CULTURAL NARRATIVES DURING EFL/ESL LESSONS:

AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE FOR INTERCULTURAL PROJECTS

Narrativas culturales durante las clases de EFL/ESL: una perspectiva epistemológica para proyectos interculturales

Narrativas culturais durante as aulas de EFL/ESL: uma perspectiva epistemológica para projetos interculturais

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Abstract: Cultures are present in everything we do; cultural contacts are constant and different cultural aspects arise during English as a foreign or second language lessons (EFL/ESL). As intercultural activities and projects are common during these lessons, and issues concerning how we perceive cultures emerge in discourses that take place in them, philosophical-based research to analyse which epistemological approaches may offer valid, realistic, and humanistic interpretations of cultures was carried out. As different notions of culture exist, the ones considered within liberal democracies were studied and Seyla Benhabib's (2002) notion of cultural narratives became the focus of the analysis. It was concluded that although a perspective based on cultural narratives cannot be considered the only valid one, it is suitable for EFL/ESL lessons as it is an open view which considers both individual and social aspects, while questioning stereotyped visions. The article provides examples on how an approach based on cultural narratives may provide theoretical support for the implementation of intercultural projects.

Keywords: culture; interculture; intercultural education; English as a foreign language; English as a second language; English language teaching.

Resumen: *Las culturas están presentes en todo lo que hacemos; los contactos culturales son constantes y diferentes aspectos que atañen a la cultura surgen durante las clases de inglés como lengua extranjera o segunda lengua (EFL/ESL). Como las actividades y los proyectos interculturales son comunes durante estas lecciones, y cuestiones en torno a cómo percibimos la cultura emergen en los discursos que se dan en estas, se llevó a cabo una investigación de corte filosófico intentando analizar qué enfoques epistemológicos pueden ofrecer interpretaciones*

válidas, realistas y humanistas sobre las culturas. Como existen diferentes nociones sobre la cultura, se investigaron las que tienen cabida en democracias liberales y se hizo foco en el concepto de narrativas culturales de Seyla Benhabib (2002). Se concluyó que, si bien esta perspectiva no puede ser considerada la única válida, es apropiada para las clases de EFL/ESL, puesto que es una visión abierta que considera aspectos tanto individuales como sociales, mientras interroga visiones estereotipadas. En el artículo se proporcionan ejemplos sobre cómo un abordaje basado en narrativas culturales puede brindar soporte teórico para la realización de proyectos interculturales.

Palabras clave: *cultura; intercultura; educación intercultural; inglés como lengua extranjera; inglés como segunda lengua; enseñanza de inglés.*

Resumo*: As culturas estão presentes em tudo o que fazemos; os contatos culturais são constantes e diferentes assuntos com respeito à cultura surgem durante as aulas de inglês como língua estrangeira ou segunda língua (EFL/ESL). Como atividades e projetos interculturais são comuns nessas aulas, e questões sobre como percebemos a cultura emergem nos discursos que são proferidos nelas, uma investigação filosófica foi realizada procurando analisar quais abordagens epistemológicas podem oferecer interpretações válidas, realistas e humanistas sobre as culturas. Como existem diferentes noções sobre cultura, foram pesquisadas as que têm lugar nas democracias liberais, com foco no conceito de narrativas culturais de Seyla Benhabib (2002). Concluiu-se que, embora essa concepção não possa ser considerada a única válida, é adequada para aulas de EFL/ESL, pois é uma visão aberta que considera questões individuais e sociais, ao mesmo tempo em que interroga visões estereotipadas. O artigo fornece exemplos de como uma abordagem baseada nas narrativas culturais pode oferecer suporte teórico para a realização de projetos interculturais.*

Palavras-chave: *cultura; intercultura; educação intercultural; inglês como língua estrangeira; inglês como segunda língua; ensino de inglês.*

Introduction

The movement of people, goods, capital —and even of images and discourses (Blommaert, 2010)— demanded languages that could be understood by many to facilitate massive interaction. English fulfils this communicative function as it is one of the six international languages used by the UNESCO. At present, around seventy-six regions are considered English-speaking and there are near two billion speakers of English around the world (Crystal, 2008), with non-native speakers outnumbering native ones (Jenkins, 2002). This fact has given place to different varieties of World Englishes (Kachru, 1986, cited in McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008) as the language has evolved in macro and micro ways, globally and locally, as it has been constantly re-embedded at local levels (Coupland, 2003) giving place to new linguistic forms.

This worldwide interaction does not mean losing one's identity; it is an encounter with diversity from one's individual identity using the language for intelligibility purposes. As Kelly (2018, p. 17) states: "there are three dimensions in particular that are always present and often in conflict. They can be summed up as communication, culture and identity". The communicative aspect has been tackled giving place to the notions of English as an international language or as a *lingua franca* (ELF) (Kirkpatrick, 2007; Dewey, 2007; Canale, 2009), that, although different, conceive English as a medium of international communication among speakers of languages other than English (Seidlhofer, 2011). The ample variation of English uses in ELF has given place to the notion of "hybrid of similects" (Mauranen, 2012 quoted in Jenkins, 2018, p. 29), or "English as a multilingua franca" (Jenkins, 2018, p. 28), breaking the language myth (Farrow, 2005) of a single standard worldwide linguistic variety.

Regarding culture and identity, an intercultural approach (Baker, 2012; Carabelli, 2012; Holliday, 2018) based on respect of Human Rights, dialogue, tolerance and equality is adopted in many English programmes. Nevertheless, as international migration implies that schools are becoming more multicultural; as cultural recognition is important for people, and as problems concerning culture many times arise, many scholars analyse language and culture policies and reflect about how to consider cultural aspects in education. Due to this, I analysed existing conceptions of culture within liberal democracies. During ESL/EFL programmes, educators perceive the importance of incorporating cultural aspects into lessons as language and culture are interrelated and students: i) have a cultural background from which they interact; ii) need to become acquainted with different cultural aspects to understand what different words or concepts mean; and iii) need to develop intercultural competence to comprehend perspectives of people from different corners of the world.

After analysing several notions of culture and focusing on the study of Seyla Benhabib's (2002) philosophical conception, I consider that the notion cultural narratives that she developed in her theory, may be incorporated in the field of language education together with other existing notions (Carabelli, 2022). Benhabib (1996, 2011) based her studies on Habermas' (1981/1987) theory of Discourse Ethics and elaborated a model centred on communicative action within institutions and the civil society. From her Kantian perspective, humans are an end in itself and therefore, everyone is worthy of recognition and has something relevant to say. Her conception regarding cultural narratives is based on recognition, dialogue and human dignity and seems a

suitable theoretical framework for classroom tasks that foster intercultural competence or involve intercultural dialogue.

As EFL/ESL lessons are based on international and intercultural approaches, cultural aspects often predominate in textbooks, videos and discussions. In these, cultural stereotypes frequently appear in discourses giving place to essentialist notions of culture; however, more complex and diffuse situations take place showing a fluidity of boundaries in things related to culture. A tension between essentialist conceptions and complex dialogic perspectives exists. By presenting diverse ways of conceptualising culture —essentialist and anti-essentialist— and by incorporating different cultural narratives during lessons, students can reflect about different aspects related to culture in critical ways, analysing and questioning reified or stereotyped conceptualisations.

Benhabib's conceptualisation of cultural narratives

Multicultural movements started in United States in the 1960's when ethnic minorities started fighting for their rights. These movements triggered philosophical debates concerning cultural recognition and cultural policies were implemented in the 1990's based on Taylor's (1994) and Kymlicka's (1995) work. These —in opposition to other liberal democratic thinkers such as Rawls (1971) or Habermas (1987) who believed that cultures and religion belong to the private sphere— understood that culture is important for individuals, and therefore, stated that liberal democracies could give place to cultural aspects. From a multicultural and plural perspective of cultures, that implies that every culture can be defined and described in some way, they stated that all cultures are equally important, and that they must therefore be recognized and protected with ethnocultural policies so that they do not become extinct. For these authors, in certain instances, collective rights may prevail over individual rights to secure cultural aspects such as linguistic options or group belonging.

As Taylor and Kymilicka —and in hand with the anthropologist Murdock (1945) who states that cultures are gratifying for human beings— Benhabib (2002) also understands that culture is important for individuals. However, she understood that a new perspective was needed; one that would promote both cultural recognition and individual autonomy. Based on the work of anthropologists Lévi-Strauss (1978, 1955/1985) and Malinowski (1972), Benhabib (2002) proposed a cultural approach focused on "complex cultural dialogue". A "model that permits

maximum cultural contestation within the public sphere, in and through the institutions and associations of the civil society" (Benhabib, 2002, p. 9). In agreement with Bhabha (1994) she states that all cultures are hybrid as constant interaction of people provokes constant variation. By burrowing Taylor's (1989) "webs of narratives" notion and stating that individuals do not belong to unique social networks but to varied and interlocked ones, she suggests the existence of constant dialogue between people provoking constant (re)configuration at the individual level and on the *ethos* that embraces them. Hence, Benhabib states that each person's life is unique and inapprehensible to a full extent. She suggests that instead of talking about culture as a unitary entity in which group ideals prevail suppressing individuals' stories, everyone's history and perspective should be given equal value by focusing on cultural narratives. Cultural narratives imply concrete people living specific lives in varied social contexts.

Benhabib conceived her theory trying to look for universal solutions to mankind's problems regarding recognition and endorsement of Human Rights; therefore, she proposed a cosmopolitan model of deliberative democracy, which would grant all humans "the right to have rights" (Arendt, 1958). She conceived the notion of cultural narratives by analysing the situation of refugees, immigrants, displaced people, minorities, people with a specific disability, people who for some reason or another may be left aside; people who may not have a group or nation that backs them up. For her, everyone should have the right to participate in public deliberations as everyone's voice is important. And these narratives are not generated in isolation, on the contrary, they are developed in dialogue with others who also determine who one is. These "others" are not perceived as different in some way; they are those who become part of a shared dialogue.

In conclusion, if presented as an additional perspective, in opposition with others and as valid as others, the notion of cultural narratives may enable critical reflections that foster complex arguments that include the inherent tension between the self and others in matters of culture.

Cultural narratives during English language lessons

Cultural aspects are present during English as a foreign language or second language lessons. Books, audios, and videos used during classes present multiple and varied cultural perspectives, and threads of thought can be identified and analysed. In resources, people from different backgrounds interact in different ways. In the past, these interactions were generally made by people who shared a certain variety of English, but as English became more international,

English speakers from all over the world, started to gain place in them. What is more, by using the Internet, language teachers tend to include different varieties of English making classes more realistic. By using different resources teachers may focus on the notion of cultural narratives allowing the English lesson to become a place of reflection regarding interculturality, and of development of intercultural competence and "transcultural communication skills" (Jenkins, 2018).

In this way, English may be taught from an international approach (Kirkpatrick, 2007; McKay & Bokhorst Heng, 2008) promoting a culturally diverse perspective. Cultural narratives can be incorporated in lessons giving place to unique stories within broader social networks and communities. Stories, poems, letters, articles, dialogues, films and plays, for example, present multiple cultural narratives which can be identified in discourses, studied, compared and contrasted.

At present, cultural aspects in language teaching materials are still frequently presented by using stereotypes. Some language books include cultural topics from an essentialist perspective stating that all the people from a certain nation wear certain clothes, eat a specific variety of food, and behave in a specific way. To break with this tendency a critical perspective may be adopted, and cultural topics may be centred on the wide variety of lives people live and on the tension between commonalities and differences. During lessons, one may focus on the analysis and comparison of cultural narratives of people who share instances to try to understand the tensions and complexities of this abstract entity that we all possess and that has the power of unifying or separating.

Intercultural pen palling projects

Apart from using books, audios and videos to incorporate multiple and varied cultural narratives during lessons, authentic first-hand narratives can also be incorporated by carrying out international projects such as pen palling. During these kinds of activities students become aware of the existence of multiple cultural narratives as the narratives of their interlocutors are authentic, spontaneous —not pre-elaborated for teaching purposes— and generally differ from preconceived stereotypes. What is more, students do not only become conscious of the variety of perspectives their pen pals present, they are also confronted with the commonalities and uniqueness of their own perceptions within their group while they elaborate and narrate their own view. When sharing and comparing written productions with classmates, individual cultural narratives become evident as

students realise that although they may all live in the same city and attend the same school, their interests and living styles differ.

It has been proven that pen palling projects are favourable for students (Barksdale, Watson & Soo Park, 2007; Thompson McMillon, 2009) as they must use the target language for an authentic purpose: to communicate effectively with people who do not belong to their close circles; this makes the writing process meaningful, and students get highly engaged improving their language and written skills. But apart from the benefits in the development of language, pen palling activities are relevant because they allow students to reflect about human commonalities and differences. By interacting with people who think and live in a way which differs with theirs, students become conscious of the existence of varied cultural narratives which coexist, interact, and are as valid and respectable as theirs. As Barksdale et al. (2007) stated, during pen palling activities different curricular areas are tackled and narratives within these areas can be studied. Climate, geographical location, history, and access to technology, for example, will define people's lives in different ways. And common aspects may always be discussed as everyone has family relations, eats, learns and lives somewhere. Hence, pen palling projects provide authentic frameworks to study human differences and similarities (Austin, 2000) and this helps students become aware of the importance of tolerance and respect while promoting reflection about questions related to justice. As Barksdale et al. (2007, p. 65) specified, while carrying out pen palling activities "it was common for children to express emotions such as compassion and sympathy".

Regarding cultural difference and dialogue, Thompson McMillon (2009, p. 119) stated that "when teachers and students are from different cultures, dissonance can occur in classrooms, which can be debilitating for effective literacy teaching and learning". In this sense, addressing the existence of diverse cultural narratives within the classroom is a highly challenging, yet necessary, task.

Conclusions

English as a Foreign Language or Second Language lessons have become a place of international and intercultural dialogue. This allows English lessons to become a space where not only language is taught; intercultural perspectives, skills, and ways of establishing meaningful dialogue, are also nurtured in them. Different conceptions of culture exist, one of them being the

conception of cultural narratives developed by Benhabib (2002) which seems to provide an appropriate theoretical framework for intercultural activities as it is based on norms of "universal respect" and "egalitarian reciprocity" and promotes open and tolerant dialogue based on narratives that are distinctive as individuals belong to multiple networks which conform them in unique ways throughout life. Although some cultural aspects may coexist within the cultural narratives of different people, for this author what is important is not the culture *per se*, but what each subject is saying from within his/her cultural narrative. In this sense her theory is deontological as it promotes dialogue and recognition of the importance of each individual. Implementing an approach based on cultural narratives in English lessons may be significant as it promotes a non-essentialist perspective that moves beyond stereotypes. Nevertheless, as tensions concerning different notions of culture, and aspects related to individual and collective issues exists, and Benhabib's model has universal pretensions, a complex approach to the analysis of cultural issues, highlighting the existence of different and opposing notions of culture, may be recommended.

One way of introducing diverse and authentic cultural narratives into classrooms is by incorporating educational projects such as pen palling. By getting engaged in these projects students do not only get to develop and use the target language purposefully by establishing meaningful communication, they also develop intercultural competence by becoming aware of the diversity of cultural narratives that exist. Drawings, letters and cards made and written by students show the complexity and tension between commonalities and differences, establishing the need of problematising cultural narratives to avoid essentialisms. By carrying out projects of this kind learners may hear other students' voices; similar, yet different, to theirs.

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