

Incorporating Culture and Cultural Identities in an Efl Freshmen Classroom at the University of Atacama

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RESUMEN

Este artículo describe como el concepto de cultura fue desarrollado en una clase de inglés en la asignatura de Lenguaje y Comunicación en inglés I, en el Departamento de Idiomas de la Universidad de Atacama. Además, este artículo pretende explorar si el nuevo conocimiento adquirido de cultura y representaciones de esta, puede afectar mi quehacer pedagógico en el aula. Es importante mencionar que esta investigación fue producto de una de mis clases del Magister en Idioma Inglés.

Esta investigación fue llevada a cabo con estudiantes de primer año de Pedagogía en Inglés. La idea de cultura fue asociada a un libro de John Steinbeck que los estudiantes debían leer como parte de una de sus evaluaciones de comprensión lectora en un segundo idioma. Además, se proponen algunos pasos a seguir para realizar la inclusión de este concepto en el aula.

Es importante mencionar que el lenguaje y la cultura están entrelazadas, es así que el lenguaje en un medio por el cual la cultura es transmitida. Phillips (2003) dice: "Cultura es la comprensión y práctica la cual es compartida con un grupo de personas". Antes de incluir el componente cultural en la clase, es importante escuchar las voces de los estudiantes y las representaciones culturales que ellos posean.

KEY WORDS: Cultura, lenguaje, representaciones culturales.

ABSTRACT

This paper describes how the concept of Culture was developed in an EFL class (Language and Communication in English I), in the Language Department at the University of Atacama. Also, it wants to explore if the new understanding of culture and cultural representations may affect my teaching practices. This research was a product of one of my classes in my Master's degree program.

This research was carried out in the first level of English pedagogy students. The idea of culture was connected to a book by John Steinbeck that the students have to read for an extensive reading evaluation. Moreover, I propose some steps to be followed when developing this concept in a class.

It is important to mention that language and culture are entangled with one another, so language is the means through which culture is transmitted. As Phillips (2003) states: "culture is the understandings and practices that are shared within a group of people". Before including culture as a component in your classes, it is important to realize that our students have their own voices or "cultural representations".

KEY WORDS: Culture, language, cultural representations.

INTRODUCTION

Incorporating culture in my teaching practices and knowing how to teach it and work with it has become an important part of my professional development as an EFL teacher. One of the main goals of this paper is to develop the idea on how the new understanding of culture and cultural representations that I have gained during a "Language and Culture" course, in my Master's degree program, will affect my teaching practices with students who are studying to become future teachers of English at the Language Department in the University in which I work. I will discuss steps in the lesson plan and important things to take into account when planning lessons in which you incorporate the concept of "culture".

Everything changes and concepts evolve, so we can appreciate this change through time in which the concept of introducing culture into our teaching has been modified. This change reflects a broader transformation in the way that culture itself is understood and taught. Some teachers think that students need to learn the language in order to truly understand and appreciate the culture; this may lead EFL¹ teachers to avoid teaching culture for a myriad of reasons. For example, students at lower proficiency levels are not ready yet to fully understand and communicate in the target language because of their language level or their intellectual maturity.

Instructors may think that teaching culture is just creating additional material that they simply do not have the time to organize, or sometimes teachers think that they are not prepared enough to introduce changes in their way of teaching. However, society expects a lot from teachers, so we have to integrate cultural components because language teaching is closely related to different perspectives of the world in which we live in. This is also reflected in the following statement from the National Center for

Cultural Competence: NCCC defines culture as an "integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations". The NCCC embraces the philosophy that culture influences all aspects of human behavior. (Goode et al., 2000, p. 1).

Language and culture are entangled with one another, so language is the means through which culture is transmitted. As Phillips (2003) states: "culture is the understandings and practices that are shared within a group of people". Before including culture as a component in your classes, it is important to realize that our students have their own voices or "cultural representations". Risager points out, "cultural representations are built up in discourses and convey images or narratives of culture and society in particular contexts" (2007, p. 180). Students have their own ideas about the world and teachers should take them into account when planning their lessons.

As a result of my readings, I worked on a lesson plan to be used in my language and communication in English I classes. First of all, I had to think on which Approach I will focus to develop this work; I decided to use a communicative and constructivist approach in which I will develop the concept of "Unfaithfulness" in different cultures and contexts, as well as "the importance of knowing what was happening at the moment that the book was written". I will develop these ideas through a book that my students have to read for an intensive reading test which is focused on learning and understanding new and important vocabulary. To achieve these objectives I will use a story called "the Murder" by John Steinbeck. We will discuss what was happening in California at that time, we will discuss the civil war and also the importance of building a railroad system in a city (in this case

¹ English as a Foreign Language

transcontinental rail lines). But before talking about the steps of my class, it is important to mention the background information that lies underneath my work. Second, before planning your classes, the teacher should investigate what was happening at the moment the book was written to have a clear picture of the concepts and the situations presented in the story.

BACKGROUND

Between the desolate, beautiful landscapes of Norte Grande and the bustling urban centers and lush valleys of Middle Chile, rest Norte Chico. Often ignored, bypassed, and overlooked. Here you will find an intriguing fusion of both geographic and human influences; here you will also find the city of Copiapó (Diaguita word meaning "cup of gold"), in which I work as an EFL teacher. It was silver that made Copiapó home to South America's first railroad in 1854 (I will connect this idea to the railroad in California in my lesson plan). While present-day Copiapó feels more like a bustling city, its mining past still resonates in the University of Atacama's mineralogical studies and the mining paths still visible in the surrounding mountains. So, it is in this context that I develop my teaching practices at the University of Atacama. Even though the city is a mining town, we still receive students from the South of Chile who come to study here because of the importance of the University.

Freshmen students who enroll in Language and Communication in English I come from different backgrounds and cultural identities. Most of the students who enroll this year (2010) in the Pedagogy program come from Copiapó and Caldera. They like rock and pop music, they enjoy movies, they use English-English dictionaries in their cell phones and some of them have internet access on their mobiles. Most of them have told me that they are studying to be English teachers because they like the language and some others because they

could not travel to study to another city and they also like the language. The ages of my students range from 18 to 20 years old, and some of them still lack depth in their critical thinking skills. As a result, to teach English and improve their skills with the teaching of the cultural component in the class, will be a great and challenging endeavor.

Spradley (1980) says: "that in acquiring knowledge about and reflecting on another culture, the importance of not assuming that the meaning of a particular cultural behavior has for the members of one group is the same as it is for others". We may think that some students are not prepared to discuss and give well-grounded opinions and I can see this in my students. On the other hand, some of them have a clear perspective of life and its difficulties, and one goal that should be encouraged when asking students to reflect upon the concept of culture is for them to consider what they understand by culture and what particular behaviors the people of the culture might have when facing different situations.

Nevertheless, there is more than meets the eye when teaching culture. We have to analyze the purpose of the topic that we will choose and its pertinence to the students' own cultural identities. We may think that a topic could be important and interesting for them to develop, but most of the time our beliefs are influenced by our own personal stories and our own cultural identities. So what we may think is relevant for them, maybe it is not. Tomalin & Stempleski (1993:7-8), modifying Seelye's (1988) talk about the "seven goals of cultural instruction: the teaching of culture has the following goals and is in itself a mean of accomplishing them:

1. To help students to develop an understanding of the facts that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors.
2. To help students to develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave.

3. To help students to become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture.
4. To help students increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.
5. To help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence.
6. To help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.
7. To stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people.

This list of goals is an improvement on Huebener's (1959: 182-183) list of "desirable outcomes". At any rate, the aim of teaching culture is "to increase students' awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own, helping them to make comparisons among cultures" (Tavares & Cavalcanti, 1996: 19). These comparisons, of course, are not meant to undermine foreign cultures but to enrich students' experience and to sensitize them to cultural diversity. That is why I have chosen to work with goals number 1, 2 and 5 in my freshmen Language and Communication in English I course at the University of Atacama.

One of the first steps that you have to take into account before planning a lesson is to pay attention to the students' characteristics. It will be important to mention the kinds of topics and activities that tend to motivate the students. Most of my students belong to The Net Generation; so, they enjoy watching videos, listening to podcasts and using technology in the classroom. Therefore, in order to fulfill the chosen objectives for this class, I selected a video that tells us about the life of John Steinbeck through pictures. This video is called "An introduction to John Steinbeck".

OUTLINE THE APPROACH TO TEACHING CULTURE

In order to fulfill the objectives chosen for developing the cultural component in my classes, I will have to explain the approaches that I normally use which are the communicative and constructivist approach. The communicative approach could be said to be the product of educators and linguists who had grown dissatisfied with the audio-lingual and grammar-translation methods of foreign language instruction.

Linguists felt that students were not learning enough realistic, whole language. They did not know how to communicate using appropriate social language, gestures, or expressions; in brief, they were at a loss to communicate in the culture of the language studied. Interest in and development of communicative-style teaching mushroomed in the 1970s; authentic language use and classroom exchanges where students engaged in real communication with one another became quite popular. Since then, the communicative approach has been adapted to the elementary, middle, secondary, and post-secondary levels, and the underlying philosophy has spawned different teaching methods known under a variety of names, including notional-functional, teaching for proficiency, proficiency-based instruction, and communicative language teaching.

Communicative language teaching makes use of real-life situations that garner communication; students' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics. Margie S. Berns, an expert in the field of communicative language teaching, writes in explaining Firth's view that "language is interaction; it is interpersonal activity and has a clear relationship with society. In this light, language study has to look at the use (function) of language in context, both its linguistic context (what is uttered before and after a given piece of discourse) and its social, or situational, context (who is speaking, what their social roles are, why they have come together to speak)" (Berns, 1984, p. 5).

Moreover, Constructivists (Von Glaserfeld, 1990) advocate models for learning based on the belief that students construct their own knowledge and understanding. The basis for learning is the set of all prior experience and the derived knowledge and understanding. As students learn, they constantly engage in the process of revising their prior learning based on new experience. Constructivism is a theory of knowledge that argues that humans generate knowledge and meaning from their experiences. Constructivism is inspired by Piaget's theory of constructivist learning which has had wide ranging impact on learning theories and teaching and is an underlying theme of many education reform movements.

Moreover, other authors that have influenced my work when including the cultural component in the classroom are the works of McKay, Sandra (2003), Kramsch (1993), Spradley (1980) and Byram and Morgan (1994). The book, *Teaching English as an International Language: The Chilean Context* by Sandra McKay discusses a questionnaire which was distributed to in-service and pre-service English teachers in public and private primary and secondary classes in my country. The purpose was to examine the role of culture in ELT materials, the prevalent methodology used in ELT and the attitudes toward native and non native English-speaking teachers. One of the questions on the survey caught my attention: the teachers had to express their ideas about the strengths of Chilean teachers. The result was that Chilean teachers know the sociocultural reality of their students and that they also know the culture and the reality of their students' mother tongue (L1). They know who their students are and how the students behave. This was important for me because I realize that talking about culture while learning a foreign language is not an easy task to accomplish, but if you are aware of the students' background and cultural identities, it will be easier to include the cultural component in your classes. An important factor that can create a major barrier in the process of

teaching culture, is that students have a lot of ideas in their minds that they may not be able to articulate in English because they lack the necessary vocabulary.

In addition, Kramsh (1993) in the book *Culture in Teaching English as an International Language* develops the idea of the "Sphere of Interculturality". This promotes the idea that the learning of culture is more than just the transfer of information between cultures, but also considers our own culture in relation to another. For this to be achieved in the language classroom, it is necessary to develop critical thinking skills in the students. Some students do not read between the lines, so it will not be easy to ask a 20-year-old student to talk about core issues in society. It is a great challenge to develop this skill in students. This is supported by Spradley (1980), who states that "in acquiring knowledge about and reflecting on another culture, the importance of not assuming the meaning that a particular cultural behavior has for the members of one group is the same as it is for others. One goal that should be encouraged when asking students to reflect on another culture is for them to consider what meaning a particular behavior might have for members of that culture, and not assume that it is the same as the one they have".

THE LESSON PLAN

The objectives for my lesson are related to Tomalin & Stempleski (1993: 7-8), modifying Seelye (1988) who talks about the "seven goals of cultural instruction. According to them, the teaching of culture has goals and is in itself a means of accomplishing them. As a result, I chose to help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors, to help students to develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave, and to help students to develop the ability to evaluate

and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence.

The materials needed to achieve these objectives are a PowerPoint presentation developed by the teacher, a video called "An introduction to John Steinbeck" which lasts 2:20 minutes, and Steinbeck's story "The Murder", which has 10 pages.

First, the class will start with the following quote created by the author: "The free exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world". Students analyze the quote and give their opinions to the teacher and peers. Second, the students watch a 2:20 minutes video which talks about the writer's life and awards. It is important to explain the students that there is always more than meets the eye when talking about a book, there is a background in history and important historical event by the time the book was written. Moreover, it is important to discuss the importance of knowing what was happening at the moment in which the story was created. Third, discuss about the differences in behaviors that exist among people of different cultures and relate this question to students' previous knowledge.

Fourth, exploration and settlement by Europeans along the coast and in the inland valleys will be also discussed with the students, as well as the built of the transcontinental rail lines. This topic will be related to the city of Copiapó which is home to South America's first railroad in 1854 which was operative between Copiapó and Caldera (third region, North part of Chile). An important idea that will be developed is the meaning that the construction of a railroad has for the city and region in terms of economical and political development. Fifth, the civil war (1861-1865) will be another topic that will be discussed. Teachers assume that students know historical events, but sometimes students lack the opportunity to discuss their ideas about the topics and they also lack the knowledge. Moreover, a war is always something that teachers can discuss with their students. Students need to know what was happening at the time

the story was written, so they will have a clear view of the political and cultural problems that arise in the story. Sixth, students will be asked to give a brief summary about the story and answer to nine questions which will be given to them, so they will be able to discuss in groups. After the discussion, the teacher will read some important lines in a paragraph at the end of the story to practice the emphasis and intonation in words, so students will be engaged in the story. Then, 7 statements will be presented for group discussion. The answers will be checked with the whole class, and at the end of the discussion, the following questions will be on the board: In many societies an unfaithful wife is, or has been, thought much worse and punished much more than an unfaithful husband. What does this show about such societies? And what do you think about it? Students will have to post their answers in a forum that they have in the Moodle platform that we use for the class and they should be prepared to comment on this the next class. Also, they will have to think that they are in Jim and Jelka's shoes (main characters in the story) and tell to the class, what they will do in this situation (the woman was passive after receiving the whippings from her husband.) and what they will do if they get married or date a foreigner. Finally, we will discuss the vocabulary words given (76 words) for an intensive reading test and also it is important to check the vocabulary that students could not find in the dictionaries. It is important to mention that at the end of the activity, the students developed a written test, in which 80% of the students obtained a grade similar or higher than 77%.

DISCUSSION

The lesson plan that I have developed to teach culture in my Language and Communication classes has been a worthwhile endeavor. I applied the lesson plan in my class and followed all the steps describe above and the students and I could observe the benefits of the

discussion. We may think that some students are not prepared to discuss and give well-grounded opinions; however, as the lesson was developed, I could see the faces and the reactions of my students when the topic of unfaithfulness and violence among the couple was developed. They could not understand why the woman was passive after receiving the whippings from her husband. For her to be unfaithful was not bad, and according to her culture she was expected to accept physical aggression from a man. Students were very surprised, and here we discussed that something might be right for ourselves because of the culture in which we live in, but it does not mean that the action itself will be right for others who belong to a different culture. I asked the students: what will they do if they get married or if they date a foreign boy/girl? Will they treat him/her as he/she is treated in their own culture?, or they will treat them according to their own beliefs?.

I was surprised with the maturity of their answers. Some of them have a clear perspective of life and its difficulties. "One goal that should be encouraged when asking students to reflect on another culture is for them to consider what meaning a particular behavior might have for members of that culture, and not assume that it is the same as the one they have". (McKay, 2002: Culture in Teaching English as an International language).

Peck (1998) states that "Culture should be our message to students and language our medium in a globalized world". The frontiers have opened and nations are closer than they used to be. Now, it is common to find people from all over the world in many countries, so teachers should "present students with a true picture or representation of another culture and language" (Singhal, 1998). According to Singhal (1998), language teachers ought to receive both experiential and academic training, with the aim of

becoming "mediators in culture teaching" (ibid.). At any rate, culture teaching should aim to foster "empathy with the cultural norms of the target language community" and "an increased awareness of one's own 'cultural logic' in relation to others" (Willems, 1992, cited in Byram, Morgan et al., 1994: 67). This cultural logic, though, is achieved through "a recognition of othernesses, and of the limitations of one's own cultural identity" (Killick & Poveda, 1997).

Finally, it is important to have a clear picture of the cultural components to be included in the lesson plan, it is also important to research on the topic and pay attention to the author's life and what was happening at the time the book was written. Then, the teacher should choose the proper materials to be used and develop his/her lesson plan. Moreover, never forget that students have their own ideas and beliefs about the world (their own cultural identities) and this knowledge should be incorporated when planning.

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