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Intercultural Communicative Competence: A Brief Review of Current Thinking and Literature

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Masoud Kermani Kojour

Department of English Language, Imam Khomeini University of Naval Sciences
Nowshahr, Iran

ABSTRACT

The present study aims to review current thinking and understanding of the issue of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) especially in foreign language education contexts. There are serious stances on the part of scholars in foreign language contexts, which must be given some serious thinking and consideration in order to uncover the hidden agendas regarding ICC. After all, it seems still unclear in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts whether to try to improve the way of thinking regarding the perspective of current intercultural communicative competence, whether there should be a separation of the cultural values from the target language and only integrate language learners' native culture with the target language. Given the development of technology and globalization, what is the right thing to do? This is a serious issue which needs much attention and contemplation by the interested scholars. By presenting the existing gaps in the literature, the paper maneuvers on the challenging notes on benefiting from culture in English Language Teaching (ELT) and, on the other hand, dividing language and culture by merely elaborating on the communicative aspect of language learning and teaching. The study puts the audience into question that although recent views are focusing on taking English as an international means of communication, there exist serious beliefs regarding the separation of language and culture, which demands more thinking and probably serious revisions.

Keywords: Intercultural communicative competence, culture shock, EFL, ELT, Literature review

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1. Introduction

It has been widely held that teaching a second or foreign language to some learners means making or helping them become communicatively competent as a native speaker of that particular language. This view originates in Hymes' (1972) proposal of the concept of communicative competence. In addition to grammatical competence, one needs to consider people's

ability to use language appropriately so as to understand first language acquisition. Therefore, more emphasis was put on sociolinguistic competence as it was influential in people's ability to communicate with one another.

Hymes' communicative competence was not presented for the sake of foreign language learning and teaching and cross-cultural communication. It was

related to social interactions and communications in social communities with one similar language. On the contrary, two other models proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) and van Ek (1986) gained popularity in the USA and Europe respectively (Byram, 1997).

After revising the previous model presented by Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983) added discourse competence to the previous three competencies of grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic. Since then, there has been notable endeavor to get it embedded in learners' head. To implement this concept, communicative approach started "calling the shots". Regarding the revised version put forward later by Canale (1983), grammatical competence refers to the knowledge of the language code, i.e., grammatical rules, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, etc. The second competence, sociolinguistic competence, is the mastery of the sociocultural code of language use, i.e., appropriate application of vocabulary, register, politeness and style in a given situation). The third is discourse competence which is the ability to combine language structures into different types of cohesive texts (e.g., political speech, poetry). Finally, the strategic competence consists of the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies which enhance the efficiency of communication and, where necessary, enable the learner to overcome difficulties when communication breakdowns occur.

van Ek's model (1986), in which there are six components, was more detailed. *Linguistic competence* is the ability to produce and interpret meaningful utterances, which are formed in accordance with the rules of the language. *Sociolinguistic competence* refers to the awareness of ways in which the choice of

language forms is determined by such conditions as setting, relationship etc. *Discourse competence* deals with the ability to use appropriate strategy in the construction and interpretation of texts. *Strategic competence* is when communication is difficult, we have to find ways of 'getting our meanings across' or of 'finding out what somebody means; these are communication strategies, such as rephrasing, assigning for clarification. *Socio-cultural competence* is based on the knowledge that socially and culturally, languages are differently framed. Being in one specific cultural or social situation or trying to master it outside the context requires a specific reference frame. Finally, *social competence* involves both the will and the skill to interact with others, involving motivation, attitudes, self-confidence, empathy and the ability to handle social situations.

Right after the proposal of the concept of communicative competence as a dead end of learning and teaching a second or foreign language, particularly English, everything related to language teaching and learning was designed to bestow learners with the aimed competence. Alas! Soon it was announced that native speakership turned into a dream (Paikeday, 1985). As one of the shortcomings of this view, it is argued that it is wrong or impossible to expect that a learners of a foreign language needs to consider a native speaker as a role model. It is wrong to expect language learners to become someone else after years of studying a given language. In the same vein, Byram (1997) argues that this view suggests that "foreign language learners should model themselves on first language speakers, ignoring the significance of the social identities and cultural competence of the learner in any intercultural interaction" (p. 8).



Whereas the above models try to capture the necessities of learning a foreign language, they are not without shortcomings. It has been shown that expecting foreign language learners to become another native speaker after learning a foreign language is just a figment of our imagination (Byram, 1997). Very few language learners managed to acquire a native-like competence. Alptekin (2002) deems that communicative competence is “as utopian as the notion of the idealized native speaker-listener” (p.59). Following this view of communicative competence, the aim of foreign and second language education became that of enculturation and native speakership. Through learning a foreign language, e.g., English, people really need to unquestionably internalize and adopt foreign language culture. The goal of language learning became integrating language and culture and turning into English-speaking people. Still, it is not far from truth and reality to claim that the overwhelming majority of language teachers around the world, especially in EFL contexts, have this in mind that one day their learners must be able to speak like a native speaker.

Alptekin (2002) argues that “the concept of communicative competence, with its orientation as native speaker norms, is as utopian as the notion of the idealized native speaker-listener” (p. 59). He discards the concept of native speakership in a sense that the idea of speaking a second or a foreign language and following the norms of a particular foreign language was and is a myth which we have now come to realize. This realization has its root in the changes in the quality of people’s interaction around the world.

Thanks to the current development in technology and telecommunication, people in particular community easily find

themselves in contact with others in other cultures. The amount of the intercultural communication has dramatically increased as Sharifian (2013) stated that “both native speakers and non-native speakers need intercultural communication skills” (p. 4). For the past two decades the issue of intercultural communicative competence has attracted scholars’ attention so much that one may feel scared to talk about communicative competence without referring to the issue of culture. In different aspects of life, namely economy, education, the traces of globalization are readily available. Thus, the suggestions and attempts to include this type of competence in language education materials and curriculum are not unreasonable or something eccentric as it is argued to be a vital competence in our contemporary world, especially (but not exclusively) for specialists involved in mediating between people (Dervin, 2010).

According to Young and Sercombe (2010), Intercultural Competence (IC) or Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is “a dynamic process by which people draw on and use the resources and processes of cultures with which they are familiar but also those they may not typically be associated with in their interactions with others” (p. 181) . ICC is perceived as the ability to effectively and appropriately perform communication for a desired answer in a particular situation. This shows that competent persons must know how to interact effectively and appropriately with people and environment and how to achieve their own communication goals using this ability.

An increasing number of studies are being conducted to develop a model to incorporate ICC in language education programs. In a review of the models

introduced so far, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) classified them into five types:

1. *Compositional models* identify the hypothesized components of competence without specifying the relations among those components. Such models represent “lists” of relevant or probable traits, characteristics, and skills supposed to be productive or constitutive of competent interaction.
2. *Co-orientational models* are models that are primarily devoted to conceptualizing the interactional achievement of intercultural understanding or any of its variants (e.g., perceptual accuracy, empathy, perspective taking, clarity, overlap of meaning systems). Such models may share many of the features of other models but are focused on a particular criterion of communicative mutuality and shared meanings.
3. *Developmental models* retain a dominant role for the time dimension of intercultural interaction. Specifying stages of progression or maturity through which competencies hypothesized to evolve. Such models may share components of other models but emphasize the process of progression over time.
4. *Adaptational models* tend to have two distinctive characteristics: First, they typically envision multiple interactants in the process, and second, they emphasize interdependence of these multiple interactants by modeling the process of mutual adjustment. The multiple interactants may be modeled as conceptual reflections of one another, and the adjustment process maybe hypothesized to represent or include any number of various outcomes, but the core emphasis is that competencies

manifest in mutual alteration of actions, attitudes, and understandings based on interaction with members of another culture. Thus, adaptation itself is taken as a type of criterion of competence.

5. *Causal path models* model reflect fairly specified interrelationships among components and are the most easily formalized or translated from or into testable propositions (p. 10).

There is considerable unanimity among researchers in terms of the components of intercultural competence. Deardoff (2006) administered a survey to scholars of intercultural competence and university international administrators and found that the majority of scholars (80%) were in agreement about 22 of the core components of intercultural competence. There was also a substantial consensus about the definition of intercultural competence; that is, as Deardoff pointed out, “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (P. 241-242). The core components also found in numerous conceptual models are the following ones:

- a. *Attitudes*: respect for other cultures; curiosity about other cultures; willingness to learn about other cultures; openness to people from other cultures; willingness to suspend judgment; willingness to tolerate ambiguity; and valuing cultural diversity.
- b. *Skills*: skills of listening to people from other cultures; skills of interacting with people from other cultures; skills of adapting to other cultural environments; linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse skills, including skills in managing breakdowns in communication; skills in mediating intercultural exchanges; skills in discovering information about



- other cultures; skills of interpreting cultures and relating cultures to one another; empathy; multiperspectivity; cognitive flexibility; and skills in critically evaluating cultural perspectives, practices and products, including those of one's own culture.
- c. *Knowledge*: cultural self-awareness; communicative awareness, especially of the different linguistic and communicative conventions within different cultures; culture specific knowledge, especially knowledge of the perspectives, practices and products of particular cultural groups; and general cultural knowledge, especially knowledge of processes of cultural, societal and individual interaction.
- d. *Behaviors*: behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately during intercultural encounters; flexibility in cultural behavior; flexibility in communicative behavior; and having an action orientation, that is, a disposition for action in society in order to enhance the common good, especially through the reduction of prejudice, discrimination and conflict.

2. Studies on Intercultural Communicative Competence

In this section, studies related to the models and the uses of the concepts of ICC form different situations are presented. Some of them have been conducted to improve the current models (Borghetti, 2013) and some have been carried to better understand the operationalizability of the proposed models (Yang & Fleming, 2013; Young & Sachdev, 2011).

Borghetti (2013) made an attempt to develop a new model by integrating the two models of Methodological Model of Intercultural Competence (MetMIC) and the Teaching Unit Model (TUM). There are

“Chains of TUMs, which, in general, are mainly focused on communicative objectives, are informed by the MetMIC framework with educational, curriculum and methodological levels” (p. 266). She believes that the integration is an innovation and offers a complete framework. She also claims that the integration “ties Intercultural Foreign Language Education (IFLF) back into the teaching contexts from which it began and from which it can draw much of its future vitality” (p. 266).

Another study related to the development of an intercultural competence model was undertaken by Porto (2013), which was to investigate cultural understanding in English as a foreign language reading in Argentina. Unlike the essentialist and static way of exploring foreign language learners' cultural understanding and the related methodology, which failed to take the social and cultural aspects into account and reduced culture “to just one aspect of an individual's identifications: race, ethnicity or nationality and occasionally religion” (p. 285), Porto's focus was on a reading response task and a visual representation task in both of which readers was to produce a new text, different from the prompt text. Her model is a six-stage conceptual model based on the centrality of cultural understanding as a fluid process in a continuum of cultural familiarity and unfamiliarity. The study also reveals the centrality of criticality and reflexivity in cultural understanding. In addition, the study stresses the significance of image and emotion schemata in the cultural dimension of reading.

Yang and Fleming (2013) interviewed 21 Chinese students on how they made sense of American and British movies. Using grounded theory, they found that five categories of sense-making: comprehending the plot, identifying

differences, indentifying similarities, re-contextualizing and perceiving as realistic. It became evident that Chinese students “have a perception of to what extent foreign films reflect the reality” (p. 306). They suggest that “teachers should not assume a student to be either a complete believer or critic all the time, because students’ judgments may vary for each individual foreign film” (p.306).

In a basically qualitative study, Young and Sachdev (2011) embarked on discovering the experienced teachers’ view of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model mainly proposed by Byram (1997). It was aimed to see whether teachers with more than two years of experience in teaching English in three locations of the UK, the US and France agreed with the introducing ICC model(s) to learners in both ESL and EFL contexts, how much ICC can be prioritized on current EFL and for what reasons it should be prioritized. Through a focus group method and a questionnaire, they found some unanimity and some discrepancy. It was found that the ICC model was not an explicit part of the curriculum; it was not also a part of the examinations and assessments. Traces of ICC model were found in the general aims in the USA and in the UK. Interestingly, teachers in all the three locations considered ICC appropriate and “saw a connection between ICC and the attributes of a successful language learner and language teacher” (p. 90). Accordingly, good EFL teachers are seen to be highly familiar with ICC.

The studies mentioned above appear to support the integration of cultures and reaching to a unity in the case of culture as it may ease up the process of understanding the other. However, there those who want to stick to their own culture even when it

comes to using a second language, such as English, which is now world lingua franca.

3. Iranian Studies on ICC

Very few studies have been conducted to explore cultural issues in Iranian context, which is considered as EFL. Two studies were found in this regard which took the stance of the separation of cultural issues and language teaching. In these two studies conducted by Zarei (2011) and Zarei and Khalessi (2010), Interchange Series were scrutinized for cultural issues, whether they exert any cultural values on the readers. Both of them showed that the book imposed certain cultural values on the students studying them in private institutes. They also see this as the one reason that learners quit classes after some time while facing cultural differences especially in the first volume.

While disagreeing with the need for cultural conversion as a pre-requisite to learning another language, Zarei (2011) explored the impact of studying an English book (Interchange) on learners’ perception of cultural issues. Two groups of junior high school and high school students completed a researcher-made questionnaire. Students in one group (22 male) were to study the first volume of Interchange Series and those in the second group (16 male) were about to finish the third volume of Interchange Series. He found that the first group was domestically inclined while the second group was sharply oriented toward Western culture. He thinks that the Interchange series “exert a strong force in shaping the learners’ cultural perception of the world” (p. 2051).

The issue now here is to find a way to resolve this dilemma of whether to include cultural issues in textbooks and educational materials or exclude them. Although the two studies above oppose the inclusion, some appear to even suggest that



we try to familiarize students by integrating cultural issues in school textbooks (Aslanabadi & Aslanabadi, 2013). Providing some sound reasons may help clarify the better stance. Nonetheless, we should never forget the advance of communication and the progression of globalization in different aspects. One may be able to delay its full presence, but it is impossible to close eyes to it.

4. Iranian Studies on Written ICC

Looking into the studies on intercultural communicative competence, one can notice that they deal with almost all aspects of language among which writing at different levels, especially at college level, is being studied under contrastive rhetoric. It refers to the cross-cultural analysis of the ways in which written texts are organized. In this regard, in a seminal study by Kaplan (1966) it was discovered that people around the world form different cultural backgrounds write based on their cultural patterns and that Each language or culture has unique rhetorical conventions.

On the theoretical basis, currently it is argued that the reductionist, deterministic and essentialist orientation of contrastive rhetoric research, its prescriptive application to classroom teaching, must be abandoned; instead, more attention must be directed to plurality, complexity, and hybridity of rhetorical patterns within one language as well as similarities among language or cultures. This is the same stance also taken to study culture and identity as mentioned above. Certain studies (Abdolahzadeh, 2011; Moradian, Adel, & Tamri, 2014) have been carried out in Iran where much work in this regard is needed as due to the lack of a clearly defined way of writing there is the question of whether to follow western style or follow the existing oral style. Below some of the

studies conducted in this regard in Iran are given.

Moradian, Adel, and Tamri (2014) argue that, unlike “English thought pattern which is direct, linear and to the topic away from any unnecessary digression” (P. 68), Persian writing system is found to have no clear and identifiable though patterns. Of course, it is dangerous to claim that there is no thought pattern in writings of a special group of people. In the rest of their discussion they present the reason as to why Persian writing follows the pattern of multitopicality unlike monotopicality of English prose. In fact, it is inspired by oral style which is topic shift, poetic style which is mainly Arabic-oriented.

Abdolahzadeh (2011) compared research article written by the two groups of Anglo-American and Iranian academic writers in terms of the use of ‘hedges’, ‘emphatics, and ‘attitude markers’. It was found that both groups strongly tend to use hedges, yet in terms of attitude markers and emphatics Iranian scholars have a strong tendency to avoid showing their certainty and using attitudinal language. The writer’s suggestion is against the concept of lingua franca in that “ESL/EFL students need to gain sensitivity to and skill with these markers in English, a task which usually involves overcoming several daunting sociolinguistic challenges” (p. 296). He accepts Hinkel’s (2004) stance on the issue that becoming proficient in this regard is notoriously difficult and is a herculean task.

Faghih & Rahimpour (2009) endeavored to see if there is any difference in the use of interactive and interactional metadiscourse in research articles about applied linguistics in Persian and English texts by Iranians and native speakers of English, in English by Iranians texts and native speakers of English, in Persian and English texts by Iranians. After Analyzing

90 discussion sections of articles through Hyland's (2004) taxonomy, they found that all subtypes of metadiscourse were used by all the three groups; interactive metadiscourse was more than interactional metadiscourse; hedges and transitions were the most frequent ones; nonetheless, a connection between culture and language could not be found.

Pooresfahani, Khajavy, and Vahidnia (2012) gained an almost the same result as that of Faghih and Rahimpour's study (2009). However, no suggestion is presented for the teachers who teach English writing courses in a similar context. Then, what happens to English as a lingua franca. They compared research articles written by the two groups of Natural Science writers (NS) and Social Science writers (SS). This shows that disciplines along with culture play a factor in writers' use of interactional and interactive metadiscourse.

5. Conclusion

All in all, different models of communicative competence have been presented, which followed by the current obsession of intercultural communicative competence. Still, it is easy to notice that nations are unwilling to even adopt this conservative stance of using English as an international language through local cultural values. Of course it is beautiful to help learners become aware of the in and out of cultural values and issues, yet this carries out the threat of hegemony on the part of English.

One thing that can be claimed to be clear is that expecting learners to become someone else after learning a foreign language is rather unrealistic as changing one's true identity bestowed upon him/her is really difficult. Thus, it may look like exporting one's culture as a by-product, which is an ill-established business.

Still, there are those who believe in the separation of the two. Therefore, it is crystal clear that in the English educational textbooks there is no trace of English cultural issues. Rather, English is given to students as it is united with Iranian cultural values. Whether it is all right to do so is the question that is not that simple to be answered without further investigations. If globalization is given green light, then this stance needs serious revision and thinking.

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