

## Intercultural Awareness in English Language Teaching: Theories and Some Implications in the Vietnamese Classroom

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**Abstract:** This paper reviews the body of research on intercultural awareness and its growing importance in the English language teaching profession. Rooted in the well-established concept of cultural awareness in language teaching, intercultural awareness represents a more embracing view of culture that captures its emergent and dynamic nature in the relationship with language. The types of knowledge, skills and attitudes of intercultural awareness are briefly presented with general suggestions and guidelines for application in the English language classroom. Finally, these theoretical developments are discussed with reflections and implications in the Vietnamese context.

**Keywords:** Cultural awareness, intercultural awareness, ELT, Vietnam.

## INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are closely intertwined, so much that it is difficult, if not impossible, to learn a language without knowing its culture. In the realm of English language teaching (ELT), the cultural dimension of language has been attracting greater attention over the last few decades, from the early conceptions of sociocultural knowledge (Hymes, 1972) to the notion of critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997). More recently, intercultural awareness has been proposed as a prerequisite of intercultural competence and thus successful intercultural communication (Chen & Starosta, 1998; Baker, 2011). With the English language having become a global language, the cultural contexts of the language have never been more diverse and complex.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### English as a global language and ELT

A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a unique role that is recognized in every country (Crystal, 2003). English is a worldwide language and a lingua franca, although these two terms are at times not fully interchangeable (Jenkins, 2012). Whatever it now is, its globalization has affected ELT and, more specifically, English teachers, who now have to choose what teaching materials to use and which variety of English to teach (Baker, 2011).

The use of English in such a diverse range of contexts also calls for a reconceptualization of its ownership and forms. With the steady growth of the “expanding circle”, all the basic assumptions of the language as an asset of a socioculturally-defined group of people are challenged (Kachru, 1990; Crystal, 2003). The *owner*, the *speaker*, and consequently, the *learner* and the *teacher* of English are thus not readily identified as it was the case when ELT still had its focus and goals on a native-like competence. Indeed, English is now used most commonly not by native speakers but as a “default” language in any intercultural communication setting (Crystal, 2008).

This phenomenon has profound implications for ELT. First, the growing linguistic variation, which is increasingly evident as different “Englishes” are constantly emerging and reshaping, requires more efforts from ELT

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researchers and practitioners alike to reconcile the discrepancies. What could be less evident is the need for learners of English to develop cultural awareness to be successful communicators. These concerns are articulated by Baker (2011):

For users of English to communicate effectively, they will need a mastery of more than the features of syntax, lexis, and phonology that are the traditional focus in ELT. Equally important is the ability to use linguistic and other communicative resources to negotiate meaning, roles, and relationships in the diverse sociocultural settings of intercultural communication through English (p. 63).

Understanding the sociocultural norms of one particular native speaker community, for example, the United Kingdom or the United States is insufficient (Crystal, 2003). On the other hand, global English can never be culturally neutral because it always involves culture-specific references and assumptions. These realizations call for a more appropriate conceptualization of the relationship between English and its diverse sociocultural contexts.

### **From cultural awareness to intercultural awareness**

*Cultural awareness* can be defined as a conscious understanding of the role culture plays in language learning and communication in both first and foreign languages (Baker, 2011, p. 65). It has been a practical approach of conceptualizing the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for successful intercultural communication with explicit recognition of the cultural aspect of communicative competence.

As detailed in Byram (1997), (critical) cultural awareness involves the understanding of the relative nature of cultural norms, which enables the language learner to critically evaluate perspectives, practices and products in a specific culture and his own (p. 101). It is also crucial to recognize that there are always contradictory views even in one culture. Finally, the intercultural speaker replaces the traditional monolingual native speaker as the "ideal model".

Cultural awareness tends to be described as knowledge, skills and attitudes the learner develops regarding defined cultural groupings, typically at the national level. However, this is not an appropriate aim as English is now used most commonly in expanding-circle contexts, making it unrealistic for any language learner to know all the cultures they may encounter in communication. Therefore, knowledge of specific cultures must be combined with an awareness of cultural influences in intercultural communication as a fluid, fragmented, hybrid, and emergent with cultural groupings or boundaries less easily defined and referenced (Baker, 2011, p. 66).

These considerations lead to the notion of *intercultural awareness*, which is a conscious understanding of the role culturally-based forms, practices and frames of experience can have in intercultural communication and the ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context-specific manner in real-time communication (Baker, 2011, p. 66). As such, intercultural awareness is not a brand-new concept but rather the highest level of cultural awareness and thus still includes the fundamental features of the cultural awareness framework (Byram, 1997).

Intercultural awareness is directly relevant in a global context. It stresses the ability to view cultures as dynamic, diverse, and emergent, thus allowing the speaker to cope with the fluidity of intercultural communication (Baker, 2011). From an ELT perspective, this approach to cultural awareness liberates the syllabus designers and materials, developers, thus teachers and learners from the dependence on the understanding of any specific English-speaking culture. Although such knowledge is still of great value and worth learning, the goal is now broader yet more realistic.

### **Teaching intercultural awareness**

Intercultural awareness can be integrated into the classroom to develop intercultural competence through learning activities. Such activities are to build (1) knowledge of self and other, of how interaction occurs and of the relationship of the individual to society; (2) knowing how to interpret and relate information; (3) knowing how to engage with the political consequences of education and being critically aware of cultural behaviours; (4) knowing how to discover cultural information; (5) knowing how to be: how to relativize oneself and value the attitudes and beliefs of the other (Corbett, 2007, p. 32). The ideal is an intercultural or transcultural speaker who can move quickly between discourse communities, observing and applying the language that is appropriate to each district (Kramsch, 1998).

Multiple suggestions have been given regarding integrating intercultural awareness in the English classroom (e.g. Baker, 2011; Corbett, 2007). In general, teachers can begin by helping students explore their own culture, primarily how it is represented and experienced. Then students are encouraged to explore how other cultures are expressed and experienced. These can be done by looking at local cultures, examining language learning materials and multimedia, or through cultural informants, reflections and sharing. Finally, teachers can focus students' attention on how intercultural communication occurs, both presented in the learning materials and the students' and the teacher's experience.

These strands of actions should make use of all the resources available in the classroom and those resources that may be available to learners outside the classroom. Altogether, they provide valuable opportunities for experience and reflection on intercultural communication and contact with other cultures that can aid in the development of intercultural awareness.

### Implications in the Vietnamese classroom

Intercultural awareness has attracted more attention in English language teaching in Vietnam despite its traditionally marginalized position in its English language programs. The emphasis is still primarily placed on developing the four "language skills" with cultural awareness fading into the background (Nguyen, T. M. H, 2011).

To the knowledge of the writer, research on intercultural learning and intercultural awareness in the Vietnamese context are scant and limited. Instead, most of the attention has been paid to cross-cultural investigations, in which similarities and differences between (usually) two cultures are examined (e.g. Dinh, T. K. D, 2008; Ly, T. T, 2009). As previously argued in this paper, this view of cultural awareness is not sufficient in today's intercultural communication.

To prepare the Vietnamese learner in the era of globalization, intercultural awareness has to be given a decent place in the English classroom. With Vietnam becoming more economically, culturally and socially integrated, and with the assistance of advances in technology, the role of intercultural awareness is now more evident and necessary than ever. Guidelines and suggestions are also available (e.g. Corbett, 2007; Dearsdorff & Jones, 2009; Baker, 2011). However, it is essential to develop a contextualized approach to intercultural awareness for the Vietnamese classroom.

However, the integration of intercultural awareness in the Vietnamese classroom also faces several difficulties. Intercultural awareness has not been efficiently combined with the teaching of language skills or has even been sacrificed for more short-term goals, especially examinations, which are still heavily loaded with linguistic rather than cultural knowledge. Teacher training is also an area where more investment should be prioritized. Last but not least, there is a need for further research on what intercultural awareness means in the case of Vietnam and how it can be fostered.

## CONCLUSION

English as a global language highlights the need to develop intercultural awareness to become successful communicators. This type of cultural understanding is not limited to the knowledge of any specific culture but rather refers to an understanding and appreciation of cultures in their emergent and dynamic nature in communication.

From an ELT perspective, teachers and learners should be engaged in multicultural practices to develop intercultural awareness. In the context of Vietnam, the position of intercultural understanding in the English classroom is being recognized more clearly, along with considerations of the opportunities and challenges involved.

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