

## **Intercultural Communication and ELT: A Classroom Experience**

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The growing priority given to both cross-cultural awareness and interculturality in ELT requires EFL teachers to be aware of how culture arises out of language. However, the relation between language and culture seems hardly noticed and usually overlooked by EFL teachers. This paper discusses a) notions about how language and culture relate; b) a practical implementation of these notions through a reading and writing activity in an undergraduate EFL course at Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla; and c) implications for how language and culture can be incorporated into EFL courses.

*Key words:* Culture, language, intercultural communication, awareness, cultural competence, metaphors, social interaction

La creciente prioridad dada tanto al conocimiento de otras culturas como a su interrelación con la enseñanza del inglés exige que los profesores de lenguas sean concientes de cómo la cultura surge de la lengua. Sin embargo, la relación entre lengua y cultura parece ser difícil de identificar y por lo general es subestimada. Este documento propone a) nociones de cómo se relaciona la lengua y la cultura; b) una implementación práctica de estas nociones a través de una actividad de lectura y escritura en un curso de inglés como lengua extranjera en la Universidad del Norte de Barranquilla; y c) implicaciones de cómo la lengua y la cultura pueden incorporarse en cursos de inglés como lengua extranjera.

*Palabras claves:* Cultura, lenguaje, comunicación intercultural, conciencia, competencia cultural, metáforas, interacción social.

## Introduction

The internationalization of the Universidad del Norte is an institutional commitment covering all areas and departments including the strengthening of its International Cooperation Office and the Teaching Development Office among others. For instance, the Universidad del Norte *Boletín Estadístico* (2005) shows how faculty and students' mobility has increased steadily and significantly over the past years, especially to English speaking countries.

The Universidad del Norte *Plan de Acción* (2006) states that the Language Institute at Universidad del Norte has the direct responsibility of fostering the development of linguistic and communicative competences in foreign languages. With regard to English Language Teaching, the Institute has implemented different approaches to satisfy the needs of its community such as English for Academic Purposes, with emphasis on reading and writing; English for General Purposes, with emphasis in oral performance; English for Specific Purposes, tailored to medical students, and even preparation courses for standardized tests. These experiences have given the Language Institute a great deal of expertise on foreign language teaching.

Yet the growing incoming and outgoing faculty and students' mobility due to the University's comprehensive internationalization plan has brought out into the open the failure of language-centered programs for the successful realization of the overseas sojourn objectives. Students and scholars who have experienced cross-cultural encounters during their academic sojourns have reported frustration due to frequent communication problems or lack of understanding despite their appropriate linguistic competence measured by means of standardized tests or language course grades.

Manifestations of patriotism, for instance, can be a source of intercultural misunderstandings. In Colombia, for example, it is widely accepted to express a strong sense of national belonging by means of wearing T-shirts, caps, and bags that display the Colombian flag. In certain countries in Europe, however, expressing a deep nationalism is often looked at with suspicion since it reminds one of the dark fascist chapters in contemporary European history. Not being aware of this difference was the reason why, as an undergraduate student reported after coming back from his exchange program in the United Kingdom, he had trouble socializing with his classmates. It took him some time, he reported, to understand that his isolation had a cultural rather than a linguistic origin.

Terms of endearment can also be a source of intercultural misunderstandings. That was the case of the Colombian EFL teacher at Universidad del Norte who, trying to be friendly with his Canadian EFL colleague, praised her by saying how “repuistica” (chubby) she looked. Neither the Canadian teacher, who felt deeply offended by the comment about her physical appearance, nor the Colombian, for whom a slightly overweight shape is a synonym of well-being, succeeded in putting themselves in the shoes of the other as to understand that words are loaded with strong cultural connotations.

Therefore, the Language Institute has committed itself to enhancing not only the linguistic and communicative competences, but also the cultural competence.

The first institutional program aimed at enhancing cultural competence consists of a multifaceted Cultural Agenda. It revolves around the rich variety of foreign teachers at the Institute who are required to visit different courses and give talks in English about their countries and their experiences as travelers. The Cultural Agenda also includes round-the-clock movie showings on a public wide-screen television, stands displaying information about selected countries, and other randomly organized activities such as thematic observation rallies and song festivals. Besides, frequent workshops and lectures on culture and intercultural communication are held by national and international speakers in order to enhance teachers’ knowledge and awareness as to the close relation between language and culture.

The institutional Cultural Agenda is based on three assumptions about the nature of culture and its teaching. On the one hand, culture is understood as a set of factual, external information which students are to learn or, at least, be exposed to as a way to improve their cultural competence. Following Ruhly’s metaphor (1976) in which culture is seen as an iceberg, the Cultural Agenda centers its attention on the most visible and superficial aspects of culture, the tip of the iceberg, and assumes that cultural competence equals cultural *knowledge*. Language learners, therefore, have nothing to say about an alienated set of data unrelated to their contexts and life experiences.

On the other hand, the Cultural Agenda presupposes a one-to-one correlation between nationality and culture and, therefore, questions the *teachability* of culture in a language course. Foreign teachers are seen as the natural owners of the cultures they belong to due to the fact that they were born, or have lived a significant period of time, in countries where the target language is spoken (Belz, 2002a; Belz, 2002b; Cook 2002a; Cook 2002b; Cook, 2003; Firth & Wagner, 1996). In a sense, the

Cultural Agenda assumes that the common set of beliefs, metaphors, behaviors, values, and attitudes shared by a community, the deep intangible aspects of culture or, going back to Ruhly's metaphor (1976), the bottom of the iceberg, can only be acquired either by birth or by living in a country where the target language is commonly used. If that were the case, developing cultural competence among users of Spanish in a non-English speaking country by local foreign language teachers might be unattainable.

Finally, the Cultural Agenda challenges the relation between local and foreign language teachers and the target language and culture. Native speakers, a rough myth that vaguely implies an abstract monolingual individual who masters his / her language due to his / her birth or education (Cook, 2002a; Cook, 2003; Kramersch, 1998; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), are the ones entitled to develop cultural awareness because natives, following this assumption, seem to have a deeper understanding of the ideological, social, political, and historical forces that govern their communities. Such assumption perpetuates the conception of foreign language users, be they local foreign language teachers or learners, as deficient L2 users, whether linguistic, communicative or cultural, vis-à-vis the unachievable status of nativeness (Belz, 2002a; Belz, 2002b; Cook 2002; Cook, 2003; Firth & Wagner, 1996).

## Culture and language

The Institute language teachers had always included the development of cultural competence in a rather intuitive way, mainly persisting in teaching cultural stereotypes about celebrations, landmarks, food, and the like. The “by the way” or “Frankenstein” approaches for teaching culture, as described by Galloway (1985), consisted of sporadic lectures or bits of behavior selected indiscriminately by teachers to emphasize sharp differences.

Under these circumstances, Kramersch's (1993) lines of thought about the teaching of culture may be useful to lay the ground for a teachable cultural awareness program that comprehends all participants in the process. Such program may also benefit from such a diverse community like the one at the Universidad del Norte. Consequently, the program may as well help overcome the deeply rooted teaching culture perspective as a mere transmission of information about the people of the target country, their general attitudes, and world views.

Firstly, a paradigmatic change is needed. In order to enhance cultural competence it is necessary to foster *intercultural communication* rather than cultural

knowledge, i.e. the teaching of culture. While the latter is product centered, the former is process centered since intercultural communication intends to establish links between the foreign culture and one's own. Kramsch (1993) considers that a cultural program based on intercultural communication should include a reflection both on the target and on the native culture and, therefore, rescue the voice and life experiences of students and teachers.

Secondly, since linguistic, social, and cultural meanings emerge through social interaction it could be inferred that culture should not be understood as a set of fixed, normative phenomena, but rather as a dialogic process. Language teachers committed to enhancing students' cultural competence should be well aware that students, as well as teachers, do have pre-conceptions about themselves, about the target culture, and about their own culture. Any piece of factual information or behavior from the target culture, or from one's own, is irremediably mediated by those pre-conceptions. The output of this complex interaction among factual information, students and teachers' self-perceptions, and students and teachers' pre-conceptions about the others is what might be called *culture*. Zárate affirms (as cited in Kramsch, 1993) that teachers should be encouraged to recognize the rupture points in the logic of the explanation brought forth by their students in order to bring cross-cultural aspects of communication to the fore.

It may be necessary to stress that the "rupture points" are brought into the interaction not only by students, but also by teachers. Tenacious national, regional, social, and even ethnic self-perceptions and stereotypes, what Kramsch (1993) describes as cultural imagination, mediate cultural communication and play a crucial role in building effective interaction. On the reality of facts and events that constitute a community's history and culture, a cultural imagination that is no less real is superimposed. Myths such as "People from the Caribbean are the happiest", "*Paisas* are hard-working people", "Germans are punctual" or "British take tea at 5:00" are deeply rooted even among language teachers and necessarily mediate intercultural communication.

Finally, enhancing cultural competence should be based on accepting difference and *conflict*. The purposes for learning a second language are as varied as students are and certainly one of those purposes could be enculturation (Cook, 2003; Nayar, 1986), that is to say, the fully adoption of a native-like linguistic, communicative, and cultural identity. Nevertheless, the ability to behave like somebody else, even linguistically, is no guarantee that one will be more easily accepted by the group who

speaks the language, nor that mutual understanding will emerge, as Kramersch (1993) has conveniently pointed out. Therefore, the ultimate alienation seems not to be the main purpose of the language courses at the Universidad del Norte since they are intended to enhance linguistic, communicative, and cultural competences vis-à-vis academic sojourns.

Language learners most frequently decide to learn a second language to a certain extent, which allows them to be proficient, but without crossing the border of becoming someone else (Belz, 2002a; Belz, 2002b; Cook 2002a.; Cook 2002b.; Cook, 2003; Kramersch, 2000; Kramersch, 1998; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Enhancing intercultural competence should, hence, rely on providing students with the necessary adaptability as to select consciously or reject the values, beliefs, metaphors, and attitudes from the other that may lead to situational and successful interaction. The assumption of conflict as a core element in intercultural communication is illustrated as follows by Kramersch (1993) with a metaphor involving bridges and boundaries:

“What we should seek in cross cultural education are less bridges than a deep understanding of the boundaries. We can teach the boundary, we cannot teach the bridge. We can *talk about* and try to *understand* the differences between the values celebrated [in different cultures]. We cannot teach directly how to resolve the conflict between the two” (p. 228, emphasis in the original).

## **Cultural awareness and empathy**

The pedagogical implications of embracing an intercultural communication program which includes a) a reflection on the target and the native cultures; b) a rescue of the voice and life experiences of students and teachers; c) a concept of culture not only understood as a set of fixed, normative phenomena, but rather as a dialogic process; d) an understanding of pre-conceptions, self-conception and stereotypes about themselves, about the target culture, and about their own culture; e) the full adoption of a native-like linguistic, communicative, and cultural identity; f) the students’ provision of the necessary adaptability to consciously select or reject values, beliefs, metaphors, and attitudes to avoid situational successful interaction, are quite challenging. Promoting in-class dialogic interactions that incorporate students and teachers’ knowledge and imagination about self and the other demand a methodological approach based on empathy and awareness. Therefore, the outcome

of such process may not necessarily be the acceptance and celebration of the other, but rather an articulated understanding of the boundaries between cultures.

The goal is to develop cross-cultural awareness in the quest of empathy, that is to say, to take language learners from outside the culture (artifacts, celebrations, foods, and the like, but also attitudes, beliefs, and values) to inside the culture (understanding who we, and they, are or claim to be).

Drawing insights about self and the other, i.e. empathy, is commonly described with metaphors such as “viewing the world with their glasses” or “putting yourself in their shoes”. Yet “their glasses” and “their shoes” will never fit “our eyes” and “our feet”. Therefore, our vision and perception of the other will always be distorted. However, in a quite restrictive sense, these metaphors may depict the methodology of the activities described in the following section and may lead to raising cultural awareness among students and language teachers.

### **Classroom relevance**

Drawing on the idea of cultural awareness development, it is indispensable to take into account intangible issues such as the social structures of the target community, the ethnic composition, the legal and ethical system that rules their interactions, and the common historical background that has molded a certain sense of nationalism.

The proposed activity revolves around this latter aspect. This same activity has been repeated several times during the last semesters with young, upper-intermediate students of the English undergraduate program at Universidad del Norte. Besides, the same assessment criterion for both reading/writing activities has been used (see Appendix 1). Finally, it is important to say that the activity has a two-fold goal: on the one hand, it intends to establish a link between cultural knowledge and cultural awareness through narration and description of historical events. On the other, it explores how to allow students to put themselves in other peoples’ environments, i.e. to put themselves in the shoes of other people with diverse cultural and historical backgrounds.

Once in the classroom, students are to select a picture from this suggested website <http://www.time.com/time/photoessays/> of any ideally worldwide or well known historical event(s) from which they have to collect factual information considering the *give-me five question strategy* (who, what, where, when, why) as a frame of reference to find more efficient and effective answers. Teachers may want to have

students write such answers by filling in a previously designed table in the form of a paragraph or simply read them aloud. At this early stage, the task perspective essentially explores the idea of narrating facts (see Appendix 2).

Provided that the teachers' goal is to go beyond the factual information, i.e. cultural knowledge, the next step shall aim towards seeing the sights of the students' perception of the same event. Put briefly, to give way to the idea of what cultural awareness is. As has been stressed above, an exploration of how to allow students to put themselves in other peoples' environments must unfold.

Therefore, students shall ideally focus on other aspects of the same event such as the atmosphere and feelings which have to do with the five senses (sight, touch, hearing, taste and smell); that is, the perception of the event. Again, it does seem fair to suggest that teachers may want to have students write their answers on the aforementioned table or simply read them aloud.

These first two receptive procedures, the narration and the description of a historical event, may have so far lent support to the last step of the activity, which is to choose another picture of any ideally worldwide or well known historical event and go through the same process of collecting both factual and perceptive information. At this point of the activity, and focusing now on a productive process, it is obviously necessary to give students more time to organize their work as they follow the writing process: brainstorming, drafting, peer editing, and final paper.

The procedure for the students' appraisal of the written papers is paramount at this point; hence, describing their self-awareness arousal and reflection on their work will, on the whole, help to give body to the next part of this paper.

## **Sharing and reflection**

We have stressed above that the development of cross-cultural awareness pursuing empathy requires taking language learners from outside the culture to inside the culture, along with the idea of a methodology which may lead to raising cultural awareness among students and language teachers. Accordingly, let us share and reflect on some of the findings after analyzing the process in which, to use Kramsch's ideas, the students were viewed as narrators of someone else's story, a process through which they inevitably narrated themselves (Kramsch, 2000).

As the exercise proceeded, and despite the previously explained goals of the activity, most of the students could not avoid keeping in mind the idea of simply completing a writing assignment. For others, on the contrary, it was more than



merely a task that entailed the use of linguistic tools. They reflected the tendency described by Kramersch (2000) when using signs to fulfill the aesthetic pleasure of the semiotic potential of their texts and their own discursive roles as narrators. This is a way to attribute meanings to oneself and others.

During the process of writing, students made use of a set of suitable grammatical and lexical forms as well as paralinguistic signs such as erasures, corrections, punctuation, and so forth. The former required, in terms of grammar, the use of past and passive forms while handling culture as narration. In the main, it was easy for the students to cope with it. Here are a few examples:

1. “On 12<sup>th</sup> October 20003, in the village of Qabatiya in Palestine; I saw the most terrible massacre that I could have committed...”
2. “I was playing at school that day...”

However, others chose to combine present and past forms or simply use present forms:

1. “I don’t like to remember those days, but I do every moment when I’m thinking in mummy. It was the first day in the school...”
2. “I remember it was a sunny day...”
3. “It’s Fourth of July and I’m feeling too sad. I bear in mind that it’s Independence Day...”

In terms of lexical forms, there was appropriateness as well. For instance, students whose papers dealt with national commemorations included key words such as liberty, union, glory, victims, war, nationalism, graveyard, tomb, marine, country, and flag, among others. Similarly, other papers featured Muslim, enemies, death, devastating, martyrs, camp, weapon, bravery, rage, fight, leader, loyalty, troops, soldier, invasion, all key words commonly expected to appear in papers about current wars.

At the moment of working on the idea of culture as description, words such as adjectives, nouns, verbs, and adverbs were expected to be used. Here a marked constraint was that sometimes students were not able to find the right words. In this sense, Kramersch (2000) argues that language learners cannot write about what they would like to, but about what they are able to write. During this semantic struggle, questions like “How do you say...?” and “Is this the right word to say...?” were frequently asked, and the selection and rejection of words in terms of connotation

and denotation as well as correct tenses indicated an attempt to sharpen both grammar and lexical accuracy with relation to the original text as showed below:

1. I was in Resort on Java coastline when the Tsunami *happens* (changed by *happened*).
2. This day, the wave *destroy* (changed by *destroyed*).
3. The wedding was *at* India (changed by *in*).
4. We have to defend *negros* (changed by *Afro-Americans*).

Retaking the idea of narrating as a possible way of crossing cultural borders, most students failed in the attempt to create new meanings during the process of writing new discourses. Following Kramsch's metaphor mentioned above, even though the teacher showed the boundaries, they neglected to cross the bridge. It is also important to note that some others kept at providing factual information only, perhaps because of the lack of interest in the activity or simply because they rejected the idea of becoming someone other than who they were (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000).

Finally, in the process of symbolically situating themselves in the worlds of others, students found it difficult to avoid showing signs of their cultural characteristics as members of their society. For instance, a student had a Hezbollah member who is about to clash with the enemy say:

"I grab my weapon and started to pray for the Lebanese troops, to not be there to fight with us... I don't want to die". For this student, it seems difficult to understand that that person might be not afraid of, but willing to, sacrifice his/her life for his/her ideals.

## Conclusions

The proposal of enhancing intercultural competence should rely on providing students with the necessary adaptability as to consciously select or reject the values, beliefs, metaphors, and attitudes of the other. This may lead to successful situational interaction. Again, we believe this goal is teachable and achievable by means of a methodology that actively involves students' life experiences and views of the world. Such methodology shall also entail a change in teacher's role from being a provider of factual information to a meaning negotiator with his/her students. That interchange should ideally result in what we understand by culture.

The teachability of cultural awareness relies also on the teachers' ability to create and design class activities in which students can put themselves in the shoes of

others, i.e. to develop empathy for the other. Teachers, therefore, may not be able to provide the highest level of empathy in the classroom, but they can, and should try to, pave the ground for learners to have access to it.

Lastly, even though enhancing EFL students' cultural competence involves reading, writing and speaking skills, authors like Jenkins (2000) propose that the ultimate goal should not be the evaluation of students' language accuracy, but the improvement of their tolerance of difference, the mutual accommodation, in small but significant ways, toward members of other groups as they engage in English language interaction. It is true we cannot teach directly how to resolve the conflict between the two, but we hope this activity may help a deeper understanding of the boundaries and the differences between values in different cultures.

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## Appendix 1: Assessment parameters

<b>Narrative aspects</b>	What		
	Where		
	When		
	Who		
	Why		
<b>Descriptive aspects</b>	How	People	
		Events-sights	
		Atmosphere	
		Feelings	
		Sounds	
		Smells	

## Appendix 2: Student sample

### *Text*

*On 6 September, 1997, the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, was held at Westminster Abbey in London. It was the biggest televised event ever, watched by between one and two billion people worldwide. Debbie Frank – Diana’s personal astrologer- was one of the guests inside the Abbey that day. She wrote this eye-witness account.*

I felt for the one last time I was in Diana’s presence. You had to be there to take in the scent of the flowers, or see the white lilies gently quiver on top of the coffin, to hear the gentle fall of the guardsmen’s boots as they carried the coffin, to feel the sorrow of the massive crowd outside. Sunshine cast magnificent prisms of light inside the Abbey, bathing Diana’s coffin in a golden radiant glow. It was an experience so beautiful and so unreal that I had to stop watching the television monitors. I had to watch everything through my own eyes to make sure I was really there. I wanted to take in every nuance, every scent, every tear and every breathtaking moment. It was only when Diana had left that I felt once again the emptiness I’ve felt all week. Suddenly the Abbey was cold, and somber and sad. It wasn’t just the scent of flowers that left us, it was Diana’s very soul.