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Intercultural communicative competence: A vital skill in the context of ASEAN economic community

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Abstract

ASEAN countries are about join in a single market and production base known as ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) 2015, which will enhance freer flows of goods, services, investment, capital, and people. This will enable the process of regional integration in which people from diverse cultures will live, meet, and work together. Accordingly, culture clash and shock and communication breakdown would seem to be unavoidable if people in ASEAN community are not well prepared in terms of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in order to effectively and appropriately function in multicultural situations. Therefore, this paper discusses the reasons why ICC is a must-to-have in AEC, and gives some implications to promote ICC among people in terms of English language education.

Keywords: English language (EL), ASEAN Economic Community (ACE), Intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

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1. Introduction

On the roadmap of the integration of the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) community, the ASEAN heads of States/Governments from Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam have agreed to establish the ASEAN Economic Community 2015, known as AEC 2015, and they have also agreed to use English as the language for business (ASEAN, 2009, 2011). The AEC 2015 will be "a single market and production base, a highly competitive economic region, a region of equitable economic development, and a region fully integrated into the global economy" (ASEAN, 2008). A new era "one vision, one identity, and one community" will be open for every people in the ASEAN community as they will be equally eligible to travel, work, and study at any country in the ASEAN community. This will be definitely a big challenge in English language education to every member country of ASEAN community inasmuch as the ultimate aim of English language education is no longer limited to train English language learners to become native-like English speakers, but it expands its goal to prepare them with intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in order to appropriately and effectively function in multicultural situations.

It has been, moreover, widely agreed that English has been globally used in multicultural contexts since it functions as a bridge between peoples, countries, and cultures, so English users need to be equipped with preliminary knowledge of different cultures in order to avoid communication breakdown, cultural shock as well as cultural clashes. Accordingly, English language learners including both ESL and EFL learners need to learn beyond the culture of the target language. i.e. the learning of culture focuses on not only its target language culture but also other cultures around the world where English is commonly used as a communication tool, in order to become interculturally communicative competent.

From the reality of the importance of ICC, it cannot be denied that ICC plays an important role in helping one to successfully interact with other people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, this paper is aimed at examining what ICC is, discussing why it is vital in AEC 2015, and suggesting some implications on how to promote ICC to English language learners.

2. What is intercultural communicative competence?

It is widely admitted that culture is one of the most sophisticated words to be properly defined, so there has been so far a myriad of definitions of culture. Each one addresses a perspective on culture, but they all seem to reflect and offer insights into the complex phenomenon of culture. The definition given by Goode et al., (2000), researchers of the National Center for Cultural Competence, is that culture involves both visible and invisible aspects which are shared among group members, and it is not limited in one generation, nor is it changeable, but it can be passed from one generation to the others, and is quite dynamic because of social changes.

> …an integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting, roles, relationships, and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations; is dynamic in nature.
>
> (Goode et al., 2000)

In another aspect, the definition of culture given by Lugstig and Koester (2000) shows the crucial connection between culture and communication in relation with the improvement of one's ICC.

> Culture is a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms, and social practices, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people.
>
> (ibid.)

From this definition, it is seen that culture is understood in five characteristics: culture is learned; culture is a set of shared interpretations; culture involves beliefs, values, norms, and social practices; culture affects behavior; and culture involves a large group of people.

The basic understanding of culture can lead to the understanding of a more complex term: ICC, which results from the combination of IC and CC.

The term of IC is variously discussed and defined in a myriad of ways. Byram (1997) defines IC as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with other people from different cultures, which includes five elements, namely attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness/political education. Likewise, according to Bennett and Bennett (2004), IC is "the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts" (p. 149). They argue that the ability to communicate effectively stems from a combination of concepts, attitudes, and skills that can be learned and acquired through training and contact with others from different cultures. However, the quality and quantity of the acquisition and learning of other cultural concepts, attitudes, and skills depend on one's experience and readiness. Sinicrope, Norris, and Watanabe (2007), unlike previous scholars, argue that IC can be simply defined as the "ability to step beyond one's own culture and function with other individuals from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds" (p. 1). This general definition focuses only on some vague ability and does not mention specific attitudes or knowledge as in many definitions of IC, but it seems to summarize what most definitions of IC have in common. In a nutshell, although IC can be differently defined, it can be commonly understood to have four key elements: attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness, which help one to effectively and appropriately communicate with other people from different cultures.

Regarding the term CC, it was first introduced in 1970s by Hymes (1972) who developed and defined CC as not only grammatical competence but also sociolinguistic competence, which is the ability to apply grammatical competence appropriately in social interactions. It was later furthered and developed into a fundamental concept in the development of communicative language teaching by Canale and Swan (1980) and Van Ek (1986). Canale and Swan (1980) defined CC in the context of foreign language education, which was composed of grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. Canale (1984) added one more component, discourse competence, some elements of which were transferred from sociolinguistic competence. As a result of adding discourse competence, his proposed framework of CC consisted of four main components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. However, Van Ek (1986) proposed a framework for comprehensive foreign language learning objectives, which included social competence, the promotion of autonomy, and the development of social responsibility. He argued that foreign language teaching aimed at training not only in communication skills but also with the personal and social development of the learner as an individual. The six components or sub-competencies that constitute communicative ability are linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, sociocultural competence, and social competence

Although the term ICC is coined from IC and CC, it has been interchangeably used with other terms, e.g., intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication competence, and even IC. This unclear difference sometimes causes confusion in addressing the right phenomenon. Among some scholars who have tried to differentiate IC and ICC, Byram (1997) points out that the former is a competence which enables one, among other things, to interact in one's native language with people from other cultures; the latter is a competence that enables one to interact in a foreign language with people from other cultures. He pinpoints that ICC is an umbrella term that covers many components including linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and IC. By proposing a model of ICC, he explains the term ICC which is the ability which enables one to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures in a foreign language. Similarly, Chen and Starosta (1999) define intercultural communication (or communicative) competence as "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment" (p. 28). IC, they argue, consists of three key

components of intercultural communication competence: intercultural sensitivity (affective process), intercultural awareness (cognitive process), and intercultural adroitness (behavioral process), all of which are defined as verbal and nonverbal skills needed to act effectively and appropriately in intercultural interactions.

To sum up, the understanding of culture helps to explore more about what ICC is, and the term ICC which is a complex term coined from IC and CC is defined in a variety of ways. However, ICC can be understood as the ability which enables one to effectively and appropriately interact in a language other than one's native language with others from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It consists of language competence (linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, & discourse competence) and intercultural competence (attitudes, knowledge, skills, & awareness) that help one to be able to successfully integrate in a multicultural society (e.g., Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2001; Sinicrope et al., 2008).

3. Why is ICC important in the context of AEC 2015?

Under AEC 2015 and onward, the AEC Blueprint will feature ASEAN countries as a single market and production base, a highly competitive economic region, a region of equitable economic development, and a region fully integrated into the global economy. In addition, people from every member of ASEAN countries will be equally free to travel, work, and study among ASEAN countries. This may result in both benefits and challenges for ASEAN countries.

Within the new era of AEC 2015, a variety of potential benefits will be expected, yet the five major benefits, namely economy, politics, tourism, healthcare, and education and culture will be most paid attention to inasmuch as they are strongly affected by AEC 2015.

- Economy: AEC will enable freer flow of goods, services, investment, capital, and skilled labor. This means that it will make ASEAN countries more cooperative, dynamic, and competitive. Moreover, AEC will become a larger regional market of nearly 600 million people (Runkel, 2008), then more foreigners around the world will come and invest in ASEAN countries since the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement will be expanded to zero tariffs on almost all goods in AEC 2015 (ASEAN, 2009a, 2011).
- Politics: Political cooperation among ASEAN nations will be more strengthened to establish a stable, secure, and prosperous region and to protect the interests and welfare of the peoples of ASEAN (ASEAN, 2009b).
- Tourism: AEC will provide more tourism opportunities to people from every ASEAN country as well as other countries. Traveling among ASEAN countries will be easier because visa will be exempted for those who come from ASEAN country members, or a common visa will be applied for those who are from countries other than ASEAN countries and would like to travel within ASEAN countries.
- Health care: A new trend of mobile patients and health care service may occur as patients travel within ASEAN countries seeking better care at better cost, and health care service will search for potential places where they can settle down for their business.
- Education and Culture: More educational and cultural exchanges among ASEAN countries will be conducted in an attempt to foster the understanding of diverse cultures of ASEAN countries. More educational opportunities will be open for those who wish to further their education at better educational institutions within ASEAN countries.

From these future perspectives mentioned above, it can be admitted that English language proficiency will become a vital skill since it is a common means of communication tool in ASEAN countries. Therefore, the learning of English will become more important than ever, and English language education will be experiencing an increasing demand of English language teachers,

resulting from the increasing number of English language learners from all walks of life, especially young people who wish to find a job by their good English language proficiency apart from the necessary working skills. What is more, English language might be adopted as a second language or an additional language instead of a foreign language in some countries. In another aspect, when AEC 2015 comes into existence, it is imperative for citizens of ASEAN countries to be interculturally competent in order to survive in a multicultural community, i.e., people in ASEAN community need to be open, respectful, tolerant, and knowledgeable to one another's culture so that they can interact or communicative effectively and appropriately with one another.

Besides the potential benefits that AEC 2015 will offer, a number of challenges like language barrier, communication breakdown, and culture shock, conflict and clash will not be avoidable if citizens from ASEAN countries are not well prepared for this huge change brought about by AEC 2015.

- Language barrier: English language will be the official language used among ASEAN countries; however, citizens from countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, etc. are currently enduring low English language proficiency (EF EPI, 2013). One of the possible causes may be due to the English language education. An example of this is the situation of English language education in Thailand, which faces some problems of teachers (unqualified & poorly-trained teachers), students (poorly-motivated students, learners of mixed abilities in overly large classes, & rare opportunities for student exposure to English outside of class time), curricula, and textbooks (e.g., Dhanasobhon, 2006; Noom-ura, 2013). Hence, this language barrier will hinder those countries from fully integrating in AEC 2015 as well as competing for jobs with other countries, resulting in an unbalance status among ASEAN countries.
- Communication breakdown: Communication breakdown, which means a failure of exchange information, can result from language barrier and lack of IC. The former is the inability to successfully communicate both verbally and non-verbally due to low level of language proficiency. The latter is the unknowledgeability of cultural difference although it is acknowledged that whether one is weak or good at English language, it may not guarantee one to be interculturally competent. This lack of ICC (language competence & IC) can cause a great number of problems such as misunderstanding, confusion, relationship split, etc. in interacting with others from different cultural background. Therefore, if ASEAN citizens are not well prepared with ICC, communication breakdowns will be avoidable, which could lead to breakup in economic, political, educational cooperation, or even worse the lagging of the integration of the whole ASEAN region.
- Culture shock, conflict, and clash: ASEAN community with ten countries is diverse in culture, so it is needless to say that cultural differences are existent and hardly avoidable. Accordingly, working, studying, and traveling in a multicultural community without being well aware of cultural difference can lead to culture shock, conflict, and clash. Additionally, lack of good understanding of one another's culture can be one of the biggest hindrances to successful interactions among people. Therefore, assuming that ASEAN people are not well knowledgeable of one another's culture in AEC 2015, there would be a backward step in the process of AEC integration insomuch as culture shock, conflict, and clash would result in the failure of cooperation in various fields.

Challenges in AEC 2015 would be innumerable, but three challenges discussed above are more or less directly relevant to the importance of ICC, which consists of language competence and IC. So, it cannot be denied that being interculturally communicative competent in a multicultural community deems to be one of the must-to-have skills in AEC since it can assure a harmony community.

4. Implications for English language education

In order to head toward the AEC 2015, things should be well prepared to create more benefits and deal with such challenges for all members of ASEAN countries, so all relevant parties should have action plans in order to foster the process of integration of ASEAN community. Nevertheless, in the limit context of this paper, only implications for English language education are made in order to prepare ASEAN people with ICC in AEC 2015.

- English language teacher training: English language teachers play a vital role in developing the quality of English language teaching and learning, so it is important to have various training programs, workshops, and seminars on intercultural language education for both in-service and pre-service English language teachers in order to raise their awareness of the importance of ICC. Long-term schemes for training and developing English language teachers at all levels should be built in order to ensure the balance of quantity and quality of intercultural language education between city and country. What is more, there should be more cultural exchange programs for English language educators to member countries of ASEAN community so that they would be able to experience cultural differences on their own.
- Pedagogical approaches: It has been noticed that the topic of IC/ICC development has been increasingly paid attention for the past decades, and many models of IC/ICC development (e.g., Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2000; Deardorff, 2006, etc.) have been constructed in an attempt to promote language learners' IC/ICC. Moreover, principles and approaches of intercultural language teaching and learning (e.g., Liddicoat, 2000; Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarinon & Kohler, 2003; Newton, Yates, Shearn & Nowitzki, 2010; etc.) have been suggested in order to solve the problems such as Whose culture should be taught? When should culture be taught? How should culture be taught? It is, hence, imperative that English language educators in ASEAN countries should pay more attention to the integration of intercultural teaching into English language teaching in order to foster ICC in English language learners. The teaching principles of intercultural language teaching should be highly recommended to be applied. They are:

  1. integrate language and culture from the beginning
  2. engage learners in genuine social interaction
  3. encourage and develops an exploratory and reflective approach to culture and culture-in-language
  4. foster explicit comparisons and connections between languages and cultures
  5. acknowledge and responds appropriately to diverse learners and learning contexts
  6. emphasize ICC rather than native-speaker competence.

(Newton et al, 2010).

- Materials and content: Most of the commercial English textbooks used ASEAN countries for teaching English are found to cover mainly linguistic competence, and some are found to include cultural content which is not specific to the context of ASEAN cultures. It is advisable that English textbooks used in ASEAN countries should be developed based on the view of intercultural language education, i.e., the learning of culture is explicitly embedded into the learning of language. Intercultural content in new English textbooks should focus on not only culture from English speaking countries but also other cultures around the world, yet diverse cultures of ASEAN community should be strongly emphasized. Furthermore, both visible and invisible cultural content should be taken into equal account in new English textbooks instead of only visible cultural content which is seen in some current commercial English textbooks.

- Policy makers: More incentive policies such as salary, training, workplace etc. should be made for English language educators in order to encourage them to promote the quality of English language education. There should be more cultural exchange programs for English language learners to ASEAN countries so that they would have more opportunities to use English in real situations and simultaneously experience. In addition, policy makers should encourage to establish intercultural language institutions / centers which aim at teaching English language and ASEAN cultures in ASEAN countries in order to support English learners to develop their English proficiency and IC.
- These implications are perhaps inclusive and may not apply to the context of ten ASEAN countries, but they reflect, to some extent, the potential realities of the current situation in the region.

5. Conclusion

There will be a great amount of work that need to be done in order to be ready for integration of ACE 2015, but above all, ASEAN community is heading toward a friendly, harmony, and equal community in which people will be able to use one common language to interact with one another effectively and appropriately, i.e., a community without language barrier, communication breakdown, and culture shock, conflict and clash among ASEAN countries. Therefore, English language education is mainly responsible for helping to develop ICC (English language competence & IC) in English language users in ASEAN community.

However, English language education should cooperate closely with other relevant social organizations to prepare human resources with appropriate skills is of great importance for every single ASEAN country in order to survive in a highly competitive and dynamic community.

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