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Culture in the EFL classroom at Universidad de La Salle: An innovation project

Diana Ariza*

ABSTRACT

Implementing cultural teaching strategies in an EFL classroom has been recently considered as a critical factor for involving students in a wider vision of learning a language. Teaching culture in a foreign language classroom makes a useful contribution to the understanding of this term and clarifies important issues about how to approach it and teach it. This article provides information about the preliminary findings of the first phase of a research project carried out with English teachers at Universidad de La Salle in order to diagnose the conception of culture, current teaching strategies and materials teachers are using to address culture in their practices.

Key words: Intercultural competence, target culture, awareness, approaches to teach culture.

LA CULTURA EN EL SALÓN DE CLASE EN EFL EN LA UNIVERSIDAD DE LA SALLE: UN PROYECTO INNOVADOR.

RESUMEN

Recientemente se ha considerado que implementar estrategias de enseñanza cultural en el salón de clases de EFL es un factor decisivo para inculcar a los estudiantes una visión más amplia sobre el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua. La enseñanza de la cultura en un salón de lengua extranjera brinda un aporte muy útil para la comprensión de este término y aclara temas importantes sobre cómo enfocarlo y enseñarlo. Este artículo proporciona información sobre los hallazgos preliminares de la primera fase de un proyecto de investigación llevado a cabo con profesores de inglés de la Universidad de La Salle con el fin de diagnosticar el concepto de cultura, estrategias actuales de enseñanza y los materiales que están empleando los profesores en su práctica diaria para enfocarse en la cultura.

Palabras clave: competencia intercultural, cultura objeto, conciencia, enfoques sobre la enseñanza de cultura.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing recognition nowadays among educators that teaching and learning in the classroom take place within sociocultural practices. The problem of leaving behind the role of culture in the EFL classroom at Universidad de La Salle may not let learners open their minds to authentic and important information that can take them to a wide learning of a target language.

There are many reasons why language courses today do not include the systematic study of culture. This study implies extra time that teachers do not consider in an already overcrowded curriculum. Many teachers affirm that students could be exposed to cultural materials later, after they have mastered the basic grammatical and lexical features of the language, insisting on a “language first, culture later” approach. Some others are afraid to teach culture because they fear they do not know enough about it. This position is not valid in terms of effectiveness since teacher’s role does not only deal with providing information but helping students to attain the skills to understand and deal with the cultural background of the target language.¹

Another reason why some teachers neglect to teach culture is due to the difficulties they may face related to negative student attitudes – learners do not care about it or consistently reject the target culture. Although several positions can be observed in a regular classroom, the teaching and learning process of a language is not simply mastering an object of academic study but is more appropriately focused on learning a means of communication.

It is not difficult to see strong arguments for developing students’ intercultural competence² giving the increasingly international nature of so many professions. In the contemporary world, a person does not need to travel to encounter representatives of other cultures: popular music, the media, tourism and the pluricultural nature of different societies. In accordance with these trends, developing students’ skills in intercultural communication is an appropriate and necessary part of the language teaching process.

Common bases presented in the CEF (Common European Framework) recently taken as a guidance for current national and local English projects and curriculums, reconfirms the importance of expanding individual personal experience of language from one’s own culture to the target one, and then to the languages and cultural backgrounds of other people. Thus, the learners will develop a greater capacity for further language learning and a greater openness towards new cultural experiences.

In order to account for the issues already mentioned, this article will provide the partial results of the first stage of a two- phase research project carried out by English teachers at La Salle University.

The English program at La Salle University has started to place a greater emphasis on the inclusion of cultural aspects in the teaching practices. Information about cultural issues is inherent to any language teaching purpose; this teaching –learning process can be achieved at different level even when teachers are not carrying out a systematic analysis in their classes. This innovative process aims at

1 Seelye (1984) points out that are to be achieved in cross-curricular understanding involve processes rather than facts, he affirms: “Facts are cheap, they are also meaningless until interpreted within a problem – solving context”

2 It is important to define clue words related to cultural teaching issues; from the CEF (Common European Framework, 2003) they are defined as follows:

Pluricultural competence: Ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part of intercultural interaction.

Intercultural competence: Knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities, distinctive differences) between the world of origin and the world of the target community.

the integration and development of intercultural competences in both pedagogical documents and teaching practices.

The first phase of the research project intends to describe the way teachers are addressing culture in their current teaching practices, while the second phase aims at the construction of a proposal to facilitate the inclusion of the concept of interculturality in the English classes of the language program.

Partial results will respond to the following research questions:

1. How do teachers understand the concept of culture?
2. How are teachers addressing cultural issues in their teaching practices?
3. What materials are teachers using to address cultural issues in their English classes ?

This article consists of four major parts: literature review to recall main theoretical reasons to address culture in the EFL classroom, research design and instruments used, preliminary results, and concluding thoughts.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE IN THE TEACHING FIELD

Culture teaching derives from social and cultural anthropology which aims to provide a comprehensive description of the way of life of a society.

In early 1900`s linguists researched the structure of Amerindian languages noting the complex

relationships among thought, abstract notions and language. In the 1920`s, Edward Sapir concluded that language and the culture of its speakers could not be analyzed in isolation; language could be seen as a way of describing and representing human experiences and understanding of the world. He stated that members of a language community share systems of beliefs and assumptions which underline the construction of the world .

Later, studies of culture were developed under the domains of anthropology³ and sociolinguistics. In the 1960`s and 1970`s, investigations of the connections between language and culture produced impressive works led by Hymes (1964) “Language and Culture,” Gumperz (1972) on interactional sociolinguistics, and Kaplan (1966) on rhetorical patterns accepted in different cultures and styles of writings. Hymes (1972) was the first to introduce the concepts of speech community, speech events, and communicative competence, stating the connections between the interpretation of speech and behavior according to the norms of the speech community.

In the 1980`s researchers pointed out the influence of culture on second and foreign language teaching processes focused on the effects of body language, eye contact and other behavioral and communicative paradigms. Damen (1987) analyzed the influence of culture on interaction and communication; and defined cultural values and beliefs. ⁴

Current perspectives about culture and language aimed by Kramsch (1991), indicated the teaching of culture implicitly or explicitly permeates the teaching of social interaction and the spoken and written language. He affirmed the necessity for second and foreign learners to become learners of

³ Geertz (1973) states that language and its use within a group are of interest to social anthropologists as much as they are significant parts of the human behavior that represents symbolic action in regard to the social structure and interaction within a group.

⁴ Damen`s (1987) definition of values and believes: Cultural beliefs : Intellectual acceptance of the truth or actuality of something. including experiential and religious believes. Cultural values :Values bring effective force to belief, Good, proper and positive and opposites.

the second culture due to the fact that a language cannot be learned without an understanding of the cultural context in which it is used.

Being proud of one's culture is stated by Byram and Morgan (1994) when they point out : "learners cannot simply shake off their own culture and step into another... their culture is a part of themselves and created them as social beings."

Learners are committed to their culture and to deny any part of it is to deny something within their own being.

Peterson & Coltrane (2003) cite the "National Standards in Foreign Language Education" of the United States which assert that "students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs" (National Standards in Foreign Language Education project, 1996).

Finally recent guidelines given by the Common European Framework⁵ aim the importance of the "Plurilingual approach" by emphasizing "... as an individual person's experience of language in its cultural contexts expands from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples, he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact."

DEFINING CULTURE

The term, "Culture" has diverse and disparate definitions that deal with speech acts, rhetorical

structure of text, social organizations and knowledge constructions. From the anthropologic view, Hinkel defines culture as "... the way of life of people, the social constructs that evolve within a group, the ways of thinking, feeling, believing and behaving that are imparted to members of a group in the socialization process "Among the different definitions of culture given by sociolinguists, Kramsch's (1998) stands "it is a membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history and common imaginings". Cortazzi & Jin (1999) defines it as: "Culture can be seen as a framework of assumptions, ideas and beliefs that are used to interpret other people's actions, words and pattern of thinking".

Both of them confirm how subjective this definition can be, outstanding at the same time, the crucial necessity in foreign language learners to become aware of different cultural frameworks. Learners will use their own cultural system to interpret target-language messages.

In the educational field, culture and language were seriously integrated in foreign language teaching in the early 1970. (Omaggio, 1986). Culture is initially defined as "everything and the best in human lives", and his elitist conceptualization of **Olympian Culture** or **Culture MLA** (music, literature and arts) was considered as a not clear but powerful notion in the components of the language teaching principles. An interesting re-elaboration of this first definition made Brook call it **Hearthstone Culture** or **Culture BBV** (beliefs, behaviors and values), thus "**Little c culture**" "related to a deep study of culture was emphasized over formal culture "**Big C culture**". (Brooks, 1964).

Later attempts to define culture from the teaching framework dealt mainly with proposing sets of

5 CEF (2003). Theoretical framework which provides common basis for the elaboration of curriculum, examinations, language syllabuses, etc across Europe. It also provides standards, levels of proficiency, cultural contexts, methodological strategies to guide the teaching process of a Foreign Language.

topics to be implemented in the teaching practice to approach a foreign culture; most of them recalled factual contents and patterns taken from the observed cultural phenomena, all of them influenced by behavioral education.

For the current research project the definition of culture given by Cortazzi & Jin was the one taken as a referent to examine teachers' conception of culture.

MODELS, APPROACHES AND MATERIALS TO TEACH CULTURE

Curricular issues started to play an important role when including cultural aspects.

Various schemes of cultural description were suggested to be adopted as goals or types of understanding that should be developed in language students as the result of instruction of culture.

Nostrand (1964) proposes nine objectives related to the abilities to react and describe social situations, recognize, explain, predict and evaluate social patterns, manifest attitudes to be accepted in a foreign society, identify basic human purposes and describe defensible methods of analyzing culture. In regards to summarize and make more effective the teaching process of culture.

Valette (1977) classifies goals in five categories: Cultural awareness, command of etiquette, understanding of daily life, understanding of cultural values, analysis of the target culture.

Both proposals imply an informational and analytic approach to teaching culture, even when they started to recognize that culture teaching involves cognitive, social and affective components.

A development of process skills was the base proposed by Galloway (1984) who organizes instruction

around four primary categories of understanding: Conventions (people's behavior), Connotation (Inference skills), Conditioning (interpretative skills) and Comprehension (Analysis, hypothesis formation, tolerance of ambiguity).

Seelye's goals (1984) address to the development of seven skills as follows :

1. The sense or functionality of culturally conditioned behavior.
2. Interaction of language and social values.
3. Conventional behavior in social situations
4. Cultural connotations of words and phrases
5. Evaluating statements about society
6. Researching another culture
7. Attitudes toward other cultures

Recent considerations given by Crawford – Lange & Lange (1984), Kramsh (1993) and Seelye (1994) condense three main criteria to conduct cultural instruction:

1. The learner's exploration of their own culture.
2. The discovery of the relationship between language and culture.
3. The learning of the heuristics for analyzing and comparing cultures

Standardized goals to teach culture proposed by the different authors led the first Teaching strategies to help teachers in selecting appropriate cultural contents in the EFL classrooms.

Galloway (1985) characterizes common approaches to teach culture into four basic types :

1. The Frankenstein Approach: When learners are provided with information from everywhere.
2. The 4 -F Approach: Related to teaching culture focused on Folk dances, Festivals, Fairs and Food.

3. The Tour guide Approach: Teaching culture by the identification of monuments, rivers and cities.
4. The By- the – Way Approach: Teaching culture by sporadic lectures or bits of behavior selected indiscriminately to emphasize sharp contrast.

Any of the models and approaches to teach culture in an EFL classroom demands the use of materials. **Materials** is a “term used to refer to anything which is used by teachers or learners to facilitate the learning of a language “.

(Tomlinson, 1998) Authentic materials are considered by Peterson and Coltrane (2003) as “authentic resources from the native speech community that helps to engage students in authentic cultural experiences “.

They affirmed teachers can adapt materials according to ages and proficiency level of the students; teaching experiences can involve different skill activities to take students to comparison and analysis processes recalling their native culture.

Materials should evidence day- to - day cultural contexts to let students know what is appropriate to say, to whom, in what situation and to better understand values and beliefs given in the different usages of a language. These are some of the materials suggested to accomplish teaching culture goals :

Text books, native informants, audiotape and videotaped interviews, culture capsules, culture clusters, role plays, films, news broadcasts, television shows, web sites, photographs, magazines, newspapers, restaurant menus, travel brochures, literature.

Current English program at Universidad la Salle will be substantially enriched by the implementation

of the Seelye`s goals at cultural knowledge and the Galloway approaches to teach culture; these principles could address regular teaching practices by taking students to a higher level of cultural awareness and knowledge of the target culture. In the same way, they may help teachers to work on a more systematic teaching process of culture evidenced in: designing objectives, activities, information about cultural issues and evaluation.

RESEARCH DESIGNED

The first-phase project “Culture in the EFL classroom at Universidad la Salle: An Innovation project” was analyzed under the principles of a qualitative, descriptive and interpretative study.

Data collection recalls different instruments such as: class observations, teachers reports, questionnaires and interviews. The participants in this process were six in-service teachers from the language department at Universidad la Salle .

English classes were chosen from both shifts, afternoon and night, and all of them belong to the group of subjects classified into the Basic Cycle of the current English program⁶.

It was important to analyze research questions in three different semesters in regards to the variety of concepts and teaching techniques teachers may implement in their classes according to students age and level of English. The semesters chosen were : first semester, third semester and fifth semester.

The data collection procedure was accomplished in three stages. First the completion of a questionnaire in which teachers were asked about culture concept and strategies to teach culture. Information collected

⁶ Current English Program at La Salle University has a credit system in which subjects are classified into two cycles : Basic cycle and Specialization cycle. Research project was conducted in English classes of the Basic cycle.

about this conception was categorized into Symbolic representation (abstract conceptions of culture) and Symbolic materialization (live events and manifestations of culture).

Second, the analysis of 2006 official final reports turned in by teachers to administrators; these documents provided more specific teaching strategies English teachers had implemented in their classes to recall culture. Third, the open class observation formats evidenced more precise information about the way teachers are addressing cultural issues in their teaching practices and the kind of materials they are implementing.

These two last formats were analyzed by recalling Galloway's approaches; in this way observed teaching experiences related to culture were classified according to their characteristics. Finally, materials were analyzed as a way to describe a culture; it was evident that all the resources implemented in classes fulfilled basic characteristics to refer to cultural issues, facts and cultural manifestations.

As it was already mentioned, this is an on-going project and not all the instruments had been applied: interviews are missing. Thus, preliminary findings will only recall what has been evident in the instruments already applied.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

In regards to the research questions and data collection, the following are the preliminary results and conclusions drawn.

About how teachers understand the concept of culture, there were different answers that evidenced a symbolic dichotomy. Some of teachers' answers given in questionnaires and the official final reports

evidenced a definition of **Culture** as a **Symbolic Representation**. The following are some samples: "Culture refers to all human representations carried out through the use of language"

(Teacher's questionnaire)

"...the advantages of learning a language is the fact of approaching new ways of thinking (culture)...".

(Teacher's report)

Some other answers evidenced the conception of culture as a **Symbolic**

Materialization:

"The whole set of particular behavior within a community belonging to a same country"

(T. questionnaire)

Conceptualization of Culture was given in different senses recalling anthropological, sociolinguistic and educational approximations.

These perspectives were not always observed when it had to do with teacher's teaching practices; data analyzed from class observations and questionnaires evidenced a cultural teaching approximation in terms of facts and festivals.

Information about culture, recalled teacher's personal experiences in the target culture and information mainly provided by text books. All these conceptions may influence students perceptions about cultural issues that can commonly be read in an imprecise way; these variations suggest the importance of addressing teaching strategies under the same definition of culture making it clear at any class situation.

Teaching practices evidenced two main types of approaches to teach culture given by Galloway (1995), The Frankenstein Approach, the 4 -F approach, and the By- the - Way approach. Class observations recorded teaching practices in which cultural issues were addressed to promote discussions about Colombian's celebrations and brief comments about English music and movies connecting them to class topics at different moments of the lesson. This is a sample of one of the teacher's answer in the questionnaire when responding to the question: What cultural aspects would you include in an English Lesson? :

"Language topics imply communication... communicative situations...literature, language interaction, common expressions, arts, drama" .

(Teacher's questionnaire)

Finally, according to the materials teachers implement to teach culture in the EFL classroom, data collected reported the intension of using them: Materials are taken as a way to describe a culture. In this sense, authentic materials such as films, music, readers, article, newspapers, TV programs are the commonly used English classes. It was very evident in both teacher's reports, questionnaires and class observations :

"I have considered to work on some segments of a video material... They are TV news reports taken from the ABC News..."

(Teacher's official report)

"The unit the teacher is doing is called "Films, music, news" in the textbook Face2face)...The teacher asks students to read and discuss one Reading about 007"

(Class observation)

"Charts, posters, CD, videos, newspapers, magazines, articles, souvenirs"

(Teacher's questionnaire).

Despite the missing data collection, information already analyzed illuminates final conclusions from this first phase of the research project and may set the premises for the second one. It was the starting point for the English program to make all members of the educational community be aware of the cultural contexts missing in the English classes. Cultural issues need to be systematically implemented in daily classes; reflections and teaching activities should take student to a higher analysis level from their own culture to the target one.

Even when teaching strategies and materials to address cultural issues had been implemented in EFL classrooms at Universidad La Salle , preliminary findings lets infer the long way to build up to reach the Intercultural Awareness expected in the Languages program.

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