

CULTURE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: A REVIEW

CULTURA EN ENSEÑANZA DE LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS: UNA REVISIÓN

Liz Ramirez. Estudiantes del semillero de Interculturalidad y Educación del programa de Licenciatura en Bilingüismo con Énfasis en Inglés, email: liz.ramirez@unicolombo.edu.co.

Maylin Peña Cervantes. Estudiantes del semillero de Interculturalidad y Educación del programa de Licenciatura en Bilingüismo con Énfasis en Inglés, email: maylin.pena@unicolombo.edu.co

Vianny Mórolo Gómez. email: Estudiantes del semillero de Interculturalidad y Educación del programa de Licenciatura en Bilingüismo con Énfasis en Inglés, email: vianny.morelo@unicolombo.edu.

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Abstract: Language plays a crucial role not only in the construction of culture but also in the emergence of cultural changes. The possibility of changing the attitudes of people by giving them a new vocabulary to build social realities whether national, gender or racial realities that allow them to access to opportunities to develop and use language to communicate and create relationships. This article presents a literature review about the role of culture in teaching a foreign language taking into account some pedagogical and didactic aspects involved in the teaching process. As the main result, it is concluded that it is impossible to teach a language without teaching the culture; the teacher becomes a mediator between foreign languages and culture, that is why certain aspects of teaching can influence the inclusion or exclusion of that elements in a foreign language classroom.

Keywords: culture, foreign language teaching, intercultural teaching resources.

Resumen: El lenguaje juega un rol crucial en la construcción de la cultura, pero también en el surgimiento de los cambios culturales. La posibilidad de cambiar la actitud de las personas proporcionándoles un nuevo vocabulario para construir las realidades sociales, ya sean nacionales, de género o raciales que les permitan acceder a oportunidades para desarrollar y utilizar el lenguaje para comunicarse y crear relaciones. Este artículo presenta una revisión de literatura sobre el papel de la cultura en la enseñanza de una lengua extranjera, teniendo en cuenta algunos aspectos pedagógicos y didácticos involucrados en el proceso de enseñanza. Como resultado principal, se confirma que es imposible enseñar un idioma sin enseñar la cultura.; el profesor se convierte en un mediador entre las lenguas extranjeras y la cultura, es por ello que ciertos aspectos de la enseñanza pueden influir en la inclusión o exclusión de ese elemento en un aula de idiomas extranjeros.

Palabras claves: cultura, enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, recursos de enseñanza intercultural.

Introduction

Kramsch (2015) mentioned that speakers and writers do not just perform culture; “they construct it in interaction with others so culture acquisition should be a desirable goal of language learning” (p.33). Another significant factor that Kramsch (1996) highlights is that, in spite of the advances made by the research in the spheres of the intercultural and the multicultural, language teaching is

still operating on a relatively narrow conception of both language and culture. Language continues to be taught as a fixed system of formal structures.

The effort to include culture within language education has occurred since anthropology and linguistic anthropology begin to resonate within applied linguistics (Kramsch, 2014, McLeod, 1976). It is well known that cultural competence plays an important role in successful

language learning since understanding language involves knowledge that overeat grammar or syntax, and include features of the social world (Cakir, 2006), when teachers are teaching languages cannot ignore the cultural load that languages bears, and thus they do not teach only structure but also general knowledge (Savu, 2016), “it is not enough for a person to be able to produce grammatical sentences; one must also know when they are contextually appropriate” (Hannerz, 1973, p. 238). American and British culture are the representation of “culture” related to the English-speaking countries in terms of English language teaching (Li, 2016; Ellis, 1994). Culture is a concept that has been the central of multiple debates, the notion is so thorny that cultural theorists have defined it in different ways. However, many definitions share a core. In fact, the term culture often refers to those representations, ideas, beliefs, practices and patterns of behavior that are transmitted socially..

The systematic literature review was done in two stages. First, the ERIC, ProQuest, Scielo, EBSCO Host and Dialnet databases were reviewed, including articles in English, Spanish and Portuguese. The descriptors culture, interculturality, foreign language teaching and intercultural language teaching materials were used. Only articles from academic journals were raised. Works published between 1993 and 2017. Second, these data were coded in an Excel spreadsheet to evaluate the main notions in the field and an analytical review template was completed for each article. The documents were published between 1993 and 2017.

Foreign Language Teaching-Learning and Culture

According to Hager (2011), culture is a set of attitudes, behaviors, and symbols that a group of people has in common, and they are usually passed on from one generation to the next. Attitudes include beliefs (religious, moral, ideological, political, etc.), stereotypes, values, opinions, superstitions, and general knowledge (empirical and theoretical). Uddin (2014) affirms that culture is in the characteristics of a particular group of people, defined by language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, and arts. Thus, “culture finds its expression in language, so the learning process of a new language remains incomplete without achieving familiarity with its culture” (Hamza, 2018, p.797). The previous idea can be complemented when thinking about the relationship between the

motivations, the achievements in the process of learning and the understanding of other cultures by the learner, then there is place for the *integrative motivations* and where the desire to learn a language is related, in some sense, closer to the desire to understand a different culture and be part if it can be in some sense closer to the process of understanding a new culture (Byram & Feng, 2004).

There is a further point to be considered: Kramersch (2014) mentioned that speakers do not just perform culture; “they construct it in interaction with others” (p.42) in that way culture is acquired, is learned and help to achieve the goals in the language learning process, but even when it is well known that culture must be involved in the curriculum, many language teachers does not know with certain what cultural aspects should be including in the curriculum. Another significant factor that Kramersch (1995) highlights is that, “despite the advances made by the research in the spheres of the intercultural and the multicultural, language teaching is still operating on a relatively narrow conception of both language and culture. Language continues to be taught as a fixed system of formal structures” (p.83).

Hager (2011) has focused particularly on the origins of culture and has established that the latter emerges from the subjects' lifestyle, and it occurs as “individuals pool and accumulate their discoveries, and institute customs and traditions to organize their labors and settle their conflicts” (p.20). Taking into account the previous concept of culture, it is important to get to know the community and the environment that surrounds us inside and outside the educational institutions, in this way, the work with the students in the classroom will be more significative (Freevman & Johnson, 1998). On the subject, Tang's words provide relevant clarification regarding the relationship between culture and language in any population:

In the field of foreign language teaching, one aspect that occasionally emerges as a topic of discussion is the relationship between knowledge of a foreign language and knowledge of the culture from which that language "originated". From my (admittedly limited) experience with foreign language education, it would appear that the question of "culture" is often relegated to the end of a language teaching plan. (1999, p.1).

Lin Sun (2013) goes beyond defining culture and establishes a link between the latter and education. According to the author, foreign language teaching should include four fundamental components, namely: language

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learning, language awareness, cultural awareness and cultural experience. These work by combining the use of learners first language and foreign language through comparative analysis and new cultural experience. Regarding this matter, Gao (2006) states that foreign language teachers should be aware of the place of cultural studies in the foreign language classroom and attempt to enhance students' cultural awareness and improve their communicative competence (Papa, 2015, p. 16).

It is necessary to remark that this research was carried out thanks to a documentary review. The theoretical positions of the authors made an important contribution to our understanding of the role of culture in teaching a foreign language, taking into account, of course, some pedagogical and didactic aspects involved in the process. It is worthy to restate the fact that the links addressed here are deeply rooted in the language and completely entwined in the culture, so the teaching process needs to be aware of the cultural aspects of the target language (Ali, Kazemian & Mahar, 2015, Assemi et al, 2012; Genc & Bada, 2005), because at the end, "the interdependence of language learning and cultural learning is so evident that one can conclude that language learning is culture learning and consequently, language teaching is cultural teaching" (Gao, 2006, p.16).

Culture and Foreign Language Teaching

Culture is something intimately related with people and community. According to Tharp (2012) culture is considered the "glue" that holds an organization together and for others, the "compass" that provides directions" (p.1). In other words, it provides people with a sense of identity and ways of thinking as well as the language they use (Castillo, 2013). Consequently, human development is linked with people's interaction in socio-historical-cultural contexts. Taking the latter into account, the sociocultural theory allows to reflect on the implications of the teaching and learning process in specific circumstances (Peer & McClendon, 2002; Polly, Allman, Casto, Norwood, 2017; Kelly, 2006).

This theory established learning as a social process through which intelligence had their origin (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Liang (2013), Vygotsky's theory offers a guide on the development of the superior human and mental cognitive function because it emphasizes on the integration of social, cultural and biological elements in the learning process and the central role of socio-cultural circumstances in human cognitive development. The ecological approach, another approach that is

pertinent to this case, established the premise that human development occurs in specific environments (Lickliter, 2000; Darling, 2007). The different systems in which people are involved and their personal relationships are contextual (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Kramersch (2008) adds to the latter when she affirms that "the second language acquisition is constrained by socio-contextual influences and intercultural encounters" (p.3).

It is because of these contributions, that inside the classroom is taking into account that every community has a background in terms of knowledge, behavior and ways of communications. From Paraquett's perspective (2009) applied linguistics support the former theories because it helps understand issues related to the use of language: "Applied linguistics deals with the linguistic and cultural diversity of the modern foreign languages, proposing practices and attitudes that lead to exposing students to different realities sociocultural, but without losing the reference of its context" (p. 3). For that reason, the materials currently used to teach students need to be adapted to their realities, answer to their needs. Banegas (2016) expresses a similar point of view when he affirms that "the materials support the development of thinking skills in students, teachers cannot only use commercial materials, but also adapt them to favor the learning, depending on the objectives or needs of the students" (p. 111) In this sense, interculturality is seen as the interaction of subjects from different backgrounds, as the knowledge and understanding between cultures. In Walsh's words: "it is a process and project directed towards the construction of" other" modes of power, knowing, being and living" (2005, p.27).

How to Teach a Foreign Language taking Culture into Account?

To teach a foreign language, teachers need to take into account varied aspects such as customs, religion, fashion and celebrations, all these aspects are part of the culture and that is why those are part of the culture and a way of living. Culture finds its expression in language (Cazden, 1988; Kramersch, 1998); so, learning a new language without familiarity with its encompassing culture it's an incomplete process. The latter is very relevant, since in many institutions, teachers are not taking into account the social and cultural development of the students, which is a fundamental part of teaching a foreign language. The most important thing to keep in mind is the base culture of the learning community, since this new language can infer in the community's ways of living and see the world. Therefore, it is very important to recognize that teaching a

language is also teaching a culture, a particular worldview that can impact both positively and negatively any population. Moreover, Mohammadi and Sadat (2012) state that learning a foreign language is not only learning a structure or new vocabulary and expressions, it mainly consists in the incorporation of cultural elements, which are not integrated with the language itself. For that reason, teachers have to take into consideration the culture of their student and the place where they come from so that this new language and new culture does not have interferences with their own and they can have a meaningful learning.

So teachers must stimulate their students' cultural awareness because this is the key to learn from a wider range of significant situations. This can be clearly exemplified by noting the words that are important for each particular language, as in the classical Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Sapir-Whorf as cited by Seeyle, 1984). According to this postulate, language is a reflection of the speaking community's reality (as illustrated by the Eskimo culture's different words for different types of snow). Berardo and Deardorff (2012) declare that instructors can probe these experiences for greater depth, connect experiences to concepts, coach respectful curiosity and support skill development. To sum up, they must find balance between the native culture and the target language, realizing that the focus of intercultural education is the transformation of intersubjective relations (Carignan, Sanders & Pourdavood, 2005).

Intercultural Education: Perspectives and Proposals in Colombia.

The current research on interculturality and its relationship with education has attracted the interest of the academic world, especially in countries like Colombia, characterized by diversity. In Cruz's view (2015)

interculturality promotes the integration of societies, respect and understanding of differences, dialogue and decreasing of stigmatization and discrimination. In other words, interculturality, rather than a tangible reality, is a normative horizon, a "must be" (p.3). Rehaag (2010) concurs that the encounter with cultural diversity has become part of the daily life, and the task of education in relation to these experiences is found in the teaching of intercultural skills. Nevertheless, Cummins (2001), argues that schools do not take into account the language, culture and previous experiences of ethnic minorities, turning the student whose cultural knowledge is unknown into an invisible and inaudible being.

Coincident with the latter, and focusing on the Colombian context, Jaraba and Arrieta (2012) mention that English teaching in our country obeys international and national policies unaware of the particularities of the country's heterogeneous communities. Following the same line, Espinosa (2009) proposes that interculturality must begin to be conceptualized as a project; "not as something existing, but as something to be achieved" (p.2). According to this author, interculturality must be seen objectively as a project to be carried out depending on the needs of a population. Arnedo and Imitola (2014) establish that it is also important to use adequate resources because they help the teaching-learning process to be collaborative and reflective, "giving way to meaningful learning and finding new and different ways to evaluate" (p.47).

In this sense, Soltis (1984) points to pedagogy as the human activity of teaching and helping others learn. Huertas and Sanchez (2014) conclude that education must assume a protagonist role in the social transformation of Colombia. Castro and Alarcón (2012) go further and emphasize that an intercultural curriculum should promote the development of students as individuals capable of participating critically and responsibly in the conservation of the country's cultural heritage (p, 84). In Trujillo's words (2002): "Interculturality represents a hopeful point of contact between the individual, school, curriculum and society" (p.116). For this reason, intercultural education in Colombia contributes to the recognition and respect of the difference, taking diversity as an available resource for institutions (Lemus, 2010).

Developing Intercultural Awareness in Language Teaching Contexts: The Teacher's Role.

In intercultural education, individuals from different backgrounds work together and become familiar with the other's traditions, regardless of whether she or he is a minority or not (Fakirska, 2010). Israelson (2010) adds that "intercultural competence is an essential part of the conceptualization of the cultural dimension in foreign language teaching that has been promoted by educationalists as the most preferred type of competence" (p.1). That is why teaching and learning a second language is an ongoing process, because every day the culture is evolving. Pertaining to the subject, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) affirm the following:

The 'best' teacher is neither the native nor the

non-native speaker, but the person who can help learners see relationships between their own and other cultures, can help them acquire interest in and curiosity about otherness', and an awareness of themselves and their own cultures. (p.6).

Deardorff (2009) describes intercultural competence as a process in which attitudes like respect for different cultures and values, openness and curiosity lead to cultural self-awareness, empathic understanding of other cultures, and the ability and willingness to behave accordingly. Kramsch (2013) states that:

Many school systems prefer to hire native speakers (NSs) as language teachers because of their authentic relationship to the target language and culture, but native speakers don't necessarily know the home culture of their students nor the intellectual tradition of their school system. As result, they feel inadequate when teaching an everyday culture, they are not really familiar with. (p.58).

In other words, more than finding native English speakers, it is important to find those who are good promoting cultural awareness. It is very important to reflect on the importance that context has on teaching practices, since variations in the same language and cultural differences mean that what is correct for some people is not so for others. It becomes paramount to avoid situations in which schools do not take into account the language, culture and previous experiences of students, becoming their cultural knowledge invisible (Cummins, 2001). A plausible approach would be the inclusion of multiple backgrounds in the classroom, including the learners' own culture. This exposes learners to different cultures through one single language, English, and could be helpful in the incorporation of "cross-cultural understanding" (Clout, 2006, p.56). Thus, the ideal teacher that most language schools are looking for could be a non-native speaker, as long as he or she promotes intercultural awareness.

Conclusion

The teaching of a foreign language has always had a relationship with the culture of the apprentices since it involves more than new vocabulary, it also includes knowledge of new cultures, in such a way that learners can interact positively or negatively with their way of living. However, one of the aspects that captures our attention the most is the decontextualized materials that are used to teach foreign languages in our own context, which means

that the teaching process is focused only on the acquisition of basic linguistic forms and not on background. It becomes clear that materials must be contextualized in relation to the context in which they are used. It must be required for foreign language textbooks to include accurate representation of the target language culture in order to develop intercultural awareness, and teachers must be familiar with the necessary information on how to teach, motivate and evaluate students in a classroom through interculturality. It means that the role of language materials in the teaching and learning process is not only the development of communicative competences, but the development of social and cultural values able to influence the context where these processes are taking place.

Similarly, some authors concur that most language books are still designed from traditional perspectives, so they did not give students the chance to think and reflect things they do in their own culture. This shows that students do not have the opportunity of being in contact with the meanings they must be allowed to discover, share, discuss and reconstruct through the target language. It also means that most of the textbooks used are created to be as universally appealing as possible. In other words, in terms of culture, language materials are focused only on the foreign. The resources applied to the teaching of a new language ought to meet the academic, cultural and evaluative needs of students and also help develop authentic materials. These materials must be determined by the scope of their impact in particular learning contexts and by their ability to respond to the training needs of groups with different backgrounds. To sum up, an ecological approach to second language acquisition could help discover the proper methods to create authentic materials. The practical application of this approach should strengthen the link that exist between the linguistic and cultural components of teaching, whatever comes out of that could be a starting point for teachers and designers of didactic materials.

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