Intercultural Approach to Language Teaching

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Abstract

The intercultural approach to language teaching aims to develop intercultural communicative competence on the part of the learners. This study 'Intercultural Approach to Language Teaching' primarily aims to explore the significance of the intercultural approach to language teaching. Additionally, it discusses the various components of intercultural communicative competence. Similarly, it offers some insights on the role of teachers and students in intercultural approach to language teaching, and strategies or modes of assessing the learners' intercultural communicative competence. The study reveals that because of the unrealistic, utopian, constrained, and decontextualized nature of communicative competence, learners need to develop intercultural communicative competence to learn the language effectively in cross-cultural settings. It was also found that closed and open-ended questions, individual and interactive activities, dialogues, interviews, presentations, demonstrations, poster sessions, simulations, role plays, self-evaluation reports, portfolios, and observation checklists are the major activities that help the teachers to assess their learners' intercultural communicative competence and to enable learners to preserve, exchange and respect each other's cultures in cross-cultural settings.

Keywords: Communicative competence, intercultural approach, intercultural communicative competence language teaching,

Introduction

Simply put, culture refers to the way of living. Although the culture does not seem to be visible explicitly, it lies inherently within us. In this regard, Agudelo (2007) opines that culture tends to be invisible to us in our daily lives until we are exposed to contexts in which cultural factors such as beliefs, behaviours, and languages are challenged, either by direct intercultural experiences or by learning experiences with cultural awareness. On the other hand, language

teaching has to do with facilitating the learners in learning various skills and aspects of any particular language. Language and culture are interrelated in such a way that the existence of one may not be possible in the absence of another. Likewise, teaching any language associating with its cultural aspects is concerned with an intercultural approach to language teaching. In other words, the intercultural approach is such approach where people of various cultures communicate with each other with mutual understanding and respect. Since the ultimate goal of language teaching and learning is to enable learners to communicate with people across cultures, the intercultural approach to language teaching aims to develop learners as intercultural speakers (Byram et al., 2002). This study tries its utmost to find out the answers to the following questions; a) How does the intercultural approach to language teaching help to develop intercultural communicative competence in learners? b) What components should be taken into consideration while teaching through an intercultural approach to language teaching and while assessing intercultural communicative competence? I claim that the intercultural approach to language teaching facilitates to development of intercultural communicative competence on the part of the learners so that they can preserve, exchange, and respect their cultures while learning a language. Although several studies have been carried out on the intercultural approach to language teaching in the global context, it is a less explored area in the context of Nepal.

Literature Review

This section discusses the literature on the intercultural approach to language teaching with a focus on its significance and effective use in English classrooms. Since communicative approach to English language teaching is heavily emphasised in school level English curriculum, the intercultural approach to language teaching might be the next step to language teaching and learning. While reviewing the literature on intercultural approaches to language teaching, I have realised that although adequate studies have been carried out on English language teaching methods in the context of Nepal, intercultural approaches to language teaching are still an under-researched area, and little published research. While reviewing the literature on intercultural approaches to language teaching, I have developed various themes based on the purpose of the study to explore resources. This section deals with the relevant literature on various themes such as communicative competence to intercultural communicative competence, components of intercultural communicative competence, intercultural approach to language teaching, the role of teachers and students in intercultural approach to language teaching, and assessing intercultural communicative competency.

Methodology

The present study is qualitative. Since the study is theoretical and descriptive in nature, it makes the use of secondary resources like books, journals, articles, theses, libraries, and websites chiefly from various search engines such as Google, Google Scholar, joster, and other online websites. These documents facilitated me to explore an in-depth intercultural approach to language teaching. As I interpreted the various themes, it is a thematic and interpretive study. As the central endeavour in the context of the interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experience (Cohen et al., 2013), this study explores how the intercultural approach to language teaching helps to develop intercultural communicative competence in learners and the components required to be taken into consideration while teaching through intercultural approach to language teaching and while assessing the intercultural communicative competence.

Results and Discussions

This section presents some finding based on the reviewed literature related to Intercultural approach to language teahing

Communicative Competence (CC) to Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

If language teaching aims to develop merely communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) on the part of the learners, it may not necessarily incorporate the cultural aspects in language teaching. However, teaching and learning the language by decontextualising it with culture makes no sense. Alptekin (2002) argues that the conventional model of communicative competence, with its firm adherence to native speaker norms within the target language culture, would appear to be invalid in accounting for knowledge and using the global language in cross-cultural contexts. In addition to this, he also argues that appropriate pedagogies and instructional materials help learners become successful bilingual and intercultural individuals who can function well in both local and international settings. As communicative competence seems to be more unrealistic, utopian, constraining, and developed on the native speaker-based notion of communicative competence, it fails to address the interaction with others who belong to different linguistic and cultural contexts. In this regard, Gadomska and Krajka (2012) reported that communicative competence which is concerned with linguistic awareness, has been said to be insufficient to master a foreign language. They further argued that people should be aware not only of linguistic aspects but also of the foreign culture and their own culture and social context of language use during language learning. Intercultural communicative competence can enhance and preserve the cultural nuances while teaching and learning any language.

For Fantini (2005), intercultural communicative competence is the complex of abilities required to execute efficiently and properly when communicating with others who are linguistically and culturally different. Likewise, Rollin and Harrap (2005) defined intercultural communicative competence as the 'capacity to function in another culture which includes reflecting on one's own culture and identity, recognizing patterns and attitudes and eliciting their meanings and connotations' (p.3). Moreover, Corbett (2003) argues that intercultural communicative competence includes the ability to understand the language and behaviour of the target community, and explain it to the members of the 'home' community – and vice versa. Therefore, an intercultural approach trains the learners to be 'diplomats', capable to perceive different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding (Corbett, 2003). Moreover, Gong et al. (2022) emphasised teacher identities in multicultural contexts in line with the intercultural approach to language teaching to ensure the effective teaching and learning process in diversified classrooms. These studies may indicate the paradigm shift in the English language in reward to the adoption of methods in the context of Nepal as well.

Components of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Unlike communicative competence, intercultural communicative competence includes components that are more context and culture-sensitive. However, there is no uniformity concerning the components of intercultural communicative competence. Byram et al. (2002) propose the most popular model of intercultural communicative competence which includes five components; intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of

discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Later on, Barrett (2013) proposed the core components of intercultural competence breaking down into values, attitudes, knowledge and understanding, skills and behaviours where the values involved in intercultural competence are valuing cultural variability and diversity and pluralism of perspectives and practices and the attitudes involved in it are respecting people with different cultures, being open to and curious and willing to engage and learn about and from the people with different cultural orientations, being willing to question what is taken for granted and being willing to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty. Similarly, knowledge and understanding, behaviours, and behavioural skills seem to be prominent aspects that language users need to know (Barrett, 2013).

Likewise, Fantini and Fellini (2012) suggested multiple components of intercultural communicative competence; a variety of characteristics, three areas or domains, four dimensions, host language proficiency, and degrees of attainment that evolve through a longitudinal and developmental process. They further elaborated that the characteristics of ICC include flexibility, humor, patience, openness, interest, curiosity, empathy, tolerance for ambiguity, and suspending judgments among others and three domains of ICC are the ability to establish and maintain relationships, the ability to communicate with minimal loss or distortion, and the ability to collaborate to accomplish something of mutual interest or need. Likewise, the four dimensions of ICC include awareness, attitude, skill and knowledge, and degrees of attainment ranging from educational traveler to sojourner, professional, and finally intercultural/multicultural specialist where learning the host language affects the development of ICC (Fantini & Fellini, 2012). Similarly, Spitzberg (2000) argued that intercultural communicative competence encompasses three components; skills, motivation, and knowledge where skills refer to our abilities to engage in behaviours, motivation is our desire to communicate effectively and appropriately with others and knowledge has to do with our awareness or understanding of what needs to be done to communicate effectively and appropriately. Likewise, Williams (2001) presents three components to developing cultural competence; self-knowledge/awareness, experience and knowledge about a particular culture, and positive change or action for successful interaction with the identified culture.

Intercultural Approach to Language Teaching

The main aim of intercultural approach to language teaching is to develop intercultural communicative competence on the part of the learners. However, there are a number of activities that the learners are expected to execute to develop it. In this regard, Liddicoat (2004) argues that an intercultural approach to language teaching encompasses four major activities relating to culture; acquisition about cultures, comparing cultures, exploring cultures, and finding one's own 'third place' between cultures. After analyzing the incorporation of intercultural approach to foreign language teaching and learning, Lomicka (2009) opined that intercultural learning in a foreign language class would seem to require both the sharing of knowledge and negotiation among the groups of native speakers and non-native speakers along with frequent interaction between cultures. The intercultural approach to language teaching does not emphasise native speakers' competence, rather it gives due emphasis on developing intercultural communicative competence on the part of the learners. The focus of teaching any language should be on intercultural communicative competence rather than native speaker competence. Byram (1997)

states that the ultimate goal of an intercultural approach to language education is not so much 'native speaker competence' but rather an 'intercultural communicative competence'. Similarly, Liddicoat (2011) presents the aims of language teaching about the intercultural approach; to give the learners intercultural competence along with linguistics, to prepare them for interaction with people who belong to different cultures, to enable learners to understand and accept people from other cultures with distinctive perspectives, values, and behaviours, and to help them see the interaction with enriching experience.

Since the intercultural approach to education is culture-sensitive, language education which adopts an intercultural approach has a unique position to contribute to openness and active participation in 'otherness' (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999). Learning a foreign language does not mean learning only its skills and aspects but also the values, attitudes, and beliefs associated with it. In this regard, Aguilar (2008) argues that foreign language teaching consists of more than mere transmission of speaking skills; it is concerned with the values, attitudes, and beliefs and it offers students the opportunities to be connected with real-life experience and with other cultures. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) also trains us as language and cultural mediators in an increasingly multilingual and multicultural world and its implementation helps a lot in the foreign language classroom independently of pragmatic or idealistic reasons (Aguilar, 2008). From a study of Indonesia, Munandar and Ulwiyah (2012) reported that intercultural approach to English language teaching fostered the development of a sphere of interculturality in which English learners link their cultural beliefs and practices to those of target culture and international target culture and the extensive use of local references in the locally-produced English language textbooks not only encourages the learners to reflect on and relate their cultures to the cultures of others, but it also helps them to readily adopt the language material and adapt cultural components to their realistic context of language use and language learning. Moreover, Baker (2022) highlighted the essence of the intercultural approach to language teaching reaching beyond communicative competence focusing on intercultural and transcultural awareness. Therefore, an intercultural approach to language teaching and learning is inevitable to develop intercultural communicative competence being more successful learners with the knowledge of diversified cultures.

Role of Teachers and Students in Intercultural Approach to Language Teaching

As teachers play a significant role in teaching a foreign language, Aleksandrowicz-Pędich et al. (2003) present various aspects of culture that they need to consider while teaching a foreign language and they include traditions and customs, history and civilization, popular culture, legends, and myths, stereotypes, geography, religion beliefs, theory and practice of democracy and individual rights, everyday life and routine, lifestyle and habits, socio-politics, art, music, cinema, literature and festivals contemporary life and civilization, food, social rules and behaviour, politeness and good manners, and degrees of formality. Similarly, from a study of New Zealand, Newton (2009) argues that the teachers need to adopt an intercultural stance towards the culture and language to cultivate intercultural sensitivities in learners which produces an integrated and consistent focus on culture as an inseparable part of all languages and communication. Moreover, a language learner should learn not only the skills and aspects of a language but also the cultural aspects of that language. In this sense, Makhmudov (2020) concluded that intercultural communication, international cultural competence, and differences

between cultures are important in language learning and teaching, and a student learning a foreign language should be conscious of both language skills and the culture of the country where the language is studied.

However, implementing an intercultural approach by the teachers is not an easy job, rather it is a challenging one. In this regard, Chlopek (2008) advocated that the implementation of an intercultural approach is a challenging and demanding task for a language teacher who should possess intercultural knowledge and very often keep developing it alongside his or her students and therefore, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers are supposed to implement the intercultural approach in a tactful, skillful and conscious way. The systematic intercultural approach focuses not only on learners' ability to tolerate but also to understand, accept, exchange, and respect various world cultures for successful learning via communication (Chlopek, 2008). To sum up, English teachers need to create the favourable environment in the classrooms for the discussions and mutual sharing of cultural nuances with the students to foster intercultural competence in students.

Assessing the Intercultural Communicative Competence

Since the sole purpose of the intercultural approach to language teaching is to develop intercultural communicative competence on the part of the learners, assessing the learners' intercultural communicative competence also comes to be an integral aspect of language teaching. As teachers facilitate to enhance intercultural communicative competence in learners, assessing it also remains an important aspect to ensure how much learners could succeed to learn from what was expected by the teachers, parents, others, and even by themselves. Therefore, several scholars have presented various ways, modes, or strategies for assessing the learners' intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006, 2011; Fantini, 2009, 2012). Fantini (2012) provides a variety of modes and strategies to assess intercultural competence and they include; closed and open-ended questions, matching items, true/false questions, multiple-choice questions, cloze or gap-filling items, oral and written activities, individual and interactive activities, dialogues, interviews, presentation, demonstration, poster sessions, simulations, role-plays, structured and unstructured field and questionnaires. Likewise, Deardorff (2011) opines that assessment and learning are integral to student development and thus assessment goes beyond simply documenting students' overseas experiences or international courses completed, and therefore, learning outcomes relating to intercultural approach are assessed through both direct and indirect measures. Moreover, teachers have an important role in assessing the learners' intercultural communicative competence. In this regard, Skopinskaja (2009) argues that teachers become observers of the intercultural learning process rather than of its end product while assessing intercultural communicative competence and the teachers have to depend upon alternative assessment tools, such as self-evaluation reports, portfolios, observation checklists for assessing students' intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes of the intercultural learning process and of students' progress. Furthermore, Ruben (1976) proposed a behavioural approach to intercultural communicative competence for assessment which included the seven dimensions of intercultural competence; display of respect, interaction posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, self-oriented role behaviour, interaction management, and tolerance of ambiguity. Furthermore, a study by Luo and Chan (2022) identified the writing based and

expressive activities apt for testing the students' intercultural competence. As teaching and testing go together, educators and teachers need to taste not only their students' English competency but also intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Conclusion and Implications

The intercultural approach to language teaching aims to develop intercultural communicative competence on the part of the learners. Since communicative competence seemed to have been failure to address cultural nuances in language teaching, intercultural communicative competence received its significance in language teaching and learning. Intercultural communicative competence refers to the learners' ability to understand the language, behaviour, and culture of the target community and their own with due respect to each culture. However, we find variations regarding the components of intercultural communicative competence. Moreover, implementing an intercultural approach is a challenging and demanding task for language teachers as they also needs to possess intercultural knowledge and facilitate the learners to develop intercultural competence in a tactful, skillful, and conscious way. Similarly, learners also should be familiar not only with target cultures, but rather they should also learn and understand their own cultures so that co-learning of both cultures is possible. Most importantly, intercultural learning in a foreign language class would seem to require both the exchanges of knowledge and negotiation between groups of native speakers and non-native speakers with frequent contact between cultures. Moreover, closed and open-ended questions, oral and written activities, individual and interactive activities, dialogues, interviews, presentations, demonstrations, poster sessions, simulations, role plays, self-evaluation reports, portfolios, and observation checklists are the key activities that help teachers assess learners' intercultural communicative competence.

As Nepal is a multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural country, we cannot imagine teaching any language separate from its culture. Although cultural aspects have not been neglected in our context, they have also not given due emphasis on incorporating them in curricula and textbooks to a large extent. Moreover, in the context of Nepal, we are still emphasizing developing communicative competence on the part of our learners as our school curricula and textbooks of English emphasize the same. In the name of getting mastery over the target language, we are ignoring not only the Nepalese culture but also the cultures of the target language. To be fact, what should be expected from Nepalese learners is that they should be aware of both native and target cultures with mutual respect and language can only be learned effectively if the culture inherent in it is also learned. This study will be useful for the policymakers, educators, teachers, and students to learn the English language with equal respect and preservation of their own culture on the part of the students. Therefore, enhancing intercultural communicative competence rather than communicative competence in students is inevitable in the context of Nepal.

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