Culturally responsive L2 education: an awareness-raising proposal

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The increasing prevalence of multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural classrooms in varied educational contexts worldwide points to the importance of cultural factors in language education and education in general. In the EFL/ESL classroom of this century, ELT is seen as including much more than purely linguistic aspects as it focuses also on broad literacy issues which acknowledge the importance of global economic, social, historical, and cultural factors in language learning and teaching. In other words, ELT in the twenty-first century means culturally responsive literacy education. It is argued here that foreign/second language education viewed in these terms requires cultural responsiveness in educators. This paper will offer a concrete proposal aimed at raising foreign language educators' awareness of this topic.

Introduction

Phenomena such as globalization, the possibility of access to knowledge and information through multiple and varied media and sources, and the dynamic and ever-changing nature of this knowledge have given increasing prominence to cultural issues in education. Concepts like multicultural and intercultural education, multiliteracies, and culturally responsive education, among others, are certainly in vogue nowadays. However, the emergence of culture as a key component in foreign and second language education is not new. Between 1972 and 1979, for instance, Morain developed several techniques to incorporate culture in the language classroom, such as the Culture Cluster, the Cultoon, and the Audio-Motor Unit.[1] More than 25 years ago, Byram was already bringing this idea to the attention of educators in Europe,[2] and since then he and his co-workers have put forward a solid case for what is now known as language-and-culture education. But, what does this mean exactly? What does culturally responsive literacy education entail in the twenty-first century?

As a foreign language educator myself, I have realized that teaching EFL from this perspective is not easy. As a teacher educator, preparing prospective teachers to wholeheartedly embrace the notion of culturally responsive education and implement literacy practices which are congruent with such a notion takes time and effort. In the context where I teach (a developing country, at a public and overpopulated university with poor facilities and underpaid staff), the importance of cultural awareness in undergraduate and graduate language education programmes, in-service teacher education courses, and other teacher development options is often

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overshadowed by limiting social and economic conditions. In addition, the way educators conceive of literacy in general and foreign language education crucially determines how they envisage their practices and roles in classrooms. Culturally responsive educators believe in foreign language teaching as *educational* and aim at their learners' *literacy* development, not only *language* development. Unfortunately, in this area of the world, practitioners in some settings (for example, public education) tend to have a more instrumental view of EFL teaching, closely tied to training in decontextualized and isolated skills.

In this context, the aim of this paper is to share a practical proposal to raise foreign language educators' awareness of cultural issues in education. In the first part, I present the rationale which guides my instruction, both as EFL educator and teacher educator. These key ideas constitute the critical underlying principles behind culturally responsive literacy education. In the second part, I share a sequence of awareness-raising tasks which I have myself successfully implemented in my country. These tasks are based on, and to a point reflect, such principles.

Theoretical framework
Educational view of foreign language teaching and identity

The general aim of foreign language education goes beyond the acquisition of linguistic, non-linguistic, cultural, etc., information and knowledge towards a fundamental transformation of the participants' actions and thoughts at a personal and social level (Chen 2005). An educational view of foreign language teaching focuses on the development of learners as individuals. This development takes place when human beings reconcile new and challenging ideas with their pre-existing beliefs and values through diverse reading and writing experiences in the foreign language, which lead to the multifaceted development of the self (McCarthey 2001; Bean and Moni 2003). Seen in these terms, foreign language education encourages learners to create, maintain, and/or develop their unique identities.

Identity matters because it is an aspect of how humans make sense of the world and their experiences in it, including their experiences with reading and writing. Identity matters because people can be understood by others in particular ways, and people act towards one another depending on such understandings and positionings. Social, economic, and historical events, among others, influence how students see themselves and others, and these understandings translate into the ways that they appropriate or reject specific forms of literacy (Jiménez 2003). As identities shape people's textual and literacy practices, their literacy practices play a role in their identifications and positionings (McCarthey and Moje 2002). This means that readers and writers understand themselves in particular ways as a result of a literacy engagement (for instance, reading or writing). Characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, educational background, sexual orientation, special capacities, etc., influence how learners interact, respond, and learn in classrooms. In addition, identity may shift as a result of reading new material within a specific context, in particular, material that challenges some of one's beliefs based on one's social and cultural background. From this perspective, literacy and literacy practices are tools for representing and/or performing particular identities. As identity changes and challenges are involved in all learning, one role of educators in this area is to engage students in resisting the identities that are often

unconsciously cast upon them (Chen op. cit.), making classrooms culturally sensitive places to learn.

Views of reading, writing, and literacy

Reading and writing are multidimensional processes (Bernhardt 2003). The possibility of diversity in reader response to textual content is related not only to the fact that the questions to be answered during reading and writing vary from reader/writer to reader/writer but also to contextual factors both at a mental level (schemata) and a situational level (specific limitations of the context in which a text is read or produced) (Bernhardt op.cit.). This context includes social, cultural, political, geographical, and historical aspects, among others (Fitzgerald 2003). However, despite the fact that we cannot remove reading, writing, and literacy from their complex social, cultural, and economic contexts, formal education in Argentina tends to narrow the issue to one aspect (for example, in reading the narrowing focuses on cognitive processing, word recognition, or text comprehension). Splitting literacy into decontextualized skills misses the point of reading and writing as genuine social and communicative practice (Berg 2003).

The significance of cultural factors in foreign language education is reflected in the notion of 'in-betweenness' (Sarroub 2002), which refers to the locality of culture, i.e. the immediate adaptation of one's performance or identity to one's textual, social, cultural, and physical surroundings. We live and participate in multiple worlds simultaneously. These worlds include the home, the community, the school, the club, the church, and many others. Through them, we enact different aspects of our identities, which are reflected in the choices we make in different facets of our lives on a daily basis (language, body language, music, dress, reading, entertainment, etc.). In this sense, we occupy the in-between spaces of two (or more) realities in these worlds, two (or more) cultures. In particular, in relation to literacy, this means that individuals in a given culture draw on multiple resources to make sense of the world and to make sense of oral and written texts. Being 'in-between' different resources, funds of knowledge, or Discourses affects one's literate, social, and cultural practices.[3] At the same time, the cultural practices that surround reading and writing in a given culture indicate to their members the appropriate ways to read and write texts in that culture.

From the forgoing, it is evident that cultural and identity issues permeate all learning, including the learners' everyday experiences with reading, writing, and literacy in the classroom. Considering this, all practice needs to be culturally responsive in order to be best practice. Culturally responsive teachers make connections with their students as individuals, while understanding the sociocultural and historical contexts that influence their interactions with reading and writing (Edwards and Pleasants 1998). This implies that it is essential to find out what works with whom, by whom, and in what contexts, looking across the multiple layers of the home, the school, the community, and the society at large (Klingner and Edwards 2006). Culturally responsive literacy education includes the necessary skills for acquiring the ability to read and write in the era of globalization, technology, and access to information. This ability involves the development of the capacity to participate in a multiplicity of ways of reading and writing in a plurality of Discourses, in different formats, and through diverse means

and resources, in the framework of socially and culturally diverse contexts (Jiménez op.cit.). When educators make attempts to understand the underlying social, cultural, and language networks of their learners, it is more likely that there will be congruence between what content is taught and how and the students' ability to learn. In this way, language teaching becomes a truly educational endeavour, sensitive to the learners' individualities within their own cultural contexts.

Awareness-raising tasks for educators

To be able to put these theoretical ideas into practice in the day-to-day reality of the classroom, educators need to recognize the centrality of culture in EFL education. I have used the following tasks with student-teachers and teachers to raise awareness about what the notion of culturally responsive literacy education means and entails in different contexts such as EFL teacher education programmes, in-service sessions, teacher development courses, etc.

Task 1: culture and culturally responsive education
The first thing I always ask teachers to do is to reflect on the notion of culture on the basis of a quotation I provide and to think about what it means to them in relation to the concept of culturally responsive literacy education.

> Culture can be likened to an iceberg—only 10 percent of the whole is seen above the surface of the water. It is the 90 percent of the iceberg that is hidden beneath the surface of the water that most concerns the ship's captain who must navigate the water. Like an iceberg, the most meaningful (and potentially dangerous) part of culture is the invisible or subjective part that is continually operating on the unconscious level to shape our perceptions and our responses to these perceptions. It is this aspect of culture that leads to the most intercultural misunderstandings. (Cushner, McClelland, and Safford 1996: 50)

In small groups, teachers explore what culture means, how it permeates all their own and their learners' lives, and why it is relevant to their profession.

In order to dig deeper into what it means to be a culturally responsive literacy educator in the twenty-first century, I pose the following question, which guides the discussion: 'Which of the following, in your view, does the notion of culturally responsive literacy education entail?' Groups reflect on each element in the list, selecting and discarding options, and fully justifying their decisions.

In relation to the learners' identities and their own cultures:

- seeing all learners as the same, attempting to build a fair, impartial, and objective classroom atmosphere
- adopting a colour-blind, gender-blind, socioeconomic status-blind, ethnicity-blind, language-blind, etc. attitude towards learners
- embracing the national and the patriotic
- encouraging learners to deepen their understanding of their own culture
- helping learners retain their heritage culture and language.

In relation to others and other cultures:

- honouring linguistic, social, cultural, etc., diversity in the classroom
- providing abundant cultural information about other cultures
- presenting a positive image of other cultures
- presenting a realistic image of other cultures
- encouraging learners to describe the life of a 'typical' American, British, etc.
- locating 'cultural informants' who are familiar with the members of a certain culture and can explain their ways (Tong, Huang, and McIntyre 2006: 204)
- identifying and using different manifestations of a culture in the classroom (food, artwork, dress, etc.), in particular in relation to the four Fs: Food, Fashion, Festivals, and Folklore.

In relation to literacy materials for classroom use:

- eliminating stereotypes from teaching materials
- foregrounding stereotypes in teaching materials
- using materials that avoid reference to the tensions and conflicts within societies
- using textbooks/materials that promote tourist views of unchanging cultures and routines
- using textbooks/materials based on the principles of critical pedagogy (Chen op. cit.) and multicultural education
- using textbooks/materials that challenge the idea of monolithic national cultures by introducing characters with multiple cultural identities
- using multicultural literature
- using materials that stress what unites human beings, with a focus on commonalities and bonds.

In relation to educators and their teaching practices:

- blurring cultural boundaries
- avoiding cultural complexity
- using experiential approaches to language-and-culture teaching (Sercu 2006)
- promoting cultural awareness only when minority community learners are in the classroom (Sercu op. cit.)
- helping students acquire intercultural skills and attitudes, beyond information and knowledge (Sercu op. cit.)
- building a culturally pluralistic classroom environment which promotes respect, care, mutual understanding, equality, acceptance of diversity, commitment to anti-racism, etc.
- seeing learners as 'citizens of the world' or 'cosmopolitan citizens' (Starkey 2007: 59)
- seeing yourself (teacher, educator) as having an 'ascribed identity as ambassador or representative of a culture' (Starkey op. cit.: 64)
- addressing issues of xenophobia, prejudice, and hostility to cultural difference
- promoting an understanding and awareness of the universal principles which underpin democratic societies (for example, diversity, unity, global interconnectedness, and human rights).

This list is usually inspiring and thought provoking as most teachers have seldom consciously stopped to think about these issues and their significance. I encourage participants to add elements to the list on the basis of their experience as foreign language educators and to discuss. As a corollary of this discussion, we reflect on the following question: 'How can we become more sophisticated in our understandings of culture and the meanings of culture that we embed in our daily classroom practices?'

Task 2: responding to the notion of culture
To pursue the issue further, teachers read the following quotation (Edwards and Pleasants op. cit.: 99) and respond using the instructions below:

> As the children entering school are recognized as increasingly diverse, teachers have become more sophisticated in their understanding of culture and the meaning of culture in the classroom. Many teachers have acknowledged that culture is made up of much more than food, artwork, or ways of dressing ourselves. (. . .) Teachers also understand that adopting a color-blind attitude toward students is not the answer to becoming culturally responsive literacy teachers. Although being color blind toward students is one way of attempting to build a fair, impartial, and objective classroom environment, it can also lead to classrooms in which differences are seen as deficits. In attempting to see all students as the same, teachers can inadvertently treat students unfairly by denying the differences in students that help make them who they are.

Record fragments from this quotation that strike you because they:

■ are new to you
■ remind you of a prior experience
■ raise questions
■ seem important to interpret
■ elicit an opinion, and/or
■ are interesting, stimulating, thought provoking, etc., for any reason.

Directly opposite each fragment, record your reactions, and personal responses. You may:

■ interpret the fragment
■ state opinions
■ raise questions
■ discuss related topics
■ argue for or against an idea, and/or
■ link a concept to your own teaching context.

Teachers collaboratively share their responses in a whole-class lesson. By asking questions, making comments, giving their opinions, and justifying these opinions, their perspectives, many times unconscious and hidden, become apparent and are clarified and enriched.

Task 3: appropriation of the notion of culturally responsive education
Finally, using the quotation from Edwards and Pleasants (1998) given above as a starting point, teachers consider the notion of culturally responsive literacy education from six points of view. They

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- define and describe it
- compare it
- associate it
- analyse it
- apply it
- argue for or against it.

The insights gained by inspecting the notion from these six perspectives are illuminating. Teachers become aware of the importance of this issue both at a theoretical level and at the level of their day-to-day classroom encounters. Concomitant with such awareness is the appreciation of the complexity and the responsibility that being a culturally responsive educator entails. This realization is generally destabilizing, but it is also so truly mobilizing that it constitutes a springboard for critical, reflexive, and continual self-development, both professionally and personally.

The following extract from one teacher, produced in response to a teacher development session as described here, gives a flavour of the impact that the notion of culturally responsive education has.

> Being Jewish, the concept of culturally responsive education gives me the idea of 'protection'. I have seen discrimination around many times, and I know how it feels.
>
> As a teacher, I went through an experience some years ago, when there was a bomb at the Israeli embassy in Argentina, and the Director of the English Institute where I worked at that time told us to discuss what had happened in class. As soon as I started talking about it, one of the students said something like, 'Anyway, they were all Jews! Who cares?' I was paralyzed. Before I was able to respond, another student—a very mature seventeen-year-old boy—reminded him about Bertold Brecht's poem. He was a 'culturally responsive . . . student'—and person!
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> Being Jewish, being a single mother, being from a province, I've often considered myself—or have been considered—'different'. But different doesn't mean worse—or better. It just means different. And it's important to accept differences, to deal with them, to learn from them, to live with them. To be culturally responsive not only as a teacher, but as a human being.
>
> ('September' (teacher's pseudonym), 30 September 2007, disclosed by permission)

This brief extract reflects some of the major theoretical underpinnings behind this notion, such as issues of identity, the educative conceptualization of foreign language teaching, cultural diversity, cultural difference, discrimination, and others. We clearly see 'September' relating historical, socioeconomic, educational, and personal events which, in the course of her life, have influenced and transformed her identity in these different facets. 'September' reflects upon painful historical events in the country, significant life events, and turning points in her life as an educator. Her exploration of relevant experiences of this kind provides the foundation for her understanding of how literacy practices can be constructed and continuously recreated in the classroom. This uncovering of significant

experiences is also powerful because it makes teachers, like 'September' in this case, more sensitive to their learners' needs in terms of their multicultural development in complex, fluid, and subtle ways.

Concluding comments

In the framework of globalization, foreign language educators in the twenty-first century need the awareness, knowledge, procedures, and strategies to focus on the complexity that the integration of language and culture involves in the practical reality of the classroom. The tasks described here have been designed to raise the awareness of educators working in different contexts about what the notion of culturally responsive literacy education involves in the reality of everyday classroom life. This is a first, necessary, and challenging step, in particular, in countries with limiting social and economic conditions like Argentina in which the priorities of the educational system have traditionally tended to reside in the instrumental and linguistic aspects of foreign language education. In countries where the importance of culture in EFL/ESL contexts is acknowledged and practised, this article offers modest, but valuable principles on which to build culturally responsive lessons. Given the pervasive diversity that educators face in their classrooms nowadays, cultural responsiveness caters for the need to discover what unites human beings, with a focus on commonalities and bonds, in an attempt to be as much at ease as possible with each others' languages, cultures, and individualities.

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Notes

1 See for instance: Elkins, Theodore, Kalivoda, and Morain (1972); Meade and Morain (1973); Morain (1976, 1979).
2 For details see: Byram (1981, 1984, 1986, 1988, 1989a, 1989b).
3 I include here some examples of resources, funds of knowledge, and Discourses. Examples in the home include the conceptions of family, the jobs and tasks that parents (and other family members) perform within and outside the home; the roles enacted by family members; all health, education, travel, and other issues in the family; household activities; etc. Examples in the community include community programmes for children and youth; entertainment and educational summer programmes; local libraries; peer activities that children and youth perform alone in the community; activities they perform accompanied by an adult; etc. For more details, see Sarroub (op. cit.).

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