DEVELOPING MULTICULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH ENGLISH: REFLECTIONS ON CULTURE AND MULTICULTURALISM

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Abstract

This paper explores how cultural elements in language teaching shape the learners’ cultural identities, in an attempt to understand why English Language Teaching (ELT) nominally promotes multiculturalism but seems to lead to the emergence of a global monocultural identity. It is pointed out that ELT tends to over-utilise cultural images from the English Speaking West (the Centre) to the exclusion of communities where English is used as a first, second or foreign language (the Periphery). It is argued that the uncritical use of these imported cultural images serves to perpetuate the inequitable distribution of power between the Centre and the Periphery. Following that, the argument is made for an alternative pedagogy (Multicultural Awareness Through English, or MATE) which seeks to create a truly multicultural identity. The paper concludes by outlining some requisites for a MATE-informed pedagogy.

Keywords: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), hegemony, Multicultural Awareness Through English (MATE).

1. INTRODUCTION

The linkage between culture and foreign language learning is most commonly framed in terms of how aspects of the target culture can be used to enhance language learning outcomes. In this paper, an attempt will be made to take this thinking one step further, by exploring how the cultural elements in language teaching shape the learners’ cultural identities. This outlook is based on a reflexive understanding of culture, in which cultural elements both provide content for learning activities and shape the learners’ outlook. By using this reflexive relation as the underpinning of the paper, I aim to shed some light on a fundamental paradox of English Language Teaching (ELT), namely that it espouses multiculturalism but in actuality seems to lead to the emergence of a global monocultural identity (Phillipson, 2009).

To do this, I will begin my discussion by briefly contextualizing the way multicultural awareness is dealt with in the framework of the English language curriculum. Next, I will present some examples of cultural input from the ELT materials that were recently introduced in the public education system and I will discuss their implications in terms of developing multicultural awareness. Finally, I will put forward a series of suggestions for an alternative language pedagogy, which is arguably better suited to the goal of developing multicultural awareness.

2. MULTICULTURALISM AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

The development of multicultural awareness constitutes one of the three main aims of the English Language Curriculum that is implemented in the public school system, along with multilingualism and foreign language literacy (ΔΕΠΠΣ, 2003). In the narrative that prefaces the curriculum, it is claimed that ELT is conducive to developing multiculturalism which, “...emerges naturally since the English language, [...] will contribute significantly towards shaping multicultural awareness which will render the Other familiar, acceptable and respected” (op. cit., p. 354, author’s translation). This perspective builds on well-established connections between language and culture (e.g. Kramsch, 1993; Tsui & Tollefson, 2007), although it should be noted that, in the case of English in particular, strong reservations have been expressed with regard to the ‘dangerous liaisons’ that appear to connect the English language and cultural imperialism (Edge, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Souther, 2007). A full discussion of these criticisms lies outside the scope of this discussion, although interested readers are referred to sources such as Canagarajah (1999) and Phillipson (1992).

In the specific context of Greek ELT, the relation between multiculturalism and the language curriculum has been challenged on both theoretical and empirical grounds. On the theoretical front, it has been pointed out that the English Language curriculum tends to equate multiculturalism with a ‘loose sense of cultural awareness about the customs and traditions of the countries where English is spoken as a native language’ (Sifakis, Lytras, & Fay, 2010). As evidence for their claim, Sifakis et al. point to a number of extracts from the curriculum which seem to pose obstacles to the development of a genuinely multicultural pedagogy. Some of the suggested activities towards which they direct our attention include the following:

- “Presentation or acting out of seasonal celebrations from English-speaking countries.”
• Recording of stories with same or similar topics and comparison of story themes from our country and English-speaking countries.
• Putting together a display of foods from different English-speaking countries.
• Collection of myths or legends from Greece and English speaking countries.” (JERITE, 2003, cited in Sifakis et al., 2010).

On the basis of this evidence, Sifakis et al. (2010) conclude that the range of suggested activities which can help to develop international cultural awareness is limited.

Adding empirical substantiation to the theoretical objections raised by Sifakis et al. (2010), other researchers have expressed reservations about the coherence between the specifications of the curriculum and the way that these specifications are implemented in the ministry-approved courseware. In what is to date the only published content analysis of the learning materials used in primary education, it is suggested that cultural elements tend to be used in ways which reinforce the notion that certain cultures are superior to others (Pozoukidis & Babalanidou, 2010, p. 346).

An example of such practices is provided by the differentiated visibility of low-prestige cultures as compared to high-prestige cultures. The latter term is defined as cultures belonging to Western Europe and North America, but in practice refers almost exclusively to the USA and the United Kingdom. Citing the coursebook used by 4th Form learners (Bratsoli & Diamantidou, 2009) as an example, Pozoukidis and Babalanidou point out that the cultural traditions that are mentioned refer exclusively to high-prestige cultures (Pozoukidis & Babalanidou, 2010, p. 343). Additional evidence that cultures that are perceived as low-status are invisibilised in the learning materials is provided by the absence of named characters or references to names from such cultures. As can be seen in Table 1, less than 2% of the names mentioned in the 6th Form coursebook (Efraimidou, Zoe-Reppa, & Frouzaki, 2009) can be traced to “low-prestige” cultures. With the exception of Greek names, most of the names seem to be Anglo-Saxon in origin (e.g. John, Mary, Alice, Tim).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names derived from</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greek background</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-prestige foreign background</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(mainly Anglo-Saxon)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-prestige foreign background</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Distribution of names in the 6th Form English Coursebook (based on Pozoukidis & Babalanidou, 2010, p. 345)

It therefore appears that strong tensions are at work between the stated aims of the public education system, which include the development of multicultural awareness, and the actuality of teaching, which is almost exclusively oriented towards the Anglophone West. Having made this observation, in the next section of the paper I will turn my attention to the use of cultural input in secondary schools, in order to examine whether it is aligned to the stated curricular aims or the implicit assimilationist language policy.

3. HOW MULTICULTURAL IS THE COURSEWARE?

The examples that are used in this section have been drawn from the English language coursebooks that were introduced in Junior High Schools in 2009. These materials, which are produced and distributed centrally by the Ministry of Education, are said to have been designed in accordance to the 2003 curriculum. However, the influence of the curriculum with regard to multiculturalism is only sporadically traceable in the materials, most obviously in the statement of aims, where it is claimed that the materials are expected to enhance “the students’ familiarisation with different cultural environments and different social behaviours” (Karagianni, Kou, & Nikolaki, 2009b, p. ii).

The extracts that are presented below form part of a broader corpus of data that is being subjected to quantitative content analysis with a view to examining their potential for multicultural education. As the findings of this investigation are expected to be published in article form in the near future, for the purposes of the current discussion, I will focus on specific examples that appear particularly striking, rather than on statistical abstractions.

The first example that will be examined (see Appendix, Figure 1) is derived from the coursebook used by false beginners in the 1st Form of Junior High School (Karagianni, Kou, & Nikolaki, 2009a). The extract in question is the introductory page of Unit 6 (p. 73). As one of the constituent lessons of the unit is titled ‘The Four Corners of the Earth’ one would expect that the contents of the unit would include cultural images from a wide variety of geographic locales. Instead, it appears that the cultural input of the unit is limited to a map and an information table about the UK which the learners are tasked with reading. This reading activity is supplemented by a writing task, in which learners are expected to produce a short article using their knowledge about the UK. The pedagogical merit of these activities notwithstanding, it is clear that the cultural dimension is quite narrowly defined in this instance.

The next extract (see Appendix, Figure 2), also taken from the same book, was selected because it is embedded in a unit that makes interdisciplinary links to Geography and History and could be used to present cultural input from a variety of synchronic and diachronic sources (op. cit. pp. 110-111). As can be seen in the Figure 2, the cultural input is strongly Anglo-centric, as it is limited to images of recognisable sights in London. It must be conceded that there are also depictions of the Greek Marbles in the British Museum and an Olympic Airlines ticket to London, but the omission of cultural references to other non-western, non-English speaking countries is very noticeable. In addition to being geographically restricted, the cultural
input is restricted in a social sense, in that it seems to valorise cultural activities associated with the upper and upper-middle classes, such as travelling abroad and visiting museums, whereas the cultural norms of lower socio-economic strata are invisible.

The last extract (see Appendix, Figure 3) to be considered forms part of a unit titled ‘Keeping Customs and Traditions Alive’, which contains cultural information about various traditional celebrations, most of which are again mainly Anglo-Saxon in origin (Mc Gavigan, 2009b, p. 63). The materials in this page form part of a jigsaw reading activity, in which learners are expected to read different texts and answer questions about them. As can be seen, one of these texts provides information about Halloween, whereas the questions below refer to the other text which is about St. Valentine’s Day. Other traditions mentioned in the same unit include Bonfire Night (a celebration commemorating an event in British parliamentary history), St. Patrick’s Day (the main religious festival in Ireland, which is also extensively celebrated in the USA), Hogmanay (the Scottish New Year) and, somewhat bizarrely, the Pamplona Bull Run which is mentioned in passing in one exercise.

Based on the example cited above, one might be forgiven for thinking that the learning materials that are used in secondary education are exclusively Anglo-centric. This is not entirely true, as there are occasional references to other cultures, of which Greek culture is the most notable. However, the coverage of such cultures is often uneven, and non-English-speaking, non-Western cultures are often presented from a deficit perspective (Mc Gavigan, 2009a, pp. 2-13). These exceptions notwithstanding, the point remains that the ELT materials sanctioned by the Ministry of Education have tended to over-utilise cultural images from the UK and to a lesser extent the USA (which can be termed the Centre of ELT), at the expense of cultural images from other communities where English is used as a first, second or foreign language (the Periphery).

The over-reliance on this kind of cultural input seems to have several undesirable effects: In the context of the Greek education system, it appears to unfairly privilege those learners whose cultural background is closer to the content described. Put differently, learners from immigrant communities or poor socio-economic status are unlikely to have background knowledge about these cultural references and are therefore placed at a learning disadvantage. From a broader perspective, when the extensive exposure to these cultural images from the Anglophone West is not accompanied by the development of a critical awareness of the non-transparent ways in which cultures interact, it implicitly legitimises the hegemonic status of the Centre and its dominance over the Periphery (Phillipson, 1992).

4. MULTICULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH ENGLISH

In the last part of this paper, I wish to lay out the requisites for an alternative language pedagogy, which appears better suited to creating a genuinely multicultural identity. The argumentation that follows draws heavily on the concept of Multicultural Awareness Through English (MATE) which has been put forward as a new mission for English Language pedagogy in an era of globalization (Fay, Lytra, & Naivalagiou, 2010; Sfakis, et al., 2010). It also forms part of a considerably broader restructuring of ELT, which seems to be moving away from Anglo-centric linguistic, methodological and cultural norms and towards a more inclusive position that is more appropriate for a global profession (Edge, 2006; Holliday, 1994; Kostoulas, 2010, in preparation).

A core characteristic of MATE-informed pedagogy is the equal representation of cultural images from a great diversity of sources. By this I mean the use of cultural input that has been drawn from many different communities where English is used as a first, second or foreign language. Such cultural input could be brought to the classroom from external sources, in the form of literary extracts by authors from other countries who have written in English, or historical and mythological narratives from around the world. More interestingly, cultural input could be generated within the space of the language classroom, by drawing on the cultural heritage of learners from different cultural backgrounds. When speaking of learners from diverse cultural settings, I most obviously have immigrants in mind, but the argument must be extended, on principle, to Greek citizens of non-mainstream cultural heritage, such as – indicatively- the Muslim minority, or children of Roma or Vlach heritage, to name some of the more recognisable groups.

The discussion of student-generated cultural input brings me to the second requisite. It can be argued that a multicultural identity can develop more naturally in an organic fashion through social interaction among learners from different cultural backgrounds (as exemplified by Fennell, 2009) rather than through transmissive methods and the top-down imposition of a centralized curriculum. This principle casts doubts on the effectiveness of centralised teaching models, such as the imposition of a standardised curriculum and uniform learning materials throughout Greece. This is not a question of the suitability (or lack whereof) of any coursebook, but rather a realisation of the learning potential inherent in a contingent syllabus that is responsive to the needs of specific groups of learners. Rather than merely engage in the transmission of the standardised curriculum, it seems necessary for teaching professionals to create of a safe social space where learners will be able to bring their cultural knowledge to bear on social interaction through the use of English. To illustrate by means of an example, if the language classroom could be transformed to a social space where an Arab immigrant could feel safe enough to place a lantern during Ramadan, and talk about this celebration to her non-Muslim peers, that would likely offer much greater potential both for language learning and for developing intercultural competence, compared to reading a passage about New Year’s celebrations in New York.

My final point is probably going to be the most controversial: I argue that the successful implementation of a culturally informed pedagogy requires us to
reconsider the question of who is best qualified to deliver English language education. Currently, English is taught in the public education system by graduates from university departments of English Studies, whose professional credentials – at least those that relate to culture – are mostly limited to an in-depth knowledge of the literary production of the British Isles and the United States. This results in a regrettable situation where English is taught to six-year old students by language and literature specialists rather than experts on pedagogy. In spite of its undisputed academic value, such specialist knowledge appears to be largely irrelevant to developing multicultural awareness. While the status of English language and literature specialists as de facto teachers of English seems entrenched in public consciousness, empirical evidence from other countries has been to cast doubts on their effectiveness as teachers especially in pedagogically challenging settings like primary education (Kirkgoz, 2008, 2009). It may well be the case that education professionals with a stronger pedagogical background, such as linguistically qualified primary education specialists, may prove better suited to creating the kind of social space where a MATE-informed pedagogy can take place.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the argument was put forward in this paper that, with regard to the English Language, the public education system is informed by a covert Anglocentric curriculum, which is sustained at least in part by the extensive and uncritical use of cultural images from the English Speaking West. As this curriculum is not conducive to the development of a genuinely multicultural awareness, some thoughts were outlined regarding the content and methods of a more inclusive pedagogical alternative (MATE) as well as some reservations about the fit between the qualifications of ELT professionals and the requirements of the new pedagogy. This pedagogy seeks to exploit the liaisons between culture and language but also raises a fundamental question: as English has become a global language, whose culture should it convey?

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6. REFERENCES


Karagianni, E., Koui, V., & Nikolaaki, A. (2009a). Think Teen! 1st Grade of Junior High School; Student's Book; Beginner. Athens: OEDB.


Appendix (Figures)

Figure 1. From Karagianni et al. (2009a), p. 73

Figure 2. From Karagianni et al. (2009a), p. 110

Figure 3. From Mc Gavigan, (2009b), p. 63.