Enhancing Intercultural Communication through English Language Teaching at the University Level

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Abstract

Language and culture are interrelated. Culture finds its expression in language; so, learning a new language without familiarity with its culture remains incomplete. English speakers at present have dual challenges: one to be able to adopt in world cultures and to promote their local culture in comparison to other cultures.The main purpose of this study is to explore lived experiences of University Level English teachers regarding the promotion of intercultural communication in English Language Teaching classes. The researcher has applied interpretive paradigm, phenomenology as the research design under qualitative reseach method. Four English language teachers from central campus, Far Western University are the informants for the study. As the data collection tools, in depth interview and personal narratives have been used. The participants are found positive in the promotion of intercultural communication through English language teaching as well as in promoting their local cultures. The study will be useful for teachers, students, curriculum designers, as well as researchers.

Keywords: Cultural dimension, mediation, Sociocultural theory, intercultural competence, English as a Foreign Language

Introduction

Nepal is a multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural country. In Nepal, 129 languages have been registered so far and among them Nepali is the dominant language. It has become the national and official language and majority of the population use Nepali as

a lingua franca or as the second language(Yadav,2007). In the preamble of the constitution of Nepal(2015) it has been highlighted that protecting and promoting social and cultural solidarity, tolerance and harmony, and unity in diversity by recognizing the multi-ethnic, multilingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural and diverse regional characteristics , resolving to build an egalitarian society founded on the proportional inclusive and participatory principles in order to ensure economic equality, prosperity and social justice …which indicates that different languages, cultural and ethnic groups are given equal rights however, in practice it is not so.

The Constitution of Nepal (2015),Article 7 (1) says-The Nepali language in the Devnagari script shall be the official language of Nepal however, the concerned federal governments, by a state law, can determine one or more languages of the nation spoken by a majority of the people within the state as its official language(s) in addition to the Nepali language. Similarly article 7(3) states that other matters relating to language shall be as decided by the Government of Nepal, on recommendation of the Language Commission.

The Constitution has also stated that all communities in Nepal have the right of education in their mother-tongues and basic level education will be free and compulsory(Article13). Similarly article 32(2) states that every person and community shall have the right to participate in the cultural life of their communities.

These constitutional provisions have encouraged different linguistic and cultural communities in the country and the respect, communication, and sharing among them.

Traditional methods for teaching foreign languages emphasized the importance of students practicing language structures, pronunciation, and vocabulary in order to become native like speakers.

The goal for the students is to start by questioning their preconceived ideas before entering into a process of discovery about the other with the intent of becoming more willing to seek out and engage with otherness in order to ultimately experience relationships of reciprocity(Byram,1997). As students continue to engage in analysis of other cultures, certain knowledge must be acquired. Once learners have taken time to discover the similarities and differences between their culture and that of the target culture, the teacher must craft activities that will prepare students to build relationships with people of diverse backgrounds and languages(Byram,1997). The students should be given opportunities for interpretation of foreign culture so that they can link it with their native culture.

When students begin to identify ethnocentric perspectives and misunderstandings related to cross-cultural situations, they become able to understand and then

explain the origins of conflict and mediate situations appropriately in order to avoid misinterpretations(Byram,1997). Furthermore, skills in discovery and interaction allow intercultural speakers to identify similarities and differences between home cultures and foreign cultures resulting in successful communication and the establishment of meaningful relationships(Byram,1997). A successful intercultural speaker seeks out opportunities to meet individuals from diverse cultures in order to share information through communication in a foreign language.

Majority of the EFL learners feel align to the foreign language cultures in the classroom so now the situation is that neither the learners are fully capable to enjoy target culture and adopt it in their practical life nor they are fully aware of the issues of their own culture.

In intercultural curriculum, the home language and the home culture of the learners (and of many non-native teachers) will be valued in the classroom alongside the often glamorized target language i.e. English, so that the intercultural learner ultimately serves as a mediator between different social groups that use different languages and language varieties. Furthermore, the ultimate aim of intercultural communication to English as a Foreign Language Education is not so much native speaker competence but rather an intercultural communicative competence(Guilherme,2002).

Intercultural communicative competence includes the ability to understand the language and behavior of the target community, and explain it to members of the home community and vice versa. Few learners can achieve native speaker linguistic competence completely. Many, however, can achieve the valuable skills of observation, explanation, and mediation that contribute to intercultural communicative competence (Byram,1997b).

In this way, intercultural communication trains learners to be able to view different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding and the key goal of intercultural communication is language development and improvement with intercultural understanding and mediation.

The main problem is how to integrate target language culture knowledge with the knowledge of first language culture of the students and how to integrate both of the cultures in their practical communication. Although, English language teaching has received extensive treatment in the literature regarding English in international contexts(Canagarajah,2005, Jenkins,2003), the cultural dimension has still to be fully explored. However, a consensus is beginning to emerge on the importance of skills and knowledge that go beyond the structure and vocabulary of a language and begin to address the importance of negotiation, adaptation, and accommodation in intercultural and /or cross-

cultural communication. Merely language structures and vocabulary are not enough to achieve the mastery in foreign language learning but the comparative analysis of the values of target culture and home culture with respect to both of them is still lacking in global context and Nepal is no exception. Integrating culture into a foreign or second language teaching is an area in language research that attracted the attention of many scholars and researchers during last decades(Bada,2000: Byram2008;Choudhury, 2014).Recent issue is how teachers and learners in certain communities perceive integrating foreign cultures in their target language classrooms. Therefore, it is important to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions about integrating English culture in their EFL classes

Literature Review

Many studies from a decade have shown the relation between language and culture and highlighted the role of culture in teaching and learning English as a foreign language. In this context, Chaudhury(2014) has emphasized the role of culture in teaching language. Similarly, Romadloni and Mantasiah(2018) have highlighted the role of attitude, culture, cultural understanding and the knowledge of first language and foreign language cultures to increase students' motivation in foreign language learning. But critically, Budiarti(2018) opined that the implementation of intercultural approach is a challenging and demanding task for the language teachers who had to possess at least some intercultural knowledge and very often keep developing it alongside his/her students. The EFL teachers must implement the intercultural approach in a tactful, skillful, and conscious way. Colson(2008) and williams (2010) claim that language is inseparable from its culture and teaching any language will inevitably involve teaching its culture. Only through understanding the culture of the target language a language learner will be able to function properly in the language s/he is learning. Clout(2012) considered culture teaching not in terms of sharing knowledge rather than intercultural skill development. Byram and Fleming(1998) highlighted in developing intercultural competence which in turn may involve promoting language diversity while encouraging English as both a means and an end of instruction. Intercultural communicative competence, according to Deardorff(2006), is the ''ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes''(p.247).This competence doesnot require only language proficiency but intercultural competence as well. In this context, Fantini(2000:28) describes five dimensions in the construct of intercultural communicative competence: awareness, attitudes, skills, knowledge and language proficiency. This five dimension construct includes linguistic and cultural dimensions. If we ignore these cultural aspects in our teaching of a target language, the overall intercultural communicative competence will be incomplete, and our learners will be incompetent in intercultural communication. Integrating English culture into our EFL

classroom teaching is important if we want to prepare our students for using English with the speakers from other cultural backgrounds.

The study of Baker(2009) declared that the successful intercultural communication utilizes dynamic, forms, practices and frameworks of reference as the resources that moves between individual, local, national, and global references. In this context, Agudelo(2007) highlighted the importance of local culture over target culture by stating that critical cultural awareness makes the learners to be able to understand other cultures without losing perspective in their own culture. Safi(2016) indicated that the students positively perceived the influential role of face to face intercutural communication to enhance their English. Mohammed and Abd Algare(2020) investigated that mastering in a language requires learners' mastery of cultural contexts in which important social acts occur because it conveys warm feelings and solidarity among speakers.

English language teaching has undergone the methodological developments from G.T. method to communicative methods and at present to culture oriented methods. In place of the dialogue of languages has come the dialogue of cultures- the form and method of communication of two or more cultures, where each party recognizes the other as an equal, shows interest in the other, recognizes its differences, respects its uniqueness, and at the same time through cognition and comparison deepens self-identity. Foreign language and culture act as a mirror that reflects the unperceived features of the native language and culture. Thus, the learner's worldview is being expanded through learner's comprehension both of another and of his own culture. In this case, foreign language learning strategy presupposes equal status of the two cultures involved in intercultural communication as a goal and a means of learning.

Recent researches on the impact of cultural barriers in EFL(English as a Foreign Language) teaching –learning suggest that cultural barriers emerge due to the lack of successful mediation between the native language culture and the target language culture. Teaching English as a foreign language in Nepal also encounters cross-cultural barriers quite extensively as the home language culture is quite distinct from the target language culture. According to Sun(2013), ''Language is one of the most important carriers of culture and reflects the latter. Without language, culture would not be possible. The basic goal of learning a foreign language is to acquire the communicative competence, while the development and improvement of such competence is to some extent dependent of efficient and scientific teaching approach''(p.371). Teachers need to focus on the aims while developing an intercultural language learning environment in EFL class. Learners' intercultural as well as linguistic competence need to be addressed to make them capable

of communicating with people of the target language. Very often the role of a teacher is culturally defined and language teaching needs cultural aspects to be taken into account as any language is culture bound. Therefore, teachers of a language are also teachers of culture (Byram1989). Therefore, mediating the cultural aspects of the target language with that of the native language is promoting intercultural communicative competence. For learning a foreign language and using it effectively in real life, mediation of the native and foreign culture is an undeniable necessity. An ability to mediate two cultures will help learners to bring themselves closer to the target language culture by specifying the difference between their native language and the foreign language that they wish to learn. In this way, successful mediation of the native language culture and the target language culture ensures meaningful intercultural communication. To bridge cross-cultural barriers in EFL learning, teachers play the most important and effective role to enable students achieve intercultural communicative competence.

The ultimate goal of intercultural communication to language education is not so much native speaker competence but rather intercultural communicative competence (Byram,1997). In other words, intercultural communication aims to develop an intercultural communicative competence that allows the student to act as mediator between the two cultures. Intercultural communication aims to develop intercultural communicative competence that includes the ability to understand the language and behavior of the target community and explain it to members of the home community and vice versa. In this context, Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 1987) consider a semiotic view of culture as the prime semiotic system for representing and maintaining cultural practices and artefacts. Wells(1999) also suggests that Vygotsky's theory focuses on the internal mental dimensions of human consciousness and development and how these are related to the sociocultural context. Furthermore, Vygotsky has also provided a theory of how culture and language are learned together. Vygotsky claimed that human interaction is mediated(Vygotsky1962 and Lantolf 2000). It means humans do not act directly upon the world but rather through mediational tools. Tools, here refer both to material objects and symbolic tools, the most significant symbolic tool being language. Tools and their use contain the knowledge and history of a culture; thus in learning to use these tools an individual appropriates the cultural meanings embedded with them.

In classroom, home culture of the learners can be exploited as a valuable classroom resource. This involves teachers finding out about students' production and consumption of cultural products-whether home culture in this sense means ethnic culture, class culture, or professional culture. This can be done initially through questionnaires which can target specific topic areas(Murray et.al. 1992). Similarly, Canagarajah(2005) focuses on the local

in the global. Drawing on Clifford's conception of," travelling cultures"(1992), Canagarajah views cultures in global contexts as hybrid, diffuse, and deterritorialized. For this reason, English language use and teaching needs to be understood from a perception of fluidity and mixing of languages; cultures, and identities. Learners of English are not learning to join a single language community but are," shuttling between communities"(Canagarajah,2005) between the local and the global, in which a variety of norms and a repertoire of codes are to be expected.

Methods and Procedures

I have adopted qualitative research method, interpretative paradigm, phenomenology research design and sociocultural framework. In this design, priority is given to the lived experiences of the participants regarding their views and understandings of how they perceive and practise intercultural communication in ELT classes. Similarly, in depth interview has been used as the research tool. The area of my study is the Central Campus of Far Western University. Four English teachers have been selected as the informants of the study purposively.

Results

The collected data from the participants was recorded and transcribed. After the deep analysis of the data, it was organized into five themes: relation between language and culture, intercultural communication promotes English language Teaching, promoting intercultural communication, strategies followed by EFL teachers, and implications of intercultural communication for curriculum designing, classroom delivery, and student evaluation.

The relation between language and culture:

There is a close relation between language and culture**.** In this context, the teacher A believes that there is close relation between language and culture like nail and flesh. Teacher A said,

> *There is a close relation between language and culture just like nail and flesh.. Language expresses culture and culture guides the way you speak. In a sense, learning a language means learning their culture as well.*

By analyzing the statement we can say that there is a close relation between language and culture. Without cultural understanding, communication in English will not be successful. Instead it may create difficulties in understanding and may create problems in communication. Therefore we should integrate language and culture for successful communication. Culture is related to the values and ideologies of people. They behave according to their cultural norms. Culture is reflected in the language of the people: what

they speak, how they behave and how they perceive the world. Culture is reflected in the language of the people. The actions they do, the language they speak and the attitude they show all are based on their cultural norms and values. Mere content or structure is meaningless without its cultural interpretations. Language expresses, promotes and carries the loads of culture in the form of its values, norms, behaviours, relations and so on.

Intercultural communication promotes English language teaching

In this context, teacher B said,'' *It teaches how people from different cultural background interact with one another.Teaching English culture motivates students to learn English language. It develops openness and tolerance towards the people from other cultures. Students' overall proficiency in English may be improved by integrating English language and English culture in classroom teaching.Culture understanding can promote adjustment in practical communication. ''*

By analyzing the statement we come to conclusion that language and culture are interrelated. In this globalized world we should understand different cultures and respect different cultures, their values, ideologies and traditions. Cultural understanding motivates learners in their language learning. It promotes their tolerance towards other cultures. In a sense cultural knowledge promotes their overall language proficiency so that we should integrate language and culture.

Regarding promoting intercultural communication among second language learners

We can promote it through the understanding of both the L1 and L2 cultures. Making students aware of their culture help in finding out the differences and similarities between cultures. Similarly, promoting cultural awareness activities in the class can be equally fruitful. Regarding this issue, teacher C has mentioned that: *openness inside and outside the classroom can encourage learners to adjust in multicultural environment. A trained or well educated teacher possesses knowledge of his /her class and students individually and collectively. Often the role of a teacher is culturally defined and language teaching needs cultural aspects to be taken into account as any language is culture bound. Effective way of teaching language requires the use of materials that could make things familiar to the learners.Materials should be locally available and based on the culture of the students.*

By observing these statements we can declare that language teaching requires cultural understanding. The materials familiar to the students may facilitate them. For this we should intergrate local as well as global materials in the course. Integration of cultures and contents broaden the understanding of the learners and prepare them for intercultural communication.

Strategies followed by EFL teachers to promote intercultural communication.

In this context, teacher A said,'' *I use cooperative learning and role play kinds of things for intercultural communication. I ask the students about their feasts and festivals, how they celebrate them and then compare them with other cultures. I try to discuss and minimize misunderstandings of the students regarding each other's cultures. Through compare and contrast I try to create mutual understanding of the learners regarding different cultures. I also encourage them to explore different cultures so that they could develop respect with each other's cultures.*

We can follow various strategies to teach English language. The selection of strategies may differ from one place to another. Some of the strategies we can use in English Language Teaching are cooperative learning, role play, experience sharing, group discussion and project work. If we can relate language aspects with various cultural understandings, we can make them easy to comprehend. We should involve learners in various activities like finding positive aspects of various cultures and to link them with their practical life.

Implication of intercultural communication for curriculum designing, classroom delivery, and student evaluation

In this context, teacher D said,'' *the implication is that the curriculum designers should try to incorporate texts from various cultures in order to promote cultural awareness on the part of learners.Culture based activities increase students' interest as they are personalizing and at the same time familiarize learners with the culture of the target language in order to raise their cultural consciousness.To promote cultural awareness is important for overall linguistic development.English language curriculum/ syllabus should be designed to develop intercultural competence as an asset to cope with practical problems and to adjust in different linguistic and cultural environments.*Language and culture should be presented integratedly. *There should be equal representation of first language culture as well as second language culture. There should be deliberate parallel reference of first language and target language cultures to make analogy and comparison so that the learners will understand the actual difference between first language culture and target language culture.*

The following pedagogical implications could be suggested after the completion of my research:

This study will be significant for teachers, students, curriculum designers, and policy makers. It will be significant to improve daily communication, classroom teaching and learning, promoting intercultural communication, textbook writing, syllabus designing and

overall policy making for English language teaching in Nepal. This study will be a landmark for the university level syllabus designers, textbook writers, material developers, teachers and students. There should be radical change in planning and policy levels.

English language teaching and learning is not merely imposing target language culture upon the students rather it is comparison, integration, and respect of different cultures in practical communication.The judicious use of mothertongue in the class should be encouraged and recommended by the experts in modern ELT pedagogy.

If we develop intercultural awareness in teachers and students they will start to learn, respect and enjoy different cultures. It will minimize linguistic and cultural conflicts and develop harmony among different cultures and will be able to adjust in any part of the globe. It will be a paradigm shift in curriculum designing by advocating the integration of cultural aspect in EFL course designing and teaching.

It will encourage learners in communication by developing skills for adjustment in different linguistic / cultural environments. Merely syntax and lexis are not enough for effective mastery of language at present, however, it needs the mastery of the ability to make use of linguistic and other communicative resources in the negotiation of meaning, roles, and relationships in the diverse sociocultural settings of intercultural communication.

A single framework for evaluating English language proficiency is not enough in international context. In other words, monolingual ENL(English as native Language) evaluators are not the best judges, as 'what works best for an international context can be very different matter from what is appropriate in an ENL perspective. In this context, Mauranen(2012: p.239) argues that,' English language testing should take place in interaction: the speakers to be evaluated for spoken proficiency should be observed as full participants with other international speakers. Jenkins(2007: p.241) reasonably suggests that examination boards could start prioritizing accommodation skills and not penalizing forms that are already existing as frequent, systematic, and intelligible among proficient ELF speakers, regarding of the fact that they differ from ways in which native speakers of English speak to each other.

It is high time to develop evaluation schemes that could address the need and skills of the English speakers representing different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and experiences. Reform is mandatory in policy making, syllabus designing, classroom delivery and evaluation system regarding English Language teaching in Nepal.

Discussion

An interculturally competent person is someone who can display a wide range of capacities: cognitive (knowledge of discovery, interpreting and relating, critical cultural awareness, behavioural flexibility, communicative awareness and affective(acknowledgement of identities of others, respect for others, tolerance for ambiguity, empathy) (Byram, 2006 as cited in Ho,2009).

The goal of intercultural language learning is then not native speaker level competence in target language but competences which enable language learners to mediate/ interpret values, beliefs and behaviors of themselves and of others and to 'stand on the bridge ' or indeed 'be the bridge' between people of different languages and cultures'.(Byram2006,p.12as cited in Ho, 2009).

Teaching a foreign language does not merely involve teaching its linguistic system but also its cultural system.

A native speaker of English may tolerate EFLspeaker's grammatical or phonological errors in communication, but cultural errors may not be tolerated and may create serious problems which lead to communication failure. Therefore, English culture should be given an adequate place in EFL teaching and syllabi if we want to produce competent users of English who can use it effectively and appropriately for communication with English people. For this reason, learning English culture can help the students in developing critical thinking regarding English culture and their own culture. A very effective way to teach the language would be to use materials that could make things familiar to the learners.

I used Sociocultural Framework of Vygotsky(1967,1987) for my study. According to this framework, classroom interaction takes palce among experienced English teachers and the novice students. They learn through the interaction. This interaction leads them to develop intercultural communicative competence (Deardorf 2006)- the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes.This competence does not require only language proficiency but intercultural competence as well.

My concern is also to develop Fatini's (2000: 28) five dimensions in the construct of intercultural communicative competence: awareness, attitudes, skills, knowledge, and language proficiency. This five dimension construct includes linguistic and cultural dimensions. University english teachers facilitate their learners in intercultural communication and encourage them for real life communication in a global context. They learn from each other under the zone of proximal development(Vygotsky, 1967)

by supporting each other and involving in classroom interaction, pairwork, group work, presentation, projectwork to list some.

Classroom interction is not only confined to delivery and sharing the content but it is also the act of sharing ideas, experiences, world knowledge, solving problems and developing intercultural skills attitudes, knowledge and language proficiency. Therefore, classroom interaction should be taken as the process of socialization in which the participants play the role actively, support each other, learn from each other and grow collaboratively.

Conclusion

English language teaching should not be confined to content delivery. It should facilitate intercultural communication by engaging in various activities like pairwork, groupwork and projectwork. University English teachers are found positive to facilitate intercultural communication in the classroom to provide students exposure to develop intercultural communicative competence. This study presents classroom interaction as the sociocultural practice and collaborative activity. Through this interaction they develop intercutural communicative competence to facilitate intercultural communication. It encourages learners to mediate/ interpret values, beliefs and behaviours of themselves and of the people of different languages and cultures. Thus, reform is mandatory in policy making, syllabus designing, classroom delivery and evaluation system regarding English language teaching in Nepal, however further researches are needed in this topic in a wider scope.

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