

Intercultural activities in English Language Teaching: a contribution to understand English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

Atividades interculturais em ensino de línguas: uma contribuição para a compreensão de inglês como língua franca

Lucielen Porfírio¹

ABSTRACT: Currently, English has acquired the status of Lingua Franca enabling world communication (CRYSTAL, 2003; SEIDLHOLFER, 2011). However, in the context of English language teaching (ELT), it is necessary to develop the idea of what the concept of ELF may contribute to students' awareness and development. This is even more relevant when we talk about pre service teachers who are in the process of learning important abilities for teaching English in a globalized context (SEIDLHOFER, 2011; SIQUEIRA, 2008; CRYSTAL, 2003; ORTIZ, 2003). One of English as a Lingua Franca's (ELF) characteristics is that it considers the nature of interculturality allowed by language (SIQUEIRA, 2008). The objective of this paper is to observe how students may understand the concept of ELF through the development of activities that promote intercultural discussions in an EFL tertiary context in Alagoinhas, Bahia, Brazil. The main question to investigate is in what ways a proposal of activities which consider intercultural aspects can contribute to understand the concept of ELF and therefore help in the education of English's future teachers in the country. In order to develop the research, some activities which consider intercultural aspects of texts are proposed to the teachers-to-be who will take part in the research, and some observations and discussions are performed before, during and after the classes. The analysis is developed by considering an intercultural dialogue based on the view of: a) language and culture as places of interaction (KRAMSCH, 1998; MENDES, 2008); b) focus on the language meanings produced and on the access to new possibilities of representation (KRAMSCH, 1993); c) selection and production of materials with authentic contents and cultural meanings (MENDES, 2008) which is possible through the understanding of ELF (SEIDLHOFER, 2011).

Keywords: Intercultural activities; English language teaching; ELF concept; foreign language undergraduate students.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, many researchers have shown the importance of English as it has become the language for communication among different people from different origins. Reasons for this language's spread worldwide range over economical, social or scientific ones (CRYSTAL, 2003; SCHMITZ, 2012). It is important to consider that in the context of permeating different people and origins, cultures and identities emerge in interactions and English students should understand such mix in order to communicate better in English

¹ Lucielen Porfírio is doctor in Linguistics by the Federal University of Bahia, in Brazil and during the project she worked in State University of Bahia, Alagoinhas, Bahia, Brazil. The author has worked with foreigner languages for more than 10 years and recently has been involved in researches that involve, English as international language, English as a Lingua Franca, interculturality, teacher's education. Email address for contact: lucielenporfitorio@hotmail.com

with different speakers. Studies in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) have discussed the importance of looking at the language as a way of communication and not as an object to be studied inside fixed structures (SEIDLHOFER, 2011; COGO, 2012). Also, we should consider that looking at English as a language for communication among people from many cultures lead to the fact that teachers must be aware of cultures' emergence during classes' interactions. This paper's objective lays on trying to understand how the development of activities that promote intercultural discussions can contribute to understand the concept of ELF in teacher's education.

In order to do so, some classes are planned for a group of pre services teachers in Alagoinhas – Bahia – Brasil. During these classes, diverse intercultural activities and discussions are proposed in order to motivate participants to get involved. Also, the researcher is supposed to bring up questions and perspectives and participants are proposed to get engaged in answering interviews to observe their concepts and ideas about ELF and interculturality. Such interviews are analyzed as an outcome of the project. Results showed that, somehow, the future teachers are aware of: the responsibility of teaching English in this new modern context, cultures that emerge in classrooms and the dissociation between teaching how to communicate in English and teaching a specific pattern of the language.

In order to organize the discussions, this article shows some theoretical aspects, the methodology and some discussions of the data. Also, in the discussions, only some of the classes are presented in order to focus the discussion.

2. English as a Lingua Franca

It is known that nowadays English is a language for communication in many different areas of modern world: science, technology, travel and economy, among others. The main point is that English goes further than the borders of Anglophones countries. It penetrates different domains - computers, air traffic, scientific colloquia, interchange among multinational companies, - in order to become the official language for international relations (ORTIZ, 2003). So, it is possible to say that English assumes the idea of enabling different kinds of communication for specific purposes in interactions.

We should highlight the fact that English is not used only by native speakers. As we said, this language is used by people from different mother tongues as a way of

communicating to others their ideas, objectives and purposes. We can say that “English is therefore used most commonly not by native speakers but as a contact language between interlocutors with different linguacultures (linguistic and cultural backgrounds)” (BAKER, 2012, p. 63).

English must be seen as an attempt to approximate speakers in interaction and not as a way of following specific patterns which are sometimes impossible to reach for non native speakers. Understanding English as a Lingua Franca means dissociating it from one unique culture, or the native speakers, and looking at it “as a common wealth for everyone who dominates it. It has no ownership and it is nobody’s mother tongue” (SIQUEIRA, 2008).

When we talk about a language teaching context, it is important to visualize the idea of ELF, especially because this concept assumes communication, understanding and adaptation to the modern context of English speakers. And it is also important to say that one of the characteristics of ELF is that it considers the nature of interculturality allowed by the language (Siqueira, 2011). Working with such idea in a context of teacher’s education is even more important because we are talking about teachers who are in the process of learning how to improve different methodologies in English Language Teaching (ELT). So, it is essential to bring here discussion on how the development of intercultural activities could interfere in the way students learn English and understand the idea of ELF. That is the main point to be discussed in this paper.

3. Interculturality

One main point of understanding language is that it cannot be dissociated from culture, identities and background. If we consider English as a language used for communication, we should also point out that it involves people, identity and cultures. As Baker (2012) declares: “Language, even used as a lingua franca, can never be culturally neutral. Language used for communication always involves people, places, and purposes, none of which exist in a cultural vacuum” (BAKER, 2012, p. 64).

By considering the idea of people related to culture during language interactions, we can see that teaching English involves the emergence of different cultures and backgrounds. So, making students aware of the presence of different cultures during English interactions is important for their understanding of diverse realities and frames

produced by language (Baker, 2012). We could say that it is really important for teachers to be conscious of the multilingual and multicultural context in which English is emerged as Baker (2012) declares:

An awareness of the multilingual and multicultural settings of English use, therefore, should be a key element of any attempt to teach communication. The ELT classroom is a site in which learners, and ideally teachers, are necessarily engaged in multilingual and multicultural practices and thus provides the ideal environment in which to develop ICA (intercultural communication awareness) and to prepare users of English to communicate in global settings (BAKER, 2012, p. 70)

By looking at the context of teacher's education, it is impossible not to visualize the fact that learning another language must involve the need of developing an ability to get opened to the other, to the difference, which contributes to the idea of making the foreigner something closer to student's reality (MENDES, 2008).

Intercultural education concerns relations among culturally different human beings. It is not only about understanding the characteristics of many and different cultures, but also making an effort to understand what meanings and actions are in a context with certain cultural patterns and to be available to let such meanings and help speakers to construct a new cultural knowledge (SOUZA; FLEURI, 2003).

Once we talk about intercultural education, we also conceive the idea of dialogue among behaviors, identities, reflections and perspectives. In such contexts where cultures emerge, it is necessary to think of ways to bring up different possibilities of interpretations and promote a constant interaction involving cultural chains. Intercultural approach is a process of learning and teaching language in which there is always a dialogue and a negotiation of possible conflicts among different cultures, promoting a new knowledge, more solid and common to all participants (MENDES, 2008).

The main point is that during language interactions, everything previously learned in mother tongue must be considered and put into discussion to be explored and (re)negotiated by participants. From the interaction among cultures, new points of view arise and the learning process is built. Kramsch (1998) points out that: "On the basis on

the experience in their culture (or combination of cultures), people organize knowledge about the world and use this knowledge to predict interpretations and relationships regarding any new information, events, and experiences that come their way” (KRAMSCH, 1998, p. 27).

Based on Kramsch’s ideas, we can point that intercultural may refer to: a) meeting of two cultures or two languages across political boundaries of nation-states and communication between people from different ethnic, social, gendered cultures within the boundaries of the same national language (KRAMSCH, 1998); b) The finding of common point among people from different backgrounds in communicating to each other and negotiating meanings from different perspectives (KRAMSCH, 1993); c) the building of a third perspective, which is a way to start building a more complete and less partial understanding of both C1 (native culture) and C2 (target culture) by creating a third space that would enable learners to take both an insider’s and an outsider’s view on C1 and C2. It is precisely that third place that cross-cultural education should seek to establish (KRAMSCH, 1993).

It is important to question ourselves here what the connection among ELF, ELT and interculturality is. First of all, it is necessary to say that the focus of this discussion is a context of teacher’s education, in a modern world where English has acquired the status of Lingua Franca, and different cultures emerge during classrooms interactions. By developing an understanding of the intercultural reality of language teaching, we can prepare effective communicators and also, teachers (GUILHERME, 2002).

When we teach a language, interactions come up where different worlds and perspectives meet each other, and this is represented during any activity performed in classes. Pedagogies which are culturally sensible to participants and are concerned about developing an intercultural dialogue, can promote changes on the way teaching and learning are constructed. Students feel as actors and participants of the knowledge produced in the classroom (MENDES, 2010).

It is also important to say that in order to understand ELF, it is corollary to visit borders every day electing new priorities, and also better pedagogies for this reality, allowing the emergence of important challenges such as the place of culture, and as a consequence the development of intercultural communicative competence in teaching/learning contexts (SIQUEIRA, 2011)

4. Methodology

The methodology here follow a qualitative ethnographic research and steps are divided into sub-sections in order to explain each part of the research:

a) Participants:

10 teachers-to-be² who are engaged in an extension project which initiated in March of 2014. All of participants are English graduation students, about intermediate low or medium level of English. Not all participants are present every meeting since it is not an obligatory subject for the graduation course. Students applied to participate in the project as volunteers.

b) Activities:

12 classes were planned during the semester and once a week participants and researcher had a meeting to perform the plan for 50 min. All of the plans for the classes included some steps:

- 1) A proposition of general themes to raise discussions in which it would be possible to develop culturally different ideas, according to the table:

Class	Theme:
1 – 2	Virtual behaviors
3 – 5	Beauty in modern context
6 – 7	Greeting manners
8 – 10	World cup in Brazil
11 – 12	Language and Identity

Table 1: List of contents for classes

2) In order to warm up for each topic, a text was proposed for all students reading. Then, questions were raised by the researcher in order to motivate student 's comprehension of the text and to build up critical thoughts on the text. Those questions included especially their opinion on the topic as well as putting students under reflections about different points of view on the topics. Also, some linguistic activities based on the topic were proposed in which students were motivated to

2 Undergraduate students of English

produce some examples of their own focusing on specific structures (i.e.: students were encouraged to produce sentences summarizing the discussions and while doing this, different English linguistic skills were explained and used according to their needs).

3) Participants were required to generate/ research their own materials for further discussions in class (finding videos, making interviews, finding different texts to read/ analyze/ propose questions. They brought their findings to forward meetings and their ideas were put under discussion by all participants. Usually, questions for discussion on their material were also proposed by the researcher in order to motivate different perspectives.

In order to analyze these classes, a journal of the classes was produced day by day, to focus on the questions and answers raised by participants during the project. These diaries were put under scrutiny to observe negotiation of meanings, different perspectives and discussions from participants. Some points were identified to check how intercultural discussions could be motivated from the themes proposed and will be presented in the results section.

c) Interviews:

Written interviews with the participants were required at the end of the semester with the goal of observing what concept of ELF students developed and how it linked with the discussions we had during classes. It is important to say that during the classes, students did not read any theoretical texts about ELF³. The questions asked in the interview were:

- 1) What is teaching English in the modern context?
- 2) What is ELF e how does this concept help on the English teaching nowadays?
- 3) How do you understand culture? Is it important for ELT? Why?

d) Analysis:

Analysis is done by observing aspects such as students' interactions during classes. The reports (journals) produced every class are also observed in order to find out how culture comes up during classroom interactions and how it was possible to dialogue with different points of view. The intercultural dialogue is considered based on:

³ Reading theoretical texts about ELF is a next step planned for the project which is still going on.

- a) Language and culture as places of interaction (KRAMSCH, 1998; MENDES, 2008);
- b) Focus on the language meanings produced and on the access to new possibilities of representation (KRAMSCH, 1993);
- c) Selection and production of materials with authentic contents and cultural meanings (MENDES, 2008);

Also, the answers to the interviews were observed and discussed in the results section of this paper. It was observed what concept of ELF they had in mind at the end of the semester and how it dialogues with the activities proposed and with the attitudes they showed during classes. It is important to say that only 5 students returned the interviews, and these students were the ones who attended to almost all classes.

5. Analyzing intercultural activities in ELT

Classes and intercultural activities

As it was reported above, the methodology included the development of some activities which considered some intercultural aspects. By trying to evoke discussions on daily life topics, students were encouraged to talk about their ideas and points of view and also research about different possibilities to understand the theme and bring it up for further discussions. As it would be too exhaustive to report every single class, two topics were chosen based on the interactions produced and on the observations of some influence of these discussions in the interview: World Cup in Brazil (classes 8 – 10) and Language and identity (classes 11 – 12).

The first topic selected for analysis, the World Cup, happened in Brazil during the application of the project. There were three classes on this topic and we started talking about it before the semi final game against Germany, in which Brazil showed a not very good performance. As the cup was going on inside participants' own country, students were encouraged to expose vocabulary⁴ about feelings and impressions they had about the event and to collect material from the internet with different points of view about the Cup from outside Brazil.

⁴ Raising vocabulary and explore students sentences was some way of developing students linguistic skills, as we are talking about an intermediary group.

In another class, after the semi final game, students were pretty pessimistic because of the loss and the first thing in class was talking about their feelings and compare to the discussions from the previous class (a comparison between excitement and pessimism). Vocabulary and attitudes were completely different in both classes according to their new perspectives on the event: first they were really excited about watching games and about the success of the Cup in their own country. After the loss, they showed a more pessimist vocabulary (it was shaming, bad organization of the Cup, sadness about the loss) and also a pessimistic attitude (not wanting to watch the games anymore). In this meeting, one of the students brought to classroom a small chat with a Russian girl he met in internet, in which she talked about her feelings over the event in Brazil. In the talk brought by the student, the Russian girl showed her concerns about her country organizing an event as good as the one she was watching on TV. By listening to the interview students seemed to have realized that other people might see the Cup (from an outsider point of view) completely different from what students were reporting at that moment. After discussing some positive aspects about the world cup (contact with different languages for example) and taking into consideration the points of view of a person from another culture (the Russian pen pal), students seemed to have raised a different perspective on the event pointing out ups and downs, showing a more balanced attitude exposing their positive and negative feelings. They were questioned to look at different sides of it (why do some people see the cup as a bad thing and others as a good one? Is there a consensus (naturalized culture) about it in our country? If there is not, should we expect equal feelings from foreigner people?).

The most interesting things observed in this class was the way students changed their points of view in three different moments: 1) the enthusiasm about the world cup taking place in their own country and how it evoked their passion for soccer events; 2) the pessimism about the Brazilian soccer team losing the semifinal game and then they showed a feeling of not wanting to talk about it anymore; 3) a more balanced attitude about the event analyzing good and bad things and being opened to listen to perspectives from foreigner people who were talking very positively about their own culture. Such considerations show that being opened to receive different opinions from different cultures, or an intercultural approach for language teaching, motivated students to accommodate perspectives, negotiate possibilities and change opinions and feelings, as well as understanding other's people culture and opinion during interactions.

A second topic brought up after the world cup classes was the relation between language and identity. Students were encouraged to identify some relations on three different topics: the world cup, language and identity. The main goal was to encourage students to talk openly about the perspectives they were building at that moment. Participants pointed out that during the cup, it was easier to see/participate in interactions with different people from different cultures because they could speak English and also teach some words in Portuguese to other people, and get to know about some different realities and perspectives. In the students' speech, this was a way to show other people about themselves and their own language and identity.

In the sequence, participants were proposed to watch a video about an American girl with Japanese physical characteristics talking about her experience of learning another language (Japanese and Spanish) and how it allowed her to hear from people in their own language, read, get information which sometimes cannot be completely translated. After a discussion about the video and their impressions, students were encouraged to produce sentences expressing their conclusions on the topic. Some of the sentences produced were:

- 1) We can express also emotion through the language.
- 2) We may understand identities because of language.
- 3) Languages might show political and ideological powers.
- 4) Language can show other people who you are, your ideas and your own way of communicating.

Some interesting things about these classes were that:

- a) Students seemed not to be worried about their accents or forms of speaking and they showed a very active way of showing their points of view. This leads to think that proposing a point of real discussion make students disconnect from the idea of choosing the "native pattern" of speaking and lead them to use the language to express their own points of view. In this case, activities that motivate intercultural discussions might help students on respecting their own identity and raising self esteem on using English by understanding different possibilities of effective communication, other than the native pattern based model.

- b) The conclusions expressed on the sentences showed some awareness about how language mixes itself with who we are, power, ideologies and how we express our ideas and perspectives to others. This may be interesting because we are talking about a group of pre service teachers who are probably going to think of some ways of allowing new discussions to make cultures and identities emerge.
- c) Participants also showed a very close connection between language and social and personal relations and they pointed that such link must be respected.

Analyzing Interviews

In a second part of the research, during the interviews, some important observations were constructed by participants by comparing students' answers and their attitudes to the dialogues shown during the classes. Some of these observations will be pointed out as follows:

1) Participants show an awareness of the need of teaching English in a context in which this is the main language for different contexts and it may communicate different identities:

S1⁵: The world of arts, science, computer, traveling speak English

S3: It⁶ is any kind of teaching that keeps a dialogue with diversity, culture, and customs different from mother culture, promoting awareness and respect to others

S4: It is important to teach English nowadays because it can influence the students to know other people

2) Students seemed to be aware that English may vary according to context, there is not a unique language pattern for it.

S1: English is not a language from a certain nation anymore, and it becomes a language shared by everybody and there is not an overlook on a "correct"

5 As there were only five students who returned the interviews, it is shown the sign for S1 (student 1) to S5 (student 5).

6 "it" refers to teaching English in the modern context exposed on the question.

English and it takes under consideration different accents which might be acceptable

3) Students seemed to be aware that their own culture is important in learning another language and that there is a diversity which can be seen in a common language, English. Such relations allow different cultural interactions:

S4: we can keep contact with a different and innovative learning, which enables us to keep in touch with people from another culture.

S5: So culture can't be ignored, once English can receive influences from each country where English is spoken even by one single person.

To sum up, from the discussions raised during the classes, pre-service teachers seemed to have started showing a higher interest on understanding relations between culture and languages around the world and investigate how it may be seen in classroom contexts.

6. Some final considerations:

The observations made during the project can allow us to conclude that developing activities based on intercultural aspects can make students aware that English is a language for communication over different reasons and cultures, which is actually an understanding of ELF. One fact that proves this is that most of students showed similarities in the discussions during classes and the concept of ELF showed in the interview.

Another thing is the awareness of the responsibility of teaching English in the modern context which was exposed in the second question of the interview. Students engaged themselves with the need of talking about normal things which happen in normal life – that was something we encouraged during classes' discussions by constructing examples for their own. This might be interesting on motivating future teachers to research new topic to bring for their classes plans and also keep them connected to the idea of bringing different perspectives in English interactions.

Also, by the development of these classes, the need of bringing authentic content and cultural meanings is highlighted: participants were encouraged to bring their own

researched material including their own point of view for every single class, which made them disconnect of the idea of speaking a very specific pattern, and just express their needs.

Yet, participants emphasized the idea that English does not belong to some specific people from a specific mother tongue. Almost all the students, somehow, indicated the importance of dissociating the idea of teaching English to teaching a specific pattern or culture.

However, it is necessary to say that none of the classes were prepared theoretically to raise the concept of ELF. Anyway, this might be a future project for these groups of teachers as they have been demonstrating interest in researching things regarding to English as an international language, interculturality, teaching language in modern contexts in public schools in Brazil⁷. Future researches in the university should be developed following some steps proposed by other researches (i.e.: SIFAKIS, 2014) for learning and discussing ELF, looking at students' context, questioning their points of view, and thinking of new perspectives for the ELT classroom.

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⁷ Three pre service teachers have already declared that they will develop researches for their final course essays including those topics

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