



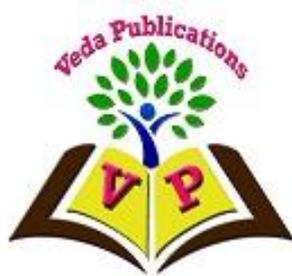
## NEED FOR INTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN ENHANCING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

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### ABSTRACT



Culture denotes the life of people in detail. The culture of a group of people includes their beliefs, attitudes, habits, traditions, behavior, appearance, food etc. The culture varies from group to group as per the nature of their family, region, religion and nationality that they live in. Language is an integral part of the culture. The development of language in an individual is mutually related to the culture he/she follows. Culture affects language and language affects culture. In the country like India where people follow diverse cultures and use different languages, English has been playing a vital role as a link language between any two cultures. No one denies the fact that, though English is not indigenous, it has been accepted widely in Indian society and used as a *linguafranka*. Both the culturally dominant and culturally marginalized communities try to get connected to the outer world through the medium of English. Hence the need for learning English is well realized and efforts are being made to teach and learn English in all levels of formal education ranging from elementary to university. In this juncture, it is very important that the teachers of English must not ignore to sensitize the bilingual learners about the intercultural aspects of both the languages connected to them. The proponents of socio-cultural theory of second language acquisition affirm that the language developmental process in the individuals is associated with their social interactions. The present paper tries to bring out some observations of ESL classroom where the learners are preparing for an international English proficiency test. It also tries to explain how Indo-European cultural sensitivity has helped them to enhance their language comprehension.

**Keywords:** *Intercultural sensitivity – Indo-European Cultures –English Language Proficiency.*



Culture is a powerful social tool. Culture is a form of habit which is commonly accepted by the members of a group and these habits take the shape of a tradition. Tradition gives rise to culture. The culture of a community creates the context for a human being's behavior, attitude, and beliefs. It imparts knowledge in the individuals, forms relationships between members and develops the community. The cultural stereotypes influence the way how people think, act and interact with others. Culture lays foundation for the patterns of communication. It decides who talks to whom, what they are saying, how they are saying and how communication proceeds through various channels and so on. Culture also determines the way people encode messages, decode the meanings of the messages, the conditions and the contexts in which various messages may be sent or may not be sent. Without the knowledge of the culture, one cannot understand the lives, intentions and motivations of the others and cannot connect with the concerns or interests of them. According to Gleason (1961), language is not only the product of culture, but also the symbol of culture. As per the USA's National Standards of Foreign Language Educations Project (1996), students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs. The National Centre for Cultural Competence defines culture as an

"integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thought, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above the succeeding generations" (Goode, Sockalingam, Brown, & Jones, 2000).

Language learners should be aware of using the language in culturally appropriate ways of the community, for example, how to greet the people, make requests and suggestions, agreeing and disagreeing with someone etc... It is essential that

the bilingual learners to be broad enough to understand the culture of the target language group as the forms and uses of that language reflect the values of the society in which it is spoken.

With the industrialization, colonization and economic liberalization, there was a need for common communication across various cultures and nations. Among seven thousand one hundred and odd languages being spoken across the world, less than half of them can be written. Only a few of them are spoken by large communities in the world and among them English has emerged as a global language and it is the *linguafranka* of the world now. English has become a language of opportunities in the modern world. The knowledge of English and the ability to communicate in English is opening new vistas for any individual in the world. Hence it has been learnt as a second language (ESL) and as a foreign language (EFL) in many parts of the world. According to Harmer (2015) many people make a choice of learning English for variety of reasons. The young learn it as it is prescribed in the curriculum or to seek admission in the English-medium higher educational institutions. The adults may need it for visiting a foreign country or getting connected to people or expressing their opinions on social media or for going to live in an English speaking country. In this context, these learners of English as a second language may need to use their English to talk to a native speaker or a non-native speaker like them who hail from different ethnic background. As discussed above, when the language and culture are interrelated, do the learners of English as a second language need to learn the culture of the target language group?

There are several arguments raised from applied linguistics and sociolinguistics to answer the question of whether it is essential to learn culture of a group to learn the language of that group. According to Brown, the relation between culture and language is as follows;

"A language is a part of a culture and culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing



the significance of either language or culture.” (1994:165)

In the context of teaching and learning, Gao presents “the interdependence of language learning and culture learning is so evident that one can conclude that language learning is culture learning and consequently, language teaching is culture teaching.” (2006:59)

This notion promotes the acculturation of second language learners with the teaching of target language culture. The other arguments is that there is no need to teach culture of the target language to the learner of that language in the countries where English is institutionalized for being used for a long time as a second language, According to Braj Kachru's (1985) 'three circles' view of English, the countries in the outer circle have a long history of English and these learners use English to communicate with other non-native speaker and English should be taught in the culture-free contexts. Considering the wide-spread use of English Tomalin (2008) suggests the use of culture as the fifth language skill in addition to LSRW. The fifth language skill should help the English language learners to adopt the techniques of the meaningful language use by understanding and appreciating unique qualities and ways of doing things in other cultures.

In such an intricate scenario, it is not likely for the teachers to find a universal solution to deal with the cultural aspects in the second language classrooms in the multicultural contexts. The teachers ought to be oriented towards an experimental activity to deal with the different affective, emotional, interpersonal, sensorial and cognitive characteristics of the learners. Similarly, the teachers should be aware of the social dimensions of the pedagogic context and encourage the learners to develop intercultural competencies. The teacher should adopt a personal methodology with precise principles and operational possibilities in the classroom. The teaching within intercultural perspective would enable the learner find similarities and contrasts between their mother tongue and target language cultures.

The present study focuses on the cultural inputs provided to the learners of English for better comprehension and use of the target language in the intercultural contexts with native as well as non-native speakers appropriately. The teacher researchers would like to share a few instances from their classroom experiences. The learners in this study are pursuing their engineering graduation aged between seventeen and eighteen. They are in the first semester of their graduation in a private deemed to be university. Most of the learners belong to the rural and semi-urban areas of various districts in Andhra Pradesh. Eighty percent of parents of these learners are either farmers or running small business. Most of them hailed from native Indian cultural context particularly been seen in the regions of costal Andhra Pradesh. Though these learners have been learning English for more than fourteen years, they are not confident in using the second language in real life contexts. As a part of the mandatory course, these learners are preparing for the Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET), a language proficiency test at B1 level of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). They are being trained to develop their grammar, vocabulary and four language skills viz. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. As this examination is an international language proficiency test, the content of the texts tries to balance the cultural dominance of the west but there are several instances where the Indian students feel out of place in understanding the intentions, opinions and attitudes of the Europeans. The test is based on the real life use of English and the contexts presented in the tasks are mostly informal. The teachers try to provide 'Comprehensible Inputs' to the learners by breaking the tasks into smaller parts and engaging the learners in interactions. The interactive communication, discourse management are the requirements of the test but it is observed that the learners are initially reticent for working in pairs and groups. The inhibitions and the social experiences of the learners is a cultural barrier which prevents the learners from working in collaboration. The role of the teacher here is to understand the inhibitions of the learners and encourage them to work with professional mindset by controlling shyness and apprehensions.



While working on the reading tasks, the learners are expected to understand short message and comprehend long texts by using various sub-skills of reading. The texts would present various opinions, likes, and dislikes, priorities, preferences of the people which reflect the thought process and life style of the Europeans. It is observed that while working on matching tasks of preferences and facilities, our learners are confident in making decisions. Though the language is not complex and the learners can understand the meanings of each word, they feel it difficult to comprehend. This seems to be because of difference between the way of thinking between the people of various cultures relating to the dependence and independence in growing the children in families. The learners are asked to draw the comparison between the family systems, rearing of the children in both Indian and European cultures. This has helped them to know more about the family and individual life of both cultures. It has also enabled them to understand the need for clarity in prioritizing and decision making. Without comparison of cultural contexts, it would be difficult to sensitize and convince the learners for making the sense of the texts. The other texts in reading would deal with information booklets or travel brochures which are also demand for the geographical knowledge and awareness of the life style of the people in target culture.

Writing tasks look for more precision in presenting the thoughts. The knowledge of the formal and informal expressions in various cultural contexts is important for the learners. Many of our learners do not accept the salutations like, *Hi Lucy, Hello John* etc. and the closing like *love* and *yours* seem to be impolite and incomplete for our Indian learners which are acceptable informal expressions for the native speakers. The expressions like '*why don't you join us?*' has taken some time to be accepted as a request. The expressions which serve various functions of the language are also cultural specific and learners essentially need to know the universal acceptance of such expressions.

Listening comprehension has become a hard nut to crack in the development of four language skills. Prediction of the context is an important technique that the learners should use for better

listening comprehension. Cultural awareness in terms of mannerisms, relations between people, economic status of the people and the country play a vital role in understanding the monologues and conversations in the listening. The learners need to identify the facts and opinions of the speakers in dealing with the listening tasks for which they should understand the attitudes, intentions, beliefs and trends of the target culture. In addition to this, the varieties of English spoken in the audio tapes pose a major problem to the second language learners. The accent, stress pattern, intonation are culture specific and reveal the meanings and intentions of the native speakers. These are hard to comprehend if the second language learners are not familiar with them.

Speaking skill reveals the spontaneity of the learners. It involves both listening and speaking. The learners respond to the questions of the interlocutor and make the conversation with the peer. The expressions they use for making suggestions, agreeing and disagreeing to the suggestions of others, expressing likes and dislikes, polite requests, reasoning are some of the language functions the learners need to exhibit in speaking. The role-play in speaking demands for cultural relevance of the context expressed in the photographs. The content of these four skills in the Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET) primarily focuses on the English language use in the informal situations and it is close to the culture of the native language users.

Thanasoulas (2001) argues that "the real communicative competence cannot be achieved without an insight into the speaker's culture." In the globalised environment, one need not always communicate with the native speakers, most of the time it is with the non-native speakers who use English as their second language. The learners' awareness of the cultural behavior of the guest or host countries would enable them to respond to the occasions appropriately. The real life use of English is well realized in the global contexts when the focus of second language learning includes intercultural sensitivity as an important fifth skill to the learner of second language. The ability to see the truth and to distinguish between right and wrong is the greatest learning anyone can do of all ages.



“What’s in a name?

That which we call a rose by any other name would  
smell as sweet.”

– William Shakespeare.

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