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Raising Intercultural Awareness in Teaching Young Learners in EFL Classes

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This paper discusses the importance of raising intercultural awareness in teaching young learners in EFL classes. More specifically, it provides a theoretical framework within which the notions of intercultural education, culture teaching, intercultural awareness, empathy, and intercultural sensitivity are positioned. Furthermore, the impact of intercultural awareness on both teachers' and learners' social identity, as well the multiple implications for the greater vicinity of foreign language pedagogy, are thoroughly discussed. The article concludes with some practical suggestions for EFL teachers who are seeking to promote culture teaching and intercultural awareness, and to integrate an intercultural approach in their young learners' classrooms.

Key words: Young learners, Culture teaching, Intercultural awareness, TEFL, Intercultural education, Intercultural communication, Intercultural competence

1. Introduction

Although considered a cliché, it is a fact that globalization makes it increasingly important to understand, accept and respect *diversity*. Recognizing that each person is different and unique in terms of race, ethnic or cultural background, gender, socio-economic background, religious beliefs, sexual orientation is a sine qua non. *Diversity* is a broad umbrella term, but because of the influx of migration, refugees, workforce mobility, and leisure traveling, being more culturally aware and developing appropriate and effective communication skills have become more important than ever before. Obviously, understanding, acceptance, and respect are not gained through an automatic process or through some kind of osmosis, but are cultivated and developed throughout one's lifetime, starting at home with the immediate family and then at school and other socialization institutions. This global interconnectedness offers new possibilities but also arguably challenges of unparalleled magnitude. Coping with these challenges requires skills, knowledge, and predispositions, as Banks (2004) points out. To this end, Oxfam (2015) talks about various skills that need to be developed, such as effective and appropriate communication, critical thinking, knowledge, and understanding of global issues. The responsibility of helping people acquire and develop these skills falls mainly within the purview of education. Schools can and should play a very

important role in this process, especially during the early formative years of education (i.e., first years of primary school) in a concerted effort to instill the values of global citizenship in the youngest members of society. Consequently, and in this line of thought, foreign language teaching, due to its nature, can take center stage in pursuing the above outlined aims and goals. This has become even more feasible since foreign languages have become part of primary school curricula in many countries. For example, in most countries of the European Union, English as a foreign/international language is taught from the first grade of primary school while in others even from preschool age (Alexiou, 2020).

In this respect, this article sets out to explore the role that English as a foreign language (EFL) classes and teachers can play in cultivating not only language awareness and communicative competence in young learners, but also in breeding a spirit of embracement of *cultural pluralism* within any given educational context. More specifically, this article provides theoretical scaffolding pertaining to the importance of intercultural education and considers how this theoretical framework can translate into concrete pedagogical practices. EFL teachers can approach intercultural education in an age- and level-appropriate way. It should be noted that the focus is specific to EFL teaching (TEFL) for purposes of a more restricted breadth, but also because TEFL classes serve as ideal incubators for helping students become more culturally aware through their exposure not only to Anglophone cultures, but to other cultures as well.

2. Why is Intercultural Education important?

Until a few decades ago, foreign language teaching and learning primarily focused on *linguistic or language competence*. Such a narrow focus was deemed inadequate, as mere knowledge of the grammatical rules and learning of the vocabulary of a foreign language are not enough to understand the conditions of their use in communication, let alone in an intercultural context. Later, the focus shifted towards *communicative competence*. The definitional nuances of this term slightly change its use in linguistics and language teaching. In the area of sociolinguistics, *communicative competence* refers to what a speaker needs to know (social knowledge), so as to communicate appropriately in a given speech community (Hymes, 1986). *Communicative competence* moves beyond the strict knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and the ability to create utterances into knowledge of rules necessary to communicate appropriately and to be able to interpret linguistic messages. *Communicative competence* is one of the components of *intercultural communicative competence*, which denotes the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultures or within culturally diverse contexts. The component of *intercultural competence* refers to the development of a reflective and also a critical understanding of the influence of culture on all aspects of one's life (e.g., behaviours, values, belief systems, etc.).

Before proceeding, it is important to delineate some fundamental terms often used in the literature either interchangeably or as complementing terms when referring to education. Therefore, we see terms like *international education*, *global education*, and *intercultural education*. However, each of these terms denotes a slightly different meaning, so they should not be used interchangeably. Instead, they should be used to complement each other. To better understand the differences among these terms, I refer to Knight (2004, p. 11) who unequivocally states:

International is used in the sense of relationships between and among nations, cultures, or countries. However, we know that internationalization is also about relating to the diversity of cultures that exists within countries, communities, and institutions, and so *intercultural* is used to address the aspects of internationalization at home. Finally, *global*, a very controversial and value-laden term these days, is included to provide the sense of worldwide scope. These three terms

complement each other and together give richness both in breadth and depth to the process of internationalization.

Learning about foreign cultures and people from around the world is a key aim of intercultural education, and thus this is the preferred term used in the context this paper is addressing. Becker (1982) espouses the view that students develop a competence in perceiving their involvement in a global society. Becker (1982, as cited in Lickteig and Danielson, 1995, p. 2) continues to claim that this “includes recognizing that (a) all individuals are members of a single species sharing a common biological status; (b) people have differing perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about a global society and its components; and (c) all human beings are a part of the earth's biosphere”. Cushner (1988) referred to this as *international socialization* and suggested that it requires a certain stage of development. Being able to understand and interact with people from another culture requires not only “the ability to project oneself into the other's mind” (empathy), but also “the ability to think, perceive, communicate, and behave in [...] new and different ways” (p. 160). This has to be seen in the light of age-appropriate instruction, which is, according to Cushner, a critical period that exists for this international socialization in children. Referring to Piaget's four stages of cognitive development (i.e., sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete operational, and formal operational), Cushner suggested that children around seven and eight years old begin to move away from a self-centered, self absorbed perspective to one where they see other people's viewpoints. Children of this age have an increased ability to communicate with others by comprehending another's perspective. Children from the abovementioned ages and beyond are in a position to develop a global and intercultural perspective (see also Papadopoulos & Shin in this volume). Hence, concerted efforts have to be made on the part of educators (and in this case EFL teachers) to create a stimulating context within which students will be able to develop their intercultural perspective. But how can we help students develop an intercultural perspective during the first few years of schooling?

3. Empathy and intercultural sensitivity: a pathway to intercultural awareness

A first step in the direction of answering the above question is helping students develop their *empathy* and *intercultural sensitivity (IS)*. Both of these notions are addressed below in the light of *intercultural awareness*.

Before exploring *intercultural sensitivity* and *empathy*, let us first look at the term *intercultural awareness* conceptually to understand its nature and function. Chen and Starosta (1998, p. 28) view intercultural awareness as the “cognitive aspect of intercultural communication competence that refers to the understanding of cultural conventions that affect how we think and behave” and distinguishes it from, for example, IS. *Intercultural awareness* is also distinct from knowledge and one of the dominant views in the literature is viewing *intercultural awareness* as a component in its own right. This knowledge-awareness distinction is highlighted by Fantini (2005, p. 2) in that the latter “is always about the ‘self’ vis-à-vis all else in the world (other things, other people, other thoughts, etc.) and ultimately helps to clarify what is deepest and most relevant to one’s identity” However, Baker (2015) uses awareness as a more “all-inclusive term” which encompasses knowledge, behavior, and skills. Despite this polysemy, one could claim with confidence that intercultural awareness is essential in developing *intercultural communicative competence* (Korzilius, Hooft, & Planken (2007), i.e., the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various cultural contexts.

Now let us move on to *intercultural sensitivity*. In defining IS, Bhawuk and Brislin (1992, p. 416) argue “to be effective in other cultures, people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences and also be willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect

for people of other cultures. A reasonable term that summarizes these qualities of people is intercultural sensitivity". Research has shown (see Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Chen & Starosta, 1998; Zhao, 2002) that IS is connected to *intercultural competence*. In fact, this research reveals that IS is a precondition for the development of *intercultural competence*. *Intercultural sensitivity* is both a predictive and determinant factor for intercultural effectiveness to transpire. Put differently, the more intercultural sensitivity a person demonstrates, the more intercultural competent he/she can potentially be (Bennet, 1993; Chen, 1997; Chen & Starosta, 1998). Bennett also points out that there is an underlying constructivist assumption with regard to IS in that as one experiences more cultural difference in a more complex and sophisticated manner, his/her potential for intercultural competence increases. IS is not static but a dynamic process or a process of development. Taking these facts into account (i.e., the developmental process of IS and its positive correlation with cultural experience), EFL teachers should strive for the creation of an environment rich in *cultural diversity*. Helping students gain meaningful and diverse cultural experiences will likely help them develop their *intercultural sensitivity*.

Moving on to *empathy*, let us look at Bennett's (2001, p. 7) definition. Bennett defines *empathy* as "a mode of relating in which one person comes to know the mental content of another, both affectively and cognitively, at a particular moment in time and as a product of the relationship that exists between them." Bennett's definitional conceptualization of *empathy* includes both affective/emotional and cognitive/intellectual components. Similarly, Gerdes et al. (2010, p. 2338) posit "empathy is an automatic, affective reaction and a cluster of cognitive abilities". Calloway-Thomas (2010, p. 8) adds a behavioral aspect in his definition in that "empathy is the ability to imaginatively enter into and participate in the world of the cultural other cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally". More simply, empathy is "the ability to treat someone as they would wish to be treated" (Olson & Kroeger, 2001, p. 118). *Empathy* is also an essential ingredient in being intercultural competent (Bennett, 2001). If we take the supposition that empathy is a competence, then, it can be developed. Therefore, teachers can create the conditions in which they can help their students nurture *empathy*. This will help students move away from their own often-strict boundaries towards understanding, appreciating, and embracing those of others.

4. Intercultural awareness: Benefits for both teachers and learners

The existing literature (e.g., Banks, 2004; Oxfam, 2015) points out that intercultural education has positive effects in that it helps students develop *social identity*, it promotes human rights and citizenship, it lowers racial prejudice and it helps students become more open to diversity. I believe that it is important to establish the need for intercultural education orientation at the onset regardless of educational context, even in cases which have been historically culturally homogenous.

If we take Greece (the author's native country) as an example (although historically schools in Greece had a monolingual and monocultural student body), most schools today enjoy cultural diversity because of the recent surge of migration and refugee waves (Kiose, Alexiou, & Iliopoulou, 2019). However, there are still cases in remote areas of Greece, where schools still tend to be made up of student populations, which share the same language and cultural background (Greek). Taking the latter into account and having taught on a Master's of Education (in Teaching English as a Foreign/International Language) program and more specifically a module on intercultural approaches to the teaching of English, it is not rare that an in-service teacher and student of this program will express his/her view that he/she works in one of these schools. They will argue that they do not have a culturally and linguistically diverse student population and wonder why and how intercultural approaches in teaching are of any use to them. Of course, this is an opportunity to unequivocally reply that such a module is even more important for them in that in such an educational context, their goal is even more heightened. The EFL class can become one of the few

resources students have to develop their intercultural awareness. These students will not be living in isolation and at some point in their lives will find themselves in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts and thus will need a mindset to be able to “survive” and also develop mechanisms that will help them cope. In cases where teachers work with diverse student populations, their need to foster an interculturally enriched environment is more obvious. Both contexts mentioned above are further explored.

We talk about developing students’ intercultural awareness, but often neglect the presupposition that it is important to help students develop awareness of themselves first. Nonetheless, taking this one step further, I would argue that it is even more important for teachers to address and challenge their own identity. Teachers, like all professionals, have not developed in a vacuum. They are human beings, each with their own history and experiences, which have shaped who they are today. Therefore, it is natural and inevitable that they carry their own sets of values, beliefs, ideologies, stereotypes, and prejudices, which may be expressed consciously or unconsciously. Students -no matter how young they are- can internalize remarks a teacher may make (regarding, e.g., derogatory comments about a custom that they come across during a lesson). One must remember that young students are individuals and carry their own set of beliefs and values, which have been mostly formed by family influence. Hence, the idea is not to put them in “preconceived molds”, but to support them in becoming aware, understanding, accepting, and in celebrating their own individuality. Teachers and students need to accept the premise that differences are to be valued and respected even if they do not agree with them.

Moreover, children at the early years of primary education are not able to refrain from asking questions on any issue, and often these questions can be on sensitive topics such as race or gender. These are opportunities that should be seized and explored to help students break down, for example, stereotypes or prejudices. EFL course books are good sources and photos and texts of other places, cultures, photos of people of other racial backgrounds can become tinder for discussion. Teachers can discuss similarities and differences among people, as long as it is done with respect and in an age-appropriate way.

At this age, a cognitive-only approach will not suffice in bringing about change (Cushner, 1988). Teachers need to also engage students behaviourally/actively and affectively/emotionally. Engaging students on all these levels will likely have a bigger impact. When EFL teachers work in multicultural schools, they are dealing with students who are experiencing their national culture, the culture of the host country, the regional culture, the school culture, and the classroom culture. In such culturally rich, but often culturally conflicting milieus, young students try to navigate through the “cultural waters” to make sense of this cultural interplay, find connections and develop a sense of self. Even in culturally homogeneous classes, students still face challenges despite having a shared national culture in their immediate environment (e.g., family, school, and neighborhood) they are still receiving cultural input from the media. In the first case, the teacher can draw opportunities from the existing multiculturalism, whereas in the second case the teacher can create the conditions through which he/she will expose his/her students to cultural contexts that will serve as a springboard for cultural discovery and a context for reflection.

Whatever the context, the common denominator is to guide and support children in recognizing, respecting, and valuing cultural differences and similarities. In any case, the overall aim for culture teaching is obviously not assimilation but to help students develop insights into a culture(s). This will likely help them understand their own culture better and at the same time develop the abovementioned traits.

Teachers must not forget that the main aim should not be the acquisition of knowledge about a specific culture per se. The main criticism behind this stance is that such learning is superficial and does not involve reflection of new cultural knowledge (Damen, 1987). In the case of young learners, nonetheless, it is cognitively difficult to critically reflect at deeper levels on cultural issues and thus maintaining a more superficial approach will suffice in creating the foundation for cultural exposure. Such an approach will in turn support the development of shared basic values of understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of diversity.

Another point that needs to be addressed, and as Álvarez (2014, p. 234) states (although in reference to a slightly different concept), is a move from “culture-centered approach to the intercultural approach”. This transition will help move away from simply looking at culture(s) in isolation or the cultural aspect of language use in EFL, as it is embedded or framed within a national conception of culture. As English has transitioned from a foreign language into becoming an international language, a *cultural approach* is rather restrictive. This has been very much the case of the BANA (British/Australian/North American) cultural models in connection to culture teaching (Pennycook, 1999; Widdowson, 1994). Again, this model provides a restrictive lens through which to view culture. An *intercultural approach* takes a more ‘non-essentialist’ view of culture and better depicts the dynamic and dialogic relationship between culture and language.

5. Suggestions for incorporating an Intercultural Approach in early primary school EFL Classes

Raising young learners’ intercultural awareness and helping them become more interculturally sensitive should be done in a systematic way and not left as a by-product or dealt with incidentally. At this age, young learners are naturally curious and inquisitive. EFL teachers should take advantage of this and further promote this curiosity and sense of discovery as it will likely lead to young learners embracing and celebrating cultural, and other, forms of diversity. This, combined with the fact that children have not yet developed many inhibitions and stereotypical images of the “other”, further lends itself to unique opportunities to cultivate understanding and appreciation. There are various age-appropriate strategies and methods EFL teachers can employ and use to help develop a toolkit for culture teaching and promoting overall intercultural education. In this section, suggestions are presented as to how a teacher can promote intercultural awareness. It should be noted that much of what follows is based not only on research but also on anecdotal evidence (personal teaching experience and several reports I have received from my M.Ed. in-service teachers employing such approaches in their own classes). As such, what I am suggesting is the result of both literature review and personal reflection.

5.1. Taking Stock of One’s Own Classroom

Ideally, culturally diverse societies should adopt culturally responsive curricula. As this may not always be the case, schools should acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of their student population. Teachers need to foster intercultural awareness in their classroom. In cases where one’s student makeup is culturally and linguistically diverse, a teacher’s first step is to express interest in his/her students’ ethnic/cultural background as a starting point in creating a culturally responsive classroom. In preparation of such a stance, teachers need to adequately prepare by informing themselves about basic cultural elements of their students’ background culture, appropriately pronouncing names and even doing some background research as to the meaning/etymology of the names, so as to use this as an opportunity to help students become aware of basic elements of his/her identity, (i.e., their name). These first approaches will likely help students feel more integrated and validated.

Cultural differences should be celebrated, but I would argue in a subtle way. Helping students feel proud of their cultural heritage is important, but at the same time, efforts should be made to integrate these students without constantly underscoring their cultural difference, as this may lead to stigmatization and marginalization, especially when dealing with students at younger ages. However, simple ideas, such as encouraging students to bring in reading material whose theme is based in their culture or bring in other realia and present them to their class can empower them, as it provides them with an opportunity to interact with their classmates and share thoughts and ideas that are important to their cultural perspective. At the same time, their classmates are provided with an opportunity to reflect upon their own culture and learn more about another culture and thus cultivate their intercultural awareness.

5.2. Course books – prescribed instructional materials

In several schools, the teaching material used is prescribed by local or national educational authorities (the latter being the case in Greece, for example). Newer material (i.e., course books) usually has a focus on culture (implicit or explicit). This focus on culture is often integrated in either the reading texts or listening activities, usually followed by visuals, for example, photos of festivals and celebrations, etc. However, in other cases, culture is separated from language and there are still course books, which deal with culture in isolation and in entirely different sections of the book, as something self-contained. Of course, the amount and complexity of cultural references will vary according to the age and level of students. Hence, in the first few years of primary schools these are usually basic and perhaps more superficial and key elements of cultural knowledge are overtly omitted (e.g., underlying value systems). These materials take a more static view of culture (Liddicoat, 2002). The static view of culture refers to the more obvious or visible elements of culture (e.g., facts, artifacts). At these levels and ages of EFL teaching, the focus is more on learning about cultural facts, festivals, celebrations, people, dress, habits, daily life, music, and fairytales/stories connected to the target language, but also of other cultures around the world. However, all this should be taught in relation to the target language and not as a separate element, as the cultural component should not be seen as something independent of language but as complementary and hence weaved into it.

Another point that should be raised is that teachers can supplement their existing material, which is often outdated, with fresh ideas and material, which fortunately now is easily accessed through media and the Internet.

5.3. Time capsules

Time capsules are used as a means to represent objects and ideas that have shaped one's national culture. The idea is for students to bring drawings, objects, photos, music etc that they feel represent their own culture and which they can send into "space" to be opened by "aliens" so the latter can learn more about the students' culture. Alternatively, the scenario can involve a cooperating school from another country where the capsule will be sent to (physically or virtually). Time capsules help students become more aware of objects and other main characteristics of their contemporary culture. If it is a monocultural class, students can focus on their home culture, but if it is a multicultural class, students can draw examples from their individual cultures.

5.4. Films, TV-series, & cartoons

Aspect of cultural diversity and multiculturalism are being addressed and subsequently promoted in various programmes on television. Carefully selected films, TV-series and cartoons can be used in the EFL classroom to facilitate intercultural learning. As Karras (2020) claims, films stimulate multi-

sensor and cognitive channels and thus are a great source of intercultural information that can appeal to both the viewer's senses and cognition, if of course approached in a systematic way. Watching films, cartoons, etc. provides ample opportunities for the teacher and the students to engage in meaningful discussions, reflection, and in certain cases, debriefing. Roell (2010, pp. 3-5) delineates the various types of films depending on how they can be used with the aim of promoting intercultural teaching and learning. More specifically, these categories refer to:

- Films that foster empathy with foreigners
- Films that illustrate intercultural conflict
- Films that deal with racism
- Films that contain stereotypes
- Films about cultural traditions and intergenerational conflict
- Films that deal with different patterns of behavior

A well-known example is the community portrayed in the cartoon series "Dora the Explorer", which is an idealistic "happy multiculturalism" (Chappell, 2010, as cited in Alexiou & Kokla, 2018). In their study, Alexiou & Kokla (2018) also concluded that the popular Peppa Pig cartoon series promotes multilingualism.

5.5. Children's literature

Children's literature can introduce aspects of the local and foreign cultures, as they often draw links between cultures. There is a wide variety of English language literature (abridged or simplified/adapted to suit the students of these levels and age), which depict children (children can identify better with other children) of different races, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, religions, physical ability, and cultures. Children's books help students understand their own identity and also expose them to different cultural aspects –as noted above- and thus help them learn about those who are different in terms of race, family composition, religious beliefs, and ability. Literature can advocate cross-cultural understanding (Harper & Brand, 2010) and increase children's capacity to understand the world (Lowery & Sabis-Burns, 2007). Having established the importance of using literature books in the classroom, it is important to encourage teachers to prompt students to become critically aware of different cultural backgrounds by engaging them in observation, reflection, and through questions, create the context for fruitful discussion.

5.6. Creating an international school network

Young learners like to learn about other schools around the world. Students can see what other classrooms look like, physical characteristics of other students as well as the things these students are taught. Teachers can easily establish such virtual connections through existing platforms. Once the network is established, a specified time can be arranged in order to virtually connect these classrooms so that there is image and sound in real time. Students can engage in common activities, sing songs (e.g., same song that has been translated in another language), be presented with students' artwork, learn about customs and traditions, etc. Especially with regard to celebrations, students can be encouraged to learn more about these celebrations and even prepare a small project if feasible. Students can introduce linguistic elements of their mother tongue to other students such as providing the words for different objects in the classroom. Students usually find it fascinating that the words used for "mother" and "father" are similar across many languages, which further highlights the universality of language and culture. Overall, this can help students understand the existence of many languages and that each language is unique and valued. At the same time, the use of English as the "common language" or lingua franca solidifies in the students' conscience the role of English and its importance globally.

5.7. International food festival

Food is an important, but also a very tangible aspect of culture. It is something young learners can relate to. EFL teachers can prepare a unit on food and eating habits of Anglophone and other countries. Children's parents (especially those of a different cultural background) can also be encouraged to prepare and bring traditional dishes to class. It should be noted here that parent involvement is also important since their influence on their children is formative. Children can gain insight into the culture through sampling food they are not familiar with. They can then compare food and discuss what they like and do not like about it, unfamiliar ingredients used, etc.

5.8. Physical appearance of the classroom

The physical appearance of the classroom should foster and reflect diversity. Posters, pictures, maps, signs, and realia, or even playing background music from different cultures can play an important role in helping children develop mental and auditory images. In conjunction to this, assigning children foreign names from time to time is also something they enjoy, as it gives them another identity, which in turn they can use to role-play. Through role-play, children can experience intercultural awareness in an amusing and non-threatening way.

5.9. Round-the-world trip

EFL teachers can help their students become "virtual world travelers". At regular intervals, teachers can focus on a particular country. Young learners can learn about simple concepts such as the flag (colors), animals, food, traditions, dances, music, folklore stories or fairy tales. The use of prompts, photos and videos can serve as visual stimulation and engage and motivate students. Students can create their own "passports" and the teacher can "stamp" each country children "enter/visit".

All the above suggestions will have an impact on young learners when they are done in a meaningful way. This also presupposes that teachers serve as role models. Children become culturally sensitive when they see adults displaying cultural sensitivity and respectfulness. EFL teachers should introspect and notice their own biases and set of values. EFL teachers need to take a stand against stereotypes, racism, bias, and prejudices that are often depicted in books, media, etc. or even expressed by their own learners. It is important that these issues be acknowledged and addressed when an opportunity arises instead of downgrading the situation. Teachers need to take a perspective that focuses on difference as something positive and that these differences are what make our world a better and more interesting place to live in.

5.10. Preparing EFL teachers to meet the challenge

Teachers are or should be viewed as dynamic agents of change. Foreign language teachers especially have the added advantage of having studied in depth at least one foreign language and culture. This is definitely a comparative advantage, but will not suffice if teachers have not had the necessary education and training to support their young learners on their journey to developing their intercultural awareness. Teacher education programs, both pre-service and in-service, need to have a significant component of their curriculum dedicated to the theory and practice of intercultural education through formal lectures, seminars, workshops, practicums/internships. Education and training will first help teachers identify and come to terms with their own deeply rooted biases and prejudices. Later, their education and training will help them become more competent in the way they handle intercultural communication. Moreover, through the process of education and training, teachers will also learn various methods and techniques to implement in their teaching and adopt an intercultural education orientation in their classes. As a result, teachers will be in a position to help

create a classroom culture that fosters knowledge of acceptance and openness towards cultural and linguistic diversity. Equipped with knowledge and some experience, teachers will be empowered to meet the challenges outlined above, but they will also be able to bring change to the often inadequate existing curricula, syllabi, and guidelines with regard to EFL, intercultural awareness, and intercultural communication competence building, as these are often prescribed by the bodies responsible for curriculum design.

6. Concluding remarks

I vehemently support the stance that one of the main aims of EFL teaching to young learners is to maintain foreign language teaching practices that acknowledge and that are respectful of differences. Being a culturally responsive EFL teacher means aiming for inclusivity. This ensures that all students feel included and that those who are from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds have a voice. Exposing students to cultural diversity, engaging them in experiential learning, and evoking their affective, behavioral, and cognitive sides can help them move beyond the strict confines of superficial knowledge of a culture into a deeper understanding of its people, artifacts, beliefs, and value systems (albeit at an elementary level).

As a final note, it should be underscored that all stakeholders of education need to recognize the importance of initiatives to infuse an intercultural dimension that permeates school curricula. This should be a curriculum that provides students with the opportunity to understand and embrace diversity. EFL teachers too have a shared responsibility to prepare their learners to be responsible, open-minded, and non-judgmental citizens of the world. And while teaching syllabi and methods change constantly, developing intercultural awareness should always remain an essential component of one's teaching agenda.

In essence, developing a community of young learners based on the premise of promoting intercultural awareness and valuing themselves and others regardless of ethnic or cultural background in a non-threatening, supportive, and engaging environment should become a priority in EFL teaching –and all teaching for that matter. After all, we must instill in our students the belief that despite differences among people, there are also many common threads that connect us all.

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