

Chapter 1

English Language Learning as Intercultural Experience: Promoting a Critical Understanding of Intercultural Relations

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English in higher education entails additional factors and considerations that exemplify the complexity of accounting for the diverse population in modern higher education institutions. In particular, the increasing flow of international students and the employment demands of functioning in multicultural contexts render helping students to develop a critical understating of intercultural relations an important aspect of English language teaching. With the increasing adoption of English as a medium of instruction and its use as a lingua franca in intercultural communication, it is important to structure English education in a way that accounts for intercultural relations both in and outside the university. In addition to the postmodern conceptualizations of interculturality that emphasize the fluidity of culture, language and identity intercultural relations are characterized by power imbalances. That is why this chapter makes a case for the necessity of considering sociopolitical realities in intercultural English language teaching in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Because the global spread of English has contributed to its wide use for intercultural communication, research on English language teaching (ELT) has widely examined various processes and factors involved

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in communicating interculturally using English. This is especially important in current times as language learners are expected to use English in order to engage in intercultural encounters with people of different lingua-cultural backgrounds (Baker, 2012; Liu & Fang, 2017). This chapter will make multiple references to intercultural English language education in higher education on account of “mobility projects in the global higher education sector” as well as the use of “English as a global language, as a medium of instruction and a competitive advantage” (Robertson & Kedzierski, 2016, p. 276). The premise of discussing intercultural relations with regards to English education in higher education is founded upon the interplay of language and culture as found in the context of internationalization. It primarily pertains to the English language and associated linguistic and cultural challenges faced by international students. Therefore, English as foreign language learning is an essential part of developing students’ capacity to meet the demands of globalization (Crichton & Scarino, 2007, p. 3).

As higher education institutes around the world are actively trying to internationalize, there has been an unprecedented growth in the number of non-language subjects being taught in English resulting in the association of ‘internationalization’ with the ‘Englishization’ of higher education (Galloway et al., 2020). The increasing adoption of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) (Macaro et al., 2018) reflects the status of English as a lingua franca (ELF), which can be used to engage in knowledge production and dissemination in addition to intercultural communication (Jenkins, 2007). This is also propelled by the current conditions of globalization and the necessity of developing a skilled workforce to function in both local and global settings. Therefore, the necessity of teaching intercultural communication in higher education (Altaher, 2019) is associated with a critical conceptualization of English-medium teaching in higher education (Schmidt-Unterberger, 2018). Conceptualizing language, culture and intercultural communication in higher education language programs (Moore & Díaz, 2019) entails engaging with cross-cultural communication barriers in globalized higher education (Bash, 2009).

Although an extensive body of research has examined interculturality and language teaching in higher education, e.g., intercultural communicative competence in the context of the European higher education area (Aguilar, 2009), there is a lack of scholarship that has investigated English and internationalization of higher education in southern spaces (Rahman & Mehar Singh, 2020) and their implications for global intercultural relations for southern individuals. An important step in furthering the discussion on intercultural communication and English language education in higher education is to realize that intercultural relations are characterized by North-South power imbalances (Mignolo, 2018; Sousa Santos, 2018) and skewed geopolitics of knowledge (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Garcia & Baca, 2019). Therefore, since most intercultural interactions are mediated through English, it is necessary to further examine the use of ELF in imbalanced intercultural relations and discuss the implications of these dynamics for intercultural English language education.

This chapter recognizes that ELT should consider the colonial-like relations between Northern and Southern spaces. Since less popular cultures use English to communicate or study, then it is a process that may entail considering southern cultures to be less valuable. This chapter will argue that (a) ELT should be mindful of the power imbalances in intercultural relations among different contexts and how the spread of English might perpetuate these inequalities, (b) English language theory and praxis should make use of other ways of knowing including southern epistemologies, and (c) it is necessary to help students in developing a critical understanding of intercultural relations and how they have been shaped by colonial legacies and continue to be influenced by the power of Northern spaces including the spread of global English.

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