

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTIFYING ONESELF AS A CULTURAL BEING IN THE PROCESS OF EXPLORING CULTURE IN AN EFL SETTING

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Abstract: *The article focuses on the significance of raising learners' cultural awareness in the process of language education, taking into consideration the needs of the 21st century globalized society. It suggests three frameworks language educators could use in the classroom to help learners become effective users of the English language in possible cross-cultural encounters. Thus, language educators should help learners understand the importance of identifying themselves as cultural beings embodying various values and beliefs of their own culture. This awareness will enable them to effectively communicate in both intracultural and intercultural settings. Language educators should also focus on the language used while expressing culture and enable learners to become effective users of English.*

Keywords: *culture, cultural being, identity, language education, intracultural communication, intercultural communication.*

Living in a globalized society, it becomes inevitable to develop cultural awareness that will enable people to engage in a process of intercultural communication. One should realize the importance of acknowledging as well as addressing the existing differences within even one and the same society. Definitely, there are values and beliefs that are shared locally, and some of them can be also universal. Yet, a person shapes their own identity according to both the environment they come in contact with and the experience they gain throughout their life. Their identity will inevitably differ from the others as the latter gained different experiences and were surrounded by other environments.

Language education has long ceased to be viewed as the mere process of acquiring the linguistic competence in a foreign language (Celce-Murcia et al, 1995; Harmer, 1991; Ur, 2012; Condrat, 2019, 2018). It is a complex process involving the development of the communicative competence, on the one hand, and the enhancement of higher order thinking skills, on the other. Language should not be viewed only as a set of forms and structures used as a means of communication, but also as the mirror of the culture of a given society. Tomilin (1993) argues that culture should be considered as the fifth skill to be developed in learners alongside reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

The EFL classroom poses a series of issues to be addressed in terms of what cultural awareness should be developed in the classroom. The English language has become the lingua franca of the present globalized world. Hence, it is rather difficult to decide which culture the language educators

should focus on, i.e. British, American, Australian, Canadian, etc. The use of English nowadays has gone beyond the boundaries of the countries where it is an official language. Thus, bearers of non-English cultures use English as a means of communication to interact in cross-cultural encounters. For example, the working language of an international conference organised in Moldova can be English, which will imply that participants coming from different countries will interact in this language.

McKay (2003) discusses the status of English as an international language, which inevitably has contributed to the way English is taught nowadays. As the learners are interested more in communicating their ideas and culture to other people (not necessarily native speakers of English), rather than internalize the norms of an Anglo-culture, the pedagogy of English as an international language should be readapted to meet the learners' needs. The scholar argues that 'as an international language, English belongs to its users, and as such it is the users' cultural content and their sense of the appropriate use of English that should inform the language pedagogy' (McKay, 2003: 13).

The textbooks used in the EFL classroom include some cultural aspects of the American and British cultures. Language educators can use other resources during classes to supplement the information from textbooks. According to Cortazzi and Jin (1996: 204-205) the type of cultural information can fall into three main categories:

- *source culture materials* that reflect the learners' own culture;
- *target culture materials* reflect the native speakers' culture, where English is spoken as the first language;
- *international target culture* materials reflect the culture of various nations using English as a means of communication in cross-cultural encounters.

So far, the way culture has been approached in the EFL classroom in the Moldovan context follows the native speaker model, where students are helped to achieve native-like competence in the foreign language. With very few exceptions, source cultural materials are not used in the EFL classroom. The main assumption is that students will acquire the pragmatic competence only if working with target culture materials, some of them not even being authentic, but rather adapted materials. Although the compilers of the textbooks are Moldovans, little attention is devoted to the source culture. This might be due to the fact that not much space is allocated even to the target culture. When it comes to international target cultures, the textbooks seem to overlook the importance of intercultural communication.

What is more, the learners themselves do not have the possibility of identifying themselves as cultural beings in this intricate process not only of intercultural communication, but also of intracultural communication. The importance of intracultural communication appears to be overlooked in the EFL classroom. In most cases, if not always, students engage in this particular type of communication using English as the code of communication. Indeed, while doing pair-work or group-work tasks in the classroom, students negotiate the meanings in English, with frequent mother tongue interferences. Moreover, it may often happen that the students will shift to the mother tongue completely. That is why the teacher will often draw their attention to the code being used by them.

It is central to draw the learners' attention to the fact that while interacting they are supposed to negotiate the meaning with their interlocutors who have different identities. Being constantly influenced by the environment a person comes into contact with, and depending on the person's desire to understand and be understood, learners should understand that identity formation is an ongoing process. Vieira claims that: 'A person is never just the past. A person is the present and is a project. Training for adults, training for teachers, and training for trainers must emphasize this transformation, this awareness of incompleteness, this desire to set out, to seek other shores. This is why I affirm that, in one way or another, learning always means transforming oneself' (Vieira, 2014: 4). Hence, language educators should help learners acknowledge and understand the other's identity, which will inevitably lead to the creation of a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom that will make the language education process more engaging and more motivational.

One way to do it is to help learners identify themselves as cultural beings having multiple identities. The term cultural being is intended to designate the individual characteristics a person has which are the result of socio-cultural influences and environments that have shaped a person's multiple identities. It is assumed that the identification of oneself as a cultural being will facilitate

the process of acknowledging the differences within one and the same culture. In a way, learners will perceive their own culture from an outside perspective, which will enable them to analyse target cultures with more sensitivity. This, in its turn, will result in a better understanding of the intricate process of intercultural communication.

Language educators could suggest learners filling in their personal wheel of multiple identities (World Learning, 2018) as presented in Figure 1. This simple activity will help learners understand differences within their own group and become more tolerant towards another point of view. Indeed, quite often the conflicts within the group are the result of failures that occur in the process of intracultural communication. Learners usually tend to notice what the others did wrong, and seem to totally ignore their own contribution to the conflict. The assumption they have is that they all have similar identities as well as perceptions of the surrounding world.

The language educator could add some other identities within the wheel, or they could challenge the learners to add them if they feel that the wheel does not fully represent their overall identity. They should be encouraged to explain what each part of the wheel would entail, i.e. specific emotions, behaviours, and reactions. By comparing and contrasting each learner’s wheel of multiple identities, learners will understand the differences and similarities existing among them, and will be able to improve their intracultural communication.

This activity could be extended while understanding the authentic texts from textbooks or other sources suggested by the teacher. It allows both language educators and learners to exploit the authentic material to a deeper degree. At the same time, it helps build mental processes that enable learners to raise their cultural awareness and, as a result, become more proficient users of the English language in the 21st century globalized world.

Moran (2001) suggests a framework language educators could use in order to enable learners to express themselves and effectively communicate with members of other cultures. The scholar argues that as language embodies the products, practices, perspectives, communities, and persons of a culture, learners should be helped to use language appropriately in specific contexts. Thus, language educators should focus on the specific use of language, which will boost the learners’ self-expression, communication and social interaction.

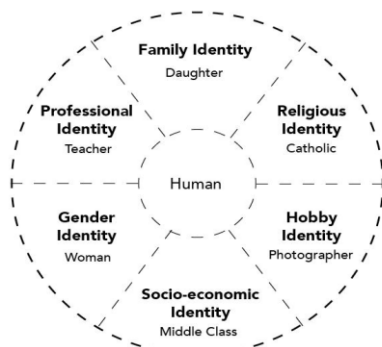


Figure 1: *Wheel of Multiple Identities*

Table 1: *Language used to express cultural elements*

Cultural Dimension	The Nature of Language-and-Culture
Products	The language used to describe and manipulate cultural products
Practices	The language used to participate in cultural practices
Perspectives	The language used to identify, explain, and justify cultural perspectives
Communities	The language used to participate appropriately in specific cultural communities
Persons	The language individuals use to express their unique identity within the culture.

(Moran, 2001: 36)

Language educators could prepare a worksheet inviting learners to first identify the five elements of their own culture. Thus, they will have to identify the products (i.e. things created and used in a culture), practices (i.e. behaviours, social interactions), persons (i.e. people acting within a culture), communities (i.e. groups of people sharing values and behaviours), and perspectives (i.e. underlying beliefs of a culture) of their own culture. Similarly, they will have to say what language they use to express themselves. This activity can be done in groups to boost learners’ communication skills. Then the language educator can present a text (it can be in written form or a video file) reflecting elements of another culture. The learners could be challenged to identify the elements and the language used to express them in the given text. Such an activity offers the learners the possibility to isolate elements of a culture for further exploration. By looking at one element in detail, learners can develop the skill to analyse it on their own.

Moran (2001) also argues that language and culture can be separated for pedagogical reason in a language classroom. He states that this separation will enable the learners to master the linguistic forms, on the hand, and to understand how language is used to express culture, on the other. In order to achieve this goal, language educators should focus on the following four language functions: language to participate in the culture, language to describe the culture, language to interpret the culture, and language to respond to culture.

Table 2: Language to Learn Culture

Stage	The Nature of Language
Participation: Knowing how	The language used to participate in the cultural experience
Description: Knowing about	The language used to describe the cultural experience
Interpretation: Knowing why	The language used to identify, explain, and justify cultural perspectives and to compare and contrast these with the perspectives from the individual's own culture and other cultures
Response: Knowing oneself	The language individuals use to express their thoughts, feelings, questions, strategies, and plans regarding the cultural experience

(Moran, 2001: 39)

Language educators could elaborate a list of questions that might help learners in the process of discovering both one's own and other cultures. Thus, they could suggest answering the following questions while working with an authentic text (Table 3).

Table 3: Learning culture

Knowing how What did you say? What did you do? How did you do it? Was it appropriate?	Knowing about What did you see or hear? What are the details?
Knowing oneself What do you think? How do you feel? What more do you need to know?	Knowing why What are the insider's perspectives? What are the outsider's perspectives? How does this compare to your culture/other cultures?

This step by step way of discovering culture allows learners to describe a cultural element from different viewpoints, analyse it taking into consideration various perspectives, and respond to it taking into account both their own perspectives and those of people belonging to another culture.

As seen, culture is language, hence it is vital to help learners to develop cultural awareness that will enable them to effectively communicate in cross-cultural encounters. While designing their education process, language educators should focus on both intracultural and intercultural communication. Learners should be helped to identify themselves as cultural beings embodying the values and beliefs of specific environments they belong to. This can be done by asking them to determine their own multiple identities and realize the differences existing within their own community, so that, later on, they are able to transfer this knowledge while understanding other cultures. Learners could also be helped to identify and analyse cultural elements, which will make learners more culturally aware of the differences and similarities existing in the world. Finally, learners should be encouraged to get to know their own culture and that of the others, which will enable them to become more proficient users of the English language while using English as a means of communication.

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