Using Authentic Materials to Develop Cultural Awareness in English Learners in

Colombia

Presented by:

Veronica Rosales Quiroz

Submitted to the school of Human Sciences

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

The degree of B.A. in English and French program

In the Linguistics and Languages Department

University of Nariño

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Las ideas y conceptos expresados en el siguiente Trabajo de Grado son de

responsabilidad del autor.

Artículo 1 de acuerdo número 324 de octubre 11 de 1966 emanado del Honorable

Consejo Directivo de la Universidad de Nariño

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Firma del presidente de Jurado

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Firma Jurado 1

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Firma Jurado 2

San Juan de Pasto, October 2017

Resumen

Este documento lleva a cabo una aproximación a la relación entre el uso de materiales auténticos y el desarrollo de la conciencia cultural por parte de los estudiantes de Inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE). Al mismo tiempo, el presente trabajo investigativo busca hacer un análisis del estado actual de la enseñanza de idiomas en el contexto Colombiano para justificar la necesidad de promover programas de aprendizaje de idiomas que no solamente se enfoquen en desarrollar habilidades comunicativas como leer, escribir, escuchar y hablar en inglés, sino también, busca reformular las prácticas pedagógicas de los profesores Colombianos de ILE para que puedan transformar sus realidades en sus contextos inmediatos. Adicionalmente al leer este documento, se espera que los profesores de ILE entiendan la necesidad de promover y estimular el desarrollo de otras habilidades importantes en sus estudiantes tales como el pensamiento crítico, la solución de problemas, la creatividad, la imaginación y el trabajo colaborativo.

Abstract

This document carries out an approximation to the relationship between the use of authentic materials and the development of cultural awareness in the EFL classroom. At the same time, the present research paper aims at doing an analysis of the current state of language teaching in the Colombian context to justify the need to promote language learning programs that not only focus on developing communicative skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking in English, but also, it seeks to reformulate the pedagogical practices of Colombian EFL teachers so that they can transform their realities in their immediate settings. Additionally, by reading this document, it is expected that EFL teachers understand the need to promote and stimulate the development of other important skills in their students such as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, imagination and collaborative work.

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Introduction

The acknowledgement of the essential role that English language learning has acquired in a globalized world has been projected in the educational system of Colombia through the implementation of the National Bilingualism Plan (Plan Nacional de Bilingüísmo, Colombia 2004-2019). This policy, imparted by the National Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, MEN), established the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001) as the central standard to measure language proficiency in learners as well as it serves as the baseline to orient language teaching and evaluation in all the educational contexts of the country. The main purpose of this program is to ensure for students to achieve a certain level of mastery of the foreign language when they graduate high school similar to or higher than B1. This is expected to be achieved by strengthening language teaching programs that follow the guidelines that the NBP provides so that instruction accommodates to reaching the expected levels of mastery of the foreign language.

This policy invites EFL teachers in the public sector to reflect on the challenges it involves to structure curricula and lesson plans parallel to the standards established in mentioned document. As a consequence, it has become a great concern for EFL teachers to respond to the demands proposed by the NBP and the MEN. This is why it is necessary for educators and institutions to ensure that their student population develops a rapid growth in English language skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. All of this with the ultimate goal of obtaining high scores in the national standardized tests administered by the

national testing system known as ICFES (Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior).

Although the program the MEN has been trying to implement is very ambitious and has good intentions under the sleeve, it lacks the consideration of many factors that affect the teaching and learning processes of a foreign language. Mainly, it is possible to say that the NBP has missed out the fact that Colombia is already a bilingual or multilingual country given the rich amount of native indigenous languages that are still alive in many areas of the nation and therefore, the bilingualism idea that the country wants to sell seems to ignore the needs of the people that are struggling to keep alive their mother tongue and cultural beliefs by implementing a foreign language that little to no interest might have to these indigenous communities.

Additionally, the NBP was implemented under the umbrella of the Common European Framework (CEF) which as Sánchez & Obando (2008) argue these standards do not cope with the cultural differences and needs of our context which is significantly different from the European educational settings. This might be one of the main weaknesses of implementing such standards in a context where there is little support from institutions, where class sizes are large, where hours for language learning are limited and most importantly where the need to speak a foreign language is questioned by its objectives.

Ultimately, Sánchez & Obando (2008) raise awareness on the fact that in order for the country and the educational settings in Colombia to have better language learning programs it should be compulsory to understand the objectives for foreign language learning as well as the justification for those objectives.

Upon this view, once EFL teachers have a clear understanding of the objectives and reasons to teach a foreign language, it will be possible to create better standards and curricula that better adjust to the needs, abilities and interests of our immediate context. A deep reflection and assessment of the pedagogical practices that EFL teachers have been implementing since the formulation of the NBP could result in transforming the realities of language teaching in high schools in Colombia. Such reflection should be based on the idea that teaching with the standards the NBP proposes could probably limit language teachers to use traditional methodologies which, as de la Torre (2004) explains, are based solely on the results, without giving major importance to the process that involves learning a foreign language.

With all these ideas formulated so far, the main purpose of this research paper is to justify the role that authentic materials play in the development of cultural awareness in Colombian l2 classroom. This, considering the importance it has to transform the teaching practices of EFL teachers, practices that include not only the development of communicative competence, but also, a pedagogy that gives importance to all the elements that make up the process of language learning such as the culture, and the awareness of global issues that help acquire other skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, creativity and imagination.

In order to have a clear idea of the objectives of this document, it is necessary to define the concepts of authentic materials and cultural awareness, and how they can be implemented in language teaching and learning processes

through a series of pedagogical activities and practical ideas to use in the classroom.

Authentic Materials: Beyond the Communicative Competence Dimension

Usually, when a language teacher is asked about their philosophy of teaching or their main objectives to teach a language, it is likely that their answer is based on their interest in having students develop communicative competence which Hymes (1972 in Bagarić & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2007) defined as 'not only inherent grammatical competence but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations' (p. 2). As it was stated above, the usual purpose of language teaching is to reach a certain level of communicative competence, which might be reflected in an efficient use of grammatical structures and knowledge of vocabulary as well as an effective command of language use in real communicative contexts, say, ordering food at a restaurant, engaging in a conversation or carrying out a monologue. However, things have changed over the last decades in the field of language teaching. For instance, according to Sun (2007) among the current trends in the global ELT field, one important change that has taken considerable attention is the expansion of that communicative competence dimension, where in there has been a shift towards the inclusion of multicompetence (Cook, 2012 in Sun 2007) and cultural competence. She also argues that integrating these new dimensions of language learning in the classrooms implies the need for teachers to pay attention not only to the culture of the language being taught, but also the local culture of the learners. She says that 'the goal is to produce effective language users competent to use

English as an international language, not just learners who mimic the "inner- circle"

countries' languages and cultures' (p. 1).

From this perspective, it seems relevant to take a close look at the

importance of promoting cultural awareness in the L2 classroom, both local and

that of the target language, and a particular way to do so might be the use of

authentic materials, since they might provide a favorable set of resources to

accompany language teaching in a more holistic way.

What Are Authentic Materials?

Among the available literature on this matter there are different scholars who

have tried to explain the idea of authentic materials. However, it is commonly

known that authentic materials bring 'exposure to real language and its use in its

own community,' as it is explained by Kilickaya (2004). And also, another common

characteristic is that this type of materials is not necessarily created for language

learning purposes but are created for and by native speakers and for real life

purposes, and they may be presented in a written or spoken fashion (Polio, 2014).

Peacock (1997) gives a similar definition of authentic materials saying that these

are materials which are produced to achieve a social goal in the language

community. The importance of authentic materials in language teaching relies on

the idea that they promote learners' motivation to learn and they expose students

to 'real language' as it is explained by Guariento & Morley (2001, p. 347 in

Kilickaya 2004).

Following up on this latter idea, by using authentic materials in contexts

where English is not an official language as is the case of Colombia, teachers need

to seek for optimal resources that help students learn the target language in a better way. This means that EFL teachers should worry about not only planning lessons that focus on grammar and vocabulary but also it is indispensable that teachers aim at bringing more interesting materials and activities that motivate students and make students see the real use of the language they are learning. For instance, when using authentic texts, such as magazines or newspapers, students' motivation to use the language may be increased because those materials are proof that the language has a real use and by real people, as it is explained by Nutall (1996 in Al Azri & Al-Rashdi, 2014).

Additionally, using authentic materials in the classroom is very beneficial because of the rich language input they provide as stated by Widdowson (1990 in Al Azri et all, 2014). Furthermore, teachers should consider bringing authentic materials to the EFL classroom because as opposed to the use of textbooks, which are created for language learning purposes, authentic materials are 'intrinsically more active, interesting and stimulating' (Lee, 1995; Little, Devitt & Singleton, 1988; Peacock, 1997; Shei, 2001 in Al Azri et al). In this sense, it might be possible to say that textbooks and materials designed specifically for language learning purposes take the risk of becoming artificial and boring as the language input they provide is not necessarily the one used in daily-life situations by the native speakers. And also, language learning materials might be blurry in terms of giving an insight to the cultural values of the target language. And in regards of this last idea as Sherman (2003) claims, authentic materials are a 'window into culture.' This because if materials such as newspapers or magazines provide examples of the life styles, beliefs, customs and current issues of the society where those

media are consumed. With this idea in mind, language learning through the use of

authentic materials opens a space for students to experience more than the

language itself and creates an opportunity for them to develop critical thinking as

they may compare their own culture with the one of the language they are learning.

Why Should EFL Students Develop Cultural Awareness?

In order to understand the reasons why EFL learners should be culturally

aware it is to set some ground over the concept of cultural awareness itself. For

instance,

As Kozhevnikova (2014) explains, language and culture are interconnected

and cannot be separated, and in order for communication to take place

successfully there needs to be an exchange of 'socio-cultural knowledge'. Which

means that for EFL teachers it implies to create curricula that integrates cultural

elements that go hand in hand with the language being taught. As the same author

explains,

> 'Every language reflects the cultural values of the society in which the
>
> language is spoken. Linguistic competence alone is just not complete
>
> for learners of a language; they need to be aware, for example, of the
>
> culturally appropriate ways to communicate people, make requests,
>
> and agree or disagree with someone. They should know that
>
> behaviors and intonation patterns that are appropriate in their own
>
> speech community may be perceived differently by members of the
>
> target language speech community. To be successful language users,

students need to realize, that language use must be associated with

other culturally appropriate behavior' (p. 1)

In addition to the arguments presented above, a language learning

environment that encompasses language and cultural aspects not only

brings benefits in terms of the skills that can be acquired, but also, a

language lesson that integrates cultural elements makes the learning

process more enjoyable because it is more attractive, interesting and

motivating. With this, students can be exposed to a variety of resources that

can help them improve their linguistic skills at the same time that they are

enjoying an episode of a tv series, reading a post on a famous magazine or

interacting with elements such as realia that can provide an insight to what it

is like to live in the medium where the language is official. One example of

the realia elements that can be considered as authentic materials may be

pictures, costumes, maps or menus.

Something important that needs to be demystified when talking about

integrating culture in the language classroom is that by teaching culture

students are not going to be assimilated into that culture nor are they going

to lose their own culture. That cannot and should not be a teacher's purpose

when using cultural elements. In fact, for that to happen students should

have to live in the country where the target language is spoken or be

exposed daily, and from different sources, to the language they are learning

(Kozhevnikova, 2013). Unfortunately, in the Colombian context students have

limited access to exposure of the foreign language. For instance, the only sources of language input they end up having is their language teacher at school which usually is for only one or two hours a week. Apart from that, the other means for students to interact with the language is by reading books, newspapers, magazines, watching a foreign film or series or going online to interact in blogs or websites in the target language. Therefore, all those previous ideas set a baseline to agree that neither teachers nor students or administrators in education should worry about concepts such as 'acculturation' or 'assimilation' because given the conditions of our Colombian educational system students are not going to lose or forget about their cultural beliefs and values.

As opposed to those ideas, EFL teachers in Colombia should promote the idea that learning cultural elements in the language classroom is essential to develop critical thinking and a comparative analysis of the target culture and the native culture. This might seem more reasonable and acceptable because in that way, language lessons could focus on not only teaching the foreign language but also this can be an opportunity to revisit cultural knowledge of the students' immediate environment. This could be done through a series of activities that trigger a comparison between the students' native culture and that of the language they are learning.

How Can Authentic Materials Be Implemented in the EFL Classroom?

Once teachers are aware of the importance of promoting cultural awareness among EFL students, it should be necessary to have a clear idea of how, when

and to what extent authentic materials can be implemented in the language lessons.

This sets a challenge particularly for EFL teachers in public schools in Colombia given that many teachers may not be familiarized with the cultural aspects of the language they are teaching. Additionally, some teachers could possibly disagree to implement authentic materials because it requires additional effort to look for materials, and adapt them to the lesson plans they have. Also, the lack of interest and little time dedicated to planning could be another factor that might prevent teachers from structuring lessons that foster cultural awareness. However, there are some easy ideas that should be considered to facilitate the integration of authentic materials in the EFL classroom.

Kozhevnikova (2014), suggests that teachers take into consideration certain factors when trying to implement authentic materials in the classroom. Namely, the key conditions she explores are related to exposure and the maximizing its effectiveness through 'diversity of exposure, arranging students' individual work and self-study, teaching culture, maintaining a high level of motivation by using authentic materials, exposing students to authentic video in the classroom, and practicing extensive narrow reading' (p 2-3). She bases the inclusion of these factors upon the idea that wherein contexts such as Colombia where there is limited access to 'natural exposure' to the language the use of authentic materials plays an essential role in filling that gap found in EFL classrooms.

The Use of Realia as Authentic Materials

It is commonplace to find this tool in lesson plans and as part of the process of materials design in foreign language classrooms. Mainly because this is an important aid that helps teachers cover certain areas of vocabulary or maybe to explain grammar points or a cultural fact. To have a clear idea of this term, Richards and Schmidt (2010) define it as '(in language teaching) actual objects and items which are brought into a classroom as examples or as aids to be talked or written about and used in teaching. Realia may include such things as photographs, articles of clothing, and kitchen objects (p. 485). Another definition is provided by Berwald (1987) who states that realia refers to

> '(...) real objects. Specimens or artifacts-not copies. Models, or
> representations from a particular culture, indeed, authentic materials, such
> as newspapers, magazines, catalogs, timetables, films. etc., are designed
> for use in real life situations not for use as instructional tools. Although not
> designed for instructional use, realia and other authentic materials including
> non-print mass media, provide a wide range of printed and spoken
> messages that can be used as primary or secondary in a foreign language
> classroom. Other examples include telephone books, menus, tickets, and
> radio and television broadcasts' (p. 3)

Under this definition it is possible to recognize the great cultural value that realia has, given that the materials used as realia come from the real world outside the classroom materials (Nunan, 1999) which were not specifically designed for

language learning. Bringing this kind of materials to the foreign language class might give an insight to students about beliefs, customs, stereotypes and traditions depending on the use that the teacher appropriately decides.

Additionally, Smith (1997) proposes the concept of virtual realia which he defines as '(in language teaching) digitized objects and items from the target culture which are brought into the classroom as examples or aids and used to stimulate spoken or written language production' (p. 1). For him virtual realia is any form of authentic materials that can be "digitized" (i.e. compiled, scanned, and posted in the web). Unlike traditional realia, the virtual one can has the advantage of giving easy, mobile, portable and fast access to the materials to anyone who has access to a working computer and an internet connection, which is something that is commonplace nowadays with the rapid proliferation of technology in education (Adams, 1995; Cerf, 1997 in Smith, 1997).

Smith recognizes the significant contribution that realia makes to the process of learning about the culture and to understand it in a better way, because realia allows students to perceive and manipulate the impressions of the target language. At the same time as Heaton (1979 in Smith 1997) states, realia is 'an associative bridge between the classroom and the world'. Bearing this latter idea, it is clear to see how using realia can make the learning experience more memorable and meaningful for the learner (Budden, 2011), this because students can actually see, hear, touch and experience first-hand samples of the target culture. Additionally, it can easily help develop the cultural knowledge given that this pedagogical tool can provide the necessary elements to reach the purpose of this

research paper which is to relate the use of realia with the development of intercultural communicative competence. Smith recognizes as well that in order for students to learn a language completely and effectively realia is an essential element in that process, he explains that when he states that 'the use of realia, then, can enhance linguistic and cultural comprehensibility, which are both prerequisites for real language learning' (ibid).

In addition to the benefits mentioned above, through the use of realia it is also possible to expand the amount of responses in students and consequently, this may lead to more participation and an increase in affective factors such as motivation and interest in the learning activities presented in the language classroom (Waltz, 1986 in Smith 1997).

The need to use realia in the EFL classroom relies on the fact that as Berwald (1987) states, it 'contains current language on all topics imaginable and provide constant reinforcement of grammatical forms learned in the classroom' (p. 3). This can be seen as the major benefit to use realia and it should be of great interest at the moment of developing a language learning process as a whole (i.e. communicative and cultural competence).

Adapting authentic materials such as those that were created for the 'residents and consumers in authentic settings' (ibid) can give students an opportunity to forget about artificial materials that are traditional in most language classes (such as text books, flash cards, posters, or language learning audios or podcasts) with the ultimate goal of relating to the real-life items that they can

interact with. This may make the lesson more interesting and therefore, students might engage better in the activities presented by the instructor.

Moreover, realia can also be seen as an advantage for instructors because as Berwald says, instructors can develop a more genuine interest and motivation in selecting and adapting materials because they can be their own material rather than using a textbook that was assigned by the institution or the program they are working for.

Now that the main features of realia have been presented and analyzed it is necessary to reflect on the connection it has with culture and how realia can help develop intercultural communicative competence in students.

For that purpose, Berwald suggests that the materials selected help us differentiate the big and small characteristics that are found in the target culture and our own one. For instance, he explains that just by looking at a movie and, a catalog or a commercial give language learners the chance to notice differences that are usually blurry in text books or language learning materials. To make this idea clearer, Berwald summarizes some of the examples of the insights to the culture that can be obtained from the interaction with authentic materials as follows

'The up-to-date movie schedules, listing films already familiar to students, introduce the use of the 24-hour clock in some countries. Mail-order catalogs present furniture and clothing styles somewhat different from those with which we are familiar. A catalog photo and description of a refrigerator can lead to a discussion of a major difference in eating and shopping habits.

The Yellow Pages throughout the world are a wonderful source of vocabulary and cultural information. Not only do they provide interesting geographical information on each country, but they also contain specialized and contextualized vocabulary in each rubric' (p. 3).

In this way, it is possible to see how authentic materials can give a better and clear view and understanding of traditions, customs and beliefs of the target culture, and this knowledge is essential in developing skills in intercultural communicative competence in EFL settings.

Pedagogical Proposal

This section will provide general guidelines to implement authentic materials based on the literature that has been revised so far.

One of the first activities proposed by this paper is the use of video inside the classroom. For instance, the following is an adaptable activity that can be used in an intermediate to advanced level of EFL.

Lesson Outline

Comparing North American and Colombian telenovelas

Videos: Depending on the time allotted for each class the number of episodes can vary. 20 minutes of video per class is suggested by the author of this paper.

Name of the series chosen for the activity: Jane the Virgin (can be found for free online)

Description: Jane the Virgin is an American telenovela adapted from the Venezuelan telenovela Juana la Virgen about a Latina young woman who gets

pregnant after being accidentally artificially incriminated and whose life changes

after this unexpected event. The idea of showing this series to the class is to

expose students to samples of the daily life of Latins living in the USA as a way to

portrait the typical Latin family where the two languages (Spanish and English)

coexist and where both worlds Latino and American get mixed in different contexts.

This series can raise awareness about immigration issues by Latina people in the

USA as well as the daily issues that this minority encounters in the educational,

political, religious, cultural, economic and social systems of the north American

country. Students can become more knowledgeable of racism issues, diversity,

and tolerance. At the same time, this activity can help students relate to the

mundane and typical dramas of Latina families and their usual problems.

Additionally, the contents of each video are very appealing because they generate

intrigue to the audience and they capture the attention with every episode. Finally,

the English used in this series is easy to understand and the show is easy to find

online so teachers could assign watching an episode for homework and doing

several tasks such as answering a questionnaire, writing in a class blog about

predictions for next episodes or scrip writings for future episodes.

Lesson 1

Activities:

- Introduce the themes of the series to the class: romance, work classes,

discrimination, racism, immigration, bilingualism. Make students define each

concept. This can be done in pairs or individually.

- Introduce the name of the series: Jane the Virgin and make students guess the

idea of this show. Present a description of the series and ask students to make a

list of telenovelas they know that might be similar to this one. An optional task can be making students define what is a telenovela and why it is so popular in Latin American culture.

- Show the first episode of the show and ask students to make notes on the following ideas:

- List of the characters and short description of each one: primary, secondary

- Do you relate to any of the characters seen so far? Why?

- Plot: short description

- What do you think will happen next?

- What themes did you see represented in this episode?

- What phrases or vocabulary did you find interesting that you would like to share with the rest of the class?

Conclusions

Being able to speak a foreign language does not exclusively mean to master the grammar structures and long lists of vocabulary; it does not solely mean to read, listen, read and speak with fluency; nor does it mean to be able to translate a text or to pronounce words perfectly. Although those are necessary skills at the linguistic level, the demands and needs of the current trends in language teaching and learning require that students develop certain other skills such as intercultural communicative competence, which refers to the ability to understand the differences between the local and international cultures as a way to engage in an effective and efficient interaction and communication in different contexts that require appropriate language, attitudes, knowledge and skills.

Following the new trends in foreign language learning and teaching, it is implied that EFL teachers in the Colombian context should be able to develop teaching skills that enable them to respond to the demands and needs of the globalized world that we are part of currently. Therefore, professional development plays is a responsibility that should be acquired as to cope with what needs to be taught in L2 classrooms. For these reasons, EFL teachers need to reflect on the objectives they have for language teaching. With a deep analysis and reflection on the pedagogical practices carried out every day in the classrooms it is possible to transform the realities of the educational settings in such a way that it improves not only the results but also the process of learning.

Although the National Bilingualism Plan has not been implemented taking into account the cultural needs and differences of the Colombian context, it is important to highlight that such policy has not been reflected in an institutionalized

curriculum for all high schools and institutions in Colombia, which gives certain

levels of autonomy to think, and design curricula and standards to language

teaching. Therefore, by identifying the interests, needs and conditions of the

student population it could be possible to create language teaching programs that

ultimately can respond to the expectations of the PNB.

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