

PROMOTING ENGLISH EDUCATION IN CULTURALLY AWARE NON-ENGLISH SOCIETY

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Abstract

This article argues for the necessity of integrating cultural learning into the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, particularly for Nepalese students. Simply mastering the linguistic aspects of English—grammar, syntax, and phonetics—is insufficient for achieving genuine communicative competence and understanding the nuances of daily life in English-speaking cultures. The article proposes adapting Spitzberg’s Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Bennet’s Intercultural Sensitivity (IS), Smuts’ Holistic Approach (HA), and Thomas’ pragmatic skills (PS) to provide EFL teachers with a framework for incorporating sociocultural factors. Key elements discussed include understanding culture as a pivotal element in developing communicative competence, preparing students for intercultural phenomena, and analyzing their pedagogical implications for the classroom, where society is well aware of its culture. It uses secondary resources for situational analysis, and concludes that being cultural sensitive is both a need and a desire. Finally, it recommends that EFL teachers expose students to cultural collections to help them acquire cultural learning strategies and become interculturally competent.

Keywords: *cultural awareness/ cultural learning/ communicative competency/ cultural sensitivity*

Introduction

Language learning is not solely about grammar and vocabulary; it also involves understanding the cultural nuances that shape communication (Maqsood, M., Zahid, A., Asghar, T., Farooqi, S. U. H., & Shahbaz, M., 2024). Teaching English in a cultural context enables students to develop cultural sensitivity and adaptability, which are crucial for effective communication (ibid.). It is more about maintaining balance between the local language, which is a crucial factor of a culture, and English education in a globalized context. There is a big advocacy going on around the globe for the preservation and promotion of local languages. It is claimed that students’ overall academic achievements should not be targeted at the cost of their values, belief systems, and other cultural artifacts. They are their inherited property. Once they lose them, they lose their cultural and linguistic identity.

Cultural awareness in the English language classroom is a classroom issue in the sense that, in its absence, the students cannot connect their learning to their previous knowledge and skills. In this case, Gay (2002) believes that culturally responsive educators can enhance their learners’ academic achievement by encouraging them to learn by building on their previous experiences, knowledge, and skills.

Need to promote English education in a multilingual society like Nepal is desirable; and at the same time, it’s a big threat to culturally diverse communities. Hence, for Nepalese teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), a crucial question is how to effectively embed cultural knowledge and understanding within their English language classes. Without this, students will lack the real insights needed to navigate the daily lives and social conventions of English speakers. This is the need of the society because, without acknowledging cultures and utilizing the lessons, teachers cannot establish equitable learning environments for students.

This research work presents a framework for introducing cultural elements in the classroom dominated by non-English speaking students. It has its of H. Dan Spitzberg’s Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Milton Bennett’s Intercultural Sensitivity (IS), Jan Smuts’ Holistic Approach (HA), and Jenny Thomas’ Pragmatic Skills (PS). The researcher believes that by focusing on those models, teachers can help students connect to the target culture, raise their awareness of cultural differences, and improve their intercultural communicative competence.

In this research work, the researcher acknowledges the models mentioned above for developing intercultural competence while maintaining the learners’ own culture in their language classroom.

Rationale

A significant challenge for EFL teachers is the lack of formal training in cultural integration and the absence of a universally accepted set of criteria for guidance. Therefore, a structured approach is necessary. Different methods and techniques forwarded by different educationists have been proven insufficient. They are only technical things. Teachers need a model or different models to put into practice.

Objectives

The purpose of the research is to help teachers understand the spirit of the models, intercultural communicative competence, holistic approach, intercultural sensitivity, and pragmatic skills, so that they can be aware of cultural artifacts necessary to grasp the competency in a second language. It also aims at suggesting ideas how to establish a ‘sphere of interculturality’ where the second language learners can construct their own notions of culture rather than receiving preformed information. Further, the research expects teachers to develop students' capacity to successfully negotiate differences by contrasting cultural values, such as those found in high- and low-context cultures.

Research questions

- *How can teachers effectively apply intercultural communicative competence models to help second-language learners understand cultural artifacts within a holistic learning environment?*
- *In what ways does fostering intercultural sensitivity in the classroom enhance learners' ability to interpret and negotiate cultural meanings in a second language?*
- *How do pragmatic skills contribute to learners' capacity to navigate cultural differences, particularly in interactions involving high-context and low-context cultural values?*
- *What role do teachers play in helping students contrast and critically engage with diverse cultural norms to develop negotiation skills essential for successful intercultural communication?*

Theoretical Background of the Study

Learning a foreign language is inextricably linked with acquiring familiarity with the associated culture. The article “Issues in Teaching English in a Cultural Context” by Maqsood et al. (2024) provides a broad and timely exploration of how cultural factors shape the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. The paper's central claim—that language cannot be separated from culture and that effective English instruction must therefore integrate cultural understanding—is well supported through both literature review and survey-based findings. For instance, Jin and Cortazzi (2018) highlight the importance of intercultural communicative competence, while Bland (2018) warns against essentializing cultures—an important caution that the authors might have engaged with more deeply. Additionally, the article acknowledges the impact of language policy (Ricento, 2013) and the potential of technology in promoting intercultural learning (Wang, H. Y., Liu, G. Z., & Hwang, G. J., 2017). These references provide a solid theoretical foundation.

The survey's findings help illustrate learners' perspectives. According to the results, 88.2% of learners consider cultural sensitivity the most important factor in teaching English in a cultural context. This aligns with earlier theoretical claims, reinforcing the argument that linguistic proficiency alone is insufficient. The writer also provides practical implications, suggesting that culturally informed instruction enriches learner engagement, enhances retention, and promotes global awareness. These points are consistent with previous findings by scholars such as Alptekin (2002) and Norton, B., & De Costa, P. I. (2018), who emphasize the intertwined nature of identity and language learning. The authors successfully argue that cultural context enhances authenticity, motivation, and communicative competence. Still, the discussion occasionally becomes repetitive and could have benefited from tighter organization.

Nguyen Thi Mai Huong's article *Culturally Responsive Teaching in English Classrooms: Practices, Perceptions and Challenges* (2025) offers a comprehensive scoping review of empirical studies on the application of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in English language education. It emphasizes the dual necessity of fostering both linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence among learners. The writer cites foundational scholars such as Gay (2000, 2002). These scholars argue that incorporating learners' cultural backgrounds into pedagogy enhances academic achievement and creates equitable learning environments. Banks (1999,

2006) further underscores CRT's role in reducing prejudice and empowering school culture. Huang (2008) builds on these frameworks to highlight the relevance of CRT in English language teaching, where linguistic diversity can be leveraged to strengthen proficiency and intercultural awareness. Ladson-Billings' "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," as cited in Nguyen's work, focuses on academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Gay (2002) provides a more practice-oriented model, stressing respect for diverse cultures and responsive instruction. Siwatu (2007) and Aceves & Orosco (2014) add competencies such as embedding learners' cultural backgrounds in curricula and fostering critical thinking. Huang's synthesis is effective, showing convergence around key principles: valuing cultural identities, aligning pedagogy with diverse learning styles, and reducing stereotypes.

Key components of culture learning through language

1. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC):

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is a model put forth by H. Dan Spitzberg discussing the importance of cultural learning in a foreign language classroom. It is widely associated with developing the concept of intercultural communicative competence, particularly in the context of foreign language education. His model outlines key skills for interacting with people from other cultures in a foreign language, and combines motivation, knowledge, and skills.

1. Intercultural Sensitivity (IS):

Intercultural Sensitivity (IS), a language learning model in an intercultural context, helps individuals understand their own cultural perspective and how it evolves as they become more comfortable with cultural differences. It was introduced by Milton Bennett, who emphasizes the inclusion of belief systems, values, system of meaning of the target culture, and ability to communicate effectively in the learning scenario where there are cultural differences.

(c) Holistic Approach (HA):

This is a philosophy about teaching a foreign language incorporating a cultural context in a language classroom. It believes language and culture are inseparable; hence, teaching language requires an understanding of culture. It was propounded by Jan Smuts.

(d) Pragmatic Skills (PS):

The theory (Pragmatic Skills), introduced by Jenny Thomas in 1938, also highlights the need of cultural nuances (tone, volume, body language,...) and cultural context (speech acts like apology, suggestions,...). It is highly desirable for the learners they understand the cultural factors while in communication.

Method

This research is fully based on the study, analysis, and interpretation of different articles related to the issues above. It has used only secondary resources.

Study, Analysis, and Interpretation

This section exclusively studies and analyzes the literature available on teaching foreign languages through cultural context.

Contextualizing Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) by H. Spitzberg Byram in the Nepalese Context

Spitzberg argues that intercultural competence is not a fixed skill, but an *impression* others form about whether someone's communication is appropriate and effective. By 'appropriate', he means norms, expectations, and cultural rules, and by 'effective', he means goals with minimal cost. He has proposed three-level models (Individual System, Episodic System, and Relational System), especially focusing on motivation, knowledge skills. He claims that competence begins with what a person brings into an interaction; communicate better when they *want* to; and competence requires knowing. Spitzberg identifies five skill

clusters: Altercentrism (showing interest in others), Coordination (smooth conversational flow), Composure (appearing calm and confident), Expressiveness (appropriate energy and emotion), and Adaptation (adjusting to others' styles and cultural norms).

Implication and Application of Spitzberg's Model in the Classroom

Nepal is a highly multicultural, multilingual, multiethnic society. Intercultural communicative competence among the learners is highly desirable. To develop the competence, teachers can focus on arousing interest and increasing motivation in them.

Teachers can/should educate them about the need of cultural value (maintaining social harmony) in the classroom since almost all classrooms are multilingual and multi-cultural. They can/ should motivate them by highlighting economic opportunities they will have when they are competent in the target language. For that, the learners can/ should adopt some cultural norms too.

However, the focus on carrying understanding cultural norms, such as *respect for elders*, *indirect communication*, *hospitality*, and *hierarchy*, knowing when to use honorific language (e.g., *tapai*, *hajur*), recognizing nonverbal cues (e.g., avoiding direct eye contact with elders), and understanding regional differences should be kept intact. According to Alptekin (2002), conventional CC models are "invalid in accounting for knowledge and using the global language in cross-cultural contexts."

As recommended by Spitzberg, teachers in the Nepalese context should keep sensitizing culture values, like listening, politeness, and showing concern, turn-taking, showing humility, appropriate greetings, religious norms, building rapport with others, and many others like such. CC is unrealistic, utopian, constraining, and decontextualized. Ranabhat (2024) also asserts the importance of an intercultural approach to develop the learners' competence. He compares this with communicative competence, stating its limitations. To him, communicative competence adheres rigidly to native speaker norms within target language culture, fails to address interactions with speakers from different linguistic and cultural contexts, and developing intercultural sensitivity. According to Aguilar (2007), foreign language teaching involves "more than mere transmission of speaking skills"—it concerns values, attitudes, and beliefs. Language can only be learned effectively if the culture inherent in it is also learned.

Pedagogical Implications (Classroom Strategies)

Activity: *Students interact with authentic materials (stamps, music, menus, movies, toys, etc.) from English-speaking countries.*

Outcome: *Connects concepts to the realities of life in the target culture and allows for higher-order thinking (e.g., classifying items by Cultural Iceberg levels)*

Cultural "Informants"

Activities: *Inviting native or proficient non-native English speakers to class to speak on their culture.*

Outcome: *Provides a resource to confirm or disconfirm impressions, offering diverse viewpoints. Students prepare questions focusing on variations in behavior across cultures.*

Role Plays

Activity: *Students act out scenarios illustrating communication breakdowns, especially between high- and low-context cultures*

Outcome: *Allows students to empathize with other cultures, practice making "mistakes" without consequence, and generate solutions to potential cross-cultural conflict.*

Cultural Observations

Activity: *Students analyze books, movies, videos, or music to describe observed behaviors and products.*

Outcome: Helps students critically evaluate practices by asking questions about dress, food, social roles, traffic, and greetings

Intercultural Sensitivity Model by Milton Bennet and its Applicability.

Intercultural sensitivity is a reaction individuals show when they confront people from different cultures, which is a prerequisite for purposeful communication. The Intercultural Sensitivity Model (ISM) asserts "an ability to identify pertinent cultural similarities and differences in intercultural communication" (Liu, 2019). In line with Liu, Rissanen et al. (2016), tell that intercultural sensitivity is characterized by understanding, appreciating, and accepting cultural diversity. This is the model where learners engage in conversational turns to reach shared understanding and mitigate communication breakdowns (van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014). Fatalaki (2015) identifies culture as "one of the most controversial issues" in second/foreign language instruction, with two major perspectives: L1-focused approach (emphasizing learners' own cultural background without considering the target community), and L2-integrated approach (advocating for integration of target language cultural features in ELT textbooks through direct and indirect instruction). The latter perspective has gained prominence because, as Bada (2000, p. 101) noted, "the need for cultural literacy in ELT arises mainly from the fact that most language learners, not exposed to cultural elements of the society in question, seem to encounter significant hardship in communicating meaning to native speakers." He emphasizes the importance, stating that the lack of cultural knowledge can impede communication, particularly regarding formal/informal distinctions and pragmatic norms that vary across communities. Fatalaki (2015) acknowledges Chen & Starosta (1997)' three-dimensional model: *Intercultural Awareness (Cognitive)*- "The understanding of cultural conventions that affect how people think and behave", *Intercultural Sensitivity (Affective)*- "an individual's ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes an appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication", and *Intercultural Competence (Behavioral)*- Shown through verbal and non-verbal behaviors in supranational interaction, representing the product of both sensitivity and awareness.

Pedagogical Implications (Classroom Strategies)

With regard to pedagogical implication, Fatalaki (2015) has his focus on :

1. Beyond Awareness to Sensitivity

This model tries to give into teachers that cultural awareness alone is insufficient: "having positive view regarding the target culture and its people is also important and should be given more attention." This positive attitude depends on individuals' previous knowledge and background.

1. The Role of Judgment and Open-mindedness

One's judgment about others' action in different contexts is related to his or her sensitivity towards the reason for their action, not only the action itself. Teachers should be aware that cultural sensitivity raises open-mindedness in multilingual settings, promotes ethno relative (rather than ethnocentric) views of behavior, and enables recognition of contextual factors in cross- cultural interactions.

(c)The Centrality of Autonomy

The real instruction for having more interculturally sensitive students is based on their level of autonomy. Hence, Teachers should give learners independence to become sensitive to new behaviors, help learners view cultural differences as natural, enable learners to identify both similarities and dissimilarities among cultures, and develop learners' ability to integrate cultural insights in international interactions.

Practical strategies

EFL teachers should:

1. Address all three dimensions: Design curricula that develop awareness (cognitive), sensitivity (affective), and competence (behavioral)

2. Foster positive emotions: Explicitly work on developing positive attitudes toward cultural differences rather than assuming awareness leads to acceptance.
3. Promote autonomy: Train learners to independently seek cultural knowledge and exposure.
4. Recognize developmental stages: Understand that learners may be at different positions on Bennett's ethnocentric-to- ethnorelative continuum.
5. Move beyond instruction: Recognize that dynamic cultural features require exposure and experience, not just explicit teaching.
6. Cultivate empathy: Focus on developing learners' ability to see situations from others' cultural perspectives.

Holistic Approach by Jan Smuts and Its Applicability in a culturally aware classroom

The South African statesman and philosopher Jan Smuts coined the term "holism" in his 1926 book, *Holism and Evolution*. This philosophical concept describes nature's tendency to form "wholes that are greater than the sum of their parts". While Smuts developed the philosophical foundation of holism, he did not specifically write a book or paper titled "A Holistic Approach to Language Teaching". The application of his general philosophy to the field of education and, more specifically, language teaching, occurred much later, in the late 20th and 21st centuries, by various educators and researchers. Elovskaya et al. (2019) argue about Holistic Approach that modern educational environments require integrative, multidimensional approaches that support both personal and professional development.

Jan Smuts' Holism and Its Educational Influence

Smuts' original work focused on the philosophical and evolutionary aspects of holism, which later theorists integrated into various disciplines, including education, psychology, and systems thinking. The core idea is that one must consider the entire system, rather than just isolated components. According to Elovskaya et al. (2019), Smuts' philosophical ideas have their direct implication for foreign language teaching. They can be understood in the following ways:

Modern Holistic Language Teaching

A modern holistic approach to language teaching, inspired by Smuts' original concept, looks at the whole learner, integrating various dimensions beyond just grammar and vocabulary:

1. *Integrated Skills*: Combining reading, writing, speaking, and listening in meaningful contexts rather than teaching them in isolation.
2. *Affective Dimension*: Recognizing the role of emotions, confidence, and a low-anxiety environment in the learning process.
3. *Cultural Context*: Tying language learning to the culture, communication styles, and social context of the speakers.
4. *Critical Thinking and Creativity*: Fostering the four C's (Communication, Critical Thinking, Collaboration, and Creativity) to develop well-rounded individuals capable of self-improvement and independent thought.

Jenny's Pragmatic Skills and Their Pedagogical Implications

Jenny Thomas's 'Pragmatic Skills' has a lasting influence on foreign language teaching. Her work focuses on the dynamic nature of meaning construction in social interaction, emphasizing the roles of both the speaker and the listener within a specific context. In essence, Thomas's work highlights that successful communication is about more than just grammar; it's about navigating the complex social and cultural factors that shape how people use and interpret language.

The dire focus of her work is on "consciousness-raising" - developing students' metapragmatic awareness so they can understand the pragmatic parameters (social distance, power relations, degree of imposition), recognize cross-cultural differences without value judgments, and make informed choices about how they wish to express themselves. The goal isn't forcing conformity to target-culture norms but enabling learners to

achieve their intended communicative effects while understanding potential consequences.

With regard to language learning, she highlights and acknowledges the importance of context, power relations of participants, and meaning they make. She sheds light on :

- **Meaning as Negotiation:** Thomas argues that meaning is not static or solely embedded in the words themselves, but is actively negotiated and constructed through interaction between the speaker and the listener.
- **Contextual Dependence:** Understanding an utterance requires looking beyond its literal meaning to consider the social, cultural, and psychological context in which it occurs.
- **Pragmatic Competence:** This is defined as the ability to use language effectively to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language appropriately in its context. This is a vital skill, especially for second-language learners, that often gets overlooked in favor of grammatical rules.
- **Pragmatic Failure:** Thomas coined this term to describe the inability to understand the speaker's intended meaning (what is "meant by what is said"). She categorized this into two main types:
 - **Pragmalinguistic failure:** This occurs when the pragmatic force of a linguistic structure is systematically different from that normally assigned by native speakers, usually due to direct translation or misapplication of language rules.
 - **Sociopragmatic failure:** This stems from a lack of awareness of or insensitivity to the social rules, norms, etiquette, and cultural customs of the target language community (e.g., misjudging social distance, power dynamics, or what constitutes an imposition). Sociopragmatic failure is often more serious than a simple linguistic error, as it can be perceived as rudeness or a personal slight, leading to communication breakdown.

Pedagogical Implication of Jenny's Pragmatic Skills:

Jenny's framework of teaching appears influential in foreign language teaching since it guides teachers in understanding students' real selves, their cultural identity in totality, and the meaning of language conveyed in a power hierarchy social setting. She encourages teachers to

- Separates linguistic from cultural issues in pragmatic competence,
- Respects learners' cultural identities and values
- Provides practical guidance for addressing a major source of cross-cultural misunderstanding, and
- Explains how fluent speakers can still be misunderstood at the pragmatic level

Conclusion

Cultural learning is difficult but necessary in the EFL classroom. Mastery of linguistic forms is incomplete without understanding the cultural contexts in which the target language is spoken. By moving beyond traditional classroom strategies and tactics, Nepalese EFL teachers can provide students with the awareness and strategies to activate their cultural antennas. This will better prepare students to participate fully in the global community, recognizing both cultural commonalities and individual differences.

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