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The Reflective Approach to Teaching Culture within the EFL Classroom

Lucia Schiopu

Abstract

This article examines the reflective approach in the teaching of culture in the EFL classroom, which is not just a mere gathering of information, but is the creation and construction of discourses that break or maintain cultural stereotypes. This is also an approach where meaning is constructed that is shaped by the quality and depth of cultural sensitivity and awareness. Teaching and learning a culture reflectively does not necessarily mean that the learner is taught to behave in accordance with specific social norms but to introduce an acceptable and appropriate conduct for the use of language in terms of intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability within a cultural context. A fundamental issue in the reflective approach to teaching culture in the EFL classroom is to establish the cultural parameters between the learner's culture and the target culture. Based on this, there should be established pedagogical reflective practices that will expand the learners' experiences

Keywords: reflective teaching, reflective approach to teaching, reflective practice in teaching culture, cultural parameters, pedagogy of culture.

Defining Culture within Language Acquisition in the EFL Setting

English as a lingua franca (ELF) is “a non-native language system which serves as a common means of communication for speakers of different first languages,” with interactions concentrating more on function rather than form. (Wiki, 2019). Many EFL programs promote the development of ELF as the motivation to learn and acquire another language through communicative approaches. Therefore, learning and teaching a language must include the integration of culture, which is the process of understanding and incorporating the knowledge, meanings, discourse, beliefs, traditions and societal systems into the curriculum. Traditionally, in the process of language learning in EFL classrooms, meaning is implied but usually is not acquired or assimilated; hence, to be able to communicate with individuals that not only speak another language, but also have a different culture, the methodology of teaching needs to be reformulated to include culture in a reflective practice so those skills can be learned for better communication.

Reflective practice in teaching English as a Foreign Language promotes the philosophy of teaching culture not through a broad discussion of learning about holidays, historical dates, political, economical facts, values,

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etc., but through creating and building discourses through the understanding of stereotypes and stereotypical knowledge. Williams in “Culture and Society” (1958) contends that culture is “an attribute of all the members of society... and can create consciousness” for “social construction and personal experience” (cited in Bassnett, 2003, p.8).

Culture deserves to be described as the fifth skill in addition to listening, speaking, reading and writing (Shahed, 2013; Sapir, 1949; Frank, 2013), and should be taught in the EFL setting as a “multi-faceted shifting mass of signs” which incorporates the products of various social and ethnic groups (Bassnett, 2003, p. xiv). Williams (2011) and Hoggart (2009) stated that learners must be aware of the fact that culture represents “a whole way of life...not a privilege of any particular class or intellectual elite.” Learning the culture of the target language simultaneously as learning the structure of the target language provides an opportunity for the student to construct his/her own schemata about the culture of the people who use this language (Kramer, 1993).

Byram and Zarate (1994) suggest that language learners must be viewed through the lens of the “insider” or the native speaker and “outsider” the agent who is discovering the culture through the language (cited in Bassnett, 2003, p. xviii). It should be emphasized that teaching and learning a culture does not mean to behave in accordance with proscriptive or prescriptive norms but instead to recognize that in foreign cross-cultural encounters there is a need to display comprehension and sensitivity (Kramersch, 1993).

Another aspect of the reflective approach to teaching English is to identify and examine the four dimensions of culture and their influence on language: 1. “the aesthetic sense” which is found in films, literature and art; 2. “the sociological sense” found in customs and traditions; 3. “the semantic sense” in the conceptual system of a language; and, 4. The “pragmatic sense” that examines cultural norms and social and cultural contexts of communication (Adaskou, Britten, & Fahsi, 1990).

Spradley (1980) indicates that culture may be defined as: what people do (cultural behavior), what people know (cultural knowledge), and what things people make and use (cultural artifacts); thus, the reflective practice in teaching culture must ensure that each language learner goes beyond his “naïve realism” while studying a foreign culture and forgets about the assumption that all people do not define cultural artifacts and practices in the same way (Spradley, 1980, p. 6). The reflective approach to teaching culture makes the language learner conscious of the fact that these are double faceted elements: on the surface they seem to be the same for all the cultural agents, but deep meaning differs. Cultural behavior, cultural knowledge, the philosophy of love, death, friendship, enemy, existence etc. in different cultures may have different meanings (McKay, 2002, p. 82-83).

Historical Background and Perspectives of Culture in Language Education

The modern school highlights four pedagogies and several pivotal aspects of educational policy and practice that have had a direct impact on the study of culture in EFL. These pedagogies include: 1) conservative, 2) liberal, 3) humanistic, and 4) radical. “The conservative, liberal and radical pedagogies promote reason and emancipation through progress, while the humanistic puts less emphasis on these aspects. The conservative, liberal and humanistic pedagogies promote individual freedom and uphold ideals of harmony and unity, while the radical ones accentuate the struggle among socio-economic classes” (Guilherme, 2002, p. 5). Classical humanism stresses the intellectual heritage from the past, reconstructionism stresses the needs of society for social improvement, progressivism places the student as nucleus of education. These features can be summarized in the Table 1.

Table 1. The Basic Features of Pedagogies

Liberal Pedagogy	More dynamic educational system (responds to economic growth).	A unified, stable, transparent subject. Commitment to individual emancipation, communal improvement and democracy.	Knowledge is objective, value-free and depoliticized.	Teachers are required to master effective teaching techniques, students are expected to be individual achievers.
Humanistic Pedagogy	Focus on micro level, through self-fulfillment and individual freedom.	School hierarchy is less rigid, teacher-pupil relation is more egalitarian and collaborative.	More autonomy is placed on the learning process; Social and personal change is a natural consequence.	Cultural capital is unconsciously reproduced. Cultural tolerance and cultural equality is humanistic discourse.
Radical Pedagogy related to neo-Marxist theories	Reproducing the economic, social, cultural matrices of	The hidden curriculum is stressed (norms and values that are	Subordination in society leads to generating of subcultures that covertly	A failure to develop the theory of ethics; to develop individual

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(the influence of society on the school)	the capitalism; so they are homogeneous and static.	taught in schools).	or overtly lead to confrontations in schools.	personality under cultural domination.
The new sociology of Education - Critical Pedagogy	Focused on micro level reality; knowledge is socially constructed; analyzes political and cultural aspects of curriculum.	The development of critical cultural awareness; Examining the critical dimension as reference for foreign language/culture education; Investigating what teachers' concepts of critical cultural awareness are.	Stresses a distinctive type of rationality that is critical, intersubjective and emancipatory.	Critical interpretation of cultural content based on multiple-perspective approach and interdisciplinary approach (refers to three main interdisciplinary areas: Cultural Studies, Intercultural Communication, Critical Pedagogy.

From (Guilherme, 2002, p. 5- 16)

All these pedagogies are reflected in the teaching of culture which is required in the reflective approach to teaching English in the EFL framework. The reflective approach theoretically attempts to provide a comprehensive explanation of education according to which the human being can only be understood by reference to their cultural values. The pedagogy of culture is another way to think and teach in the world of globalization, a wisdom reached through meditation on man and human growth, gathering and decoding knowledge, and human progress. It manages to solve through reflective teaching practices the contradictions that emerge between antagonistic notions such as education and life, school and curriculum, inclusion, and diversity, theory and practice. The modern pedagogy of culture is addressed by the identity crisis which struggles to denominate cultural knowledge and behavior. The parameters of the knowledge strategy used in the classroom, and knowledge technology are all designed to implement knowledge management initiatives.

Setting the Cultural Parameters within the EFL Classroom

Reflective practice in teaching culture in the process of English language learning consists of: 1) Construction of the meanings by active involvement and critical thinking, 2) Integration of the new meanings in the schemata of conceived cultural paradigms that form the cycle of knowledge and experience, and 3) Complexity of access to the target culture. The reflective teaching of culture in the process of the language acquisition must include such aspects as understanding, tolerance, empathy, acceptance with all these concepts presupposing a psychological preparedness of a learner to get inveigled in the culture of a language. It can be achieved through the development of socio-cultural competence as a part of intercultural communicative competence (Byram & Zarate, 1994). The intercultural speaker is “the foreign language learner as a social actor whose interaction is colored by the social identities he brings to communication... and how those identities are perceived by other speakers...natives and non-natives” (Bassnett, 2003, p. 59).

Harnessing socio-cultural competence within the reflective approach to teaching culture in the EFL framework incorporates four dimensions: 1) *Savoir-être* (establishing the relationship between ethnocentric attitudes, otherness, cognitive ability), 2) *Savoir-apprendre* (construction of an interpretative system to promote the system of meanings of a target culture), 3) *Savoirs* (the sets of cultural and linguistic data structured around implicit and explicit knowledge with the stress on native-speaker’s awareness and not disciplinary knowledge), 4) *Savoir-faire* (integration of *savoir-être*, *savoir-apprendre*, *savoirs*) (Bassnett, 2003, p. 59-60). The intercultural speaker is the constant mediator of the cultural phenomena to which he continually is adding the new meanings of otherness.

According to McKay (2002), another parameter to be incorporated into the EFL setting would be pragmatic competence which varies cross-culturally and is made of the ability to construct the meaning and encloses a set of purposes; it also “involves the ability to understand the illocutionary force of an utterance” whose form of the expression is the most appropriate for certain socio-cultural contexts p.73. There are two aspects of pragmatics that should be discussed within the reflective approach to teaching culture in the EFL framework: cross-cultural pragmatics i.e., the comprehension of cultural differences, and how the texts can be used differently in the socio-cultural contexts to achieve different meanings; and interlanguage pragmatics deals with the transfer of the meaning from the speaker’s native language into target language; it deals with the conduct of native speaker while finding the path to communicate in foreign language.

In the reflective practice in teaching culture the pragmatic competence plays a huge role as it helps the learner understand, with his/her own conversational paradigm, communication patterns and codes, and some socio-

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pragmatic aspects of the studied language that come in conflict with learner's values and culture. On such terms the learners should be viewed as the identities of their culture but not mere members of their culture.

Another important aspect of the reflective approach to teaching culture in the EFL classroom is contrastive rhetoric which is defined as problem identification in writing (Connor, 1996). McKay (2002) advocates that contrastive rhetoric attempts "to explain bilingual English user's problems in using English by comparing their rhetorical patterns to those of native speakers" (p.76). Ballard and Clanchy (1991) state that rhetorical differences evolve from different approaches to learning e.g. the teaching and learning strategies may be based on reproduction, recalling and stressing the existing norms and rules or the teaching and learning strategies are based on a reflective approach to teaching, encouraging the learners' critical view on the cultural patterns.

The fundamental issue in the reflective teaching of culture in the process of language acquisition is to incorporate the appropriate vocabulary, resources and materials. The reflective practice in teaching culture is laying the focus on curriculum innovation and restructuring, the stress being laid not as much as on subject material but on the content such as: "range of subject areas, the generally accepted knowledge, and hierarchy of prestigious areas for social advance" (Bassnett, 2003, p.46). The reflective practice in the cultural agenda within the EFL setting will incorporate certain instrumental skills: social usage skills, stylistic inventiveness skills, embedding discourse in social contexts, idiomatic dissemination.

Unfortunately, the reflective teaching of culture in the EFL classroom does not adequately address the knowledge framework, the deconstruction of corpus of texts used in the context of cultural mediation, "apprehension of ideologies and not the adoption of surface behavior," and shaping the empathy within the cultural framework which is all aimed to create an uncritical and sensitive communication (Bassnett, 2003, p.65). In the reflective practice in teaching culture a special attention should be given to the corpus of texts which undergoes a process of analysis, deconstruction and criticism from the part of language learner and language educator to develop a peculiar view of the society whose culture they are approaching. The corpus reflective study helps to clear out the system of values and beliefs of the cultural groups within one society.

Globalization, communication and mobility are key interconnected terms in the reflective approach to teaching culture in the EFL classroom that generate an infinite perspectives of human activities and organizational spaces. They give answer to the questions like network society, communication/information society on geographical frameworks through cultural comprehension and a more reflective engaged pedagogy. The reflective practice in teaching culture within EFL should be global thinking with citizens that will have global responsibilities to build a value-based global community.

The reflective practice in teaching culture in the EFL classroom should be clarified in the terms of intelligibility (ability to recognize a word within a context), comprehensibility (recognizing the meaning of a word), and interpretability (ability to use the expression in certain cultural contexts). In reflective teaching exploring cultural awareness and sensitivity means self-reflection, becoming aware of cultural views, attitudes, and values, the ability to identify the past, present and to predict the future. It is about being aware of the individual cultural background and behavior and become sensitive to the differences of other cultures.

In the reflective approach to teaching culture in the EFL setting there should be established the cultural parameters and boundaries between the learner's culture and the target culture, native and non- native perspectives. Based on these there should be established pedagogical reflective practices that will enlarge the learners' instructional experiences of new texts and backgrounds through an increase of the number of instructional hours, breaking stereotypes or misconceptions.

A reflective practitioner in the EFL classroom must take into account that cultural knowledge and behavior are shaped through a long lasting "national history", "economical", "civic" programs, supported by intuition, conscious learning process acquired through analysis, judgments, representations "mediated by previous interpretation". The process of shaping the cultural knowledge and behavior is a long lasting process that must be approached with prudence because it is made up of meanings that shape the quality and depth of cultural sensitivity and awareness (Bassnett, 2003, p. 25).

Method

The goal of this research was to involve English language teachers in the reflective practice in teaching cultural knowledge and behavior in the EFL classroom. This study was implemented through qualitative research design of 30 English language teachers from primary and secondary schools from Moldova participating in in-service teacher training courses at the Pedagogical State University "Ion Creangă," who reflected on their teaching experience over the students' perception of culture awareness and cultural knowledge and behavior in the EFL classroom.

The participants enrolled in the in-service training program for English language teachers at the Pedagogical State University "Ion Creangă," a 3-week teacher training program aimed to help the trainees to have a deeper understanding about the reflective approach to teaching culture in the EFL classroom. The participating teachers had the opportunity to take part in seminars, workshops, experience sharing sessions, hands-on practices, group discussions and they were also asked to keep self- reflective journals, think aloud protocols, to be active observers being systematically involved in reflective reading and writing. The curriculum of this English Language

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Program for in-service teachers focused on reflective practice in exploration of culture in the EFL setting and required the teachers to design authentic learning environments to develop students' ability to explore a variety of cultures and to create opportunities to reflect on real life experiences i.e. to analyze from multiple perspectives, observe, apply, discuss with more care and depth than usual, and share. The participants were asked to analyze personal teaching experiences, media, EFL textbooks, and classrooms to develop the capacity to think critically about the cultural assumptions and viewpoints embedded in their daily professional life.

Findings and Discussion

The goal of this reflective practice in teaching culture is to improve the didactic process in the teaching of English as a foreign language. For this reason, the English teachers had to document the information to initiate the process of reflection to improve teaching effective. For Stage 1- Collecting the Data, the following research techniques were used: self-reflective journal, video recording, student observation, and peer observation; for Stage 2- Analyzing the Data, the following techniques were used such as: talking with other teachers of English who may have encountered the same problems, reading about effective techniques to remedy the recurrent issues, and the utilization of think aloud protocols; and for Stage 3- Implementation, where teachers reshaped and designed their teaching strategies to improve instruction.

The ten main findings drawn from this reflective analysis of this research are: 1) Setting the boundaries for intercultural domain i.e. the learner is establishing the borders between the native language and target language in reference to the meaning transfer; 2) Disseminating the cultural identities through the notion of gender, origin, nationality and social status (Kramsch, 1993); 3) English language classrooms should be equipped with multi-media facilities and other teaching aids to enable English language teachers to provide possibilities of presenting cultural content; 4) the EFL teachers should be trained on how to teach reflectively cultural content; 5) a special attention should be given to the corpus of texts used as the instructional materials laying the focus on culture; (Yeganeh & Raeesi, 2015, p. 541- 542); 6) incorporating in the curriculum activities that will allow students to learn through reflection; 7) exploring personal cultural values and association with the social ones; 8) focusing on quality and diversity, cultural awareness and sensitivity, intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability; 9) establishing the cultural parameters between the learner's culture and the target culture, and shaping socio-cultural competence as a part of intercultural communicative competence; 10) valorization of the pedagogy of culture and knowledge management initiatives. These factors need to be considered when using the reflective approach in teaching culture in the EFL classroom.

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