TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH AS AN INTERCULTURAL ENDEAVOR: OPENING THE WINDOWS OF A REAL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

A great deal has been discussed and written about the relevance of interculturality in the additional language teaching and learning (Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 2002; Liddicoat and Scarino, 2013). According to Kramsch (1993), the teaching of an additional language, from an intercultural perspective, works as an experience that involves learners in de-constructing their perceptions about the world and the communities where they belong. In such experience, the learner is interactively involved in practices of meaning making, which results from multiple interpretations of their own and other's cultures. However, despite the wide range of theoretical studies developed so far, there is not much empirical research conducted in real classrooms to investigate how interculturality can be constructed through the interaction between learners, teachers and texts. Therefore, this paper aims to discuss how an intercultural perspective can be co-constructed in classroom, by taking into consideration the analysis of a moment, here called *episode*, from an English class in a public school context. At first, we will set a brief discussion on the most relevant theoretical accounts regarding interculturality, and then analyse a classroom interaction so as to illustrate how this intercultural paradigm can be co-constructed in the additional language classroom.

KEY-WORDS: Interculturality. Culture. English Language. Additional Language Classroom

RESUMO

Muito se tem falado e escrito sobre a relevância da interculturalidade no ensino e aprendizagem de línguas adicionais (Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 2002; Liddicoat e Scarino, 2013). Segundo Kramsch (1993), o ensino de uma língua adicional, a partir de uma perspectiva intercultural, funciona como uma experiência que envolve os aprendizes na desconstrução de suas percepções sobre o mundo e as comunidades a que pertencem. Nesse tipo de experiência, o aprendiz é interativamente envolvido em práticas de construção de significados, que resultam de múltiplas interpretações de sua própria cultura e da cultura de outros. No entanto, apesar da vasta gama de estudos teóricos desenvolvidos até o momento, há poucas pesquisas empíricas realizadas em salas de aula reais para que se possa investigar como a interculturalidade pode ser construída através da interação entre alunos, professores e textos. Portanto, este trabalho tem como objetivo discutir como a perspectiva intercultural pode ser co-construída em sala de aula, levando-se em consideração a análise de um momento, aqui chamado de *episódio*, de uma aula de Inglês em um contexto de escola pública. Em primeiro lugar, faremos uma breve discussão sobre as correntes teóricas mais relevantes a respeito da interculturalidade e, em seguida, analisaremos uma interação de sala de aula a fim de ilustrar como esse paradigma intercultural pode ser co-construído na aula de língua adicional.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Interculturalidade. Cultura. Língua Inglesa. Sala de Aula de Língua Adicional.

1   Introduction

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A wide range of research informing additional language pedagogy has been grounded on the paradigm shift of how language and culture should be dealt in the classroom. At first, traditional models defined cultural competence as an encyclopedic knowledge about the target country (Lo Bianco *et al*, 1999), and language as a conduit of culture that functioned as a tool for naming events, institutions, people, and places. Based on such postulations, the aim of learning an additional language was to become as close as possible to a native speaker, that is, to acquire a native-like proficiency.

Nowadays, due to the drawbacks on the very concept of *native speaker* (Davis, 1991; Kramsch, 1999; Widdowson, 1994), and the current multicultural status of English, the goals involved in the additional language teaching are no longer set on the native speaker as a target model. In this sense, many researchers now claim that the focus should be placed on the *intercultural speaker* (Byram 2002; Corbet (2003); Kramsch, 1998; Liddicoat, Crozet, and Lo Bianco, 1999), and the teaching of an additional language as an experience that should provide a transformational engagement of the learner by exploring, problematizing, and redrawing the boarders between the self and the other (Liddicoat, 2013).

Theoretically, these ideas are not a novelty within the Brazilian educational context. The Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais (PCNs) (1998), for instance, take into account the teaching of an additional language as an opportunity to encourage learners to reflect upon their own and the other's cultures so as to deconstruct prejudices and stereotypes. However, despite the relevant theoretical framework developed so far, many are the difficulties related to the implementation of an intercultural approach to the teaching of English, and the ways in which teachers associate culture and language in their actual practices can be far from an intercultural perspective (GIMENEZ, 2001). Thus, the development of interculturality can be sometimes neglected or misinterpreted.

In addition, only a few studies discuss how intercultural moments can be constructed through the interaction in classrooms, mainly in the case of public school contexts in Brazil. Thus, given that little research on the issue of how interculturality can be co-constructed in Brazilian public schools, this paper aims at opening the windows of a real classroom so as to present how an intercultural episode can be interactively constructed in such context.

2   The intercultural perspective

According to Kramsch (1993), the intercultural perspective involves reflection on the native and the target culture (C1 and C2) rather than simply transferring factual information from one to another. Therefore, an intercultural speaker would be, within this perspective, the one who is aware of the relation between a certain language and its particular context, capable of interacting through cultural frontiers, predicting possible misunderstandings and dealing with cognitive and social demands intrinsic in the relationship with the other. 'Walking' around such frontiers, however, is quite a challenge since the way we perceive realities is always mediated by our cultural lenses. At this point, the intercultural speaker is faced with a "kaleidoscope of at least four different reflections of facts and events (…)" (KRAMSCH, 1993, p. 207), as presented in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Cultural reflections involved in language and culture teaching
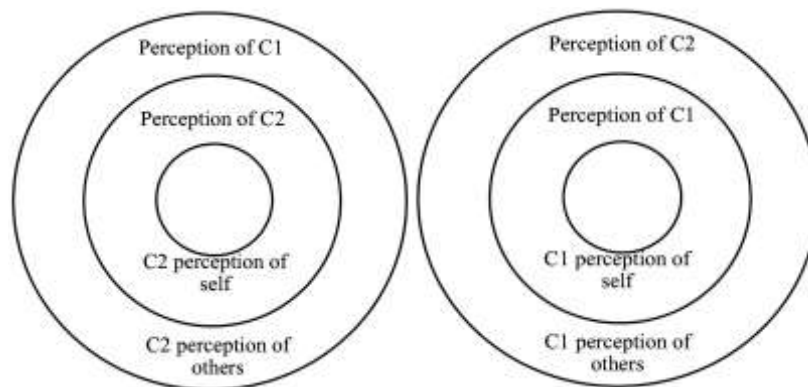
(Kramsch, 1993)

According to Kramsch's diagram of cultural reflections, it is possible to assume that there is no direct access to real C1 or C2, but only perceptions of such realities (C1', C1", C2', C2"). In this case, reality is constructed while interpreting the facts, and in the teaching of culture, "myth and reality both contradict and reinforce one another" (KRAMSCH, 1993, p. 207).

As a way to deal with all this complexity, and construct an intercultural sphere, Kramsch postulates four main steps which are first, based on reconstructing the context of production within the foreign culture (C2), then, on constructing the same context in the native culture (C1), and on comparing how different cultures have different perceptions of contexts (C1-C2). By doing so, it is

finally possible to raise a discussion that may lead to a change on the perspectives about oneself and the other.

Based on this understanding of culture as a social construct, and a product of self and other perceptions, the author proposes a different pedagogy to language and culture by suggesting four new lines of thought, as described below:

1. *Establishing a 'sphere of interculturality':* the relationship between linguistic forms and social structure is not given, but rather constructed through interaction, and understanding a different culture requires reflection on both the target and the native culture. Thus, the intercultural teaching must promote spaces for such reflections.

2. *Teaching culture as an interpersonal process:* teaching fixed, normative factors of language use seems to be pointless, since meaning is constructed through social interaction. Instead, teachers should try to "replace the presentation/prescription of cultural facts and behaviors by the teaching of a process that applies itself to understanding foreignness or otherness" (KRAMSCH, 1993, p. 206).

3. *Teaching culture as difference:* relying on national or regional traits to describe the habits/behavior of a certain group of people can reinforce stereotypes that disregards particular cultural factors such as age, gender, ethnic background, and social class.

4. *Crossing disciplinary boundaries:* language teachers must broaden their readings to include other disciplines than the ones academically recognized for the teaching of culture, such as anthropology, sociology and semiology.

Byram (2002) provides a different interpretation of interculturality by suggesting that intercultural competence is composed by different *savoirs*, which are essential for intercultural speakers/mediators. *Savoir* (knowledge) is addressed by the author as knowledge of self and others, of their products, practices, and the general process of interaction. Such knowledge about the other may be held consciously or unconsciously, and it comes from experiences of interlocutors from another culture or from experiences of learning about other languages and cultures (Liddicoat and Scarino, 2003). *Savoir* constitutes, in this sense, a comprehensive body of knowledge on which other operations can be performed, as described by Byram (2002):

- *Savoir être*: a set of intercultural attitudes that encompass curiosity and openness, as well as readiness to suspend disbelief and judgment about others, and a willingness to suspend belief in one's own meanings so as to view them from a decentered perspective.

- *Savoir comprendre*: an ability to interpret texts, interactions and cultural practices by comparing them with aspects of one's own culture. Learning to interpret texts or practices of a

different culture involves learning to understand the knowledge that lies upon the act of interpretation, and how such knowledge is used.

- *Savoir apprendre*: an ability to acquire new knowledge, to make discoveries through social interaction or in the use of texts. In the processes of communication and interpretation, learners are engaged in a continuous process of knowledge building through understandings reached in the experience with other languages and cultures.

- *Savoir s'engager*: an ability to make critical evaluations of aspects of one's own and other cultures. Such ability includes investigating and understanding ideological perspectives of others communicated through language use and behaviors.

The role of the language teacher is, therefore, to develop these skills and attitudes that will make students aware of the meaning behind the words and the world represented by them. The following section will illustrate how some of the intercultural principles discussed in this paper can be interactively constructed in classroom.

3   Opening the windows of a real classroom: a brief contextualization

We observed Camila's[3] classes in a second-year of secondary school classroom where learners were in English classes approximately 45 minutes a day, 2 days a week. The classroom was composed of 11 students, and the classes were teacher centered with students organized in lines.

On our first day in this classroom, we introduced ourselves and explained to the group that we would be observing the teacher for a period of time as a way to understand how she dealt with language and culture in her classes. We guaranteed the protection of their identities on the results of the study, and the whole group seemed to be very comfortable with our presence.

The collaborative atmosphere in this classroom really caught our attention. The teacher was always smiling, and by the beginning of every class she used to ask students how they were doing, and what they had done during the weekend as a way to show her affection towards the group. Students were always very helpful. They commonly offered themselves to help the teacher with anything she needed, and the majority of the group was always eager to participate in the usual classroom discussions.

Camila devoted much of her time to prepare her classes and to bring activities that could call the learners' attention. Classroom exercises were highly diversified, as the teacher made use of videos,

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[3] The real name of the participant teacher was replaced by a pseudonym in this study.

images, and paper-based activities to set discussions in class. The limited time in class did not prevent the teacher from constructing interculturality in classroom, and many were the moments where she involved learners in practices of deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices.

During the classes observed, the teacher was dealing with the theme 'Advertising in different medias' provided by the fourth unit of the book Globetrekker 2[4], and throughout that unit she proposed different tasks to deal with the theme. At first, they developed activities to understand the specificities of different forms of advertising, and after that, the teacher presented videos of different types of advertisements and commercials to discuss with the group. The excerpts of Camila's classroom were taken from the moments where the teacher and students were talking about the videos presented in class. From a total of 12 classes observed, 6 intercultural episodes could be noticed. In this paper, we will present one intercultural episode taken from a larger study.

4   Intercultural episode: No Brasil só tem Rio de Janeiro?

As the teacher was dealing with the theme 'Advertising in different medias', she proposed a series of activities that fostered students to develop their critical thinking. At first, she presented three different commercials broadcasted on YouTube (two Havaianas and one Nivia sunblock commercial) and asked students to sit in small groups, and discuss the following questions:

- What is the product they are selling?
- What is the main message in them?
- How do the images and phrases help to convey the main message?
- What is the view they bring about Brazil? Do you agree with that view?

The dialogue below is the moment in which the teacher and students were talking about the last question. Camila emphasized that the learners could discuss in Portuguese if they did not know how to fully express themselves in English:

1. T: Now the last question I have for you. What is the view they bring about Brasil?
2. S3: Copacabana.
3. T: Yes, you think about Rio de Janeiro!
4. S1: Cidade Maravilhosa

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[4] The textbook used in her classes was the Globetrekker 2 (Globetrekker: inglês para ensino médio.Vol. 2, 2 ed. São Paulo: Macmillan, 2010)

5. T: People, do you agree with this view?

6. S2: Mais ou menos.

7. S4: It's a commercial view.

8. S1: Esqueceu da farofada que tem na praia?

9. S2: Quando o pobre chega na praia com aqueles 30 isopor, 30 cadeiras… todo mundo tem uma cadeira e um isopor. Isso é coisa de pobre.

10. T: E que visão é essa que as pessoas tem do Brasil, gente?

11. S4: It's a commercial view

12. T: É uma visão padronizada. É um estereótipo, certo? Isso que vocês estão comentando aí sobre pessoas pobres também são estereótipos, vocês não acham? Nem toda pessoa de renda mais baixa vai se comportar da mesma forma. O que eu to querendo dizer é que, não que essa realidade não exista, mas se a gente pensar nas propagandas do Brasil, por exemplo, isso existe, mas é só isso? E é sempre assim? O brasileiro está sempre feliz? Vocês estão sempre felizes?

13. Ss: Não…

14. T: O Brasil só tem lugares bonitos?

15. S1: Não. Tem o Bela Vista, tem a Palhoça…

16. T: No Brasil só tem Rio de Janeiro?

17. Ss: Não…

18. T: Okay. Então o que é que tá faltando aqui, gente?

19. S2: A realidade

20. T: Reality, yes!

21. S1: Mas também no que a gente vê lá dos Estados Unidos, todo mundo gordo e feliz por causa do McDonalds e uma professora foi lá e explicou que não tem nada a ver com o que a gente vê nos filmes mesmo. Então é a mesma coisa.

22. T: So when we think about other countries, we normally relate to stereotypes, right?

23. S2: A senhora já foi para os Estados Unidos?

24. T: Yes.

25. S2: Como é lá? Normal? Eles são educados?

26. T: The people that I met, yes! Aí que tem a questão, gente. Não existe "eles são" né? Tem as pessoas que a gente encontra… Aqui no Brasil eu posso encontrar gente que é bem educada e gente que é super mal educada.

27. S1: É, tem muita gente que diz "Ah! lá em POA as pessoas são super educadas".

28. T: Pois é, mas nem todo mundo, né?

(Classroom observation, 09/06/2014)

In this conversation, line 5 shows that the teacher is encouraging students to criticize the representations of Brazil portrayed on those commercials. By doing so, Camila is trying to develop the students' critical cultural awareness, what Byram (2002) calls *savoir s'engager:* "an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (BYRAM, 2002, p. 13).

Students' reactions on lines (6) and (7) demonstrate disagreement with the views of Brazil depicted on the commercials. However, in order to prove that those views are not reflecting Brazilian's reality, some students came up with offensive comments about poor people (lines 8 and 9). The teacher then, explained that those commercial views are based on stereotypes (line 12), and she took advantage of the students' comments to emphasize that, just like the commercials are showing a stereotyped image of Brazil, their comments about poor people are stereotyping lower-class population. At that point, the teacher is in accordance to what is proposed by the PCNs regarding interculturality and language teaching, since the English classroom is functioning as a space to stand against any discrimination based on cultural differences, social class, belief, sex, ethnicity or other individual and social characteristics (BRASIL, 1998. p. 7).

Also, on line 12 the teacher explains that the problem about a stereotype is not that it depicts a reality that does not exist, but the fact that it turns one single reality as representative for a whole country. In this sense, culture is being taught as difference, rather than stereotyped national traits: "(…) não que essa realidade não exista, mas se a gente pensar nas propagandas do Brasil, por exemplo, isso existe, mas é só isso?". Camila, then problematizes this issue, by fostering students to think about how Brazil is much more than beautiful landscapes (line 14) and Rio de Janeiro (line 16). Through that discussion, a student realized that the same way American people can have a stereotyped view of Brazil, we might have a stereotyped view of the United States based on the media representations about this country (line 21). At that point, it is possible to see how students were led to understand how our perception of a certain reality is always mediated through our cultural lenses.

By the end of this dialogue, when one of the students asked the teacher if American people are polite (line 25), Camila took advantage of that question to once again reinforce how problematic it is to ground your opinions on stereotypes: "Aí que tem a questão, gente. Não existe "eles são" né? Tem as

pessoas que a gente encontra… Aqui no Brasil eu posso encontrar gente que é bem educada e gente que é super mal educada".

Based on this excerpt, it is possible to see how dialogues such as this one can provide opportunities for teachers to help learners make meaning of different situations by constructing a sphere of interculturality, which is a place of mediation between the students' own culture and the culture of others, where it is possible to raise discussions that may lead to a change on the perspectives about oneself and the other.

5   Final remarks

Based on the findings of this study, it is possible to see how the experience in school engaged learners in practices of de-construction of their perceptions about the world, and the communities where they belong. In this sense, the English class could be seen as a space of social transformation.

Also, through the intercultural dialogue presented in this article, it could be noticed how learners were fostered to analyse their own life experiences in relation to what was being discussed in classroom. Therefore, the English class was not isolated inside the school context, and also, the construction of interculturality was fundamental on the development of critical thinking and citizenship. Thus, the benefits of setting an intercultural sphere in classroom are threesome: (1) it helps learners to deconstruct pre-conceived ideas about themselves and the others, (2) learning may be a more meaningful experience, since students are able to relate what is being taught to their own life experiences, and (3) learners are fostered to think critically and not accept naturalized views of culture.

This study is limited in the sense that the context investigated might not be representative of all public school contexts, for its privileged infrastructure, and teachers who are fluent in the language. Therefore, I would suggest that further research in other public teaching environments is necessary to be carried out.

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