Intercultural Competence through Brazilian University Students Lens

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Abstract

We intend to discuss the importance of promoting the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence in a Modern Language course in Brazil, to foster the education of language teachers who are critical and reflective, also in regards to the relation between language and culture. We assume that an intercultural approach to teaching English should prioritize a multicultural and critical curriculum that actively teaches and facilitates the construction of personal and social identities of apprentices in the integrated process of developing language skills, namely: production and listening skills and writing. We seek to reflect theoretically upon the concept of Intercultural Competence in connection with the language setting as a social practice, co-built and re-signified historically through dialogic social interaction. Our central argument is that intercultural competence can contribute to the understanding of foreign culture, starting from our own culture and also an outside perspective, that is, it can be understood from the perspective of the other. The research was conducted at the Letras (Modern Languages) course, at UEG – Universidade Estadual de Goiás, a public university, in Goiás, Brazil, under the auspices of Technology, Education and Language Master Program that supported authors’ academic activities at the institution, during an academic semester in 2015. Participants in the study were asked to reflect critically on relation between language and culture in English language teaching and how sociocultural identity impacts speech interaction.

Keywords: Teacher education, English, intercultural education.
Introduction

The current scenario of technological development and the consequent change in the interaction between people invite us for a redefinition of the cultural factor in the educational processes of language teaching. Since we refer to this process we are considering that beings involved are unique and cultural, able to express in many dimensions. In this sense, it is essential to seek didactic and pedagogical practices less impregnated by only illustrative content on customs, personality, among others, from the country of the target language.

Given these assumptions, we understand that the foreign language classroom (FL) represents a social context that can involve their members in a process of awareness about their cultural and intercultural training.

Through classroom observation, recording audio and video, questionnaires and interviews, we sought to understand the perceptions of Modern Language course students regarding the interconnection between language and culture and its contribution to the linguistic and communicative understanding, and present reflections on dialogical construction of cultural meanings emerged in English class.

In this paper we present discussions on the language setting, culture, interculturalism and intercultural classroom. We started explaining the concept of language and culture advocated by Kramsch (2001), Risager (2006) and Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009). They argue that culture refers to the way of acting, beliefs, values and standards built in a community. Thus, we noted how the linguistic and cultural flows are pervaded by the identity of a people, group or nation.

Further, considering the theories of Corbett (2003), Hall (2012) and Risager (2006), we discussed the importance of understanding the inteculturality term for an intercultural classroom, as language teaching seeks for communicative development in order to understand the ‘other’ and be understood by him, to socio-cultural activities, learning a language and communicate through it.

Interculturaly in Foreign Language Teaching

Summarize about Culture

We started this journey with a retrospective of the origin of the term culture presented by Karen Risager in its publication Language and Culture: Global flows and local complexity (2006). The author divides the constitution of term in three moments. The first point refers to the individual concept of culture that comes with Cicero and his metaphor cultura animi (mental cultivation of the

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1 Karen Risager is PHD in Cultural Studies by the Department of Culture and Identity at the University of Roskilde, Denmark. Thirty years ago conducts interdisciplinary research in sociolinguistic area, teaching language and culture, internationalization and intercultural competence. Source: http://www.multilingual-matters.com/display.asp?K=9781853599590. Acess in 12/01/2015.
individual, self-development), followed by cultivation soul of Augustino's idea. That time is considered by the culture what the individual knows about the world, how many works were read, encyclopedic knowledge.

In the second, she defends the vision of culture collective concept, which is developed concurrent with the individual concept, emphasizing the idea that all people participate in a historical and gradual process of culturing, i.e. all have culture. Thus, each individual cultural aspect undergoes changes as the social aspects around her are transformed.

The third highlights the aesthetic concept of culture. Because it is based on Cultural Studies of the 60s, it focuses on artistic products as the supreme realization of symbolic creativity. Thus, it values the popular culture, sports, music etc. Here culture is also respect the meanings that each individual gives to the social events of their daily lives.

The intersection of these three moments is the issue of cyclical formation, non-linear social practices of the individual, which we call culture. It is not static. Therefore, considering the English teaching learning process actual, we cannot think of teaching language linked to a set of products offered as features that should be followed to have a good communication level. But consider that culture is a social product that turns in the discursive interactions.

In this sense, Moita Lopes (2005) conceives the idea of culture as a social construct, a product of discursive practices. Viewed in this way, it is understood as part of the process of teaching foreign languages, as (re) constructs these linguistics practices.

To Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009), culture is acquired and construct through interaction with others. Therefore, it affects people's behavior and consequently their interpretations of these behaviors. The way to understand and interpret reality (oral, written and pictorial texts) surrounding the individual makes him unique and at the same time, part of a group that can share with him some of these values and knowledge and build continuously new perspectives of thought.

This definition supports the view advocated by Kramsch (2004, p.45) culture as "imaginative conceptions in common among members of a discourse community who share the same social and historical space". These, regardless of where they are, preserve perception, evaluation and action patterns.

Based on these assumptions, considering the language as a social practice, which presupposes language teaching focused on the learner and their sociocultural practices, we understand culture as the sum of different classification systems and different discursive formations to which the language refers to give meaning to things (Kramsch, 1998, 2001, 2004; Moita Lopes, 2005).

These considerations lead us to the dimensions of that concept advocated by Spencer-Oatey (2012). The author considers the etics aspects such as everyday issues permeated by similarities between different cultures, that is, universal

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2 We understand here linguistic practice in the sense of discursive practice, being used interchangeable. As the definition of Risager (2006), are practices that take place on social networks in which such language is spoken, as internet, classroom, church, business relations, among others.
aspects and *emics* as aspects of life that show different between cultures, or the specifics of each culture.

With this understanding, we can think on social practices that are at play when we teach a foreign language. For example, what cultural issues that are referred to an English written text for tourists visiting Rio? What meanings are related to an English song wrote by Mexican singer used to teach English? We restrict ourselves to exemplify some discursive practices that permeate the teaching of English in Brazil, but that could be thought in other contexts.

*Some Conceptions of Language*

Taking into account the definitions of culture presented in the previous section, we realized that they lead to a number of features that are important to construct language.

When we use a language we do as individuals with social stories and these stories are defined as part of the social groups we belong and/or identify us, for example, religion, social class, gender and race. Thus, "the language is a reflection of the culture, because at the same time that language is part of culture, it is also something that composes it" (Moreira & Figueiredo, 2012, p. 147).

To Kramsch (1998), the language is based on a system of signs and has itself a cultural value. Thus, the speakers of this language identify themselves with others through the use of language. The language as social identity.

Risager (2006) states that language is always cultural in some aspects it is not neutral culturally. She considers language as scattered linguistic practices, flowing on social networks around the world, influenced by the specific characteristics of each user of that language. As stated by the author, "states have boundaries, language doesn’t" (Risager, 2005, p. 187).

By understanding the language as a social as cultural phenomenon, we must clarify the *languaculture* term. This concept was developed by linguist american anthropologist Michael Agar in 1994, focused on variability between language and culture in the speech. However, Risager (2005) uses this concept to create opportunities of theorizing about the connections and reconnections between language and culture, in front of this context of linguistic and cultural migration as a result of globalization. The author acknowledges that all states are multicultural in some way, including the country where the target language is taught, and this target language stands in competition status with the other languages that may have a minority position"(p. 187). We are thinking about the hierarchy of languages in the context in which the speaker is inserted.

The concept of languaculture is a bridge between the structure of language and personal dialects social made, emphasizing the semantic connotations. In addition to understanding the learning of a language as a process that integrates the life history and social identity with individual themes.

So languaculture goes beyond the idea of associating language plus culture, it covers the whole language/linguistic flows and amount of cultural experiences/cultural flows that make up the linguistic system of each speaker.
Since the linguistic practice cannot be produced without language resources (rhythm, accent, poetic style etc.) carried by individual aspects and language resources cannot be developed without the experience - semantic, pragmatic and social variations (Risager, 2005, 2006).

These theoretical assumptions raise questions about the separability and/or inseparability of language and culture. With the advent of globalization, the idea of transnationality emerges, where national identities and structures are continuously being migrated, constructed and reconstructed. Questions about the association of language to a specific nation and, consequently, their inseparable nature with culture initiate.

Bakhtin's view that language is not just "an abstract system of linguistic forms far from the speaker's activity but is an evolutionary, continuous process, consisting of the social phenomenon of verbal interaction" (Bakhtin, 2011, p.43) leads to perception of the existing dialogue between language and culture and its indissoluble character (Kramsch, 1998). Emphasizing that language is not only structure, and that express the values, ways of doing things, the beliefs that permeate the relationships of a group, confirms the interrelationship between language and culture.

However, Karen Risager (2006) studies extend to the possibility of the relationship between language and culture can be inseparable and separable, depending on the communicative event and its dimensions of power.

On the inseparability of language and culture, the author presents two factors: 1) the tendency of speakers to project subjective feelings the association between language and personal culture and the identity of the local community and 2) the political use of national advertising in which nation image is built, characterized by a common national culture and language articulated joints. In this sense, language and culture are inseparable. On the other, it is necessary to consider foreign language teaching by the multiculturalism of discursive practices in it, so language and culture may be separable.

Risager (2006) sought to show three dimensions for this question. From a sociological view, the discursive - linguistic practice, speaker languageculture, in relation to a cultural macro context, can be separated from your first language context, via migration or acquisition, which will be transferred to the foreign language or language target. In this sense, language and culture can be separated.

In a psychological view, the language and culture of the individual are inseparable from the context of his life. The history of life and self-narratives are restructured and reinterpreted in this mutual relationship. The speaker design your own understanding of the world and invites, consciously or not, their interlocutors to react.

The last one is oriented system, where the language is seen as a system and the linguistic development of the individual there is an ideological construct connected to the construction of imagined cultural community. Thus, language and culture are part of an intimate connection, so inseparable.

We noticed that the linguistic and communicative event should be considered. For example, language and culture separates as the speaker uses the cultural characteristics of their mother tongue to speaking a foreign language,
from the experience gained with the socio-cultural groups close to them, to express or interpret linguistic interaction. And it does not separate if we think that the linguistic practice is full of identities, cultural and social conditions. (Hall, 2012; Risager, 2006)

Such issues alert us to the complex cultural conflicts experienced by users of a foreign language in their local and global intercultural experiences. Thus, we will bring the concept of interculturalism in the next section.

Interculturalism

Intercultural word can be understood from two dimensions. The first dimension considers the meeting of two cultures and two languages with their political boundaries as they represented different nations. And the other goes through the communication between people from different social classes, ethnic and cultural, which are within the limits of the same country or the same national language (Kramsch, 2001).

Corbett (2003) points out that the fundamental purpose of an intercultural approach to teaching languages is that when teaching about culture we also teach on their values and beliefs and how they are expressed, from our own vision/reading in relation to these values and/or beliefs, which will be understood from the languaculture of learners. Grosso modo, the author states that "[is] to prepare learners to be 'diplomats' able to see different cultures by a comprehensive perspective" (p.2).

Faced with the elucidations in this study, we understand interculturalism as a trading space where different cultures can move in (re)signification of linguistic knowledge are learned and taught.

This conception of interculturalism reverberates the prospect of experiences in teaching and learning english in which tensions and resistance can be mitigated by the ability to integrate differences in a respectful relationship.

In this sense, intercultural approach extends Communicative approach, in which the individual was led to different skills development, such as grammar (learning vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, spelling and word formation); sociolinguistic (produce and understand language, properly, in specific social situations); strategic (use gestures and paraphrase to cover linguistic limitations) and discursive (combine ideas - cohesion and coherence). Introduced by Hymes (1972) and grouped and definidades by Canale and Swain (1980) as mentioned above.

By learning another language is also need to develop an Intercultural Competence (IC), which is "the ability to critically understand the foreign culture, starting from our own culture and also from external perspective, in which the student seeks understanding from the view of the other" (Figueroedo, 2007, p.85).

Deardoff (2009) defines intercultural competence as the ability to behave and communicate effective and appropriately in intercultural situations, to understand other perspectives on the world. Thus, at intercultural educational context, the teacher should focus on skills that allow students to reflect on the
new forms of using language. As we noted in this globalized and technological contemporary society, whose language migrations by social networks surf from local to global instantly. This language interconnection carries characteristics of its speakers and reflected in the search for understanding of others who have overcome the geopolitical and cultural barriers.

About the meaning of Intercultural Competence, Corbett (2003) includes the ability to understand the language and behavior of the target community, and clarify it to members of the local community. It also presents the reflections of Byram (1989), for whom the IC contains within itself the ability to mediate and interpret the relationships between different cultures. In this process, IC seeks to develop the ability to interact with people, respecting them as complex human beings from different social identities, and analyzing critically their own culture.

Given these components, we note that the intercultural dimension goes beyond the transmission of information about another culture, and assumes the understanding that cultural aspects are part of every interaction. An intercultural approach to language teaching, in this sense, it is necessary, in that it aims to develop intercultural learners who are mediators able to handle the complexity and multiple identity, avoiding the stereotypes that lead to the perception of others through a single identity, but treating them on a equal and respect level (Byram, 1989).

**Implications for the Intercultural Classroom**

The perspective of interculturalism puts us in front of a conception of language as a social phenomenon, such as speech, not as a system of fragmented, structured and prefixed elements to the speakers community of that language. This prospect interests the language (re) produced and (re) built in real context, in the case of this research, the understanding built on themselves, society, the other and the world, in English class.

Given this theoretical view, the classroom is presented as a complex scenario that should be examined, in which diverse knowledge are shared. We assume that the relationship between individuals, in this environment of clashes and conflicts, is supported by the interaction. In this sense, we will focus our thoughts on the interaction process in the dialogic principle of Bakhtin (2011).

For Bakhtin (2011), verbal interactions, whether oral or written, are conducted by the discursive dialogue, which is built for statements, uninterrupted elements of a communicative cycled chain. And the dialogic nature of the discourse governing the social construction of who we are, since

[The] an announcer speech object , whatever it may be , is not the first speech of the object in this statement, and this speaker is not the first to talk about it ... An announcer is not Adam biblical, before virgin objects ; not yet designated , which is the first to call. (Bakhtin, 2011, p.89)
Bakhtin’s analyzes (2011) show that the individual is not the source of what he says, because the speech takes form the continuous and constant interaction with the individual statements of their interlocutors. By dialogism that meanings, ideologies and consciousness will materialize, this quest for understanding the statements have no end and carries cultural, historical aspects and experiences of the speakers.

Considering that teachers and students experienced different cultural experiences, this way, it is not possible that the learning environment is homogeneous and free from conflicts. Thinking about these assumptions and the concept of culture adopted in this work, we are led to reflect on the issue of macro and micro-cultures in intercultural interaction process. Once the classroom has its microcultures inserted in macroculture of the institution.

The microculture refers to the actions and behavior of a group, while the members of this group are associated, meet and develop local and specific understandings (Rees, 2003), as an example, the world of the classroom. While macroculture includes, for example, institution, regional or national, or shared knowledge considers a larger perspective, not local. Thinking about the educational environment, macroculture governs teaching and learning expectations.

As we see, the relationship between language and culture is complex. Thus, a proposal for intercultural approach to foreign language teaching leads us to (re) examine the proposals on what language does and what a language course should aim. Some authors argue that intercultural classroom needs to provide an environment where students can uncover other ways to understand and interpret the world, to be guided by the behavior of the universe of the ‘other’, his way of acting and why this one acts.

**Data Analyses**

This work can be characterized as a case study, by analyzing a specific unit within a larger system (André, 1986). The survey was conducted by the approval of the students, who signed a consent form after being duly informed about the content study and created their own pseudonyms to preserve their identities. It has developed in a class of 4th year in English Language subject during the second half of 2015 in a public University in Brazilian Midwest. For the sake of space, we will analysis a fragment of a class only.

It is noteworthy that the conceptions of language and culture can interfere with the process of teaching and learning a foreign language. We analyze the dimensions of languacultures presents in the classroom. We are certain that every member of that context brings its cultural belonging, i.e. their microcultures. The fragment to be discussed was extracted from the second part of a lecture whose theme was *snacks around the world*. The proposed activities aimed to encourage reflection on the connection between language and culture so as to cause an intercultural critical awareness in the participating learners.
Fragment of a classroom interaction [08/19/2015]

1. Franklin: What can you say about snacks in Brazil?...When you think about meal many people try translating breakfast as café da manhã, lunch as almoço, dinner as jantar. But when you do that you give your conception of the word. For example, snack is snack, breakfast is breakfast...because if you translate breakfast as café da manhã, you have to think about what is breakfast in Brazil? What’s the meaning of lunch in Brazil? What do people eat for lunch in Brazil? What do people eat for lunch in France? What do people usually eat at dinner in the USA? So when you translate sometimes you have to explain the difference. Now, let’s talk about snacks. So, what do people generally eat as snack in Brazil?...Give your opinion The Guy.

2. The Guy: (lll...I’m gonna speak portuguese) Usually at snack time we eat a pastry, drink a sugar cane juice... These things, at least my snack is this, or pamonha.

3. Annogle: And the finger food?

4. The Guy: cuscus

5. Franklin/The Guy*: So, cuscuz. It's not every day we eat cuscuz. I love, but it is not a common snack in people lives around me.

6. Leiz Mascarenhas: Form me, I eat bread and drink coffee every day.

7. Franklin: The bradsticks are quite common.

8. Annogle: But snack... I think about finger food, no?

9. Franklin/Annogle: humm...Petisco, finger food...something you only hold with your fingers.

10. Sunshine: I eat sandwich...juice.

11. Franklin: ok! We have to look this question of translation, because if I translate the breakfast as café da manhã, my head will think at the bread with butter and coffee, will think of coffee with milk... You have to be very careful in building these concepts, because we have to think that there are ideological issues as well. And question what Brazilian people eat at the breakfast and why?... So when working these signifiers and meanings I have to be careful when a student of mine asks me about the translation. I have to consider what is behind those concepts, because they have different contexts. Now let's continue.

12. Franklin/Annogle: Chicken finger is a petisco, a finger food. Sometimes they are considered snacks you can eat between breakfast and lunch or before dinner.

13. Annogle: All these food is finger snacks (point out book’s page) because you get with your hands and eat. How can I say ‘talher’?

14. Franklin: silverware

15. Annogle: silverware... So finger food is when I use my hands, my fingers to get the food, without silverware.

16. BG: I researched that finger food refers to pub food, o petisco.

*The slash between the names means, for example, that at that time Franklin is addressed to The Guy.
17. **Annogle**: So petisco in a general term refers to the way you eat, when you use your fingers to hold the food, no silverware.

18. **BG**: I'm addicted to cooking shows and watch all day. I was watching TSC in English... finger food was presented as a bar food.

19. This issue of finger food is cultural. For example, in Spain the "tapas" are very common. It is interesting that when trade closes, around 5 pm, people usually go out to some places that are similar to our fairs, the flea markets, full of stalls, including tapas ones. Once there, you can go a little bit in each tasting booth, even without money, if you cannot pay you eat anyway. It is a time of meeting after work, people drink beer or chopp and tapas. It would be like our fim de tarde, a moment of pleasure ... it is cultural.

We can understand from this cut that linguistic knowledge is constructed by the dialogic relationship, advocated by Bakhtin (2011). The understanding of the relationship between differences and similarities in microculture of interlocutors will be reconstructing and transforming by continuous interaction into view of the individual who seeks to understand the other language. On the other hand, as the mediator and questioning role of teacher merges the information from their cultural experiences (languaculture), we noticed an intercultural awareness.

Another important aspect concerns the need to consider other cultures beyond those which are directly related to the target and native learner languages, as the principles of cultural flows (Risager, 2006), in which the interlocutor enters cultural elements of his experience to illustrate, clarify or enrich his statement.

**Conclusion**

In light of the theories presented, we noticed that the intercultural classroom, for being a construction and reconstruction space of negotiation and translation of symbolic processes, within specific contexts and temporality, it should create opportunities for variable, contradictory and complex cultural elements association. It should consider that every learner brings his specific - individual variations, different opinions and points of view - to the process of learning the foreign language.

In this sense, the proposed intercultural approach could allow articulation of these varieties of linguistic and cultural flows in the social construction of the individual, so that he can learn and understand the culture of the 'other', reflecting on his and being aware of his place in relation to other cultural universes.

We can understand, then, that the teacher must pay attention to the reactions of learners and their understanding of cultures aspects, leading them to share, differentiate and question them in the search for mutual understanding. For this, the teacher can explore many texts not only in the target language as their first language, but also as a foreign language, so that the learner has also access to the
production of the target language by other users and the contributions of these to expand your repertoire (multi)cultural.

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