Exploring Intercultural and Transcultural Communication in ELT

英語教育における異文化・超文化コミュニケーションの探求

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ABSTRACT

In this article I argue that ELT needs to incorporate a more intercultural and transcultural approach to teaching about culture and language. I discuss three perspectives to understanding language and culture in communication: cross-cultural, intercultural and transcultural. While cross-cultural perspectives, with their focus on homogenous national level accounts of language and culture, have been criticised as stereotyped and essentialist, they are still the most prevalent in ELT. However, in order to better represent the fluidity of language and culture through ELF intercultural and transcultural perspectives need to be adopted more widely in pedagogy. One of the most fundamental implications of this is a re-evaluation of communicative competence in ELT. Competence needs to be expanded to intercultural communicative competence, and particularly intercultural awareness (ICA), to better recognise the intercultural dimension of English teaching and use. I conclude with some suggestions for pedagogic approaches and practices which incorporate intercultural and transcultural perspectives by utilizing ICA, with the overall aim of better preparing learners for the superdiversity of languages and cultures in ELF communication.

KEYWORDS: Intercultural and transcultural communication, Intercultural awareness, ELF, ELT

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper considers the relevance of intercultural communication and, most recently, transcultural communication research to ELT practices. It begins with a brief overview of different approaches to understanding intercultural interactions from traditional cross-cultural communication, to more critical intercultural communication and, finally, transcultural communication perspectives. Given the focus on 'successful' communication in ELT, and that this communication is typically intercultural and transcultural, intercultural and transcultural communication should be central to ELT. Linked to this is an expansion of communicative competence (e.g. Canale & Swain, 1980) to incorporate intercultural

communicative competence and awareness[1]   (e.g. Baker, 2015a; Byram, 1997). Pedagogic implications are explored through approaches that place the intercultural dimension at the core of ELT. I argue that such approaches, in which the intercultural and transcultural aspects of communicating across and through linguistic and cultural boundaries are brought to the fore, better equip learners for the diverse reality of English as a global multilingua franca (Jenkins, 2015).

2. FROM CROSS-CULTURAL TO TRANSCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Traditional approaches to culture in language teaching have often treated them from a cross-cultural perspective in which cultures are viewed as clearly delineated separable entities, typically at a national scale. These cultural characterisations are used to explain the behaviour of members of that culture as a homogeneous group (see for instance the influential work of Hofstede e.g. https://www.hofstede-insights.com/). So, for example, the culturally influenced behaviour of Japanese people will be identified in a particular area e.g., greetings. The equivalent behaviour in another cultural group will also be described, for example, British people. Then the behaviour of the two groups will be compared identifying similarities and differences, in this example, perhaps noting the differences between the use of bowing in Japan and shaking hands in the UK. While there is some value in this approach in highlighting the influence culture can have on communicative behaviour and also that differences exist between cultural groups, there are also a number of problems. Most obviously it compares the behaviour of groups of people in intracultural communication (i.e., communication within shared cultures) not intercultural communication (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). How people behave when they are communicating with someone who shares a cultural background and with someone who has a different cultural background are not the same. To return to the earlier example, if two people from Japan and the UK meet they will not presume greetings to be the same as when in their 'home' culture and will not necessarily expect to be greeted with a bow or a handshake. In other words, people are usually aware they are in an intercultural interaction and typically behave accordingly in a flexible manner. Therefore, cross-cultural approaches are limited by an overly static view of communication, assuming that characteristics of communicative behaviour can be identified from one situation and then generalised to many different situations across a large group of people. However, communication, and especially intercultural communication, is frequently characterised by flexibility and adaptation, making it difficult to identify 'fixed' patterns and suggesting we need to avoid overgeneralisation (e.g., Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Scollon, Scollon, & Jones, 2012). Indeed, cross-cultural approaches have been criticised as stereotyped and essentialist in assuming that people will behave in a particular way based on a national cultural characterisation (e.g., Baker, 2015a; Holliday, 2011; Piller, 2017; Zhu Hua, 2014). In reality, people are members of many different cultural groups, not just national cultures, and, moreover, we can expect a great deal of variety among national groups.

[1]   Use of terminology such as competence and awareness in relation to communication is a far from straightforward matter and there has been much debate on this which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in specific reference to English and ELF see, for example, Widdowson (2012), Canagarajah (2013), Baker (2015a) and Lee and Canagarajah (2019).

Furthermore, the boundaries between cultures are blurred and constantly changing, making the link between a particular national culture and behaviour problematic (e.g., handshaking is not only a greeting in the UK and bowing is not unique to Japan). Nonetheless, despite the criticisms of cross-cultural approaches, they are still prevalent in ELT materials (see Gray, 2010; Baker, 2015b).

In contrast to cross-cultural perspectives, intercultural communication perspectives focus on people from different cultural backgrounds in interaction with each other (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). So instead of examining Japanese and British greetings, an intercultural perspective would look at what happens when a Japanese person and a British person greet each other. Thus, an important part of an intercultural communication perspective is not to make a priori assumptions about what happens in communication, but rather to adopt a flexible approach and observe what happens in interactions. Research has typically focused on discourse analysis of naturally occurring intercultural communication and examined how cultural references, practices and identities are constructed and negotiated in interaction (Jackson, 2012). There is also a recognition that people are members of many different cultural groupings such as ethnicity, religion, gender, generation, region, and occupation, to name a few (Scollon et al., 2012). This means that national cultures are seen as just one of many scales of culture that may, or may not, be relevant to interactions (Holliday, 2011). Furthermore, the boundaries between cultures are viewed as dynamic and blurred and even 'within' cultures a great deal of variety is expected. Intercultural communication approaches have frequently examined hybrid cultural practices mixing different cultures (e.g., Jackson, 2012). There is also an interest in the notion of third spaces in which cultural practices and identities are more fluid and not linked to any one cultural group but instead occupy a liminal in-between space (e.g., Baker, 2009; Kramsch & Uryu, 2012; MacDonald, 2019). Intercultural communication approaches have been very influential in ELT research and postgraduate level teacher education (e.g., Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2017); however, they have had less influence on ELT materials and everyday classroom practices (Baker, 2015b).

The final and most recent perspective on language and culture in communication is transcultural communication (Baker, 2015a; 2020; Baker & Sangiamchit, 2019; Dovchin, Saltana, & Pennycook, 2016; Pennycook, 2007). Transcultural communication builds on intercultural communication approaches that examine how cultural references, practices and identities are constructed and negotiated in interaction. However, it also goes a step further in questioning the 'inter' aspects of intercultural communication and attempting to understand cultural practices that are not necessarily linked to any single identifiable culture and, hence, not in-between or 'inter' any cultures. Participants in transcultural communication are seen moving through and across cultural and linguistic boundaries and in the process transcending those boundaries. Therefore, cultural practices and representations can be constructed in situ and, unlike in intercultural communication, participants are not viewed as being 'in-between' any named cultures. In a recent research study Baker and Sangiamchit (2019, p. 481) provide the following example to illustrate transcultural communication.

Example 1: Mooncake
Private message exchange on Facebook between international students in UK - North (Thai) and Ling (Chinese) both female.

North
1. My lovely daughter
2. Thank you for your moon cake
3. It's really delicious
4. I gave P'Sa and P'Yui already
5. and I'll give P'Beau on this Sat

Ling
6. U r welcome, and the mid-autumn festival is this Sunday, enjoy~
7. Can u tell P'Sa, she can get her bag back now~

In this extract we see English used a lingua franca between two friends discussing the mid-autumn festival. Firstly, the subject of the conversation is transcultural with the mid-autumn festival and mooncake being originally associated with Chinese culture but also a familiar practice in Thailand (and other Asian cultures). Here though, both participants are based in the UK while the conversation occurs in the virtual space of a social networking site (SNS). Thus, we see the mid-autumn festival as a cultural practice that moves through multiple scales and spaces from the virtual and local to the global. Secondly, as with much ELF communication, the communication is multilingual or translingual with other languages present too. We have the use of 'P' (พี่), in lines 4 and 5, which translates as 'older sibling' in Thai. In Thai culture 'P' needs to be used when speaking to an older person in an informal situation in order to show respect. This term of address is also taken up by Ling in line 7; although, Ling is unfamiliar with Thai[2]. Moreover, in line 1 North refers to Ling as her 'daughter' following a Thai cultural practice of addressing a younger friend as a daughter or son; although, this time the language of the cultural practice is English rather than Thai. The transcultural dimension comes from the use of cultural practices, intimate terms of address ('P' and 'daughter'), linked to Thai culture but also used by a Chinese interlocutor and expressed through English and Thai. Furthermore, they are discussing a festival of Chinese origin (but now international) while geographically based in the UK in the virtual space of a SNS. Examples such as this highlight the complex links between culture and language in which they are not solely fixed to, nor in-between, any particular national scale culture. Given how new the transcultural approach is, it has not yet had a lot of impact on ELT practices, but as I will argue in this paper, it is highly relevant for global uses and users of English as a lingua franca.

3. INTERCULTURAL AND TRANSCULTURAL APPROACHES TO TEACHING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

As discussed in the previous section culture and language (however the relationship

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2   This information came from additional interviews (see Baker & Sangiamchit 2019)

is interpreted) are closely linked and this has important implications for language teaching. As Zhu Hua notes, "language is key to understanding culture, and culture is an indispensable part of studying language" (2014, p. 219). Language teaching will, thus, inevitably have a cultural dimension but where a language is not associated with one particular geographical or national entity, as is the case with English, what culture(s) is the language linked to and how should we decide on the cultural content and intercultural processes to include in the language classroom? One answer might be to attempt to teach language as culturally 'neutral' and not associated with any culture. However, this is problematic because it represents a misunderstanding of culture and language. While languages are not fixed in their links to any one particular named culture, there is always a cultural dimension to language since it is culture which gives language its meaning. An alternative is to choose a particular 'target culture' (e.g. the US or UK in the case of English). However, this is also a misrepresentation of how language is used and fails to represent the diversity of relationships between language and culture in which global languages can be linked to multiple cultures, as the Mooncake example showed. Focusing on one 'target' culture would also fail to properly prepare learners for the variety of cultural contexts in which they will encounter English outside the classroom. Another approach is to teach language as a means of representing local cultures (i.e., classroom, school, community, region) and/or the L1 'national' culture. Again, though, adopting this approach runs the risk of misrepresenting the complexity of connections between languages and cultures and not adequately preparing learners for how language is used outside classrooms. Given what we know about the fluidity of links between the English language and culture, most appropriate is to teach language as a means of intercultural and transcultural communication with no fixed cultural associations, but which can be linked to a range of different cultural scales, including local and 'target' cultures, as relevant to the learners and teaching context.

There have been a variety of pedagogic approaches in recent years which have incorporated a more critical and fluid view of culture and language (e.g. Kramsch, 2009; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Zhu Hua, 2014). Many of them share a concern with developing three dimensions among learners in relation to intercultural communication. These are attitudes (affective dimension), skills (behavioural dimension) and knowledge and awareness (cognitive dimension). These three dimensions are dealt with most explicitly through intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997; 2008) which has been highly influential in teaching culture. Importantly, ICC recognises that the majority of learners of second or additional languages are learning for intercultural communication. Thus, traditional conceptions of communicative competence are expanded to properly account for this intercultural dimension. This entails going beyond the focus on linguistic competence and a narrow account of the sociocultural aspects of communication and adding intercultural factors such as interpretation, negotiation, adaptation and reflection in intercultural communication. Central to ICC is critical cultural awareness which is "an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997, p. 53).

Although ICC has been valuable in emphasising the intercultural in conceptions of competence and language teaching, the focus on that national scale of culture, i.e.,

"one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997, p. 53) is problematic for ELF. There are no clear a priori links between a culture and country in ELF communication and the national scale is just one of many. Instead, a more fluid conception of competence or awareness of culture, communication and language is needed. An alternative notion which has its foundation in ICC, but is specifically developed for the fluid scenarios of ELF communication, is intercultural awareness (ICA). ICA is defined as "a conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices and frames of reference can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in communication." (Baker, 2015a, p. 163). In ICA there is an emphasis on process and practice where negotiation and fluidity are central and hence knowledge, skills and attitudes are dynamic and context specific. This dynamism is crucial and must be part of pedagogy in order to prepare learners for the variable and complex links between languages and cultures in transcultural communication through ELF. How this complexity and fluidity can be meaningfully made part of classroom practices will be the focus of the next section.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICES

In specific relation to ICA and classroom practices there are two strands which are applicable to classroom practices. The first is the three levels and 12 elements of the model of ICA (Figure 1) which offer a way for teachers and learners to identify different aspects of the development of ICA. While the three levels and 12 elements are not offered as a literal account of the development of ICA, linking learners' intercultural interactions and interpretations of culture and language to the different levels can be useful for both teachers and learners in gaining insights into their understanding of these issues (Baker, 2015a). They can also be used to measure how learners progress over a course of instruction (Abdzadeh, 2017; Yu & Maele, 2018), with the caveat that progression may not be linear.

Level 1 – Basic Cultural Awareness

An awareness of:
1. culture as a set of shared behaviours, beliefs, and values
2. the role culture and context play in any interpretation of meaning
3. our own culturally induced behaviour, values and beliefs and the ability to articulate this
4. others' culturally induced behaviour, values and beliefs and the ability to compare this with our own culturally induced behaviour, values and beliefs

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Level 2 – Advanced Cultural Awareness

An awareness of:
5. the relative nature of cultural norms

6.   cultural understanding as provisional and open to revision
7.   multiple voices or perspectives within any cultural grouping
8.   individuals as members of many social groupings including cultural ones
9.   common ground between specific cultures as well as an awareness of possibilities for mismatch and miscommunication between specific cultures

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Level 3 – Intercultural Awareness

An awareness of:
10.   culturally based frames of reference, forms and communicative practices as being related both to specific cultures and also as emergent and hybrid in intercultural communication
11.   initial interaction in intercultural communication as possibly based on cultural stereotypes or generalisations but an ability to move beyond these through;
12.   a capacity to negotiate and mediate between different emergent socioculturally grounded communication modes and frames of reference based on the above understanding of culture in intercultural communication.

Figure 1. Twelve components of intercultural awareness (Baker, 2015a, p.164)

Alongside this model of ICA are also recommendations for classroom practices organised around five different strands (Baker, 2015a).

1.   **Exploring the complexity of local cultures** including the different cultural identities present in the classroom and local communities
2.   **Exploring cultural representations in language learning materials** such as textbooks, websites, assessment
3.   **Exploring cultural representations in the media and arts** both online (websites, SNS) and in more 'traditional' mediums (novels, films)
4.   **Making use of cultural informants** such as teachers, classmates, friends and family who have experience of other cultures and intercultural communication
5.   **Engaging in intercultural/transcultural communication** both face to face and electronically and taking time to reflect on these experiences

This list is not exhaustive and is deliberately general in its suggestions since the details of what is included will be best decided in particular settings and are not generalizable. A crucial part of each of the areas outlined is that any representations of culture presented are treated in a critical manner as subjective and partial. This does not undermine their value, since all characterisations of specific language and culture connections are necessarily subjective and context specific. Overall, these five recommendations illustrate how culture can be integrated into the ELT classroom in a non-essentialist manner that recognises the complexity of connections between language, culture, and communication. Such an approach meshes well with other ELF informed

approaches to teaching English that also emphasise the necessity of critically questioning established norms. In particular, the need to raise awareness among learners and teachers of the variability of communication through ELF and the subsequent need for fluidity and adaptability in communicative practices has been a recurring theme (e.g., Dewey, 2012; Ishikawa, 2017; Sifakis et al., 2018; Suzuki, 2011) in pedagogic research and ELF.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have proposed that ELF use should be viewed as a fundamentally intercultural and transcultural process not tied to any particular 'target culture' but rather moving across and through multiple scales from the local to the global. In order to incorporate these complex and diverse cultural scales into ELT, teaching practices need to move away from essentialist cross-cultural views on language and culture and adopt intercultural and transcultural perspectives. Intercultural and transcultural perspectives also entail a re-thinking of one of the core principles of ELT, communicative competence, and expanding it beyond a narrow focus on linguistic forms. ICA is put forward as an alternative that incorporates the wider range of attitudes, skills and knowledge needed for intercultural and transcultural communication. In relation to classroom practices, the different levels of ICA provide a structure by which teachers and learners can explore their development of intercultural awareness. Utilizing ICA is one way to incorporate the non-essentialist pedagogic approaches that are needed to expose learners to the complexity and fluidity of connections between language and culture in their everyday environments both inside and outside the classroom.

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