

***Developing an Intercultural Awareness in an ESP Context:  
A challenge for the Novice ESP Practitioners***

**Biodata**

Nawal MEBITIL is Assistant Professor at MASCARA University. She Holds a Magister in ESP from TLEMCEM University and she is currently a doctorate student. Her research interests include language-learning motivation, teachers' development, teaching strategies, needs analysis, and factors that affect ESP teaching/ learning process.

- E-mail: [mebitilnawal@hotmail.fr](mailto:mebitilnawal@hotmail.fr)
- Phone number: 00 213 772 288 425

***Abstract:***

The adoption of the LMD system within an Algerian context, fundamentally, at all universities, across different departments including mostly all specialities, aspired to achieve, more or less, better changes in the Algerian system of higher education and go, even, beyond to produce, hopefully, prospective Algerian scientists, researchers, teachers and workers who are supposed to be well prepared for the trend they are expected to take part in to meet both the needs and the requirements of the working life and the different markets. To manage this end, ESP courses are provided nationwide. The main purpose of the current paper is, therefore, to expand the actual scope of developing an intercultural awareness among learners who are already engaged in ESP context by developing what is theoretically known as “intercultural competence” as a key to better grasp the learners' actual needs and wants, besides, their future expectations.

In this respect, one should think of **how to bridge the existing gap between ESP learners' own culture and the others' culture (i.e., target one). And how would it be possible to develop their intercultural awareness taking into account that the ESP practitioners are still novice teachers?**

**Key-words:** ESP, ESP context, practitioner, learners, intercultural competence, intercultural awareness, teaching/learning process.

## 1.1. Introduction

A remarkable tendency within foreign language teaching and more precisely that of the ESP instruction has emerged, and flourished nowadays as the cultural dimension takes the lion-share in the teaching/learning process. To this end, and for the sake of mastering the target language, culture as a main component of this systematic and fundamental process should be taken into serious consideration. Hence, learning thoroughly the language, besides, the ability to communicate effectively in the target language will not be achieved unless the cultural aspect is put forward.

In this vein, Hall (2008:45) sustains:

*No two concepts are more intimately linked than language and culture. In our interactions with others, we use language not only to refer to or represent our sociocultural worlds. It is also the central means by which we bring our cultural worlds into existence, maintain them, and shape them for our own purposes.*

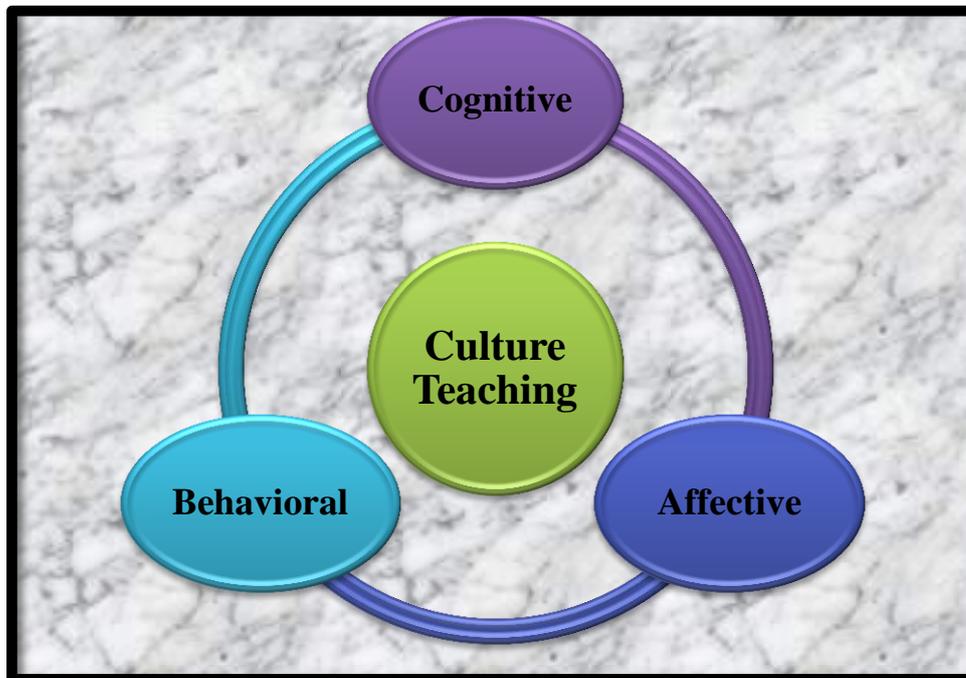
Quoted in (May *et al* 2008: 45)

Starting from this point and bearing in mind the fact that predicting the kind of context which may suit ESP learners' needs, wants, and their expectations, too, depending on their own situations, managing the cultural component, at this level, can be considered as a key which may facilitate the teaching/learning procedure and achieve, indeed, what is known as a better professionalization of the whole process. In this sense, Williams (1976: 87) writes: *“Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.”*

In the same line of thought, Louis Kelly (1966: 378) emphasizes that *“the cultural orientation of language teaching has always been one of its unstated aims”*. The main aim of culture teaching, therefore,

*Is to help L2 learners develop the ability to use the target language in culturally appropriate ways for the specific purpose of empathizing and interacting with native speakers of the target language.*

Kumaravadivelu (2008: 114)



**Figure 1.1: Components of Culture Teaching**

From the above mentioned figure, one may relate the idea of teaching culture to including the three following components on which Stern (1992) has strongly emphasized, notably; *a cognitive* component; *an affective* component; and *a behavioral* component. As for the first element, i.e., the cognitive component concerns with the cognitive aspect. According to Stern (1992) is derived from three different varieties of knowledge such as the geographical and those of the target culture as far as the world civilization. The third aspect, on the other hand, refers to the idea of obtaining a clear picture about the way of life along with the understanding of the values and attitudes of the target discourse community

The second constituent, i.e., affective component involves both factors the learners' curiosity and their empathy for the target culture. (Stern: 1992).

Moving a step further, Stern (1992) relates the third ingredient, i.e., behavioral component with the learners' ability to understand, what is supposed to be, culturally appropriate behavior, and to conduct themselves in culturally suitable ways.

## **1.2. Developing an Intercultural Awareness in an ESP Context: A challenge for the Novice ESP Practitioners**

The present paper, therefore, aims at helping ESP learners' acquire an intercultural competence through developing an intercultural awareness. In this vein, it is of paramount importance to reveal that developing an intercultural awareness as one of the intricate concepts which should be dealt with in, a way or another, to achieve a set of definite purposes the LMD as a system which seeks changes within the higher educational trend is, notably, calling for.

Consequently, providing answers to the following questions which constitute the core of this paper will be considered as an essential step towards framing possible techniques which may help ESP practitioners find feasible ways to bridge the existing gap between ESP learners' own culture and the others' culture (i.e., target one). *Then, how would it be possible to develop their intercultural awareness taking into account that the ESP practitioners are still novice teachers?*

Accordingly, developing the intercultural awareness within an ESP context among ESP learners, at this level, could be seen as an inevitable solution. In this sense, and for the sake of bridging the existing gap between the learners' own culture and the others' cultures while exploring, detecting and discussing differences occurring between them endeavouring at developing an awareness of that particular comparison may help, later on, both ESP teachers and their learners, too benefit from such assessment while developing an adequate cultural consciousness. In this respect, Kumaravadivelu (2003: 271-272) argues that:

***Developing critical cultural consciousness enables one to learn and grow, to change and evolve, so as to meet the challenges of today's emerging global reality.***

It is from this standpoint that the newly recruited ESP teachers who are considered as novice practitioners and who lack, definitely, expertise may deem developing this intercultural awareness among their learners while acquiring an intercultural competence, fundamentally, in an ESP context as a challenge for them besides, their apprentices, too who are supposed to learn the target language for a definite purpose; being academic, occupational, or professional. In this regard, *Intercultural competence must therefore be seen as a generic competence. (Matsumoto et al. 2003: 545).*

To this end, and from Byram *et al*'s angle (2002:10):

***The 'best' teacher is neither the native nor the non-native speaker, but the person who can help learners see relationships between their own and other cultures, can help them acquire interest in and curiosity about 'otherness', and an awareness of themselves and their own cultures seen from other people's perspectives.***

To put it differently, the real role of the language teacher being a General English teacher or an ESP practitioner, in fact, is to establish a link between the learners' own culture and the target one where a shared knowledge, of this latter is, a foreseeable outcome.

Moving a step forward, chiefly, in an ESP context, the language teacher is required to equipped his learners with more than the ability to acquire an intercultural competence but going, yet, beyond this to achieve what is theoretically known as *Intercultural Communicative Competence*, hence 'ICC' for short. 'ICC' as a process involves, above all, two broad dimensions, notably, raising the students' *critical thinking* in addition to developing their *analytical*

*skills*. To meet this end, a set of activities are offered based on the following tasks, namely, noticing; comparing; reflecting; and finally interpreting.

Going deeper into the main duties and roles of the ESP practitioner, it could be noticed that he/she is required to design materials, adopt them if there is no suitable or even, available one, devise tasks depending on the learners' own needs and expectations attempting at achieving two broad aspects, namely, linguistic knowledge along with the ability to communicate effectively in the target language while acquiring and developing an intercultural competence. This later can be done mostly, through analyzing, comparing, interpreting and reflecting upon the use of different discourses and different texts taking into consideration the learners' own culture as a main source for careful reflection which should be taken, in fact, into a serious consideration.

Because ESP has its own typical characteristics which most of the time has relation with learners who are often adults who seek to learn the target language, i.e., English, for a clearly determined purpose (MacKay et al: 1978). This fact may affect both teachers' and learners' position simply because ***“the teacher is not ‘the primary knower’ of the carrier content of the material.”***(Dudley Evans et al, 1998:13) Hence, learners have more knowledge of the area they are learning. As a result, students can be considered as a source of information not only in terms of content matters but also in terms of target as well as learning needs. (Almagro et al 2002).

Starting from this point, and considering the fact that the ESP practitioner is not the solely cultural mediator and the learners may, fundamentally, act as the cultural informants, too while they impart their culture with them, in a way or another, reflecting upon it, and sharing their individual perspectives with both parameters; notably their teachers and their classmates, as well. In this esteem, Kumaravadivelu (2003: 273) strongly emphasises on the idea that

***By treating learners as cultural informants, we can encourage them to engage in a process of participation that puts a premium on their own power/knowledge.***

Accepting that fact may constitute a step further in the promotion of the ESP teaching /learning process; it is a mature of innovation and change if the language teachers learn how to work in teams with their learners. This can be undertaken by sharing responsibilities from both parts; that of the ESP teacher and that of the learners too. This later may help learners take full responsibility for their learning by being autonomous learners while sharing experiences, expectations and reflections.

Raising and indeed, developing a critical intercultural awareness in an ESP context goes beyond those principles cited in different textbooks to reach a fully involvement of the learners in this process as they bring their home culture in the classroom experience associated with the target cultures they are expected to take part in, to have an accurate idea about, and hence, to reflect appropriately upon it. It is of worthy significance to mention, at this point, that using theme-based besides, culture-based instructions while selecting those topics learners are supposed to be familiar with whilst designing suitable materials may enhance both their motivations and later on, their performance in a specific context.

In this sense, expanding intercultural awareness becomes a means for *self-reflection and self-renewal* (Kumaravadivelu: 2003). To put it differently, raising this consciousness among learners will help them, for sure, to reveal critically about their own culture, refreshing their standpoints, and reviewing it in relation to the target one. In the same line of thought and apart from learners, teachers are also invited to reflect consciously upon their cultures as profoundly as they are anticipated their students to do. This later can be considered as once again a challenge for the novice ESP practitioners as they are required to establish an atmosphere where promoting the cultural awareness among their

learners constitute the first element in the professionalization of the ESP teaching/learning process while trying to authenticate a set of precise objectives.

At this level, ESP practitioners are supposed to select socio-cultural themes that most students are concerned with to help them better communicate in the target language. In addition to this, they are believed to set artificial settings where students engage in carrying out conversations using the target language as if they are in real ones.

### **1.3. Conclusion**

To conclude, it can be said that within the world of globalization, economics, sciences and technology, communication holds the lion-share and to develop the learners' intercultural awareness in an ESP context seems to be an obligation for those who wish to achieve a better professionalization of our prospective scientists, researchers and workers.

Nevertheless, these pedagogical suggestions remain only theoretical unless serious actions put into practice by those who are considered as the decision makers within their classrooms, i.e., ESP practitioners. This could be done mainly for the sake of maintaining balance between the requirements of different situations; being academic or professional and our learners' actual needs, wants, lacks and, of course, their future prospects.

Finally, it is worth remembering that this paper is, fundamentally, a moderate contribution towards developing, more or less, an intercultural awareness in an ESP context as it is believed to be a challenge for any novice ESP practitioner who lacks, definitely, expertise and who seeks to promote his/her own situation and knowledge of how to deal with a particular learners in a meticulous situation.

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