

Teaching about Indigenous peoples in the EFL classroom: Practical approaches to the development of intercultural competence

Helen Margaret Murray

Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Correspondence

Helen Margaret Murray, Norwegian University of Science and Technology.
Email: helen.m.murray@ntnu.no

Abstract

This article considers how theories about intercultural competence can be used when teaching about Indigenous peoples in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. Intercultural understanding and communicative competence are important skills for pupils to develop for living in modern multicultural societies. Although based on the requirements of the Norwegian curriculum, the suggestions made in this article are applicable to all EFL classrooms where topics relating to Indigenous peoples are taught. After brief discussion of relevant theories concerning the development of intercultural competence, practical approaches to teaching are suggested. These can guide teachers when creating teaching modules on topics relating to Indigenous peoples. The article discusses how using authentic materials, avoiding stereotyping, and redressing the balance of power when teaching about Indigenous peoples in the EFL classroom can lead to the development of intercultural understanding. The practical approaches for how pupils can work with topics relating to Indigenous peoples include suggestions for activities and discussion questions taken from the author's own teaching materials.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Teaching about culture has long been an important element in English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction. We are transmitting not merely linguistic knowledge to our pupils, but also the knowledge and skills required to communicate successfully with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. This is reflected in international guidelines for EFL teaching, such as the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2020). Key concepts for learning about culture within the CEFR framework include the following points, which require an understanding of others' and one's own culture as well as linguistic skills:

- recognizing and acting on cultural, socio-pragmatic and sociolinguistic conventions/cues
- recognizing and interpreting similarities and differences in perspectives, practices and events
- evaluating neutrally and critically (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 124)

These key concepts may also be reflected in the curricula of individual countries. The new national curriculum in Norway, introduced in stages from the autumn 2020 term, includes a clear focus on developing intercultural understanding in the language classroom (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019b). The opening paragraph of the English curriculum, referring to "Relevance and Central Values" in the EFL curriculum, states, "English shall help the pupils to develop an intercultural understanding of different ways of living, ways of thinking and communication patterns" (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019b, Paragraph 1).

This acquisition of "intercultural understanding" of "ways of living, ways of thinking and communication patterns" will require pupils to develop *intercultural competence*, that is, the knowledge and skills needed for meaningful communication with people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and an understanding of how other people's and their own cultural background affects what they say, how they say it, and how they interpret the responses that they get from the other person (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002). In communication with others and through self-reflection, pupils will therefore become involved in a two-way interaction between known and unknown cultures, where they "draw on and use the resources and processes of cultures with which they are familiar but also those they might not typically be associated with in their interactions with others" (Young & Sercombe, 2010, p. 181).

However, the acquisition of intercultural competence also requires that pupils develop an awareness that cultural identities are complex and in flux and that individuals will have multiple identities depending on the role and situation that they find themselves in. For pupils acquiring intercultural competence, it will therefore also include an understanding of "contradictions, instabilities and discontinuities" (Dervin, 2016b, p. 6). Pupils with good skills in intercultural communication will

demonstrate willingness/ability to communicate with individuals, when they make an effort to decentre from their own culture, when they develop an awareness that "national culture" can be an oversimplistic explanation of culture, and when they develop an awareness that all individuals are diverse, and shift identities according to interlocutor and context. (Moloney, Harbon, & Fielding, 2016, p. 192)

Theories about developing intercultural competence are relevant for teaching about communication and understanding of cultures in general, but this article discusses how ideas for developing

intercultural competence can be used in the EFL classroom when teaching about topics relating to Indigenous peoples. The inclusion of topics about Indigenous history, society, cultures, and ways of thinking are relevant to EFL classrooms worldwide because they are part of developing pupils' understanding of English-dominant cultures and of relations between peoples throughout the English-speaking world. Teaching about the topic of Indigenous peoples may also create potential for cross-curricular work because pupils can compare and contrast what they have learned in English classes with what they learn in other subjects about, for example, Indigenous peoples in South and Central America, Africa, or Asia. This article considers how using authentic materials, avoiding stereotyping, and redressing the balance of power when teaching about Indigenous peoples in the EFL classroom can lead to the development of intercultural understanding.

The discussion in this article is based on the requirements of the Norwegian curriculum, which states that "the indigenous perspective is part of pupils' democratic education" (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019a, Paragraph 3). Nevertheless, the suggestions here are applicable to all classrooms where topics including Indigenous and other minority perspectives are taught. Several examples of how these ideas can be put to practical use are given in activities aimed primarily at EFL pupils with an intermediate to advanced level of English.

2 | INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AND TEACHING ABOUT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Byram et al.'s (2002) theories on developing intercultural competence have had a major impact on the development of school curricula in English as a foreign language in numerous countries, including Norway since the 1990s (Hoff, 2018, p. 72). Whereas previous EFL curricula in Norway did not explicitly mention "intercultural competence," the new curriculum contains direct reference to it. Under the core element "Working With Texts in English," pupils are, through reflection, interpretation, and critical assessment, to "develop intercultural competence" (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019b).

According to Byram's theories, intercultural competence includes several aspects, involving attitudes to other cultures and critical awareness of one's own cultural background, knowledge of how social groups and identities function and interact (including the development of one's own and others' identities), communicative skills and considering cultures from diverse perspectives, and skills in language acquisition (Byram et al., 2002, pp. 11–13). Consideration of the different aspects mentioned by Byram et al. (2002) may be a useful tool when planning work in the classroom.

A weakness in Byram et al.'s model may be that it presents a view of an individual's cultural identity as singular. As Hoff (2018) explains, "The fundamental premise of Byram's model is that insight into various aspects of 'the foreign culture' enable the intercultural speaker to understand and anticipate how the other person in the intercultural encounter thinks and feels" (p. 73). This premise may lead to an assumption that other cultures can be defined by a certain set of features, such as behavior and outlook. This view of culture can be associated with an "essentialist" understanding of culture: "the idea that a person from a given culture is essentially different from someone with another cultural background" (p. 73). An essentialist approach to culture focuses on group behaviors rather than considering personal choices and preferences and may reduce culture to one single representation (Holliday, 2010). This can lead to the "othering" of people from certain cultures (i.e., when a group of people is set apart from the majority society) and often attributing negative characteristics through stereotyping.

When considering the portrayal of Indigenous peoples in texts and tasks used in the classroom, both stereotyping and othering are not uncommon in teaching materials. Words such as *we*, *us*, and *our* are widely used about the majority society, whereas the Indigenous group is referred to as *them* (Smith, 2012, p. 37). Research published in Norway has shown that textbook representations of Indigenous peoples have tended toward the stereotypical rather than encouraging insight into the diversity of Indigenous ways of living and thinking (Brown & Habegger-Conti, 2017; Eriksen, 2018; Lund, 2016; Olsen, 2017). One-sided representations may reduce cultures to specific, often exotic characteristics rather than looking at present-day ways of living and ways of thinking (Brown & Habegger-Conti, 2017). These same tendencies can be seen in studies of textbooks in other countries—for example, Clark's (2007) discussion of representations of Aboriginal peoples in textbooks used historically and in present-day Canada.

In the classroom, cultures should instead be approached from a “nonessentialist” perspective, meaning that they are dynamic and complex and cut across national boundaries. Dervin (2016a) discusses how, rather than talking of a single “diversity,” we should talk of “diversities,” thus avoiding essentialist attitudes where “the other is often imprisoned in the straitjackets of a homogenized ‘diversity,’ the majority can freely claim to be ‘normal,’ ‘not visible’ and thus not needing special attention” (p. 28). In teaching about cultures, teachers should portray individuals as moving in and out of different roles depending on context. People from different national backgrounds may belong to similar cultures in relation to, for example, ways of living or sporting interests. As a step toward bringing these diversities in culture into the classroom when working with topics relating to Indigenous peoples, an *indigenization* of teaching materials may be required. This means using a range of authentic teaching materials in which Indigenous voices are included and given equal weight to majority voices, referencing Indigenous perspectives on topics, and including texts written by Indigenous authors (Olsen, 2017, p. 72). Teachers should be aware of including Indigenous voices also in topics where the curriculum does not necessarily specify that they should be included, but where Indigenous perspectives on issues can be expected, such as on economic issues involving mining on Indigenous land in Australia or pipeline construction in North America. Including these perspectives give pupils greater insight into the complexities and challenges of societies in the English-dominant world.

In addition to consideration of how the individual can relate to diverse cultures and perspectives, an understanding of the fluid, dynamic, and transnational aspect of cultures can help pupils accept that others are neither worse nor better than themselves, which may in turn lead to understanding of and a revision of unequal power relations (Dervin, 2016b, p. 6). Inequality in the balance of power is a characteristic of relations between Indigenous and majority society historically and in the present day, and although it is important to consider similarities between peoples and cultures, at the same time there should be a recognition that differences do exist, given that to ignore these can create and perpetuate power imbalances. Especially when working with topics involving peoples who historically have experienced oppression by another cultural group, awareness and discussion of difference can bring inequalities to light. This discussion can include reference to relations between the languages of the colonizers and Indigenous languages. Pupils can be made aware of how the colonial languages, of which English is a prime example, could be used to enforce “injustice, inequality, and hierarchy that privileges those able to use the dominant language” (Phillipson, 2013, p. 1). Analysis of teaching materials shows that they often skim over issues such as racism and colonial oppression (Smith, 2012, p. 37), and although pupils do discuss the effects of colonization, the story is often told from Western perspectives—for example, that Columbus

“discovered” the Americas. In the Norwegian context, colonization is often seen as something that happens overseas and is not discussed in the context of the Sámi peoples in Norway (Olsen, 2017, p. 83).

In addition to access to a range of authentic source materials, dialogue is an essential element in the development of intercultural competence. Intercultural competence is not a skill that can be acquired through individual study; it is formed through communication with others, where different attitudes and perspectives meet and dialogue “lays the ground for the formation of values and democratic thinking” (Hoff, 2018, p. 80). It is through these meetings with individuals from other cultural backgrounds and the potential misunderstandings, communication successes, and breakdowns that will happen that learning about other cultures can occur (Dervin, 2016a, pp. 83–84). Difficult topics relating to Indigenous peoples should not be avoided; dialogue that challenges outdated ideas and stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples can have great value and promote personal growth and awareness among pupils.

This section has suggested some aspects of intercultural competence that relate to the teaching about Indigenous peoples in the EFL classroom. Pupils enter the classroom with different viewpoints, levels of knowledge, experiences, and cultural backgrounds as well as different academic levels, meaning there is no common starting point for the development of intercultural competence. Pupils develop skills at different rates, making intercultural competence a lifelong learning goal, part of a never-ending cycle in which previous knowledge is gradually replaced with new (Moeller & Nugent, 2014, pp. 5–6), rather than the aim of a particular semester or school year. Teachers’ goal must be to encourage and stimulate personal development in their pupils. The following section suggests practical approaches for how this may be achieved.

3 | PRACTICAL APPROACHES FOR TEACHING ABOUT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE CLASSROOM

James A. Banks (1989, pp. 245–255) has created a four-level model for multicultural curricula, which may be used in the assessment of current course content and in planning the creation of good teaching modules:

1. The Contributions Approach
2. The Additive Approach
3. The Transformation Approach
4. The Social Action Approach

Level 1 has limited integration of content about minority cultures into the curriculum, often only in connection with certain days of the year or well-known people. Level 2 includes more content, but this is often limited to one teaching module, separate from other course content. Level 3 includes structural reform that “changes the basic assumptions of the curriculum and enables students to view concepts, issues, themes, and problems from several ethnic perspectives and points of view” (p. 250). Level 4 requires pupils’ active engagement in the topics being taught, with the aim “to educate students for social criticism and social change and to teach them decision-making skills” (p. 253). To encourage pupils’ development of intercultural competence, teachers should create teaching modules that can be placed at levels 3 and 4 of Banks’ model. However, a consideration of the other two levels may be useful when assessing the degree to which content about minority cultures is found in current teaching modules and when

considering how the teaching materials included in these modules can be further developed to include minority perspectives.

Levels 1 and 2 involve the integration of content about minority cultures into the mainstream curriculum while at the same time leaving it unchanged in terms of structure, goals, and characteristics. Teaching about minority cultures and inclusion of minority perspectives in the classroom is restricted to certain days, weeks, or years or to certain well-known persons who are chosen for being part of mainstream consciousness, rather than for their relevance or importance within the minority group. Larger issues such as racism and colonial oppression are often skimmed over and stereotypes may be reinforced (Banks, 1989, pp. 245–250). Teaching materials at levels 1 and 2 are often essentialist in their approaches to minority cultures and reduce diverse and complex cultures to one single voice and identity. Therefore, these should be avoided by teachers aiming to develop pupils' intercultural competence.

Good teaching materials to encourage the development of intercultural competence should be placeable at levels 3 and 4 of Banks's model. The third level, the Transformation Approach, encourages pupils to view concepts and ideas from multiple perspectives. Teaching materials should offer engagement with minority perspectives in texts created by authors from the minority group. In the Transformation Approach these voices are given equal weight with the majority voices to avoid a single perspective dominating (Banks, 1989, pp. 250–252). The fourth level of Banks's model, the Social Action Approach, requires pupils to build on their acquired knowledge and use it to plan how they can make a difference in their society to improve the conditions for minority groups (Banks, 1989, pp. 252–255). Discussion of inequalities, power imbalances, and issues between minority groups and state or national government can contribute to pupils' personal development by promoting awareness of current affairs and encouraging pupils to become active members of society.

In teaching about Indigenous peoples in the classroom, Banks's (1989) levels 3 and 4 require an indigenization of teaching materials. In practice, this means that when choosing teaching materials for topics relating to Indigenous people's ways of living and thinking, teachers should choose primarily materials in which Indigenous peoples tell their own stories. When discussing colonies and colonization, it would be viewed not only through its effect on the colonizers but equally through its effect on Indigenous peoples (Olsen, 2017, p. 84). Although non-Indigenous perspectives can also be included, they should be one part of a variety of sources, rather than the primary source material on the topic.

Teachers should aim to expose pupils to as wide a range of voices and opinions as possible and expand pupils' understanding of the nature of minority societies and their complexities. The Norwegian curriculum, demanding that pupils gain insight into "ways of living, ways of thinking and communication patterns," requires pupils to develop awareness of diversities within Indigenous groups. By working with a wide variety of texts (written, oral, and visual) made by different individuals and groups, pupils should be able to reflect on the diverse nature of society and perspectives in that society. Within the framework of the school timetable and year, there will be limitations in the extent to which diversities can be portrayed; nevertheless, an awareness of diversities may encourage teachers to assess how cultures are being portrayed in teaching materials and encourage them to include a multiplicity of perspectives in the classroom.

Many websites can aid teachers in this work and can be used as a step toward an indigenization of the curriculum. An example of good Indigenous-made web-based resources are educational materials produced by the National Museum of the American Indian (in the United States) called "Native Knowledge 360°" (Smithsonian, 2019b). At the start of each unit are 10 points, called "Essential Understandings," about Indigenous peoples that are the foundation of

the teaching unit. These points cover cultural diversity, history from Native American perspectives, relations to homelands, identity, social structures, Indigenous governance, economic systems, languages and cultural practices, global connections, and citizenship (Smithsonian, 2019a). These points can be used actively by teachers in planning teaching because, in combination, they give a well-rounded and multifaceted overview of Indigenous cultures. The teaching materials, incorporating Native American narratives and source materials, focus on different nations and discuss historical and current issues with which Native peoples are concerned. The range of materials offers possibilities for including multiple perspectives on issues that affect different Indigenous peoples.

However, it is not sufficient to include Indigenous voices if stereotypes and imbalanced power relations are reinforced through classroom discussion and activities. To develop intercultural competence, a shift in ways of working with topics relating to Indigenous peoples in the classroom is also required. Indigenization of teaching materials also means creating tasks that encourage critical thinking and exploring ethical questions relating to Indigenous peoples. Pupils should be challenged with open-ended questions, questions that draw parallels between different Indigenous groups and that actively use their newly acquired knowledge. This may stimulate cross-curricular work, where pupils use knowledge gained in classes in, for example, social studies or history together with what they have learned in English classes. In the Norwegian context, this would encourage pupils to see connections between what they learn about Indigenous peoples in other parts of the world and the Sámi peoples in Norway.

In developing intercultural competence, it is important for pupils to reflect on their newfound knowledge and relate it to their own lives and the societies in which they live. This is primarily to avoid othering and the feeling that the issues they are learning about relate only to people living far away from their own locality, avoiding the *us* and *them* that is found in many textbooks. Pupils can learn to regard their own culture from a distance and with a critical eye through *decentering*, that is, an ability to look at one's own culture and assess it from perspectives that are outside of the culture. Classroom activities involving decentering may be a useful aid to understanding one's own privilege and position in mainstream society. Linked to these activities can be an understanding of the role language plays in shaping realities and Indigenous epistemologies (Battiste, 2013) and discussion of how colonization has affected Indigenous languages, as "linguistic imperialism interlocks with a structure of imperialism in culture, education, the media, communication" (Phillipson, 2013, p. 1). Pupils should become aware not only of how their own language shapes their ways of knowing and experiences, but also of how Indigenous languages shape Indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems. This can be encouraged by reading short stories, novels, lyrics, and poetry by Indigenous authors and discussing the ideas that they contain. Literature can give insight into ways of living and thinking that are difficult to access from outside the community.

In the creation of tasks, teachers can largely follow common practices in EFL didactics when working with cultural topics (Byram et al., 2002; Sandhaug & Munden, 2017), involving discussion, role-play, and other oral-based activities. Many topics are excellent openers for classroom debates, where multiple sides of the same issue may be explored. It is important in these discussions that all sides are given equal weight so that one particular viewpoint does not dominate. I would argue that discussion of colonization and privilege is an essential first step when working with topics relating to Indigenous peoples. This discussion should happen before pupils start work with the topic that is the focus of the teaching module. This is necessary to avoid a "whitestreaming" of the content, that is, a bias toward White and majority history and cultures to the detriment of minority perspectives (Eriksen, 2018, p. 36).

I have attempted to include these perspectives in the creation of my website, *Teach Indigenous Knowledge* (Murray, 2019). Indigenous-made source material is used, in so far as it is available, and questions require pupils to engage with the content of the multimodal texts on or linked to the website. General activities encourage discussion of “Western worldviews” and “Indigenous worldviews,” and pupils are encouraged to find similarities and differences, discuss why these exist, and then relate what they have learned to their own worldview. Links are also given to different source materials on racism toward Indigenous peoples and on White privilege to encourage teachers to discuss these topics in class. In materials focused on particular Indigenous groups, parallels are drawn between what is learned about Indigenous peoples in other parts of the world and in Norway. For example, a page on environmental issues encourages pupils to work with issues in North America and in Northern Scandinavia.

Tasks on the website are largely discussion based and involve *how* and *why* questions that encourage reflection. Below is an example of a task taken from the website, where pupils are encouraged to decenter themselves and reflect on their own culture. After a text and video introduction to Māori *mihi* (a formal speech of greeting where someone introduces themselves and talks about their family and where they come from), the pupils are asked,

3a. In your community, when someone new arrives, how are introductions done? What should the new arrival do and say to be accepted into the community?

3b. Write a guide on how to be accepted into your community for someone who has never been there before. (Murray, 2019)

The aims of this task are to make pupils think about their own cultural practices from an outside perspective and to take a critical stance. The video that accompanies the text is made by a Māori girl about *mihi*, encouraging pupils to engage with a concept in Te Reo Māori (the Māori language) and what it means for the Māori community. Community here is understood as the Indigenous community and “someone new” as the settler. In this approach, the majority community perspective is no longer dominant, but the Indigenous community is put in the central position, a step toward redressing the balance of power.

4 | CONCLUSION

Intercultural understanding and communicative competence are vital skills for our pupils to develop given that they will live their adult lives in a multicultural and ever-changing world. Social identities are not static, and pupils will develop their own identities and interact with people of different and changing identities throughout their lives. Activities in the classroom should be tailored to developing pupils’ intercultural competence through exposure to texts and tasks that increase intercultural understanding, giving pupils access to as wide a range of voices and experiences as possible, and letting them become acquainted with a variety of social identities as well as exploring their own. Learning activities that promote dialogue are essential, because it is in the meeting with others that intercultural competence can develop.

This article has given some practical suggestions as to how theories relating to intercultural competence can be used in finding and developing teaching materials for topics relating to Indigenous peoples for the EFL classroom. These approaches can help teachers create better teaching materials about Indigenous peoples, requiring a greater level of engagement and

understanding from pupils, and in line with curriculum requirements. Although the examples here are related to the Norwegian curriculum, the principles have a general application to all classrooms where topics relating to ethnic minorities are covered and can be included as part of teachers' toolkits when planning their teaching.

5 | THE AUTHOR

Helen Margaret Murray works at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, in Trondheim, Norway. She works in the English section and is also leader of the interdisciplinary research group Indigenous Topics in Education. Her research interests include curriculum and textbook analysis, and didactical perspectives on teaching about minority cultures.

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