Socio-Cultural Stereotypes: Exploring Students' Perceptions Regarding Social Issues

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This research started from the need of looking for ways to involve learners dynamically in classroom activities, including social issues. The study was developed with ten students (10) in tenth grade. It was carried out to explore tenth graders' perceptions on gender, race and social class to report their socio-cultural stereotypes through the development of a project work called "Stereotyping our Culture" divided into three (3) workshops, where students dealt with different Colombian social issues while they were learning English. Data collection sources incorporated field notes to record events and ideas for further reflection, video-taping to get accurate students' perceptions to confirm our impressions reported in the field notes and artifacts from workshops to perceive what students wanted to express by means of drawings or writings.

Key words: Culture, perceptions, social stereotypes, project work

Esta investigación surgió de la necesidad de buscar nuevas formas de involucrar dinámicamente a los estudiantes en actividades de clase que incluyan aspectos sociales. El estudio se desarrolló con diez estudiantes (10) de décimo grado, para explorar sus percepciones sobre género, raza y clase social reportando sus estereotipos socio-culturales a través del desarrollo de un proyecto llamado "Estereotipando nuestra cultura" que se dividió en tres (3) talleres, donde los estudiantes se enfrentan a diferentes aspectos sociales mientras están aprendiendo inglés. La recolección de datos incorporó el diario de campo para reportar los eventos e ideas para una posterior reflexión, video grabación para obtener las percepciones exactas de los estudiantes, confirmando así nuestras impresiones y producciones de los talleres para percibir lo que los estudiantes quieren expresar por medio de sus escritos o dibujos.

Palabras Clave: Cultura, percepciones, estereotipos sociales, proyecto

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Rationale

The importance of this study relies on some reasons. The first one has to do with a pedagogical perspective, in which using Colombian cultural elements to teach English will not necessarily be a fifth skill but a concept that is attached to the daily teaching practices. As a result, the foreign language classroom becomes a place where diverse perceptions are welcome when students participate in workshops related to Colombian social issues. The second one refers to a personal belief, which is that teachers should highlight elements of the home culture before teaching a target culture. In this way, students will be more aware of their own culture and, consequently, will recognize and understand their cultural diversity in such a way they could make comparisons among different cultural perceptions. Therefore this study suggests paying more attention to the approaches to teach a foreign language without missing out on our own culture, as indicated by Bell (1997): taking our culture as a tool for developing and recognizing the foreign language, as well as to construct or reconstruct ourselves.

Integrating Socio-Cultural Project Work in the Classroom

For teaching another language we should consider aspects that are present in the class such as personal, social and cultural factors which comprise part of our essence because we live in a community that tends to create patterns to dictate the way we have to behave, dress or speak. In fact, these patterns are connected with what is called stereotypes. The connection between culture and stereotypes has long been acknowledged and, so, there is an increasing interest in the study of the relationship between these two fields which is included in a project that could be a useful tool for teaching and learning English since it provides situations in which social skills are functional and can be strengthened. Dealing with project work facilitates the students' integration of the four language skills in meaningful situations and in a natural way; in addition, the different experiences and workshops students have during project work should lead them to obtain meaningful results.

Project work is "a systematic plan that includes multi-skill activities, ideas and resources, among others, having the tendency to solve a problem or any other daily activity that requires a previous plan" (Fried-Booth, 1990, p. 8). Otherwise, it will be a set of disorganized and incoherent activities. For this reason project work must have

a logical organization with curriculum objectives to avoid teachers carrying out activities without a specific purpose or orientation and to prevent the teacher's improvising his/her work.

The following is an explanation of how culture, perceptions and stereotypes are integrated in the development of socio-cultural project work.

Culture

To provide a description of what culture entails is difficult. There is a variety of different definitions which attempts to convey what the concept means from different perspectives; in this sense, the concept adopted in this study is closely related to Nieto's (2002) vision of culture. He believes the following:

> Culture is the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created and shared by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors (which can include a common history, geographic locations, language, social class, and/or religion), and how these are transformed by those who share them (Nieto, 1996, p. 390). Culture includes not only language, ethnicity and race, but other crucial dimensions such as social class and gender, because they may be key factors in explaining educational achievement (p. 53).

Nieto (2002) aims at establishing the basics of multicultural education by providing a set of aspects that should be taken into account for achieving equality in the multicultural classroom. This perspective, highly focused on the connection of culture to teaching and learning in educational context, takes into account the socio-cultural context and diversity. Consequently, students can take advantage of the English class, sharing their different points of view and constructing their own cultural knowledge, in which they will come to know their community and different Colombian cultural backgrounds that exist around them.

Perceptions

Wright (2004) states that perceptions vary from person to person. Different people perceive different things about the same situation. But more than that, we assign different meanings to what we perceive. And the meanings might change for a certain person. One might change one's perspective or simply make things mean something.

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Stereotypes

The use of stereotypes is a part of our everyday way of thinking; for this reason, our society often innocently creates and perpetuates stereotypes, but these stereotypes often lead to unfair discrimination and persecution when they are unfavorable, but they may also be positive or negative such as when various nationalities are stereotyped as friendly or unfriendly.

Walter Lippmann adopted the term in his book *Public Opinion* (1922) as a means of describing the way society set about categorizing people—"stamping" human beings with a set of characteristics—as well. In this pioneering work, Lippmann identified the following four aspects of stereotypes: 1. Acquired Second-hand: People acquire (and absorb) stereotypes from cultural mediators rather than from their own direct experience with the groups being stereotyped. 2. Erroneous: All stereotypes are false. Some are less false than others and, more importantly, some are less harmful than others. They attempt to claim that each human being in a certain group shares a set of common qualities. 3. Resistant to change: Where people resist changing and follow common patterns that are difficult to avoid. 4. Simple: Certainly more simple than reality, but also often capable of being summarized in only two to three sentences.

Methodology

Now, the model used to give easy-management structure to project work and to guide teachers and students in developing meaningful projects that facilitate content learning and provide opportunities for explicit language instruction at critical moments in the project (Stoller, 1997) is explained. This model is summarized in six steps as described in Figure 1.

Next, you are going to find an explanation of the adaptation of Stoller's (1997) Project Model which was applied step-by-step in this research:

Step I. Propose a "Project work" to be developed in the class. As our principal goal is to evidence and analyze the cultural component and students' perceptions towards stereotypes, we decided to do project work implementing workshops, in which the Colombian cultural component is integrated.

Step II. Present the theme to work on: Colombian Culture. Considering that our project work is a structural one, the teacher-researcher proposed its theme, Colombian culture, and students agreed to work on this theme.
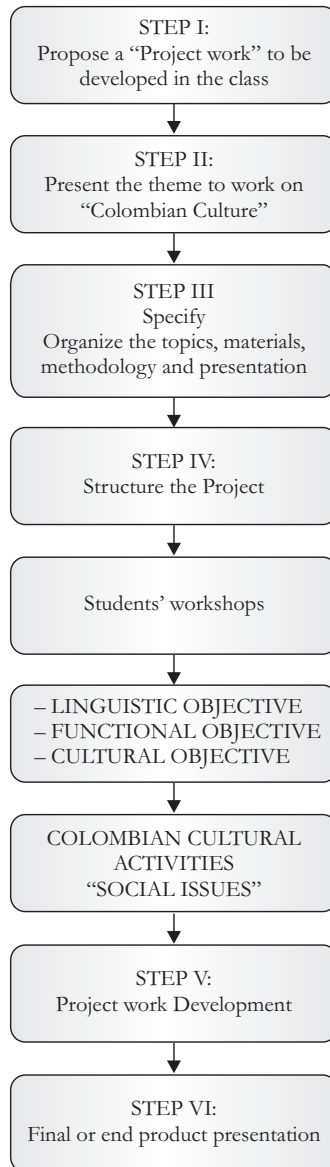
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│  Propose a "Project work" to be │
│    developed in the class       │
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│           STEP II:              │
│   Present the theme to work on  │
│      "Colombian Culture"        │
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│           STEP III              │
│            Specify              │
│  Organize the topics, materials,│
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│           STEP IV:              │
│       Structure the Project     │
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│           STEP VI:              │
│  Final or end product presentation │
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Figure 1. Adaptation from Stoller's (1997) Project Model.

Step III. Specify and organize the topics, materials, methodology and presentation. The teacher-researcher presented the topic Colombian culture which focused on three main social issues such as gender, race and social class, and would be developed through workshops with different activities in which students need to investigate, give conclusions, carry out debates and oral presentations related to the social issue.

Step IV. Structure the project. The project is divided into three workshops based on social issues, and each one has a linguistic, functional and cultural objective. The purpose is to guide students in successful development of each activity.

Step V. Project work development. First, students read the activities of the workshop, following a path: they read the workshop's objectives, then they developed each point and finally, they let us know their perceptions by sharing them through their writings, ideas and answers. Accordingly, students used different tools to develop the activities; using their previous cultural knowledge and experiences in their environment in order to express their points of view, they had the idea to approach students with their partners' perceptions. During the classes, students used their creativity and abilities to develop workshops that integrated social issues such as race, gender and social class, which were the bridge between the classroom and real world; in this way, students could understand and respect other ways of life and thinking.

Step VI. Final or end product presentation. Students are now ready to present the final outcome of their projects. They can choose the way to present the end-product; for instance, a poster session, a writer's report, a letter, a handbook or a brochure. In this case, students made a poster session which was videotaped; they presented it by groups; students had the opportunity to share and discuss their ideas and perceptions; also, to talk about their experiences. The presentation of this final product was an opportunity in which students could reflect on the relation they found in the three workshops regarding gender, race and social class.

After analyzing the information gathered from the workshops, we found that there were some important commonalities among the participants. This can be explained better by looking at the following three categories which have emerged from the data.

1. Gender Characteristics

This category emerging from the first workshop related to Gender had participants gathering information about stereotypes; after that, there was a discussion based on what they researched about stereotypes. The idea was to

approach students with their partners' perceptions. Participants reported that stereotypes are a kind of discrimination and that it is impossible to use them. Furthermore, many of the students agreed that a stereotype marks differences among people and gives a subjective idea of a group of people based on only one person. The following excerpts taken from samples of students' artifacts exemplify what was mentioned above.

> *"Stereotype is the discrimination in a country where nobody knows the respect". (Lombo/WS1)*

> *"I think that stereotypes are very frequently in the society because in the cultures existent different thoughts and different languages". (Bob/WS1)*

> *"Stereotypes are very bad in our life because they give a general idea of a group of people based in one person or what people had said us". (Nick/WS1)*

We could deduce from the previous samples that students have different perceptions related to the concept of stereotypes, as Wright (2004) states, perceptions vary from person to person. In spite of their converging in a common point, the stereotype is a form of discrimination, each one exemplifying their perception through experiences or previous knowledge.

After students examined a relationship about how stereotypes are involved in their daily life as a warm up to introduce the next activity whose objective was to get them totally engaged in one of the key aspects of our research matter, that is Gender, the purpose of the next activity was to explore students' perceptions about the role of men and women in our country. To achieve this, two pictures were presented: a man working on a computer and the second a woman architect. Students relayed on the fact that there is a great difference between what a woman and a man can do, despite a student's having expressed that she would like to find equality between women and men regarding responsibilities and abilities.

> *"I think that girls should work too. They said that men don't make anything, but, really she don't make anything nor help the men. The strong sex is the masculine and the woman is the weak sex". (Guajiro/WS1)*

> *"Something that call my attention was the fact that in the drawings' descriptions many of them agree that women can be an architect but she is too weak for developing some activities". (FN/WS1)*

> *"The man work more time that women, the woman can't play soccer, the men are workers, the woman can't be "papá", the woman can't drive". (Xina/WS1)*

"The man can work more than the woman, because the woman is weak. The man can't cook and care children because it is work to a woman". (Casta/WS)

From these opinions we could state that students made an over-generalization of gender, establishing specific functions about what women and men must or are able to do. This corroborates what Lippmann (1922) declared about stereotypes, which are called "resistant to change" where people resist changes, following established patterns. It was evidenced in the previous samples, in which the participants affirmed that men are the strong sex and women are the weak sex.

To enrich the data, a third activity inside this workshop was carried out. Five questions were posed: 1. Are the responsibilities of a mother the same as the responsibilities of a father concerning their families? 2. Are men and women equal in ability and intelligence? 3. What behaviors are deemed as appropriate for men but inappropriate for women? Students had to discuss the responsibilities, abilities and behaviors that a man or a woman could assume in the society. Participants could answer in writing or by means of drawings. When we were reading and contrasting the data from this workshop, we found that students were describing common characteristics about women and men that people learn from society.

From the drawings and writing excerpts we could deduce that their parents do not have the same responsibilities in the family and that the roles each member assumes are classified according to their familiar environment. This can be evidenced in Parsons and Bales' (1955) gender model, which was used to contrast and illustrated extreme positions on gender roles. Model A describes total separation of male and female roles, while Model B describes the complete dissolution of barriers between gender roles. From this perspective, our participants' excerpts, we could deduce that
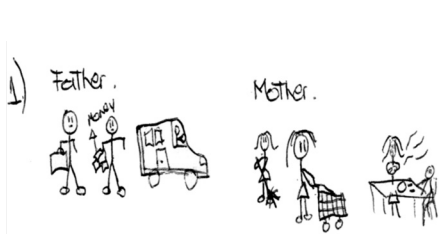

Figure 2. Drawing taken from Xina's gender workshop.

Figure 3. Drawing taken from Bob's gender workshop.

the Parsons and Bales' model A is applied, in which housekeeping and child care are the primary functions of the woman. She fullfills 'internal' functions; for example, to strengthen the ties between members of the family. The man, on the other hand, performed the 'external' functions of a family, such as providing monetary support.

2. Human Races

This category appeared from the data found in the development of the second workshop related to race in which the participants had to discuss the concept of race in groups of three and had to write their own concept; after that, they had to list different Colombian racial groups they knew about. They had to describe each racial group they named before and, finally, as a home activity over the course of four days, students had to use a worksheet in which they had to keep a log of how television shows, sponsors or movies often use labels or categories to describe others based on race with features such as clothing, looks, the way a person talks, or the groups to which she or he belongs.

This category reflects the way students perceive race according to their knowledge and experiences in the environment they are in contact with. When we were reading and contrasting the data from this workshop, we found that students assigned different features to describe the concept of race.

Figure 4. Excerpt taken from Chevi's race workshop.

We can recapitulate from this category that students' responses related to race definition and how they perceive the different racial groups were related to stereotypes. It was evidenced when participants assigned specific characteristics to each racial group like skin color, behaviors and attitudes that mark positive and negative differences among racial groups. Here, the use of resistant-to-change stereotypes is clear, which was previously explained, and the erroneous stereotype, which attempts to claim that not each individual human being in a certain group shares a set of common qualities, as proposed by Lippmann (1922).

3. *Social Class*

This category emerged from the data found in the development of the third workshop related to Social Class in which participants had to draw their own concept about social class; after that, they had to write a short paragraph reflecting on the following situation: You take a bus or Transmilenio; there are only three empty seats; imagine the people who are next to these, and choose one seat for yourself. Give the reason why you chose it and then share your answers with a partner. The aim was to pick up students' perceptions about the given situation.

This category reflects the way students perceive social class according to their knowledge and experiences in the environment they are in contact with. When we were reading and contrasting the data from this workshop, we found that students assigned characteristics to the different social classes.

The students' concept of social class could be perceived through drawings in which a hierarchical distinction was evident. They divided society into three classes:
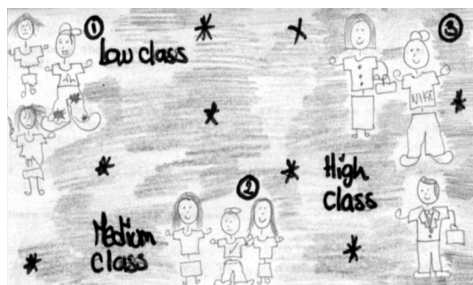

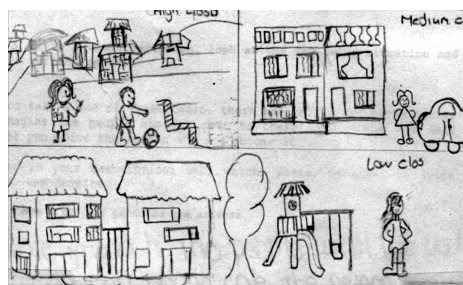**Figure 5**. Drawing taken from Lombo's social class workshop.

Figure 6. Drawing taken from Casta's social class workshop.

high, medium and lower following Warner's model (1949), which has a similar division. The difference is that Warner's class division was based more on attitudes than on the actual amount of money an individual made; on the contrary, by analyzing students' drawings and their social classification, we could perceive that the division was based on two aspects: "material and emotional": material seen as all tangible things a person can have such as a house, clothes, money, a car, a job, etc.; and emotional seen as personal appearance, feelings, thoughts, etc, as was exemplified in the drawings above.

These evidenced how students tend to stereotype people without knowing them, by using a classification method based on initial impressions about strangers with incomplete information about others. This is a negative stereotype which has a negative effect where the tendency of people is to evaluate the causes of the behaviors of a person they dislike. This negativity plays a role in producing the ultimate attribution error, a major contributor to prejudice.

To recapitulate, we found three main categories: the first one is called Gender Characteristics; the second one is called Human Races, and the third is Feelings and Money. In conclusion, we consider that one the most relevant aspects of this research is the fact that students and the teacher-researcher had the opportunity to explore social issues from different perspectives, sources and points of view due to the project work we developed during the study. When pupils explored social issues, they started to show their perceptions that could be "positive" o "negative" for them, according to their own way of reading the world, and these were joined by stereotypes.

Conclusions

In this research study the use of project work was a tool of having learners participate, sharing knowledge and meaningful experiences and giving participants chances to be more aware of their own culture. Consequently, they recognized and understood their cultural diversity in such a way that they could make comparisons among different cultural perceptions regarding stereotypes. On the other hand, this study gave students an environment in which they could exchange meanings, express their systems of values and beliefs, and the ways they relate to others, but the most important was that it gave them opportunities to express and share their perceptions about Colombian socio-cultural issues. Once participants started to participate in the workshops, they realized that there were many differences as well as similarities that

go beyond the stereotypical vision they usually have. In this way, they could perceive other realities different from their own.

Reflecting on what we could find in student's perceptions, we can conclude that, in each social issue analyzed in the workshops, participants made use of stereotypes. All of these stereotypes emerged from students' perceptions and, according to the data analyzed, they assign different meanings to what they perceive, coinciding in most of the cases with the same perceptions towards a specific social issue. In this way, according to Liebert and Sprafkin (1988), if two or more people coincide with the same perceptions, it can become a stereotype based on extreme characteristics attributed to the group. The authors added that a stereotype is applied whenever a group is depicted or portrayed in such a way that all its members appear to have the same characteristics, attitudes or life conditions.

One of the aims for carrying out this study was to provide a sample of how we, as teachers, can teach a foreign language without missing out on our own culture. It contributes to delving into ourselves, recognizing our origins and customs in order to be more aware of other cultures. The Colombian educational setting needs new ways to involve learners who are acquiring a foreign language but studying it with our own cultural elements so that the foreign culture can be welcome and students can be able to find and discuss similarities and differences between both cultures. One way to make this possible is to create and work on new materials focused on the students' necessities and interests. The idea is that those materials as we used in this study with the project work let students follow an organized process, developing their social and language skills, and implicated the cognitive, socio-affective, communicative and cultural components.

Furthermore, within our educational context we can include Colombian socio-cultural elements as another skill in order to complement the other four skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking). As a consequence, our classrooms become a place where diverse perceptions are welcome when students perform workshops related to the Colombian culture through a good development of a Project Work, which facilitates the students' integration of the four language communicative skills in meaningful situations and in a natural way. In addition, the different experiences and workshops students have during a project work should lead them to obtain meaningful results; consequently, project work has a great influence on the students' confidence, self-esteem, autonomy, language and cognitive abilities.

Considering the contribution of this research to the Colombian Educational setting, the authors conclude that young Colombian learners need to be educated not only to fill their minds with a lot of new information to achieve required academic standards, but also to increase the level of awareness of the implementation of values in their lives.

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