

Intercultural learning 1

Chris Rose, British Council, Italy

This is the first of two articles that deal with the topic of intercultural awareness and learning. This article sets out the methodological background to this topic, and the second article - **Intercultural learning 2** - offers practical suggestions for the classroom.

Introduction

There will have been points in most teachers' careers when we have stopped to wonder "What am I actually doing?". Sometimes, filling our students up with all the requisite grammar and vocabulary, and polishing their pronunciation and honing their communicative skills doesn't actually seem to be helping them to achieve the wider goal of being able to genuinely communicate with and understand the real world outside the classroom at all.

For too long, we have been concentrating on structures and forms and producing materials that may help our students to have perfect diphthongs or a flawless command of the third conditional while leaving out anything approaching real, valid, meaningful content. Major ELT publishers have produced materials so carefully calculated not to offend anyone that they far too often end up being vacuous if not completely meaningless. If our students are to have any hope of using their language skills to genuinely comprehend and communicate in the global village, intercultural awareness is crucial.

What is intercultural learning?

The process of becoming more aware of and better understanding one's own culture and other cultures around the world. The aim of intercultural learning is to increase international and cross-cultural tolerance and understanding. This can take lots of forms - intercultural learning is by no means only a part of EFL, but has exponents in all fields of education.

What do we understand by the word 'culture'?

A way of life. A set of social practices. A system of beliefs. A shared history or set of experiences. A culture may be synonymous with a country, or a region, or a nationality or it may cross several countries or regions. A culture may be synonymous with a religion, though followers of Christianity or Judaism or Islam may also come from different cultures. It is highly possible to belong to or identify oneself with more than one culture.

Intercultural awareness

Intercultural awareness in language learning is often talked about as though it were a 'fifth skill' - the ability to be aware of cultural relativity following reading, writing, listening and speaking. There is something to be said for this as an initial attempt to understand or define something that may seem a difficult concept but, as Claire Kramsch points out ...

"If...language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed as enabling

language proficiency ... Culture in language teaching is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing" (in Context and Culture in Language Teaching OUP, 1993).

Language itself is defined by a culture. We cannot be competent in the language if we do not also understand the culture that has shaped and informed it. We cannot learn a second language if we do not have an awareness of that culture, and how that culture relates to our own first language/first culture. It is not only therefore essential to have cultural awareness, but also intercultural awareness.

Intercultural communicative competence

Following on from what Kramsch says above, intercultural awareness is not really therefore a skill, but a collection of skills and attitudes better thought of as a competence.

Intercultural communicative competence is an attempt to raise students' awareness of their own culture, and in so doing, help them to interpret and understand other cultures. It is not just a body of knowledge, but a set of practices requiring knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Intercultural awareness skills

What are these attitudes and skills that make up the competence? Among them are:

- observing, identifying and recognising
- comparing and contrasting
- negotiating meaning
- dealing with or tolerating ambiguity
- effectively interpreting messages
- limiting the possibility of misinterpretation
- defending one's own point of view while acknowledging the legitimacy of others
- accepting difference

These are very similar to many of the skills we teach normally. So what makes intercultural learning different?

Raised awareness of what we do and of the vital importance of these skills already makes intercultural communicative competence a more attainable goal. Moreover - and despite the fact that the competence is more than just a body of knowledge - intercultural awareness skills can be developed by designing materials which have cultural and intercultural themes as their content, a kind of loop input, if you like.

How does this affect the role of the teacher?

What are teachers? Activities managers? Language facilitation units? Babysitters? Intercultural learning gives the teacher a role not only as one or more of these, but also as an educator. This makes many teachers feel uncomfortable, above all with the idea that we may be influencing our students in some way. Are we responsible for transmitting some kind of ideology to our students?

No, we are helping them to become more aware of the world around them, and to better interact with that world. These are the crucial roles of the teacher.

Moreover, EFL teachers tend to have a wide variety of different backgrounds in different disciplines. They have different experiences, and in many cases may have travelled extensively and got to know several different cultures. They may have

undergone the experience of living in, adjusting to and understanding a different culture. There is a lot that they can bring to the job. They are unique mediators of cultural relativity.

When should we introduce this?

Previously, "cultural awareness" has often only been seen as something for advanced learners, an extension exercise that can be "tacked on" to an ordinary lesson. This is partly due to the all-too frequent error of assuming that students with a low level of English also have a low intellect generally, or that it is impossible to explain intellectual concepts in level one English. Intercultural awareness, as a fundamental feature of language and an integral part of language learning, is important at all levels.

Intercultural learning 2

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Intercultural awareness and perspectives on communication

It has been suggested that intercultural awareness consists of having four different perspectives on communication with a different culture.

Interculturally competent students should be able to...

1. look at their own culture from the point of view of their own culture (i.e. have a good understanding and awareness of their own culture)
2. be aware of how their culture is seen from outside, by other countries or cultures
3. understand or see the target culture from its own perspective (i.e. understand and be aware of what other people think of their own culture)
4. be aware of how they see the target culture

Ways to develop intercultural competence

An example of how to deal with each one of these steps could be:

1. Produce a guidebook, poster or webpage for visitors to their town, country or region. This should not only describe famous sites and places to visit, stay or eat, but also give visitors advice about what they may find strange or unusual about their own culture.
2. Read articles or extracts from books, newspapers, magazines or websites written by people who have visited the students' town, country or region. (A good source of texts for this are guidebooks such as the Rough Guide, Lonely Planet or Time Out series, articles from the travel sections of newspapers such as The Guardian or The Independent or extracts from books by travel writers such as Colin Thubron, Bill Bryson, Paul Theroux, Jan Morris or Bruce Chatwin.)
3. Familiarise students with sources of information about the target culture. Again, newspapers and websites can be an invaluable source of reading materials here. Films and literary texts often depict and interrogate their own cultures. (For the UK, for example, popular films such as The Full Monty, Bend it like Beckham, East is East, Billy Elliott or Calendar Girls are vital and engaging depictions of contemporary British culture.)
4. The non-native teacher has a valuable role to play here, being a person from one culture who has a certain amount of knowledge and/or experience of the target culture.
If students have visited the target culture, they can recount their experiences - perhaps by giving a written or oral presentation with advice for other students. If there is no such source available, students can do a valuable creative writing activity - imagining a journey into the target culture, predicting the problems and misunderstandings they may encounter and creatively resolving them. At this fourth step, students can measure their knowledge and awareness of

the target culture at the end of a course compared to the beginning of the course. How have their attitudes and perceptions changed (if at all)?

Conclusion

A reaction of some teachers when faced with these ideas is "Why bother?". There is a feeling that we help our students to communicate anyhow, and that if culture is an integral part of the language then students will just pick it up, that culture is impossible to teach, that we shouldn't in any way be seen to be foisting values on our students.

I would argue that to make our job relevant and meaningful, teaching intercultural awareness is absolutely vital.

"What am I actually doing?". All teachers have asked themselves that question - here's an answer: helping your students to understand, interact with and - hopefully - change for the better the world we all live in. Given the current global situation, there are few jobs more important than this.

Further reading

Two key theoretical books on the subject are...

Context and Culture in Language Teaching Claire Kramsch (OUP, 1993)
Language and Culture Claire Kramsch (OUP, 1998) (This is a condensed version of the above, and makes a good introduction to the subject)

Commercially published coursebooks and materials have so far been disappointingly slow to pick up on intercultural learning. Two brave attempts to rectify this are below.

Changing Skies Alan Pulverness (Swan Communications, 2000) Specifically designed for higher level European students, and those from Central and Eastern Europe in particular, this may not be usable for classes outside Europe, but is worth looking at to gain ideas and see an example of the approach in action.

Zoom In Mark Andrews and Csilla Hos (Swan Communications, 2000) This book is specifically designed for Hungarian teenagers. While, therefore, of no classroom use outside Hungary, it is an interesting example of how to make the approach work.

Two recent practical collections of activities...

The Culture Pack: intercultural communication resources for trainers Derek Utley (York Associates, 2002)

Intercultural Activities Michaela Cankova and Simon Gill (OUP, 2001)

For a more detailed list of the skills that comprise intercultural awareness skills, see the appendix to the Unesco report at...

unesco.org/International/Publications/FreePublications/FreePublicationsPdf/batelaan.PDF

The Common European Framework at...

culture2.coe.int/portfolio//documents/0521803136txt.pdf

