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Importance of Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence among Students of ESL (Special Reference to Jaffna Students)

V. Suntharesan, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D. Scholar

Abstract

Since English has been branded as an international language, teaching for linguistic competence cannot be isolated from teaching for intercultural competence. Yet intercultural communication has not been paid due attention to in ESL (English as a Second Language) teaching in Sri Lanka. It prompts us to realize the fact that Sri Lankan students of English may master English in terms of its grammar and linguistic aspects but encounter several problems in intercultural communication.

This article aims to pay more attention to intercultural communication in English language teaching to develop students' intercultural communicative competence.

Further, the article emphasizes increasingly important role of intercultural communication in English language teaching and the necessity to develop students' intercultural communicative competence. Sample learning and teaching activities are presented to be integrated in ESL teaching and learning. As per data elicited by the author, an enlightenment of the cultural norms and values of native speakers of English to Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

V. Suntharesan, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D. Scholar

Importance of Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence among Students of ESL (Special Reference to Jaffna Students)

students of English as a Second language would cushion against the ‘culture shock’ learners may experience during the learning process. Further, the comparison of learners’ own culture with the foreign culture in the classroom would facilitate learning.

Key Words: Intercultural Communicative Competence, Culture Shock, Cognition, Affective, Cross Cultural Awareness, Cultural Assimilation

Introduction

Culture, an integral aspect of language learning, in several instances, has lost its significance in the background of ESL classes in Sri Lanka. The usual emphasis is on the development of the basic skills, i.e., speaking, listening, reading and writing. Many Sri Lankan teachers tend to believe in the “teaching language first, and introducing culture later” approach discussed by Omaggio (1993, pp.357-358). The question concerned with this notion is how language can be taught without culture. It is generally admitted that language is communication, but not without an understanding of culture. Students may master English in terms of its grammar, lexis, phonology, but have many problems in intercultural or cross-cultural communication which can be defined as an act of communication undertaken by individuals identified with groups exhibiting intergroup variation in shared social and cultural problems. These shared patterns, individually expressed are the major variables in the purpose, the manner, the mode, and the means by which the communicative process is affected (Damen, 1987).

Several researchers (e.g., Ortuno, 1991; Coffey, 1999) have illustrated the importance of cultural information in language teaching. They have pointed out that communication is an inter relationship between a language and its people and if cultural information is not taught as a part of communicative competence, complete communication is impossible. In case, people from different cultures meet and use English to communicate with one another, they will use it in culturally distinct ways. Therefore it is apparent that teaching intercultural interaction competence in English may well be among the most significant undertakings of the future. It stands to justify that culture needs to be integrated into the teaching of all language skills so that learners can learn to speak, but also to write, in culturally appropriate ways for specific purposes.

The quality of English teaching and learning is still a concern to many Sri Lankan educators. In Sri Lanka, most classrooms have been teacher-centered or teacher-fronted. Teaching methods are also outdated, relying entirely on strictly teacher-centered methods and rote learning. Therefore, intercultural training should be integrated in English language teaching; thus preparing learners to be both global and local speakers of English and to feel at home in international and national culture.

While getting students to practice the four skills, the teacher should get them to make some comparisons between the culture of English speaking countries and Sri

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

V. Suntharesan, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D. Scholar

Importance of Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence among Students of ESL (Special Reference to Jaffna Students)

Lankan culture. Culture is embedded in knowledge about the history, geography and institutions of the target language country. Cultural competence in this case comes to be viewed as a body of knowledge about the country. Students, of course, are expected to acquire knowledge about the L2 culture. Yet, “This receptive aspect of cultural competence is not sufficient”(Lessard-Clouston,1997,p.137). In the view of Tseng (2002), culture can be learned as a process rather than as a collection of facts. Therefore, it is necessary for learners to develop strategies by which they can further their own learning and interpret cultural acts in the context in which they occur, not some information about the target language cultural practices.

The fact that at present English has become a means of intercultural communication is unquestionable. In addition to the understanding of the target culture, awareness of the intercultural communication is indispensable in English language teaching. It is deplorable to note that insufficient attention is paid to the development of intercultural awareness. The opportunities for students in Jaffna, to develop their affective domain and behavioural skills are limited. This is partly due to the fact that English learning conditions in Jaffna are limited in the classroom. Jaffna students of English generally have few chances to improve their intercultural communicative competence outside the classroom. They generally have limited access to foreign English programmes on T.V. or in other media or to people from other cultures. Further, modified reading materials are not made available to students. In short, the only learning location is the classroom which is not conducive to the development of skills. Hence the provision of sufficient facilities to students to master skills in cross-culturally appropriate communication and behavior.

Objective

This article is intended to stress the need for integrating students’ intercultural awareness to enable them to communicate effectively in English not only with native speakers but also with non-native speakers in intercultural communication. The three domains of intercultural communicative competence, i.e. cognition, affect and behaviour have been identified to draw attention to promote the learning of intercultural communication beyond its cognitive domain. Some activities connected to teaching and learning are suggested to achieve progress in the current situation in ESL teaching.

Intercultural Communication

The term *intercultural communication* is defined as the communication between people from different cultures (Dodd, 1998; Ting-Toomey,1999). Ting-Toomey (1999) specifically elucidated it as “symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two or more different cultural communities negotiate shared meaning in an interactive situation.” (p.16). In the symbolic exchange process, people from different cultural communities encode and decode the verbal and nonverbal messages into comprehensive

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

V. Suntharesan, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D. Scholar

Importance of Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence among Students of ESL (Special Reference to Jaffna Students)

meanings. The dominance of cultural variability and diversity on communication is well reflected by this definition. Undoubtedly when two or more people from culturally varied backgrounds attempt to communicate, they are hindered by cultural barriers which are the results of differences in their patterns of life, social style, customs, world view, religion, philosophy etc.

Currently the role of intercultural communication in English language teaching is very important as English has become an international language worldwide to “convey national and international perceptions of reality which may be quite different from those of English speaking cultures” (Alptekin, 1984, p17). As one could observe the rapid progress of English being the international language, the number of people using English as the L2 grows further and further, and even surpasses the number of native speakers of English. It is also obvious that Sri Lankan learners of English use it to communicate more with the second learners of English rather than the native speakers of English. Hence greater emphasis laid on the efforts of motivating learners to exchange their ideas and cultures with not only the speakers of English but also those of other cultures.

The term “intercultural communicative competence” is defined as “the overall internal capacity of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication” (Kim, 1991, p.259) to efficiently negotiate a mode of communication and interaction by ability to use and adapt language use appropriately in culturally different contexts. The challenging features of intercultural communication include cultural differences, unfamiliarity, and incompatibility between the interactants. The function of English as a means of international and intercultural communication poses many challenges to teachers and learners of English. It is apparent that for communication to be successful, more acquisition of a linguistic code is not adequate. Rather different cultural values need to be dealt with properly. Communicative competence ought to be regarded as intercultural communicative competence including not only the knowledge of basic values and norms; competence in creating and interpreting linguistic aspects of social reality, but also “the cognitive, affective and behavioural adaptability of an individual’s internal system in all intercultural contexts” (Kim, 1991, p.259)

In this context, it is appropriate to analyze the characteristics of effective intercultural communicators. In the view of Baxter (1983), an effective cross-cultural communicator should tolerate ambiguity and also adapt to new social conventions and behaviour demands, and then understand his/her own cultural backgrounds and the effect of other cultures on personal behaviour .

In order to develop intercultural communicative competence, a kind of cross-cultural training is required and scholars like Martin (1994) suggest that focus should be on the three domains, i.e. cognition, affect and behavior.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

V. Suntharesan, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D. Scholar

Importance of Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence among Students of ESL (Special Reference to Jaffna Students)

Cognition

Several researchers (Lambert, 1999; Schmidt, 2000) point out the benefit of introducing specific knowledge topics such as history, politics, economics, geography etc. which could help the students engage in communicating with people belonging to the host culture. In this manner, students can gain certain understanding of specific areas of culture. Subsequently they achieve the basis for meaningful interaction with the people of the host culture. Anyhow it should be noted that if the interlocutors do not understand the underlying rules of behaviours, they are likely to face misunderstandings and as a result intercultural communication may breakdown. Besides, the possible risk of this approach is that the students' memory is challenged with too many facts and their tolerance is questionable.

Developing intercultural communicative competence needs to go beyond the mere transmissions of facts about a culture and enlighten the participants with information of how and why perform certain behaviours and have certain attitudes during cross cultural encounters. Language programme should be involved to familiarize the students with the major differences in fundamental cultural patterns of attitudes and behaviours.

Cognition is supposed to be the first step in any intercultural training. This stage aims to help students understand how their culture influences their interaction with people of other cultures. In order to fulfill it in a language programme, the language teacher can conduct lectures or present readings or listening materials to develop students' awareness of how behavioural attributions are made during interaction.

Affect

Intercultural interactions, in general, involve stress, adjustment, anxiety and uncertainty to some extent in participants due to unfamiliarity and cultural differences. It is also observable that participants may face complex emotions such as confusion and anger. Several researchers (Lambert, 1999; Kim, 1991; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994) have emphasized the aims of cross cultural awareness at the affective level, which is to enable the students to effectively manage their emotional reactions, thus maximizing the effectiveness of their interactions with members of other cultures. Intercultural training seems to be an effective means to offer learners the necessary awareness of why uncertainty and anxiety occur and to provide them with the essential tools and information to cope with that anxiety, and it also encourages them to subdue their biases and prejudices so that they can more effectively deal with them.

Numerous authors (Baxter, 1983; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994) have recommended different kinds of activities to develop learners' cross-cultural awareness at the affective level. Among such activities discussions, simulation, role-play etc. are found. A well designed simulation or role-play helps students to experience emotions, paving the way

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

V. Suntharesan, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D. Scholar

Importance of Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence among Students of ESL (Special Reference to Jaffna Students)

to understand how culture influences their behaviours and emotions. In these activities the learners need to consider and discuss either their own reaction or those of others when they take part in observing “posed” cross-cultural interactions. These activities are supposed to enable participants to be aware of the varied emotional reactions that may arise during cross-cultural contact and learn through the discussion stage of the activities, the reasons for the emotional reaction.

Nevertheless, the very fact that ought to be acknowledged is that knowledge of another culture and the influence of affective factors is not sufficient. For communication to occur smoothly, an understanding of the behaviours and social skills that are associated with communication is necessary.

Behaviour

Several scholars (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Gudykunst et al., 1996) endorse the view that behavioural practice is necessary for students to develop their intercultural communicative competence. Particularly, in promoting learners’ cross-cultural awareness, learners need to be made realize that changes in behavior lead to successful communication with culturally diverse people. Learners also attain the ability to study the behavior of other participants in cross-cultural encounters and familiarize with relevant social skills. In other words, learners should have the ability to discover, interpret, relate and adapt to the requirements posed by different contexts.

To develop an effective cross-cultural training integration, the above discussed three domains- cognitive, affective and behavioural, need to be incorporated to it.

Learning Activities

The following activities are suggested here with the aim of providing opportunities to develop cultural and interactional competence in addition to communicative competence

Instruction

Instructions can be programmed to tell students about the culturally different aspects which create the greatest problems. It’s also wise to pinpoint the cultural similarities which usually facilitate learning. It would enable students to have a broader perspective of their own language as well as the target language.

For example, in English culture, the owl is a symbol of wisdom whereas in the Jaffna Tamil culture the presence of the same bird in the vicinity of a house is treated as an instance of misfortune or a bad omen.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

V. Suntharesan, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D. Scholar

Importance of Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence among Students of ESL (Special Reference to Jaffna Students)

English people generally use bed to sleep and hence the phrase, “Go to bed” refers to the act of sleeping. People in Jaffna may sleep either on a mat or on the bare floor but they use the same phrase to refer to the act of sleeping. A Jaffna ESL student may get baffled when he comes across this phrase the literal meaning of which is somehow confusing to him.

Since Western countries have cold climate, warmth offers them physical comfort, ease and pleasure. Hence the use of the word ‘warm’ with its figurative meanings such as enthusiasm, heartiness etc. as in the phrases like “warm welcome”, “warm recommendation”, “warm congratulation” etc. Whereas in Tamil the language used by people living in countries experiencing hot climate, it is the term ‘*kulirmai*’ with its literal meaning coolness which may imply the above discussed figurative ideas as suggested by ‘warm’

Similarly, as English people usually have tea in a cup the phrase, “Cup of tea” has come into usage. But people of other cultures may use vessels other than a cup to hold tea. It’s another instance of confusion for a student of a culture other than the English when he hears this phrase.

The above examples demonstrate how cultural dissimilarities cause impediments among students in learning the second language.

In the following section, some commonness pertaining to the use of colour terms in Tamil and English is discussed.

The colour term *green* referred to as ‘*patfai*’ in Tamil is used to denote the state of being immature, inexperienced and easily fooled, in both English and Tamil. It could be noted that when leaves or fruits are unripe, they remain green. Hence, in the same sense, the term green is used to represent the quality of being immature. An example in English is the expression, ‘a young green novice’, while in Tamil, phrases like, ‘*patfai pillai*’ (literal meaning – green child) and ‘*patfai θanni:r*’ (literal meaning – green water) are used to refer to a person who is very innocent or harmless, to imply the state of being immature.

There is the Tamil proverb, “*ik katai ma:ddukku ak katai patfai*” (literal meaning – For the cow grazing on this side other side seems to be greener.) which is the equivalent of the English proverb, “The grass is greener on the other side” and one can observe the occurrence of the colour term *green* in both proverbs.

The figurative usage of green meaning flourishing, fresh or full of vigour as in the utterances like, ‘Memories are still green’ in English and ‘*pasumai ninaivuhal*’ (literal meaning – green memories) in Tamil is found in both languages.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

V. Suntharesan, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D. Scholar

Importance of Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence among Students of ESL (Special Reference to Jaffna Students)

Also, in both English and Tamil, colour term *red* is used to refer to the mental state of anger or shyness.

The term *pale* referred to as '*vəliɾæl*' in Tamil, is associated with emotional states, fear and shock in both languages.

Further, when one considers greetings in both Tamil and English exchanged between people who meet, one can note the sameness of their nature in conveying the message. Expressions such as "Good Morning", "How do you do" and their Tamil equivalents, "*ka:lai vanakkam*" and "*əppadi sukam*", etc., do not have any factual contents. They are not uttered to convey any fresh information but are intended to create a friendly atmosphere.

Remarks of Crystal (1997: p.10) in this context are worth mentioning here. "When someone sneezes, English stock response is 'Bless you'.

In Tongu, a sneeze is often taken to be a sign that your loved one is missing you. It is quite common for someone to say jokingly, after a sneeze, *lkai ke nofo noa mua* literally, 'Not to be nothing alas'. The sense intended is that the loved one who has 'caused' the sneeze should be thinking about nothing, instead of about the one who has sneezed.

In Tamil, when someone, particularly a child sneezes, response from others is '*nu:ru*', the literal meaning of which is 'hundred'. In fact, this response by others is to greet the child to have a long life.

Role Play

Role plays can be designed in such a manner that students imagine themselves in an intercultural situation outside the class room. They perform a role-play about a situation within one's own culture or another culture. It enables the students to have a better awareness and understanding of one's own culture and culture of other people.

Discussion

Discussion involves topics about intercultural aspects, contributing greatly to learners' motivation and critical thinking. Discussion turns out to be a fine learning atmosphere in which students can cooperate and interact better with one another and learn from one another. Students can participate in discussion in pairs or in groups.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

V. Suntharesan, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D. Scholar

Importance of Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence among Students of ESL (Special Reference to Jaffna Students)

Cultural Simulation Games

The purpose of this kind of games is to simulate culture shock. It is believed that experiencing culture shock prior to field experience will cushion actual shock by increasing awareness of cross-cultural problems.

Cultural Assimilations

A cultural assimilation is a brief description of critical incidents of cross-cultural behaviours that may be probably misunderstood by students. After the incident is described, students are presented with explanations. Then students have to select the correct explanation from the set of explanations presented. Culture assimilation helps students to identify differences in cultural values. Thus students are able to better understand the culturally complex issues. It is an effective way of teaching students to come out with culturally appropriate interpretations of the meaning of other behavior. It induces the students to be more sensitive to the differences in culture.

Each activity discussed above has some merits. These activities provide learners with opportunities to practice their learned behavior and thus develop their social skills. Further such activities would demonstrate how to behave and serve as a means of reducing stress and anxiety which may be generated in cross-cultural interactions. Students will be able to use the language interactively and communicatively for the meaning. If the activities are handled properly, they can develop students' intercultural communicative competence, build up their vocabulary, expand their grammatical accuracy and promote their communicative competence.

Conclusion

It need to be admitted that intercultural communication is important in English language teaching in Sri Lanka since English has been widely recognized as international language and Sri Lankan learners have greater avenues presently, particularly after the end of civil conflicts, to involve in intercultural communication.

Also it is obvious that the integration of cross-cultural awareness into language teaching is immensely significant in promoting students' communicative competence. As we have observed, many research findings provide us with insights into how teachers can incorporate intercultural dimensions through language teaching process. In order to obtain the optimum effectiveness of intercultural communicative competence, it is important to incorporate all three domains- cognitive, affective, and behavioral into English language teaching, As English has been broadly recognized as a means of intercultural communication, integration of intercultural communicative learning into English language teaching is felt essential.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

V. Suntharesan, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D. Scholar

Importance of Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence among Students of ESL (Special Reference to Jaffna Students)

Thus teachers of English are expected to focus their maximum to discuss cultural similarities as well as dissimilarities in different languages so as to develop the students' intercultural communicative competence by developing their cognitive faculty. Particularly, through assimilation of culturally different aspects found between languages concerned, students will be able to tolerate the culture shock to be experienced during the course of second language learning.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

V. Suntharesan, M.Phil. in Linguistics, Ph.D. Scholar

Importance of Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence among Students of ESL (Special Reference to Jaffna Students)

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

13 : 2 February 2013

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Importance of Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence among Students of ESL (Special Reference to Jaffna Students)