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Intercultural Communicative Competence: Obstacles Faced by NESTs, NNESTs and Learners

Abstract

This paper looks at three possible actors in the ELT classroom: learners, non-native English speaking teachers (NNEST) and native English speaking teachers (NEST). Each particular group has a need to acquire the skill of intercultural competence. For the learners, it is a necessary element alongside their knowledge of the language to be effective in real-life intercultural communications. For the teachers, it is to be sensitive to their learners from other cultures, to have a neutral bias to whichever of the L1 or L2 cultures is not their own, and also to enable incorporation of intercultural content effectively into the English lesson. The paper examines the obstacles to achieving Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) encountered by each group. Some are unique to that group, such as the comparative disparity of the influence of the globally dominant culture of the NEST, and some are common among two or all three, for example, culture shock whilst abroad. By understanding these obstacles, it is possible to make suggestions on how to overcome them in each particular group. Some examples of recommendations are for ICC building skills to be included in teacher training courses as well as foreign exchange trips for both learners and teacher trainees. Finally, some observations are made as to how L1 and intercultural aspects can be included in the lessons themselves.

Keywords: Intercultural Communicative Competence, NEST, NNEST, ELT, ethnocentricism

1. Introduction

In the context of the increased use of English in L2 to L2 communications (Graddol 2006: 87), the objective of language learners is no longer to communicate with native speakers exclusively, but as a lingua franca between L2 to L2 speakers. The implication of this acknowledgement is that learners should possess intercultural skills in order to be able to communicate effectively with other English L2 speakers who come from different cultures, vary in proficiency of the language, or indeed use different forms of it such as regional variations, accents, *etc.* It is argued that these skills should be incorporated into English lessons (Prodromou 1992, Sárdi 2002). This paper aims to approach the issue from the perspective of

integrating Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) into the English language lesson. If teachers wish to address these skills in class, they need to be prepared to reflect and examine their own levels of ICC. As sources of ethnocentricity may vary according to background, it was decided to examine the obstacles to achieving a higher level of ICC development encountered by native English speaking teachers (NESTs), non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) and the learners themselves. Some of the obstacles are unique to each group and others are common. For example, the NNESTs who wish to expose their learners to a culture that is not their own, and the students who may experience barriers to or issues with L2 cultural aspects. Each obstacle has the possibility to cause *noise* in an intercultural communication and may even reduce learning outcomes if the learner does not feel comfortable with aspects of communication with other cultures. The obstacles will be explored and compared; solutions will be proposed on how to overcome them. The result of achieving a higher degree of ICC in all three groups would remove cultural barriers to intercultural communication between both sets of teachers and their learners by promoting understanding, empathy and accommodation; therefore enhancing not only the ELT learning process but learners' eventual intercultural communication outside the classroom too.

2. Intercultural communicative competence

Alvino Fantini illustrates the skills required in order to be a successful intercultural communicator:

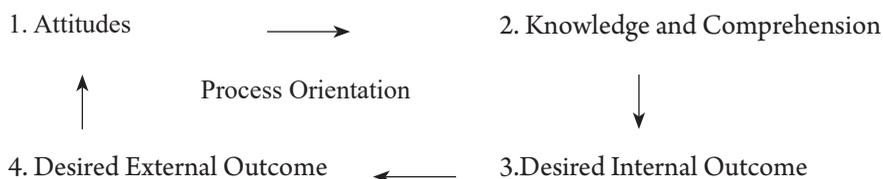
This means not only making themselves understood—in their own tongue, the interlocutor's tongue, or a third language not native to either party—but, perhaps more important, also learning new behaviours and interactional styles that go beyond those of their native systems. (Fantini 2009: 456)

The ELT classroom may be a monocultural one which consists of learners and teacher of the same culture, or a multicultural one which comprises a foreign teacher and local students, or a combination of local/foreign teacher and international mix of students. Some of these variations involve members of the classroom who are also contending with the external challenges of living in a foreign country. Each of these groups may come with their own cultural baggage when it comes to communicating with each other. Then there is the L2 itself, English in this case. It has been accepted that linguistic competence alone is not sufficient to attain successful communication without a good command of sociolinguistic aspects which include cultural norms (Byram 1989: 42). These may run counter to what the learner has experienced in her/his own culture.

Byram (1997: 30) points to the complexity of defining ICC because of the amount of considerations involved. He cites, for example: non-verbal communication, psychological characteristics, even “social and political factors”. Nonetheless, he defines one who possess ICC as an “intercultural speaker” who employs the *Savoirs* (knowledge), *Savoir comprendre* (ability to interpret and relate), *Savoir apprendre/faire* (skills of acquiring and applying new cultural knowledge), *Savoir être* (ability to see one's own culture from different perspectives) and *Savoir s'engager* (critical engagement with the foreign culture with regard to one's own). Byram (1997: 3) also points to the deliberate connection between Intercultural Communicative Competence and Communicative Competence (Hymes 1972). The former effectively ties the intercultural communicative aspect with the latter. Chen and Starosta (2000: 3) suggest misperceptions between the concepts of Cultural Awareness, Cultural Sensitivity and Intercultural Communicative Competence. They refer to the latter as an “umbrella concept” in which

Intercultural Adroitness (skills and cleverness), Intercultural Awareness (the cognitive aspect) and Intercultural Sensitivity (involving open-mindedness, empathy and non-judgement) enable a person to be interculturally competent (Chen and Starosta 1998: 27). They ultimately define ICC as “the ability to get the job done” in terms of a successful intercultural interaction (Chen and Starosta 2000: 3). Byram (1997: 30) however, makes a distinction between the terms Intercultural Communicative Competence which includes the *another* language aspect of interacting with someone from another linguaculture and Intercultural Competence (IC) which is the same interaction in one’s own language. Deardorff (2011: 68) views IC as a continual process in which “individuals need to reflect and assess over time” as seen in the diagram below. Therefore, this paper will alternate between IC and ICC, taking into account Byram’s (*ibid.*) other-language consideration, Deardorff’s (*ibid.*) model that it is acquired over time and Chen and Starosta’s (*ibid.*) description of it as the ability to achieve a successful intercultural exchange.

Process Model of Intercultural Competence.



Deardorff (2006: 256)

3. The obstacles to attaining ICC

3.1. The native English speaking teacher

This paper seeks to differentiate the challenges that are posed to native English speaking teachers (NEST) and non-native English speaking teachers (NNEST) in achieving and utilising ICC in the ELT classroom. From the point of view of the language, the NEST has all the advantages of having acquired natural and intuitive knowledge. He/she has grown up in an Anglophone culture, is familiar with social norms and customs, and has been educated and trained through that culture’s system and methodology. In that sense they are more capable of acting as a model for the language, its pronunciation and culture than the NNEST, as they have the life experience to teach it in context. However, it is exactly those characteristics which can prove disadvantageous when it comes to ICC. The native-speaker model and *ownership* of English has been questioned by scholars (Widdowson 1994, Jenkins 2000, Seidlhofer 2004, Holliday 2006) as to whether it (native proficiency) is ultimately achievable or even desirable for speakers who wish to use it as an International Language. While undoubtedly a cohort of learners may wish to embrace Anglo-American culture, the title of Robert Phillipson’s *ELT: the native speaker’s burden* (1992) with its colonial allusions is an illustration of aspects that have been criticised such as acculturation and neo-colonialism (Phillipson 1992, Pennycook 1994, Canagarajah 1999). Then there is criticism of the methodology used in mainstream ELT emanating from the Anglophone centre. The Communicative Approach has

been found as not always universally applicable when it comes to other cultures (Swan 1985, Hofstede 1986, Ellis 1996, Alptekin 2002, Bax 2003). It is inevitable that the NEST's students will originate from a different culture than theirs, which differentiates them from the NNEST, thus justifying the need for ICC and the intercultural sensitivity not to impose their dominant culture on their learners.

Phillipson (1992) and Fantini (2019) observe that native English speakers have a lower motivation to learn a foreign language. Not learning a foreign language, it could be argued, hinders the ability to gain a deeper knowledge of the culture. In fact, Byram (1997: 70, 71) provides knowledge of a foreign language as a requisite to the attainment of ICC. Neuner (2003: 50–51) points to the beneficial aspects of learners being able to utilise knowledge of their own world as a “reference point” in learning about the “foreign world” (L2). It is therefore important that the teacher has comprehension of and is able to include reference to the learner's L1 world in learning content. This puts the NEST at a disadvantage when she/he is relatively ignorant of their learner's culture, and thus Byram (2021: 125) considers that the native speaker needs additional skills when it comes to interacting with someone for whom the language is an L2. Any ethnocentric bias can cause obstacles in moving past the first stage (Attitudes) of Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence (2006). The following factors may also have the potential for ethnocentricity in NESTS, distinguishing them from both NNESTs and their learners:

- Anglophone culture is a dominant and omnipresent culture worldwide; evident in music, films, products, corporations, international communication, *etc.*
- Patriotism and pride in the historic political and military power of the ‘Anglosphere’, particularly in the case of Britain and the USA.

Additionally, in a practical context, NESTS may also experience culture shock and difficulties while working in a foreign country which may engender negative attitudes towards the local culture, thus further reinforcing ethnocentric bias and causing obstacles to acceptance of the local behaviour and practices. Kiss and Medgyes (2019: 3–7) list such issues, particular to NESTS, that contrast stereotypical beliefs about the “smooth-sailing and trouble-free lifestyle of expats”. Their findings reported such difficulties as obtaining visa and resident permits, being overcharged for accommodation compared to locals, miscommunication due to language/cultural issues, lack of a social life, lack of opportunity to practise the local language because contacts wish to utilise their English, difficulties in negotiating rules and customs of the local educational system, not being “fully accepted” by local teachers and reduced access to national social security, retirement packages, *etc.*

3.2. The non-native English speaking teacher

The NNEST faces a comparable quantity of intercultural challenges as the NEST, although sometimes different in nature. This teacher is more likely to teach in their home country (Medgyes 2020: 36). Although this is not exclusively the case as the NNEST is accepted as equal in ability to the NEST with different attributes (Medgyes 2001, 2020: 36). Teaching locally implies a higher probability of a monocultural class, hence the teacher speaking the same L1 as their students. Baimuratova and Doganay (2017: 18) point to the advantage of this shared background of teacher and students as it enables a cross-referencing of “English through the eyes of the L1 culture”. Therefore, in this particular combination of

learners and teacher there are not likely to be the issues with the L1 culture that were described in the case of the NEST. In this context though, there may be a stronger emphasis on passing the exams of national curricula than ICC development (Koch and Takashima 2021: 90). Any cultural challenges are with regard to the L2 linguaculture, English, which extends beyond Anglophone culture when considering the wider context of its use as a *lingua franca*. Sercu (2005: 5) refers to the need for teachers to have “adequate knowledge of the target language community”. However, Abayadeera *et al.* (2018: 183) indicate that the literature has more or less exclusively concentrated on the linguistic capabilities of NNESTS, and less on their intercultural communication skills. Furthermore, the NNEST who teaches locally may have knowledge of Anglophone culture that is not experiential. Rather, it may have been learned from books or other media. This may have provided them with a distorted view. (Neuner 2003: 17) in referring to this aspect of authenticity, points to knowledge that is:

- Filtered by media (coursebook content, *etc.*)
- Filtered by selection of information (materials selected by educational authorities, *etc.*)

To provide a further illustration of this aspect, scholars have found that the content contained in many ELT course books does not reflect real life; rather, a filtered, sanitised and glamorous version of it (Gray 2002; Mishan 2021; Branigan 2022). Therefore, a NNEST who has not lived among Anglophone culture may have such an inauthentic perspective, acquired from its particular portrayal in media such as educational content, music, films *etc.* In addition, they may cling to stereotypical views of the L2 culture such as that Anglophone people are over-confident, materialistic, superficial, rich, *etc.*, for example. This lack of authentic experience may reinforce their own ethnocentricity, thus hindering genuine understanding of the L2 culture and therefore acting as an obstacle to ICC. This may also lead to another frame of mind; Reversal, which will be discussed further on. Reversal is the mindset whereby a person wholeheartedly embraces the L2 culture at the expense of their own; it may result in the NNEST’s overenthusiasm or overselling of the L2 linguaculture. The teacher’s attitude has obvious effects on the students.

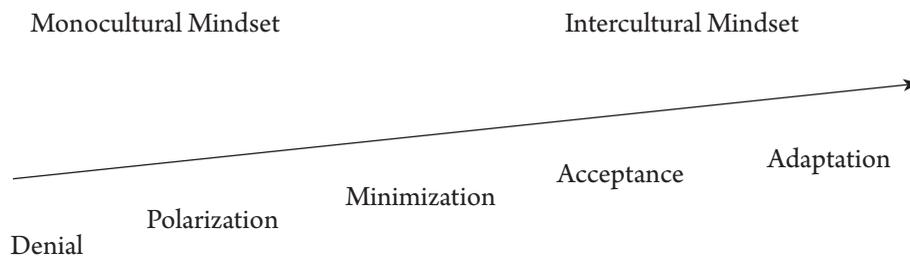
When it comes to the context of the NNEST teaching abroad, there are other possible challenges in addition to those faced by the NEST, notably, negotiating the local culture and customs, finding accommodation, miscommunications with locals *etc.* Medgyes (2001: 434) points to an “inferiority complex” in NNESTS due to the fact that their proficiency in the language is not that of the NEST. This may even be reflected in the observations of students. For example, Abayadeera *et al.* (2018), in a survey of Australian business students’ opinions, found NNESTS suffered from “intercultural apprehension and linguistic barriers” whilst teaching at an Australian university. Furthermore, Kiss and Medgyes (2019: 2) point to discrimination in the job market, with job advertisements offered only to UK or US passport holders, for example. In an abroad context, the NNEST suffers the comparative disadvantage of neither being a native speaker of the learners’ L1, nor the L2 they are teaching. These aspects of insecurity and culture shock may interfere with the NNEST’s ability to integrate and communicate whilst teaching abroad, hence the need for intercultural skills.

3.3. The learner

Zhang and Zhou (2019: 31) point to a general insufficiency of students' "intercultural knowledge, attitudes (and) skills". Hernandez-Bravo *et al.* (2017: 34) in referring to a Spanish context attributed this to schools not offering an "intercultural curriculum". Zhang and Zhou (2019: 32) suggest a lack of IC amongst students leads to prejudice and discrimination. These states of mind could act as obstacles to the intercultural aspect of learning the foreign language. Abayadeera *et al.* (2018: 184) found evidence of the ethnocentric perspectives of students even forming their feedback on NNEST teacher evaluations. When it comes to learners, the challenges with regard to achieving ICC also depend to an extent on whether they are learning in their own country or abroad, either in an Anglophone country or otherwise. When learning abroad they are exposed to intercultural situations. When learning at home, as with the case of the NNEST, it will be more likely than not in a monocultural classroom, *i.e.*, both teacher and learners will be from the L1 linguaculture. This increases the likelihood of L1 ethnocentrism persisting amongst all of the participants in the classroom. Furthermore, there will be the possibility of learning through inauthentic (at least, never truly authentic) cultural content and a need to overcome L2 cultural stereotypes.

In addition to the obstacles of their own attitudes and course materials, the learner is on the receiving end of cultural messages from the two previously described groups, the NNEST and NEST. If either is deficient in terms of ICC, the learner may be subject to receiving elements of their particular cultural bias. When it comes to the local context, there will also be inexperience with actual intercultural contact. Koch and Takashima (2021: 81) argued that not enough focus is given to intercultural communication development in "mainstream EFL practice", to this local, monocultural context where students cannot experience intercultural communication in "authentic intercultural settings". They refer to a lack of "diverse cultural representations in Japanese EFL textbooks", for example. Another factor worth returning to, Hammer (2012: 122) discusses Reversal which can also be an obstacle to ICC and is the converse of ethnocentrism. Learners have bought into and hold the L2 in such high regard that they judge and belittle their own L1 linguaculture. He argues that this may interfere with the attainment of a deeper knowledge of the L2 culture. This is an obstacle because ICC features an acceptance of both cultures, L1 and L2.

Hammer's Intercultural Development Continuum (IDC)

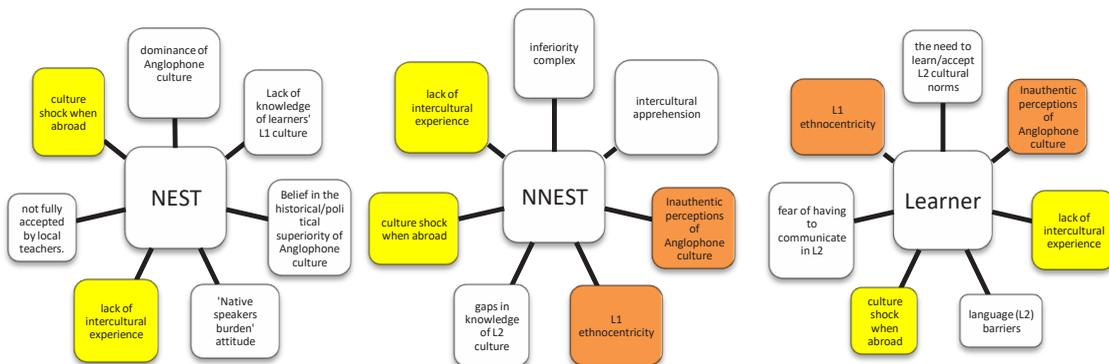


Source: Hammer (2012: 119)

The IDC has links to Bennett’s (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) which illustrates a person progressing from an Ethnocentric stage to an Ethnorelative stage. The IDC features a person’s growth from a Monocultural mindset to an Intercultural Mindset. When learners are studying English abroad they are inevitably placed in a multicultural environment, either within the L2 culture itself or another. Especially if they have not lived abroad before, they may experience culture shock and the initial stages of Denial and Polarization on the IDC. In addition, lack of previous cultural interactions may lead to intercultural apprehension and fear of failure. They may face the additional challenge of needing to use English outside the classroom for the first time, having to employ sociolinguistic aspects which may be new to them, not to mention negotiate local accents, vernacular, *etc.* Hammer (2012: 119) points to students with a Denial mindset becoming “rapidly overwhelmed” when faced with these obstacles. This may lead to the defensive Polarization phase of *it is done better where I come from*. Development of their ICC skills would lead them further along the curve towards acceptance and adaptation and leave them better prepared for such situations.

4. Commonalities and differences in the three groups

Obstacles to successful intercultural communication



The diagrams show that some factors are common amongst two (orange shading) or all three actors (yellow shading), such as culture shock when abroad. Others are unique to that particular actor (unshaded), such as the NEST coming from the globally dominant culture. Both the NNEST and learner share the possibility of a learned (vs. experienced) and inauthentic version of Anglophone culture. Particularly in a monocultural classroom, they may possess mutually reinforcing ethnocentric perspectives particular to their own shared linguaculture. All this information leads to the conclusion that in the case of both groups of teachers, training courses would benefit from the inclusion of intercultural instruction that deals with their particular obstacles as seen on the diagram. When it comes to learners, it is clear that in the real world they will face often non-verbal, intercultural challenges that are not usually dealt with in the ELT classroom and they need the skills to overcome them.

5. Overcoming obstacles to intercultural communication

5.1. Teacher training

Sercu (2005: 5) states that “foreign language teachers need additional knowledge, attitudes, competencies and skills”. That is in consideration of the fact that once the language is learnt in class, its actual use will occur in the *real world* where intercultural skills in addition to knowledge of the language will be required for effective communication. Zhang (2017: 230–232) referred to the need for emotional qualities involved in facing the challenge of integrating ICC in the classroom, as well as respecting students and being non-judgemental on the side of the teacher. Georgidis and Zisimos (2012: 50) in referring to a Greek context of working with Roma and socially disadvantaged children observed that “teachers are often poorly prepared and trained for working with diverse groups of children” and teachers do not receive this additional knowledge and skills in their training. A teacher who has attained a degree of Intercultural Competence in their education and experience would see their role from a different perspective than the traditional teacher model. Byram (2009: 326) suggests that the teacher would take the role of “cultural mediator”, Fantini (2019: 24) calls this a “linguaculture teacher”. These labels imply the teacher moving beyond the traditional role as model of the L2 to one who empowers learners with knowledge and awareness of cultures and their differences. Mediation here implies comparing and contrasting, exploring the similarities and differences between the cultures, critically evaluating both towards discovery, accommodation and appreciation of both L1 and L2 cultures. In the case of English as an international language that means other cultures too. One such example of mediation would be what Sercu (2005: 5) describes as having the ability to search for understanding with their learners when instances of intercultural conflict arise.

Baker (2015: 133) when referring to Intercultural Awareness, stated that there is “little indication of these ideas appearing in L2 teacher training materials or curricula”. When it comes to the training of the NEST in particular, the most popular international ELT qualifications are Cambridge’s CELTA and TrinityTESOL (12,000 candidates per year take the CELTA alone {Cambridgeenglish.org}). These courses have been widely criticised for their monocultural slant (Holliday 1994; Ellis 1996; Jenkins 2017; Gallagher and Geraghty 2021) and lack of course components which develop the ICC skills of their trainees. In these centre-method, Western, monolingual courses, appropriate instruction would bring awareness to the possible implications arising from the cultural imbalance that exists wherever the globally dominant Anglophone culture is concerned. The content of these courses should also take into consideration the specific needs of L2 to L2 communications. It is logical to conclude that the inclusion of ICC components in the instruction of both NNEST’s and NEST’s training would have the effect of both of these actors being able to effectively integrate elements of these skills alongside the language elements of their EFL courses.

5.2. Experience abroad

Scholarly advice recommends experience abroad as the ultimate enabler of intercultural skills for both learners and teachers. Fantini (2007: 5) describes intercultural experiences by learners as “life-altering”. Cushner (2007: 29) reports on foreign experiences by preservice teachers as having “challenged their perceptions of themselves as well as others”. Hismanoglu (2011: 814) in a study of students from

the University of Lefke, found that those who had experience abroad demonstrated a higher level of intercultural communication skills. Zhang (2017: 232) pointed to the fact that teachers with overseas experience are more competent than those who have not. The ERASMUS student exchange programme in the EU is such an example. In the case of preservice teachers spending some of their training abroad, Cushner (2007: 29) points to the additional benefit of trainees who are exposed to “new pedagogical approaches and educational philosophies”. Further to providing them with more options with regard to their approach to teaching, it can also be assumed a period abroad will leave them better equipped to relate to their future students’ differing cultural and educational backgrounds, in addition to the challenges centre, Western pedagogical practices might present to those from a different culture.

The citations in the previous paragraph illustrate the impact of the experiential aspect of a sojourn abroad over classroom instruction in aspects of intercultural communication. Hofstede (2009: 85) explains the rationale for this in that Intercultural Competence requires “the ability to participate in the social life of people who live according to different unwritten rules”. Of course, immersion in a foreign culture represents an active participation. While stressful and cognitively taxing on the learning curve, it certainly leads to self-development and the acquisition of a new set of skills: intercultural skills. Yet, ICC is not a given ability that is automatically acquired during a period abroad. Yarosh *et al.* (2018: 68) signal the importance of students realising that Intercultural Competence is a skill that needs to be consciously developed. Hammer (2012: 116–132), in referring to the Immersion Assumption, reveals through the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a 50 item questionnaire, that although immersion in a foreign culture does lead to improvements in intercultural communication, it is not enough in itself. He finds a dichotomy between the qualitative reports of students describing transformational experiences abroad as cited above (Cushner 2007 :29; Fantini 2007 :5), and the quantitative data of the IDI research which reveals, in fact, insignificant improvements in intercultural skills after a period abroad if those skills have not been cultivated in a conscious way. If consequential improvement is to be achieved, his findings advocated that cultural mentoring be part of the foreign placement. This is a guided developmental programme which involves students reflecting on their experiences abroad in order to construct new attitudes and build Intercultural Awareness. In referring to this conscious act of building on the experiential aspect, Fantini (2009) uses the KASA framework (knowledge, attitudes, skills, awareness) when it comes to reflecting on and assessing IC after such a sojourn. This is straightforward to apply in reflection activities. For example, what new things have I learnt from my experience abroad? (knowledge), I have learnt to overcome my fear of speaking English (skills), *etc.*

5.3. Lesson content

The importance of experiential learning over books has been established as it is difficult for the latter to be ever truly authentic. Intercultural training in class can be of benefit though, either when experience in a foreign country is not possible, or as a complementary activity to immersion abroad. In addition, as Hammer (2012: 116-132) illustrated, it is important as immersion alone may not develop the required intercultural skills. Furthermore, intercultural aspects can be integrated relatively easily into the day-to-day content of the English language lesson.

Hernandez-Bravo *et al.* (2017: 34), in a study of Spanish elementary school pupils, found that before any intercultural training, learners showed a “lack of intercultural knowledge and skills to interact with others”. This is an issue as once students make the progression from learners of the language to

users of the language they are going to need to employ their ICC skills. These are often non-verbal and attitudinal in aspect, as opposed to language skills learned in class, which ensure a successful intercultural communication in the real world. Xiao and Petraki (2007) illustrate what can happen when this is not achieved over the learner's period of English language study, with the example of Chinese students who obtain a high grade in examinations; however, are not able to interact with foreign people.

When it comes to including ICC content in the classroom, Sercu (2005: 11) reported a cohort of teachers who believed that it is not possible to include culture teaching with language learning. Reasons cited were reinforcement of cultural stereotypes and a belief that IC skills cannot be learned in class. To counter those arguments, she points to the commonalities between language educators and "intercultural educators" and states that "foreign language is by definition intercultural". It can thus be logically deduced that the culture element is a common denominator in both fields. Therefore, it can be argued that language teachers are well placed to incorporate ICC skills into ELT. Indeed, Zhang and Zhou (2019: 42) point to the positive relationship between language proficiency and IC; indicating the link between both once again. Popular international ELT coursebooks do not consider this by largely neglecting inclusion of aspects of the students' L1 culture, and not accommodating the fact they might need to interact with cultures other than Anglophone (Mishan 2021). That is why teachers may need to use their ICC skills and experience to integrate such content into the lesson content where it is absent.

As to activities for developing intercultural skills in the English language classroom, the scope of this paper limits their description to a brief outline. Zhang and Zhou (2019: 42) found that classroom activities had a positive effect on learners' intercultural skills. They suggested working with authentic materials from the target culture and "hands on experiential activities" such as roleplay, groupwork, *etc.* Hismanoglu (2011: 816) in suggesting similar activities, listed cultural assimilators, cartoons, games, discussion, ethnographic tasks, projects, *etc.*, and also made the important suggestion that learners' ICC education should begin once they commence learning a foreign language. Byram (1997: 7) in advocating raising cultural awareness in the classroom, recommends activities such as: examining the local culture, critically evaluating descriptions of cultures within course materials, making use of electronic media and interaction with "cultural informants", *i.e.*, local and non-local people with intercultural experiences who may visit the classroom in an informative role. Starkey (2003: 76–78) refers to two general methodologies for the critical study of such authentic materials. The first is Critical Discourse Analysis whereby issues such as social power, dominance, inequality, stereotypes *etc.* are explored and interpreted. Any points of concern can be discussed in class and comparisons made with the L1 culture. The second is a Cultural Studies approach in which students learn about other cultures through the analysis of materials which often contain contrasting views. That way, learners, rather than simply receive information provided, are able to construct their own knowledge and awareness from examining the culture from different perspectives.

6. Conclusion

Intercultural Communicative Competence goes beyond the mere language skills of the learner and extends communicative competence in English to the ability to interact successfully with people of multiple cultures. This involves overcoming cultural barriers such as stereotypes and ethnocentric biases

which may act as obstacles to communication. The ELT classroom is a good context in which to learn such intercultural skills as they are so closely linked and interdependent with language. Such skills need to be employed from the outset in the ELT classroom as by nature it is a place where two or more cultures are to meet. The actors in such a multicultural context may be take the form of a NEST who comes from a foreign culture, a NNEST who needs to inform of a culture foreign to their own and learners whose ethnocentric perspectives may act as obstacles to the achievement of Intercultural Competence, or a multicultural mix of variations of all three. While each of the stated actors encounters common obstacles to achieving Intercultural Competence such as lack of intercultural experience, there are others which are unique to that particular group, for example, the implications arising from the fact that the NEST comes from the globally dominant culture. Solutions to overcoming such barriers may be tailored to the obstacles encountered by that particular group. These include the incorporation intercultural components into teacher training courses which are often neglected. Experience abroad is vital for all and may be part of teacher training or student exchange programmes such as ERASMUS. However, it is essential that a dimension of building intercultural skills is incorporated into the programme if a genuine strengthening of such competences is to be achieved. Finally, lesson content should include activities that encourage critical analysis of possible ethnocentric biases that occur in content relating to both the students' L1 and the L2, including exploration of other cultures. The result should be that learners arrive at an appreciation of the commonalities and differences between cultures that eliminates obstacles to intercultural communication and provides them with the tools to function in various cultural perspectives through the medium English.

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