



EXPLORATION OF TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE RELATION OF CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The present document presents some interpretations made from raw data obtained through a semi structured interview applied to five EFL teachers as an initial inquiry interest about cultural aspects within teaching practices. The interview aim was to gather information about addressing culture within the teaching practice and to identify perceptions teachers have about this issue. At the end, it is imperative to say that the respondents agree that it is very important to address cultural aspects in the current teaching practice; hence, part of our actions in teaching must be to help students to be culturally aware and competent.

Key words: Culture, Culture in Language Teaching and Social Teaching Practice.

Resumen

El presente documento presenta algunas interpretaciones de la información de una entrevista semi estructurada aplicada a cinco docentes de lenguaje extranjero (Inglés) como una exploración inicial sobre aspectos culturales dentro de la práctica docente. El objetivo de la entrevista era recolectar información acerca del manejo de la cultura en la enseñanza e identificar las percepciones que los docentes tienen acerca del tema. Al final, es imperativo decir que los entrevistados mencionan la importancia de trabajar niveles interculturales en la práctica docente; como consecuencia, parte de nuestras acciones como docentes debe ser ayudar a los estudiantes a ser culturalmente competentes.

Palabras clave: Cultura, Cultura en la enseñanza del lenguaje y Práctica Social de la Enseñanza.

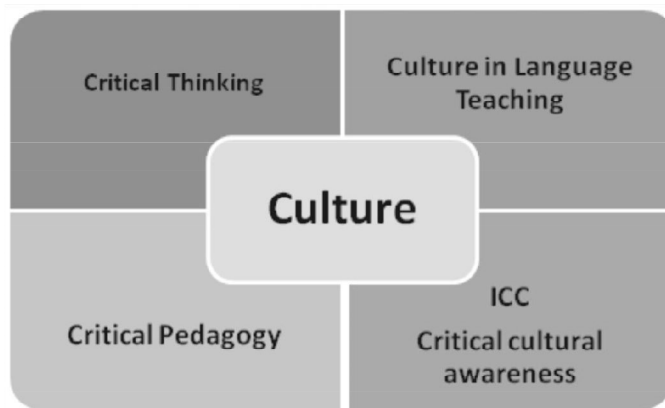
Introduction

This explorative interest focused on pedagogy and culture for an EFL environment through the analysis of some perceptions and it has as a main objective to interpret how five EFL teachers recognize their culture and what their perceptions about addressing culture in the classroom area. This objective was planned from informal observations of lessons during an immersion course programmed by the Secretaría de Educación de Boyacá, where high school EFL teachers, were being trained in language use as well as strategies for teaching based on the theory of learning in Communicative Approach and critical thinking. We had different tutors for the immersion, and the program developed was mostly the same for all according to topics and methodology, during that period of time, of about one month. I considered this research because the teachers set up dialogues mostly about the communicative approach, and other theories of learning and teaching a language; however, I perceived that most of them did not address aspects of culture within the teaching practice directly; that is why, I decided to interview five of them with the goal of finding out their perception on culture and the way they address it in the lessons. The

preliminary outcomes attempt to give a useful contribution to the understanding of culture and its relevance within the classroom practices. It is relevant to state that teachers need to deal with cultural aspects in their educational processes because I dare to say that it offers students the opportunity to be competitive and to succeed in their community in a sense of being critical of their own culture and the foreign ones, giving as result a wider vision of learning a language.

Literature Review

Understanding culture as a frame where all actions, single participation of individuals and representations of reality make sense within a society (Farrallelli, 2009), the perspective of addressing culture within teaching practices could be an inherent process; consequently, this part of the document provides some relevant concepts of culture, culture within teaching practice and culture as a social aspect within a process of critical thinking and cultural awareness, topics that are close to the idea that cultural aspects are relevant issues to address in an EFL learning process, due to their significance in educational prospects as they provide stages of analysis, understandings and interpretations of their realities to construct a better society.



What Is Culture?

Defining culture is a little complicated, even though a common sense is sewn around this concept, it is a social term, it has to do with people and communities understood as social institutions and their ways of life, social grouping, religious beliefs and practices, history, custom, law and any other aspect of a human being within a society. Keesing (1981) demarcates “Cultures are systems (of social behavior patterns) that serve to relate human communities to their ecological settings”, (p. 75). In this sense, culture concerns to a specific setting and mainly how actors play within it, as people are culturally shaped in that stage. Culture worries to a common social space and history and the way people behave in it, and it is often seen as mere information conveyed by language, not as a feature of language itself (Kramsch, 1998), language understood as a means of knowledge of the world and its social realities, language as a vehicle to transform social conditions. In accordance, language teachers can focus their practice on communicative as well as intercultural competence; culture could be addressed as specific information related to a language and as means to address linguistic patterns of a language within foreign language teaching practice.

Culture In Language Teaching

Language and culture are an entrenched feature of language teaching around the world and the intersection of cultural studies and pedagogy has little to do with theorizing the role pedagogy might play in linking learning to social changes outside of traditional sites of schooling (Giroux, 2004).

To constitute the precondition for all consequential practices, culture must be recognized as the set of social practices that imply a variety of meanings and ideologies which may construct individualized and social identities (Geertz, 2000 as cited in Farrallelli, 2009); in this sense, culture becomes the means and the object of inquiry and critical analysis with which educational practices can focus on the social construction of knowledge and so, teachers should direct their practices to impact social forces with the objective of the improvement of life conditions as meaningful practices into a specific context. Then addressing cultural aspects is relevant for educational processes, subsequently Hesar, Konca&Zarfsaz (2012) say that “in language learning culture acts as if the flesh and language are the skeleton of a society” (p.69) ; language cannot exist if there is not culture or vice versa. Therefore, language and culture could not be analyzed in isolation because language is a social matter that describes the way of life of a society; both are seen as systems of values and beliefs, which highlight the construction of the world.

In this sense, there is a need of learning a language not also understanding the local culture but the culture of the foreign language giving a wide view of the world. In addition to this, teachers need to be aware of how to be culturally responsive in the same way to students’ own culture as well as to the target language culture due to, the fact that the teaching of language tacitly floods the teaching of culture and social interaction of a spoken or written language; consequently, language cannot be learned without an understanding of the context in which it is used and it is learned.

Likewise, the Common European Framework (2003) in the recent guidelines aims at the importance of the inclusion of cultural aspects in the teaching practices where learners must acquire the ability to use languages for different purposes and to take part of the intercultural understanding between the local culture and the world of the target one.

Critical Pedagogy

There is a social perspective which is considered to address, critical pedagogy, it is an approach to teaching, “that... seeks to understand and critique the historical and sociopolitical context of schooling and to develop pedagogical practices that aim not only to change the nature of schooling, but also the wider society.” (Pennycook, as cited in Crookes & Lehner, 1991). This approach relates to pedagogy that focuses not only on education itself, but also on the crucial role it plays to make our society better according to ethical, social and political aspects; hence, it is important to address the perspectives for language teaching beyond linguistic aspects, language used as a means to improve society where language is an ability citizens need to acquire to take relevant participations in a society. According to this trend, Byram (1997) speaks about ICC (Intercultural Communicative Competence) which reflects on the emphasis on language as well as on culture learning in the same stage, the process encourages the engagement with other languages and cultures and their cohesion where communication flows into favorable conditions for mutual understanding.

According to Giroux (2004) “Pedagogy, at its best, implies that learning takes place across a spectrum of social practices and

settings” (61), according to this trend, language goes beyond classroom practice; learners need to know what they learn and what for and that its use depends on a specific context, also they need to understand their own culture. It is essential to point out the shift of the role according to the participants, the activities and the context, which must be engaged, to impact daily practices where the teacher is a means to encourage students’ critical voices analyzing not only their culture but the culture of the foreign language as well.

When we speak about language we have to speak of language beyond the concept for communicative approach, language understood as the way people in life interact with thoughts and feelings and the way we negotiate knowledge to build up communication beyond communicative purposes, language for critical pedagogy works with principles of the social role of language and the issue of life conditions improvement and consequently the influence of culture in the learning and teaching process. In critical pedagogy students must learn their communicative skills while developing self-awareness of social issues in the world, critical awareness of society and their own realities; that is why, the language learning process must focus on both, the acquisition of foreign language and the construction of students’ critical view to turn them into agents of validation and construction of the new society. Thus, socio-cultural conditions always influence cognitive and metacognitive progression (Rashid & Safari, 2011)

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking skills instruction refers to the

inquiring processes students need to analyze, interpret, comprehend, act and perform changes in the adjacent community and where cultural issues are involved. Consequently, education has to prepare students to think and react about their natural world; education focuses on and in consciousness and social responsibility of their reality and cultural issues are inherent in its construction. Therefore, the language learning process converges in a relationship between cultural and language awareness, so that it could be a process which promotes independent and critical thinking. Language and cultural awareness are mental attributes which develop thought and thought is developed through using and relating language as knowledge of a community within a big society.

Critical Cultural Awareness

There are different kinds of dimensions or perspectives for foreign language practices, but it is considered that the relevance has its roots in how it contributes to our life conditions in the society, and how we evaluate it critically; hence, language, culture and the society itself work in the same direction; in fact, in a language teaching process they are worked together and one supports the other. According to Byram (2004) a perspective called Critical Cultural Awareness, in which a foreign language education perspective can complement and enrich the element of political education, not only providing linguistic competence ...but also in the capacity of mediation and negotiation in political aspects of the society could help to the social practice of teaching a language. "Critical cultural awareness has evaluative orientation awareness that one's values and

ideological perspectives are culturally determined and that they may not be compatible with those of other people" (179).

Research Design

Context

The small research project was carried out in Villa de Leyva, in the English training course called "Immersion Course for EFL Teachers from Boyacá", this course was planned by "Secretaría de Educación de Boyacá", and it was guided with the objective of supporting teachers with the use of foreign language and possible strategies to apply in the teaching practice, the teachers who were in charge of the course were people from T&T Company. At the end of the immersion, I set up as an objective to interview its tutors and to interpret their opinions about their conceptions on cultural aspects as well as their perceptions regarding the native and target culture as an initial inquiry on the issue.

Participants

I interviewed five English teachers, four Colombian teachers and one British teacher who guided the process of teaching during the immersion. I expected to interview the majority of them but it was impossible because of the schedule of lessons given for the course. According to the participants' experience and background, it is imperative to state that the five teachers who were interviewed have been teaching English and Spanish for more than seven years, and their experience has to do with working in Colombian culture and American or British culture, too.

Type Of Study

The present exploration is named as a qualitative interpretative one in the sense of Merriam's (2009) orientation, reality is present everywhere and it varies in relation to the context, knowledge is relative rather than absolute, in this way language and knowledge are constructed through specific interaction and experiences and it could be interpreted from different perspectives. Culture perceptions vary according to the people and context; that is why, I tried to explore different perceptions of culture into the classroom practice.

Data Collection Methods

Data for this explorative study consist of information from answers of a semi-structured interview applied to the five participants, which is the initial process of an inquiry for a wider research process in which I intend to foster intercultural awareness in teaching practices.

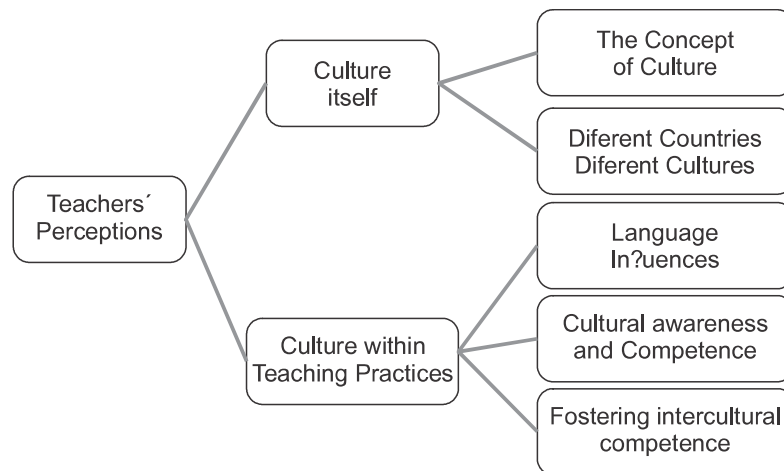
A follow-up in-depth interview with each teacher was conducted to give an interpretation as explorative work focused on teachers' perceptions regarding the relation of culture and language within an EFL process. The data analysis followed the grounded theory principle mentioned by Auerbach & Silverstein (2003), the theoretical coding to develop a hypothesis from participants' sayings within a process of analysis, questioning and interpretation which allows the researcher to develop theoretical narratives from the raw data.

The process also involved looking at the interview transcripts through different perspectives to write the interpretative analysis trying to reconstruct meanings and individual realities; and the process proposed by McCormack, (2000) "viewing the transcript through multiple lenses", addressed to this kind of study. She states that a variety of views help to see realities and could reduce the distance between an individual understanding and his or her interpretation. Active listening, narrative processes, language, context and moments highlight the interpretative stories.

In the recordings of the interviews, there is a specific item in which participants gave their approval to use the data to be analyzed considering my research objective, and a letter of consent was provided together with an introductory letter for the director's consent by means of a formal request as ethical issues for the explorative study.

Preliminary Findings And Conclusions

Five interviews were made then raw data was analyzed, and two main categories were presented from the analysis of the interviews regarding teachers' perceptions as following: first, the teachers' perceptions about culture itself, where teachers not only defined culture, but also made some comparisons of target and foreign cultures from their own experience, and second, the conceptions that teachers had according to the importance of addressing culture within the classroom practices revealing the importance of culture awareness and competence as following. (*The excerpts were taken from the video recordings*).



Culture Itself

o The concept of culture

From the anthropological view, culture is seen as the social system in which a community has to interact with others, the way of life, the way they interact agreeing with beliefs and behaviors. Different authors come to an agreement that culture is understood as the combination of beliefs, customs, behaviors, expectations, values and social habits of the members of a particular community and the respondents agree with this concept, too. They state that culture concerns a specific group of individuals sharing some commonalities regarding different aspects such as law, beliefs, and values among others; being close to Kramsch's conception (as cited in Saluveer, 2004) who defines culture, "as membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history and common imaginings". Social sense of culture, culture in and for a society.

R. "We are culture, and we come from our ancestors, we have a heritage of beliefs and

values... ah..."

A, "... everybody is a unique culture, individuals with behaviors and values, and sometimes we share them into a community to be a greater culture..."

Concurrent with their conceptions, Purba, (2011) synthesizes culture as "the context, within which a member of a society exists, behaves, thinks, feels, and relates to other" (50). Consequently, there is an imminent need to address culture within educational practices where foreign language teachers can foster communicative competence as well as intercultural competence since both entails pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects.

o Different countries, different cultures

The participants agree that American and British culture have a huge difference with the Colombian culture; they state differences in family structure, religion and behaviors but they also point out that even Colombia has different cultures itself and that it is difficult to categorize culture, even that they know their culture since they recognize

others.

G1 *“The family structured is mainly the difference, we are the same at the end of the day, but in united states if a child finishes high school the forgings stop raising the child, they throw him to face life alone...the nucleon of the family is tier, there is more affection... grandparents living with his son and the family. British and American people are generally introverted, it is not common to see them laughing and besides they don't have strong religion beliefs”.*

R. *“We have moral customs regarding religion beliefs, it makes the family.... To be together for more much time ...we, Colombian, we are more affectionate, we express our feelings easy we are sociable and funny and they don't like to touch each other, they kept the distance, they are rude...and teachers act in the same way”.*

Culture Within Teaching Practices

o Language influences

Socio-cultural conditions always influence our cognitive activity, mediating how we perceive and interpret the world around us (Canagarajah, 2005). Learners often link their classroom practices, the knowledge presented with the outside world, the previous action gives students values, identity and a sense of community. In short language could construct realities. Therefore, we could affirm that culture is a network of meanings constructed by language. (Kramsch, 1998)

JC. *“... Language is affected by social and political circumstances. Certain*

things that people use in Colombian culture, common ways of saying things are different according to social conventions...and policies as well, like for instance... in Colombia for example we have this, ah ..” Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo” ,ah, which have very specific conditions and goals directed by the central government, that of course that influenced language learning process eventually and the kind of language students must use as well.

The perception of the world around is different depending on individuals, learners are influenced by their environment, learning has far-reaching implications for students' values, identity, and community and students always make connections with the school proceedings and the outside world. (Canagarajah, 1999).

o Cultural awareness and competence

Cultural awareness and competence have to do with becoming aware of different ways of thinking, it is necessary to know the culture of the target language in order to validate values, expectations of life, beliefs and behaviors from our own perspective, learners of a foreign language have the responsibility to confront information and make their identity and culture legitimate. Students should take a critical position not only to judge the target culture but also to analyze it, contrast it and make an understanding of their own culture, (Álvarez& Bonilla, 2009). Then we are talking about the development of intercultural competence proposed by Byram, Gribkova& Starkey (2002), they define intercultural competence as the ability

to interact with people with multiple identities and own individuality, as the ability to share different understandings according to their culture and the culture of others and to mediate values, beliefs and behaviors.

Saluveer, (2004) states that “cultural awareness is based on knowledge of the other as well as one’s own culture”, (p.23) and he also mentions that the cultural competence is related to how people mediate with the knowledge, the ideal intercultural speaker could be understood as a learner using the target and foreign culture to relate his/her reality. Certainly, according to the data, the British teacher agrees with the idea of an intercultural speaker given by Kramsch (1998), he states that “the intercultural speaker is a tolerant and open minded person who is able to interact with other cultures taking into account cultural differences” (p. 10)

G2, The target language in particular can give relevance and entrance to worldwide knowledge as a privilege of a foreign language learner which must be multicultural competent, cultural competence understood as way of being aware of different cultural groups, even in small societies of the same country, competence in this sense has to do with the right action a person takes at facing different kinds of people from different culture.

Language teaching processes have to contribute to the creation and function of the social dimension of language through mutual understanding of different social groups in a society (Byram, 2004). In this process, cultural issues are very significant, learners and teachers reflect their own

culture allowing a dialogical perspective with which they have the opportunity to create and be living actors of the process working not only in language skills improvement but also in understanding social realities.

o Fostering Intercultural Competence

Gilmore (2007) speaks about “Cultura Franca” which refers to what extent it is possible or advisable to separate the language from its cultural associations; he states that it is advisable to address native and target cultures into the classroom practice and that the measure depends on the teacher and students’ needs. If foreign language learners do not know anything about other cultures they could have absence of information, their curiosity could decrease and even they could not have anything to compare with. They could think everything is the same to their own culture, maybe their perspective of the world will be plain, and knowing about other cultures could enrich the perspective of the native culture. It is necessary to compare, to set up advantages of the culture and even to take positive aspects from the target culture, aspects that learners consider crucial according to their interest and desires of life.

To sum up, managing cultural aspects within the teaching practice depends specifically on the students’ needs and interest, we as foreign language teachers can provide material which let students know about the target culture according to their needs and desires. Some teachers point out something relevant for this feature, they state that it is important to address the target culture, mainly if there is a need. “Learning a foreign language involves more than the acquisition

of linguistic and communicative competence. It also entails an increase in learners' familiarity with that language cultural background, an expansion of the learners' cultural awareness and intercultural competence". (Castro, Méndez & Sercu, 2004, p.2)

J.C. it is important for people who have the opportunity to travel abroad or businessmen who really are going to face it...

G1. "It is very important for...English useful regarding to context, useful if you're gonna travel ...Actual language use for specific purposes and the culture issue is relevant..."

Despite the importance of addressing the target culture in teaching practices, there are some other views; for instance, teaching the target language through the learners own culture may help to reinforce their national identity, cultural domains to protect their way of life, (Gilmore, 2007) and one of the respondent agrees with this premise, saying that it is best to focus on our own culture due to the difficulties about studying a foreign culture, where materials and context are not adequate.

A. "there isn't enough time and resources to work with target culture, we need efforts and time to teach the target language that is a little difficult because students are not immersed in the context of it ... we should emphasize our teaching practices to highlight our values and identity".

G2. "Language is acquired appropriately when you are learning through

something that is relevant for you, most English texts for EFL, they address like very general international culture with a very irrelevant context...

However, it is important to consider that there are some materials which can be useful to engage students in authentic cultural experiences within teaching practices and working on local cultural practices is as important as working in the target ones to deepen students' cultural competences, abilities needed for a language learner. Widdowson's (2003) states that language that is taught from its own culture, and its social reality activates the language learning process easily (as cited in Gilmore, 2007). Although others say that the culture of the target language also motivates language learning, because it brings meaningfulness to what they are learning.

Canagarajah (2005) points out that a more appropriate teaching practice is based on the local knowledge and their local understanding. The role of the teacher when addressing the target culture must be to encourage students' critical voice to the information presented, being aware of their own identity. Critical educators also need to register and make their own subjective involvement in what they teach visible, how they shape classroom social relations, and how they defend their positions within institutions that often legitimate educational processes based on ideological privileges and political exclusions (Giroux, 2004).

R. "...Culture and language have to be together, the idea is to be aware of their influence in our social lives and prepare

our students to face that kind of issues...in particular with English, we cannot only focus on culture or language learning, the idea is to use that information for our benefit, I mean for educational reasons..."

In this sense, the idea of addressing local or foreign culture mainly depends on educational purposes but preparing students to be critically aware of their context as well as surroundings. Consequently with the premise of educational effectiveness, in which "teachers' 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 and the ability to use the language mediating the knowledge of the world where language and culture are bound together" (Ariza, 2007, p.10). In addition to this, Kramsch (1998) points out that language and culture are linked; due to the fact that, language expresses reality based on people's facts, ideas and attitudes, by means of communication people give meaning to their individual experiences and besides, individuals see their language as the symbol of representing their reality. Therefore, language teaching is a process of communication, and the process involves individuals, criticism, understandings and meaning construction within own and individual realities.

Conclusions

To work with both cultures in the classroom, the native culture as well as the target one can give a sense of justice. We can approach the target culture by means of reading texts, movies, news and authentic

materials because learners must have the opportunity to be multiculturally competent, but we also have to bear in mind that there is a mismatch according to what is being presented to learners in the classroom and the actual language and culture students have to face outside classrooms. That is why, students' own culture must be also established in the classroom as the motor to make up an identity and the target culture as the means of confirming it.

It is important to address the target culture in the classroom practices because it seems like we are using different ways to see our own reality and construct our identity from different perspectives. Language is seen as a means of shift, through the studying of a different culture in the classroom; "with a pair of two different colored lenses, everything could be shown in different light" (Canagarajah, 1999).

One important aspect from the data is that teachers mention some crucial aspects about culture, but the matter is that cultural aspects are a need and a must in educational processes, and that there are many reasons to address culture within classrooms practices, justifications that are summarized by Purba, (2011), who points out three fundamental reasons, the idea that language and culture function in one way, the idea that language is a system of patterns constructed in a society and finally that teaching language is teaching communicative competence, knowledge and attitude in front of a real time situation while acquiring a target language. "Culture is the foundation of communication", (Samovar, Porter, and Jain 1981, as cited in Purba, 2011).

Pedagogical Implications

This initial stage of the inquiry lets me recognize the importance of addressing culture within the educational practices, since it may help learners be aware of the individual learning experience of their culture and the target one. Thus, learners' minds could be opened to authentic information to be critically aware allowing different perspectives about learning of the language itself. In accordance with these trends, the construction of a proposal focused on the inclusion of interculturality in English classes could be focused as the next stage of the study considering some relevant statements: "Developing students' skills in intercultural communication is an appropriate and necessary part of the language teaching process" (Ariza, 2007, p. 10).

Furthermore, the idea that the cultural aspect plays an important role in curricular issues as an important aspect of the social world of the classroom, it is important to address culture within EFL teaching practices, teaching processes where foreign language learning not only has to do with language competence, but also with language that enhances students to make suitable alternative choices which could help their living conditions and their community.

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