
The Transformative Experience of Cultivating Empathy in Teaching Intercultural Studies as Substantiated in The Sociolinguistics and Gender Studies Master One Community

BENNEGHROUZI Fatima Zohra¹

¹University of Mostaganem Abdelhamid Ibn Badis. Algeria

benfati79@gmail.com

Received: 20/06/2019,

Accepted: 30/07/2019,

Published: 31/07/2019

ABSTRACT: *Different value systems, coupled with diverging communication styles and behaviours can build up into stern instances of miscommunication and conflict among cultural groups, both within and across societies. In this spirit, my paper probes the following question: How can learners of intercultural studies attain the flair to understand the dynamics of intercultural contact and the practical skills to successfully engage with cultural diversity? This is tested against the postulation which states that learners of intercultural studies can scarcely generate a trans-cultural competence in an eight-week lecture series. With this in mind and through the intercultural studies lecture series, my main objective is to call attention to the significance of cultivating empathy which becomes pivotal in the intercultural perception enacted by and cultivated in the Master 1 (Sociolinguistics and Gender Studies) inter-cultural classroom. The research tool employed in the present study is: An eight week structured observation describing the intercultural studies lecture series in action. This includes the distribution of 4 assignments to students which aims at gauging the development of their intercultural sensitiveness all along the eight week lecture series in the light of their classroom interactions. Issues relating to colonialism, religion, gender, racism, prejudice, interdependence and many more are also closely summoned up in the wake of such interactions. The strategy implemented throughout the course elaborates chiefly on Sitaram and Cogdell's Value Classification Chart (1976) which contrasts mainstream values at work in different cultural environments, and the Worldwork's Framework of International Competencies (2010) which propounds manoeuvres for trans-cultural sensitivity.*

KEYWORDS: intercultural-studies lecture series; empathy; value system; conflict; trans-cultural competencies

RESUME: *Des systèmes de valeurs différents, associés à des styles de communication divergents, peuvent être des exemples de conflits communicationnels et culturels. Dans cet esprit, mon article examine la question suivante: Comment les apprenants des études interculturelles peuvent-ils acquérir le flair pour comprendre la dynamique du contact interculturel et les compétences pratiques pour s'engager avec succès dans la diversité culturelle? Ceci est testé contre la conjecture qui stipule que les apprenants d'études interculturelles peuvent difficilement générer une compétence transculturelle dans une série de séminaires de huit semaines. Mon objectif principal est d'attirer l'attention sur l'importance de cultiver l'empathie qui devient essentielle dans la perception interculturelle adoptée et cultivée dans le groupe de Master 1 (sociolinguistique et études de genre). L'outil de recherche utilisé dans la présente étude est: Une observation structurée de huit semaines décrivant la série de conférences sur les études interculturelles en action. Cela inclut la distribution de 4 tâches aux étudiants qui visent à évaluer le développement de leur sensibilité interculturelle tout au long de la série de séminaires. Les questions relatives au colonialisme, à la religion, au genre, au racisme, aux préjugés, à l'interdépendance et à bien d'autres sont également profondément évoquées à la suite de telles interactions. La stratégie mise en œuvre tout au long du cours s'appuie principalement sur le tableau de classification des valeurs de Sitaram et Cogdell (1976) qui met en contraste les valeurs dominantes dans différents environnements culturels et la charte des compétences internationales de Worldwork (2010)..*

MOTS-CLES: inter-culturalité; empathie; valeurs; conflit culturel

1. Introduction

Teaching intercultural studies can be teachers' most laborious and challenging experience as it engages them along with their learners in a complex process of intercultural perception identification which is often replete with incidents of misunderstanding, over-generalizing, stereotyping to list but a few. The teachers' awareness of the complexity of such process is fundamental in fashioning their course. In this spirit, my purpose, as a teacher of intercultural studies, is shaped in such a manner as to make the route towards the recognition and progression of intercultural sensitiveness the least muddled. It follows that my perspective is convened into two cultures: (a) Algerian/Arab/Muslim and (b) Western. Technically, the course objectives that I propounded include: (1) analyzing key elements of *culture, society, subordinate group, dominant group,*

stereotyping, *conflict*, and *prejudice*, (2) identifying areas of cultural difference and conflict, (3) delineating the notions of *cultural identity/individual identity*, and ultimately (4) unfolding/ investigating the moral and ethical dimensions of cultural conflict. The elements in this list are approached primarily through the implementation of the notion of *empathy* which is steeped in a common sense of cultural relativism. My recurring questioning phrases at the opening of each lecture series is the following: you are born...VS You could have been born...The principle behind such phrases is to bring learners to the assumption that they have no direct interference with the pros and cons of their own cultural birthright.

I am, thereby, proceeding by demarcating the concepts that are referentially significant to the implementation of the present investigation, with a special emphasis on, *prejudice*, *stereotype* and *empathy*. Relevant to this, I engage in my practical part through gauging the first postulation of whether or not my learners could build up a trans-cultural competence in an eight week time. This is realised within the completion of four assignments.

2. Conceptual Demystification

A host of considerations take part in the intercultural screening or filtering process, ranging from *stereotypes* and *prejudices* to *beliefs* and *values*. *Stereotypes* refer to over simplified, even, exaggerated statements. Some are totally false, and others are constructed on half-truths as they are eventually over generalised on a community or a group of people. When you ascribe the attribute *dark* to an Arab, you are neutrally describing him with reference to a racial stock. Whereas, when you evaluate an Arab as *aggressive* or *lazy*, you are chauvinistically drawing on a set of stereotypes pertaining to a racist stock. A *Prejudice*, however, is different in the sense that it implies a prejudgment, yet a fossilized one. A *prejudice* is unshakable by evidence because it resists any new knowledge that would unseat it. Erroneous beliefs and misconceptions embed themselves in prejudices. The marked difference between a stereotype and a prejudice is that a stereotype is a belief whereas a prejudice is an attitude. A *Belief* refers to the propositions that are held by a given society and unarguably approved and accepted as being true. *Beliefs* are often associated with religion. Mostly, they are not based on empiricism or logic, but emanate

from cultural, emotional and social aspects. Many believe, for instance, that the world was created in seven days, while Darwin's exponents, namely the evolutionists still uphold the Darwinian belief that people were not created but evolved from lower forms of life over a long period of time. These beliefs, actually, impinge on people's behaviours and world-view as well. A *value*, as its name indicates, is an evaluative estimating and assessing principle at work in one culture. It is all about an attribute that is ascribed to such or such belief within the bonds of culture. Judgment value binaries such as *good* and *bad*, *right* and *wrong*, *appreciated* and *depreciated*, *desirable* and *undesirable* are subjectively associated to the *orthodox* and *unorthodox* beliefs operating in a given community respectively. Naturally, values fairly differ from one society to another. *Conversational non aggressiveness* and *reservation* in England, for instance, are much appreciated in relation to *openness* and *showiness* which are disfavouredly judged as *uncouth*. In the same way, *polygamous marriages* are allowed in Moslem societies as opposed to the West where they are regarded as forms of adultery.

Recognizing the intensity or strength of these notions help teachers decide what trans- cultural attributes are most required as tools of intercultural communication. This can vary from the ability to respond in non-evaluative ways which is a criterion for open mindedness to the ability of shifting frames of reference which is a feature for flexibility. There is no denying that each trans-cultural attribute bears its own significance to intercultural interaction construal while sending to others, thus far only one attribute is, in my opinion, a prerequisite for the functioning of all the other ones: *empathy*.

Merriam Webster defines *empathy* as —the feeling that you care about and are sorry about someone else's trouble, grief, misfortune, etc.; a feeling of support for something; a state in which different people share the same interests, opinions, goals, etc." As opposed to the feeling of sympathy which stems from acknowledging another person's agony, that of empathy is more forceful in the sense that it unfolds as a feeling of this pain or torment. While sympathy is expressed, sympathy is shared. In its simplest terms, *empathy* can mean putting oneself in someone else's shoes. *Empathy* can also be defined as the ability to feel in an approximately similar manner as another person feels, even when we do not share the

same value or belief system as it is the case with *intercultural empathy*. *Intercultural empathy*, then, implies suspending, yet temporarily, one's reference frame to fit into another person's. It is carrying over one's emotive and cognitive makeup to correlate with the changes of an external environment. Such relocation of one's thinking and feeling- of course without forsaking one's own- to dynamically project oneself in another cultural model is conscious and deliberate. (Yang Kun, 2004). It is worth noting, here, that empathy not only nudges us to reflect upon another's feeling but also on our own for an unbiased reappraisal of all sides.

With the rapid growth in communication and internet technologies, the interactive role of *intercultural empathy* in intercultural communication becomes all the more salient, particularly in teaching foreign languages. As a trans-cultural attribute, intercultural empathy competence aims at developing an individual's faculty to shift their frame of reference within a new environment and a changing worldview. At this particular juncture, one question poses itself: How can teachers make their learners' reference frames transposable to another context?

Nurturing one's learners' *intercultural empathy* necessitates working on their cultural sensitiveness and their adaptation capacity. This demands being responsive to the difference between one's own culture and the others' culture, and acknowledging the influence cultures might have on one another. It also calls for the teachers to actively engage in the alteration and rebuilding process of their learners' cognitive and emotional makeup in a varying milieu. To this aim, I, as a teacher of intercultural studies to Algerian students of English at Mostaganem University, propounded a set of four assignments for students over an eight week period. The following part spreads out the assignments while accentuating the students' responsiveness.

2.1. Assignment N°1

In the first assignment, students are asked to establish a charter based on their own intercultural encounters or on encounters they witnessed on others with the emerging values those encounters allow and the specifications (favourable or un-favourable) those values represent for them. Through this assignment, I try to set off my students' sense of relativism by stimulating an in group discussion of what aspects of their

values might seem odd, difficult to relate to, funny and so forth to foreigners and vice versa. Many of them came up with ideas like questions on age and social status in first time encounters might seem rude in English culture for example. Others suggested that readiness to welcome guests anytime might seem odd in English culture and insistence on guests to eat repeatedly even when they decline it might seem funny in English culture. On the other hand, another group drew attention to the fact that sharing intimate kisses in public can be definitely rude in Algerian context and not sharing one's food/sandwich with a friend might be odd, even mean in Algerian culture. Notwithstanding, all of them recognised the universality (with some variations) of certain values like *motherhood* or *respect for elders*.

In the course of this assignment, students were able to rethink not only others' values but their own as well. For them, *individuality*, which is a primary value in Western culture, is positive when giving room for autonomy and creativity but negative when buttressing individuals' high sense of self centeredness. In the same line of thought, students rethought a value which is prime in Arab Muslim Algerian culture, namely, *collectiveness*. For many of them, *collectiveness* can be an excuse for idleness but optimistically a means of solidarity as well. Towards the end of the first assignment, I could state that students, relatively speaking, built up a toned down vision of themselves and of the others. It is very important to understand that *intercultural empathy* is also a matter of maneuvering and recognising such value system shift in intercultural contact, allowing understanding, without judgment, others' frame of reference.

2.2. Assignment N°2

In the second assignment, students are asked to collect material from internet of instances of unsuccessful and successful intercultural encounters then stage the encounters at class while readjusting instances of intercultural conflict drawing on WorldWork's framework of international key competencies.

One instance showed invitation protocols across Algerian culture and English culture. Students explained first that in Algerian culture, the inviting persons customarily show hospitality through preparing copious amounts of food but they also expect their invitees to not eat up all of the

food displayed (judged discourteous). Whilst in English culture, it is almost unmannerly to not try to eat up all of the food (a sign of food appreciation/ depreciation). This is one source of intercultural breakdown between English and Algerian cultures. At the same time as food abundance is a sign of irrational over-spending in English context, entire food consumption by invitees is a sign of barefaced miserliness in Algerian context.

Students are set to act as children to the Algerian and English couples. Their task is to explain to their respective parents the reasons behind each code of behavior. Readjusting the encounter consisted of explaining to the English couple that in the Algerian culture, food abundance during invitations is an indication of the inviting persons' generosity and welfare (a much cherished value in that culture) in the same manner as eating moderately is a sign of one's self-control/ moderation (a very positive value in Moslem culture)-true Muslims do not eat to fullness. Similarly students who staged as children to the Algerian couple made it clear for them that in English culture Guests who restrain from eating or eat the least amount can be seen as offensive (sign of wastefulness/ tasteless food). Wasting food is an extremely poor/negative practice in an English context.

This assignment allowed students to "de-centre" from their self-referenced clues and see the world, even if it is momentarily, through their negotiated third place eye (Corbett, 2003). At this point, students were situated in an "intercultural stance". (Ware and Kramsch, 2005)

2.3. Assignment N°3

This assignment consists in asking students to select and analyse chief cultural elements in a particular film and demonstrate the manner(s) such film stirs (cross) cultural and ideological controversies.

The following is the film list along with the type of dispute it starts out.

- The Davinci Code 2003 (Biblical disagreement)
- The Passion of the Christ 2004 (Judaeo-Christian controversy)
- Alladin 1992 (Arab contention)
- JFK 1991(Political strife)
- Fitna 2008 (Moslem storm)
- Philadelphia 1993 (Gender row)

The analysis of this list led students to apprehend that the clash of values- which is the direct product of the lack of empathetic feelings- was at the genesis of those controversies. Understanding the critical role of empathy in attenuating the severity of intercultural conflict was what students were, in the end, nudged to be aware of.

2.4. Assignment N°4

This last assignment involved gauging students' intercultural understanding competencies prior to the lecture series and post to the lecture series with mind teasing statements of a religious, cultural or social defiance. Some of these statements include:

If prostitution is legalised in the Arab countries, sexually transmitted diseases might be avoided or controlled to the least.

Ideologically enforced veiling may need to be banned when being not a matter of choice but of hegemonic/ institutionalised enforcement.

Virginity may not be an honour indicator since it is a congenital matter.

Despite the non-compliant character of the aforementioned statements, students were able to demonstrate a high sense of emotional resilience by not jumping into quick conclusions and weighing up the pros and cons of each statement.

3. Conclusion

Responding in non evaluative ways while shifting frames of reference was the most challenging job still for my students and me all along. Completing it demanded that we build up certain trans-cultural competencies like *openness*, *flexibility*, and most importantly *empathy* in a short time period at the same time as having recourse to both real life and virtual experiences of intercultural contact substantiated in four assignments. By the end of the eighth week of the lecture series, I could state that the conjecture I departed from believing that learners of intercultural studies can hardly construct a trans-cultural competence in an eight week time was refuted. Surprisingly enough, during the last assignment, students were by now able to develop some key competencies like avoiding coming up with quick conclusions with unfamiliar settings, developing active listening and expressing emotional strength. Through the debates we engaged in, students were able to base their ideas on articulately ordered and systemised knowledge rather

than the impressionistic knowledge they set off with and which engaged first “instinctive –contact” understanding. Prior to the lecture series, I could observe students’ meager sense of *empathy* which was even sharpened by an elevated sense of *ethnocentrism*. The later stages of the lecture series, however, revealed a major alteration in students’ trans-cultural sensitiveness given that they were able to convey a much higher sense of *empathy* which correlated with a lower sense of *ethnocentrism* and an advanced sense of *ethno-relativism*. Henceforward, we could explore possible key choices posed by experiencing a new cultural event or environment. In this sense, we accomplished something significant called trans-cultural sensitiveness and the experience was all the most transformative.

References

- Byram, M. A, Nichols, A. and D. Stevens. 2001. *Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Corbett, J. 2003. *An Intercultural Approach to English Language Teaching*, Cromwell Press
- Levinson, D. J, Malone. 1980. *Towards Explaining Human Culture: A critical review of the findings of worldwide cross-cultural research*. New Haven, CT:Human Relations Area Files Press
- Samover. L. A, .Porter, Nemi, R, E., C. Jain. 1981. *Understanding Intercultural Communication*, California.
- Ware.P,D, C. Kramsch. 2005. *Toward an Intercultural Stance: Teaching German and English through Telecollaboration*, New York. World-work’s Framework of International Competencies, 2010.