

Fostering intercultural competence through contextualized texts in EFL settings

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Intercultural competence and language proficiency are mutually dependant for effective foreign language learning/teaching. This paper puts forward a methodological proposal in which each lesson includes a carefully designed text which includes lexicogrammatical features that help relate the linguistic production to choices made at the extralinguistic level, and thus foster the development of cultural competence. The exploitation of the lesson's script is done through fully contextualized activities which gradually familiarize learners with the use of the lexicogrammar for the negotiation of a specific situation proper to the target culture, and thus brings them up to act as interculturally competent speakers. The lesson is completed with a section aimed to reinforce the development of intercultural awareness by means of a number of cultural activities related to the lesson's cultural topic.

KEY WORDS: contextualized EFL teaching, collaborative learning, SFL

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of Intercultural Competence is nowadays taken to be an essential goal for the achievement of proficiency in a foreign language. According to the CEFR (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*), "Users of the Framework may wish to consider and where appropriate state... what awareness of the relation between home and target cultures the learner will need so as to develop an appropriate *intercultural competence*" (Council of Europe 2001: 104, our emphasis). However, both the reference to Intercultural Competence by the CEFR and the way in which the development of this competence is tackled by foreign language teaching methods and instructors lack specificity. Concerning the former, for instance, Michael Byram states that "the CEF[R] was published without resolution of the problem of establishing levels of attainment of intercultural competence as the authors would have liked" (2003: 12), which, we add, may be a reason for the dearth of clear models of implementation available to methodologists and teachers.

This leaves us with a situation where such an important issue as the integration of intercultural competence within foreign language teaching/learning remains largely unresolved. Methodological proposals are needed which successfully bridge this gap so we can really move forward in this respect. A first step may be to look back at those authors who have pinned down the concept of Intercultural (Communication) Competence by providing a sound definition. One such author is Richard L. Wiseman, for whom "Intercultural Communication Competence involves the knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures" (Wiseman 2002: 208). This definition does not solve the above-mentioned problem of the establishment of levels of attainment of this competence, but it can serve as a good starting point, at least to know what it is that we are seeking to achieve.

The pursuit of the Cultural Communication Competence in Foreign Language teaching is older than the CEFR. Arguably not as old, generally speaking, as the *Threshold Level English*, the legitimate predecessor of the CEFR, which dates back to 1980, although as early as 1974 Howard Lee Nostrand defended the study of language through culture because it enables learners to "feel the fittingness of the detail as perceived by the bearer of the other culture" (1974: 273). In the 1980s and forward, however, an increasing number of studies appeared which reflected an ever-widening agreement on the need for the integration of language in context – or the contextualization of language – in the teaching process. This contextualization is not simply situational, i.e. the presentation of the teaching material as part of a situation reflecting the target language setting, but also cultural, by which instruction

should grant learners an understanding of the context of culture within which the L2 is spoken.

Among the studies dealing with this subject, we can mention, for instance, Seelye (1993), who speaks of language as a vehicle to penetrate another culture, or Omaggio (2001), who in her very influential book on the proficiency-oriented approach, devotes a whole chapter to the issue of “teaching for cultural understanding”, citing in it another classical authority in the issue, Robert G. Hanvey, whose perhaps most celebrated contribution is the mapping out of the four stages leading to the understanding of the target culture, where learners evolve from a consideration of the target culture as exotic and bizarre (stage I), to unbelievable, irrational (stage II), believable (stage III) and, finally, believable from subjective familiarity (stage IV) (Hanvey 1987: 20).

The literature deals not only with the importance of the integration of culture in instruction but also with the reasons why this is not always done. Authors such as Galloway (1985), Crawford-Lange and Lange (1984), Stern (1983), or the above-mentioned Seelye (1993) pinpoint the different reasons underlying this shortcoming, all of which point in a similar direction: a misunderstanding of both the role and the meaning of culture in the L2 classroom. Omaggio (2001: 349) follows Brooks (1971, 1975) in the identification of what is meant by *culture* in the context of L2 teaching, i.e. the beliefs, behaviour and values of the native speakers of the target language rather than *culture* in the sense of Literature, Art or History. This can be of help to method designers when developing their teaching models, as it is feasible to build a taxonomy of beliefs, behaviours and values of the target culture, which thus becomes to an extent quantified and can therefore be subjected to sequencing for integration with lexicogrammatical aspects throughout a teaching course.

Space constraints keep us here from delving into the wealth of literature on the integration of culture and language since the 1980s. A comprehensive account of the history of culture in L2 teaching is provided by Thanasoulas (2001). Our aim here is to make a contribution to fill the existing gap in the application of the theory to actual Foreign Language teaching models. For that purpose, we present in the remainder of this paper an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning)-based notional-functional approach which fosters collaborative learning as a way of getting learners involved in the practice of the English language as a tool to negotiate specific situations in the way native speakers of English do. As will be seen, culture (beliefs, behaviour, values and the like) and language go in our model hand in hand in an attempt to make learners not only inter-linguistically but also inter-culturally competent. The presentation of our methodological proposal takes up the whole of the next section, which is in turn followed by a concluding section providing a wrap-up of our proposal as well as some pointers to future work.

2. A BLENDED-LEARNING MODEL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

2.1. Theoretical underpinnings: Systemic Functional Grammar

Learning a second language necessarily implies the opening to another culture, of which the L2 is a manifestation. The method presented in this paper, developed by the Atlas research group, wants to take learners on a trip throughout the English-speaking world, allowing them to live a multicultural experience, with the English language as the unifying factor. The study of English is not an end in itself. Rather, language is seen as a means to an end: the personal enrichment obtained from the access to another way of coding experience.

Our proposal uses SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistics) as theoretical background (see Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). Following this theoretical approach, in our model language is seen as a meaning potential offering a number of possibilities for speakers to understand and construe the world around them. Those linguistic resources ultimately – and intimately – depend on the extra-linguistic context that motivates their being the way they are. The entailment is that it is not possible to learn a language without integrating it in the cultural context that makes it meaningful: without its context, language is something dead.

Learning a L2 is, therefore, opening up a new window to look at the world we live in, a window which offers learners an alternative perspective to the one provided by their mother tongue, resulting in two perspectives which, far from being opposed, complement each other. Learning a new language multiplies our perceptive and expressive potential, improving our integration in the environment, in society, and thus enriching us as human beings. This method wants to help learners not only to learn a L2 but also to see the world around them through the eyes of the native speakers of that language.

To achieve this purpose, the method seeks to immerse learners into the English-speaking culture *through* the language, avoiding the attachment of cultural files unrelated to the didactic goals of each unit. Exposure to the target culture as such usually results off-putting and does nothing to attract learners to the target culture. This method, on the other hand, seeks to develop empathy with the English-speaking culture through the unveiling of the linguistic resources of that language in the context of the English-speaking world. In doing so, learners are granted access to the way of construing experience through the English language, which is very different from the mere application of English words and expressions to their habitual L1 speech.

A positive effect of the study of a L2 as an opening to another culture is that, once learners feel able to use the language in the target culture setting, they will have the motivation to explore further realms of that culture. If they see that they can do things with language, learners will re-create the process experienced as children, when the need to do more things motivated them to extend their linguistic system (see Painter 1989: 63 for an explanation of this phenomenon in the acquisition of the mother tongue).

Additionally, and intimately related to the cultural advantage that can be obtained by learners, there are the functionality and the creativity which are gradually developed. A contextualized, function-oriented method fosters the development of creativity with the language, so learners can gain the ability to function effectively within a number of discourse practices embedded in the social and cultural context of the L2-speaking world. Our ultimate goal is to form self-sufficient English speakers who, on completion of the method series, will feel prepared – and willing – to move from ‘virtual’ re-creations of the English-speaking context to the ‘real thing’.

2.2. Methodological underpinnings: Constructivism and Collaborative Learning

Drawing upon Piaget’s constructivism, which contends that learning is largely conditioned by the different experiences specific to each individual (see Piaget 1977, 1985), our methodological proposal relies on computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) to foster interaction among learners as a way to get them dynamically involved in the learning process and thus reflect the dynamic nature of language, where speakers are constantly making choices from the possibilities offered by the meaning potential specified in 2.1. The tool used to implement our teaching model is LAMS, which is specifically aimed at enabling the design of online collaborative learning activities (available at <http://www.lamsfoundation.org/>). CSCL is very useful in distance education where direct face-to-face interaction is not available, and in order to expand study and practice time

beyond the limits of the classroom. In general terms, it has the advantage that it reinforces user centeredness, permitting collaborative and explorative learning to take place, and reflects the communicative / social constructivist views of language use and learning in that learners move away from interacting *with* the computer to interacting with other people *via* the computer. This is complemented with classroom learning, where the instructor can verify the progress made by learners in the CSCL-based component, and eventually take remedial steps, if needed (for further support of the advantages of computer-based collaborative learning, see Gokhale 1995; Renié and Chanier 1995; Beauvois 1997; Read *et al.* 2006).

By combining CSCL and in-classroom learning, our model tries to exploit the advantages of what is known as *blended-learning*, i.e. the use of e-learning technology to support traditional learning methods. We actually take one step further in that in our methodological proposal it is the traditional in-classroom learning that supports the e-learning practice, as the performance of learners in their computer-based interaction determines what is then done in the classroom. This blended-learning approach tries to address an important issue identified in previous projects, where learners have shown their preference for collaborative learning but at the same time have complained that the activity was time consuming (explaining the procedure to slower students, etc.) in comparison to individual learning. It appears that if the student never actually *studies* the language individually, then the effects of peer interaction become somewhat limited and learning takes longer. In particular, the adult cognitive structure has been argued to benefit from individual training, both for its intensiveness and the awareness that it provides about one's own progress. As we are about to see, the collaborative work in our proposal is preceded by solid individual practice aimed to render the collaborative phase more meaningful and feasible. Additionally, the role of the instructor, who has access to both the individual and collaborative work of learners and can then act as a monitor via the computer or in the classroom, also contributes to keep learners from straying, as may happen in more hands-off types of collaborative learning.

2.3. *The scaffolding of lexicogrammar in context*

The computer-supported segment of our model consists of the following main sections: text (in video or audio format), oral comprehension, vocabulary, lexicogrammar and culture. The whole sequence takes up two weeks, including for classroom sessions: one after the vocabulary activities, one after the lexicogrammar activities, one more after the first three cultural activities (see below), and a final session at the end of the sequence. Every section in a lesson is fully contextualized, both in itself (with the different questions within the same activity contextually related) and with respect to the other activities in the lesson, and all of these with the lesson's notional-functional topic. Thus, if the lesson's situation (text) takes place in a restaurant where the characters order food, all activities in that lesson will revolve around the topic of food, ordering, etc. Learners will thus become gradually familiarized with the use of the lexicogrammar for the negotiation of a specific situation proper to the target culture. As we said in the introduction, culture files unrelated to the lessons topic should be avoided. In that light, the culture practice that comes at the end of each sequence in our model sticks to the lesson's notional-functional topic, granting learners access to additional information on the topic, as well as to habits, particularities, etc that can be found in the target culture concerning that topic. This culture practice has the aim of increasing the learners' intercultural awareness. For instance, continuing with the topic of food, learners are given information on a number of not very enticing dishes – including dishes from the target culture as well as the learners' – and then are tested on the information given, followed by a request

to provide a recipe for a dish from their hometown and, finally, they are given a number of Web links where they can find information related to different aspects of the lesson's topic.

The culture section has one last part, which takes place after the third classroom session and represents the transition from individual to collaborative work: the WebQuest. Working in pre-established groups and searching on the Internet, learners have to choose a topic within the more general topic of the lesson and prepare a presentation that they will then deliver in the following classroom session. This collaborative activity is done via de computer, by means of a wiki-like application which enables the members of each group to work telematically on the same interface and allows the instructor to watch, and eventually monitor, the work in progress.

Key to our proposal is the scaffolded sequencing of activities, by which those learners obtaining poor results in a given activity are redirected to another activity of a similar level, to a theoretical explanation related with the activity or, after repeated poor performances, to a lower level activity from a previous lesson. This lowers the risk of learners moving forward to more open-ended practice without being prepared to do so and, at the same time, provides the instructor with relevant information about the strengths and weaknesses of each learner, which will have an incidence on the instructor's planning of the classroom sessions.

The individual, scaffolded work done by each learner *via* the computer pays off at the time of the collaborative work with peers, notably when preparing and acting out role-plays based on the lesson's notional-functional goal. In those role-plays acted out in the classroom, learners have the opportunity to show that they have learned to use the language as a tool to negotiate a situation in the target culture. One of the positive effects of scaffolding is that it helps prevent one of the most recurrent and impairing situations associated with role-plays and collaborative work in general, i.e. the presence of sharp dissimilarities in the learners' competences, at least, and most notably, in their capacity to negotiate a specific situation, i.e. their communicative competence in the target culture.

To understand how scaffolding helps to even out the competence of learners, it is useful to resort to Vygotsky's notion of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the gap between children's (English learners', in our case) independent and assisted performance (Vygotsky 1978). Some learners have a wide ZPD, which means that what they can do with the help of others, i.e. the instructor or their peers, is a lot more than what they can do when no one is helping them, as is the case with open-ended activities, epitomized by role-plays. As said above, scaffolding makes learners take side steps, or even back steps, until they are ready to step forward. Our computer-supported model therefore acts as a patient tutor that makes sure learners are not thrown into the deep end before they can fend for themselves. If the e-learning component is not able to bring a learner to perform satisfactorily on a given activity, it is then the instructor's turn to try to remedy that. The ultimate goal is that the ZPD becomes as narrow as possible, i.e. that the learners' unassisted performance at the time of doing open-ended activities such as a role-play lives up to the lesson's expectations. This will at the same time help to bring the different learners in a class to similar levels of intercultural communicative competence.

Figure 1, below, serves as a summary to this section by illustrating the sequence of activities for each lesson as implemented in LAMS. We can observe a vertical display of cells representing the unfolding of the lesson, and horizontal displays representing scaffolding. Thus, the top cell in the sequence contains the audio file with the lesson's text (budget permitting, the audio files should in the future be turned into video files). This is followed by a comprehension activity. If satisfactorily completed (70% of correct answers) the learner moves on to the third step (represented by the cell below); otherwise the learner is sent to a similar comprehension activity, represented by the first cell to the right; if performance is still unsatisfactory, the learner is granted access to the audio's script and then another

comprehension activity is done (all this within the last cell to the right). This is followed by two activities on vocabulary, an explanation of the lexicogrammar, a scaffolded grammar practice, where the last cell to the right includes a related activity from a previous lesson for those in need, a slightly more open-ended lexicogrammatical activity and four culture related activities, of which the last one is the above-mentioned WebQuest, where collaborative work starts. The notes taken by the instructor on learner's performance in the sequence – including those who fail to complete scaffolded activities satisfactorily – allow customizing the classroom sessions.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

3. CONCLUSIONS AND POINTERS TO THE FUTURE

The previous pages have provided a justification for the integration of language in culture in L2 teaching methods as well as a description of how this integration takes place in our methodological proposal for the teaching of English as a Foreign Language. As explained, our proposal relies on three basic pillars: SFL theory both for the handling of lexicogrammatical issues and for the general approach of how the linguistic relates to the extralinguistic (culture as beliefs, behaviour, values and the like); computer-supported collaborative learning as the actual way to teach English in context by means of contextualized activities that help learners get accustomed to using the language as a tool to negotiate situations specific to the English-speaking world; and scaffolding as a way to provide extra practice for slower learners and ensure that the different learners in a class reach the final, more open-ended stages of each lesson with similarly acquired competences – notably Intercultural Communication Competence, as we can claim that being an interculturally competent speaker of a language necessarily implies the achievement of the other competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic). This is, again, a by-product, a reflection, of the continuum between language and culture: only if the right choices are made at the extralinguistic, cultural level will the linguistic choices (which include sociolinguistic and pragmatic ones) be felicitous in the use of language as a tool to negotiate situations.

A sample lesson, containing material for two weeks work, of the methodological proposal presented here is already implemented in LAMS, as seen in the screenshot in figure 1, above. It is currently being tested by the member of the ATLAS research group for fine-tuning before it is used with students while the model is expanded. It can be expected that when learners use it, specific problems or shortcomings of the model will come to life. This will be an opportunity to further fine-tune the model or, eventually, take the necessary steps to remedy more serious problems. The human team behind this project, composed by linguists, IT specialists and methodologists, is a guarantee not only that eventual glitches will be satisfactorily fixed but also that, generally speaking, the learners will access a product that will greatly help them in the quest for intercultural competence.

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