The role of intercultural competence in foreign language teaching

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Abstract: In recent years there has been a growing interest in the cultural dimension of foreign language education, and teachers today are expected to promote the acquisition of intercultural competence in their learners. Thus, the present study aimed to investigate the opinions and attitudes of Iranian teachers of English on intercultural competence teaching and to see how and to what extent these opinions and attitudes are reflected in their classroom application data were selected from 50 EFL teachers by mean of questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of four parts that investigate the teachers' attitudes and opinions. Date for present study, which was descriptive. Two statistics were used, if so, one sample t-test can be used, otherwise the chi-square test can applicable. The result of one sample t-test revealed that language teachers seem to be aware of the role of the culture in foreign language education though they do not often integrate culture into their teaching in order to develop intercultural competence in their learners. In overall, Iranian EFL teachers had positive attitude toward teaching culture in the classroom.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence, Foreign Language Teaching, Communication

1. Introduction

The concern for intercultural competence and more generally intercultural education reflect changing circumstances across the globe which result from trends of increased mobility (tourism, traveling, and migration) and modern communication which multiplies interactions through the use of new technologies. learners are more than ever likely to work, live, and communicate with people who are linguistically and culturally different, which sets a priority for educators: to prepare learners for 21 century and intercultural encounters resulting from an increased global interdependence. The objective of language learning is no longer defined in terms of the acquisition of communicative competence in a foreign language, which refers to a person's ability to act in a foreign language in linguistically, sociolinguistically and pragmatically appropriate ways (Council of Europe, 2001). As stated by Byram (1997) the success of interaction implies not only an effective interchange of information, as was the goal of communicative language teaching, but also "the ability of decenter and take up the other's perspective on their own culture, anticipating and where possible, resolving dysfunctions in communication and behavior"(p.42).

2. Review of Literature

The intercultural dimension in the teaching of foreign languages has become a special concern for teachers and researchers. Studies in the field of social psychology, as well as studies of intercultural communication (Wiseman&Koster, 1993) have provided insights into the linguistic and social skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural contact situations. The intercultural dimension in foreign languages emphasizes effective cross-cultural communication based on the acquisition of a key set of competence as suggested by different factors involved: attitudes, skills of interpreting and

relating, skills of discovery and interaction and political education including critical cultural awareness(1997). Jokikokko (2005) defines intercultural competence as "an ethical orientation in which certain morally right ways of being, thinking and acting are emphasized"(p.79). kramsch and McConnel-Ginet(1992) further claimed that the primary focus of teaching based on the intercultural approach is on the target cultures, yet, it also includes comparisons between the learner's own country and target country, thereby helping learnerto develop a reflective attitude to the culture and civilization of their own countries.

Thus, educating student to use a second/foreign language means to accustom them to being intercultural sensitive, by supporting them to build the ability to act as a cultural mediator, to see the world through the other's eyes , and to consciously use cultural learning skills(SenGupt,2002). Within this framework, the foreign language learner is viewed as an "intercultural speaker", someone who "crosses frontiers, and who is to some extent a specialist in the transit of cultural property and symbolic values"(Byram&Zarate 1997, p.11). This change in focus in the conceptualization of the foreign language learners entails a change in the expectations voiced towards foreign language teachers. Teachers are now expected not only to teach the foreign linguistic code but also to "contextualize that code against the socio-cultural background associated with the foreign language and to promote the acquisitions of the intercultural communicative competence"(Castro,1999,p.92).

Ateacher is expected to mediate between the native language and the target language culture to help learners the above mentioned goals(Byram& Risager,1999; Edelhoff,1993). Thus, to support the intercultural learning process, foreign language teachers need additional knowledge, attitudes, competencies and skills. They need to be acquainted with basic insights from cultural anthropology, culture learning theory and intercultural communication and need to be willing to teach intercultural competence and know how to do so (Edelhoff,1993;Willems,2002). Research into innovation in education has shown that teachers' perceptions of the innovation, beliefs, and preferences, in short, their conceptions determine the success of that innovation to a large extent. When taken as a whole, the body of research on teachers 'conceptions suggests that these conceptions shape teachers' instructional behavior to a considerable degree and a direct relationship was found to exist between these and the way teachers teach (Prosser&Trigwell 1999;Williams&Burden 1997).

Therefore, insights on teachers' conceptions are crucial for understanding the way in which teachers currently perceive the advocacy to integrate intercultural competence teaching in foreign language education and the reasons underlying their actual practices. The present study aimed to investigate the opinions and attitudes of Iranian teachers of English on intercultural competence teaching and to see how and to what extent these opinions and attitudes are reflected in their classroom applications, reported by teachers.

3. Research Questions

1. How do Iranian EFL teachers perceive the objectives of foreign language education?

2. What are the opinion and the attitudes of Iranian EFL teachers regarding the role of intercultural competence in teaching foreign language?

3. To what extent can Iranian EFL teachers incorporate classroom practice related to cultural teaching?

4. Methodology

4.1. Participate

The participate of present study were 50 Iranian teachers of English from Mazandaran. The teachers selected randomly from public and private school and from different levels. Most of teachers hold MA university degree and the rest of them hold BA degrees.

4.2. Instrument

In this research we used a questionnaire developed by Sercu et al (2005). The questionnaire, consisting of four sections, aimed to investigate teacher's views on the role of culture in language teaching and the extent to which their current teaching practice can be characterized as directed towards the attainment of intercultural competence and a cultural approach. the first section of the questionnaire consist of 8 statement and asked to indicate the objective of foreign language teaching on a 5 point likert scale ranging from "very important" to "not important at all".The second section consists of seven statements to indicate definition of culture teaching. The third section consist of 5 statement to indicate ways of communication with foreign people and cultures on a 3 point likert scale (often, sometimes, never). The last section consist of 10 statement to indicate classroom practicing focusing on culture teaching on a 3 point (often, sometimes, never).

5. Procedure of Study

The sample consisted of 50 Iranian EFL learners. Most of the teachers hold MA degrees and the rest of them hold BA degrees. Participants' experiences of teaching were from 1 to 12 years. The most of participants had 5 years' experience. A data were collected from English teachers by means of a questionnaire developed by Sercu et al. (2005). A questionnaire, consisting of four sections, aimed to investigate teachers' views on the role of culture in language teaching and the extent to which their current teaching practice can be characterized as directed towards the attainment of intercultural competence and a cultural approach.
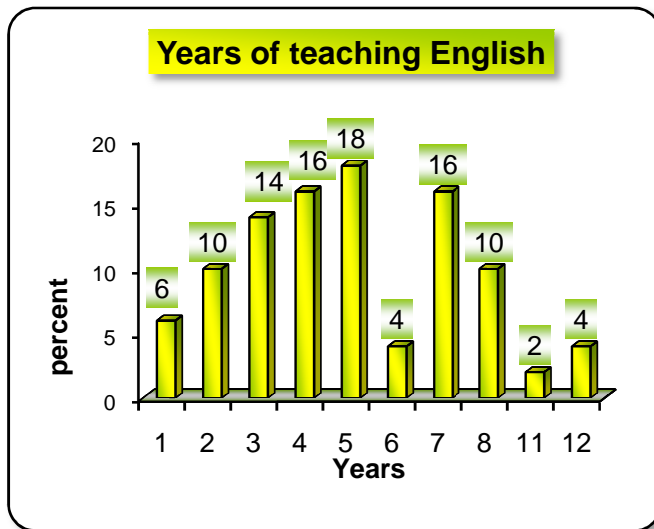
Years of teaching English

Fig. 1. *Distribution of years of teaching English.*

6. Data Analysis

In this section we study research questions. To use a proper statistics test, we need to know whether variable distributions were normal. If so, one-sample t-test can be used, otherwise the chi-square test is applicable. Thus we investigated the normality of the variables distribution by Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test.

Table 1. *Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of normality for WTC and EI components.*

Variable	Z	Sig. (p)
Objectives	1.350	0.052
Definition of culture teaching	0.881	0.420
Ways of communication	1.458	0.028
Classroom practicing	1.133	0.153

The above table shows results for Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. Since p –values were greater than 0.05 (p>0.05) for variables Objectives, Definition of culture teaching and Classroom practicing, the statistics were not significant which means that the distributions were normal for these variables. On the other hand, for Ways of communication, the statistics was significant (p<0.05) thus the distribution of Ways of communication was not normal.

Research question 1: how do Iranian EFL teachers perceive the objectives of foreign language education?

To investigate this question, regarding that scores were between 1 and 5, we compared the score obtained from this part of questionnaire with the expected value of 3. According to information befour, the mean of Objectives of foreign language teaching (M=3.85) was greater than 3. The statistically significance of the difference was tested by the one-sample t-test as presented in the following table.

Table 2. *The one-sample t-test for the Objectives of foreign language teaching.*

Statistics Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Test value = 3			
					Mean Difference	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Objectives	50	3.85	0.490	0.069	0.85	12.299	49	0.001

As shown in table 2, the t-test was significant at the level of 0.01 (t=12.299, df=49, p=0.001<0.01). Thus the difference between the Objectives of foreign language teaching mean and the expected value (3) was significant. In other words, Iranian EFL teachers perceive the objectives of foreign language education more than the expected mean.

Research question 2: what are the opinion and the attitudes of Iranian EFL teachers regarding the role of intercultural competence in teaching foreign language?

Two variables, Definition of culture teaching and Ways of communication were involved in this question, so we tested them separately.

- Definition of culture teaching:

For this variable, scores were between 1 and 5, so we compared the scores with the expected value of 3. According to table 3, the mean of Definition of culture teaching(M=4.10) was greater than 3. The statistically significance of the difference was tested by the one-sample t-test as presented in the following table.

Table 3. *The one-sample t-test for the Definition of culture teaching.*

Statistics Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Test value = 3			
					Mean Difference	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Definition of culture teaching	50	4.10	0.550	0.077	1.10	14.12	49	0.001

As shown in table 3, the t-test was significant at the level of 0.01 (t=14.12, df=49, p=0.001<0.01). Thus the difference between the Definition of culture teaching mean and the expected value (3) was significant. In other words, Iranian EFL teachers had positive attitude towards Definition of culture teaching.

- Ways of communication:

Firstly notice that according to table 3, distribution of this variable was not normal. Thus we used the non-parametric chi-square test. To do so, we categorized the Ways of communication scores into 3 levels, below 1.67 as low level, between 1.67 and 2.33 as moderate level and above 2.33 as high level of Ways of communication. Then the chi-square tested the significance of frequencies observed at each level.

Table 4. *The Chi-square test for Ways of communication.*

Statistics Group	Observed N	Expected N	Chi-Square	df	Asymp. Sig.
Low (below 1.67)	14	16.7			
Moderate (between 1.67 and 2.33)	13	16.7	3.64	2	0.162
High (above 2.33)	23	16.7			
Total	50				

Results of the chi-square test show that the frequencies in 3 levels were not significantly different (p=0.162>0.05). This indicates that Iranian EFL teachers had diverse opinion regarding the Ways of communication.

In overall, to answer research question 2, Iranian EFL teachershad positive attitude towards Definition of culture teaching, while there was no enough evidence to conclude about Iranian EFL teachers' opinion regarding the Ways of communication.

Research question 3: to what extent can Iranian EFL teachers incorporate classroom practice related to culture teaching?

To investigate this question, regarding that scores were between 1 and 3, we compared the score obtained from this part of questionnaire with the expected value of 2. According to table 3, the mean of Classroom practicing(M=2.07) was greater than 2. The statistically significance of the difference was tested by the one-sample t-test as presented in the following table.

Table 5. *The one-sample t-test for the Classroom practicing.*

Statistics Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Test value = 2			
					Mean Difference	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Classroom practicing	50	2.07	0.325	0.046	0.070	1.52	49	0.135

As shown in Table 5, the t-test was significant at the level of 0.01 (t=1.52, df=49, p=0.135>0.05). Thus the difference between the Classroom practicing mean and the expected value (2) was not significant. In other words, Iranian EFL teachers incorporated classroom practice related to culture teaching as much as the expected average.

7. Conclusion

One of the most significant changes over the past decades has been the recognition of the cultural dimension as a key component of language studies. This has transformed the nature of the experience of teaching and learning languages to a great extent and the traditional aim of developing linguistic skills modeled on the norms of native speakers has lost ground. According to the intercultural model, language are related to the cultures, communities and societies that use them for communication and language learners should be encouraged to become competent intercultural speakers (Garrido&Alvarez,2006). For this purpose, language teachers are expected to guide students in the acquisition of various skills, contributing to the development of their knowledge and understanding of a target language and culture, and helping them reflect on their own culture as well. Thus, language teachers have to be familiar with what lies behind the new skills and strategies their students are expected to acquire for intercultural understanding. The present study aimed to investigate the opinions of Iranian EFL teachers regarding the role of teaching culture in foreign language education and the extent to which they incorporate cultural activities into their classroom practices. The finding of the present study were consistent with those of Sercu et al.,(2005).

Regarding the objectives of culture teaching, Iranian EFL teachers supported the skills objective helping student gain knowledge and skills necessary for both other subjects and life in general as well as skills necessary to learn different foreign languages, Iranian EFL teachers perceive the objectives of foreign language education more than the expected mean. An interesting finding of the present study was the teachers expressed strong support to" help students understand their own cultures better".

Finally, teachers appeared not to be integrated culture-related classroom practices in their own classes frequently, although they reported to have positive attitudes towards the role of culture in foreign language education. This finding is in contrast with the research finding that teachers' belief and attitudes shape their teaching practice (Prosser&Trigwell, 1999; Williama&Burden, 1997). This might be due to two reasons: first, teachers might not know how to integrate culture into their own classrooms. In other words, they might be lacking the training focusing on the integration of culture into foreign language education. Second, they might not have the opportunities to integrate cultural practices into their classes. In overall, Iranian EFL teachers had positive attitude towards definition of culture teaching, while there was no enough evidence to conclude about Iranian EFL teachers' opinion regarding the ways ofcommunication.

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