

Constructing EFL learners as Intercultural Speakers through digital technologies

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Educators have called for basing language instruction on a definition of language as ideological social practice, rather than autonomous linguistic skills (Gee, 1992; Street, 1984, 1995). As a social practice, language always enacts a communicative purpose to accomplish valued social goals. As a social practice, language always involves linguistic skills, but the skills are consequences of participating in the social practice, or discourse, as a member of the cultural community. Language skills cannot be taught in isolation of a discourse-practice with the hopes of transferring them into some future participation in the practice. Instead, you must engage in the communicative activity and develop sociolinguistic as well as psycholinguistic knowledge in how the language functions in cultural contexts of experience.

It entails at least a tacit awareness of the relations between textual conventions and their contexts of use and, ideally, the ability to reflect critically on those relations. Because it is purpose-sensitive, literacy is dynamic—not static—and variable across and within discourse communities and cultures (Kern, 2003, p. 48).

The emphasis on critical reflection by the language learner is common to language instruction based on participation in social practices. The critical reflection on how social contexts and texts mutually shape possible identities provides a sense of agency and control over language expressions and meanings. This goal for critical awareness in language learning and use is most difficult for the second language learner who is distanced from the cultural practices in which the

target language is constructed. Digital technologies can help to overcome this cultural distance by providing an electronic space in which language learners can construct ideas and negotiate meanings in cross cultural communities as an intercultural speaker.

For Byram, Nichols, & Stevens (2001), the intercultural speaker has “a willingness to relativise one’s own values, beliefs and behaviours, not to assume that they are the only possible and naturally correct ones, and to be able to see how they might look from the perspective of an outsider who has a different set of values, beliefs and behaviours” (p. 5). In proposing an educational goal for an intercultural speaker over the previous goal for a native speaker, Kramersch (1998) explains how students’ linguistic products, or meanings, are cultural products that reflect their different “life experiences, ethnicity, social and economic background, attitudes and beliefs” (p. 28). Byram’s definition of an intercultural speaker parallels definitions of critical literacy by identifying a speaker who has a conscious ability to transform cultural practices by using language from “a position which *acknowledges respect for human dignity and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction*” (Byram, et. al., 2001, p. 7).

Foreign language pedagogy must go beyond learning “about” a culture’s rituals and histories and engage the learner in a reflective experience of the dialectic between language and culture. “The responsibility of the language teacher is to teach culture *as it is mediated through language*, not as it is studied by social scientists and anthropologists” (Kramersch, 1998, p. 31). In a similar way, Freire and Macedo (1987) emphasize that reading and writing the world must precede and accompany learning to read and write the word. A critical pedagogy centers itself first within a cultural practice, then moves beyond it to reflexively consider how language and multimodal symbolic systems are co-constructed with the social practice.

Banks (2004), working within the field of multicultural education, merges awareness of the self and the other within six stages he proposes for “cosmopolitan” individuals that possess the reflective and clarified national and global identifications characteristic of intercultural speakers. The first two stages find individuals who have internalized negative stereotypes about their cultural identity, or feel their group is exclusive and superior to others. At these two stages individuals are unreflective, with a sense of the self fully oppressed, and the recognition of an other fully suppressed. In the middle stages, individuals have a genuine pride in the attributes of their group, and they are developing a strong desire to function successfully in their own and another cultural group. Here the self has become reflective and connects with the other sensing that they are mutually constructive. In the final two stages, individuals clarify their various identifications and have positive attitudes towards all other groups, then develop a primary commitment to justice rather than to any one human community. Ultimately, the self and the other are integrated into a shared global consciousness. Similar to this final stage, Lundgren (2002) characterizes an intercultural speaker as one who would seek critical cultural awareness and active global citizenship, repudiate ethnocentrism and develop a deepened solidarity with others.

Intercultural critical literacy with print and media texts easily shared with today’s digital technologies is essential in our increasingly multicultural and international lives in which our acts of language, literacy, and media often create divisions and dislikes, instead of provide opportunities to negotiate shared meaning through our cultural differences.

Although it is essential that all students acquire basic skills in literacy, basic skills are necessary but not sufficient in our diverse and troubled world. Literate citizens in a

diverse democratic society should be reflective, moral, and active citizens in an interconnected global world (Banks, 2004, p. 298).

These constructivist and critical goals for language education extend current teaching beyond linguistic skills and communication conventions, to explore how culture is situated in communication. While, students may read materials about a culture's traditions and language, or even read books written by authors from diverse cultures, until they participate in communicative acts with members of other cultures, they can not construct the skills to use language within a intercultural context, with greater understanding of the multiple meanings words can have when interpreted within different cultural perspectives.

Thus, every language lesson must engage the learner in 1) explaining how one's own cultural practices shape the meanings for symbols, 2) hypothesizing how and why the cultural practices of others shape meanings in similar and different ways, 3) exploring how changes to the symbols used in communication can expand possible identities, relationships, and values. Kramsch & Andersen (1999) describe a gap between the text and its context that allows texts to be framed by different discourses to signify different meanings to allow cultural participants to enact different social practices. Wallace (2002) defines critical reading as the act of gaining some distance between texts and the social circumstances of their production to allow for the consideration of how different discourses might give rise to alternative meanings. She also cautions that "the ability to engage in this level of critical analysis is not easily achieved" (p.108). The New London Group (1996) argues that even if a reader is able to accomplish this distance and use the gap between text and discourse to engage in critique, "they might still be incapable of reflexively enacting their knowledge in practice" (p. 82). They describe how two dominant language pedagogies may both fail to generate "critical understanding or cultural

understanding. In fact, both immersion and many sorts of Overt Instruction are notorious as socializing agents that can render learners quite uncritical and unconscious of the cultural locatedness of meanings and practices” (p. 83).

The specific pedagogical challenge is to engage language learners in activities that generate awareness of how symbols and culture dialectically construct a discourse that positions readers’ identities and meanings. The digital world is especially suited to generate this intercultural critical literacy practice. Books, film, TV, art, music, newspapers, everyday images, blogs, and audio broadcasts are just a few examples of the media converging within the instantaneous internet conduit called the world wide web, creating new forms of global literacy and authoring, and demanding new forms of intercultural critical interpretation. Potential audiences for multimedia communication expand in all dimensions of diversity on the internet; we experience media texts as composed of layers of possible meaning, each layer derived from a different cultural discourse that frames the content for a particular purpose. We must prepare members of this global community to decenter culturally in their communications and become more conscious of how discourses constitute their own identities and meanings, as well as those of others.

Namhee Kim (2003) researched the impact of website authoring by ESL students in US high schools. In their “culture projects” the students constructed a website about an aspect from their own culture. The project engaged various literacy activities to support language acquisition: Students searched the web for links to relevant cultural sites; they wrote explanations about cultural topics and histories for the webpages; and they discussed their ideas with classmates during the authoring process and in final oral presentations. Just as significantly, the project

forced students to negotiate their identities out of the everyday confrontations they were experiencing with American culture and English. As one student reported:

This kind of project is really helpful for international students. This project gave me confidence and made me feel proud as a Korean in an American school. If I had the chance, I would even present this project in a regular class with American students. Now I am proud of myself as a Korean. (Kim, 2003, p. 157)

The process of authoring a public website in this project engaged students in self-examination of their own cultural perspectives and how to represent that identity through a second language to students of different cultures. They learned to reposition symbols from their first culture in a second language, thus developed an essential intercultural framework for representing and interpreting ideas and identities.

Sangmin Lee's (2004) research describes how authoring in electronic spaces changes the possibilities for communication by providing multimedia representational tools, collaborative contexts for digital text production, and new relationships between the digital author and the digital audience. The student authoring of websites and discussion boards in response to literature "functioned as new writing and communication spaces to expand the students' literacy and connect them with their experiences, needs, interests, their peers and the world" (Lee, 2004a, p. 238). Lee (2004b, 2005) claims that technology projects can transform individualistic school literacy practices into collaborative communicative practices if teachers can support a constructivist context in which students use media and linguistic tools to negotiate their ideas in digital spaces. This "if" is very important because it calls for a pedagogy in which students are not expected to reproduce a correct and predetermined body of knowledge about school readings. Instead, the digital tools provide a greater breadth of representation and interaction to express,

negotiate, debate, and critique ideas about the assigned texts. According to Lee, a greater sense of authentic activity arises out of the social and constructive nature of communication in electronic spaces because students can integrate life relevant texts, and use everyday multimodal means to symbolize ideas.

Inquiry approaches into cultural practices can be especially supported by the use of digital tools to represent the discoveries of these inquiries. Kiwan Sung (2001) describes the websites created by Korean students who investigated various social practices that made use of literacy and symbols. The students reported strong advancement in their acquisition of English through the activities of representing their own cultural activities in multimedia videos and websites. The authoring process itself contributed to the social construction of language abilities. Beach and Myers (2001), also argue for centering all language instruction around inquiry into how symbols and language construct our social worlds. Within the multiple social worlds, or discourse, we participate, language and symbols are used to create particular identities, relationships, and values. By inquiring into how language and symbols work in a particular world, then representing their findings, students can gain important critical understandings of literacy that can support the use of language and symbols in new ways to transform a social world and construct greater democratic equity and agency.

The construction of global citizens and intercultural speakers comprises the central goal of an ongoing global project to enact a pedagogy for intercultural critical literacy education in the PICCLE project (<http://piccle.ed.psu.edu/>). The PICCLE project provides asynchronous discussion forums in which students from many global cultures interact to interpret and discuss print and media texts. While each forum is unique in design, depending on the collaborating faculty, all of the forums direct students to share their interpretations, to compare experiences

related to the texts, to identify their cultural values and perspectives as represented in responses, and to critique the representations in the texts and their discussion posts. In the PICCLE forums, speakers construct an awareness of “other” cultural discourses, but more importantly, they generate a greater awareness of the “self” and one’s own cultural frames of meaning. Sercu (1998) describes a similar goal with an in-service project for teachers in Belgium:

the attainment target of intercultural language teaching is ‘critical understanding of otherness’. A first condition for acquiring this ability is that one gains some insight into one’s own culture and into the conditions of observation (p. 261).

It is most likely that greater consciousness of the self or the other does not proceed in either set direction, but is dialectically constructed within a critical intercultural literacy practice.

Digital spaces and tools can provide the opportunities for language learners to construct multimedia representations of their lives, to use their first and second languages to negotiate meanings for images, print, video, and music, and to communicate about their multimedia texts with speakers from cultures around the world. Through these authentic communicative events, the digital tools help all participants to transform their linguistic knowledge of a second language and their cultural knowledge of a first language into the new third space of an intercultural critical literacy practice.

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