

Intercultural Teaching in the ESP Classroom: Case Study Outline

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Abstract

Working in a fast moving and modern society, centered on key terms such as “globalization” and “interculturality/interculturalism”, is a challenge for many professional categories, especially for the language teachers focusing on proficiency and effectiveness. Since professional development may be influenced by intercultural teaching and learning elements, this paper tackles several theoretical and experimental aspects related to this approach, such as principles, practices and activities. Moreover, it also proposes a study performed in connection with the way in which elements of British and American culture and civilization can be taught to in ESP classes, in an intercultural manner.

Key words: intercultural teaching, British and American culture, ESP, cultural skills, business English

J.E.L. classification: G20, G23

1. Introduction

According to the literature (Fantini, 2019; Newton et al., 2010; Bennet, 2015; Sercu et al., 2005), “Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching” is a very important stage in achieving effectiveness, as the interculturally competent teacher must teach students not only how to communicate in a foreign language but also how to understand cultural differences, to show respect and tolerance to cultural diversity, without losing their national self, the classroom becoming a place of profound reflections on socio-cultural identity.

The first section of this paper presents several theoretical aspects related to the principles and approaches to culture in “intercultural teaching and learning”, the methods and techniques that can be implemented in order to help students understand and respect cultural diversity. The development of interculturality in the ESP courses or seminars involves both learners and teachers as key actors that employ language to solve a variety of tasks, to make connections and compare source and target languages and cultures, to interact properly in various contexts, reflecting and understanding the concepts of cultural differences and cultural diversity.

The approach presented in the paper is underlined by the inherent interconnections between language and culture. In addition, it aims at underlining the vital part that culture plays within any society, at any time, from various perspectives, such as academic, social, historical or geographical. Furthermore, it also stresses the importance of accumulating living experiences in order to train people as intercultural speakers. The principles emphasized in the theoretical section of the paper underlie classroom practices and activities suitable for intercultural learning, engaging teachers with both theory and practice and using authentic materials as key resources in developing intercultural communicative competences. All these practices are seen as a cycle of interconnected processes, helping learners engage in experiences of a different language and culture, having as a goal their intercultural development (see Fantini, 2019; Deardorff, 2009, 2020).

The second section of the paper represents a pedagogical study, whose purpose is to show the difference between traditional ESP teaching and intercultural ESP teaching, with focus on elements of culture and civilization from Great Britain and the USA. As research methods, it proposes the administration of two surveys to students, during an experiment conducted in order to highlight the advantages of incorporating these elements into ESP classes.

2. Theoretical background. The main principles of "intercultural teaching and learning"

The literature has shown that the intricate concept of interculturality lies the foundations of "Intercultural Teaching and Learning", as a new and challenging field in the education system, which is heavily influenced by globalization (Ogay and Edelmann, 2016, pp. 388-400). Its main purpose is focused on the shift from the traditional ways of teaching a foreign language (with focus on language and vocabulary structures), to teaching cultural elements from the very beginning, promoting thus the learners' so-called "intercultural awareness" and "intercultural communication competence" (Planken et. al., 2004). Learners are more prone to use language in a critical and reflective way, and are also given the opportunity to develop their intercultural sensitivity. Moreover, according to Liddicoat et al. (2003, p.46), "Intercultural language learning involves (...) a dialogue that allows for reaching a common ground for negotiation to take place, and where variable points of view are recognized, mediated, and accepted".

The literature that focuses on "Intercultural Teaching and Learning" presents five main principles that emphasize the inherent interconnections between culture and language, i.e. active construction, making connections, social interaction, reflection and responsibility (in this regard, see Liddicoat et al., 2003; Liddicoat, 2004; Kohler, 2015). Active Construction highlights the involvement of both learners and teachers in the language learning process; all the actors involved in this process should pay attention to culture and interculturality from the very beginning of the language teaching and learning processes. The above-mentioned scholars argue that under this principle, teachers give their students as many opportunities as possible to find various solutions to issues tackled when communicating with other individuals from another cultural background, and to understand the significance of others' communication in the respective foreign language. Thus, learners engage in exploring cultural diversity when communicating with others in a foreign language (see Kohler, 2015; Liddicoat et al., 2003; Liddicoat, 2004).

The principle of Making Connections focuses on the part played by the creation of connections and by the comparison of the source and target languages and cultures. Whenever people enter into contact with something new, they try to associate the respective item to things they are familiar with, in order to make sense of it; they compare it to what they already know. In this regard, Byram et al. (2001) and Kramsch (2006) pointed out that the learner can achieve new insights into self and others by comparing cultures, often in a guided manner. This comparative process focused on the source and target cultures should support learners to leap to the so-called "third place" or "third position", situated between these two types of culture, wherefrom they can interact more easily comfortably with individuals belonging to the target culture, while keeping their own identity (Dellit, 2005). This principle also underlies the learners' ever-expanding negotiation skills, in order to overcome differences and achieve mutual understanding between the source and the target cultures and languages. For this purpose, teachers should encourage students to get involved within the process of comparing cultures and should provide them language and cultural experiences that allow them to tackle similarities and differences and to become aware of their implications in the individuals' lives.

As far as social interaction is concerned, it takes many forms, such as spoken interaction, which offers learners the opportunity to deal with personal, cultural and linguistic values, goals and preferences. In this manner, they can express their own ideas or attitudes, they can make their own interpretations and to learn how to react to those expressed by others. As Newton et al. (2009, p. 61) explained, when communicating with persons from other parts of the world, who speak another language, one interacts within a unique social context, facing the possibility of "stumbling" upon new and unexpected elements. When learners get engaged in intercultural social interaction, they engage with new ideas and attitudes and are thus required to develop receptive and productive skills. Furthermore, under this principle that also involves sharing various experiences and understandings of similar elements, students and teachers are able to develop collaborative learning strategies. Therefore, the teacher should give students as many opportunities as possible in order to have real experiences and exchanges with people from other countries; students should also be encouraged to assume the responsibility of getting themselves involved in intercultural activities that can improve their receptive and productive skills, which are vital when it comes to language learning.

According to the reflection principle, learners are able to understand cultural differences and interculturality when reflecting upon "social processes and their outcomes" (Byram, 1997, p. 19). The intercultural learner develops his/her ability to reflect on experiences of diversity by trying to answer questions such as: "what is identical or similar?", "what is different?", "what is interesting?", "how did I feel?", "how was the meaning different from what I expected?". Therefore, learners will be able to reflect properly on their successes, flaws and developments if they understand and analyze their linguistic and cultural identities. Moreover, intercultural awareness also involves understanding that what is familiar to somebody can be strange for somebody else and that both perspectives may be valid, valuable and important. In this regard, it is necessary to find various approaches in order to respond properly to these differences and to engage with others' linguistic and cultural practices (see Baker, 2011, pp. 197-214). For this purpose, teachers should encourage or contribute to the creation of multi-perspective cultural contexts, without making learners believe that they should abandon their own cultural context. Additionally, both teachers and learners should engage in the exploration process. As shown by scholars Byram and Cain (1998), teachers can also benefit from this approach, as they encourage their students to explore, discover and reflect upon new facts, concepts or ideas and compare them with familiar ones.

According to the responsibility principle, both students and teachers should acknowledge the parts that they play in the communication process, as well as the significance of these parts and the effects that they have on others. By taking responsibility and acknowledging their status as intercultural individuals, they demonstrate their ability to deal with diversity and they are also able to notice (and analyze) how communication is influenced and even shaped by one's cultural backgrounds (see Patel et al., 2011; Liddicoat et al., 2003; Liddicoat, 2004; Kohler, 2015). For this purpose, teachers should encourage open-minded perspectives, create motivating learning conditions and preserve them during the entire intercultural learning process, in order to develop collaborative relationships, group cohesiveness and promote integrative values.

Therefore, intercultural communicative competence can be developed by carrying out a set of classroom activities and by providing learners various communicative opportunities, aimed at guiding their attention to diversity, interculturality and self-identity (Mihai, 2018).

3. Several practices for "intercultural language teaching"

The literature (see, for example, Kearney, 2016; Liddicoat, 2004; Ennis and Riley, 2017) has shown that the practice related to "Intercultural Teaching and Learning" is strongly connected with their meaning for language education and with the learning and teaching processes. This practice can be seen as a cycle of interconnected processes that engage learners in the experience of different languages and cultures. The relationships established among these interconnected processes are not linear, as they may appear in any teaching and learning instance, in order to reach an outcome. These processes are noticing, comparing, reflecting and interacting. Moreover, they can be seen as a set of processes rather than individual, distinct ones, which the intercultural learner experiences in order to develop a greater complexity of understanding.

Noticing (concept introduced by Richard Schmidt in 1990), which is fundamental to learning a foreign language from an intercultural perspective, involves one's ability to pay special attention to a further possibility, to experience what is given at present, and to use what has already been noticed in order to prepare for what might come next. Noticing is somewhat like experiential learning during which the observers, as potential learners, are expected to connect what they observed to their own personal experiences, making the difference between what is new and what is already known, noticing and understanding cultural similarities and differences that are made obvious through language. In classroom activities, noticing goes beyond old traditional limitations, as teachers should use questions in order to develop the sophistication of the students' noticing and become independent observers of what they experience. Noticing requires the teacher to provide students a common background for comparison, reflection, questioning and experimentation (see Róg, 2017).

Based on the second process, i.e. comparing, students can perform comparisons starting from their own experiences of language and culture. Thus, they identify similarities and differences, make connections more easily, interpret and react to what they notice. Moreover, it helps students see how people might look from the other perspective, how one might understand or misunderstand what is said, written or done by someone with a different cultural identity. Due to this process, learners enhance their culture knowledge and understand better different cultural identities, which grants the success of the intercultural communication, also providing resources for the third process, i.e. reflection (Byram and Planet, 2000, p. 189).

In the literature (see, for instance, Dimitrov and Haque, 2016), reflecting implies involving a dialectical interaction between the self and the external world, it is that active and important consideration of any belief or knowledge that helps individuals reach further considerations related to the subject that triggered his/her reflective attitude. This cognitive process – which turns experience into knowledge as it involves thinking and exploration – follows some steps such as observing the experience, making inferences from it, having a relation to it, which can be a state of perplexity, hesitation or doubt, making a hypothesis or multiple ones, reconstructing the experience, based on the new hypothesis and finally taking action. The above-cited authors imply that during the reflecting process, learners observe, compare, interpret, discuss and negotiate the meaning, they try to reflect objectively on the source and target cultures, in order to acquire better understanding over facts and events, fresh new ideas and self-awareness.

Interacting, which is the last process, involves the creation of an environment suitable to interaction, granting thus opportunities to learners to practice intercultural communicative skills, shifting from the status of analyst to that of participant. Scarino and Liddicoat (2009) argue that the exploration of language and culture interactions underlie the development of cultural awareness. Furthermore, the learners' experiences of diversity enhance interaction; thus, learners create personal meanings, communicate them, explore them and even reshape them in response to others, which keeps a dynamic interconnection between language and culture. The above-mentioned scholars also argues that from a social perspective, interaction is a social process of meaning-making and interpreting, which treats the participants in different ways, as each of them brings his/her own ideas, beliefs, attitudes, experiences, etc. while giving them opportunities to make interpretations and react to them. It is noteworthy that attention and noticing play significant parts in interaction, as the learner acquires knowledge through the observations made in his/her classroom experiences.

4. Classroom activities

After discovering similarities and differences between the source and the target culture, the teacher should design activities that aim at preparing learners to interact and build relationships with persons from diverse backgrounds, and to develop their skills in terms of interpreting and relating.

Some standard activities suggested by Corbet (2003), in order to actively engage learners in the target culture are role-plays, reading activities, or listening activities. In addition, these activities should deal with various aspects of the target culture, challenging learners to compare them with their own culture and to identify similarities and differences, facts, patterns of behavior, historical and modern elements, urban and rural elements, etc. In this regard, Moeler and Nugent (2014, p. 7) stated that "teachers must lead students through activities in which the attitudes about the other are considered that ideally transform the learner".

Moreover, the activities used in the ESP classroom should shift from preparing students to communicate errorless (which is often the aim of traditional teaching approaches) to communicate openly, to interact and cope with the target culture. Authentic materials (see Buzarna-Tihenea Gălbează and Nădrag, 2018; Nădrag, 2018) and online tools should also be used. Such activities may include: Online Blog Exchange, artifact exploration, documenting activity, attitude exploration with the OSEE tool – created by Deardorff (2000).

When the Online Blog Exchange is expanded for the purpose of comparing materials (such as films, books, literature, images and videos), it slowly turns into a process of negotiation; thus, learners work together to make observations, formulate hypotheses, create patterns, confront and

analyze their own attitudes, beliefs and values. As far as the last classroom activity is concerned i.e. attitude exploration with the OSEE tool, it should be mentioned that OSEE stands for: "O: observe what is happening, S: state objectively what is happening, E: explore different explanations for what is happening, E: evaluate which explanation is the most likely one" (Moeler and Nugent, 2014, p. 9). It is therefore supported by conversations, dialogues or role-plays and it creates an environment that promotes interculturality and that focuses on the intercultural competence. By asking students to perform documenting activities, the teacher gives them, among others, the opportunity to share words and ideas on a given topic, using the brainstorming technique. In its turn, the artifact exploration involves the creation of a context that requires students to imagine they are invited to a special event typical of the target culture, to pay attention to what happens from the beginning to the end and to notice what is different from their own culture.

5. Research methodology

This section includes the research aimed at demonstrating the utility and efficiency of incorporating elements of British and American culture in ESP teaching process (more specifically, Business English). Therefore, the research hypotheses are the following: 1. the incorporation of British and American culture items in ESP teaching process enhances the efficiency of the teaching and learning process; 2. the insertion of British and American culture items in ESP teaching process contributes to the students' personal and intercultural development. Thus, the research is meant to prove the usefulness and efficiency of incorporating elements of culture and civilization into ESP classes.

The research sample will be represented by the students enrolled in International Business, second year of study. These students will be divided into two groups, i.e. a control and an experimental one.

As research methods, two surveys will be applied to students, and their participation in the activities will also be monitored by the observation method (i.e. a social research technique that involves the direct observation of phenomena in their natural setting, dealing in this case with classroom management items). In order to reach a high reliability and validity degree of the research result, the instructions for the completion of the questionnaire will be clearly explained to the students before administering it.

6. Findings

The analysis of the answers provided by students in the two surveys and the results obtained should validate the research hypotheses (i.e. efficiency of incorporating elements of culture and civilization into ESP classes and their positive impact on the students' personal development of knowledge, beliefs and attitudes towards others' culture).

For one month, the students from the control group will be taught ESP by means of traditional activities and techniques while those from the experimental group will be taught ESP by means of intercultural activities and techniques, in an interactive manner, in order to develop their intercultural communicative skills, respect, tolerance and appreciation towards others' culture, lifestyle, beliefs, values and attitudes. In this regard, during the ESP seminars, interculturality issues will be tackled, such as nationality, lifestyles, stereotypes, traditions and customs, systems of education and the learners' ability to cope with them, to understand, accept and use the knowledge acquired in order to interact properly with interlocutors from the target cultures.

For the purpose of this research, the students from both groups will be given two surveys, i.e. before and after the teaching period, in order to verify the validity of the hypotheses. Thus, the first survey will be applied before the teaching process and it will include questions related to the learners' general perception of British and American people, in order to assess the knowledge level of the two research groups. The answers provided by this first survey will also provide a comparison basis for the analysis of the results. The second survey will be applied at the end of the teaching period and it will mainly show the degree in which the incorporation of the key elements of culture and civilization influence the students' ability to understand, reflect upon and use

interculturality, in order to become intercultural competent speakers.

The first survey will include 15 open-answer questions about nationality, lifestyles, customs and traditions in the UK and the USA. For each question, the students will be required to give open answers according to the way they perceive general elements related to the British and American culture or leave the space empty if they do not know to answer it. Thus, in the first survey, the students will be required to express their general perception, beliefs and attitudes related to British and American people. The answers will show the students' level of knowledge and interest related to the target culture.

The second survey, which will end the cycle of the intercultural process, will assess the degree in which important elements of British and American culture and civilization will be assimilated and their contribution to the development of the students' intercultural communicative competence. Therefore, the analysis of the results provided by this second survey and their comparison with the ones provided by the first one will prove the validity or the invalidity of the research hypotheses, in terms of the efficiency of cultural items (i.e. the increase or decrease in the students' interest in the activities they will be involved in, the change in their attitude towards the target cultures, the development degree of their abilities to cope with the target cultures). Moreover, the results will also reveal if the students from the experimental group will improve their ESP skills and their general knowledge about the target cultures. This second survey will consist of 15 open-answer questions (similar to those applied at the beginning of the research).

The analysis of the results will focus on the differences and similarities in the students' answers (comparison made between the control and the experimental groups). Furthermore, it will also tackle the differences in the students' ESP skills and cultural knowledge and attitude towards interculturality, at two different chronological moments, i.e. before and after the teaching period (i.e. one month).

7. Conclusions

ESP teaching should not focus only on grammar structures and vocabulary items, as this does not help learners use the specialized language in the real world. The main purpose of ESP learning is represented by communication; learners must acquire those skills that help them understand others and make themselves understood, both in terms of action and identity. Having in view the rise of globalization and the increasingly multicultural work and study environments, the need to develop interculturality has become an urgent issue, as the intercultural competence requires good understanding and handling of the others' culture and uniqueness. As far as ESP teaching is concerned, the intercultural approach can transform learners from language users into intercultural speakers, stimulating their curiosity and enhancing their cultural knowledge and language skills.

The principles, practices and activities discussed in the theoretical section of the paper contribute to the understanding of the intercultural approach to ESP teaching, focusing as a whole on promoting intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence. The intercultural approach can improve the communication process, and raise people's interest in interaction, diversity and self-identity.

The second part of this paper proposes a pedagogical research aimed at assessing the usefulness and efficiency of incorporating the intercultural approach in ESP teaching. For this purpose, two surveys will be applied before and after the teaching stage and the results will be compared, in order to analyze the difference both between the two research groups (i.e. the control and the experimental one), in terms of their answers, but also between the two moments when these surveys will be applied. We expect that the answers given by the experimental group will demonstrate, at the end of the teaching stage, that their exposure to elements of British and American culture and civilization will have a positive impact, compared to the answers given before the teaching stage. The exposure should be also visible when comparing these answers with those given by the students from the control group, who will not be exposed to such elements of culture and civilization.

When learning ESP in an intercultural manner, students get engaged in new and attractive experiences involving the target (mainly British and American) culture. They become "social actors" engaged in problem-solving activities, role-plays and simulations, debates and discussions, improving thus their abilities to express their personal views and manifesting acceptance and tolerance towards different attitudes, ideas, values, etc.

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