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Intercultural Competence Past, Present and Future

Respecting the Past, Problems in
the Present and Forging the Future

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Chapter 12
Intercultural Competence and Parsnip: Voices From Teachers of English in Australia

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12.1 Introduction

The globalized era together with demographic, geographical, and structural changes to English has reshaped the landscape of English language teaching (ELT) and emphasized the importance of preparing language learners for intercultural communication. Research has shown that without intercultural communication, academic success and life satisfaction are hard to achieve (Young, Sercombe, Sachdev, Naeb, & Schartner, 2013). However, in order to engage successfully in intercultural communication, language learners need intercultural competence. Intercultural competence (IC) is variously defined; however, here it refers to "being aware that cultures are relative. That is, being aware that there is no one 'normal' way of doing things, but that all behaviours are culturally variable" (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 24). It is also understood as the ability to interact, communicate, and work effectively with people from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds both in local and international contexts (Sharifian, 2009).

Thus, IC has been highlighted as an appropriate goal for language learning (e.g., Byram, 1997, 2012; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Despite this, intercultural teaching material is still rare (cf. Diaz, 2015). Textbooks which have always been part of foreign language teaching materials in many educational institutions have been of limited use in developing the aspects of intercultural understanding that help facilitate intercultural competence (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

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Language teaching resources, as argued by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), which incorporate topics related to gender, social class, ethnicity, region, religion, and political affiliation inherently include variability of cultures in any context and can be exploited to facilitate intercultural competence. Nonetheless, not all topics are represented in language materials for some may be culturally sensitive and are likely to provoke cultural conflicts if not pragmatically addressed in class (Gray, 2002). PARSNIP (*Pork, Alcohol, Religion, Sex, Narcotics, Ism,* and *Politics*) was coined by Gray (2002) to refer to the seven most observed taboo topics that have been widely avoided in ELT. Gray coined the concept to create "one size fits all" materials (Gray, 2002, p. 159). For publishers, the avoidance of these issues means their products can reach as many potential consumers across cultures as possible (Gray, 2002). However, debates surrounding whether or not these culturally sensitive topics should be represented in ELT materials and addressed in class remain controversial yet under-discussed. On the one hand, taboo topics can create conflicts and discourage consumers from purchasing materials when they find hard to cope with (Gray, 2002); on the other hand, a textbook which excludes thought-provoking issues and taboos is bland or boring (Leather, 2003).

This study aims to investigate teachers' voices regarding PARSNIP and intercultural competence within their existing curriculum. To be more specific, it addresses the responses of teachers of English in Australia to PARSNIP and the extent to which PARSNIP has been and should be incorporated in their teaching for the development of intercultural competence.

12.2 Theoretical Framework

12.2.1 ELT and Intercultural Competence in Australia

Australia is a country where "the multicultural fabric of the society has been well established" (Sharifian, 2014, p. 35). Due to the changing patterns of the Australian immigration, the ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity is significant in the Australian primary and secondary schools (Collins & Reid, 2012), and many Australia's teachers in general come from non-English-speaking countries in Asia and Africa (Collins, 2012). Specifically, in ELT, Sharifian (2014) observes that many teachers of English in the country have different cultural linguistic backgrounds who have grown up and learned English in countries other than Australia.

Reflecting on its diversity, Australian schooling is attempting to cultivate interculturality and places emphasis on facilitating students' awareness and understanding of cultural differences and similarities to enhance their self-respect and appreciation for others' values, practice, and attitude (Harbon & Moloney, 2015). Furthermore, higher education in Australia accentuates that IC and critical thinking about culture should go hand in hand (Moloney & Hui, 2015). It is specifically suggested that teachers provide students with opportunities for critical observations

of language and culture and for cultural meaning negotiation practice to develop intercultural competence (ibid).

In the field of ELT in Australia, regardless of the sociocultural diversity and intercultural learning goal, the presence of British English or American English rather than Australian English, as Sharifian (2014) notes, is obvious in ELT textbooks. In order to better address intercultural competence in language education, there are several suggestions, one of which is treating English as a pluricentric language, focusing on students' intercultural communication skills (Sharifian, 2014). In doing this, according to Diaz (2015), the development of teaching resources can be a starting point to move from information-oriented to IC-oriented practice in class. However, Diaz (2015), in her own study, found that selecting, adapting, and using interculturally oriented teaching resources remain challenging. The challenges lie in the availability, suitability, and teachers' readiness to develop and implement (inter)cultural materials and activities in order to develop IC. These facts highlight the need for teachers to receive professional development as to how personally engage in adapting available resources to make the most of teaching materials as well as teachers' potential to provide intercultural materials which suit their students' needs and context.

In Australia, ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) focuses on EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and general English for international students, migrants, refugees, and tourists. As such, ELICOS prepares students with skills and proficiency in English for further education, business, and living both in a multicultural Australia and elsewhere. The reason is after completing their studies, students will return to their home or move to other countries. In other words, understanding linguistic and cultural diversity should be targeted in ELICOS (see, for more description of ELICOS, Hatoss, 2006) which implicitly or explicitly regards intercultural competence as one of the ultimate goals.

12.2.2 PARSNIP in ELT

Recently a group of teachers in Australia have created two series of activity book on PARSNIP. In the foreword of the first book entitled *Parsnips in ELT: Stepping Out of the Comfort Zone (Vol. 1)*, it is highlighted that what is considered controversial and untouchable varies across time as the world has become more homogenized (Smith, 2015). While it might be true that some "controversial" topics no longer are controversial as time goes by, it is certainly not due to the world which has become homogenized but rather due to "super-diversity" (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1024).

In this super-diverse world, classrooms are our students' social meeting interface where they can encounter and negotiate different cultures (Pratt, 1999). Classrooms are also connected to wider contexts which cannot be ignored. Thus, teachers, as intercultural mediators, need to prepare a space for students to begin this journey of negotiating different values embedded in an array of contexts and explore cultural diversity through many topics including PARSNIP. For intercultural language

learning to take place, teachers can engage students by asking questions of "why" and "how" (How did I interpret the writer's/speaker's meaning? Why did I interpret this event/text in this way? How was the meaning different from what I expected? How did I respond and why?, etc.) and go beyond questions of "what" (What did I see? What did I think? What did I feel?, etc.) ("Module 2 - Exploring intercultural language teaching and learning," 2007).

Over the years PARSNIP has been considered as "taboo topics" (Gray, 2002) and extended differently in different contexts, which reveals its limitations, and that taboo topics are culturally and socially constructed. For example, Gray (2002) includes anarchy, AIDS, and Israel on the list of taboo topics in the ESL classroom. In a different Western context, Keturi and Lehmonen (2011) add suicide, violence, abortion, cursing, and smoking in an analysis of four series of EFL textbooks published in Finland by Finnish publishers for junior to senior high school English language learners. In a more comprehensive study, Keturi and Lehmonen (2012) investigated forty-four Finnish EFL textbook series for upper secondary school and interviewed two book authors. They found that there was an absence of topics such as incest, pedophilia, taboo language, sexual abuse, offending political opinions, or religious beliefs in the textbooks. They also observed that topics that both authors consider to be either taboo or borderline taboo include bodily effluvia, sex, and taboo language. They, however, have different opinions on these topics as they consider alcohol, tobacco, and body parts such as breasts and buttock as taboo topics and bullshit, asshole, hell, and menstruation as mild taboo language. Zaid (1999) elucidates 16 cultural values of non-Islamic societies which can be offensive to Muslims, namely, boyfriend/girlfriend, dating, beach/bikini wear, the consumption of wine and alcohol, dancing, hugging, a picture of an uncovered breast, fortune-tellers and predicting the future, a cross worn by a man subliminally conveys an advocacy of a Christian perspective, the Christian church, sexism, superstitions, guns, teen suicide, life after death, and birth control.

Gobert (2015) argues that although all of these listed topics above are taboo in Gulf Arab Muslim classrooms, they might not be in other Muslim or Arab contexts such as Pakistan or Lebanon. The use of PARSNIP as a filter to avoid culture clash is problematic. It unveils a generalization by publishers which may ultimately be just another example of stereotyping. Thus, language teachers should be more critical of and reflective on this practice since they are in a much better position to change this drawback. Moreover, Hook (2011) puts forth that "the unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex, and class is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable and that emotions and passions will not be contained" (p. 93). However, Mambu (2014) argues that

> although not all teachers have to include issues of PARSNIP in any ELT-related class [. . .] in an ever-pluralizing society of our time in this 21st century, it is crucial that English language teachers or teacher educators are better equipped with the ability to engage with, and reflect upon, such issues, especially spirituality and/or religion, in class. (p. 180)

After all, teachers play an important role in constructing a cultural environment through a range of work including selecting videos, collecting newspapers, planning

seating, and setting tasks that are of social, cultural, and educational values (Duff & Uchida, 1997).

In short, avoiding PARSNIP in teaching does not prevent teachers from facing conflicts in classroom. Instead, it takes them to ignore potential learning opportunities which can be used to prompt students to develop skills, attitude, and awareness to manage their stereotypes and prejudice when facing controversial issues such as taboos. It is also important to locally interpret PARSNIP as language teachers need to reflect on their immediate and wider social, linguistic, and cultural context(s) and guide their students to do the same by engaging them to deal with complex or confronting issues in their learning. As Gray (2010) emphasizes, the cultural content should always be meaningful to the learners. The decision of what kind of cultural content might be appropriate is best reached locally by local teachers for whom English may have a range of meanings other than those determined for them by British ELT publishers. Thus, it is important to gain an insight into local teachers' voices on PARSNIP in the context of Australia.

12.3 Methodology

12.3.1 Context and Participants

This study collected data from five teachers of Australian (1), Iranian (1), Saudi Arabic (1), and Vietnamese (2) backgrounds who are currently involved in ELICOS in Melbourne, Australia. They volunteered to participate in the study, and all shared one feature: not having been informed of PARSNIP before. Below is a summary of their personal information together with the pseudonyms used in the study (Table 12.1).

They were teaching general English (intermediate level) to international students at the same language center that utilizes internationally marketed English textbooks in Melbourne.

12.3.2 Research Questions

The study aims to gain answers to the following research questions surrounding two main issues: teachers' response to PARSNIP and their integration of PARSNIP in practice.

Teachers' response to PARSNIP

1. To what extent do they believe PARSNIP should be addressed in ELT to facilitate intercultural competence?
2. What does PARSNIP mean to teachers of different cultural backgrounds?

Table 12.1 A summary of English teachers' personal information in the PARSNIP study

Name	Gender and age	Cultural backgrounds	Qualifications	TESOL experience outside Australia	TESOL experience in Australia
Helen	Female, 25	Australian	PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics	1 year in China	2 years in Australia
Marzieh	Female, 32	Iranian	PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics	9 years in Iran	2 years in Australia
Leila	Female, 36	Arabic	PhD candidate in TESOL	6 years in Saudi Arabia	4 years in Australia
Huy	Male, 31	Vietnamese	MATESOL	7 years in Vietnam	3 years in Australia
Thu	Female, 42	Vietnamese	PhD in TESOL	7 years in Vietnam	8 years in Australia

3. What issues, if any, have impacted teachers' decisions to avoid or address PARSNIP?
   Teachers' integration of PARSNIP in practice
4. To what extent do they address PARSNIP in class?

12.3.3   Data Collection Tools, Procedure, and Analysis

This study employed the NAR (narrative action reflection) workshop (Lorenzo, 2005) to gather data and the analysis procedure of the study followed the NAR workshop (Lorenzo, 2010) and complemented it with in-depth interviews. A snapshot of the research methodology is as follows (Table 12.2):

According to Lorenzo (2010), NAR workshops can be used as a data-gathering tool or data trigger. In this study, one of the researchers conducted a one-hour workshop on what is meant by PARSNIP, how it has been discussed in ELT, how it is relevant to intercultural competence, and which activities can be implemented in class. The teachers were also given materials on PARSNIP that outline some sample activities. They then were engaged in a small group discussion right after the workshop to share ideas on whether or not they believed PARSNIP should be avoided in ELT materials, what PARSNIP meant to them, whether they had addressed these "cultural taboo" topics in class so far, and to what extent they thought PARSNIP would help enhance intercultural competence.

The second small group discussion was conducted one week after the first workshop. It aimed to yield more data on how the PARSNIP materials and the workshop informed them of the tools for their current ELT materials evaluation and their teaching pedagogy as well as their concerns/issues regarding PARSNIP and intercultural competence in ELT. After that, an in-depth interview was conducted

Table 12.2 Research methodology

Data production			
Data generation	Data triggers	Facilitation techniques	Data-capturing method
Narrative telling reflection workshop on PARSNIP and intercultural competence	Materials on PARSNIP Sample activities on how to address PARSNIPS in class	Small group discussion Discussion 1: Right after the workshop Discussion 2: 1 week after the workshop	Audio recording
⬇			
Interviews			

with each teacher to clarify certain points they made at the workshops and elicit elaboration.

12.4 Results

The findings were grouped into four main sections elucidating teachers' responses to PARSNIP, which were collected during the workshop and discussion, and teachers' integration of PARSNIP in the followed-up discussion and interviews.

12.4.1 PARSNIP Across Teachers of English in Australia

During the first discussion, the teachers revealed variations in their interpretations of PARSNIP and added further taboo issues, from their own personal perspectives and the current curriculum (Table 12.3).

It is evident from the summary that not all elements in PARSNIP are considered offensive to teachers. Here are the teachers' key responses related to the different taboo topics of PARSNIP.

First, pork is, to all five participants, a non-taboo topic. They observed that pork and other types of meat such as beef and chicken are represented in ELT materials. However, there was a shift in addressing pork when teachers, Marzieh and Leila, moved to another context. In Iran and Saudi Arabia, according to them, topics related to pork and beef are strictly monitored and avoided as they are connected to taboos in the Islamic culture. Also, the ELT textbooks, which are mostly censored by the government and republished to suit the local cultures, have cut off those topics. Yet, in a completely different context, Australia, the two teachers found it normal to talk

Table 12.3 A summary of findings on taboo topics across teachers of English in Australia

Teachers	Which PARSNIP topics are taboos?	Reasons	Other taboos
Helen	S: Sex P: Politics R: Religion	Sex-related topics are private, personal and uncomfortable to discuss even with friends.	Topic Age -> It may single out some mature-aged students, and it is a taboo to many Australians.
			Disabilities
			Swearwords
			Nonverbal offensive behaviors
		Politics-related topics can be out of hand and off the focus easily.	Visuals Provocative visuals
		Religion: God, Jesus Christ, Allah as exclamation should be avoided in class on the part of the teachers.	
Marzieh	S: Sex	Sex-related topics are sensitive and do not promise engaged discussion.	Visuals: Bikinis, intimate images, and body figures
Leila	S: Sex R: Religion	Sex-related and gender topics are sensitive and personal	Topics and visuals Violence, dancing, and boys and girls in bars
		Religion-related topics might provoke a lot of explanation in the part of the teachers and do not engage students.	
Huy	P: Politics (communism and democracy)	The teacher has little knowledge in politics and the discussion might be out of hand.	Topics and visuals Age and poverty -> They might upset some students and relate to some specific countries.
Thu	S: Sex R: Religion P: Politics	These topics are sensitive and rarely addressed in textbooks.	Topic Gender (gay, lesbian) -> It may single out some individuals and create irritation if not approached appropriately.

about pork and beef. Huy elaborated on this element by suggesting the variation in the notion of meat. As Huy observed and experienced, pork is not a taboo to him, his colleagues, and many students in his teaching context and has not so far created any conflicts, but dog and cat meat have. Huy shared that

> in a country where dogs and cats are valued pets like Australia, I find it immoral to mention those types of meat though I know in some cultures where my international students come from, dog or cat meat is acceptable. Yet, I try to avoid as it may cause discomfort to both whether they approve or disapprove of the practice. (Discussion data)

Therefore, pork is not a universal taboo; instead, the types of meat considered as taboos are determined divergently across cultures. All the teachers in the discussion

agreed that an understanding of students' cultural backgrounds is essential in the teaching process.

Second, alcohol is not a taboo to the teachers either. To them, the internationally marketed textbooks that they have used sometimes contain some images of beer and people holding champagne at a party. Even though alcohol is sensitive to some cultures/countries (e.g., Iran and Saudi Arabia), the teachers all found the topic about alcoholism, food, and drink educationally relevant. Thu demonstrated that some discussion questions about whether alcohol should be avoided at some parties or how alcoholism should be dealt with in Australia are of relevance to both speaking and writing tasks.

Third, religion is culturally sensitive to Helen, Leila, and Thu. These three teachers admitted that as students come from different cultures and teachers themselves do not have sufficient knowledge about different religions, they avoided it to prevent themselves from mentioning something that is unintentionally offensive to some students. Also, they were afraid that discussion about religion might be out of focus and control, posing difficulty to both teachers and students. While Helen, Leila, and Thu were reluctant to discussing religions, Huy strongly supported that religion has been and should be discussed in class to raise students' awareness of different worldviews, cultural values, and beliefs. He cited an example of Christmas which should not be taught as a mere feast when people party and exchange gifts but as a religious festival; hence, stories related to God, how Christ was born, and relevant facts about Christian teachings should be presented. He also added that occasionally, he reflected on the Bible teachings and his religious background as a Catholic to share educational lessons and provoked discussions surrounding lessons about religious diversity. For Leila and Marzieh, addressing religious topics was not actually a taboo at all as in their home cultures, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Islamic practices were explicitly represented across materials. In Australia, they felt comfortable talking about their religious backgrounds and festivals when asked by students and sometimes posed some reflective questions in class such as whether and how students celebrate Vesak, Christmas, or Ramadan in their own cultures. Nonetheless, Leila and Marzieh shared that no more in-depth discussion on religion was integrated for the fear of unintentionally touching on sensitive issues among different belief systems. They admitted that they did not feel comfortable talking deeply about or praising their religion as it may sound like promoting Muslim or provoke some controversial issues such as people's attitudes to Muslim and the association of Muslim and terrorism throughout the discussion.

Fourth, sex is the most fully agreed taboo topic across the participants except for Huy. In the discussion, the five teachers supported that the topic is not common among their friends and family, let alone in class. In addition, textbooks do not address sex, and this topic may bring about certain awkward atmosphere including negative feelings of discomfort, shyness, and offense and does not promise engaged discussion among students. Thu stated that

> sex is a personal and private issue that we rarely talk about in public and talking about it may cause some misunderstanding and our self-representation in public as well. Everyone has his/her own secret, so we can teach students that sex is among those secrets and they had

better avoid asking sensitive questions since they may cause offence or discomfort to the interlocutors. (Discussion data)

Huy, in contrast, was totally convinced that topics about abortion, cohabitation, same sex marriage, and sex education are common in language class. Huy believed that these topics will allow students to express their viewpoints about socially debatable issues for they may encounter these issues in reality. Thus, knowing how to express their opinions pragmatically should be taught at school. Another issue that emerged during the discussion is the selection of appropriate visuals in class. Sometimes the topic is not necessarily about sex or an overly romance but provocative images such as girls wearing bikinis and accentuated body figures that may evoke certain associations in students. These images should be carefully censored by teachers in class.

Fifth, narcotics are regarded as normal to all the participants. Being against narcotics does not mean the absolute avoidance of the topic as it can promise numerous discussions and lends itself to various educational values. Helen, for instance, suggested that teachers could create some discussion questions about how to educate people awareness of narcotics and how to deal with it in reality. Huy added that supplementary materials based on newspapers and other mass media could help enhance reading practice and convey educational messages about the use of drugs among youngsters.

Sixth, -ism was seen as a vague concept to the five teachers. They clarified that there were numerous -isms related to religions, politics, and certain social beliefs. Nevertheless, the pivotal issue is how comfortable teachers and their students are when discussing those topics. There were two -isms substantially discussed in the workshop: racism and terrorism. Four teachers, Helen, Thu, Leila, and Marzieh, confessed that they avoided the two issues as they may trigger reflection on past experiences, for example, the 2014 terrorist attack in Sydney, Australia, caused by an Islamic individual. As a result, stereotypes and unpleasant association between Muslim and terrorism may arise uncontrollably. With regard to racism, Helen encountered a situation when some of her students complained about being treated unfairly by local people as they were Chinese. According to her, this can lead to "hatredness to the current society" (interview data). In contrast, Huy believed racism should be taught in class, for example, posing a reflective question of what can be considered racism. He said that "sometimes students do not intend to be discriminatory [. . .] they may comment on one's accent and it can be racist" (interview data). Racism, to him, can occur, so it is advisable to develop students' awareness of racist acts and empathy as sometimes people do not mean to be racist. It is our interpretation that also counts.

Seventh, politics is controversial among the participants. While Helen, Huy, and Thu were reluctant to the topic, Marzieh and Leila found it normal. To Helen, politics is avoidable as it may easily trigger conflicts even within one culture let alone different cultures in her multicultural class. Huy and Thu were used to refraining themselves from discussing communist topics in Vietnam; hence, political topics were subconsciously considered to be taboo. This finding makes it clear that

teachers' sociocultural backgrounds determine taboo and non-taboo issues in class. They have brought what they learned in Vietnam to Australia. Despite shifting the contexts, the teachers still feel reluctant to discussing an issue they believed to be avoided. In contrast, to Marzieh and Leila, politics is an ordinary topic which provides much space for discussion on the current local and international affairs.

12.4.2 PARSNIP, Teachers' Roles, and Intercultural Competence

In spite of viewing some of PARSNIP elements as culturally sensitive, all five teachers advocated that they should be addressed in class. To justify this argument, they reflected on their roles as teachers of English, the current sociocultural context, and the goal of teaching and learning English in a globalized era. Below is a summary of their rationale for the integration of PARSNIP in ELT for enhancing intercultural competence.

- *The roles of English teachers nowadays* include raising students' awareness of language and culture; cultivating manners and ethics through language education; widening students' worldviews; exposing them to linguistic and cultural diversity; educating them to become global citizens, respect diversity, and appreciate differences; and developing skills to deal with unexpected intercultural communication situations.
- *The sociocultural context* is signified by the advent of globalization, multilingualism, multiculturalism, and the popularity of online and offline communication across cultures.
- *The goal in ELT* entails intercultural competence (explicate one's own cultures, be aware of other cultures, avoid sensitive topics, negotiate cultural differences, and discuss different topics competently and pragmatically).

All five teachers emphasized that PARSNIP should be incorporated in ELT as the role of English teachers is not merely about teaching language. They acknowledged the need to raise students' awareness of diversity, in this case taboo variation across cultures. Students are expected to know that what is considered taboo to them might not be to others and vice versa. Thus, the ability to negotiate cultural differences and handle sensitive issues competently and appropriately is essential. Helen ascertained that "linguistic competence is insufficient, as teachers definitely do not want their students to be fluent fools – fluent in the language but do not know what to say in certain cultural situations." Here Helen's viewpoint echoes Bennett, Bennett, and Allen's (2003) observation of "the person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool" (p. 237). Agreeing with Helen, Leila added that "students at least need to know what topics are taboos when communicating with people of different cultures and how to explain themselves if miscommunication occurs." Huy highlighted that

if teachers do not teach students how to handle these topics in English, then who will [?] They will face these issues in their real life anyway, and it is not wise to avoid them. The more we avoid, the more problems students will face later when they are not well prepared. (Interview data)

Overall, taboo topics are regarded as essential for intercultural communication as "successful communication should be learned from reflection on miscommunication and misunderstanding" (Helen, interview data). Another reason is the fact that their own current classrooms in particular and in Australia in general are multilingual and multicultural which pose both opportunities for intercultural understanding and challenges in cultural conflicts. Henceforth, misunderstandings and miscommunication regarding cultural taboo issues can occur if students are not aware and fully prepared.

In terms of teaching goals, all teachers stressed that teaching English should go beyond linguistic fluency and accuracy. Instead, it is the intercultural competence that needs to be addressed and emphasized as one of the participants, Helen, reiterated, "global citizenship is what both teachers and students aim at" (interview data). Even though some of the participants admitted that they did not implement this goal to the full in all classes, they needed to pursue it regarding the status of English as a global language and the interrelationship of English and multiple cultures.

12.4.3   PARSNIP and Classroom Decision-Making in Practice

The discussion also revolved around what issues and possible challenges impacted their decisions to integrate PARSNIP and other culturally sensitive topics in ELT classes. The teachers listed out the following issues as decisive factors:

- *Students' cultural backgrounds* (age, levels of proficiency, and ethnicity): A thorough understanding of students' cultural backgrounds plays a significant role. The teacher participants fully agreed that students' cultural backgrounds determine how teachers approach the topic, how language should be articulated when they address the topic, and which images can be shown in class. Moreover, students' age and level of English proficiency help decide whether it is appropriate to discuss controversial issues or not.
- *The aims of the whole course and specific lessons*: The decision to incorporate further topics depends on course objectives. For example, if the course is about grammar or IELTS, then teachers will have little room to explore cultural issues.
- *Relevancy to the currently used ELT materials*: The choice of illustrated images, supplementary materials, redesigned tasks, and elaboration on those topics should be tied to and based on the themes or subthemes of the lessons. Otherwise, students will be perplexed and fail to gain the most out of the materials and activities.

- *Class experience*: Reflection on past experiences with the class is an important factor. Leila, for instance, encountered an unpleasant experience with gender issues when she mentioned same-sex marriage. One of her students expressed discontentment and emotional outburst on talking about people's attitudes to gay people in some societies as the topic, to a large extent, triggered his personal experience. Therefore, she tried to avoid the topic in class. Other teachers agreed that teachers, in designing tasks, would have a prediction about the extent to which the tasks suit the students' needs and work well in their class.
- *Potential for productive and interesting activities*: Whether the topic lends itself to relevant, helpful, and interesting activities is of significant consideration.
- *Teachers' knowledge, confidence, and teaching strategies*: It is obvious that if the teachers know little about a certain topic or feel uncomfortable talking about it, it is unlikely that they will bring it to class. All five teachers consider "sex" to be an uncommon topic even in their daily life, so they avoid it in class or misunderstanding may arise. Similarly, if the teachers were not interested in "politics," they would avoid it as much as possible. Also, how confident teachers can be in dealing with challenging topics is of importance. As a result, teachers' preparation, experience, and teaching strategies when unexpected scenarios arise will decide the presence of those topics in their tasks.
- *The availability of existing supplementary resources*: The participants were concerned about the materials and sample activities around PARSNIP and beyond. According to them, searching supplementary materials and devising extra activities is time-consuming. Henceforth, more guidelines and resources are critically needed for a successful integration of PARSNIP and intercultural competence.

To sum up, the workshop discussion was fruitful in revealing teachers' interests in exploring and integrating PARSNIP, their awareness of their roles, ELT and intercultural competence, and their concerns about the possibility of addressing taboo topics in class.

12.4.4 Teachers' Integration of PARSNIP in Practice: Reflection and Orientation

After the workshop and first discussion, the teachers were given further materials, both printed and nonprinted, on PARSNIP for another discussion 1 week after. They were invited to talk about their reflection on the workshop, materials, and past experiences and their orientation for future practice.

The teachers reported that they actually had addressed the taboo topics of PARSNIP. Some examples are talking about Ramadan (Leila); citing Bible teaching and stories about God and Christmas (Huy); dating online, voting rights, immigration policy (Helen); and drug trafficking (Thu). They all had positive reactions from the students. For example, in Huy's lesson about Christmas, he talked about the role

of religious festivals and beliefs in people's life and the history of God. On eliciting students' reflection and viewpoint, Huy perceived that students were engaged in the tasks and positive about expanding cultural knowledge.

The teachers also suggested different strategies and possible activities for their ELICOS classes. Each of the teacher participants shared their own activities that addressed PARSNIP and intercultural competence. They together discussed the pros and cons of the activities in relation to classroom context and lesson goal.

Below is a summary of strategies and example activities that the participants proposed (Table 12.4):

In addition to these activities, in the second workshop, the teachers discussed possible problems and proposed strategies to deal with potential conflicts or discontentment as far as culturally sensitive topics are concerned. Those include:

- Topic introduction – for example, "today we are going to discuss swearwords, is anyone not comfortable with the topic?" (Helen, discussion data).
- Clear explanation of the aim and rationale of the lesson and tasks – this helps make students convinced and aware of why and how they conduct the tasks.
- Attention to teachers' own choice of words and nonverbal behaviors on talking about sensitive topics.
- Acknowledgment of possible conflicts and offense – for instance, "this topic is quite sensitive, so if I unintentionally say something that might be inappropriate in your cultures, I apologize in advance" (Huy, discussion data).

The participants explicitly and implicitly advocated that taboo topics should be incorporated to develop students' intercultural competence in terms of awareness, attitude, knowledge, and communication skills. They also expressed their concerns over possible challenges including students' disengagement in the topics, discontentment at the teachers, and unmanageable discussion; as a result, several strategies outlined above can help minimize such challenges.

12.5   Discussion

The findings reveal that PARSNIP is, to the teachers, relatively reductionist and essentialist as there are further taboos that may be inappropriate in their teaching contexts. Those include age, disability, vulgar language, violence, poverty, and visual illustrations that provoke negative associations such as provocative body figures, bikinis, boys and girls in romance, and violent scenes.

The teachers decoded PARSNIP in terms of topics, language, and visuals, and at times, there is an inconsistency among the three. For instance, sex education can be a relevant discussion topic in class, but an explicit sex scene image is definitely a taboo. Some teachers' reluctance to exploring topics related to sex supports Hook's (2011) argument that teachers might be unwilling to address sex-related issues since they are afraid of not being able to control emotions and passions. Another example is a discussion on how people celebrate a Buddhist festival. Vesak is possible while

Table 12.4 Implementation of PARSNIP in activities by teachers

Strategies	Example topics	Example activities
Share self-culture with students	Culture Emails Politeness	List out some topics that are normally avoided in conversations in your own culture. Explain why.
Facilitate culture exchange		Talk about some festivals in your cultures.
		What are some activities people do in the festival? Do people dance? Drink wine?
Facilitate culture comparison		Do you find any similarities and differences between your and your friends' cultures?
Encourage culture understanding	Sex education Cohabitation Abortion Same-sex marriage	Should sex education be compulsory in high school education?
Elicit viewpoints		What are pros and cons of cohabitation?
Elicit speculations		Are you pro or against abortion? Justify your viewpoints.
		Is same-sex marriage accepted in your country? If yes, what is your view? If no, do you think it will be? Why or why not and what is your view? If you were the government of your home country, would you accept same-sex marriage?
Raise awareness of the functions of language and variations in seemingly offensive language use	Swearwords	What words or phrases seem offensive to you? How would you react if people used these words? Why do people swear? Do you swear? Does swearing show that you are bad people? What are the functions of swearwords?
Provoke thoughts on hypothesis/imagined scenarios		
Elicit self-reflection on language use		
Improve general knowledge	Cultural and religious festivals	What is the national religion in your country? Introduce to your class some religious festivals in your country. What are some festivals that you have attended in Australia? Do you celebrate them in your home country? If yes, is the way people celebrate it the same or different from that in Australia?

an image of Buddha beer can be offensive to Buddhist students (Thu). A quiz or supplementary reading about Jesus Christ and Christmas is interesting, but an overuse of such expressions as "oh my God" and "Jesus Christ" to convey certain

emotional states can be inappropriate in class, at least on the part of teachers (Helen). Therefore, taboo needs to be broken down to language use, topic, content, image use, and nonverbal communication.

The data indicate that the five teachers viewed some of the elements within PARSNIP culturally sensitive resulting in their avoidance especially for the topic religion. While Huy overtly shared his belief and used materials related to his belief, other teachers chose to avoid the topic or only openly shared their religious affiliation but did not engage the students in in-depth discussion on religion. The findings reinforce Mambu's (2014) argument that teachers should be prepared to engage students to reflect on topics related to spirituality and/or religion in class. In addition, as Purgason (1994), as cited in Mambu (2014), suggests, when teachers discuss topics related to religion, "students will not hear what the teacher says as propaganda or proselytizing" if all ideas by students are "welcomed, encouraged, and appreciated" (p. 32). However, Mambu (2014) warns that teachers still need to be cautious of power that they exercise when they are in class, and they have to make sure students have equal opportunities to share their perspectives. Thus, it is crucial to prepare teachers to be able to ethically deal with questions about religion and be mindful of power relations between them and students and between students and students. The preparation will not only help them develop students' IC but also hinder them from forcing their religious values to their students.

The activities, topics, and strategies in Table 12.4 are relevant to intercultural competence as they invite students to reflect on their own cultures, exchange worldviews, discuss global issues, explore the functions of language use, and play different cultural roles to negotiate their ideas. Nonetheless, there is still room for improving these activities by modifying teachers' questions. For instance, the questions can encourage students to explore the fundamental values and beliefs underlying those cultural practices such as why people in a culture drink wine in a festival, what the roles of wine are, and why it is so. Furthermore, the questions need to raise students' awareness of diversity and how different cultures are in contact. To be specific, one recommendation/suggestion is that teachers could ask how their religion influences their cultural daily practice, how their living in Australia raises their awareness and understanding of other religions, and how religions impact their language use such as "may God find you in good health" or "God bless you" instead of or in addition to asking students what their country's national religion is. The findings support Diaz's (2015) observation that teachers' readiness to develop and implement (inter)cultural materials and activities remains a challenge.

Although the teachers admitted that it is their students' cultural backgrounds that determine whether or not these topics are better avoided in class, it can be seen that their own cultures do play a role since teachers normally rely on their cultural experiences as the compass of what to tackle or not in class. For instance, the religious affiliation and religious experiences of Huy, Marzieh, and Leila influence how they deal with topics related to religion. In a former study by Sercu (2005), it is stated that teachers' IC practices are shaped and influenced by "the social, psychological and environmental realities of the school and classroom" (p. 174). Nevertheless, what was found in this study indicates that besides these realities, the

teachers' cultural backgrounds and identities also play a role in their enactment of IC through the application of PARSNIP. The findings are in line with the autoethnographic study by Siregar (2016) which demonstrated that the incorporation of teaching material related to PARSNIP was influenced by teachers' cultural backgrounds and identities.

12.6   Conclusions and Implications

The findings above answered the research questions in terms of the teachers' responses and interpretation of PARSNIP and their integration of PARSNIP activities as follows:

To what extent do they believe PARSNIP should be addressed in ELT to facilitate intercultural competence?

The teachers advocated that since taboo topics in general and PARSNIP in specific vary across cultures and are inevitable in everyday intercultural communication, addressing them in class is advantageous in multiple ways. Those include (i) raising students' awareness of culturally sensitive topics and variations in the notion of taboos across cultures and (ii) preparing them with strategies to deal with the topics appropriately and pragmatically to maintain harmonious relationship in intercultural exchange. In general, teachers are opposed to the avoidance of taboos in ELT as the more they are avoided, the more potential dangers students can encounter in reality due to a lack of preparation.

What does PARSNIP mean to teachers of different cultural backgrounds?

PARSNIP, despite being viewed as universal taboos (Gray, 2002), is interpreted differently across cultures and individuals. Teachers' varied responses on what is taboo reinforces the fact that taboo itself is a fluid, comprehensive and elusive concept as it is culturally specific and can be religious, dietary, or cultural. Some of the elements of PARSNIP are not taboos to the teachers while there are other elements that are considered potentially sensitive such as age, disabilities, violence, gender, and poverty. In their experience, not only topics but also the use of language and visuals should be handled with caution. Their reflection indicates that the interpretation of PARSNIP is context, culture, and individual specific.

What issues, if any, have impacted teachers' decisions to avoid or address PARSNIP?

As revealed by the five teachers, whether PARSNIP is addressed in their teaching or not does not lie in the fact that it is widely regarded as taboos but in a multitude of objective and subjective factors. They include the students' cultural backgrounds; the aims of the whole course and specific lessons; the relevancy to the currently used ELT materials; the class experience; the potential for productive and interesting

activities; the teachers' knowledge, confidence, and teaching strategies; and the availability of existing supplementary resources.

To what extent do they address PARSNIP in class?

The teachers had addressed these culturally sensitive topics intentionally or unintentionally in class. There have been negative and positive experiences in doing so, but they supported that had they been well prepared for tackling with these issues, they would have turned discussion or activities in a more engaging manner.

The teachers believed that PARSNIP and beyond, if being addressed appropriately in class, would foster students' understanding of different cultures and develop their intercultural competence in terms of awareness, attitudes, knowledge, and strategies.

They also came up with a range of activities and strategies including eliciting self-reflection, encouraging critical observation, facilitating cultural exchange, and explication of cultural practice, as well as drawing attention to language use, visuals, and different negotiation strategies.

In brief, PARSNIP is not homogenously interpreted as taboos across teachers of English in Australia. The findings illuminate the expansion and implications of PARSNIP in the current and future ELT practice as teachers acknowledged the pros of addressing global and local taboo issues in class for the development of intercultural competence. They also become cognizant of factors determining their decisions on whether or not an issue should be addressed to develop students' intercultural competence. The findings emphasize that teachers' awareness of PARSNIP will inform their roles as English teachers in today's era and in the future. The awareness will increase teachers' readiness to discuss global issues and controversial topics competently and pragmatically in English. Hence, teachers have to keep developing their questioning skills so that they can engage students in any debatable topics and empower their students to take actions and negotiate when facing cultural conflicts. It is implied that there is a real need for material development and professional development courses which can give teachers learning opportunities to reflect on the limitations of PARSNIP as well as its potentials as debatable topics that can develop students' IC when handled critically and ethically. In other words, what has been found regarding cultural taboo topics in this study opens a dimension of discussion on addressing intercultural communication and cultural conflicts, one of the challenges in ELT in the globalized era.

As discussed above, the study offers an insight into IC and PARSNIP. However, the study was conducted on a small number of teachers in an institution in Melbourne, Australia. Thus, further research is needed to confirm and expand on the findings of this study by incorporating more teachers' voices from different institutions in Australia and elsewhere.

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