

## **Cross-cultural Analysis of Issues that arise within Language Teaching**

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**Abstract:** *Culture impacts our way of thinking, our values, our language, our interaction with other people, and the way we look at the world (Hale-Benson, 1986, cited in Kutay, 2006, p. 28). Language and culture are considered as inseparable entities. It is acknowledged that language proficiency alone is inadequate in language teaching, thus language teachers with linguistic knowledge alone are insufficient; communication is holistic and also requires knowledge of the ways culture and language interlock and an understanding of how interaction across cultures operates. Modern language teaching and learning highlight teachers as 'intercultural speakers who will be capable, adaptable actors and mediators in globalized contexts' (Buttjes&Byram, 1991, Byram&Zarate, 1994, Kramersch, 1993 and 1998, cited in Jordon, 2002). A teacher not only needs to be tolerant, flexible, patient, but also be able to motivate students, satisfy the needs of the students and parents and have problem solving abilities (Norris et al., 2007, p. 26). All this cannot be easily achieved and there is no teaching without any problems or cultural issues.*

**Keywords:** Culture, intercultural competence, intercultural communication, tensions, internalized culture.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Foreign or second language teaching focuses on learner motivation, language socialization and pragmatic competence (Agar, 1994; Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986; Gardner and Lambert, 1972, cited in Norris et al., 2007, p. 45). However, there is a need for intercultural awareness in this field. The notion of intercultural communication and thus intercultural competence are of equal importance as that of language itself. According to Byram et al. (1994, p. 4) the knowledge of the grammatical system of a language can be said to be complete, only if the students should be provided with the understanding of culture-specific meanings. Information about geographical features, family structures, education systems, social institutions, etc. facilitates the understanding of grammar and meaning. For this purpose, this essay we will look twosuchcross-cultural issues that arise in some aspect of the life of a teacher. The first case study handles the problem of managing a language classroom where the students come from varied cultural backgrounds and the second deals with the culturally different perceptions to teaching and learning processes.

**Issue 1:** I teach German in a college in Pune, India in a class that has gender imbalance. There are more boys in the class and only two girls. They also come from different states, each with varied cultural believes and different first languages. One is a Marathi-speaking group and other is a non-Marathi speaking group (speaking various other languages as their first language, but commonly Hindi among them). This creates three groups in the class- two language groups of boys and one group of the girls. The three groups tend to sit separate and speak amongst them much of the time their first language and are reluctant to work together with each other, making it hard to get them to speak German. **How do I manage these three groups in such a way as to maximize the use of English in class, while not letting the girls feel left out?**

Alferd North Whitehead (1929, cited in Seelye, 1993, p. 14) defines culture as:

“Culture is activity of thought and sensitiveness to beauty and human feeling. Mere scraps of information have nothing to do with it. The merely well-informed man is the most useless boor on God’s green earth”.

Culture is quite a broad concept. It has numerous definitions and approaches (Lustig et al., 2013). However, our concern is with the culture that helps human communication and especially the one that allows us to analyze issues within teaching. Culture can be subsumed in a range of variables, each of which can be seen affecting the learning process. Few prominent cultures and sub-cultures in this context are the Indian culture in broad, the culture in Pune, the education culture in general in Pune, as also the education culture of that college, culture of the students, Marathi speakers’ culture, non-Marathi speakers’ culture (the culture that is different

from the Marathi culture), gender, and the classroom culture. Along with these, it is also noteworthy to take the students' and teachers' culture into consideration.

Being a native Indian, my observation has shown that the culture of the Indian education system is quite hierarchical. Hofstede's 'Power Distance' (2010, p. 61) is prevalent in Indian schools and colleges. Teachers enjoy a greater power over the students. The power among students and teachers is unequally distributed. India is a vast country and I would therefore limit myself to Pune henceforth. It can be argued that intercultural awareness is an individual trait rather than an outcome of the behavior of a nation (Crawshaw, 2005). People in Pune show a dimension of collectivism to some extent as opposed to the individualism, one of the Hofstede's (2010, pp. 89-94) five cultural dimensions. This could be one of the possible reasons for the Marathi speaking students to cling together. Seliger (1988, p. 30, cited in Byram et al., 1994, p. 5) argues that the target language culture, the feelings and attitudes towards the target language and the speakers of that language as well as the motivation of learners determines the rate and degree of second or foreign language learning. Considering Pune, it is a multicultural and multilingual city. It is not just an educational hub but also an industrial hub (job providing sector). This acts as a motivation for students to study and learn languages.

**Internalized culture-** McDonough (1981, pp. 134-135, cited in Byram et al., 1994, pp. 5-6) and Krashen (1981, pp. 23-33) talk about the personality as being equally important as attitudes. Personality factors like being introvert or extrovert, tolerant towards others and change, ability to empathize, self-confidence, etc. need special attention while teaching language. Considering the three groups in the German class, each group member may behave in these ways because of the cultures they have internalized. Hofstede's (2010, p. 140) 'Masculinity' and 'Femininity' dimensions are seen in various parts of India. It is seen that some cultures in India are also gender biased, being a reason for girls and boys' sitting separately. India is considered a masculine country. Students coming from such background show this internalized behavioral distinction. Girls and boys not working together have probably internalized the culture of the society, in which males and females do not mix up.

**Tensions-** Differences and similarities between team members' cultural behavior may change or affect team dynamics and working practices. In this issue we can say that the boys and girls' values and beliefs may change as they are exposed to other cultures and as their student-culture evolves (CILT, 2008, p. 18). The gap between the two linguistic groups is another tension in the classroom. The linguistic collectivism (Hofstede, 2010) shown by the Marathi-speakers adds to the tension. This hampers their interaction in German and this affects communication in German. Learning a language is being able to communicate in that language and this does not seem to be achieved in this three-grouped class.

Fantini (2006, p. 12) defines intercultural competence as "a complex of abilities needed to perform *effectively* and *appropriately* when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself". Some of the aspects of Intercultural Competence needed in this context could be the skills described by Ruben (1976, cited in Humphrey, 2007). His skill of 'Empathy' is one of the important skills that a teacher needs to show in language teaching, that is an ability to empathize with students and showing an understanding of their cultural beliefs and practices. Language learning can also prove effective if a teacher is able to engage with students from different cultures and create positive relationships with them. In other words, a teacher should show 'Relational Role Behavior'. Being able to create positive relationships and engage with students needs tolerance. If a teacher is intolerant towards uncertain situations or towards students, who tend to behave, may be intentionally or unintentionally, in a way that is different from the teacher's expectations, then this can hamper the teaching-learning process. A teacher needs to be flexible, adapt him/herself to the situation or in other words, have the skill of 'Tolerance for Ambiguity'. All these are skills and can therefore be learnt (Ruben 1976, cited in Humphrey, 2007). Though this can go against the personal intercultural competence and be a criticism of Ruben's skills, these can actually help a teacher to understand tensions and solve problems in a culturally diverse class.

Being in an authoritative position I can order the students to sit in a way that does not allow them to converse in their first language but this would not take the psychological stability of the class into account. Teaching should aim for psychological rather than mere physical presence according to La Forge (1983, p. 66, cited in Byram et al., 1994, p. 9). His dual teaching method based on interpersonal security and cultural security advocates supportive atmosphere among the students. The behavior of the three groups in the class needs psychological attention. The problems should be dealt with by appropriate methods and activities that are not harmful to their ethnic backgrounds, beliefs and practices. Being able to give this security means being able to relate to other cultures and have a positive mindset about the differences.

Littlewood (1981, p. 55) acknowledges the fact that in the process of learning new language, we are to some extent giving up markers of our own identity in order to accept another culture's ways of perceiving the world. A teacher always has his/her own set of cultural beliefs, but being able to evaluate, critically and explicitly, practices of one's own and other cultures is important. To have a critical awareness (*savoir s'engager*) is one of the components of intercultural competence according to Byram (1997). I should, therefore, aim to be

at the Integration stage of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1993). Being at this 'ethnorelative' stage enables me to move easily among cultures and take practical steps to handle the problem. In Byram's (1997) words I should have the ability to 'decentre'.

If I want my students to work together, I need to set a goal for them that makes them work together to achieve the best. Mixing groups would enable the team to operate in a more innovative and creative way. Activities should be such that would encourage mutual respect, inclusiveness and equality. It should promote respectful communication, improved performances and better understanding. In order to make the students work together and raise learners' intercultural awareness, I can make use of exercises, games, simulations and quizzes. Games and quizzes usually bring a team together with a common goal of winning. Students can be given random numbers and then asked to switch places based on the numbers they get and thus make a heterogeneous group that would serve the purpose. Following Schulz's notion (2007, p. 17) shape students' communicative behavior can be shaped in such ways that they overcome their stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings between members of different cultures.

As a teacher my efforts work towards motivating the team, help them explore common grounds and achieve an atmosphere of mutual acceptance and purpose. By assigning random numbers I make sure that there is an equality of opportunity to all team members and make sure no team members are excluded from any work-based or non work-based team activities because of race or cultural background. After a couple of days, with keen observations I can pick extrovert and outgoing students and get them to support me to resolve issues caused by intercultural tension or misunderstanding (CILT, 2008).

Issue 2: A young teacher encourages a more informal relationship with students and the use of more student-student communication time and activities in her English classes in a high school in Pune, India. She is friendly and teaches the prescribed syllabus but in a playful manner with the help of songs and games rather than textbooks and chalk and board writing. Though some students enjoy the classes and manage to do well in the examination, some others and their parents do not approve of this method. The school is fairly accepting these new methods but does not encourage it much due to the opposition that comes from parents and students.

**How does this teacher meet the expectations of the parents, students and the school, but still carry on with what she feels helpful in her classes?**

Culture as discussed earlier in this essay has various definitions. It provides the members of the group with a set of interpretations that help them to make sense of the messages and experiences. Teaching and learning experience has its own culture in every country. Considering the Indian scenario, cultures and subcultures involved in this problem are: the culture of the country, India and the city, Pune in general; the education culture of the city; the school culture; the teacher's culture, students' culture, the culture of parents and their past experiences with school education, the culture of the institute/country the teacher took education/training from.

Being a native Indian, my observation has shown that the culture of the Indian education system is quite textbook oriented. India is a multicultural country, with very little emphasis on culture in education. Education is accepted as is, as natural way rather than trying out new things or considering it as an area of culture. Education in schools in Pune mostly is based on memory rather than learning skills or acquiring knowledge. In such a setting, it is very difficult for a schoolteacher to incorporate communication in the class. Classroom teaching is usually teacher centered with minimum student talking time. It does not challenge the students to think much. I understand that this cannot be generalized but is mostly the case in most of the schools in Pune. (This is based on my observation on Pune, where I have been a student for 23 years and teaching English and German languages for almost 4 years.)

Internalized culture is deeply rooted. India is a vast country and I would again limit myself to Pune. We can also see Ruben's (1976, cited in Humphrey, 2007, pp. 22-23) 'Display of Respect' in the Indian education. The city has internalized the culture of 'teacher being equal to God'. Teachers are usually seen as the ultimate source of knowledge. Students in this issue seem to have internalized this belief and have therefore learnt to be silent in the classroom and listen carefully to the teachers. The internalized culture of the teachers in general also gives them an authority over students that advise students to accept a teacher's views and ideas and maintain silence while he/she talks/teaches. The parents also have internalized this and consider teaching as teachers imparting knowledge and students accepting the fruit of knowledge quietly. The young teacher, however, in this case seems to have internalized communicative style of teaching and learning and lays greater emphasis on student talking time. Some parents and students, however, do not feel that students too can have their own opinions and thoughts and consider it as a waste of teaching time.

Tensions- The main tension here is between those students and parents on the one hand, who think teaching should be one sided and the young teacher on the other hand, who believes in communicative approach and freedom of thoughts and opinions. These students and parents believe that the students cannot get access to the knowledge on their own, or would not dig deeper into the subject without a teacher. There is an idea that suggests that teachers deliver and students consume. There is also tension between the young teacher and the

school management, who is supportive to some extent, yet not fully convinced. There could also be possible tension between the students, who do well with the communicative approach and the students, who feel, they do not because of their deeply rooted internalized cultural belief. There is a relationship between attitudes, insight and knowledge. Forming and changing attitudes becomes difficult in secondary school and the influence of teachers affects this attitude formation (Byram, 1994, p. 32). Overcoming prejudice is the most important priority for language teachers (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey, 2002, p. 27). If certain parents and students have prejudiced thinking about teaching styles, it is the teachers' responsibility to help them overcome these. Prejudgments about either communicative or blackboard teaching are mainly based on feeling and habit. This gives teachers an opportunity to explore their feelings and thoughts and challenge these. This can be achieved through careful observation and classroom management.

Intercultural communication is effective and competent interaction in a context in which the interaction occurs, in spite of cultural differences and dissimilar expectations (Lustig et al., 2013, pp. 49-61, Spitzberg, 2000, p. 68). The forms of IC shown in this context by the young teacher are: Catteeuw's (cited in Humphrey, 2007, pp. 47-49) 'Openness', that is an ability to deal with ambiguous situations and differ to others accepting and respecting the possible differences. The teacher seems to be independent in her thoughts and actions, creative and exploring new styles of teaching, thus displaying Schwartz's 'Self Direction' value type (2007, cited in Lustig, 2013, p.117).

Van den Boom (2003, cited in Humphrey, 2007, p. 29) defines intercultural competence as "an overall capability of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication: namely, cultural differences and unfamiliarity, inter-group dynamics, and the tensions and conflicts that can accompany this process". The forms of IC shown needed by the young teacher are: Spitzberg and Cupach (1984, cited in Humphrey, 2007, p. 20) give three conditions that can help in this situation. The teacher needs to show awareness of the situation or have the 'Knowledge' of the expectations of the education culture. The students need to be motivated, another condition given by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984, cited in Humphrey, 2007, p. 20) and have the desire to learn effective and appropriate interaction skills and engage in actual communication. Ruben (1976) and the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (BASIC) (Koester and Oebele, 1988; Ruben and Kealey, 1979, cited in Norris et al., 2007, p. 13) identified behavioral elements and competencies that help individuals in intercultural situations. The teacher needs the element of 'Interaction Management, that is should be able to manage the complex dialogues with the parents and the school management and convince them that the methods she uses in the classroom are helpful. The parents also need to have the element of 'Tolerance for Ambiguity' and accept the new methods and not react to unexpected situation with such discomfort. In the similar way, parents and school authorities should show openness and willingness in accepting the teacher's perspective, which is different from their set of beliefs and behaviors, that is have Byram's (1997) value of 'Intercultural attitudes'. All the persons involved in this problem, the teacher, students, parents and school authorities need to display Chen's (1992, cited in Humphrey, 2007, p. 33), Catteeuw (cited in Humphrey, 2007, p. 48) and Martin's (1987, cited in Humphrey, 2007, p. 33) 'Behavioral flexibility', the ability to behave flexibly in different situations. The teacher should be able to communicate skillfully and effectively in order to be able to put her point across and deal with the situation consciously (Catteeuw, cited in Humphrey, 2007). The teacher needs a 'solution oriented attitude' and not give up easily, but think and act to find a solution to the problem.

All this means that all the people should be Type I participants and show high tolerance for ambiguity, high interaction management, high respect (BASIC, Koester and Oebele, 1988; Ruben and Kealey, 1979, cited in Norris et al., 2007, p. 13 and Ruben, 1976). This looks very idealistic and seems easy but in reality it is quite difficult for human beings to be Type I participants. Considering the reality, the teacher must aim towards achieving her goals, but not get depressed by negative comments and attitudes, and show a little flexibility in order to accommodate the fears of the parents/ students in some sort of way.

Research has shown that people from different cultural background have different learning styles, but psychologists, however, have not been successful in determining one method of teaching that works better for one cultural group of students and another method for another group (Kleinfield, 1994). Dunn dc Griggs (1988, cited in Kleinfield, 1994) talks about learning styles. These can refer to a wide range of abilities, ways of processing information, personal choices and preferences and many more. We all try to adapt to the methods that we feel fit best in our situation and feel irritated about teaching and learning methods that we feel we are forced into. To make such assumptions about individual's learning styles and recommending using the suitable methods in a class of 60 students can become difficult for the teacher in Pune. Kleinfield (1994) further argues that just because different cultural groups have different intellectual abilities and cognitive strengths does not mean that teachers should aim continuously at matching their teaching styles to their abilities. For example, it would become so chaotic if a teacher tries to use all possible learning styles at the same time in the same class for the same topic just because some of her students learn better with the help of textbooks and some other with the help of songs, while yet some other with some other method. The notion of learning styles can prove useful

to the teacher if it helps her create a rich and diverse classroom atmosphere which offers various learning aids and styles. In other words, training the students' mind to respond in various ways, in which the information is provided, can prove beneficial if it is not used to stereotype a particular group and limit their education (Kleinfield, 1994).

The young teacher can talk to the parents personally and try to explain them the importance of communicative methodology. She can also bring examples from different countries where such approach is used in schools. The students, who do well in the examinations after being taught in this manner, can help other students, as peer learning has always proved beneficial. The school authorities need to be patient and support Mrs. Shah in such experiments for at least a term, without much interference and boast her confidence. "Professional growth is thus essentially a question of time, struggle, commitment and support" (Kohonen, 2002, p. 49, cited in Álvarez, 2005). Time, struggle and commitment are in teachers' hands support, however, cannot be achieved unless there is a strong external coordinated hand. A combined effort from institutions, parents and education agencies is required if teachers are to fulfill their responsibilities with a greater confidence.

To conclude one can say that be it a multicultural language classroom or a culturally different perception towards learning and teaching, awareness of different forms IC shown and knowing their personalities can help a teacher in problem solving. At the same time, we should believe that the adequate development of learners' intercultural competence cannot be achieved exclusively through educational policies or materials (Byram and Zarate, 1996, cited in Álvarez, 2005). Teachers' awareness and understanding of the main issues in intercultural communication is extremely important for students' progress (Sercu, 2002b, cited in Álvarez, 2005). Similarly, language teachers' intercultural skills cannot develop without appropriate training. Teachers need to be prepared to fulfill all their roles and to carry out their responsibilities. For this purpose teachers need training and professional development. The education agencies are also equally responsible training that addresses teaching and learning needs within their common context.

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