in other countries.

Cultural informants

Non-local English-speaking teachers and local English teachers with experience of intercultural communication and other cultures can be used to provide information about these experiences and cultures. This can also provide another chance to reflect upon the relevance of different elements of ICA in these situations. Teachers can present their experiences of other cultures as content for the classroom through, for example, reading texts or discussion topics.

Face-to-face intercultural communication (often with non-local English teachers)

These are valuable both in themselves as offering opportunities to develop and put ICA into practice and for providing materials and experiences to reflect on in the classroom that can further aid in the development of ICA. In situations where there are non-local teachers or non-local students (as may be the case in further education settings), opportunities for intercultural communication clearly exist. Even where such opportunities do not exist, students and teachers can bring their own experiences of intercultural communication to the class for discussion and reflection, for example considering what was successful or not successful or how they felt about the experience.

These strands attempt to utilize all the resources available in the language classroom including the textbook and teacher, as well as those resources that may be available to learners outside the classroom, such as the internet, but can then be reflected on in the classroom. The six strands provide opportunities to gain the necessary experience of intercultural communication and investigating local and other cultures. This is balanced with the equally important task of exploring and evaluating those experiences. It is important to recognize that all of these sources will only provide partial accounts of cultures and will inevitably be biased. However, as long as this is made clear and learners and teachers approach the cultural images and information presented in a critical manner, these can provide valuable opportunities for experience of and reflection on intercultural communication and contact with other cultures that can aid in the development of ICA.

Conclusion

The use of English as the global lingua franca highlights the need for an understanding of cultural contexts and communicative practices to successfully communicate across diverse cultures. Yet, it also raises the problem of naively associating the English language with a specific culture or nation. Traditional conceptions of communicative competence and CA in ELT have focused on an understanding of particular cultures and countries such as the USA or UK and their associated sociocultural norms. English as a global lingua franca forces us to go beyond notions of teaching a fixed language and cultural context as adequate for successful communication.

Most significant when examining culture in ELT are the types of knowledge, skills, and attitudes envisaged in ICA. These relate to understanding culture, language, and communication in general, as well as in relation to particular contexts, and an awareness of the dynamic relationship between

English and its diverse sociocultural settings. An awareness of the multilingual and multicultural settings of English use, therefore, should be a key element of any attempt to teach communication. The ELT classroom is a site in which learners, and ideally teachers, are necessarily engaged in multilingual and multicultural practices and thus provides the ideal environment in which to develop ICA and to prepare users of English to communicate in global settings.

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Notes

- 1 ELF is also sometimes referred to as English as an international language; although, there is some debate as to whether the two terms are interchangeable (see Jenkins op.cit.).
- 2 These are based in part on an earlier empirical study of English use in an expanding circle setting (see Baker 2009a for a more detailed explanation of this).

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