

Incorporating Intercultural Awareness and Critical Thinking Skills into the ELT Classroom

As OECD PISA Global Competence Framework puts it, “learning to participate in interconnected, complex and diverse societies is no longer a luxury but a pressing necessity.” In order to address the underlying issue, there has been a growing concern about how Japanese teachers of English can develop students’ intercultural understanding associated with English. Yet, the reality is that there are many Japanese students who have never been abroad or have no chances to interact with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds, languages, social conventions. They are more likely to have a question about why they should study English or culture associated with it because they are in the social context where the recognition of the world being interconnected is not so much required. I find it challenging to make a convincing and reasonable account of the issue to my students. While I am exploring some feasible and constructive solutions, my potential avenues may include fostering students’ intercultural communication and critical thinking skills in order to prepare them to effectively use English in a wide range of sociocultural contexts with cultural awareness.

In line with ongoing increases in being interconnected globally suggested by the above-mentioned guiding principle, intercultural communication by the medium of English is more likely to be characterized by the plurality nature of English. In actuality, English may be still somewhat affected by native English-speaking norms; however, English is no longer a communication tool used only by native English speakers as a first language. Additionally, the industry seeks university graduates with fluent spoken communication skills in English, with which they can promptly contribute to companies’ productivity in the global market. Yet, the narrowly perceived economic advantage which is associated with English proficiency may be gradually vanished; it does not necessarily promise to provide a strong rationale for developing students’ English competency because of the global phenomenon of plurilingualism or the advent of the new technology including artificial intelligence. Given this, I am keenly recognizing the importance to look beyond English education affected by monolingualism or the instrumental view. It involves considering how English teachers can strike a right balance between the idea of English as skills for communication and more holistic view of English learning within “the Global Englishes paradigm”; or what Japanese students should do to develop their linguistic and cultural competencies as global citizens with a broader perspective.

The global nature of English as a lingua franca has led students learning English to get intercultural competent with critical thinking skills. Thus, it is imperative that English teachers create a learning environment that prompts students to bring up their own issues of cultural topics and construct their own perspectives of culture, instead of simply mastering a linguistic form. It is also necessary to offer students rich opportunities to encounter with a wide variety of views about culture, incorporate them into students’ own ideas, and develop their own critical thinking skills. However, such pedagogical proposals sound idealistic to Japanese teachers of English and it can be demanding for them to take concrete action on this matter. The biggest problem that many of them seem to have identified is what approach to take in order to raise their students’ cultural awareness in class. Despite being lack of resources or disadvantageous to English teachers, some could be improved if professional development is properly given to them.

In an effort to foster students' intercultural communication or critical thinking skills, one key component is that English teachers need to provide their students with a wide range of their own experiences, knowledge, or skills that represent cultural contents in their language classroom. That can be successfully accomplished by participating in learning programs for in-service teachers such as an online learning platform or a face-to-face learning opportunity for professional growth. As one instance in my intercultural communication breakdown, I will describe my failure that I experienced during professional development. A peer review process with an English teacher in Haiti didn't work properly when I was doing online learning on TESOL. I found it hard and frustrating for me to communicate in English, which is not my first language, but I became fully aware that the cross-cultural communication could be challenging on a number of levels. It is significant for users of English as an international language with different cultural backgrounds to understand how their values or beliefs are shaped and both of them reflect on their behaviors. Promoting intercultural awareness involves pragmatic competence; successful intercultural communication concerns appropriate language choices and awareness of oneself as a cultural being.

To conclude, there are two pedagogical implications for effective implementation of the discussions made above. One way is to provide students with tasks which are conducive to critical reading of information, texts, or documents relevant to culture study or intercultural communication, writing papers coherently based on the understanding and interpretations of the sources, or giving an oral presentation of their ideas. To this end, materials or resources including textbooks or media should be designed in such a way as to promote students' pragmatic and strategic competences, which require their cultural awareness and critical thinking skills. Another approach is that English teachers need to shift from the ones who simply transmit knowledge to the ones who play a variety of roles beyond giving linguistic knowledge to students in a communicative language classroom. In an attempt to bring about a transformative effect on the current traditional teaching practices, English teachers in Japan are continuously required to apply their language learning or intercultural communication experiences into their instructional approaches with the use of expertise, knowledge or skills obtained through their professional development. Put together, students will be expected to construct their own critical perspectives of how they use English in the multilingual and multicultural society, enrich more communication repertoires with linguistic multi-competence and be equipped with the knowledge or proficiencies vital to actively participate in global contexts. (978 words)