Utilizing Mexican-American poetry to promote Intercultural Communicative Competence: A paradigm

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Abstract:

Nowadays, the intercultural and social dimension of education is widely recognized, raising voices that claim that "if education is not intercultural, it is probably not education" (Coulby, 2006: 246). Greece, as part of the European Union (EU), but also as an increasingly multicultural society, has gradually shifted its attention to a type of education promoting tolerance, equal opportunities and social justice (Paleologou, 2004). To this end, there has been increasing interest in the implementation of an intercultural approach to teaching, by providing the necessary sociocultural input which teachers can use to promote tolerance for ethnic group minorities, gender equality and global cultural understanding. The specific article presents an interculturally-oriented lesson that uses the poem "Fences" by the Latino-American poet Pat Mora, so as to demonstrate the importance of respecting otherness and ethnic diversity.

Keywords: Mexican-American, poetry, Intercultural Communicative Competence, tolerance

Apstrakt:

U današnje vreme interkulturalna i socijalna dimenzija obrazovanja naširoko je priznata, uz stavove da „ukoliko obrazovanje nije interkulturalno, onda veovatno nije u pitanju obrazovanje" (Coulby, 2006: 246). Grčka, kao deo Evropske unije (EU), ali i kao društvo koje je sve više multikulturalno, polako menja svoju svest ka obrazovanju koje promoviše toleranciju, jednake prilike i socijalnu ravnopravnost (Paleologou, 2004). Zbog toga je došlo do povećanog interesovanja da se u nastavu uključi interkulturalni pristup time što se pruža neophodan socio-kulturni input koji nastavnici mogu da upotrebe da promovišu toleranciju manjina, jednakost polova i razumevanje globalne kulture. Ovaj članak predstavlja opis časa koji je interkulturalno orijentisan i u kome se koristi pesma „Ograde" latino-američke pesnikinje Pet More kako bi se pokazala važnost poštovanja drugih i etničkih različitosti.

Ključne reči: meksički Amerikanci, poezija, interkulturalnka komunikativna kompetencija, tolerancija

1. Culture in the English classroom

The growing recognition of the importance of culture in the EL classroom in second language (L2) pedagogy stems from Alptekin's (2002: 58) assumption that "learning a foreign language becomes a kind of enculturation, where one acquires new frames of reference and a new world view, reflecting those of the target language culture and its speakers".

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Trying to comprehend what culture actually is can be a complicated endeavor, including various notions, ranging from literature to people's insignificant daily routines (Alemi & Jafari, 2012). Many educationalists have provided various definitions, each one with its unique connotation and emphasis. For instance, both Kramsch (1998) and Brown (2000) view culture as a set of common aspects that a specific group of people share. Other scholars such as Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino attain that values, concepts, attitudes, behaviors, lifestyles and institutions are indispensable aspects of any definition of culture.

If culture is then a handful of values, beliefs, arts, attitudes and customs which are not universal but shared by a specific group of people, it becomes obvious that to communicate effectively with this group one must not only know its distinctive linguistic features but also respect its cultural uniqueness.

2. The relationship of culture and language

A great number of researchers have acknowledged the interwoven relationship of culture and language. For instance, Tang's (1999) declaration that language is culture and culture is language summarizes this strong interdependence (Kramsch, 1998) and stresses their 'keystone' connection to the EL classroom (Brown, 2000).

According to Cakir (2006), language is regulated by social and cultural norms, proving that language is a sociocultural phenomenon. With this realization in mind, this research investigates the degree to which Greek EL teachers realize the strong link between the linguistic aspect of a language and the values and beliefs of its speakers (Cakir, 2006). If language is not a simplistic term but a multidimensional notion, as proved by the existence of words such as "lingua-culture" (Fantini, 1997), "languaculture" (Risager, 2005) and "culturelanguage" (Papademetre & Scarino, 2006), then the instruction of that language in Greek classrooms should include its cultural aspects (Clouet, 2006).

The inseparability of language and culture affects the way EL teaching is perceived. Initially, language learning entails culture learning and, consequently, language instruction entails culture instruction (Gao, 2006). Correspondingly, Wang (2008) claims that teaching a foreign language entails teaching a foreign culture. Greek EL instructors need to remember that "the person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool" (Bennett, Bennett & Allen, 1999: 237). With this in mind, the next section attempts to highlight the inadequacies of viewing English, as EFL and not as a cultural bearer.

3. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Reviewing L2 literature, one can encounter various terms underpinning the international and cultural dimension of English. Terms such as Intercultural Communicative Competence, Intercultural Awareness Competence, Interculturalism, Cross-cultural Awareness and Multiculturalism are used interchangeably to present a new approach to the instruction of English, moving beyond a simplistic

presentation of culture to a display of respect towards otherness (Fries, 2009). In a Greek society, now characterized by cultural diversity (Fay, Lytra & Ntavialagkou, 2010), this respect for otherness provokes educational challenges for the EL teachers, in their attempt to help their students evolve into future citizens that display solidarity, acceptance and empathy, notions present in the essence of ICC.

More specifically, ICC is the 'ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities and the ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002: 10).

It emphasizes the relationship with the 'other', regardless of the 'other's' social, ethnic, cultural, economic and linguistic background. It is an approach defying cultural and physical borders (Giroux, 1992), by assigning significance to the notion of multiple identities, namely people's ability to adapt to different linguistic and social contexts (Sercu, 2002). Obviously, a person with an adequate degree of ICC can reconcile two different cultures, not only by understanding the other's culture but also by helping the other understand theirs (Byram & Zarate, 1997).

4. Language learning as tolerance and respect towards otherness

In an intercultural classroom, Greek EL teachers should recognize themselves as agents of social change. They ought to treat their learners not as defective users of L2 but as future contributors to the well-being of societies, respecting their varied personal values and experiences (Duarte, 2010). They should be interested in developing their students' identity, not only in the strict sense of understanding themselves, but also in how they understand their place in the world (Cummins, 1996). Furthermore, they must stimulate their learners' agency, their socially constructed capability to act freely in the world (Duarte, 2010).

The language classroom is not one in which learners learn the linguistic aspects of a new code of communication. It is a venue where students can become intercultural mediators, people who can deal with complexity and multiple identities and reject the stereotypes that derive from judging someone by their ethnic and social identity (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002). It is a place where they can be taught how to demonstrate a high degree of intercultural empathy, the ability to understand others by 'standing in their shoes' (Zhu, 2011). Apparently, teachers main aim should be the creation of literate citizens that are moral, active and reflective in an interconnected world (Banks, 2004). These learners-citizens will eventually know how to respect and accept otherness and utilize language to bridge cultural and social difference (Holmes, 2001).

5. Ethnic diversity in the English classroom

English, either as a L1 or L2, is not only spoken by White Caucasians. It is also spoken by Mexican-Americans, Afro-Americans, Africans, Asians and Caribbean people (Schneider, 2007). Apparently,

textbooks need to evince the ethnically diverse character of the English language, so as to avoid presenting some linguistic varieties as superior to others.

Contemporary textbooks need to address issues such as race, ethnicity, prejudice and social justice or injustice, all vital features of EL education (Kubota & Lin, 2010). Race can be defined as the 'phenotypical features such as skin color, eye shape, hair texture, facial features and so on' (Kubota & Lin, 2010: 2). A related concept is ethnicity describing the sociocultural categorization of people based on religion, culture, language and lifestyle (Thompson & Hickey, 1994). Misconceptions about race and ethnicity can lead to prejudice and racism, '*the practice of inferiorizing ethnic groups*' (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992: 12) and can jeopardize teachers' attempts to promote tolerance through IT.

6. Poetry as a teaching tool

Beyond any doubt, the first reaction of people, let alone students, is that it is a rather complex literary form. Nevertheless, many educationalists claim that the utilization of poetry in the English classroom can be extremely beneficial for the language learners (Hanauer, 2001 in Kellem, 2009).

Pedagogically, poems can be the basis for a handful of lessons. To begin with, they are reading materials, combining artistic excellence with a pluralistic content. Furthermore, they are an invaluable source of vocabulary, presented in context, most of it not easily encountered in other written genres. Apart from triggering readers' imagination, poems also expose students to phonological and phonetic aspects of English, such as stress, rhythm and intonation (Kellem, 2009).

The introduction of poems in the English classroom is mainly based on two distinct teaching approaches: *stylistics* and *reader-response*. The first approach emphasizes a deeper analysis of the linguistic choices of a poet. It thus deals with lexical repetition, lexical items of the poem, its rhyming, discourse and grammatical phenomena (Kellem, 2009)

On the other hand, the reader-response approach pinpoints the fact that meaning and reading are closely related. It introduces the personal perspective in the comprehension of poetry, by allowing students to express their personal responses, ideas and feeling towards what they read (Kellem, 2009).

It is obvious that the combination of the two approaches enriches students' learning experiences.

7. Pat Mora's biographical information

Pat Mora, a leading figure in contemporary Hispanic poetry, was born on January 19, 1942 in El Paso, Texas. She received a BA from Texas Western College in 1963 and an MA from the University of Texas, El Paso in 1967.

Her recent books include *Dizzy in Your Eyes: Poems about Love* (Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2010); *My Own True Name: New and Selected Poems for Young Adults, 1984-1999* (Arte Publico Press, 2000), *Aunt Carmen's Book of Practical Saints* (1997), and *Agua Santa: Holy Water* (1995).

Her numerous awards and fellowships include the Kellogg National Leadership Fellowship, fellowships in poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts, four Southwest Book awards and the Premio Aztlán Literature Award.

In addition to her books of poetry, Mora has also written numerous children's books, including *A Birthday Basket for Tia* (1992) and a memoir. Mora has taught at the University of New Mexico where she held the position of Distinguished Visiting Professor. She has also worked as a museum director and as a consultant on U.S.-Mexico youth exchanges. She resides in Santa Fe, New Mexico and Cincinnati, Ohio.

8. The Methodological presentation of the lesson

The lesson presented in the specific article is a reading sequence based on the poem "Fences" written by Pat Mora.

The lesson follows the warm-up, pre, while, post and follow-up structure, which is widely applicable since it has clear pre-set stages and pre-set objectives.

Initially, the lesson starts by using visual aids to activate students' background knowledge (Warm-up). The teacher displays two photographs taken in the Mexican-American border and the infamous wall built to prevent illegal Mexican immigrants from entering the US soil. The first shows a woman trying to embrace her loved one, who is at the other side of the wall.

The second shows a young male adult of Mexican origin, who is trying to climb over the borderline fence, despite it being an extremely hazardous attempt.

The goal of the warm-up is to unearth students' historical schemata concerning discrimination and racism and illegal immigration. The teacher writes the three notions on the board and involves students in a brainstrorming activity, for which students need to come up with phrases and ideas connected to discrimination, racism and illegal immigration. It is important in this stage to help students comprehend the fact that immigrants, both illegal and legal, are usually treated badly by the official authorities.

The pre-reading activity is a listening extract from the American radio station KPBS[2], which presents the feelings of discrimination experienced by the Latinos living in San Diego. The students listen to the four-minute video and comment on its content. Emphasis is given to the racist treatment of Latinos in a city with a Latin-American character, revealed not only by its name but by its culture. The teaching aim of the stage is two-fold. On the one hand, it tries to provide additional information for the

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[2] The listening extract can be retrieved from https://www.kpbs.org/news/2013/dec/11/survey-discrimination-felt-many-san-diego-latinos/

problem of discrimination encountered by many Mexican-Americans, a problem faced by the poet herself. On the other hand, it also integrates the skills of speaking and listening in a reading lesson.

During the while-reading stage, the teacher recites the poem. It is an autobiographical poem in which Pat Mora presents a scene from her family life in a luxurious hotel for White Caucasians. Her brother and mother work there, while the poet and her sister are the laborers' children that need to remain invisible, so as not to annoy the tourists. The students are given copies of the poem from which certain words have been removed. The teacher re-reads the poem and students need to complete the missing words. More specifically, emphasis is given on words that illustrate the separation between the White Caucasians tourists that enjoy their summer holidays and the Mexican employees, who try hard to make the tourists' stay more comfortable.

As the next step, the learners are asked to detect the points in the poem that display the discrimination experienced by the poet. Children are expected to find phrases such as "**I peek through the cactus fence", "the turistas come to the tall hotel with suitcases full of dollars", my brother makes the cool beach new for them"** and **"once my little sister ran barefoot across the hot sand for a taste.** All of the aforementioned extracts are indicative of the economic, social and even physical separation of the Mexican immigrants-workers. They make vivid visual representations of two distinct worlds, having a powerful effect on students. Nevertheless, the most emotionally powerful phrase of the poem is the mother's reaction when she sees her daughter entering the tourists' beach. Sounding like an ocean she shouts "**No. No. It's their beach.**

It's their beach". It is significant to pay attention on the title of the poem "Fences" which is a strong metaphor on the invisible borderline between tourists and immigrant-employees.

As far as the post-listening stage is concerned, the learners collaborate in groups in order to think and write a short dialogue presenting the content of the poem. As this is a highly confessional poem, presenting Mora's childhood experience, as a child of a family that worked in a summer resort, but not being allowed to come into contact with the children vacating there, a role-play can boost students' sense of empathy towards the poet.

Lastly, a writing activity is assigned as homework. Learners are asked to create an alternative version of the poem, in which Pat Mora and her family are accepted as equally acknowledged guests in the same hotel. The students need to present the Mexicans not as invisible employees but as vacating guests that enjoy the same privileges as anybody else.

9. Concluding Remarks

This article is a brief description of the innumerable potentials of poetry in the intercultural classroom. A literary text, such as a poem can present the ideas of respect and tolerance towards otherness in an imaginative way that can help students get into others' shoes, the different but equally unique.

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Appendix

"Fences" by Pat Mora (1942-)

Mouths full of laughter,
the turistas come to the tall hotel
with suitcases full of dollars.
Every morning my brother makes
 the cool beach new for them.
With a wooden board he smooths
away all footprints.
I peek through the cactus fence
and watch the women rub oil
sweeter than honey into their arms and legs
while their children jump waves
or sip drinks from long straws,
 coconut white, mango yellow.
Once my little sister
ran barefoot across the hot sand
for a taste.
 My mother roared like the ocean,
"No. No. It's their beach.
It's their beach."
Source: Communion (Arte Publico Press, University of Houston, 1991)