

MEDIATING CROSS-CULTURAL BARRIERS IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A PILOT STUDY ON TEACHERS

Rowshon Ara¹ and Ismat Zarin²

¹Senior Lecturer, Eastern University, Bangladesh

²Assistant Professor, Eastern University, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT: *Recent researches on the impact of cultural barriers in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching-learning suggest that cultural barriers emerge due to the lack of successful mediation between the native language culture and the target language culture. Eventually, the teaching-learning of EFL in Bangladesh, a south-east Asian country, encounters cross- cultural barriers quite extensively as the home language culture is quite distinct from the target language culture. Therefore, this study concentrates on EFL teachers' role in promoting intercultural communicative competence among EFL learners through successful mediation of native language culture with foreign language culture. 12 EFL teachers and 200 tertiary level students from Bangladeshi private universities were chosen as the subjects of this study to identify their perspectives on this issue. The findings of the study suggest the need for constructive changes in the choice and use of teaching-learning materials and teaching methods in EFL classrooms.*

KEYWORDS: EFL, Native Culture, Teacher Role, Materials, Mediation of Cultures

INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of culture in the teaching and learning of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) has become an inevitable phenomenon in the recent years. According to Sun (2013), "language is one of the most important carriers of culture and reflects the latter. Without language, culture would not be possible. The basic goal of learning a foreign language is to acquire the communicative competence, while the development and improvement of such competence is to some extent dependent of efficient and scientific teaching approach" (p.371). It thus becomes apparent that it is crucial to connect the teaching of a language and, more specifically, the teaching of a foreign language with the culture of the respective language. According to Stuart and Nocon (1996), learning about the lived culture of actual target language speakers as well as about one's own culture requires tools that assist language learners in negotiating meaning and understanding the communicative and cultural texts in which linguistic codes are used" (p. 432). That is to say, teachers need to focus on the aims while developing an intercultural language learning environment in EFL Class. Learners' intercultural as well as linguistic competence need be addressed to make them capable of communicating with people of the target language. People of other culture must be evaluated according to their distinctive perspectives, manners, attitudes and values. Above all, learners must accept such interaction as beneficial and enriching for them. In EFL classrooms learners get introduced to the target language culture with the help of their instructor and the materials he/she uses. So, while learning a language, it is necessary to be familiar with the materials used to teach language. Learner inhibition including other difficulties can easily be addressed if culture friendly materials are used. A very effective way to teach/learn the language would be to use materials that could make things familiar to the learners. Culturally exclusive materials used in EFL

classrooms create a different level of cultural barrier for the EFL learners as these cause obscurity and imperceptibility to them. Nevertheless, this difficulty in part of the learners is very often ignored or neglected. Therefore, textbooks used in EFL classes often contain materials totally different in terms of learners' familiarity. This unfamiliarity causes a kind of bar which is not easy to bridge. This directly works with the student's knowledge of the world and a major part of it is defined by his culture. This paper is a pilot study on EFL teachers and students at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. Findings provide new insightful knowledge for the stakeholders, i.e. teachers, learners, policy makers etc. of not only Bangladesh but also other countries in the world that have the same EFL learning environment.

Research Question:

What roles do EFL teachers play in promoting intercultural communicative competence?

Hypothesis:

The role of a teacher in EFL settings is crucial as an EFL teacher plays multifold roles e.g. the role of an instructor, a facilitator and a guide altogether. In doing so, an EFL teacher employs effective methodology to teach his/ her students. Whatever methodology the teacher is trained in, at the end of the day it depends on the teacher's discretion as each and every classroom experience is unique. However, often the role of a teacher is culturally defined and language teaching needs cultural aspects to be taken into account as any language is culture bound. Therefore, teachers of a language are also teachers of culture (Byram 1989). This study hypothesizes that mediating the cultural aspects of the target language with that of the native language is the best logical way to promote intercultural communicative competence among the learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Available existing literature relating to the issue at hand is consulted to establish a literary basis of the study. The study deals with the problems faced by the EFL teachers of Bangladesh in classrooms with the materials found in the texts fixed for the purpose of teaching and learning. A survey on students reveal the level of unfamiliarity students face in EFL classrooms due to materials used in class that are culturally oriented within the target language. This leaves us with a requirement to address the problem and try to come up with a solution from the teacher's part. Thus this part of the study deals with defining the teacher's role, effectiveness of materials used in classrooms and how the mediation of cultural aspects between the target language and the native language helps.

Teachers:

Fu (1991) reports that teachers in Asia have more authority in classroom than teachers in western countries. This clearly affects student access to classroom participation. In such situations teacher awareness is required. This is a common scenario in EFL classes as well. Ishihara & Cohen (2010) assert, "Through teacher education, classroom practice, and experiences inside and outside of the classroom, teachers knowledge is , for example , acquired, shaped, refined , modified, reinforced, transformed, used and revised"(23). A trained or well educated teacher possesses knowledge of his/her class and students, individually and collectively. Richards & Lockhart (1994), reflect, "While many teachers may have been taught

to use a specific method or asked to teach within a framework or philosophy established by their institution, the way they teach is often a personal interpretation of what they think works best in a given situation” (p. 104). Teachers, in this way, possess great power in taking decisions to bring changes in teaching a language. But possession of great power requires greater wisdom which is, clearly, under severe criticism in the context of Bangladesh.

Teaching system and materials:

Methodology and materials are the major factors of language teaching in the teaching system. Effective methodology and materials are required for teaching English as a foreign language. In this regard learners’ practical need for English in the society must be kept in mind. Harmer (2007) distinguishes between the needs of an EFL learner and his knowledge of that language. While learning English, learning only the grammatical rules and vocabulary is not sufficient. The EFL learner needs to learn how to use the target language pragmatically, i.e. in the practical world of that language. Therefore, the curriculum of EFL must be developed in accordance with the students’ need.

Mediation of two cultures through comparison:

Geertz (1983), the American ethnographer, is one of the first to find out that “the concern with linguistic categories” was going to be “a methodological theme in ethnography and beyond” (p.157). A more sociological approach to cultural analysis insists on including the actual “manipulation of the material world” besides the “discussion of values”. Whenever someone wishes to learn a new language he/she comes out of his/her own familiar culture and goes through a dual process of separating the two languages further apart while bringing the two cultures closer. Therefore, a lot more is involved in language teaching than a mere exchange of linguistic aspects. For learning a foreign language and using it effectively in real life, a mediation of the native and foreign culture is an undeniable necessity. An ability to mediate two cultures will help learners to bring themselves closer to the target language culture by specifying the difference between their native language and the foreign language that they wish to learn. In this way, successful mediation of the native language culture and the target language culture ensures meaningful intercultural communication. Teachers can help learners in this regard.

Nevertheless, the process of mediation requires a conscious comparison and contrast of the target culture and the native culture. Learners need to look for similarities and differences between the target and native cultural aspects which will enhance their understanding, cultural knowledge and facilitate their values. More understanding, eventually, will lead to more acceptance. Byram and Planet (2000) define how the process works by saying, “comparison makes the strange, the other familiar, and makes the familiar, the self-strange and therefore easier to reconsider” (p. 189). That is, learners place their own culture as a “starting point” and from there gradually “decentre” themselves (Byram, 1989). Eventually they gather sufficient “skills and knowledge” to acquire decentring (Liddicoat et al., 2003). What happens when the learner becomes capable of decentring is an interesting understanding of himself in a different position than before. Crozet (2007), sees this as “the turning inward of cultural information through self-reflection leading to enhanced understanding of the role of culture/language in the construct of worldviews” (p. 5). Learners “infer”, “interpret”, “discuss” and “negotiate” meaning to enhance understanding (Liddicoat et al., 2003). The self-reflection leads learners to a “third place” where they are able to “decentre” themselves (Kramsch, 1993). Decentering takes place as the learner observes the culture of the target language and is consciously able to

set himself aloof from his own culture. He, then, “observes” and “reflect s” on both the cultures through comparison and contrast (Byram, 1989). Kramsch (1993), marks that from the third place learners “synthesize” elements of diverse culture and form their individual “understanding” of the differences. This exclusive “unbounded” and “dynamic” position facilitates language learners to “bridge the gap” between the native and the target culture and by bringing the cultures close sets the languages apart with their distinctive features and enable learners to achieve their “personal” as well as “communicative” goals (Crozet & Liddicoat, 2000).

METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

Sampling:

Teachers and students are participants of this study. 200 students from two private universities of Dhaka, Bangladesh were approached to take part in an online survey. The survey is done in www.surveymonkey.com. These students are first semester freshman students of foundation English course titled “English 103, Listening and Speaking” across different departments of the universities. They were asked two questions. Twelve teachers were interviewed for the purpose of this research. All of them are from one university. All of them are from the department of English and have experience in teaching listening and speaking to freshman students across all the departments of the university. The participants range from Lecturer to Assistant professor with EFL teaching experience from three to thirty one years at the tertiary level. Teachers were asked four semi-structured open ended questions to gather in depth knowledge for the study.

Data Analysis:

This research is a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collected through survey and interview. For to “include only qualitative and quantitative methods falls short of the major approaches being used today in the social and human sciences”(Creswell, 2003: 4). The methodology used in this study is the Parsimonious Exploratory design by Creswell and Plano Clark (2007). As such, in this method the data collection process follows a sequence. Quantitative data is collected at first and interpreted then qualitative data is collected and interpreted. Both the data help to reach a holistic interpretation of the issue of research.

The chart below reflects how the method works:

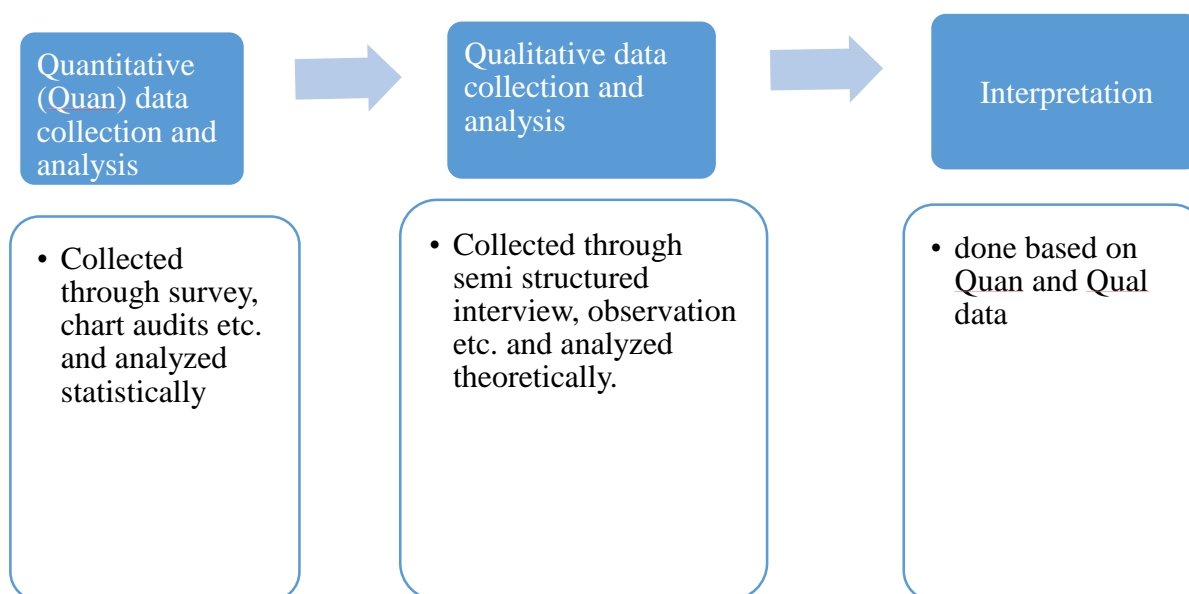


Figure 1: Methodology: Parsimonious Exploratory design by Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007

At first quantitative data was collected from the students through survey and then qualitative data was collected from experienced teachers through semi-structured open-ended questions. The collected quantitative data was then analyzed in light of the qualitative data and also through related theories and in light of previously done research. The researcher particularly chose teachers who have the experience of teaching Listening and Speaking to the freshman students. They were asked four questions related to the topic of the survey. Each of the teachers gave their expert opinions and shed lights on related issues. A detailed transcription of the teacher interviews is added in table 1 below. Their opinions clarify problems highlighted in this study and also focus light on the path of supposed solutions.

Due to slow Wi-Fi connection, students at first were not eager to participate in the survey. So, the researchers collected data on hardcopies. Much effort is given on this. So, it can be said that the researchers made a conscious effort to keep the data collection process transparent and uninterrupted. The data collection through survey is randomly done based on the presence of students in class.

FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH:

Student response:

The first question the students were asked is: “What is the name of the text book used in your Listening and Speaking class?”

Their responses were as follows:

The course book:

The course book used in classes in the universities is titled as *Headway Pre- Intermediate 3rd edition* by John and Liz Soars. Some students seem confused with the name of the textbook as they have responded in the positive to the names of different editions of the referred text. In one class of university A students were not familiar with the name of the text. It needs to be mentioned that the survey was done one week prior to mid-term exam in that university. At another class in the other university students were seen asking each other the name of the text. In addition to the book teachers also used guided materials for speaking activities. The teacher responses reflect on that.

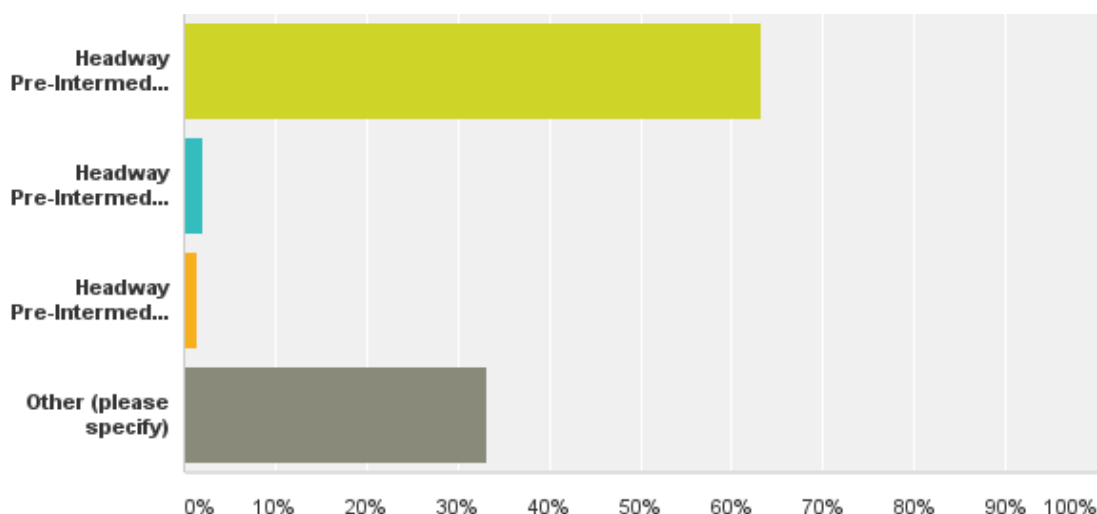


Figure 2: Course Book identification

Familiarity with the Listening and speaking activities:

How familiar are the students with the lessons of their listening and speaking course book? This is the second question the students answered. The answers are rated from somewhat familiar, familiar, very familiar, extremely familiar to unfamiliar. 199 students answered the questions and one skipped the answer.

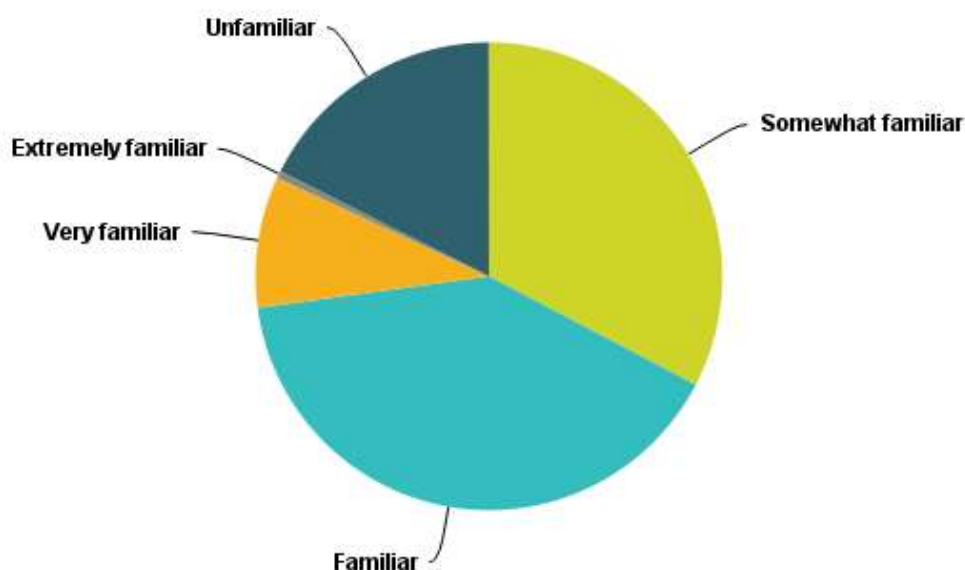


Figure 3: Students' familiarity with Listening and speaking activities

The results seem mostly to roam around familiar (40.20%), somewhat familiar (32.66%) to unfamiliar (17.59%). Very few students are very familiar (9.05%) and only 1 student (0.50%) is extremely familiar with the listening and speaking activities done in class.

Teacher response:

For this study teachers were asked four questions:

1. Which text book do you use to teach EFL in class?
2. How familiar are the students with the topics you use in EFL class?
3. Could you give some examples of unfamiliar topics that you come across in the text book?
4. What do you do to familiarize students with topics culturally different from their native culture?

The book used by the teachers is *Headway Pre-Intermediate* 3rd edition written by John and Liz Soars. This is in the syllabus. All teachers unanimously agreed that students face difficulty familiarizing with many topics found in the text book and handouts used by the teachers. Responses to the third and fourth questions are placed in the form of a table below:

Table 1: Teacher interview information

Teacher	Materials used in classroom
A	Headway: “Brat camp”, at beginning students did not understand much but later used similar concept of “kishor shodhonagar” (an organization that work to purify adolescent criminals) in Bangladesh.
B	Students are not familiar with polite expressions of English culture. They are very direct in asking personal questions.
C	Christmas Carol: students are not familiar with snow, Christmas etc. Students write, “Merry Christmas”, “Marry Christmas”. It does create a hurdle at first.
D	Students from business, law, science program have difficulty understanding and accepting a film / festival of America on which they have no prior knowledge.
E	Headway: 1.Accent- British, Scottish etc. in materials difficult for students, also tape scripts run very fast 2. buying car, driving (students in Bangladesh are not familiar as they cannot afford and are not allowed to use a car at an early age) 3. A young girl leaves home to a big city when she is 18. (Students in Bangladesh do not leave home when 18).
F,L	Headway: Half the topics of this book are not familiar to students. Gives example of “Brat Camp” and “Dog House” (defined below)
G	Christmas Eve: most of the students do not understand what this is. He explains it with “Chad Rat” that is the night before the holy Eid festival. (95% people of Bangladesh are Muslims and they follow Arabic lunar month calendar to enjoy Eid, which is the biggest festival for them. As a result the celebration begins the night before Eid day. Chad rat means the night when the moon declaring Eid is seen.) Headway: “Blind date”-a guy choosing a lady from three. Sometimes he wonders if students will feel comfortable with this for one of the ladies is older to the guy. Sometimes it evokes laughter in the classroom. This often comes as a cultural shock to the students.
H , J,K	Headway: Students are not really acquainted with the topics of the book- dating, pet house, having gap years, living alone away from the family, dog houses, camping etc. Teacher needs to explain a lot before beginning the lessons. Often need to use learners’ native language Bangla for this purpose.
I	Headway: “Dog house”-in Bangladesh dog houses are not available. Very unusual. Students coming from different backgrounds find it very difficult to cope up with these types of topics.

Summary of the findings from teacher interview:

1. Half the topics used in the text are not familiar to the students.

2. Teachers need to understand the situation alongside student demand to marginalize cultural difference.
3. Students often come up with misinterpretations of aspects taught in class based on their, limited proficiency of English language and knowledge of the world.
4. Students of different disciplines are not familiar with different aspects of the target culture due to lack of exposure.
5. Teachers need to explain a lot to make students familiar with the topic at hand.
6. Often teachers use similar concepts present in the native culture to make students understand and appreciate the target culture. This technique works effectively. On the other hand culturally unmediated aspects require a lot of logical explanation often through the native language to make students understand the target language cultural aspects, making it difficult for teachers and learners as well as affecting the language teaching and learning process.
7. Tape scripts for listening with different accents create added difficulty to understanding in EFL classroom.

DISCUSSION

To implement mediation of culture in EFL classroom teachers along with students need to play particular roles and along with these appropriate materials are required. The study brings down the focus to the roles these three play:

Role of the teacher in bridging the native and target culture in EFL:

Teachers stand out to be the super saviors to minimize cultural impacts on teaching and learning English as a foreign language. EFL teachers have the great responsibility to ensure student participation in class. A study of the Iranian University context (Alemi & Pakzadian, 2011) suggest that, the greatest support for the EFL learners are their teachers. This should never be forgotten that classrooms are very busy and complex places and that teachers are always engaged with various modes of interactions with their students in class. The intensity and speed of these interactions often make the teacher unaware of the happenings in class (M. Sadker & Sadker, 1986).

Well trained and proficient teachers are required to teach English as a foreign language in Bangladesh. They are able to deal with all the sophisticated issues of bridging the cultures of Bangla with that of English. One of the major objectives of foreign language classroom is to ensure interaction. As teacher is the sole authority in class, it is the teacher's responsibility to initiate interaction. According to Brown (2001), a major obstacle that learners face while speaking in English is "the anxiety generated over the risks of blurting things out that are wrong, stupid and incomprehensible" and it is the teachers duty "to provide the kind of warm, embracing climate that encourages students to speak, however halting or broken their attempts may be" (p.269). Xiao-yan (2006), suggests teacher's interactive manner initiates interaction in class and encourages learners to participate in classroom activities. There have been many studies to determine teacher-student interactions in class. Especially to find out the role of teachers helping students with opportunities of equal interactions regardless of gender, race

and social status of the students. For these are of vitally important for language practice and through practice the development of language (Xiao-yan, 2006)

Culture bridging materials in EFL classrooms:

A study conducted by Hasan and Akhand (2009) reveal that appropriate teaching materials and competent teachers are the major lacking in the colleges of Bangladesh. The study surveys rural and urban colleges of all the districts of Bangladesh and reports these as the challenges of spoken English for students thus leading towards degradation of TESL in Bangladesh. This study finds out that students, at different degrees are familiar with the materials that are used in speaking classes. Students who are thoroughly familiar with the materials are 0.50% that is only 1 student. Students, very familiar with the materials, are 18 in number (9.05%). 40.20% students are familiar with the materials. 32.66% are somewhat familiar and 17.59% are unfamiliar with the materials used in English as a foreign language class. The given data clarifies the obstacles and challenges teachers face in a class full of mixed level students. An analysis of the teachers' opinion of the materials they use in class shows that the textbook (Headway Pre-Intermediate 3rd edition) is full of topics unfamiliar to the students. Two of the teachers use the method of comparison to find similar concepts in Bangla culture to familiarize students with the concept. Even though it is difficult at first, with a bit of proficiency teachers can overcome this. In this case culture friendly materials may be defined as materials that are able to bridge the distance between the native and the target culture. A mediation of two cultures will convey the meanings and eventually will be able to retain the linguistic individualities of the two languages. Teachers need to use materials in class that must help students of no familiarity to full familiarity of the topics. This turns out to be a great challenge and again teacher proficiency and use of proper methodology with materials that are able to bridge two cultures in an effective teaching system is felt as a requirement for the success of teaching English as a foreign language.

Heller (1987) suggests that the knowledge of shared culture and shared speaking can enhance shared social identity and shared identity helps to strengthen the social network. With English now being used globally across diverse cultures, learners of English most obviously should have an understanding of the culture related to the language. To ensure this, English educators will not only need to be more culturally and linguistically aware but also able to design curriculums with an international and multicultural focus. In modern approaches such as Task-Based Language Teaching, Content-Based Language Teaching, and Cooperative Language Teaching, there is great emphasis put on culture and social awareness. In Bangladesh in the EFL curriculum materials of instruction should be culture friendly to such extent that they are able to bridge between the target culture of English and the native culture of Bangla. Thus a two way purpose will be served; the learner will not only learn the language but also will be able to effectively use English to communicate with speakers of English throughout the world. Mediation of two cultures is possible through a careful selection of culture bridging materials based on student proficiency in EFL class. Teaching with the help of these materials will raise learner's intercultural communicative competence.

Raising Learner awareness of their “third place”:

Though the analysis of the teachers' interviews and student survey the issue of learners being unaware of their own cultural aspects causing barriers to language learning emerges out. Social

values, attitudes, manners, customs etc. are active at a very subconscious level of human mind. Conscious awareness of these cultural issues would give new insights in learning a foreign language. These implicit but powerful issues of the native culture should be explicitly explained to the learners. Once the learners are aware of these issues at hand, they would be able to immerse into learning the foreign language better and gradually gain autonomy as a language learner.

It is, therefore, evident that the more learners are acquainted with the target culture the more they are able to distinguish the cultural differences between the target culture and the native culture. Living in a particular cultural environment, many cultural norms and behaviors are taken for granted. But a comparison with the target culture will make the learner aware of the behaviors and beliefs of the target culture as well as his own culture. Through developing a healthy reading habit of the literature of the target language culture learners can come closer to understanding the ways of life of the target language speakers. Along with this, teachers may suggest and support learners to read more on the history, geography, cultural norms, customs, festivals, religion etc. of the English culture. Learner consciousness will automatically lead them towards a comparative ground with their native and target culture. Through an understanding and acceptance of the target culture, the EFL learners will be able to use the language as closely as possible to native English speakers. An acceptance of the target language (e.g. English) culture will encourage learners to thrive among the EFL learners to learn the language at its own flavor without harming it with the cultural beliefs of their native tongue.

CONCLUSION

The study brings out the fact to light that in terms of bridging cross-cultural barriers in EFL learning, teachers play the most important and effective role to enable students achieve intercultural communicative competence. In Bangladesh, where teachers play an authoritative role in the EFL classroom, possess the potentially influential power to help students on this note. The study reflects that to bridge the cultural barriers teachers at the tertiary level use approaches to explain the cultural issues of the target language at hand through comparison of native cultural aspects that bring out similar sort of ideas. This mediation of cultural issues in the teaching materials help learners to understand and accept the target cultural aspects along with the target language. Thus, learners are able to form an understanding and place themselves at a “third place”. This “third place” is actually a “vantage point” from where learners are able to understand and appreciate the target culture without being hampered by the constant subconscious barrier of his/her native language culture. But to reach this state of EFL learning, students need a very proficient and carefully calculated push from the teachers. For this purpose, along with a proficient mind EFL instructors need a well-designed curriculum with materials subtly mediated with aspects of the target culture and native culture.

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