Impact of Ethnic Background on Iranian EFL University Students' Intercultural Sensitivity Level

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Abstract

Investigation of FL learners’ intercultural sensitivity as the prerequisite for intercultural competence and its relationship with their ethnicity can throw new light on second language education given the dramatic increase in the amount of communication among individuals enjoying diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds and the rapidly growing trend of globalization. Using survey method of data collection, this study aimed to investigate the effect of ethnic background on Iranian EFL learners' intercultural sensitivity. To this end, 382 female and male students belonging to Azeri, Farsi, Kurdish, Lori and Baluchi ethnic groups and studying in different universities located in seven provinces across the country were randomly selected. Chen and Starosta's (2000) Intercultural Sensitivity Scale was employed for data collection. The results of the Chi-square indicated a strong relationship between intercultural sensitivity and ethnic background. The results of the layered Chi-square and Phi coefficient demonstrated that the relationship between the two proved the strongest in Kurdish and the weakest in Azeri ethnic groups. The findings of this study can encourage all educational stakeholders to give due weight to FL learners' intercultural competence and ethnic background as crucial components of modern language education. Finally, suggestions as to the application potential of novel approaches are provided hoping to help applied linguistics a step forward.

Keywords: Iranian EFL learners, Intercultural sensitivity, Ethnicity, Second language education;

1. Introduction

The inseparable nature of language and culture set the ground for the development of language socialization theory, based upon which culture and language co-contextualize each other and linguistic knowledge and sociocultural

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knowledge must be acquired simultaneously in order for language learning to occur (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). On the basis of the significance attached to intercultural communicative competence as the prerequisite for effective and appropriate interaction with members of other cultures as well as the ever-increasing pace of globalization which in turn necessitates the close interaction of nations and cultures, we can tangibly feel the necessity of establishing due relationship between the source and the target cultures. In the field of language learning, too, acquainting language learners with the culture of the language they are learning is considered to be one of the most fundamental pillars of intercultural language education. This seems unfeasible unless we have an ample awareness of the extent to which they are already familiar with the target culture as well as the degree to which they are sensitive to intercultural differences.

Despite the bulk of research having been conducted on the centrality of cultural dimensions of language teaching and learning, what is deemed neglected in many studies is the necessity of investigating the relationship between the Degree of intercultural sensitivity and the ethnic group FL learners belong to particularly in a country diverse ethnic backgrounds. Byram (2000) strongly believes that, "the need to assess cultural learning in some way has become ever more important" (p. 1).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Intercultural Language Learning

The relationship between culture and language is like by Jiang (2000) to the relationship between the swimming skill and water. This suggests that communication would become highly restricted without language (the swimming skill), and it would become impossible without culture (water). Therefore, individuals "swim confidently and rapidly when they are familiar with the water (i.e. with their native culture), but cautiously and slowly when it is unfamiliar to them (within a foreign culture)" (p. 332).

Several other scholars have also attempted, one way or another, to warn language teachers of limiting themselves to language proficiency, and have stressed the necessity of due attention to intercultural competence. Elola et al. (2008), for instance, contend, “An essential instructional goal in foreign language education is the enhancement of students’ intercultural competence” (p. 454). Having conducted a research study on the role of cultural aspects in foreign language teaching, Cortes (2007) concluded that, “if students do not learn about these aspects, they will never achieve full communicative and sociocultural competence in the foreign language” (p. 230).

2.2. Measurement of Intercultural Sensitivity

In the course of recent decades, research into the measurement of intercultural sensitivity has gained a foothold in the literature leading to the development of diverse measurement tools and instruments, each being stemmed from the specific perspective adopted by its developer. Each developer has attempted to design an instrument which reflects the way he views competence on the one hand, and intercultural sensitivity and competence on the other. One of the most oft-cited instruments utilized numerously in different research studies is the one developed by Chen and Starosta (2000). Given the trends towards globalization and internationalization in the contemporary world of expanding technology on the one hand and the necessity of giving due weight to second language learners' intercultural competence as well as ethnic backgrounds on the other, looking into the relationships among these variables seems ever more important.

2.3. Learner Differences and Characteristics

Attainment of the desired goals in second language learning could be attributed to three important general factors: the course itself, the teacher, and the learner and his characteristics (Cohen & Dornyei, 2002). Broadly speaking, underachievement in language learning can be accounted for by taking into pedantic consideration both linguistic and nonlinguistic factors. In addition to linguistic factors, learner differences need to be considered in order to help us explicate the underlying reasons why some language learners prove to be more successful than others. Learner characteristics turn out to be clustered into two major categories: characteristics controllable by the teacher, and characteristics outside his control. The second main part deals with characteristics, which are too individualistic to be controlled by the teacher. One of these characteristics is ethnicity, which is also the focus of this study.
2.3.1. Ethnic Background
When encountering novel phenomena in general and new ideas in particular, people turn out to have various interpretations based on different factors including the ethnic background they come from. In other words, a different perception of the same new thing is owing to different factors one of which is ethnic background (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1989). Having probed into the attitudes of a group of Rumansch speakers along with a group of German speakers who intended to learn French in Switzerland, Brohy (2001) discovered that there were some differences between the two groups in terms of their attitudes towards learning French. According to her research, Rumansch speakers were found to have more positive attitudes than German speakers. Her study also indicated that learners’ aptitudes towards language learning can be affected by their ethnic backgrounds.

There exist several ethnic groups in Iran living in different parts of the country. In addition to Turks, Fars and Kurds, as mentioned by Sharifian (2007), there exist some other ethnic groups such as Lors, Baluchis, and Arabs in Iran. This diversity is cogent enough to persuade educational policy makers, curriculum designers, materials developers, and language teachers to give due weight to this important and determining factor and to take into account its influence on language learning more carefully and open-mindedly.

3. The Present Study
Although the importance of intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity and ethnicity has been theoretically accentuated, few studies have attempted, to my knowledge, to provide sufficient evidence reflecting the link between these important elements. Given the scarcity of research on these issues particularly in Iran regardless of the profound emphasis laid nowadays on intercultural competence in communicative language teaching in general and intercultural sensitivity in particular, this study aimed at looking into the probable relationship between these two highly important factors in different ethnic groups across the country. To this end, the following research questions were formulated:

1) Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ intercultural sensitivity and ethnic background?
2) Are all of the Iranian students with different ethnic backgrounds equally sensitive to intercultural differences?
3) Does ethnic background affect the relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ language proficiency and their intercultural sensitivity?

4. Method
4.1. Participants
A total of 382 male and female students majoring in English as a foreign language and studying in different universities located in seven provinces were selected through convenience sampling as the participants of the study. They were senior students majoring in English Translation, English Literature, and Teaching English at several universities including Zanjan University, Kashan University, Tabriz University, Uremia University, Qom University, Lorestan University, and Sistan-Baluchestan University who were selected on the basis of their language proficiency level (one standard deviation below and above the mean).

4.2. Instrumentation
The instrumentation used to collect data included:

1) A general language proficiency test, January 2004 version of TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) PBT, (TOEFL ACTUAL TESTS, 2005, pp.7-36) was used to evaluate the participants’ level in terms of language proficiency and to homogenize them. We were restricted to use a paper-based TOEFL due to lack of technological facilities in administering other versions. The students who scored between one standard deviation above and below the mean on the normal distribution of this TOEFL test were selected as the participants of the study. This standardized test was pilot-tested prior to the administration and the reliability index obtained through Kurder- Richardson (KR-21) formula was 0.78.

2) Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), developed by Chen and Starosta (2000), was administered to the participants. This scale includes twenty-four five-point Likert items with a five-point rating scale: strongly disagree, disagree, uncertain, agree, and strongly agree. It was employed to measure the participants’ intercultural sensitivity level. This scale is normally applied to test how individuals feel when communicating with people having cultural backgrounds other than their own. This scale has an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.86 according to the study.
conducted in the United States by Chen and Starosta (2000). Another study with a German sample validated this scale through a confirmatory factor analysis. It also reported the internal consistency values of its five subscales to range from 0.58 to 0.79 (Fritz, Mollenberg, & Chen, 2001). Based on the results of the pilot study, the reliability indices of the instrument as estimated by Cronbach alpha coefficient turned out to be 0.78.

4.3. Data Collection Procedures

Adopting a cross-sectional design for data collection, the researchers selected 308 participants, based on their language proficiency level, from among 350 students majoring in English Translation, English Literature, and Teaching English at seven universities in different provinces. The criterion for choosing these universities was their ethnic distribution. In order to evaluate the participants' level in terms of language proficiency and to homogenize them, the researcher administered a 140-item TOEFL test. The participants were asked to answer one hundred forty multiple-choice questions in 120 minutes after being provided with the necessary directions. Subsequently, they were asked to complete the intercultural sensitivity scale in a separate session in the presence of the researcher. Immediately before the completion of the questionnaire and the intercultural sensitivity scale, the researchers provided them with a detailed description and explanation of the intercultural sensitivity scale as well as the directions needed.

5. Results

The first two research questions probed the probable relationship between intercultural sensitivity and ethnic background. In order to test the related null hypothesis, the participants were divided, according to their ethnic backgrounds, into five groups: Persian (Fars), Turkish (Azeri), Kurdish, Lor and Baluchi. The Chi-square technique was employed owing to the categorical nature of the intercultural sensitivity variable. The null hypothesis was rejected meaning that there exist some significant differences among these five ethnic groups in terms of intercultural sensitivity (ICS) (p-value ≤ 0.05). Figure 1 demonstrates the variations among the groups.

As Figure 1 reveals, whereas the intercultural sensitivity levels of Lor learners proved to be the highest, those of Azeri learners were the lowest and the other groups were found, from high to low, to be Baluchi, Kurdish, and Fars (Persian) respectively. The result obtained can probably be justified by the degree of flexibility of each of the ethnic groups in accepting and respecting intercultural differences.

As the positive correlation between language proficiency and intercultural sensitivity had already been proved through empirical investigation by Rahimi and Soltani (2011), the researchers focused on the impact of ethnic background on the relationship between the participants’ language proficiency and their intercultural sensitivity. To examine the related null hypothesis, the participants coming from Farsi(Persian), Azeri (Turkish), Kurdish, Baluchi and Lori ethnic backgrounds were classified into two groups of 'up to moderate' and 'higher than moderate' in terms of their language proficiency levels. Their intercultural sensitivity levels were also categorized into three levels: low, moderate and high. Then, the layered Chi-square was employed to determine the effect of ethnic background on the relationship existing between language proficiency and intercultural sensitivity. Figure 2 below depicts the relationship in each of the ethnic groups.
As it is obviously displayed in the figure above, there exists a statistically significant relationship between language proficiency and ICS level of all ethnic groups. In relation to Fars (Persian) ethnic group, as an example, it can be easily observed that while only 0.06 percent of the learners with up to moderate language proficiency have high level of ICS, this percentage increases to 0.46 in learners with higher than moderate language proficiency. This trend of noticeable increase holds true for all Iranian ethnic groups. In other words, the computed Chi-square for any ethnic group turned out to be bigger than critical Chi-square (p-value ≤ 0.05) which means that there exists a statistically significant and direct relationship between language proficiency and intercultural sensitivity of each of the ethnic groups. This in turn means that ethnic background does not influence the statistical relationship between intercultural sensitivity and language proficiency. Thus, the null-hypothesis is not rejected.

It is worth mentioning that although the impact of ethnic background was found to be statistically insignificant on the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and language proficiency as a whole, its influence turned out to be different for each of the ethnic groups in terms of the degree of strength. In order to determine the degree of the strength of the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and language proficiency of each of the ethnic groups, the Phi coefficient was exploited. The results are displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Phi coefficients between language proficiency and intercultural sensitivity of each of the ethnic groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Background</th>
<th>Persian (Farsi)</th>
<th>Turkish (Azeri)</th>
<th>Kurdish</th>
<th>Lori</th>
<th>Baluchi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phi coefficient</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>0.052</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As revealed in Table 1, the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and language proficiency within Baluchi and Kurdish groups is stronger than those of the other ethnic groups. The Azeri(Turkish) ethnic group proved more resistant to the impact compared to the other groups. Statistically speaking, whereas there seems to be a strong association between language proficiency and intercultural sensitivity of such ethnic groups as Baluchi and Kurdish, such an association proved to be at its lowest level for Azeri ethnic group. Although further research is required to explore the probable causes of such a phenomenon, these finding, to the best of my understanding, can probably be justified by nationalistic zeal held by Azeri ethnic group who tend not to be so malleable when it comes to acknowledging and accepting cultural differences. A number of limitations can be considered for this study. First, this study could include Arab students as another ethnic group in the country. A second limitation of the present study concerns the level of the participants. This study included merely graduate students. Postgraduate students were not incorporated into the study.
6. Conclusion

Given the variations observed among the ethnic groups (i.e. Azeri (Turkish), Kurdish, Lori, Kurdish, Farsi (Persian), and Baluchi) in terms of their different intercultural sensitivity levels, ethnicity needs to be taken into careful account in EFL programs. One method to implement this is to assign EFL learners into different classes according to their ethnic backgrounds. Azeri learners, as an example, can attend the same class, so can each of the ethnic groups. It is possible due to the fact that at least in big universities the number of the learners from the same ethnic background is usually large enough nowadays. Another suggestion is to constitute Intercultural sensitivity training as an integral component of all second language teaching programs and to use more literary texts in EFL classes. According to Matos (2005) literature can assist FL learners to "reconstruct perceptions of the world by raising awareness of cultural differences" (p. 57). Finally, to shed more light on the relationship between ethnicity and intercultural sensitivity and the generalizability of the findings, further research can be carried out with a larger population to build a more concrete evaluation of intercultural sensitivity in an Asian context.

The findings of this study indicated that the intercultural sensitivity level of Iranian EFL students with almost the same level of language proficiency is influenced by their ethnic backgrounds as a determining factor. In conclusion, pedantic attention on the part of all educational stakeholders to such crucial issues might result in the betterment of modern language education on both national and international scales.

References


