Intercultural Sensitivity and Its Implications in Language Teaching

Javad Ahmadi Fatalaki
Allameh Tabataba’i University

Ahmady.fatalaky@gmail.com

Abstract

What is important in international communication is the mutual understanding with regard to the cultural differences. Robinson (1981) stated that one cannot see the world from others’ eyes. What is important is the extension of the worldview through having more awareness regarding cultural differences. This study aims at reviewing the concept of intercultural sensitivity and its implications in language teaching in EFL contexts. In this regard, the researcher perused the literature to have the appropriate definition for this concept that is distinctly differentiated from other concepts such as intercultural awareness and competence. Then, two important frameworks were discussed to have the better view on the underlying factors that have the key role for the development of individuals’ intercultural sensitivity. Intercultural sensitivity was also viewed from its role in the rudimentary step of attitude shaping that can have positive and negative role in language learning.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity, language teaching, autonomy.

Introduction

Culture is one of the most controversial issues that are discussed regarding the instruction of second or foreign language. Due to its importance, there have been large amount of research to specify its role in language learning. In this regard, there are two major perspectives. The first one deals with highlighting L1 cultural background of language learners without considering the target community. And, the second view advocates the presence and integration of the cultural features of the second and foreign language in ELT texts books and asks for the direct and indirect instruction of the target language culture. The latter perspective has drawn more attention due to its importance for the real communication with native speakers of the target language. The knowledge of the cultural norms of the target community provides the language learners with sense of being global citizens who can interact appropriately. As Bada (2000, p. 101) stated, “the need for cultural literacy in ELT arises mainly from the fact that most language learners, not exposed to cultural elements of the society in question, seem to encounter significant hardship in communicating meaning to native speakers.”

One may have studied a foreign language for years without having the opportunity to
communicate with others in supranational contexts and therefore this is quite clear that his/her ability to exchange meaning will be affected ,to some extent, by his/her lack of knowledge over the pragmatic norms. In this case, this is probable that the real act of communication be hampered due to lack of knowledge, for example, on the formal and informal styles. What may be formal in one community may be exactly the opposite in other community. This lack of knowledge necessitates the presence of cultural norms of the target community in linguistic and pedagogical aspects of language learning. In McKay’s (2003) view, culture affects the language by its influence on semantic, pragmatic features of the target language linguistically and it affects the selection of the authentic materials pedagogically. Whether the focus on the instruction of these materials is explicit or implicit, the selected materials should be the representative of the normal behaviors of the native speakers of the target language.

The first and the foremost concern of the language teachers with regard to the cultural norms of L2 should be the enough exposure through different input modalities. Although the simple exposure seems insufficient, it can pass cultural norms through the mind of learners. This can be a beginning phase for having more interculturally competent language learners. This stage of the integration of the target culture norms brings about cognitive and affective mind performances that are of our concern in this paper. Chen and Starosta (1998) considered the affective aspects of the intercultural communication and mentioned that intercultural sensitivity is the locus for the affective aspects of intercultural communication. In line with the great contribution, this study aims at reviewing the concept of intercultural sensitivity and its probable implications in language teaching. This emphasis on intercultural sensitivity is due to its beneficial role for the development of the language learners’ intercultural communicative competence from the affective point of view.

Intercultural Sensitivity

The Definitions of Intercultural Sensitivity

Lack of consensus over any definition that includes all attributes of intercultural sensitivity brought about misunderstanding. Chen and Starosta (1997) believed that the reason for this issue is that there is no clear definition that can differentiate intercultural sensitivity from intercultural awareness and competence. In wider sense, Chen (1990) claimed that previous models and studies regarding intercultural competence have conceptual ambiguity. In Chen and Starosta’s view, intercultural awareness is “the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication. It refers to the understanding of cultural conventions that affect how people think and behave” (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 9). Chen and Starosta stated that intercultural competence is related to the behavioral aspect of communication and it is shown through the verbal and non-verbal behaviors in interaction at supranational levels. Behavioral aspects of communication are the product of both intercultural sensitivity and awareness because the conglomeration of affective and cognitive aspects leads into a special sort of behavior. So far, the distinction between intercultural
communication and awareness has been clarified. Regarding the Intercultural sensitivity, Chen and Starosta (1997) considered ‘emotion’ as the key word. Chen and Starosta defined Intercultural sensitivity as “an individual's ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes an appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication” (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 5). These aspects should work hand in hand to serve the communicative purposes. The lack of coverage on every one of these aspects may result in failure in international communication. These aspects should be taken into account regarding the preparation of the language learners because of parallel development of these aspects. That is, behavior is not always the result of cognitive and affective aspects. One’s behavior may occur before cognitive and affective steps and forms further behaviors. Therefore, what learners face is an ongoing process.

Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) pointed out that intercultural sensitivity is the reaction individuals show when they confront people from different cultures. This ability is the prerequisite for the purposeful communication. From the practical perspective, intercultural sensitivity can be defined in action. That is, characteristics of the person who is interculturally sensitive can clarify the difficulty in the definition of intercultural sensitivity. In this respects, Chen & Starosta, 2000, p. 4) mentioned that: interculturally sensitive persons are able to reach the level of dual identity and enjoy cultural differences by gradually overcoming the problems of denying or concealing the existence of cultural differences and attempting to defend their own world views, and moving to develop empathic ability to accept and adapt cultural differences.

The proposed Models Related to Intercultural Sensitivity

Bennett (1986; 1993) proposed a framework through which he claimed for the developmental stage for the cognitive process of intercultural sensitivity. He addressed all the stages in two major categories, that is, ethnocentric and ethnorelative. These categories can be called the major steps that individuals should follow to have more awareness and understanding of other cultures and have the ability to adjust and integrate their cultural norms with them. Ethnocentrism deals with the worldview that has been centralized based on just one culture and context while ethno relativism advocates the existence of different world views due to the contextual and cultural differences and it also mirrors the reality from different views.

The following table shows the subcategories:
Table 1: The Developmental Stages of Intercultural Sensitivity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Stages</th>
<th>Levels/Stages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnocentrism</td>
<td>1.Denial</td>
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<td>2.Defense</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnorelativism</td>
<td>1.Acceptance</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.Adaptation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3.Integration</td>
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**Ethnocentrism:**

1. Denial: One of the reasons for denial may be related to the lack of access to other cultures due to social and physical isolation (Bennett, 1986). In Bennett’s view, there may be relative conditions that people are not in touch with other cultures. He believed that this type of contact leads into parochialism. In extreme cases, negative attitudes towards other culture may result in the emergence of tribes that do not accept the presence of foreigners in their homogenous groups.

2. Defense: defense is the mechanism that serves as tool that staves off the threatening factors to the central world-view. “The most common Defense strategy is denigration of difference wherein undesirable characteristics are attributed to every member of a culturally distinct group. The denigration may be attached to race, religion, age, gender, or any other assumed indicator of difference”(Bennett, 1986, p. 184).

3. Minimization: This last stage of the ethnocentrism does not explicitly show reluctance to other cultures. Rather, it minimizes the differences.

Bennett considered two forms for this level:

a. Physical Universalism:

b. Transcendent Universalism:

**Ethnorelativism:**

1. Acceptance: The second stage starts with the change of the attitude of the individuals’ from being ethnocentric to be moderately ethnorelative. In this level, difference between cultures is respected and understood. Bennett (1986) believed that there are two levels within acceptance. The first one is the behavioral acceptance and the
second one, which is deeper, is the understanding of the underlying cultural features of other cultures.

2. Adaptation: this level is the “temporary alteration of process that forms the heart of intercultural communication. The ability to change processing of reality constitutes an increase in intercultural sensitivity when it occurs in a cross-cultural context” (Bennett, 1986, p. 185). The central part of this level is ‘empathy’ (Bennett, 1986). Empathy has been defined by Bennett as the “temporary shift in frame of reference such that one construes events “as if” one were the other person” (Bennett, 1986, p. 185). What is important here is that this empathy is directed towards the target culture. Empathy can be regarded as the cognitive state and even the behavioral one through verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Cultural Pluralism is another form of adaptation that means the shift to several other cultures.

3. Integration: In this level, individuals can take advantage of the cultural diversity and enjoy the presence of several cultures. This stage is the end for the developmental identity of intercultural sensitivity that has positive effect on the intercultural competence. Individuals learn how to act according to the contextual factors and see themselves within different contexts not apart from them as aliens.

One of the newest models for the measurement of intercultural sensitivity is Chen and Starosta’s model. They designed a questionnaire that is consisted of 24 items to measure the level of intercultural sensitivity. The validated questionnaire was published in 2000. Five factors have been identified in their models that are depicted in the following figure (figure 1):
Intercultural Sensitivity in EFL Settings

Culture in language teaching is one of the most controversial issues that has been discussed. These discussions were over the teachability and learnability of target culture. Moreover, the influence of L1 and L2 culture and the extent to which they should be applied were investigated. The investigation in this interdisciplinary field is much owed to the work of Seelye (1981), Byram (1994), and Kramsch (1993).

Due to the importance of culture in communication, Kramsch (1993) emphasized on the integration of language teaching with the cultural features of the target community. The questions here is that what types of elements should be integrated to serve the purpose and what elements should be eliminated because of their probable negative loads based on the values of the L1 culture. Moreover, the dynamicity
of culture should be taken into account. That is, the static view regarding target culture can be followed by instruction while the dynamic features of culture, which are revealed in the relevant contexts, can not be taught via just instruction. Rather, the exposure to target culture should be considered. However, providing enough exposure for language learners is demanding activity that is not cost-effective. Therefore, the solution here can be readiness for autonomy. In other words, autonomy can be trained and supported by language teachers to make them ready to search for new identity. This new identity should be free of biases towards L1 culture to serve the communicative purposes.

Intercultural sensitivity as the affective part of intercultural competence can pave the way for communication in which there are mutual understandings between partees. This effective role is due to the relation between sensitivity and attitude. Attitude towards L2 culture shapes the communications and the perspectives. Sensitivity serves the affective process of attitude in the mind of learners and, therefore, is of great importance because the behavior as the final product of attitudes takes shape based on cognitive and affective processes.

**Conclusion**

Awareness regarding the cultural elements and norms of the target community is not always the only contributor to the international interaction with native and non-native speakers of English. Rather, having positive view regarding the target culture and its people is also important and should be given more attention. This positive attitude owes much to the individuals’ previous knowledge and background. One’s judgment about others’ action in different contexts is related to his or her sensitivity towards the reason for their action not only the action itself. The sensitivity towards the cultural differences can raise open-mindedness in multilingual settings. And, this open-mindedness brings ethnorelative view towards people’s behavior in different contexts. What should be noted here is that the real instruction for having more interculturally sensitive students is based on their level of autonomy. Therefore, it is quite necessary to give learners independence to become sensitive towards new behavior and consider this difference natural. Additionally, they should
also find both similarities and dissimilarities among cultures and have the ability to integrate them in international interactions.

References