

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASS AND ITS SPECIFIC 'CULTURE'

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Abstract

Lately ELT practice has been approached from an intercultural perspective. The field of English Language teaching has already accepted that language and culture are inseparably related and has also recognized that culture plays an important role throughout the process of foreign language teaching and learning.

The current paper reiterates the idea that communicative EL teaching/learning is or should often be an intercultural environment in itself. The authors will try to provide arguments for the idea that the non-native EL classroom becomes a setting where intercultural communication skills can be acquired not only through language but also through appropriate methodology and practice.

Key-words: language classroom, culture, intercultural, communicative approach.

In this paper we would like to challenge the traditional view according to which English Language Teaching (ELT) is just Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) concerned with teaching language only, while the teaching of cultural concepts is seen as incidental. The main argument is that the communicative methodology has brought a 'load' of cultural values to the Romanian educational context and has an impact on ELT practice. The point that we are trying to make is that the modern ELT approach can be seen as an opportunity given to the learners to build their communicative competence understood as a repertoire of language and culture.

The first part of the paper outlines the conceptual framework that upholds the idea that the EL classroom in the Romanian educational context becomes a culturally-pinned milieu

with an emerging specific culture. The second part will provide arguments based on the current classroom practice and empirical research to support this assumption.

Holliday (1994) argues that the deep principles of communication are not culture-bound and, therefore, neither is communicative methodology at that deep level. However, we wish to challenge this view by assuming that it is the implementation of these principles of communication and the classroom techniques adopted that become culture-bound and therefore 'culture' teaching under specific circumstances. The overall hypothesis prompted by empirical research is that a process of 'acculturation', i.e. the process of second culture acquisition, does take place in the Romanian FL classroom.

People learn a language to communicate. Language and culture are inseparable - this means that communication involves both linguistic and cultural elements. As the field literature states, language learning or acquisition is a central element within the process of culture learning that humans go through. To continue, we can refer to Fay's (1996:19) suggestion for ELT practitioners to compare the processes of *first language acquisition* (1LA) and *first culture acquisition* (1CA) with *second language acquisition* (2LA) and *second culture acquisition* (2CA) or *acculturation*. If 1LA is culture-free and instinctive (Pinker, 1994), the learning of a foreign/second language (2LA) is obviously deliberate and must be culture-bound. 2LA represents a choice made by learners who put some conscious effort into achieving this. In the same way, 1CA can be seen as the natural result of the interaction with the cultural environment in which 1LA took place. Thus, 2CA becomes the result of the interaction with a chosen environment, i.e. the language classroom. If people choose to learn a second language, they implicitly choose to learn a second culture. If people become 'cultured' (1CA) by and when learning their first language (1LA), it means that they go through a similar process of becoming 'cultured' (2CA) by and when learning a second language (2LA).

Romanian Classroom Culture

Following some empirical research (informal questionnaires, interviews) we carried out with 1st-year students in the 'Politehnica' University we could identify some generally-shared particulars of the Romanian students' '*cultural baggage*' prior to their encounter with the communicative methodology adopted in the foreign language class. The Self-Assessment Exercise in Instruction Styles (Goodman, 1994) developed from the research of Hofstede (1986) was used for this purpose. Thus, the students' 'home' culture can be characterized as being hierarchical, collectivist, more rule-governed and assertive as opposed to the desired

traits of egalitarian, individualist, less rule-governed and more quality-of-life for everybody. These original values determine specific expectations regarding the teacher's and the students' roles and status. Our students' original educational background is *teacher-centred*, highly *collectivist* with marked tendencies of *large-power distance* regarding the class interaction, based on a *low tolerance of ambiguity* and primarily focused on *performance*, i.e. learning how to do things.

A key concept is the notion of power which influences the teacher/learner relationship and their interaction in the classroom:

'High power distance societies are characterized by teacher-centered education in which the teacher transfers wisdom to the students. Information flow is from teacher to student and students are not expected to initiate communication or speak up unless called upon to do so. In such societies, teachers are respected in and out of class and are not to be publicly contradicted. The status of the school is also an important factor in determining the status of a person. (Goodman, 1994: 138)

According to Hofstede (1994), 'collectivist' culture learners are not used to a two-way communication. They are reluctant to speak up without a teacher being present and are keen on learning how to do things, viewing learning as a one-time process, i.e. a product-oriented view. The same researcher points out that teachers are seen as '*gurus*' who have all the answers and the learners feel comfortable in situations in which there is only one correct answer.

ELT Culture – The Communicative Approach

In view of the above, it is obvious that the communicative methodology is likely to create a new type of classroom culture different which influences the local institutional culture. It is what Holliday (1999: 237) calls a '*small culture*', i.e. the culture displayed and formed in a small social grouping or activities wherever there is cohesive behaviour. This specific culture springs from the techniques, tasks and working formats promoted by the communicative approach to language teaching/learning. Such a statement finds support in Hofstede's words who says that

'Culture is learned, not inherited. It derives from one's social environment, not from one's genes.' (1994 : 5)

In this particular case, the social environment is the ELT classroom in which the learners learn the language by thinking, exploring and discovering things on their own or in a group or pair under the guidance of the teacher who is a monitor and facilitator. The learning

which takes place is sustained by the learners' effort to make sense of the new environment. The classroom culture can be defined as '*small*' in terms of power distance. The teacher is no longer a 'guru' who transfers personal wisdom. The class becomes *learner-centred*, the focus falling on the learners' active, participatory roles. Communicative ELT fosters the culture of learner-centredness in which the students are treated as independent individuals who take initiative in communication, have their own opinions, assume responsibility and ultimately build up a new type of competence, i.e. learning how to learn. The learning situations are frequently open-ended with a higher tolerance for ambiguity. The approach makes room for context-derived meaning, for argued disagreement with the teacher expressed in a multiplicity of learner-individualized answers. Confrontation in learning situations is seen as beneficial and 'face-saving' is of little importance.

ELT Culture at Work

If people go through a process of becoming 'cultured' by and when learning a language as we have stated already, then it means that the Romanian learners are likely to experience a similar process in the language class. For instance, the working format of pairs/groups gives the learners the opportunity to experience a variety of viewpoints and verbal behaviours which are influenced by each group member's *idioculture*, i.e. the individual unique level of culture and communicative competence/linguistic ability. In this way, the learners' monocultural environment acquires multicultural dimensions similar to real-life interactions. The group dynamics becomes intercultural – the learners come from various walks of life, they have different backgrounds and they represent a certain degree of societal multiculturalism, i.e. cultural diversity. As Cushner & Brislin point out :

'We consider most people to be potentially multicultural, as we are all socialized by many different groups that influence our behaviours and thought patterns, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and religion, for example, all play roles in our socialization' (1996 : 5)

Group work can be considered a replica of the real-life encounter between cultures - students learn how to negotiate, how to be part of a team, how to share responsibility and how to nourish respect for '*otherness*'. All these emerging values, e.g. team spirit, flexibility, tolerance, acceptance, cooperation, a renewed understanding of the concept of competition and a shared responsibility belong to the new, specific culture of learner-centredness which reshapes the dimensions of the learners' original culture.

The technique of **predicting** has a positive effect on the learners' low tolerance of ambiguity. In the same way, *guessing unknown words* from the context contributes to boosting the learners' self-confidence in their own abilities. Such strategies foster a higher degree of self-esteem. The 'small' ELT culture of the language class makes the learners look at themselves in a different way. They are guided to find their own paths by capitalizing on their experiences; this is a piece of learning that transcends the limits of the language classroom and paves the way to a new identity.

Brainstorming is another communicative technique which encourages the free association of concepts, ideas, facts or feelings related to a context without evaluating the merits of a thought. It places value on learner initiative and non-judgemental behaviour. **Opinion-exchange** teaches the learners respect for and tolerance of otherness, i.e. views, beliefs or feelings other than their own.

All the above mentioned techniques and strategies are just a few examples of the vast repertoire of communicative ELT. All of them contribute to the culture of learner-centredness which brings about a new kind of interaction and communication with modified teacher's and learners' roles. The new type of interaction resembles the type of 'partnership' interaction the students are likely to come across in their future professional life.

To sum up, it can be said that the communicative approach to ELT creates a new learning environment for the Romanian learners. The learners interact with an 'unfamiliar' setting and the interaction is likely to result in a reciprocal effect on each other, i.e. a presupposed process of acculturation. The assumption is that while the learners are learning the foreign language, they develop a new mode of thinking, feeling and acting which modifies their previous 'cultural baggage' and reshapes it.

Beyond Assumptions

This part describes a survey in the form of an informal questionnaire which was administered with a number of 200 first and second-year students in the 'Politehnica' University at the beginning of the 2nd semester, March 2010. The survey was meant to reveal what the learners themselves feel and how they perceive the new 'culture' of the language class. The questions are open-ended and free of words like 'culture' or 'cultural' in an attempt not to influence answers but to elicit genuine perceptions and attitudes.

The questionnaire can be considered a cross-cultural exercise in the sense that the learners contrasted two cultures, comparing the local institutional culture with the EL class culture which is the target language culture.

The Questionnaire

1. *Do you feel that the English language class is different from other specialist study classes?*
2. *Characterize the language class in terms of :*
 - a) *teacher-student relationship*
 - b) *student-student relationship*
 - c) *types of activities*
 - d) *learning formats (individual, pairs, groups, whole class)*
 - e) *learning efficiency*
 - f) *atmosphere*
- 3) *Can you think of any reason why the English language class is/isn't different from the other classes in the university?*

In presenting the learners' responses, some answers were quoted for the sake of authenticity.

Question 1 is meant to set the learners thinking about the cultural environment they find themselves in. All the respondents gave the same answer: the English language class is different from the other specialist subject classes in the university. This proves that the learners are already aware that there is a difference between learning contexts and that the FL class is a new setting. What is interesting is the fact that the students seem to experience no 'culture shock' and take the co-existence of the two different milieus for granted. One explanation that we found for this might be the fact that the Romanian learners have developed their internal capacity to cope with the change in the local culture owing to their motivation to learn the language. This constitutes a valuable prerequisite for the ability of being 'intercultural' outside the classroom.

Question 2 focuses on the existing differences. The answers show that the teacher-student relationship is perceived in a very positive way. The respondents describe it as '*friendly, relaxed and open*' based on '*a permanent dialogue*'. About 50% talk about their '*freedom to initiate communication*' and literally say that '*we are not usually allowed to talk to the professor in other classes*'. A recurrent statement is the one which says that '*I am not treated as a listener but as an active participant to the class*'. Most of the students say they feel stimulated and motivated, confident and '*acknowledged as human beings*'.

As for the student-student relationship, the learners appreciate it as being one of *'cooperation'* and *'getting to know one another better'*. Most of them remark that this relationship in the language class replicates the one existing between students outside the classroom which gives a dimension of authenticity to the artificial setting of the classroom.

When they refer to the activities and working formats, the students use as a common denominator the verb *'enjoy'*.

About 75% of the respondents appreciate that learning the language in this way *'seems'* more efficient and easier. The atmosphere of the class is simply described as *'relaxed and friendly'*.

Question 3 was intended to elicit from the learners the evidence that there is an awareness of cultural differences.

'I do not know very well why it is different but I know it is different.'

'It's simple. The English teacher is more open minded because of his contacts with foreign cultures.'

About 80% of the respondents say that it is the teacher who makes the class different. They refer to *'the teacher's western way of thinking'* generated by *'the contact with a West-European culture and civilisation'*. Others bring up the argument that language learning is a humanity subject and therefore must be different from their science classes (although the nature of English as an academic subject does not account for a relaxed or friendly atmosphere in the class). Only 5% admit they cannot find a reason.

It is obvious that the learners tend to preserve a teacher-centred view of the class in the sense that they consider it is the teacher who makes things different. They mention a new way of thinking and being but they associate the latter with the 'western' culture of the teacher. However, their positive attitude shows that they are willing to accommodate another culture for, at least, two hours per week which is an opening towards flexibility and tolerance for 'difference'.

An interesting aspect of the survey was the fact that the students asked whether they 'have' to sign the questionnaire or not. They were told it was not mandatory and that it was up to them. The result was that 45% of the respondents signed it. This behaviour showed that part of the Romanian learners have learnt how to assume responsibility for their individual actions, a cultural value transferred from the language class.

Final Remarks

We can say that the Romanian EL classes are likely to develop their own ‘small’ cultures’ on the basis of which a more deliberate approach to teaching ‘culture’ can be consciously grafted. The communicative approach gives the learners practice in a battery of intercultural skills of which the most important is openness to and acceptance of difference. The language class has its own *modus vivendi and operandi* : its culture is a mélange of Romanian educational culture, learners’ and teacher’s cultures, the cultural values associated with the language taught/learned and the approach taken to it. All these melt into cohesive group activities, into a ‘*small culture*’ which fosters generally-valid intercultural values:

- availability to attribute new meaning,
- ability to discover and interpret,
- active participation in the exchange and
- cooperation with other people who are different from you.

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