

A PLEA FOR INTERCULTURAL TRAINING THROUGH LANGUAGE LEARNING

Georgeta GHIGA

Abstract

This article sets out to meet questions about intercultural communication in an increasingly demanding communication environment. It is an account of the evolution of key terms in the field of language training and research and although it does not offer explicit practical input into teaching a language interculturally, it contains information on guidelines and patterns of thought that helped to design the view of language teaching that we share today. The analysis of the evolution of the English language as an international means of communication is meant to raise awareness to the complex problems that teachers of English face when they have to teach intercultural competence and not just language in a restricted sense.

Keywords: english as an international language, intercultural communication training, communicative competence, strategic competence

Preliminary remarks

Intercultural dialogue is not only a strategic priority on the agenda of the European Union nowadays as a relevant requirement for promoting diversity, regional identity and social cohesion but stems from a profound need for communication in various areas of human activity. Anthropologists, political scientists and linguists have long been concerned with language and communication. Curiously enough, twenty years ago, language teachers were not mentioned as practitioners in intercultural training, despite their long-standing concern with both language and culture. In his famous article „English for Intercultural Competence: An approach to Intercultural Communication Training”, published in 1983, James Baxter was arguing that “... English-language teaching and intercultural training have been insulated one from the other.” However, he also saw indications that the situation was beginning to change.

The situation has since changed for many European languages as European enlargement continued and the need for communication was no longer entirely satisfied by the extensive use of English, especially around cross-border areas. Far-reaching European projects such as EuroIntegrELP (Equal Chances to European Integration through the Use of the European Language Portfolio) put together massive amounts of work to promote understanding in learning and evaluation in all European languages by providing uniform criteria for self-evaluation and mapping out individual progress. Throughout Europe, languages have been recovered from their semi-anonymous position and restored to a legitimate place in regional and continental contexts.

This article will focus on English as an intercultural tool for communication in spite of the fact that, although continuing to play an important role in communication worldwide, it has, however, lost some of its halo as the unique means of interaction as well as of transmitting culture.

Brief history of EIL

The 1970s and 1980s saw the concept of EIL (English as an International Language) emerging and acquiring characteristics that would ensure its dominance among the related concepts: EFL (English as a Foreign Language), ESL (English as a Second Language), World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca. While most of the other concepts addressed mainly the teaching environment, EIL was seen as going beyond classroom use and outside a certain speech community. This encouraged researchers like Smith (1976) and Kachru (1985) to recognize the fact that a language diversifies as it spreads, and the varieties that are shaped in different sociocultural, multilingual contexts tend to become “denationalized” within the process. In 1985 Kachru appreciated that

...English has acquired unprecedented sociological and ideological dimensions. It is now well-recognized that in linguistic history no language has touched the lives of so many people, in so many cultures and continents, in so many functional roles, and with so much prestige, as has the English language since the 1930s. And, equally important, across cultures, English has been successful in creating a class of people who have gained intellectual power in multiple spheres of language use unsurpassed by any single language before; not by Sanskrit in its heyday, not by Latin during its grip on Europe, not by French during the peak of the colonial period. (Cf. Kachru, 1985)

Kachru is also the designer of what is known today as the paradigm of the process of the spread of English through the visual representation of the three “Circles” (see Figure 1 below).

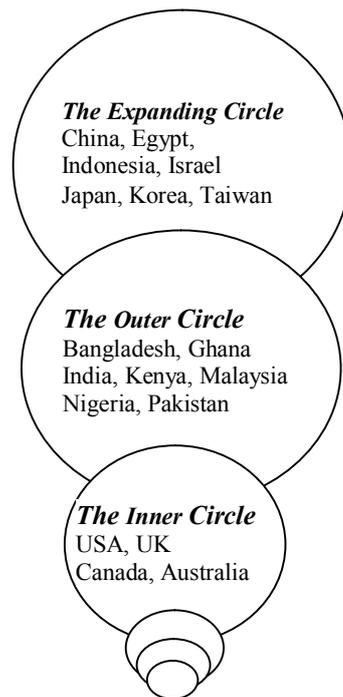


Figure 1

Source: adapted from *World Englishes and Applied Linguistics* (1995)

Kachru also emphasized that the spread of English outside the inner circle was mainly due to its influence in the developing world which was directly influenced by the research in applied linguistics and which was also the beneficiary of the insights gained by this type of research. In these areas of the world English became one of the most important factors of ideological and social change. It was this which brought to the English language its unique cultural pluralism and such a rich and dense linguistic diversity.

Characteristics of culture and language as a cultural element

Any language expresses a perspective on the world and carries the cultural identity of its speakers. This section will outline characteristics of culture in an attempt to show the strong links between culture and language, the way they are associated and how the learning process encompasses both of them.

An anthropological view (Samovar and Porter, 1994: 11) defines culture as ...”the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course

of generations through individual and group striving". It is "ubiquitous, multidimensional, complex, and all-pervasive". Samovar and Porter's contribution will be used below to outline several features of culture which are important from an intercultural communication perspective.

1. The first characteristic is that culture is **not innate, it is learned**. This refers to the patterns of behaviour that are learned by the members of a culture until they become internalized. Culture is mastered through observing other people, imitating them and interacting with them. In the process of learning culture people also learn language and both are meant to transmit values and norms. Other authors (e.g. Kirch, 1973: 340) speak of language as "an integral part of the culture with which it is associated".
2. Culture is **transmissible**. Apart from the fact that the content of culture can be transmitted by symbols, what is important here is the role of language in the spread of a culture. One view of this process (Lafayette, 1978: 15) tells us that "...although language may be the medium, culture is the message."
3. As with communication, culture is **dynamic**, ongoing and subject to fluctuations. Inside a certain culture, ideas and beliefs evolve and in doing so, they induce change through the mechanisms of *invention* and *diffusion*. Out of these two I would like to concentrate on diffusion since it puts better in perspective the role of language. Diffusion is seen mainly as borrowing from other cultures; this process accelerates as cultures come into closer contact with each other. Although some of the change only affects the surface structure of culture language plays nevertheless an important role in the process of diffusion of values. It is a fact that language serves both as a medium for communication and as a guide to social reality, helping in the process of shaping patterns of thought.
4. Culture is **ethnocentric**. This feature, which defines centeredness on one's own group, is perhaps most directly linked to intercultural communication. Its general evaluation is, according to authors like Keesing (1965 : 46) , that "it is the perceptual window through which a culture interprets and judges all other cultures". People tend to put their own culture and society in a central position of priority and worth. In many ways the evaluation of other cultures is negative, exclusivist and unleashes feelings of superiority. The discussion of the role of language here is interesting because if we apply ethnocentrism to language (as we do, as being part of a culture) it must follow that language is a primary vehicle by which a culture expresses itself, and is implicitly confined between the boundaries of that culture.

The conclusions to this brief review of culture characteristics and language as the carrier of culture could be summed up as follows:

- In the field of intercultural training and research language and culture are seen as being intimately related.
- The role of language in this complex matrix is to represent, through a learned system of symbols, human experience within a geographic or cultural community.
- Language facilitates interaction among members of the same culture and provides a means of thinking which is shared by members of the same community. It helps to emphasize the ethnocentrism of culture because events, experiences, feelings, general perception are embodied in a system that symbolically represents reality to a community of people.
- Finally, it seems that language encircles a cultural community by helping with the creation of its identity and communicates that identity as it is to the world.

The final conclusion is supported by the evolution of the English language around the world I presented earlier in the first section.

However, the subsequent evolution of English (also presented briefly in the first part) shows the transition from language seen as an integral part of the culture it is associated with to a means of communication which is international and culture-free.

Language as intercultural communication

This long and decisive step in regarding the function of a language was taken in the process of teaching language as intercultural communication. Going back to Baxter's research (1983) we need to remind ourselves that the foundation of English as an International Language (an important movement brought about by a growing awareness to intercultural communication) is the belief that "English belongs to no one group of people. Although the use of English is always culture-bound, the language itself is not bound to any specific culture".

This view contrasts sharply to earlier research in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Tucker and Lambert, 1973: 246) in the field of language teaching and learning which stated that the ability to communicate fully in a second language depended on the degree of nonethnocentrism of the learner. Learners were supposed to develop an awareness and sensitivity toward the culture whose language was being studied and mastery of the second language was dependent upon acquisition of a second culture. In other words, in order to feel confident in a second language, the learner needed to synchronise linguistic and cultural development.

This stage which prevailed for a long time in language training research has become outdated for some time and especially nowadays when cultural diversity is

the norm in many places of the world. Speaking of English, with a growing number of non-European immigrants to Britain and the United States (as well as numerous European non-native speakers of English) teachers and researchers have begun to see that teaching English to speakers of other languages also means teaching English to speakers of other cultures.

The following statements about English as an international language are based on a perspective in which attention has shifted from language itself to language in use, to language as communication, to functional language. The concept of *communicative competence* is implicit in this assessment; therefore I will not dwell on it, as it is one of the basic formal terms in linguistic theory. However, I would like to say briefly that Chomsky's restrictive notion of linguistic competence was enlarged by Hymes (1971) who saw communication as a form of cultural behaviour. He included in the concept of competence knowledge as to "when to speak, when not, what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner." His insights on the importance and constitutive role of sociocultural factors were further developed and translated in pedagogical terms. *Sociolinguistic competence* emerged as referring to an individual's knowledge of using the language appropriately, therefore bringing forward the importance of *situation* or context.

Coming back to English as an international language, which is the beneficiary of this research, the statements below show the way it is integrated in the intercultural communication:

- a. EIL targets the functions of English, not any given form of the language. It is conceptually distinct from basic English and it admits that communication does not automatically flow from linguistic competence. Attention must be focused on those areas of behaviour which are not shared across cultural lines.
- b. EIL situations are frequent and involve a variety of patterns of participation in communication, in which native and non-native speakers communicate through English in complex and differing cultural backgrounds.
- c. There are many varieties of English, native and non-native.
- d. Attitudes held by participants in an EIL situation can either facilitate or hinder communication and concerns in this area include finding those attitudes which enable a person to be an effective intercultural communicator in English.

The EIL perspective has extended the concept of communicative competence and has definitely taken English teaching much closer to an integration with intercultural training. The EIL argument is that "learners must be given basic skills for communicating with any potential interlocutor, of whatever national, linguistic or cultural background (Baxter, 1983: 306) and its goal is teaching members of one culture to interact effectively through English with members of other cultures, with minimal misunderstanding".

In spite of these firm tenets, no set of culture-general communication skills has been put forward and we have not actually been told how one speaks English interculturally by using the EIL principles or goals.

Identifying skills of intercultural communication

The EIL approach argues that shared linguistic competence in English will not of itself ensure intercultural communication. Linguistic and sociolinguistic competences are not enough, so there must be something else that the effective intercultural communicator needs to be able to do. The solution was found in the field of intercultural training and research which further refined the concept of communicative competence transforming it into a model able to react interculturally by activating three components which had already been discussed in isolation: strategic competence, sociolinguistic competence and linguistic competence.

Strategic competence (formulated in detail by Canale and Swain, 1979 and 1980) is responsible for designing the hypothesis that there is a culture-general combination of behaviours, attitudes and awareness that enables a speaker of English to manage intercultural communication. On the basis of this assumption, research in the intercultural field (e.g. Renwick, 1980) has come up with a series of teachable skills to be included in strategic competence. Below are several skills that can compensate for lack of fluency:

- awareness and wish of being chosen as a communicative partner (there is no value in speaking unless being spoken to);
- ability to read nonverbal behavior (it is interesting that nonverbal behavior, being a constitutive element of intercultural communication, is also listed as a skill related to the improvement in language communication; to give only two examples, touch as a form of communication or eye contact can demonstrate how nonverbal communication is a product of culture and should be taught within an intercultural model);
- ability to anticipate what the other person will say;
- capacity to fill in missing words;
- ability to help the other person say what he/she wants to say in your language;
- skill in learning or teaching each other's language on the job without interrupting work in progress;
- skill in using a third person as an "interpreter" to get meaning across without insulting or embarrassing the second person;
- skill in being able to come into a conversation and facilitate communication without embarrassing anyone;
- skill in asking for repetition and for clarification of meaning.

The list can definitely be improved by adding interpretive strategies which are meant to deal with vagueness of meaning (e.g. questioning repeat: the listener repeats a part of a speaker's utterance, thereby signaling that clarification is needed) and teachers should be encouraged to use these repertoires of skills in classroom materials and contexts.

Conclusions

I hope that one important idea concerning implications for intercultural training has emerged of this analysis and that is the shift from content-based training (i.e. training in a particular culture, with clear focus on certain values, beliefs, etc.) to training based on skills that would ensure effective intercultural training. The culture-specific aspect has by no means been excluded from the teaching premises but has been inserted into a model of intercultural communicative competence which combines culture-general, culture-specific and language-specific training. Research (Baxter, 1983: 312) argues that the notion of appropriateness is changed and the "measure is no longer appropriateness according to native-speaker standards, but instead, appropriateness of the use of English within intercultural contexts."

Although this type of research has been integrated into language training for some time under various shapes I believe that teachers still need to be more specific about the way in which English teaching can move away from a native-speaker model (and students' expectations), and what is involved in such a move. A new discussion can start from here.

References and bibliography

- Baxter, J.** 1983. (in Landis, D. and Brislin, R. eds.) *English for Intercultural Competence: An Approach to Intercultural Training*, in A Handbook of Intercultural Training. New York: Pergamon.
- Kachru, B.B.** 1995. *The English Language in the Outer Circle* in World Englishes and Applied Linguistics. New York.
- Keesing, M.F.** 1965. *Cultural Anthropology: The Science of Custom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Samovar, L. A. and Porter, R. E.** 1994. *Approaches: Understanding Intercultural Communication*, in Intercultural Communication, A Reader.

The author

Valentina Robu is Assistant Lecturer at the Department of English in The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies. She has extensive experience in teaching Business English with a focus on communication skills in a professional environment. She is also a qualified teacher trainer and took part in many projects initiated by The British Council Romania in the fields of teaching and educational management. She holds a Master of Education from the University of Manchester, UK. Her professional interests include cultural studies, educational management and materials and textbook writing.