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Intercultural Communicative Competence in Secondary ELT – 30 Years of Change



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The opportunity for our secondary learners to communicate with others in English has never been so exciting, thanks to the growth of the Internet. Whether through chats, messages, forums, blogs or video clips, teenagers want their say! And on the international stage, this usually means in English. 2015 was not just a year of chit-chat. Serious issues affecting our world were discussed, from civil rights to social injustices (for evidence, see these top Twitter hashtags of 2015):

Top Twitter hashtags of 2015



Throughout this flurry of communication, what was taking place with the walls of our secondary English language classrooms? Which varieties of English were being taught? Which cultures were being focused on? From whose perspectives? Were we preparing our secondary learners to interact using English in an increasingly globalised world?

Reflections for us, as ELT practitioners:

- English is owned by everyone in today's world. Both L1 and L2 speakers of English communicate on the Internet, using English as their medium.
- If we want to prepare our learners for success in a global world, 'World Englishes' are essential for our classrooms. In 2015, numerous varieties of English were used on the Internet.
- Teenagers were equally involved in cross-cultural communication in 2015, according to Time magazine. Many teens used Instagram to argue for gender equality and/or YouTube to speak out against racial profiling. We should be careful not to equate age with a genuine interest in social justice. Teens want to participate, too!
- Everyone who participates in a cross-cultural discussion faces the dual challenge of culture and language. Given that language and culture belong intrinsically together (Kramsch, 1993), we must take this cultural dimension more seriously in our language teaching.

Intercultural Communicative Competence

Importantly, our secondary English language learners should develop 'intercultural communicative competence' (ICC) (Byram, 1997). To understand the meaning of ICC, let us return to the social media posts of 2015. Misunderstandings frequently arise from misinterpretations of the values, beliefs and behaviours of others. ICC, however, is achieved when understanding of values and beliefs occurs (with or without reaching consensus, as acceptance does not necessarily equate with agreement, Alptekin, 2002). Finally, those who demonstrated "intercultural communicative competence" were the learners who gained insight into both their own and the foreign culture (Kramsch, 1993).

The ultimate goal of ICC is to be able to ‘stand on the bridge’ or indeed ‘be the bridge’ between people of different languages and cultures (Byram, 2006). It is not necessary to campaign or be a hero. By standing on a bridge, you correctly interpret other people’s messages through their eyes and/or you enable others to see your culture through your eyes. A clear example from 2015 was 16-year-old Syrian Noujain Mustaffa, when she described her journey across Europe by wheelchair from her war-torn home in Syria, she became “a bridge”. Her intercultural competence in English, as well as her humour and honesty, helped her to succeed in creating empathy in her listeners.

ICC in Secondary ELT

In order for our learners to develop ICC, we need materials that (a) connect language and culture, (b) reflect the reality of world cultures, (c) include diversity in terms of nationality, religion, ethnicity, social class, age, gender, disability and sexual orientation and (d) enable learners to gain insight into both their own and foreign cultures. Some desirable changes to our materials include:

1) Exposure to culture

- ☑ Culture integrated into the whole course, rather than assigned to a ‘culture section’
- ☑ A shift away from the dominance of the UK / USA toward the whole world
- ☑ Fewer ‘facts’ about cultures and more insight provided into attitudes, behaviours and beliefs
- ☑ Greater challenge to stereotypes when describing a culture and its people, including artwork
- ☑ Audio material which exposes learners to World Englishes

2) Standard ICC classroom activities (Byram et al, 2002):

- ☑ Notice, compare, and contrast (e.g. How are these people’s beliefs similar or different?)
- ☑ Reflect and personalise (e.g. Are there problems like this in your country?)
- ☑ Explore a culture further (e.g. What else can you find out? Do a web quest / project).
- ☑ Intercultural exchanges (e.g. Post a blog about movies from different countries, other than the USA / UK on the Internet and encourage others to respond).

ICC in Secondary Course Books

Having reviewed over 30 lower and upper secondary ELT course books, two distinct phases emerge from the past 30 years. The following comments refer specifically to cultural trends and ICC:

The ‘Downton Abbey’ Era (c. 1986 – 1999)

During this phase, publishers focused on learning language, rather than on culture. Intercultural understanding was not yet convincingly nor consistently embraced neither was it promoted in ELT. The goal was generally to acquire cultural knowledge about the ‘host nation’. The implicit notion was that English was ‘owned’ by an Inner Circle nation (usually the UK or the USA) and as such, learners from the Expanding Circle should study (selected bits of) that culture. Schools and/or learners chose either a British or American course, depending on which ‘host nation’ they preferred, and were provided with a stereotyped view of its culture. The UK for example, was presented as a nation of white, middle class, Christian, heterosexual inhabitants, all of whom spoke ‘Queen’s English’. These people ate roast beef, visited castles, and in true Downton style, even drank 4 o’clock tea in some course books! Prodromou (1988) aptly summarises this as, ‘[learners] leave their three-dimensional humanity outside and enter the plastic world of EFL textbooks where life is safe and innocent and does not say or do anything. Most textbooks present an Anglo-centric, male-dominated, middle-class utopia’ (ELT Journal 1988:79).

Brown (1993) highlights the changing status of English as a World Language and the increasing number of users in the Outer and Expanding Circles, yet courses remained fixated on British and American English for the most part. One course that stands out for boldly departing from the Downton Era and challenging these rigid paradigms is *Cambridge English for Schools* (Hicks, D. and Littlejohn, A., CUP). Some key features of the course included:

- A multicultural Britain, whose inhabitants spoke with various British accents in the videos
- A variety of countries (from the Outer and Expanding circles) such as India
- A variety of World Englishes, such as Australian English
- Children lived real lives, and experienced real challenges for example, school bullying
- Real-world topics were included for learners to explore and discuss, e.g., apartheid in South Africa
- The Parcel of English project twinned each class with a class from another part of the world. They enthusiastically exchanged materials and information about their countries

The 'McDonalds' Era (c. 2000 - 2010)

From around the year 2000, lower and upper secondary ELT course books adopted a new focus. The key development was to start to commonly teach language and skills in the context of Western pop culture, such as music, TV, sports and celebrities. Additionally, the UK / US was often represented through the eyes of 'photo story' characters, including non-white and multi-faith people, gender became more balanced, and stereotypes better challenged. Nevertheless, people with visible disabilities still tended to appear in 'S/he's a hero' articles rather than represented in everyday life, Africa continued to be associated with poverty, and few books challenged the inappropriate Colombian stereotype of drug barons, for example.

This pop culture approach, while refreshing at first, came to be criticised by many educators as 'McDonaldsisation', on the grounds that materials are totally predictable and standardised (Littlejohn, 2012). Other criticisms made are that we should avoid pandering to our learners' 'favourite bands'. Firstly, learners probably know more about the band than we do and secondly, there is a reason why teenagers often close their bedroom doors at home; they view these bands as 'their' private world, not to be invaded by adults. Yet it was during the 2000s that we can see the rise of Intercultural Competence (ICC). In theory, the ultimate goal of learning a foreign language is no longer acquiring 'native-speaker competence', or even communicative competence, but rather an ICC approach (Guilherme, 2002). ICC even came to be considered by some educators as "the fifth skill". My content analysis related to interculturality in ELT course books, however reveals that many 'culture' sections still relied on acquiring facts about other countries, with the linguistic goal of increasing learners' lexis and developing their reading sub-skills. So, a task like Read this text about Machu Picchu and answer the questions places little or no emphasis on understanding the attitudes or behaviours of the Peruvian people (only facts about a landmark). Worse still, many courses avoid so-called 'risky' topics including Politics, Alcohol, Religion, Sex/sexuality, Narcotics, Isms, and Pork. Much has been written about PARSNIPs (topics authors should avoid in course books). However, for the purposes of this article, it is valid to ask: by limiting these topics, are we not also limiting our secondary learners' ICC? How can they truly understand cultures or discuss them without these and other 'hot' topics?

Fortunately, from 2010-2015 we have witnessed an increase in ICC-based course books, illustrated by the following examples:

- *IB English B* (Kawther Saa'd Aldin et al., OUP). More challenging, real-world themes are introduced, for example, racism. Learners are then invited to investigate the history of the notion: Why is the colour black often equated with negative issues? Learners explore before providing their own opinions. They challenge existing frameworks, reflect, and discuss.
- *Our World levels 4-6* (Cory-Wright, K. and Scro, R., National Geographic Learning). There is no "host country" in *Our World*. It is set globally, aimed at global citizens, with an original, broad, and non-stereotypical focus on cultures. Learners also read about beliefs and attitudes of international explorers in order to explore their own.
- *Eyes Open* (Goldstein, B. and Jones C., CUP). Developed with Discovery Education™, learners explore countries and people around the world. The aim is to develop a deeper understanding of the world through global topics.

- **Next Move / Move it! (Barraclough C. et al, Pearson)** Written for individual markets, the texts are about real teenagers from a variety of cultures (e.g. Afghanistan and Uganda). Questions prompt meaningful cross-cultural comparisons.

A New Era?

It is approximately 15 years since many of us recognised the need to progress from communicative competence to intercultural communicative competence in ELT, yet commercial publishers of secondary course books have been disappointingly slow to develop their materials accordingly. Too few English language course books reflect the diversity of the real world and too few enable our secondary English language learners to better understand other people's cultures, or even their own.

However, there are reasons to be optimistic. In today's 21st century world, many secondary learners have access to the intercultural English-medium of the Internet. In my experience, they often show real interest in ICC on a variety of topics and issues. Clearly, the opportunity and motivation for genuine focus on ICC exists among these age groups. As for the classroom materials necessary for developing teenagers' ICC skills, recent course books indicate that we may be moving on from 'The McDonalds Era' and toward courses which positively promote ICC. Could it be that a focus on celebrating diversity, promoting peace, and encouraging empathy - so necessary in contemporary times, will accompany this long-awaited era of ICC? I personally believe so.

Happy 30th Anniversary! ■

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