
Intercultural Communicative Competence in English Language Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper explores the techniques of developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of English language learners through different literary texts like stories, essays, poems, dramas, novels etc. as well as the texts from the learners' local cultures within the theoretical framework of intercultural communicative competence and literary texts as a means of developing ICC. It further explores that integrating language and literature in the classroom not only constitutes communicative and interactive reading and writing practices but also provides an opportunity to construct cultural knowledge through social interactions. The study reveals that the English language textbooks undervalue the socio-cultural, local contexts of our Nepalese society and give the main priority to the grammatical and linguistic features of the English language.

Keywords: Communicative Competence, Intercultural Communication, Multicultural Contexts

Introduction

The development of intercultural communicative competence has become a crucial issue in teaching the English language. Teachers are becoming aware of their teaching profession about the main goal of language teaching is to enable learners to communicate and interact effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. In this regard, Lazar (2003) claims that intercultural communicative competence can be enhanced through different means such as speaking with members of various cultural backgrounds and using textbooks, media, documentaries, and movies. However, in the Nepalese context, learners have limited opportunities to speak with native English speakers. Hence, in such case, teachers can use instructional materials such as songs, videos, movies and, very often, communicative textbooks in their classes as these are one of the effective techniques for developing intercultural communicative competence of English language learners.

It has been one of the major issues in the 21st century. Teaching language refers to teaching culture, and it aims to develop intercultural competence in the students of the English language. Intercultural communication is the mediation of cultural differences between social groups through verbal or nonverbal

interaction. In our Nepalese context, most of the students belong to diverse cultural backgrounds. Almost they communicate and interact in their mother tongue. In this regard, teachers need to create varieties of contexts like a conversation, communication, explanation, description, translation, and activities like play, drama, dialogue, role play, demonstration, activity performance, presentation, speech, etc. As Fries (2002) suggested that cross-cultural is a notion of covering two or more than two cultures in teaching and learning, he further believes that cultural shock and cultural adaptations are two assumptions of the intercultural study, for example, we can bring many cultural contexts either of learners' teacher's or any part of the country. Similarly, Padhi (2016) defines culture as the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, represented by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, and arts. We cannot separate language and culture with each other. It is crucial for English teachers in their classrooms to be aware of the differences in communication between learners and teachers because most of the students belong to different cultures and need to be understood by each other.

Intercultural communication defines a situation of communication that occurred between two or more than two cultures and those people differ in the cultural background (Issa, 2016). It is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people from different cultures and they create shared meanings. It means students from diverse contexts interact in their language, share rituals and learn cultures as well. It is an important aspect in English classrooms since it is one of the learners' environments to learn the culture and intercultural communication. The teacher needs to pay more attention to these socio-cultural issues.

Considering the benefits of participating in the English language class of learning culture, students can enhance their awareness of different cultural issues of their own and the others. Farnia, Maryam, & Rozina (2009) found that cross-cultural knowledge helps teachers to enhance their students' awareness of the social and cultural differences between their native language and the language they are learning. In the Nepalese academia, due to the lack of diverse cross-cultural contexts, teachers are facing the obstacles in teaching English, and are unable to meet the demand of curriculum designed for multicultural and multilingual learners. Different literary texts like festivals including Jitiya, Lhosar, Chhath, Dashain, Tihar, Holi, Christmas, Id, and the other chapters are also related to multicultural learning. These texts aim to familiarize them with different socio-cultural situations. Therefore, multicultural context is a part of the curriculum in the language teaching classrooms. Holmes (2003) believes that language is an important component of culture; so it occurs in different cross-cultural contexts. The teacher tries to bring

globally contextualized words and phrases, but in the multicultural classroom, many hidden cultural contexts within learners may affect communication. In this context, English language educators take English as the language that can address cross-cultural situations while teaching different subjects like social study, science, population, health, etc. The teachers have to develop knowledge of the learners' cross-cultural contexts presented in the textbooks.

Therefore, effective intercultural communication establishes the relationship between teachers and learners where culture is the structured manifestation of human behaviour in social life within specific national and local contexts, e.g. political, linguistic, economic, institutional, and professional as well.

On the other hand, culture is a set of beliefs, values, customs, traditions, and ways of behaviour that characterize a particular community or a particular group of people. It is a way of thinking and acting that a group of people is committed to. In most of the Nepalese English language classrooms, students come from different communities where they practise different cultures. Our ELT classroom has been a shared community. Lado (1957) states that cultures structured systems of patterned behaviour that sets the behaviours patterns to their individuals. In the anthropological perspective, culture is the product of what man believes and does and is very rich, variable, flexible and large.

Culture is known as the shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization. Social patterns unique to a particular group foster the growth of their identity. In this regard, Kramsch (1993) defines culture as "a social construct, the product of self and other perceptions". In the same way, McCarthy and Carter (1994) have viewed culture from the socially discursive perspective as "social knowledge and interactive skills which are required in addition to knowledge of the language system" (p.151-152). They emphasized that culture is social as it relates to society and includes the rules of social life. It is also a skill for interacting with each other as such a kind of communication can't be achieved through language alone. To foster learner's intercultural communicative competence, it requires integrating language, culture and literary texts. Therefore, English language teaching through different literary texts entails cultural elements that help learners achieve the ability of ICC, and enhance their effective communication skills.

Talking about the rationale of this study, most of the Nepalese English language classrooms consist of students from various socio-cultural backgrounds. They communicate in their languages. Here, learners' socio-cultural contexts influence the way of interaction and classroom communication. In this regard, fostering intercultural communicative competence of English language learners is widely and keenly

desired for teachers and researchers and more specifically English teachers. As a result, many studies have been carried out to address this issue. However, in the context of Nepal, the concept of intercultural communication is less practised despite its global interest. To concretize its concept and practices in Nepal, it is important to reveal the classroom practices from the panoramic view of the frog's eye view.

Learning a language is learning the culture of its people. English language teachers need to know the cultural contexts and the social issues of their students. The grammar-translation method, which emphasizes linguistic competence, neglects students' cultural issues in the Nepalese classroom contexts. For Byram and Haneda (1997), cultural competence has been often ignored in English language classrooms because language teaching has been influenced by the study of grammatical forms. It is also the fact that our English language learners have limited opportunities to speak with native speakers. Therefore, the term 'intercultural communication' is a new "edge" subject, which has a close relationship with English teaching (Yu, 2014). As an English teacher, he/she should undertake the new mission, combine the language teaching with culture teaching, and develop students' intercultural communicative competence. Integrating culture into English language teaching is an area in language research that attracted the attention of many scholars and researchers. The classroom setting represents a field of communication between teachers and students. Teachers and students come from different cultures and they have faced challenges towards students' interactive and communicative activities. If these issues happen there, misunderstandings and miscommunications will be caused. In this regard, Carol (1986) argues that cultural shock might occur when one has expectations of one's behaviour and gets something completely different. This happens in most of our English language classrooms.

Teachers and students develop their norms and practice in their behaviors in the classroom. Almost both teachers and students from different cultures come into the classroom. They might find so many differences from what they have been used to in their ways of speaking, their gestures, facial expressions, communication, interaction and terms used to address each other and ways of participating in the class activities. The major challenge for English language teachers is teaching English as a window to the outer world preserving the local cultural practices. Therefore, we have observed the need for a study in the Nepalese English language context to investigate teachers' perceptions about integrating English culture and different literary texts in their English language classes. As a result, this paper aims to explore the intercultural communicative competence of English language learners. Based on this purpose, the whole paper is based on these research questions: How do English language learners develop intercultural communicative competence through different literary texts?

Theoretical Framework

This study is supported by two theoretical considerations which are as follows:

Intercultural Communicative competence: The notion of intercultural communicative competence involves the acquisition of both language and cultural competence in the classroom. Lazar (2003) defines ICC as an extension of communicative competence. Intercultural communicative competence came into existence when communicative competence could not address cultural aspects. ICC is taken as the speakers' ability to interact effectively with people from other cultures that they are known to be different from their culture. Therefore, ICC is the ability to cope with one's cultural aspects in interaction with others. Here, almost our English classrooms consist of students who come from diverse communities. They interact and communicate differently based on their language.

Language and culture are interrelated to each other. In this respect, Sihui (1996) affirms that language is an inseparable part of culture because the beliefs, ideas, and identities of a group of people are constructed and communicated by language. That's why intercultural communicative competence should be understood as the ability to identify cultural issues that are necessarily expressed through real language in use. Almost, we use our language wherever we go and perform any sorts of activities. If we have the intercultural ability, there won't be miscommunication. We need not face any difficulties while we are others' cultures. Therefore, teachers need to facilitate learners to develop the ability to deal with their cultural meanings as well as those from other cultural settings. Moreover, authentic literary texts like poems, short stories, novels, essays contain real-life language that offers learners the opportunity to develop intercultural communicative competence.

Literary Texts as a Means to Develop Intercultural Communicative Competence: It is necessary to reconsider that literary texts in English courses are ideal materials to promote meaning negotiation and access to cultural knowledge, like textbooks and other factual readings do. For Kramersch (2001), English language learners need to be exposed to different types of conventional reading texts like textbooks, newspapers, and magazines to literary texts; stories, dramas, essays, poems and novels because they offer learners the opportunity to encounter with cultural representations and negotiate to mean. These texts offer different cultural contexts and representations that make students able to cope with those cultural issues.

Similarly, teachers need to provide an opportunity for their learners to open their minds to cross-cultural experiences and to enhance their language learning process as they negotiate meaning by reading different

authentic literary texts. In the same way, Amer (2003) affirms that literature acts as a powerful agent to develop students' intercultural awareness. They are interculturally aware of those texts when they read, negotiate and communicate with other cultures' people. As an English teacher, if intercultural communicative competence is the main goal to be achieved in English language learning, it is essential to consider the inclusion of well-selected literary texts. After all, from a very early age in our language, we are exposed to read or listen to different literary pieces such as folk tales, fairy tales, legends, fables, and other selections from children's literature, reflecting the important heritage of our own culture. By selecting appropriate literary texts, it might help English learners to become aware of diverse cultural expressions. Then automatically, their intercultural competency level will be developed.

Overall, we have to be very much careful about selecting different literary texts in our course book. Some texts may not fit the level of our students. It needs to be selected based on students' level, their cultural and religious perspectives socio-cultural background and more importantly, from their local contexts. Here, Gomez (2011) argues from the pedagogical point of view, multicultural literature aims at accomplishing several goals. First, it tries to expand students' knowledge of the world. Second, it helps learners to understand and communicate cross-culturally with other communities. Third, it reduces the proliferation of prejudices, stereotypes, and racist attitudes, and fourth, it helps students appreciate aesthetic manifestations produced by authors from different cultural backgrounds. Besides, multicultural literary texts also promote the same goals of intercultural communicative competence which is one of the crucial issues in our Nepalese English language contexts.

Methodology

This paper follows the qualitative approach as its research design. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) define qualitative research is multi-methodic which goes for subjective and multiple realities based on experiences, cultures, contexts. This research explores the issues that take place in the classroom settings and makes subjective interpretation of the phenomenon regarding the practices of intercultural communicative competence. This study design draws meaning from the participants' experiences and understandings of teaching different literary texts to develop intercultural communication.

This study analyzes the participants' lived experiences of using language in their natural cultural settings. It further involves an analysis of information such as word, sentence and discourse examples from interviews, transcripts, pictures, video recordings, notes, documents and records of materials we collected from the participants. Our research method is based on interviews with two participants. We selected the

participants from Kathmandu district who have been teaching English at the secondary level in private institutions for more than ten years.

The participants were interviewed using open-ended questions based on our purpose and research questions. We asked these sub-questions to the participant teachers: 1. what do you think is inter-cultural communicative competence/communication? 2. Have you found any authentic literary texts in your course? 3. Are you familiar with the term multicultural literature, cross-cultural context? 4. How is your experience teaching multi-cultural/intercultural literary texts? 5. How important do you think it is necessary to develop your students' ICC? 6. Does the course you teach contain diverse culture-related literary texts? 7. What other texts do you think should be included in the course you teach?

First of all, we made them feel comfortable by explaining our research purpose before the interview and some informal talks. We explored their understandings and experiences of teaching in multicultural contexts. They shared the course contents they teach that are related to intercultural/socio-cultural contexts. They shared their classes consist of students from various socio-cultural backgrounds such as ethnic groups, castes, and religions. The information was then transcribed and analyzed to generate the themes.

Data were transcribed and analyzed from recordings and field notes to identify significant opinions, attitudes, experiences and comments about the literary texts applied in the course the participants teach. The study explores that there is there a gap between teachers' attitudes towards the importance of teaching culture and their actual practices for integrating culture into their classroom teaching. Such a gap can be explained in terms of time limitations, the amount of culture in the syllabi and teachers' familiarity with the culture.

The findings show that intercultural communicative competence can be developed through different literary texts if the students get opportunities for reading and understanding the texts; enjoy and perform other cultures' rituals and festivals. It was found that the students are socially and culturally aware of their contexts. The teachers argued that stories, poems, essays, novels, dramas, even songs, movies are the core sources of developing ICC in their students. The readings of literary texts, listen to songs and watch videos make them experience and realize others' cultures too.

Students' Understanding of Intercultural Communicative Competence

Teachers claim that their students get quite closer to the culture from the places about which the texts have been written. They further state that when the students come to know the festivals and cultural ceremonies, they practice celebrating others' cultures as well. They can also predict the beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviour of others and interact with people from various cultures effectively (Neuliep, 2006). All these practices make them familiar with festivals, rituals, and traditions where they can compare others' cultural ceremonies to their own culture.

In the following excerpt from an interview, one teacher commented, '*Students read the text Grandmother and they compare it with their context in which having grandmother*'. Because they can understand other contexts as well, they are very much aware of these things. This helps them be familiar with foreign cultures, events and practices. Another interviewee said, '*when I teach texts related to culture, traditional rituals, I make my students perform accordingly. They feel they are there in those contexts.*' Due to these practices, students are not facing any kind of miscommunication while speaking, understanding literary texts, communicating and they also act whatever things they listen, see, and observe due to having intercultural communicative competence. The application of these techniques helps to foster students' ability in ICC. Both the participants found these issues are relevant for their teaching-learning process as well as for their future teaching profession. They valued the notion of intercultural communicative competence through literary texts as a crucial technique, especially in the Nepalese English language teaching contexts.

Places of Literary texts in our textbooks

The textbooks of English in Nepal incorporate various literary genres which inculcate the objectives to make students familiar with others' cultures and respect them. The textbooks include culture-related lessons such as festivals, religious and cultural practices, ancestral events, traditions and ceremonies which help the learners to construct their knowledge about their and others' cultures. As a result, "they preserve the diversity of styles, purposes, and interests among learners, and the variety of local educational cultures as well" (Kramsch, 1993 p. 247). In this regard, one of the participants said:

As we know that most of our classrooms have multi-lingual and multi-cultural students, and they belong to different cultures. Most of the lessons are related to grammatical and linguistic activities and a few to socio-cultural activities. In my opinion, if at least, forty per cent of lessons are related to literary texts and varieties of cultural issues, and our students are aware of those issues. Then it is easy to foster their ICC ability. However, following our coursebook, when I have to teach different literary texts, first of all, I need to know like reciting the poem, I have to

act while teaching drama and I do accordingly. I get my students to practice all the textbook activities in my classroom.'

Although selections of literary texts are very much difficult for the students understanding level as English is our foreign language. English is a foreign language for Nepali learners; so the selection of foreign literary texts is more difficult to match their level of understanding. However, teachers implement reading comprehension strategies to make them read the texts for developing their intercultural ability. Moreover, the teachers indicated that students face difficulties reading literary texts in the beginning because of unfamiliar vocabulary. But later practicing in reading poems, short stories, dramas, dialogues and essays, they feel a little bit easy. Teachers make students able to understand the meaning of the contexts. However, they argued that intercultural communicative competence is the most essential, and it is needed for multi-lingual and multi-cultural students. They can get opportunities to develop the ability in ICC. Therefore, literary texts play the role of fostering intercultural CC in English language classrooms.

Conclusion

The study explores that the participants develop intercultural communicative competence by making students able to read different literary texts. Students do not only develop communicative and intercultural competence, but they also become bilingual and multilingual speakers. Both teachers claimed that literary texts are found to be the main sources of fostering students' intercultural ability. They also suggest that our course books should incorporate more local cultural issues and ceremonies that can aware them of the recent problems and traditions happening in society. Further, it is indicated that our current curriculum of English mainly focuses on mastering the linguistic systems or grammatical competence and ignores intercultural aspects. It further suggests that the curriculum needs to integrate more authentic texts from the cultural contexts of learners in English language classrooms to complement the pedagogical goals of communicative competence.

The students go to school with some cultural knowledge that plays an important role in fostering multicultural communicative competence. They have also learned English in different cultural contexts like watching movies, TV channels, listening to the radio and music, and reading. Moreover, culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member's behaviour and their interpretation of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour too (Spencer-Otey & Franklin 2009). Thus, learners acquire these

skills to explore cultural complexity and enhance understanding of other cultures and literary texts also offer them opportunities for developing critical thinking and reading skills.

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