Culture and Identity through English as a Lingua Franca: Rethinking Concepts and Goals in Intercultural Communication
Will Baker. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015.

Reviewed by Sibylle Ratz. Edinburgh Napier University. UK.

This book combines theoretical and practical aspects of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and critically discusses a multitude of studies from intercultural communication, applied linguistics and ELF. The research draws from the author’s experience of teaching English in Thailand and his research in culture, identity and communication.

Chapter one explores various definitions of the term ELF and gives an overview of the book with the first part relating to various areas of ELF research in theory, and the second part offering more practical contributions to ELF and English language teaching.

Chapter two addresses points of convergence and divergence between research in ELF and intercultural communication. Both research areas focus on how successful communication is achieved and explore the relationship between language and identity. Both view identity from a postmodern, fluid perspective. However, while intercultural communication often starts from a perspective of difference, in ELF research the interest lies in shared linguistic resources and communicative strategies.

Chapter 3 presents various characterisations of culture (as product, discourse, practice, and ideology) and explores links between culture, nation and globalisation, which inform the global flows theory. It is suggested that complexity theory is a useful metaphor for thinking about culture, as this allows for a holistic approach, where small changes can impact the overall system and the system is in a constant state of emerging. Complexity theory is proposed to also be very compatible with the dimension of language, which in itself can be conceptualised as a system. Thus, culture and language can be seen as nested systems. These conceptualisations inform current research in ELF and it is taken for granted that the relationship between language and culture is created anew in each instance of communication.

Chapter four deals more specifically with identity and its links to culture through ELF. Identity is viewed from a poststructuralist perspective as constructed, multiple and negotiated. Language and discourse, as well as a complex net of cultural and group identities, are all seen as essential for identity construction. Baker argues that ELF communications occur in multilingual and multicultural settings and that culture, identity and language interact in multiple ways and must be approached holistically.

Chapter five deals with the implications of ELF research for conceptualising intercultural competence. The focus is on how successful intercultural communication can be achieved given that culture and identity have been characterised as fluid and complex. Baker describes the split between intercultural competence, which is concerned with the ability to interact with people from other cultures, and communicative competence where the focus is on linguistic competence. The author then explores Byram’s model of intercultural communicative competence, which seeks to resolve this dichotomy by suggesting a set of linguistic and intercultural skills needed to become an intercultural mediator. However, Baker posits that this model still presupposes national cultural borders and is less appropriate to ELF. Additionally, he adds that the importance of linguistic skills is different in ELF where the role of grammar has been described as functional rather than prescriptive. Recent alternatives more suited to ELF have been suggested through Canagarajah’s performative competence, Kramsch’s symbolic competence, and other theories of pragmatic or interactional competence.

Baker proceeds to introduce his own model of Intercultural Awareness (ICA), which focusses on the fluid relationship of culture, language and communication. The model consists of 12 components on three different levels, with level one aimed at understanding one’s own culture and an often essentialist understanding of the other culture. Level 2 moves beyond generalisations and describes the ability to mediate between specific cultures. Level three aims at a poststructuralist understanding of the emergent natures of culture, language and communication. Learners, according to Baker’s model, who reach level 3 will have gained the ability to mediate and negotiate between different emergent communication modes and cultural frames of reference. However, not all individuals will progress through all levels or in the prescribed order.

Chapters six and seven are more practical in nature and address the consequences of ELF and ICA research for teaching English.

Chapter six presents an overview of recent interests in ELF including the importance of local contexts, as well as a focus on the process of learning and communication (rather than specific fixed sets of linguistic forms or cultural norms). Baker suggests five pedagogical strands to bridge the gap between linguistic issues and intercultural communication and to develop ICA: Exploring the complexity of local cultures; exploring cultural representations in language learning materials; exploring cultural representations in the media and arts; making use of cultural informants; and engaging in intercultural communication.

In chapter seven Baker presents an example of a course in ELF and ICA for language learners in Thailand where topics centre around the awareness of culture, the individual and communication. An evaluation of the course shows that ICA and the five pedagogical strands outlined above could be usefully translated into course materials. While there is little development of ICA attitudes measured through questionnaires (most students remained at level 2 throughout the course), the forum discussions reveal that some students developed a deeper understanding of the relationship between language, culture and identity in communication. The course was generally rated positively by students and teachers.

Overall, this book provides a very insightful and extensive discussion of culture, identity and communication in relation to ELF. The first part of the book will be extremely useful for advanced students and researchers wishing to fully engage with these research areas. The final practical chapters will be of interest to instructors of ELF and provide an application of Baker’s model of ICA. However, the underlying dilemma of how to actually teach ELF from a linguistic point of view remains unresolved and Baker himself admits that “more attention would need to be given to language forms if this programme was extended” (229).

I declare that this submission has not been previously published and is not being considered for publication elsewhere.

Biography:

Sibylle Ratz studied in Germany, Russia and the UK and has worked as a teacher, translator, course coordinator and lecturer in Germany and Scotland. She is employed at Edinburgh Napier University as the module leader for the German modules and the programme leader for the undergraduate degree programme “International Business Management and Language”. She also teaches on “Intercultural Training for the Year Abroad” where she is the contact person for students of German. Sibylle is currently working towards a PhD at London Metropolitan University in the field of second language identity in multilingual contexts.