Construction of Intercultural Receptiveness in Classroom Settings

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Abstract

Objectives: This article in detail reviews some of the major cultural constructs that are useful in understanding the complexity prevalent in intercultural classroom settings. Cultural constructs such as language and cultural conflicts, inequality, assumptions, poor decision making are addressed to formulate a whole encompassing solution. This paper sheds light on how the confluence of multiple cultures is formed by assimilating different cultural values brought forward by learners and these values are enacted, shaped and strengthened to cultivate a set standard form. **Methods:** A questionnaire on cultural influence on learning has been administered to elicit responses from the undergraduate learners. Random sampling analysis on 50 responses was carried out. **Findings:** When poor cultural interaction and communication fuel underperformance and refusal to participate, the formation of 'normality' in identity creation which include many cultural differences together under one umbrella provides a synergic learning atmosphere in classrooms. The result depicts that the poor participation of the learners can be assessed as a live response to identity crisis and alienation in order to keep safeguard the identities they have constructed with in a given hostile context. **Novelty:** Aspects such as institutional characteristics, predominant socio-cultural behavior of the student body and the level of learner flexibility in embracing a new learning environment play vital role in framing intercultural identity formation.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence, Identity, Integration, Receptiveness, Self-Images

1. Introduction

The rationale behind this article is to create an overt cultural awareness which dismisses the perceptional differences, anxiety, underperformance and stereotypes among the learners of a new classroom setting and create a congenial learning environment. Here, the culture means the activity that increases the quality of life and at the same time includes most of the social activities such as academic and art activities, politics, economics, technology and religion, etc.[1]

The research problem put forward was "how do we develop a teaching and learning atmosphere which hail cultural and social underpinnings of the learner to improve the second language acquisition and content learning at the graduation level?"

The learners may fail to adapt to distinctive challenges of learning, interacting and living in a completely new atmosphere provided which leads to underperformance, homesickness and an early return of the learners to their home ground. The growing life levels polarity, uncertainty of development perspectives, imposed modus vivendi have led to the emerging of intercultural contradictions and conflicts[2]. The factors that determine the receptiveness of a new cultural setting are institutional characteristics, predominant socio-cultural behavior of the student body and the level of flexibility in embracing a new learning environment. The mechanisms by which these factors are achieved have been materialized in terms of coping and learning strategies. The final outcome can be perceived as the state of being accepted, mental well-being and successful social interactions. The mechanisms that a learner uses to increase the individual fitness into new environment and its endurance, in relation with the tolerance level of his surroundings are various coping

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strategies. This reduces the conflicts between the situational demands and his individual needs.

An individual's sense of who he is affects the formation of his identity and this happens through intercultural communication in a new learning environment. Communications and interactions with others in situated environments are the medium through which the learners negotiate and co-construct their views of themselves and the world."[3] In identity negotiation theory, Ting-Toomey defines identity as "reflective self-images constructed, experienced, and communicated by the individuals within a culture and in a particular interaction situation"[4]. Identity negotiation is a transactional communicative process in which people work to define, challenge, or modify these self images. The identity formation is actually a discursive relationship between the learner and his opponent, formed through the telling of stories, through dialogue: "Is it not a way of framing one's consciousness, one's position, one's identity, one's commitment with respect to another? Self. . .becomes 'dialogue dependent,' designed as much for the recipient of our discourse as for intrapsychic purpose"[5].

Language strategies are processes or actions consciously selected by users for the purpose of learning or using a language[6]. Such conscious thoughts and actions are connected to their own meta-cognitive knowledge on the strategic learning approaches, better grasping on how a task entails, and the capabilities to orchestrate the methods that best suit the task needs as well as the their own learning strengths. New strategies specifically concentrate on areas where the learner need to deliberately focus on and such strategies help the learner to assimilate the best methods prevalent into their mental schemata of language learning methods. Learners need to focus of continuing their strategies even after their formal learning period to improve and hone the language. Language strategies and very important since researchers point out that with the help of such strategies learners can improve and can be successful in language learning.

In[7] argue that mental processes are not internal, universal and consistent but the result of social, discursive activity. Based on this angle, the learner is not an isolated, watertight compartment, but a social entity, whose self image, learning process, actions and behavioral patterns are completely affected by the interaction with some other entities in particular situational and intercultural contexts. Communication plays an earnest role in this interaction owing to the interrelation between action and communication and their current situational use. The identity formation is continuous, unstable and even fragmented as a result of contradictory interactions thrives in the new classroom settings and hence identity construction is not a permanent or fixed being. Identity is dynamic, and it is something that is presented and re-presented, constructed and reconstructed in interaction (including written communication)[8]. While undergoing an identity construction process, which is continuous, the learners find themselves more powerful in terms of understanding their own cultural underpinnings, heritage, as well as that of others' traditional values. Such a cosmopolitan refinement helps the learner to better equip to understand the role of culture and learning in their lives away from familiar spaces.

2. Materials and Methods

Uncertainty reduction based theory of intercultural adaptation claims that adjustment occurs by both increasing knowledge about the host and passive, active and interactive strategies to reduce uncertainty and anxiety[9]. The receptiveness of intercultural communication can be perceived through various modes such as assimilation, separation, marginalization and integration and are explained as follows:

Assimilation: The learner adopts the nuances of new learning environment sidelining his own.

Separation: Arises if the learner maintains his own cultural identity and reject the new situation.

Marginalization: Occurs when the values and norms of two cultures are not compatible and the learner is unsteady and vacillates between the cultures.

Integration: When convergence of two cultures happens, the integration of cultural stability takes place and the learner easily adapts to the new learning environment.

Based on the above mentioned strategies, a questionnaire was administered among 300 engineering students of VIT University, Vellore. The questionnaire elicited information on what motivates their learning in intercultural perspective, how biographical delineation of renowned personalities improve their learning, how they get inspired on the accomplishments of other people, etc. Random sampling of the population was conducted for the analysis. The sample size was restricted to 50 nos.

When the learner blindly follows the new learning environment and act in accordance with the surroundings, intercultural negotiations or a cultural in-between-ness of

both the parties evolve and that set a standard learning behavior, norms and patters. This initiates the stripping of existing social status and inducts the learner into a period of transition, the liminal stage[10], and finally integrates into the new learning environment.

The participants of the questionnaire have multiple set of identities which are brought by them from various geographical locations where as a few of them alone come up and acknowledged by the fellow learners and always favored over others at a given time in a classroom. This over powering of a one cultural identity over other by influencing, appreciating and distinguishing its own reflective self-images is conducted in a largely supportive environment. This identity creation is dynamic and hence the learners enter and exit through this process based on the power negotiations of other predominant cultures.

3. Results and Discussion

In Figure 1, the graphical representation of various bar coding draws the responses given by the learners to the given study from 'almost always true of me' to 'almost never true of me'.
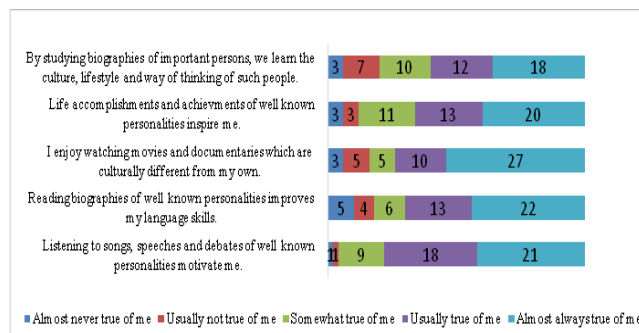

Figure 1. Graphical representation of responses elicited for each question from the learners.

Figure 2 gives the diagrammatic representation of the responses in percentile for better clarity. According to the result, 43% of the respondents state that the responses elicited from them are almost always true of them and 26.4% of the respondents reported that the study is usually true of them and a good number of respondents, i.e., 16.4% registered that the study is somewhat true of them.

On the other hand, 14% have denied fact that these situations did not have a significant influence in their learning.

Here, 84% acknowledge the fact that they will be highly enthusiastic and curious when administering a

language learning pedagogy prepared based on the implications given in questionnaire. Majority of the responses indicate interest among learners.
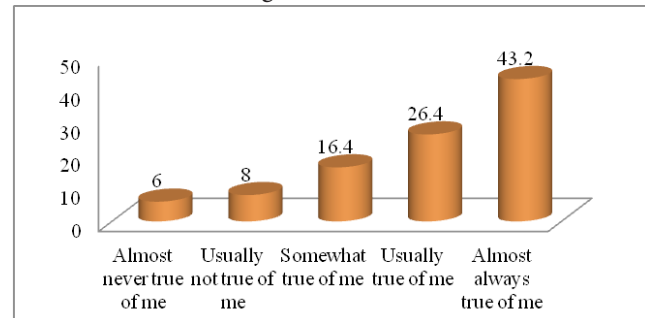

Figure 2. Diagram represents the total percentage for the given responses.

Globalization has paved way for better commutation and this has made instructors to face or communicate in multiple languages which hold variegated ideologies, philosophies, beliefs, and cultural values. Instructors should be "trained to reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture"[11] in order to better meet the needs of their learners who come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This approach gels well with Britzman's rejection of the reduction of teaching to the application of de-contextualized skills and predetermined images. Rather, learning to teach "is always the process of becoming: A time of formation and transformation"[12]. Surfacing such realizations in the teaching arena has prompted to analyze the role of teachers in creating intercultural identity formation in classroom settings. This also throws more light on training prospective teachers to cater to a multilingual student body. This has to read in connection with what Kramsch has put forward as learners themselves are "likely to encounter not just monolingual native speakers belonging to identifiable national cultures, as in the 1970s, but multilingual individuals who have grown up in a variety of national, supranational, and ethnic cultures"[13].

Challenges to teacher identity occur in intercultural classroom settings since teacher identity consists of both "person and the context"[14]. Expressing more focus on cultural-general knowledge over cultural specific knowledge and understanding the generic differences among cultures to acknowledge the sidelined and lesser known identities bring better competence in the classroom. Course preparation by keeping the intercultural communication as a primary objective helps intercultural conflict management and explicates various cultural manifestations

of the classroom. Furstenberg details that our mission as language teachers is more important than ever and that our goal should no longer be limited to helping students develop and achieve linguistic and communicative competence. Our foreign language curriculum needs to expand not just to include intercultural competence but also to make it the main objective of the language class[15]. The traditional way to approach teaching challenges is to focus on effective teaching methods[16–19].

The confidence of the instructor in navigating through intercultural identity challenges is directly proportional to the influence the instructor can make on mitigating the crisis faced by the learners and in their identity construction in the given environment. Instructors are the best medium to facilitate intercultural identity formation since they are more aware of the dialectical tensions and conflicts prevalent in their classrooms. Hoffman-Kipp highlights, "teachers' identities are the powerful factors in students' identity construction"[20]. The constructive relation between the instructor and the learner facilitate a better learning environment and improves learning.

4. Conclusion

The insurmountable cultural distance brings down the learner participation and receptiveness in classroom activities and therefore learning. Effective intercultural competence and identity formation among learners as well as instructors can easily create conducive learning environment envisaged by the learners while joining the institution. To better interpret differences in learning opportunities, we need to integrate in our analyses the micro and macro social context, together with the individual[21]. Aspects such as institutional characteristics, predominant socio-cultural behavior of the student body and the level of learner flexibility in embracing a new learning environment play vital role in framing intercultural identity formation. When the cultures of learners from various geographical origins could conform to the existing normality of the classroom, their performance competence as a learner considerably improve. When the instructor acknowledges the sidelined and lesser known identities, it will hasten the social context of the classroom more appropriate and comparably 'normal' to the learner.

5. References

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