

IMPROVING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION OF EFL STUDENTS THROUGH SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

At present, globalization and foreign languages learning are the most essential and inseparable things. Learning of communication in a foreign language is very important to be aware of culture, life style, literature, history of foreign country and etc. This paper is based on useful instructions and how to use storytelling as a means of improving intercultural communication in EFL classes. Storytelling may be a new concept for teachers that have no experience in teaching and an informal technique for experienced teachers. The article discusses the importance of storytelling in developing oral communication in foreign language learning for EFL students. Reading short stories is comparable to the process of intercultural communication, as the author and the reader are representatives of different cultures. Intercultural communication through stories has a number of features compared to real communication, the identification of which is the purpose of the research presented in the article. Furthermore, this article shows that learners have a positive attitude towards working with the story, and that they get a deeper understanding of the story and the concepts in focus. This way reveals that there has been a development in the learners' intercultural competence.

Keywords: *Storytelling, intercultural communication, short story, cultural awareness, culture, identity.*

I. INTRODUCTION

National Curriculum of Foreign Languages in Uzbekistan is based on Common European Framework of References for Languages. This means that foreign language teaching is not any more a traditional option: learning for "culture" or "knowledge". This notion is utilized in another tip which is based on learning to communicate. The development of opportunities for communication created a demand for verbal proficiency in foreign languages. As we know, all English language skills can be used by learners to learn communication. Also, teaching methods, techniques and strategies have great roles to get knowledge on improving intercultural communication. There are many essential types of learning intercultural communication in English Language classes. One of them is storytelling that is used for pedagogical purposes and based on developing intercultural communication. In teaching process, we have different options as teachers and learners. One of them is differentiate methodology. Also, there are various types of techniques that are used in English Foreign Language classes such as pair-work, group- work, cooperative learning, jigsaw technique, language games, round table discussion and so on.

English language learning intends to provide learner with contexts which enhance communicative competence. Curriculum of foreign language learning defines the fact that students might be presented to meaningful situations, process, contexts where students should improve communicative competence, intercultural competence, socio-cultural competence, discourse competence. This means that teachers based on specific teaching program, prepare language syllabus providing students opportunities to study and learn a foreign language. [1, p. 15] One of the rules that teachers may choose to use is finding interesting topics taking in consideration the students' interest and not basing their teaching on textbook. At English classes storytelling should be used by students as an interactive technique in order to improve students' intercultural communication. Storytelling is very effective to develop students' oral speech and comprehension. It is not a new thing. The meaning of the word "storytelling" is the activity of telling or sharing stories and their plot. It is

used in every culture to educate children with different ideas, viewpoints, suggestions, theories about life, learning, history, culture, education, and so on. In our everyday life we use different books, oral communication, storytelling or legends to educate our children. Storytelling is used not in native language study but even in foreign language study in order to stabilize children's knowledge, perception and comprehension. The purpose is to tell something about an idea, a concept, notion, real and unreal events and so on. As an example, we can say the cultural corner in English textbooks in the Uzbek state World languages university. The teacher introduces the reading part to enhancing intercultural communication through storytelling in EFL students, but the teacher also uses all her / his knowledge to tell something more about that in order to attract students' attention and create an interesting atmosphere. At university level, English students study different subjects that is why, verbal communication of students can have a great role in showing oral speech by presentation, discussion, or any kinds of conversation such as, dialogue, monologue and debate.

Storytelling is used in an informal way, but it is presented in every foreign language class. The teacher does not depend just on the coursebook but supplies students with additional information and materials. The basic aim of the work is to present how storytelling can influence EFL students' communication to examine communicative skill completely and carefully in order to find out more about it.

Through the use of storytelling, learners are motivated and they develop communicative competence, critical thinking, reading skill, listening skill, comprehensive skill, creative skill, accuracy and fluency. Storytelling and extensive reading can be joined together to stimulate language learning, creativity and imagination. In everyday life more we listen and more we read, we can learn more effectively. The basic aim is to give right instructions and have correct teaching procedures to have an effective language classroom. In teaching, storytelling is considered as a technique that has possibilities if used in the right style to assist learners increase intercultural communication. Exploring culture helps learners to extend vocabulary, ideas, perception, interpretation, outlook, fantasy and creative writing as well. In such ways, learners are motivated and they can have lower emotional barriers. All English language skills can be taught by using short stories by teachers in an interactive way. Because, students can give their opinions, ideas, attitudes to this or that kind of situations, points, parts of the plot of story by retelling and also they can use oral speech directly, fluently in an appropriate way.

To understand the concept of Intercultural Communication, it is fruitful to clarify and explain some of the related notions such as identity, culture, intercultural encounters and competence (Barrett, Byram, Lazar, Mompoin-Gailard & Philippou, 2014, p. 13).

Identity "is a multifaceted, dynamic, abstract concept that plays an integral role in daily communicative interaction and particularly in intercultural communication" (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel & Roy, 2015, p. 243). Identity is a person's sense of who they are, and most people attribute themselves a variety of different identities according to various contexts. These multiple identities help people navigate and orient themselves through the world when they relate to other people (Barrett et al., 2014, p. 13). In society today, cultures mix through globalization, and cross-cultural interaction is part of everyday life. Identity plays a vital role in intercultural communication, and it is of importance to understand what it entails (Samovar et al., 2015, p. 243).

The concept of cultural identity is a term that is relevant when working with IC. Cultural identity refers to having a sense of belonging to a particular group based on various cultural categories such as nationality, race and gender. Cultural identity is constructed and maintained through, among others, tradition, heritage and language. Individuals typically affiliate with more than one cultural group which makes the notion of cultural identity so complex and multifaceted (Chen, 2014). "Identity is not a single entity", it is a combination of multiple integrated identities that people use in combination based on the situation they are in and the context of an encounter (Samovar et al., 2015, p. 245). All the identities people attribute themselves are influenced to various degrees by culture (ibid, p. 248), and according to Magne Dypedahl and Henrik Bøhn (2017) it is possible to claim that all individuals are their own cultures (p. 62).

In English foreign language learning, elements of culture have previously been seen as static, representative and homogenous because learners and teachers tend to create and rely on stereotypes and generalizations. However, recent developments in the area have led to the acknowledgement of the fact that *culture* is dynamic and variable. This is because it is now recognized that members of a given community display different behavior, attitudes and values towards what is established within their community (Gomez Rodriguez, 2013, p. 97). *Culture* has been defined in many ways. Gert Hofstede's (2011) definition is: "Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (p. 3). This definition fits well with the idea of cultural identity, because culture is always a collective phenomenon, however, there is always a variety of individuals within the cultural groups. These individuals move between the cultural groups and assume their different identities according to what group they are participating in. Barrett et al. (2014) draw a distinction between material, social and subjective aspects of culture. Material culture consists of the material artefacts commonly used by a cultural group, social culture consists of social institutions and subjective culture consists of the beliefs, practices, norms and values which the cultural group use as a point of reference to relate to the world. Culture itself is composed of all these three aspects, which means that culture is "a network of material, social and subjective resources" (p. 13). The idea behind this way of looking at culture is to show that groups of any size have their own distinctive culture (ibid, pp. 13-14).

II. METHODOLOGY

Now we can discuss the methodology of using storytelling in English Language classes. As it was given above there are various causes of why to the usage of storytelling. In this part we are going to illustrate some ways of how to use it in English Foreign Language classes. Learning a language becomes boring if the chosen topics are not interesting and informative, if the learners are not too much motivated, collaborative and so on. According to Chambers storytelling is "a technique of teaching that has stood the test of time." [2, p. 77] If students are passive or careless on learning something new, teachers should give them the opportunity of being active, in other words, and make them use their sociolinguistic competences. Storytelling may become an effective technique not only if teachers use it, but even in case any learners use it. Mostly, students can utilize this fruitful technique in literature class, culture class, reading, vocabulary class, almost in all specific subjects. Storytelling helps learners to improve many skills with pronunciation, stimulate thinking, creativity, broadening world looking. Teachers may use pair-work, group-work, brainstorming-activities, case-study, problem-solving activities, information-gap exercises to help students in order to stabilize knowledge on learning intercultural communication of English language. In the process of learning, we can be aware of input and output

information, in this case, storytelling develops students' listening and speaking skills, providing cultural information and language knowledge.

As we come to the choice of story, each story that can be used as an effective activity at class should be very interesting, informative, meaningful, attractive and educative to attract students' attention and influence on their mind. Before choosing short stories as efficient activities in the class, every teacher should draw attention to these criteria such as: age, language level, information provided, language patterns, skills practiced, interactive activities provided, the time, the length, students' interest, ability. An experienced teacher has to choose stories taking in consideration the above mentioned instructions. While telling even pauses, intonation, stress, pronunciation and speed are significant for learners' comprehension. In teaching process, there are spoken and written communication that is significant to share intercultural competence. Students can retell the plot of a story in a very special way in their mother tongue by using gestures and teachers may help them to perform in English in the same way.

From language learning methods, new English teachers learn a lot about the use of methods, the combination of method components to have effective language classrooms, helping learners to develop their skills on enhancing intercultural communication through storytelling in EFL competence. Knowing very well the history and the culture of the English language is one of the major competences that a foreign language teacher should improve in the correct way. For this reason, firstly, a language teacher should be a good storyteller, secondly she or he must have a great deal of knowledge from the subject of history, literature, culture, geography and art as well.

In addition, there are basic and useful classroom activities that can be based on raising students' intercultural communication. These activities included:

- *Intensive Reading*: Students were guided through some paragraphs to discuss the hidden cultural points and agenda.
- *Extensive Reading*: Students were given some time to read a portion of the text by avoiding sub-vocalization. After that, some questions were asked about the content of the text.
- *Cross-cultural discussions*: Students were asked how the values, customs, behaviors, etc. would be in agreement or disagreement with their own culture.
- *Critical thinking*: Students were encouraged to think more deeply and reflectively about the cultural and historical facts in the short stories.
- *Role Play*: Students were asked to demonstrate how they would act in similar situations as those portrayed in some short stories. As an example, a short story entitled "The Ninny" by Anton Chekov was performed as a play and students were asked to discuss its themes.

III. RESULTS

If we come to the analysis and results of the improvement of students intercultural awareness, there should be four sub groups, in the whole class has to be divided in to four parts. These parts can be named as East, West, South, North ones. Teachers have to conduct their lessons dividing four groups and the first group will have to choose short stories about peoples who live in the eastern part of the world, the second group can choose short

stories those who live in the Western part and the third and fourth ones are related to the Southern and Northern parts of the world. Actually, four groups' members in which students must retell and narrate the plot of the stories and make a presentation or role play, discussion on the meaning and moral of the stories in order to improve intercultural communicative competence at class. Narration, presentation, role-play, discussion and analysis should have a great importance for raising cultural awareness but basically, in these activities, teachers must control and regulate their student's participation and active reaction with positive attitude and assess by giving feedback about each student's participation. Students are interested in being informed about the peoples and culture of foreign countries. The analysis of the responses revealed the second year students seem to be positive in receiving information about different cultures of foreign countries, although the percentage of positive responses was not very high in second year students. Moreover, students of four groups showed a slightly greater preference to receiving information about the culture of foreign countries than their people. Students with a positive attitude towards receiving information and retelling about foreign peoples and cultures.

Positive attitude towards: The Second year students

Foreign peoples 50,4% 42,0%

Foreign cultures 56,3% 54,7%

Regarding the most preferred sources of information about cultural issues, the participants could choose stories about four parts of the that were given above. Another dimension of the students' interest in global social issues and intercultural awareness was also analyzed by exploring whether they think it is important for them to be able to discuss cultural issues with one another. The analysis of the results revealed that second year students, in particular, do not show keen interest in developing this skill, to be more positive in this type of communication.

In addition, teachers can give another tasks to students in order to enhance their cultural awareness in which students can be asked the following questions:

1. Try to guess what this new course is going to be about. What topics are you likely to study?
2. In your view, what is meant by "intercultural communication"?
3. What cultures (countries) are you familiar with?

In order to match students' expectations to what we taught them, we suggested five questions mentioned above. Here are their most typical answers summarized below.

Result demonstrates most typical answers to Rating

Question 1:

"Try to guess what this new course is going to be about. What topics are you likely to study?"

Most students gave more than one answer.

Typical answers:

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 1- Communication between
representatives of different cultures | 95% |
| 2- Rules of cross-cultural interaction | 75% |

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 3- Various cultural values, traditions, beliefs | 50% |
| 4- Cultural differences/stereotypes | 26% |
| 5- The importance of intercultural communication in the work of a teacher/interpreter | 22% |

Answers to the first questions show that students' guesses were quite correct: 95% suggested "Communication between representatives of different cultures", then come "Rules of cross-cultural interaction", various cultural values, traditions, beliefs, cultural differences/ stereotypes, the importance of intercultural communication in the work of a teacher/interpreter. These topics will have been covered in the course. The least frequent answer reveals students' awareness of the fact that if a course is suggested to their attention it is supposed to be part of their professional training.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

Foreign language learner does not have the possibility to be presented to authentic language. Using storytelling by non-native language teachers or even native teacher needs to utilize some skills, such as listening, speaking, critical thinking and so on. At English class, teachers can come across some difficulties on providing children with meaningful contexts, interactive activities. Especially, the choice of short stories should be suitable for students' level, life style and educational atmosphere. Every teacher has to follow a procedure that is written with exact instructions, before narrating a story. There are not written rules about it, but the practice and the experience help the teacher to conduct the lesson in appropriate way which can be based on developing students' intercultural communication. There are many ways of enhancing intercultural communication that can be utilized by students on storytelling at English classes. [4, p. 125] One of them is learning the content. First of all, the teacher chooses a story then he or she should learn its content. After learning and having been informed about the content of the story, the teacher can choose the strategies to tell it. Retelling does not mean learning by heart and memorize it word by word. We are different so the way we notice is different too. Storytelling is also unusual too. While we reading a book we enter inside it, we feel it, we become the character himself, we imagine the setting, and we live it. The same happens even with storytelling, as teachers we tell a story in our own voice, intonation, mime, emotion, pause, word and sentence stress and feeling. The language teacher retells it in such way in order to keep the audience in suspense, to feel the story to understand it in the same way, to know the order in which a series of events happened and what comes next and what might be the end.

The next one is preparing the setting, in this way teachers may choose posters, pictures, photographs, real objects, visual aids to tell a story. They prepare the students or children for the story by defining the purpose, idea and moral warming up the setting before performing. Some techniques of warming up may be: Brainstorm key words of the story, show some pictures that can lead children to guess, imagine, analyze and understand what they are going to get, utilizing collecting new vocabulary, ask some questions in order to allow students to predict the story.

The third way is telling the story that is based on narration of the plot about story. After preparing the setting the teacher starts the story by using verbal and nonverbal communication. Students are helped to know the story and its meaning by the hints given to them.

The fourth one is controlling the time of storytelling. The time management has a great importance in the process of teaching because essential tasks or activities are shared with students in the correct way to manage time that is why it is very crucial. In 90 minutes the teacher has to explain, to check, and develop activities. If the teacher uses storytelling in the same way, she or he should manage time of telling, time of reading, time of interactive activities or any interesting games. If the time is not managed very well, the aim is not finished or achieved successfully.

Another one is usage of vocabulary which is given in the story. It is very essential to choose carefully the vocabulary presented in the story. The students can be aware the meaning of the new words immediately. You can prepare flash cards to present new vocabulary to your students, you may choose even pictures or real objects to present it. It always depends on the story, students' age, outlook, interest and language level. As a simple example we can bring these stories "The Gift of magi" by O. Henry and "Cat in the rain" by E. Hemingway. These authors' stories are much more understandable and educative for challenging goodness, friendship, love, humanity and so on. At the same time, students can get more information on the plot and understand the meaning of new words easily in such way.

Last significant way is based on letting students perform the main idea of the plot of the story. Once the story is performed, let the students choose a story to present it next time. This will help our language learners to develop communicative ability, which is the aim of studying a foreign language.

In short, it should be pointed out that the students, in general, developed intercultural understanding and respect for both their local and Western culture but at the same time were critical of some aspects. In other words, the results from the students' interview and journal entries showed that some patterns of change emerged after the dialogic discussions held in class and the writings that the students composed in the form of reflective responses:

- 1) Seven of the participants remained the same or with little change. In other words, they claimed that the course had not changed them at all. The researchers, however, later realized that the course had consolidated their knowledge. In other words, though the students had some pre-ordained beliefs about their local and American cultural values, the course content and discussions secured or modified their stance.
- 2) Three participants were more critical and did not take things at face value. They contributed a lot to the classroom discussions and were not easily persuaded by their peers or the teacher. Therefore, there was an on-going debate regarding these critical topics in class.
- 3) All the participants, even those who were very critical in class, developed a more positive attitude toward both their own and Western cultures. This shows that the course has been successful in imparting a more international view.
- 4) All the students were worried about their own cultural norms in Iranian society. Although they were not concerned at the outset of the term, they gradually developed a better understanding of their own cultural norms thereby equipping them with a more 'glocalised' view and identity. This can be achieved by appropriating

global issues or cultural values and add local taste to it or sometimes critiquing global norms and localizing it. This can be also seen in the themes extracted from the interview and journal entries.

As Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) assert, an intercultural competent learner must be aware of the elusive, multilayered and multifaceted nature of a culture. He or she should be exposed to diverse aspects of a foreign culture and read about the alternative voices and less represented issues before making a judgment. The results of this research can be compared with the case study done by Burwitz-Melzer (2001) who showed how students' language and culture learning can be promoted with the use of short stories. Burwitz-Melzer (2001) used one short story about a Mexican migrant in the US and the researcher assessed her students understanding through a number of different tasks including writing a title for a short story and writing an end for a story. Similarly, Hibbs (2016) used novels for promoting his learners' ICC. He used some short stories with some cultural points for discussion in a short story class. In this study, it was also found that short stories provided a good platform for the learners to become more cognizant of intercultural issues. Some of the participants of the current study gradually shifted from total attachment to the target culture and alienation from their own native culture to a more global understanding of other cultures. In other words, the participants in general became more aware of their own and target culture. This result is similar to Zapata (2005) whose research culminated in a critical stance of the participants to both L1 and L2 cultures. The results of this research are also comparable with Rodríguez and Puyal (2012) who also highlighted the role of literary texts in enriching not only their learners' linguistic but also cultural knowledge. Like what Gómez (2012) did in Colombia, the present study also shows that the exploration of literary texts, for instance short stories, can develop a more (inter)culturally competent person. The results of the present qualitative research have several pedagogical implications for both language teachers and learners. The results of this research showed that literary texts are useful materials for raising intercultural awareness. Furthermore, materials developers should pay more attention to the cultural components in the textbooks they devise. Textbook writers should include more cultural topics from local people and avoid having an Anglo-Saxon focus to the exclusion of local or minority cultures. Teacher training courses should also allocate some modules to teaching culture in order to reach a more socially just teaching where marginalization is critiqued and a more emergent syllabus based on local values and beliefs is appreciated (Ramezanzadeh & Rezaei, 2018).

As for the direction for further research, the researchers in the present study focused on American short story writers and shifted the students' attention to local writers to compare both the stylistic and cultural differences within these two different contexts. Future research can further incorporate world literature to see how this intercultural understanding can be nurtured. Other materials such as movies and drama can be also used. Researchers can also compare the effect of different media and modes of teaching, for example the comparison between literature Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research 6(2), (July, 2018) 77-96 93

CONCLUSION

To sum up, storytelling is not an unknown concept in teaching and learning a foreign language. The main purposes of using short stories and retelling the plot of stories are to challenge, educate, motivate, develop critical thinking, creativity, imagination, stabilize knowledge and learn intercultural communication. Storytelling helps learners to stabilize skills. If the teacher focuses on and draws attention to the usage of short stories, their narrations by dedicating special classes to storytelling, teaching intercultural communication can not be boring but becomes useful, fruitful and interesting. Students do not get not only a basic information but also increase cultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence by reading short stories because

there are given many real events, social life style, history, culture of this or that country in the short stories. Creating an enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom helps students to overcome emotions, support shy students, and help passive students and foster communication. What it is suggested in this paper is that storytelling can be used and chosen for different ages and language levels. It is a potential pedagogical tool to enhance communication in English Language classes.

The main reason for misunderstanding in intercultural communication is not the difference in languages, but the difference in the national consciousness of the communicants, while the dialogue of cultures is not so much a communication of different consciousness, but rather a communication of images of different cultures within the same consciousness. The comprehension of the images of another culture occurs either through a search for an “equivalent” image of one’s culture, or through a search for differences in the images of one’s and another’s culture. The unjustified transfer of stereotypical images of one’s culture to someone else’s provokes communicative failures and complicates the understanding of the message. Therefore, it becomes important to study and describe the basic stereotypical representations of different cultures, which will solve many of the problems that arise in intercultural communication, both real and mediated by reading a work of art.

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