

Task-based Intercultural Language Teaching in EFL Classroom

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Research on building linguistic and inter-cultural competence simultaneously is gaining more and more attention from EFL teachers and curriculum developers. In this paper it is argued that intercultural competence entails a broader spectrum that includes cultural knowledge and ways to undertake linguistic or intercultural tasks. The case study made in a tertiary institution in southwest China indicates that intercultural language teaching tasks can facilitate tertiary students to build both linguistic and intercultural competence through participation and interaction in EFL classroom.

In a sense, there is correlation between the intercultural competence and linguistic competence in terms of tertiary students (Liddicoat, Crozet, & Bianco, 2000). It is generally assumed that a linguistically competent EFL learner should acquire fairly strong intercultural competence simultaneously. However, according to two quantitative studies conducted by two Chinese scholars (Hua & Wei, 2001) on more than 200 English and non-English majors who gained high marks on China national English test (TEM¹ Band 4 and Band 8 and CET² Band 4 and Band 6), there is a low degree of

¹ TEM refers to the Test of English Major, which is a national English test for English majors in China.

² CET refers to College English Test, which is a national-wide test for non-English majors in China.

correlation between these two competencies and the linguistic performance of the target testees is much better than their socio-cultural competence. They attribute the socio-cultural incompetence to the neglect of teaching culture in language programs, the lack of relevant materials, random elaboration, ineffective methodology and above all, no learning autonomy.

However, it is believed that the above-mentioned studies only revealed the “trees” rather than the “forest”. That is to say the fundamental question, “What on earth brings about the unbalanced development of linguistic and intercultural competence” has not been really explored as the above-mentioned research is based only on the “products” of traditionally dominated reproductive approach in language learning in most Asian countries which focuses on memorizing information and following procedures set by the teacher (Ballard & Clancy, 1988). In the late 20th century, some EFL teachers put forward that the intercultural language teaching (ILT) would be an option to develop tertiary students’ bi-competence. According to the research made by Liddicoat, Crozet and Bianco (2000), there are three points to be noticed in ELT:

- (1) Language teaching cannot be limited to teaching the code, viewed as an objective, isolated artifacts, but must inherently bring with it practice and values which are integrated and subjective.
- (2) Empowerment comes through understanding language as practice and understanding the cultural context in which the practice is manifested.
- (3) In intercultural language teaching, the teacher has responsibility to provide opportunities for students to develop their own intermediary place between their own culture and that of the target language community.

(Liddicoat, et al., 2000, p. 184)

The above arguments throw some light on the controversial issues on language teaching and learning. That is to say what to teach in language classroom-language or culture? What counts most in language teaching-process or product? What roles should teachers and students play in language teaching and learning (cultural observers, participants, transmitters or

practitioners)?

RATIONALE

The task-based ILT approach in this paper can find the theoretical and empirical support from cognitive psychology and pedagogy. The idea is developed from purposeful learning (Dewey, 1938), social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) and discovery learning (Bruner, 1996). According to constructivists, people construct knowledge on the basis of their experiences. Therefore, students need opportunities in the classroom to learn through experience and experimentation. Therefore, the teacher should move beyond the current teacher-centered learning strategy, which has been dominant in ELT in China since the nineteenth century. That is to say, it is necessary to make a shift from teacher-centered learning to student-centered autonomous learning; from the process of information transmission (linguistic and cultural) to the participation and interaction with foreign cultures.

It is argued that the process of ELT itself is a kind of intercultural communication. ELT should not only teach some basic rules and facts about the target language but also develop students' intercultural competence through the process of learning. It is argued here that a reciprocal approach should be taken, which emphasizes participation and interaction in the EFL classroom.

As a new strategy in foreign language teaching, task-based ILT is an experience-orientated approach that puts more emphasis on the process of interaction and exploration rather than assimilation and passive intake. In this sense, EFL learners are no longer "defective native speakers" (Liddicoat, et al., 2000, p.181) but "users" (Firth & Wagner, 1997, p. 287) who use the language for the purpose of communication in various social contexts. As Liddicoat, et al. (2000) put it, "language can not be considered just as a set of purely linguistic skills. And the language learner needs to move beyond what s/he functions within cultural boundaries. This is the core of the process of

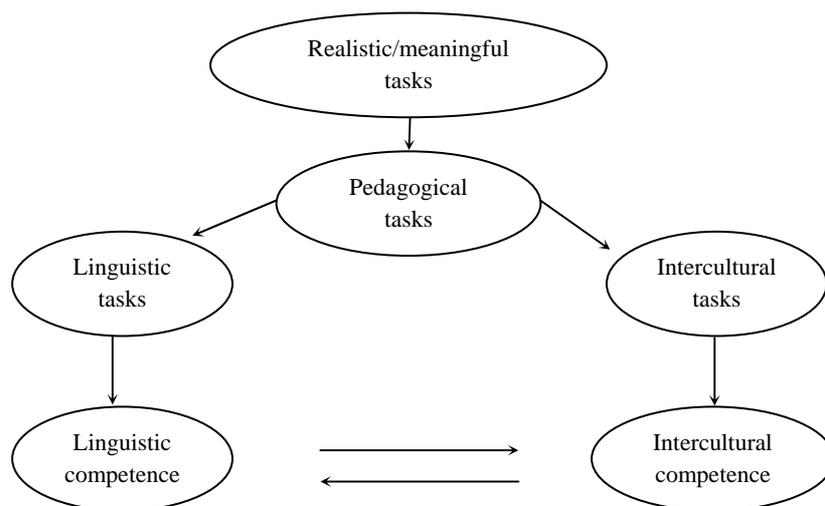
moving towards a bilingual norm.”(p. 181). In this sense, ILT is aimed to achieve the following goals in ELT classroom, as Ge (2003, p. 6) put it:

- To get access to the culture through the language being taught.
- To make the study of cultural behaviors an integral part of each lesson.
- To achieve the intercultural competence that students are lacking.
- To achieve cross-cultural understanding- awareness of their own culture, as well as that of the target culture.
- To develop cultural tolerance and proper behaviors in different cultural contexts.
- To work harmoniously with people of different nationalities, gender, age and backgrounds.
- To recognize barriers to intercultural communication, particularly ethnocentrism and stereotyping.
- To identify language difficulties in intercultural communication.
- To identify various nonverbal messages between people from different cultures.
- To be aware that rules of etiquette differ from culture to culture.

METHODOLOGY

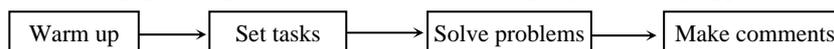
Figure 1 describes a framework of task-based ILT developed by the author. It clearly elaborates that linguistic and intercultural competence can be developed through carefully designed ILT tasks. Here ILT tasks refer to pieces of meaning-focused linguistic and communicative activities involving learners in comprehending, producing and /or interacting in the target language, and these tasks are analyzed or categorized according to their goals, input data, sub-tasks, setting and roles (Nunan, 1989).

FIGURE 1
A Framework for Task-based Intercultural Language Teaching



As can be seen from Figure 2, task-based ILT consists of 4 steps:

FIGURE 2
Pedagogical Sequences for Intercultural Language Teaching Approach



Warm Up

Create a number of schema building tasks that introduce background information, initial vocabulary, language and context for tasks. For example, when it comes to the topic of Barbeque in Australia, the author extracted some articles on the topic from the Internet and asked the first-year English major students to read them after the class. Some key words on BBQ are explained in the class.

Set Tasks

Give learners authentic input and tasks on given situation. Tell students that the task is for linguistic or intercultural competence training rather than entertainment, i.e. focus learners on task meanings instead of task forms. For instance, students are then asked to collect any information they can find from any sources and make a presentation in English on Barbeque in China. In addition to the main task, sub-tasks could be designed as follows:

Linguistic Task

Read the essay *BBQ in Australia* and answer the following questions

- What does BBQ mean in the sentence “As you are in Australia many homes will already have a BBQ as part of the furniture”?
- What ritual will take place to celebrate while barbequing?
- What food or drinks will be served in an Australian BBQ?
- What kind of beverages are to be prepared?
- What kind of music is to be presented?

Communicative Task

Discuss in groups and work out the differences in BBQ in China and Australia.

Solve Problems

Problems-solving tasks that learners undertake in small groups can facilitate language acquisition and cross-culture awareness. For example, in order to achieve the above-mentioned purposes, an intercultural task is to be set to develop learners’ linguistic and intercultural competence.

Intercultural task

Watch the video *Hello Australia II* and answer questions based on the situation below:

Arjad was a Hindu who did not drink alcohol or eat meat. But he was treated with beer and steak by the hospitable host at a BBQ. As a result, he was in dilemma on what to do so as to neither offend his host nor his own customs.

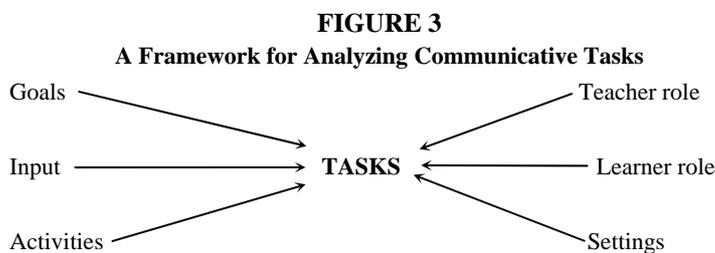
- (1) If you were Arjad, what would you do and say in this embarrassing situation?
- (2) How to communicate with the people from another culture? Write an essay based on Arjad's story.

Make Comments

Comments from both the teacher and the students are preferred after the tasks are finished. It is not very important to measure how many tasks are fulfilled but it is quite important for the teacher to chair dialectic and democratic comments from different voices and perspectives and offer advice if necessary.

Case Description

The above case can be transformed from ILT perspective as Figure 3 shows:



(Adapted from Nunan, 1989)

- Target:** First-year English major students of SWFC
- Goals:**
- (1) Build vocabulary on Barbeque
 - (2) Understanding BBQ as a social event
 - (3) Develop intercultural awareness and solve linguistic and/or intercultural problems
- Input:** Barbeque in Australia, an extract from the Internet
- Activity:**
- (1) Read the essay *Barbeque in Australia* and study the words involved.

- (2) Discuss the question: What are the differences in BBQ in China and Australia?
- (3) Writing an essay based on Arjad's story: How to communicate with people from another culture

Teacher role: Monitor and facilitator

Learner role: Conversational and discussing partners, presenters and essay writers

Setting: Classroom/group work

RESULTS

As the author expected, the target students took very active part in the activities involved for the topic BBQ itself was very interesting and it was also one of their favorite pastimes. In terms of the differences in BBQ in China and Australia, students sketched impressive profiles of BBQ in two countries as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Feedback for the Linguistic Task

Aspects	BBQ in China	BBQ in Australia
Meat	Beef, pork, fish, chicken, sausage	Beef, pork, fish, chicken, sausage, steak, vegetarian meat, snags
Food	Potatoes, beancurd, mushroom, cabbage, corn, melon	Hamburgers, sweet corn, mushroom, bread, onions, salads and various sauces
Beverages	Beer, juice, Cola, water	Light beer, soft drinks
Music	No music is required	Music catering for different ages and tastes

The most exciting and encouraging feedbacks from the target students are their solutions to Arjad's problem, as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Feedback for the Intercultural Task

S1—If I were the man, I would give the steak and beer to the next coming guest and take some vegetables and water for myself.	S3—Thank you very much. I would appreciate it very much if you give me some vegetables because I am a Hindu and I can't eat meat or drink beer. Vegetables are just OK.
S2—It's very kind of you to treat me so well. But I don't eat meat or drink beer. I am a Hindu you see. Maybe you can give me some potatoes instead. And thank you all the same.	S4—I'm sorry I can't take it because of my culture. I never eat meat or drink beer. Thank you all the same. Er, do you have any soft drinks? I think that will be better. Maybe I can have some vegetables. Thanks a lot. [Then give the food back to the host].

S stands for certain target student in the case study

On the topic of “How to communicate with people from another culture?” the target students also contribute very positive and reasonable views, as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Feedback for the Linguistic + Intercultural Task

S1—First of all, we should admit [cultural] differences. After admitting the differences, we should accept them with our hearts open. Then, we should also respect their beliefs, religions and habits. As the saying goes, “you should respect others before you win other's respect.” As a matter of fact, no cultures are high or low, right or wrong, noble or humble. If we open our hearts, show our respects and walk out of the closed world, we can communicate with others freely and effectively in spite of the races, beliefs and origins.	S3—On the one hand, I think we should know about the culture of others, know their religious beliefs, characters, customs, lives and so on. When we communicate with them, we should respect their cultures. At the same time, we should keep our own cultures for we are equal. On the other hand, mastering communicative skills is also important.
S2—We should learn from their cultures as much as we can. We should respect their cultures and avoid offending their taboos.	S4—When we are in a foreign culture, We'd better “do as the Romans do.”

S stands for certain target student in the case study

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this case study, the teacher tries to apply ILT to achieve the purpose of meaningful learning (Brown, 2000). Table 4 indicates that intercultural language teaching is a quite effective strategy in EFL pedagogy, which aims to build both linguistic and intercultural competence through participation and interaction in the EFL classroom. What benefits the author most from the case study is the possibility of developing student's analytic and speculative learning strategy by reproduction and interaction. In ELT classroom, the "process" of learning rather than the "products" of learning is emphasized. The target goals are achieved through the model of learning by doing and ILT framework. The students are encouraged as much as possible to participate in and interact with foreign cultures. After a semester's training, most of the target students have learned how to survey a topic, find the main idea, and conduct a discussion within a group and present their arguments in public. At the same time, they have developed certain social skills as teamwork and cooperative learning. As a result, with "one stone" (process focused on task-based ILT approach), "Two birds" (linguistic and intercultural competence) are caught in hand.

TABLE 4
Results of the Case Study

Skills Involved	Achievements	Generic & Transferable skills	Achievements
Listening/reading	✓	Autonomous learning	✓
Vocabulary building	✓	Experiential learning	✓
Speaking	✓	Interpersonal communication	✓
Writing	✓	Teamwork	✓
Intercultural competence	✓	Information searching	✓

This approach, compared with others, highlights that EFL teachers, with their professional advantage and intercultural experiences may play more active and important roles in developing students' intercultural communication

competence through ELT (Ge, 2003). In classroom practice, some points should be attended as follows:

- (1) It is very important to design proper tasks. That is to say the tasks should be linguistically and culturally appropriate for the students' cognitive competence and language level. The teacher should use realistic activities based on real-life situations or well-set tasks for instructive purposes.
- (2) The teacher can set tasks by selecting information from various sources such as newspapers, magazines, timetables and the Internet etc. If possible, modern education technology and equipment such as DVD players, and beam projectors are preferred in EFL classrooms to demonstrate tasks and the students' findings.
- (3) To make ILT approach more effective, students should be trained more often in learning strategies such as experiential learning, cooperative learning and group works, for it is well known that the Asian students are more accustomed to the teacher-centered learning and are often criticized by western scholars as "group-oriented, passive and non-critical thinkers as well as inactive learners" in EFL classroom (Guest, 2002).

THE AUTHOR

Wang Ge is associate professor of Department of Foreign Languages, Southwest Forestry College, China. He also serves as a member of Asia TEFL and China Association of Intercultural Communication. He obtained his B.A. and M.A. in English language and literature from YNU and SCNU. In the past 12 years he has been involved in a number of TEFL teaching and research programs and had more than 8 papers and 2 books published in China or presented at international conferences. His academic interest is in language teaching methodologies, multiple intelligences development and

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