ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Intercultural Communicative Competence in English Language Teaching: Towards Validation of Student Identity

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ABSTRACT

While the use of appropriate linguistic items is essential for successful communication in any language, sociocultural factors also play an important role. Intercultural communicative competence is one dimension of sociocultural awareness that has been recognized as integral for communicative competence, but its practical application remains a challenge, possibly due to the fact that language educators tend to have more knowledge about the target language than its related cultural aspects (Celce-Murcia, 2007). While cultural references are, even if implicitly, prevalent in textbooks, teacher discourse, and the media, they are often reduced to "American" or "British" while the culture of speakers of English from many other countries, including Brazil, are often ignored. Another important dimension that positively affects language and cultural learning is the representation of one's identity (Norton, 2013). In this sense, implementing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in English Language Teaching (ELT) allows learners to express their identities while engaging in meaningful discussions about cultural views. This article provides a brief overview of communicative competence and draws on Byram's (1997) model of ICC to suggest pedagogical applications aimed at validating student identity in English language classes, particularly but not exclusively, in Brazil.

KEYWORDS: Intercultural communicative competence; Identity and language learning; English Language Teaching; Communicative competence.

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1. ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN BRAZIL

Due to colonization, the official language in Brazil is Portuguese, but the country is linguistically diverse with over 250 languages. A vast majority of these languages are indigenous languages such as Tupi, Tupi-Guarani, Aruak, among many others (IBGE, 2010). In addition, many immigrant languages such as Japanese, German, Italian, and French, among others, contribute to this rich diversity. All these languages are linked to their cultures, and educational contexts play a pivotal role in recognizing, respecting, and valuing both language and culture.

In the past few decades, the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) began to address linguistic and cultural diversity; rather than focusing on teaching aspects related only to the English language, ELT includes sociocultural factors acknowledging how language and culture are related to one's identity. Without a doubt, English is the most popular foreign language many Brazilians wish to learn for economic, educational, and social reasons (Brasil, 1998), a reality that applies to many other non-English speaking countries as well. English instruction in grades 5-11 of most state schools in Brazil is compulsory, from elementary to secondary education (Bastos, 2005). However, although the National Curriculum Parameters rightly suggest that the Brazilian cultural plurality be acknowledged and that varieties of the English language be included in the English curriculum (Brasil, 1998), it fails to recognize the importance of the development of interculturality and the relationship between language and culture in the representation of one's identity.

In this article, I will first introduce the role of culture in communicative competence; then, I will present one model of intercultural competence that can be used in language learning. Finally, I will discuss identity as an integral dimension in ELT that cannot be ignored, and suggest three educational projects that can be applied in the English classroom.

2. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND CULTURE

Although the field of linguistics is relatively new, it has witnessed several attempts to conceptualize what it means to communicate effectively in a given language. In its early years, with generative linguistics, the concept of competence was theorized as the knowledge of language items (e.g., grammar, phonology, morphology, etc.) that refers to what one knows about language, regarding the 'native-speaker' who is part of a monolingual community as the ideal speaker-hearer of a language (Chomsky, 1965). Reactions to this purist theory began to burgeon with Hymes (1972) drawing from anthropology to redefine the concept of competence and arguing that social factors play a key role in communication. For Hymes, knowing how to use a language reflects knowing how to use it appropriately in different social contexts. Since then, the concept of communicative competence has gained significant attention and has been reconceptualized over the years (see Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia, 1995; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurell, 1995; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000 for a historical perspective), moving away from the native speaker model.

Any discussion of communicative competence in recent years recognizes the importance of the use of the language in social contexts, also referred to as pragmatics. Bachman (1990) uses pragmatics as an overarching term that includes sociolinguistic competence and its related elements: sensitivity to differences in dialect or variety, in register, naturalness, cultural references, and figurative language. For example, a competent speaker is one who has awareness that a language can be used distinctively in certain geographical locations and/or within different social groups, and that certain linguistic features carry cultural meanings. Although Bachman's (1990) model rightly acknowledges the sociocultural dimension, it is limited to the appropriate use of the language itself. Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000) go beyond linguistic references and point out that pragmatics also includes "people's intentions, assumptions, beliefs, goals" that are socioculturally appropriate (p. 19). More recently, Celce-Murcia (2007) has warned ELT practitioners that "if the goal of language instruction is communicative competence, language instruction must be integrated with cultural and cross-cultural instruction" (p. 51). Thus, besides knowledge of linguistic cultural appropriateness, being sensitive to people's underlying cultural beliefs when using language is crucial for effective communication.

3. WHAT IS ICC?

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been endorsed by many important educational organizations around the world (ACTFL, 2006, Council of Europe, 2001, UNESCO, 2009) and, given that many people use English to communicate with others who com from different cultural backgrounds, it is essential that ICC be integrated in language teaching, including ELT. The Council of Europe's (2001) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is one important document used worldwide that highly recommends the integration of cultural dimensions in language teaching. It defines that one main goal of interculturality is to "help language learners to interact with speakers of other languages on equal terms, and to be aware of their own identities and those of their interlocutors" (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002, p. 7). In essence, when language learners develop intercultural awareness, they can convey information effectively and also develop a "human relationship with people of other languages and cultures" (Byram *et al.*, 2002, p. 7). This implies that any speaker of English who wishes to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds needs to develop intercultural awareness for effective communication.

Cultural concepts, if learned in English classrooms, need to be treated with caution as the spread of the English language around the world implies that many non-native speakers of English use the language to communicate with other non-native speakers. Discussions about culture in the English classroom need to go beyond references to the native speaker who is part of a monolingual community, that is, learning about American or British cultural aspects could reduce the possibilities of acknowledging other less dominant cultural groups. For example, varieties of English used in certain geographical locations and social groups, as well as in English-speaking (e.g., South Africa) and non English-speaking countries (e.g., Brazil)

need to be acknowledged. As well, considering one of the functions of the use of English is to facilitate communication among speakers from different cultures and languages (McKay, 2002), exploring cultures that are not related to the English language (e.g., indigenous and immigrant languages in Brazil, varieties of Portuguese, among other factors) is another goal of ICC.

In Brazil, it is common for speakers of Portuguese as a mother tongue to use English to communicate with non-native speakers of English (speakers of Chinese as a mother tongue, for example). In this case, both speakers use English as a lingua franca (ELF)[1]. Considering language is linked to culture, one particular language has variations and so does its culture. For example, someone who is a native speaker of English from India is not expected to have the same cultural orientations as a native speaker of English from Australia. Thus, understanding people's cultural orientations is important for successful communication.

4. REFLECTIONS ON THE INTEGRATION OF ICC IN ELT

Discussions of culture and the integration of ICC in English learning must include cultural relativism as a pivotal parameter. Nieto (2010) points out that cultures can be interpreted in relation to many aspects, including "the other," traditions, and values. In the case of ELT in Brazil, this means that teaching about dominant cultures related to the English language, such as North American (US and Canada) and British is to maintain the dominance of these cultures in the classroom and not to allow less dominant ones to be explored and validated. An ethnocentric view of culture, which considers a given culture more or less valuable in relation to another, is not accurate (Bennett, 1993), and drawing students' attention to relations of power in ICC is important. A reasonable consideration is to address culture as "dynamic; multifaceted; embedded in context; influenced by social, economic, and political factors; created and socially constructed; learned; and dialectical" (Nieto, 2010, p. 137).

Analyses of cultures, particularly in English language classrooms, must include an in-depth reflection on attitudes from encounters with people from other cultures, without placing more or less value within a particular culture; in fact, this reflection must include positive experiences and benefits that can be drawn from these encounters (Beacco, 2011). Essentially, any discussion of culture in English classes must go beyond stereotypical views. In Brazil, for example, English classes can include materials that showcase how the English language is diverse and how people from different cultural backgrounds use English to communicate. One example is the inclusion of listening materials with speakers from English-speaking countries such as Jamaica, New Zealand, Singapore, and Tanzania, as well as speakers of English from non-English speaking countries such as Korea, Spain and Russia. It is important to note that teaching methodologies such as Communicative

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[1] English as a lingua franca – or ELF as it is commonly known in the literature – is a term that refers to the use of English as a language of choice among speakers who come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds; ELF communication is not particularly linked to a specific geographical location but means that English is not the first language of the participants (Jenkins, 2009).

Language Teaching (CLT), Task-based Learning (TBL), and the Audiolingual Method[2], among others, still have a place in the English classroom; however, other factors such as awareness of people's identities and the sociocultural context are also critical dimensions (Galante, 2014a). These concepts are integral to ICC and its five "knowledges".

5. THE FIVE "KNOWLEDGES" OF ICC

Several models of ICC have been conceptualized to suit diverse contexts – including business relations, health care, and organizational management, among others (see Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009 for a comprehensive review). In the context of language learning, Byram's (1997) model of ICC is one of the most influential and widely cited models that guide language teachers to integrate interculturality in the classroom. This ICC model includes five subsets of *savoirs*, or "knowledges:"

1. Attitudes relativizing self, valuing other (*savoir être*);
2. Education: political education, critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*);
3. Skills: discover and/or interact (*savoir aprendre/faire*);
4. Knowledge of self and other; of interaction: individual and societal (*savoirs*)
5. Skills interpret and relate (*savoir comprendre*) (p. 34)

Byram's model (1997) values key dimensions in relation to culture: cultural relativism, critical awareness, empathy, curiosity, and cultural identity. Knowledge about cultures from one's own country as well as other countries is important for effective communication. In Brazil, given the popularity of the use of English as a lingua franca, English learners need to develop an understanding of speakers of English from many different countries. In the English class, they can critically analyze cultural knowledge from other countries in relation to their own culture. When interacting with speakers of English from other countries, it is also relevant to understand how communication styles work. For example, one culture may value the use of body language (e.g., eye contact, closeness, gesticulation) differently from others. Skills of critical analysis and interpretation of cultures through relativism is necessary for effective practical interactions; a critical self-reflection about decentralizing one's cultural beliefs and viewing cultures from an ethnorelative, rather than ethnocentric perspective is encouraged.

Through the five knowledges proposed by Byram (1997), language learners can identify misunderstandings while interacting with people from other cultures, explain their conflicting interpretations, define the need for further learning, and take action to avoid such misunderstandings. As previously mentioned, Brazil is linguistically and culturally diverse and making use of this diversity to develop ICC particularly, but not exclusively, in educational contexts is necessary. Given that Brazilian speakers of English often use the language to communicate with people from other countries,

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[2] For a comprehensive review of English teaching methodologies see Brown, 2014.

ICC offers an invaluable opportunity to engage them in learning about other cultures. Learning about dominant cultures such as American and/ or British is not enough for communicative competence as it limits certain cultures as representative of an entire country, with no geographical or social diversity. As well, given that the English language has an international status, with many non-native speakers of English worldwide, it is not primarily linked to countries where it is spoken as an official language (McKay, 2002).

In short, being able to communicate in English, especially among people who will use English as a lingua franca, includes knowing how to communicate with people from several linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It is also important to point out that one particular language has several varieties so viewing languages and cultures from a monolithic perspective is not accurate in a globalized world. The integration of ICC in English classes in Brazil offers students an opportunity to learn about many other cultures that are not necessarily related to native speakers of English. In this sense, it is important that teachers are mindful to include pedagogical resources that promote linguistic and cultural diversity in English, and also provide opportunities for students to express their identities.

6. IDENTITY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Identity has been **recognized** as an important factor in the development of an additional language (Gass, 1998). In the past decade, research has suggested that student identity cannot be ignored in the classroom (Cummins, 2001; Norton & Toohey, 2011). In her seminal book *Identity and language learning*, Bonny Norton (2013) has defined identity as "the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how the relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 4). Negotiating identities can be particularly beneficial in language classrooms where students can voice their beliefs, values, and issues from a cultural standpoint. Agency is key for identity expression; in the language classroom, teachers should encourage students to develop the ability to critically question meanings from pre-existing dominant discourse (Norton, 2013) that are often present in textbooks, teacher/school discourse, and the media. It is important that Brazilian English learners be aware of meanings from texts and pedagogical materials, and how cultural concepts are explored through words and images. The concept of agency has its origins on Freire's concept of critical pedagogy (1970), and it remains timely as it offers a strong foundation for the analysis of the relationships among teachers, students, and the community. Byram, *et al.* (2002) have rightly identified that social interaction in the language classroom should acknowledge "respect for human dignity and equality of human rights" (p. 13); in this sense, critical discussions of identity through ICC offer Brazilian English learners a unique opportunity to express their worldviews, including their values, beliefs, and identities. As such, critical pedagogy entails the use of language to problematize worldviews and to construct and reconstruct knowledge through social relations of cultures, race, ethnicity, gender, and identities.

7. EXPLORING ICC AND IDENTITY IN ELT

Language learning classrooms, including English classrooms in Brazil, are a perfect place to explore ICC. Considering Brazilian English learners are likely to use English to communicate with people from English-speaking and non-English speaking countries, it is important that they are aware of cultural differences in communication styles, as well as different values, ideologies, and beliefs. As previously noted, culture and language are tightly linked (Byram, 1991; Nieto, 2010) and cultural awareness is an integral dimension in language teaching (Beacco, 2011). However, engaging students in intercultural dialogues is often disregarded in language classrooms, possibly due to a lack of teacher preparation (Celce-Murcia, 2007), which is not surprising given that most courses for language teacher preparation do not yet include an exploration of the cultural dimensions of language learning.

One way to promote intercultural dialogues is to watch and carry out projects that invite students to reflect on the beliefs, values, and issues of people from diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. Several projects (see Byram, Nichols, & Stevens, 2001 for samples) have been used in the English language classroom to address the cultural dimension. In the 2000s, digital literacies, more specifically video projects, have been a helpful way to cross geographical barriers, allowing contact with different cultures and exploration of people's cultural identities easily accessible (see samples in Cummins & Early, 2010; Darvin & Norton, 2014; Lotherington & Jenson, 2011; Galante, 2014b; Galante, 2015; Toohey, Dagenais, & Schulze, 2012). Below is a description of three sample video projects that can engage students in applying Byram's (1997) five knowledges of ICC in the English classroom, while expressing their identities (digital samples of these projects can be found at www.breakingtheinvisiblewall.com under the tab *Identity Projects*):

1. **My multicultural identity:** Students are asked to reflect on their life trajectories and include all cultural backgrounds that might have shaped their identity: heritage (culture of the parents/family); the country/city/neighborhood in which they were born; culture practiced at home, school, work; cultures learned when traveling (to other cities, regions, countries); media (including music, TV, movies, art, etc.); beliefs; and others of their own. The aim is to encourage students to reflect on the many cultural orientations they may possess by moving away from an ethnocentric view of cultures;

2. **Your accent is funny:** The provocative title of the project is aimed at stimulating students to reflect on power relations associated to socially constructed notions of prestige related to accents. Students are invited to recall situations in which people discriminated against or were discriminated against because of other types of accents. They may be required to think of accents used in their mother tongue (e.g., Portuguese) or any other language they know and move towards English. Although stereotypical views may be discussed, the reflection should go beyond stereotypes; the discussion should be a critical evaluation from a social justice viewpoint that includes factors that contribute to an imbalance of power. This is also an opportunity for students to teach their peers about different accents of languages they

know and learn about and appreciate the diversity of accents in many languages;

3. **Why don't you think they way I do?:** Students are invited to recall misunderstandings they have had when communicating with people from other cultures, why such misunderstandings happened, and invite them for a reflection that includes beliefs, values, and cultural orientations from both the students and his/her interlocutor. Examples could include differences in opinions related to what constitutes a family (e.g., single parent; couples with no kids); number of hours that should be dedicated to family, study, or work; views on social issues (e.g., homelessness, security), among others. It is important to note these differences may not be limited to a country as this could happen in different geographical and social contexts within the same country.

The video projects suggested above could be made available online for other students to watch and reflect on the issues raised during their peers' intercultural encounters. These videos could be shared publicly (e.g., YouTube or Vimeo) or privately (e.g., VoiceThread). As part of the project, the videos could be played during class time and students could complete a written or oral reflection on the stories told by their peers. For example, the reflection could ask students to consider whether they had experienced a similar story, how they dealt with the situation, and how mutual understanding could be reached between the people from different cultural backgrounds. It is important to note that the intercultural reflections suggested should move away from ethnocentric views of cultures and adopt cultural relativism, so understanding and mutual respect can be major goals (Bredella, 1993). Also, the main goal is to encourage dialogues from different cultural viewpoints rather than adaptation to only one cultural orientation. In this sense, respect rather than tolerance is a salient aspect of ICC: the ability to understand other cultural perspectives and accept cultural relativism is necessary.

CONCLUSION

This article has briefly introduced how the notion of communicative competence in ELT has evolved to recognize the importance of the inextricable integration of language and culture. Exploring cultural and intercultural dimensions in language learning is necessary, particularly, but not exclusively, among speakers of English as a lingua franca. Brazil is a culturally diverse country and encouraging students to reflect on their own cultural background in relation to others is paramount for intercultural awareness. Through a critical perspective, ICC offers Brazilian students unique opportunities to express their identities and worldviews. The integration of ICC in ELT is particularly beneficial for students as it prepares them to communicate with people from other cultures in English, understand, respect, and value others' cultural identities, as well as their own.

Through Byram's ICC model (1997), students can relativize cultures, position themselves in relation to cultural awareness, learn about their own culture and the other's, and interpret and relate to cultures. They are also given the opportunity to use English while reflecting on the various

cultures related to the English language, as well as the ones that make up the Brazilian cultural landscape, which include immigrant and indigenous languages, and varieties of the official language of the country. Discussions that go beyond stereotypical views of cultures and cultures of native-speakers of English are essential for preparing Brazilian English speakers for successful communication in the increasingly global community. Exploring identities through video projects provides students an opportunity to share their stories, personal experiences, and self-reflection about their own and others' cultures. Through these projects, reflections about identities enhance students' intercultural communication awareness and competence while using the English language.

English language teachers need to provide opportunities for students to reflect on and express their and others' identities and cultural views. The ultimate goal is to open up possibilities to explore the use of English in different contexts (e.g., English and non English-speaking countries) and cultures and allow students to affirm their identities while respecting linguistic and cultural diversity.

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