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## Critical Intercultural Communication Education: Cultural Analysis and Pedagogical Applications



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### Abstract

With continuous advances in communication, technology, and increased mobility, intercultural communication competence has become an essential element to address in foreign and second language education (Kramsch, 2013, Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). This paper proposes a pedagogical approach to intercultural language education that utilizes the students' L1 (i.e., Persian) to facilitate cultural awareness and successful intercultural communication. A cultural analysis model is used to show how L1 cultural values contribute to politeness and speech act realization patterns and how that knowledge can be used when making sense of the pragmatics of other languages. Specifically, we place emphasis on learners' critical awareness and appreciation of their own cultural values and language in order to be able to develop heightened sensitivity to the potential influence of cultural assumptions on communication. Our approach aligns well with the current shift towards critical pedagogy which encourages learners to be critically reflective (Kumaravadivelu, 2008) with awareness and appreciation of their own local cultural values and critical awareness of other cultures. After discussing how cultural conceptualisations of face and politeness influence the use of pragmatics and speech act realization patterns in Persian, we suggest a number of pedagogical activities to raise students' meta-pragmatic awareness and capacity for reflecting on relationships between language use and culture.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication, English as an international language, cultural analysis, cultural relativity, interculturality

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## Introduction

The role of culture in language teaching has long been discussed and debated from a variety of theoretical and philosophical positions in the academic and professional literature (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Despite different theoretical and pedagogical orientations within the field, rationales for including culture in language teaching tend to assume that the locus of responsibility for ensuring successful intercultural communication lies with the language learner. Specifically, it is seen as the job of the language learner to develop adequate understanding of the target language and culture so as to be able to interact appropriately according to the standards of native speakers of the L2 (Savignon 1983; Cohen, 1996). As Holliday (2018) contends, such a position tends to be associated with other beliefs that privilege native speakers, such as the idea that native speakers make the best language models, the best teachers, and the best communicative partners for language learners. This has meant that much pedagogical attention has been focused on helping learners develop knowledge, behavioral competence and helpful attitudes towards native speakers and their culture/s rather than encouraging learners to reflect on aspects of their own cultures and how they can best express their own identities through the L2 (McConachy, 2013; Baker, 2015).

Such assumptions have come under sustained critique, particularly in regards to the English language, as the notion of “target culture” is increasingly problematic due to the truly international speakership of English (Prodromou, 1992; Baker, 2009). It is now commonly recognized that speakers of English as a lingua franca utilize the language in accordance with their own purposes and creatively construct ways to express their own cultural identities (Baker, 2015). Therefore, there is currently a shift towards encouraging learners to be critically reflective (Kumaravadivelu, 2008), with awareness and appreciation of their own local cultural values and critical awareness of other cultures. This does not mean encouraging learners to develop essentialized notions of “our culture” and “their culture”, but to develop heightened sensitivity to the potential influence of cultural assumptions on the act of communication, whether that communication takes place with native speakers of a language or those using the language as a lingua franca (McConachy, 2018).

A theoretical point on the use of the term “culture” is in order at this point. We are aware of the criticisms directed at the use of the term “culture” on the basis that the practices of speakers of similar backgrounds are not uniform, but variable (Dervin, 2011). In response to such critique, Sharifian (2011) proposes the use of cultural conceptualizations and the notion of “distributed representation” in the account and development of a model of cultural conceptualizations. With the above caveat in mind, we use the term “culture” heuristically, to denote general observable tendencies in the groups of speakers we focus on here.

In this paper, we propose a pedagogical approach to language and culture education that aligns with critical discussions concerning English as an international language (EIL) and its ideological, political, and pedagogic implications. Specifically, we consider the relationship between language and culture from the perspective of cross-cultural and intercultural pragmatics and the implications of this relationship for developing intercultural communication competence in the language classroom. We also put emphasis on learners’ critical awareness and appreciation of their own cultural values and language (i.e., Persian) in order to be able to develop heightened sensitivity to the potential influence of cultural assumptions on communication. We first discuss the role of pragmatic awareness within intercultural communication competence.

## **Intercultural Communication Competence and Pragmatic Awareness**

The aim of language teaching is to help students achieve not only grammatical fluency but also the ability to put the target language to use to communicate meanings and shape relationships with diverse interlocutors. Whilst the prevailing tendency within language teaching is to focus on the acquisition of rule-like cultural knowledge (Kramsch, 2013), it is increasingly important that students' performance in the target language is informed by a critical understanding of cultural variability in terms of how culture-specific conceptions of the social world (e.g., perceptions of hierarchy or group belonging) influence communication patterns. As discussed by McConachy and Liddicoat (2016), such understanding opens up possibilities for generating appreciation of the broader relativity of cultures and the ways communication functions to represent cultural meanings. Accordingly, our position is that intercultural communication competence entails a sensitivity to the ways that language structures (e.g., lexis, syntax) as well as pragmatic patterns (e.g. speech act realization patterns) reveal aspects of the cultural cognition of particular groups, including the learners' own cultural group/s (Sharifian, 2011). As such, we align with Holliday's (2018) argument for the need to promote reflexive awareness of Self and Other in a crossing of boundaries, particularly by capitalizing on learners' existing cultural knowledge as a resource for learning.

In developing students' intercultural communication competence, there is an important role for promoting reflection on the relationship between culture and pragmatics by drawing on cultural analyses from published studies. It is true that published papers can be very complex and ostensibly inaccessible to many teachers and students, but we believe that the task can be made less overwhelming by focusing on cultural data that links identifiable cultural values and their manifestation in pragmatic patterns. We do not suggest that we should attempt to turn learners into students of anthropology; however, we believe that students studying a language for the purposes of intercultural communication need to develop awareness of how different cultural conceptualisations may lead to different realisation of language use strategies. The focus is not primarily on helping students predict potential sources of miscommunication, but rather on helping students internalise the principle of cultural relativity by developing appreciation of culture-specific conceptions and their various linguistic manifestations.

In order to provide support for this notion, we will present a cultural analysis of politeness and face in Persian, which illuminates links between cultural conceptualizations and pragmatic patterns. We should point out here that the focus in the next section is to demonstrate how a model of cultural analysis can have pedagogical applications for developing intercultural communication competence. To this end, we use data from Persian language used by Iranians for exemplification purposes. The analysis model, of course, can apply equally to other languages and cultural groups. We also need to add that the following exposition deals with tendencies, not absolutes.

### **Cultural Model of Analysis: Face and Politeness in Persian and Practical Implications**

In this section, we intend to highlight some aspects of a theoretical model of cultural analysis that can have useful applications in IC. The original explication of the model (Koutlaki, 1997) was based on Persian and mainly British English, but the points made can be seen as examples of the areas that can be used to raise the awareness of students of other backgrounds. The following section ("Teaching Implications") lays out the specific strategies that can be utilized practically in the classroom in order to help EFL learners develop IC.

Earlier works by Koutlaki (1997, 2002, 2009) and Eslami-Rasekh (2004, 2005), analyzed the system of politeness in Persian and demonstrated the centrality of the concept of face. Using a variety of ethnographic research methods, Koutlaki puts forward the following model of face and politeness in Persian.

### **The Concept and Components of Politeness and Face**

The basis of the description of face in Persian is Goffman's (1972, p. 322) concept of face, described as an individual's "most personal possession and the center of his security and pleasure". An individual's position in society places certain limitations on behavior which stem from pride ("from duty to himself" 1967, p. 9) or honor, on which Koutlaki bases the two aspects of Persian face, *shakhsiyat* and *ehteram*. *Shakhsiyat* ("personality," "character"), a static concept, is understood as the outcome of the education and upbringing of a person, while *ehteram* ("respect," "esteem"), a dynamic concept, is demonstrated in the flow of interaction through conformity to the conventions of ritual politeness (*ta'arof*) and to other behavioral norms. Speakers demonstrate their *shakhsiyat* through verbal and non-verbal behavior conforming to societal norms and paying the appropriate amount of *ehteram* to interlocutors. In Persian, these face conceptualisations are encoded through verbal and non-verbal behavior indexing the principles of deference, humility and cordiality (Koutlaki 1997; 2009) which often co-exist in interaction.

Deference among Iranians often works reciprocally among equals and attends to the other's *shakhsiyat* by directly or indirectly acknowledging other as superior, or better than self, even if only nominally so, by showing him/her *ehteram*. At the same time, self appears as knowledgeable in the ways of behavior in society, and therefore self's *shakhsiyat* is satisfied too. A speaker may praise one's interlocutor in terms of accomplishments, abilities, knowledge or possessions. Deference and humility often mirror each other in practice as the speaker who elevates an addressee may also humble him/herself.

In Persian interaction, deference and humility are linguistically encoded through a wide variety of honorifics (Eslami, Dini, & Abolhosseini, 2018) which do not always reflect reality; in other words, a speaker may lower the self and elevate an interlocutor even though s/he may be older or socially superior. The following points are illustrative of this tendency. Honorific terms, for example, *enāb-e āli* "your Excellency," *hazræt-e āli* "your Excellency," and *qorbān* "your honor" are used to show respect and deference. The use of address terms in Persian is a complex manifestation of underlying notions of deference and humility. The contrast of two address systems, one relatively simple and the other more complex, indicates differences in usage and context: even when an apparently equivalent term exists in both systems, their usage patterns differ, reflecting deep underlying differences in the conceptualisations of relationships and encoding of status differences.

The use of TLN (Title + Last Name) is much more widespread in Iran than in Britain and America; in professional and tertiary education settings, only TLNs are used, even if in a private setting or behind closed doors interlocutors may be on first name terms. In English-speaking settings, the opposite is generally the case, with the vast majority of participants being on first name terms with each other in the same settings. Ide, Hill, Carnes, Ogino, and Kawasaki (1992, p. 291) write that in a culture like the US, where "polite" and "friendly" are perceived as similar concepts, it is easy to switch from the polite TLN (Title + Last Name) to FN (First Name) to address a person to whom deferential attitude is due. For Japanese speakers, in whose culture "politeness" and "friendliness" are quite discreet, learning to operate within the American system involves re-learning the concepts "polite" and "friendly".

Another principle of Persian politeness, cordiality, is also shown verbally through the show of interest in other's affairs, concern for other's needs, comfort and welfare. It can take the shape of health and other enquiries; repeated offers of refreshments; repeated genuine or ritual (*ta'arof*) offers and expressions of thanks (Eslami, 2005; Koutlaki, 2002); ostensible invitations; and extended closings of interactions. In Persian social encounters and telephone interactions, health enquiries are quite extensive, asking about each other's family even if the speaker has never met them, which may sound

bizarre to non-Iranian ears. As the responses to these enquiries is usually ritual, their sheer number and the rapidity of their delivery may make the interaction sound tedious and trivial to English ears (Koutlaki, 2010, pp. 41-43). Health enquiries are often followed by questions about the addressee's recent activities and any affairs that were left pending since the interactants' last communication. All these questions, often delivered in "machine-gun" style, are quite acceptable and expected by Iranians, but may be perceived as inquisitiveness by speakers of other backgrounds. To show cordiality, Iranians may also try to include new acquaintances in the circle of existing acquaintances by direct inquiries about a stranger's marital status, salary, religious affiliation or political conviction (Koutlaki, 2010, pp. 36-37). In some cultures (e.g., Anglo cultures), this may seem unacceptably intrusive (Thomas, 1983, p. 105).

Ostensible invitations can be another source of variant understandings. In Persian ostensible invitations are issued, for instance, when an Iranian is given a lift and invites the person who brought him/her in for tea or a meal. In an interaction between Iranians, such invitations are correctly interpreted as "a sincere expression—of thanks or regard—but [...] rarely [as] a sincere invitation." (Beeman, 1986, pp.185-186), and therefore refusal is the only expected response. Beeman explains that ostensible invitations are understood as the desire to reciprocate the favor, even if only nominally, and to bring the interaction to a close (see Eslami, 2005, for examples). On the other hand, in English, an on-the-spot invitation will most likely be interpreted as a genuine invitation, with acceptance or refusal as equally possible responses (Eslami, 2005).

Repeated offers of refreshments or help and initial refusals, which are very common in Persian, convey cordiality and warmth of feeling (Koutlaki, 2002; Eslami, 2005). In Anglo cultural settings however, an offer will usually be made once, possibly repeated once more, but once a refusal has been made, it is considered as final. It is worth pointing out these differences in order to avoid misunderstandings or discomfort, e.g. an Iranian guest going hungry after having refused a second helping, in the hope that the English host will repeat the offer, or an Iranian host appearing pushy to an English guest, who has refused more food (cf., Rafiee, 1992, p. 51).

In practice, this means that in Iranian settings, involvement and inclusion are the norm, and their lack may cause hurt and offence. On the contrary, mainstream Anglo cultural norms place a high value on independence, autonomy and freedom from imposition, or Brown and Levinson's negative face (Wierzbicka, 2003). In Iranian society, the concept of "privacy" differs substantially from individualistic societies (see Wierzbicka, 1991, p.47 about the concept of privacy in Anglo-Saxon culture). As stated by Eslami-Rasekh (2004, p. 191), "translating the concepts of individualism (*fardgeraee*) and autonomy (*khodmokhtari*) is problematic in Persian and has negative connotations."

In this section, we used cultural analysis to explicate different aspects of students' L1 (Persian) pragmatics and politeness system. It is essential to help students become aware of cultural principles underlying language use as "Interculturality is a reflexive awareness of Self and Other in a crossing of boundaries..." (Holliday, 2018, p. 4).

The following section ("Teaching Implications") lays out the specific strategies that can be utilized practically in the classroom in order to help EFL learners develop IC.

### Teaching Implications

The cultural analysis above provides insights into some of the ways that cultural conceptualisations influence the ways that language is used to convey social meaning, particularly through attending to issues of power and distance between interlocutors. In the Iranian context, the analysis above would

be used to help students reflect on their L1 in relation to the English language, but it could be used as a useful reference point for developing pragmatic awareness and appreciation of cultural relativity in any foreign language teaching context. Alternatively, teachers could refer to similar work on politeness relevant to the students' L1.

Attempts to develop pragmatic awareness in the classroom inevitably involve cross-linguistic comparison—that is, comparing and contrasting speech act strategies, use of honorifics etc.—and also reflection on the cultural conceptions underlying language use (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; McConachy, 2018). The aim of cross-cultural comparison is not to reinforce students' sense of “us” and “them,” but rather to explore how seemingly universal aspects of communication (e.g., politeness) can be conceptualised and linguistically constructed in very different ways across languages and cultures. This not only helps learners more accurately interpret the cultural significance of pragmatic realization strategies – e.g. such as whether an ostensible invitation is really an invitation – but it also helps them suspend their own assumptions about what is normal or preferable in social interaction. We may be intrigued, fascinated, attracted or puzzled by aspects of another language and culture, or of our own, but it is crucial for students to be able to adopt a position of cultural relativity, acknowledging that it is problematic to make judgments about “better” or “worse.” Cross-cultural comparisons and strategically organized reflective tasks can help students adopt such a mindset. The specific pedagogic tasks below draw on Eslami-Rasekh (2005), with some modifications.

### **Student-centered Tasks**

Student-centered tasks encourage students to experiment with translation activities based on existing knowledge or to gather new data for cross-linguistic comparison. The aim is to have learners develop a good sense of what to look for in conducting a cultural analysis and to help them become keen and reflective observers of language use in both L1 and L2.

One effective strategy is to have students literally translate speech acts from their first language to the target language. This activity can indicate to learners how cultural norms are reflected in the language and why pragmatic translations of instances of language use can be challenging. The translation activity can instigate class discussion of pragmatic norms in different speech communities and help students reflect on the data. For example, in Persian, to show deference and humility, when offering a present to someone, if the literal translation is used, the expression would be “I've brought something unworthy of you.” Students can reflect on the appropriateness of this translation in English and realize that a pragmatic translation of this expression “This is a little something I've brought for you,” is needed for intercultural communication to be successful.

Using translation as an activity for pragmatic awareness raising can help students realize how culture and language are interrelated and that some of the pragmatic strategies used to realize specific speech acts in their L1 cannot be easily translated into L2 due to underlying cultural difference. For example, the difficulty of finding an equivalent translation for Persian concepts such as *fardgeraee* (individualism) and *khodmokhtari* (autonomy) which have negative connotations in Persian but not in English can lead to awareness of cultural values reflected in language use and instigate insightful classroom discussion.

A discourse completion task (DCT) can be used as a starter for translation activities or as a means to collect data in L1 and L2. There are several versions of discourse completion tasks available in the literature (see Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). The form contains situations in which students are to respond in their first language (L1) and then translate it into L2 followed by gathering data from the target language users. Using the L1 at the beginning has the benefit of validating the learners' L1 as a useful

resource.

### **Teacher Explanation**

On a practical level, in order to give learners a clearer picture of the target or any other culture, the materials writer and the language teacher will need to provide thorough explanations of the different values prevalent in the two cultures and how these are encoded in the various communicative strategies in different languages. Language textbooks have largely neglected the area of pragmatic competence, firstly because detailed description of pragmatic rules does not exist to the extent of grammatical rules (Vellenga, 2015), and secondly because “pragmatics—language in use—is a delicate area and it is not immediately obvious how it can be ‘taught’” (Thomas, 1983, p. 97).

The goal is to expose learners to the communication and cultural aspects of language (L1 and L2) and provide them with the analytical tools they need to arrive at their own generalizations concerning contextually appropriate language use in intercultural situations. Differences between cultural norms in language use are often ignored by learners and go unnoticed unless they are directly addressed (Schmidt, 1993). Meta-pragmatic awareness activities focused on appropriate use of language in context provides learners with linguistic resources that allow them to take up agency in constructing the social relationships but also embodies recognition of the symbolic value residing in language. As stated by Eslami and McLeod (2008), teachers can activate students’ prior knowledge by asking them what they know about, for example, requesting in their L1 and how it is similar or different from performing specific requests (for information, for action, for appointment) in English. Questions such as “How is requesting in English (asking for a pen from your friend) similar to and different from requesting in your first language?” and “How does a higher status person ask a lower status person to do something?” can inspire a discussion and encourage students to think about request forms. Questions such as “How would you ask a younger brother to wash the dishes?” draw students’ attention to their relationships with different people to whom they regularly make direct requests. A common result of this elicitation of requests is that some students may provide highly polite forms involving modals (e.g., “Would you please wash the dishes, Ali?”) or highly direct forms using the imperative (e.g., “Wash the dishes, Ali!”) with few examples in between. Once students begin to provide examples, teachers can list them on the board. Then learners can examine the list for similarities and differences and comment on any that are found.

### **Using Miscommunications**

Miscommunications offer powerful L2 learning opportunities. They also stir emotions that facilitate event recall and could motivate learners to recognize communicative importance and relevance of underlying language features (Ryan, 2015, Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). Teachers can use potentially challenging miscommunication incidents in introducing intercultural communication clashes to students. For example, in Iranian culture paying compliments on looks and appearance by a male to a female friend is considered inappropriate and has sexual connotation. Eslami-Rasekh (2005) has shared her experience in a situation in which she received such compliments from her male officemate in several occasions and was confused how to interpret the intended message. Students may be able to share cases of problematic interactions from their own experiences or from movies and programs in the target language. The examples can be presented to learners and they can offer tentative explanations for the pragmatic failures in the exchanges. Another problematic situation which can be used by teachers is related to offers and invitations as insistent offers of refreshments are very common in Persian and convey cordiality and warmth of feeling (Koutlaki, 2002). In English, however, an offer will usually be made once, possibly repeated once more, but once a refusal has been made, it is considered as final. It is worth pointing out these differences in order to avoid misunderstandings or

real discomfort, e.g. an Iranian guest going hungry after having refused a second helping, in the hope that the English host will repeat the offer, or an Iranian host appearing pushy to an English guest, who has refused more food.

## Conclusion

This paper set out from a thesis that foreign language learners not only need to know about the culture of native speakers of the target language, but also need a broader appreciation of the various ways that cultural assumptions and conceptualizations influence pragmatic patterns. We have argued throughout that there is an important role for exposing learners to cultural analyses of pragmatic phenomena such as politeness in order to help them develop the ability to analyze and reflect on how cultural meanings are embodied in language patterns. Such abilities are essential for ongoing development of pragmatic awareness and for the broader development of intercultural communication competence (McConachy & Liddicoat, 2016).

By way of an example, we have focused on the Persian concept of face and its associated politeness system and outlined how some elements can be utilized in order to raise learners' awareness of cross-cultural differences equipped with explanatory power. We suggested cultural analysis and other pedagogical activities to raise learners' awareness of cultural and pragmatic issues in their L1. Enhancing learners' analytical and evaluative power in regards to pragmatic aspects (e.g., politeness, deference, humility) in their L1 will promote intercultural communication competency. As research shows, students can develop intercultural communication strategies by being engaged in communication activities as well as acquiring knowledge of "self" and "other" (Griva & Papadopoulos, 2017).

It should be noted that although we have drawn on notions of Anglo culture to construct a point of comparison, we do not assume that such a point of comparison would necessarily be relevant in all contexts. Given the international speakership of the English language, it is important for language teachers themselves to consider the linguistic and cultural groups that might serve as the most relevant examples or source of cross-cultural comparison for their learners. Moreover, in promoting cross-cultural pragmatic comparisons, the implication is not that learners need to blindly adopt the standards of pragmatic appropriateness of native speakers. In line with the discourse of learner agency (van Compernelle, 2014) and the current emphasis on critical reflection (Kumaravadivelu, 2008), educators should be aware that not all English language learners wish to behave like native speakers of the target language, particularly when it comes to pragmatics (Washburn 2001). As educators, we need to acknowledge and respect learners' individuality and freedom of choice and their systems of values and beliefs.

As suggested in this paper, teachers can use published research findings to help students develop awareness of L1 (or L2) pragmatics and the underlying cultural values. Teachers can then use their knowledge about students' L1 and its culture to engage learners in collaborative classroom discussions for examining various cultural assumptions that impact different pragmatic features.

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