Linguistics and literature

THE ROLE OF CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS IN IMPROVING ENGLISH COMMUNICATION SKILLS AMONG EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract. *In today's globalized world, effective communication in English requires not only linguistic competence but also an understanding of cultural differences. Cross-cultural awareness has become an essential component of English language teaching because it enables learners to interact appropriately and effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. This study investigates the role of cross-cultural awareness in improving English communication skills among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. A mixed-method approach was employed involving 30 undergraduate EFL students. Data were collected through questionnaires, speaking assessments, and classroom observations over an eight-week instructional period. The findings indicate that students who received cross-cultural instruction demonstrated improvements in communicative competence, confidence, and interactional effectiveness. The results suggest that integrating cultural content into English language instruction can significantly enhance learners' communication skills and prepare them for intercultural interactions.*

Keywords: *cross-cultural awareness, EFL learners, communicative competence, intercultural communication, English language teaching*

Introduction

English has become a global language used for communication among people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As a result, language learning is no longer limited to mastering grammar and vocabulary; it also involves understanding cultural norms, values, beliefs, and communication styles (Byram, 1997). Effective

communication in English requires learners to develop intercultural competence alongside linguistic competence.

Many EFL learners possess sufficient grammatical knowledge but experience difficulties when communicating with speakers from different cultures. Misunderstandings may arise due to differences in politeness conventions, non-verbal communication, conversational norms, and cultural expectations (Kramsch, 1993). Therefore, language educators increasingly recognize the importance of incorporating cultural awareness into language instruction.

Cross-cultural awareness refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and respect cultural differences while interacting with individuals from diverse backgrounds (Samovar et al., 2017). According to Byram (1997), intercultural competence enables language learners to interpret cultural practices, avoid stereotypes, and communicate effectively across cultures.

Research suggests that cultural instruction contributes positively to language development. Learners who understand cultural contexts are better able to interpret meaning, participate in conversations, and adapt their communication strategies appropriately (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Moreover, exposure to cultural content increases learner motivation and engagement in language learning (Baker, 2015).

Despite growing recognition of intercultural competence in language education, many EFL classrooms continue to focus primarily on linguistic accuracy. Consequently, learners may graduate with strong grammatical knowledge but insufficient preparation for real-world intercultural communication.

The present study seeks to examine the impact of cross-cultural awareness on English communication skills among EFL learners.

Research Questions

1. Does cross-cultural awareness improve English communication skills among EFL learners?
2. Which aspects of communication benefit most from cultural instruction?
3. How do students perceive the role of cross-cultural awareness in language learning?

Literature Review

Cross-Cultural Awareness in Language Education

The relationship between language and culture has long been recognized in applied linguistics. Kramsch (1993) argues that language and culture are inseparable because language reflects cultural meanings and social practices. Consequently, language teaching should involve cultural learning in addition to linguistic instruction.

Byram (1997) introduced the concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), which includes attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpretation, and critical cultural awareness. According to this framework, successful language users must be capable of understanding both their own culture and the cultures of others.

Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) emphasize that intercultural learning encourages learners to reflect on cultural perspectives and develop greater flexibility in communication. Such awareness helps learners avoid misunderstandings and communicate more effectively in multicultural environments.

Communicative Competence and Culture

Communicative competence extends beyond grammatical accuracy and includes sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Cultural knowledge contributes significantly to these components because communication often depends on context-specific conventions and expectations.

For example, politeness strategies differ across cultures. What is considered direct and efficient in one culture may be perceived as rude in another (Samovar et al., 2017). Therefore, cultural awareness supports appropriate language use and improves communicative effectiveness.

Research by Baker (2015) demonstrated that intercultural communication skills are increasingly important in English as a Lingua Franca contexts, where speakers from diverse backgrounds use English to communicate.

Benefits of Cross-Cultural Instruction

Numerous studies have reported positive outcomes associated with cultural instruction. Sercu (2005) found that learners who engaged in intercultural activities demonstrated greater confidence and openness toward cultural diversity. Similarly, Fantini (2009) reported that intercultural training improved communication skills and reduced anxiety during interactions with people from different cultures.

Cultural instruction also promotes critical thinking by encouraging learners to compare cultural perspectives and challenge stereotypes (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). These skills contribute to more effective communication and stronger intercultural relationships.

Methods

Research Design

The study employed a mixed-method research design combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods.

Participants

Thirty undergraduate EFL students enrolled in a university English program participated in the study. Their proficiency levels ranged from B1 to B2 according to the CEFR.

Instruments

Questionnaire

A pre-intervention and post-intervention questionnaire measured students' levels of cultural awareness and perceptions of intercultural communication.

Speaking Assessment

Students completed speaking tasks involving intercultural communication scenarios. Their performances were assessed according to:

- Fluency
- Interactional competence
- Appropriateness of responses
- Cultural sensitivity

Classroom Observation

Observations were conducted during classroom discussions and intercultural activities to examine students' communication behaviors.

Procedure

The intervention lasted eight weeks. Students participated in lessons covering:

- Cultural values and beliefs
- Communication styles
- Non-verbal communication
- Stereotypes and cultural perceptions
- Intercultural problem-solving activities

At the beginning and end of the intervention, students completed speaking assessments and questionnaires.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data from observations were examined through thematic analysis.

Results

Speaking Performance

Table 1 presents the mean scores obtained before and after the intervention.

Criterion	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Fluency	6.2	7.8
Interactional Competence	5.9	8.0
Cultural Sensitivity	5.4	8.2
Appropriateness of Responses	5.8	7.9

The results indicate improvements across all categories. The greatest gains were observed in cultural sensitivity and interactional competence.

Student Perceptions

Questionnaire findings revealed positive attitudes toward cross-cultural instruction.

- 92% agreed that cultural knowledge improved communication.
- 88% reported increased confidence when speaking with people from different cultures.
- 90% believed intercultural activities made language learning more meaningful.
- 85% expressed interest in learning more about global cultures.

Discussion

The findings suggest that cross-cultural awareness contributes significantly to the development of English communication skills. Students demonstrated improvements not only in linguistic performance but also in interactional competence and cultural sensitivity.

These results support Byram's (1997) theory of intercultural communicative competence, which emphasizes the importance of cultural knowledge in successful communication. The improvements observed in interactional competence also align with findings reported by Sercu (2005), who argued that intercultural instruction enhances learners' ability to communicate effectively across cultures.

The increase in students' confidence may be explained by their greater understanding of cultural norms and communication styles. When learners are aware of cultural expectations, they are better equipped to navigate intercultural interactions and avoid misunderstandings (Samovar et al., 2017).

Furthermore, classroom observations indicated that students became more open-minded and willing to consider alternative perspectives. Such outcomes reflect the broader educational benefits of intercultural learning identified by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013).

Conclusion

This study examined the role of cross-cultural awareness in improving English communication skills among EFL learners. The findings revealed that cultural instruction positively influenced communicative competence, interactional effectiveness, and learner confidence.

The study highlights the importance of integrating cultural content into English language teaching. Language educators should incorporate intercultural activities, discussions, and authentic cultural materials to prepare learners for communication in a globalized world.

Future research should investigate the long-term effects of intercultural instruction and explore its impact across different educational contexts and proficiency levels.

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