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DEVELOPING MULTIPLE IDENTITIES IN THE EFL CLASS: A STUDY ON ROMANIAN HIGHSCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract: *There is a close relationship between language and identity, and, consequently, any process of foreign language acquisition will exert a certain influence on the learners' overall sense of identity. In the case of English learning, the situation is even more complex, since this foreign language is commonly perceived as a key to global access. The paper will discuss the role played by the English instruction in the process of developing multiple identities in a multicultural Europe and beyond, taking into account research data based on both the input offered by the English textbooks meant for high school level, and the Romanian students' perceptions in this respect.*

Key words: "big C" culture, English instruction, "little c" culture, multicultural identity, textbooks

Introduction

The very strong connection between foreign language learning and culture is widely acknowledged by both teachers and methodologists nowadays. As a consequence, the process of language teaching can never be a "neutral" one, because culture is dynamically crystallized in the manner in which a certain language presents and makes use of a particular concept.

In foreign language teaching, cultural elements do not have just the role of contributing to a better linguistic competence, but they also exert a certain influence on the learners' sense of identity. This happens because languages are considered to be symbols of identities, signalling a number of characteristics that define those who speak them. Additionally, languages give a sense of belonging to a certain social group, be it a family, a club, a nation, Europe, etc. Each group has its own language, dialect or jargon, and, consequently, speaking the correct linguistic variety represents an essential condition for individuals to be turned into "insiders", to become members of that group. Both the natural acquisition of languages and their formal study create, strengthen or weaken the links between languages and identities.

The starting point for the present paper is represented by the belief that, in the context of foreign language teaching and learning, the situation of English is somehow different and even special, because this language is commonly perceived as a key to global access. Therefore, the identities shaped and developed during the process of English learning do not have to do only with the English-speaking nations, but with a multitude of nations which use English as a common instrument. In my attempt to test this hypothesis in the context of the Romanian educational context, I conducted a research study which involves two different, but still inter-related, perspectives. On the one hand, I examined a few English textbooks used in Romanian high-schools, with a view to identifying the input that can be considered to contribute to the development of the learners' (multi-)cultural identities. On the other hand, I was interested in finding out the Romanian students' perceptions with regard to the (possible) influence exerted by the process of English instruction on their individual, European and even

world identity. The results of my research study will be discussed at large in the following sections.

1. On the multi-cultural dimension of some of the English textbooks used in the Romanian high-schools

Even if everybody talks about it, “culture” is one of those concepts which are not very easily defined. This happens because the concept of culture is an extremely complex one, as it is also revealed by the manner in which it is defined in the dictionary. Thus, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2006: 382) defines culture as:

- a) (in a society) the beliefs, way of life, art, and customs that are shared and accepted by people in a particular society
- b) (in a group) the attitudes and beliefs about something that are shared by a particular group of people or in a particular organization
- c) (art/ music/ literature) activities that are related to art, music, literature, etc.

For many years, the cultural aspects of the foreign language textbooks referred to history and artistic products, that is to aspects covered by definition (c). More recently, methodologists have started to recommend a concept of culture understood as the ways in which the society constructs the meaning of the people’s lives and gives it expression, which is covered by definition (a). It seems that the meanings rendered by definition (b) have been more or less ignored by the English language courses, although they refer to aspects of great importance for any competent user of a foreign language, especially if he/she intends, for example, to study abroad or to become member of an international organization.

In order to identify the kind of cultural and multi-cultural input offered by the English textbooks used in high schools, I analysed the upper-intermediate and advanced levels of three types of textbooks: *Upstream*, *Gold* and *Click On*. I want to stress that my intention is not to draw a comparison between these textbooks or between various levels of the same type of textbook. My purpose is to identify the incidences of cultural learning revealed by these textbooks and to discuss them from a qualitative perspective, with a view to identifying, on the one hand, the kind of “culture” that they refer to, and, on the other, their multi-cultural dimension.

1.1. Types of cultural occurrences in the English textbooks

In my approach to the type of cultural components in the textbooks under analysis, I will rely on the widely-used distinction between the “big C” culture and the “little c” culture (e.g. Chastain 1988, Lee 2009, Kramsch 2013, Raigon Rodriguez and Larrea Espinar 2015). The “big C” culture is the one that has been traditionally taught with standard national language, covering topics such as arts, history, geography, religion, education, festivals and customs of a foreign language society. Although useful and interesting, the knowledge specific to the “big C culture” is considered to contribute only indirectly to the students’ ability to function linguistically and socially in the foreign language culture. The communicative approach to language teaching has brought with it a more pragmatic concept of culture as way of living, which is referred to as “little c” culture. The topics discussed here refer to everyday cultural practices and customs that give a group its identity, such as family life, daily routines, eating, good manners, money, leisure activities, earning a living, humour, folklore or specific non-verbal communication. These topics involve a functional knowledge of the foreign-culture system, similar to the knowledge of the foreign language system.

As a very general comment, I must mention that all the textbooks that I have analysed contain numerous instances of cultural material. *Upstream Upper Intermediate* and *Click On*

4 have special sections in this respect: Culture Clip and Literature Corner in the former, and Culture Clip and Literature Clip in the latter. These sections deal with iconic elements from the British and American cultural space, such as great literary works (e.g. *Great Expectations*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Little Women*, *Jane Eyre*, *Moby-Dick*), emblematic figures in various fields of activity (e.g. Amelia Earhart, Florence Nightingale), specific cultural and institutional manifestations (e.g. Edinburgh Military Tattoo, Quebec Winter Carnival, Sign Language theatre interpreters in America, the St. John Ambulance Brigade), and various other elements that are considered to be symbolic of the target context (e.g. traditional British thatched houses, the tartan kilt, traditional British jobs, Millenium Seed Bank, the Millenium Stadium).

It is obvious that all the cultural occurrences discussed above represent manifestations of the “big C” culture. However, “big C” cultural topics are not restricted to these special sections, since the textbooks under analysis make use of a wide range of materials with cultural implications not only in the sections devoted to the development of reading, listening, writing and speaking, but also in the context of the grammar activities. Thus, in *Going for Gold Upper Intermediate*, *CAE Gold Plus* and *Upstream Advanced*, which do not have sections specifically devoted to culture, we find reading and listening texts which refer to important historical and literary figures like Isaac Newton, Marie Curie or Shakespeare, to famous names of the present time, like David Beckham, Christopher Reeve, Steve Jobs, or to interesting places in the world, like Machu Pichu, the Pyramids, or Antarctica. Additionally, these textbooks reveal instances of grammatical contexts characterized by cultural content, for example a correct-form-of-the verb exercise based on an extract from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, or a question-building exercise referring to Ricky Martin and Enrique Iglesias.

Even if the manifestations of the “big C” culture represent a very high percentage of the total of cultural occurrences in the textbooks under analysis, the “little c” culture is also present. Thus, all textbook types include sections devoted to teaching students a series of practical aspects meant to help them use English not only correctly, but also appropriately in a series of communicative contexts. These aspects regard, on the one hand, the elements and the conventions that students must pay attention to when they produce various types of writing (e.g. a good report, a letter of invitation, a transactional letter, an article). On the other hand, the textbooks contain activities that practise language functions, such as apologising, giving advice, making assumptions or expressing frustration. The “small c” culture nature of some of the reading, listening or use-of-English texts in these textbooks is also signalled by the topics they propose: spending and saving money, effects of consumerism in society (*CAE Gold Plus*), maintaining work – life balance (*Upstream Advanced*), significance of gestures and smile (*Upstream Upper Intermediate*, *CAE Gold Plus*), travelling in various parts of the world (*Click On 4*, *CAE Gold Plus*), a comparison between the British and the American education (*Upstream Upper Intermediate*).

It must be stressed that the manifestations specific to the “little c” culture are clearly not as well represented as those of the “big C” culture, which means that textbooks contribute to the general culture of the students, but do not help them so much with regard to the practical information and skills that they need in various types of real-life situational contexts. This entails increased responsibilities on the part of the English teachers, who are supposed to supplement the textbook input in such a way as to transmit their students a set of skills, behaviours and attitudes which are of real help in reducing the effects of the culture shock that normally accompanies the process of an individual’s acclimatizing and adjusting to the new way of life.

1.2. The multi-cultural dimension of the textbook input

With regard to the multi-cultural character of the input offered by the English textbooks I have analysed, the numerous examples offered so far create a relatively accurate image. As illustrated above, there is an obvious predominance of the cultural references to the British and American cultures, which can be labelled as the “target cultures” for the English language. However, as various researchers point out, the concept of culture understood as “the culture(s) of the target language” is considered to be limited, because, in this globalized era, students need to relate to the whole world. Shin, Eslami and Chen (2011: 266) comment in this respect that “mass-produced textbooks presenting a single target culture no longer meet the needs of students learning an international language”.

The multi-cultural input in the textbooks under analysis is presented under various forms. There are texts and exercises which familiarize students with places in different parts of the world (e.g. Mexico, Pamukkale or the great Wall of China in *Click On 4*, Tasmania in *Upstream Advance*), or with international personalities, either from the past (e.g. Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton in *Going for Gold*), or from the present (e.g. the referee Pierluigi Collina in *Upstream Advanced*). The topics of the texts used for reading, listening or grammar activities may also turn these texts into multi-cultural input. Thus, topics like gadgets and their inventors, rites of passage in different cultures (*Going for Gold*), Feng Shui, environmental problems (*Upstream Upper Intermediate*) or historic medical breakthroughs (*Upstream Advanced*) represent issues of interest for all the people, irrespective of their nationalities.

Unfortunately, the problem mentioned in my approach to the types of cultural occurrences is valid here, too: few of the materials with a multi-cultural dimension can be said to really help students in their contact with a multi-cultural world. Most of the cultural input has an informative character and is meant to raise the students’ awareness with regard to the existence of a multi-cultural world, without contributing directly to their integration into it.

2. Developing multiple identities in the EFL class: the Romanian high-school students’ perceptions

At a time when the role of learning a foreign language is that of preparing the students for living in a multicultural world, it is obvious that intercultural understanding represents an important goal of language education. Consequently, irrespective of the support offered by the English textbooks in this respect, teachers are supposed to help their students get familiarized with various facets of the culture in which they want to function as competent foreign language users. But which are the perceptions of the Romanian learners of English with regard to the effect that the process of instruction has on their cultural identity? In order to find out some answers in this respect, I conducted a mini-research study among students from two different high-schools in Timisoara. My subjects were 68 10th and 11th graders, who, on the one hand, have long experience as English learners, and, on the other, are mature enough to be able to reflect on issues of identity. As data collection instrument, I used a questionnaire with open-ended questions. Since my intention was not to make statistics, but just to reflect a certain reality, the research data was analysed only from a qualitative perspective.

My research study was focused on three aspects: the subjects’ main reasons for studying English, their perceptions of the influence exerted by learning English on their identity as citizens of Europe and/ or of the world, and the extent to which their formal English training contributed to their preparation for the real contact with a multi-cultural world. In what follows, I will briefly present the most important conclusions resulting from the analysis of the data provided by my subjects:

2.1. Motivations for learning English

Due to the close inter-relation between identity and motivation, I was interested, first of all, in the reasons underlying my subjects' desire and interest in learning English. Just as I somehow expected, the reason that was mentioned by the vast majority of the respondents referred to the status of English as a "universal language" nowadays. In this way, even if they are not fully aware of that, my subjects are motivated by the desire to develop their identity as members of the international English-speaking community.

The students offered various explanations for their motivation: from the blunt assertion that English must be learnt because "everybody speaks in English" to more elaborate formulations such as: "We are living in the era of globalization: as nations and cultures are brought together, the English language is the one to unite them.", or: "The whole world revolves around communication and ... the English language is the main provider in this respect, being the most used language worldwide."

In addition to this very general motivation for learning English, which is related to the fact that "it makes it easy to communicate everywhere in the world", the respondents mentioned various other related reasons, which, in their turn, reflect a desire to acquire a certain type of identity.

Thus, many of them mentioned the usefulness of English when they are tourists abroad: "If you go in a foreign country, you will be able to talk with someone even if you don't know their language. Nowadays, we can talk to someone from Asia, for example, and we can learn about their culture." This is only one illustration of the fact that the English learners do not perceive this language as being of help in the English-speaking countries, but all over the world. Another subject even says: "If you know English, you can go to other countries, like Egypt, Canada, Russia and so on, and manage very well."

It is interesting that one student even considers the positive subjective impression of a touristic experience as being dependent on the ability to speak English: "If you go to a foreign country and you can't say a word in English, you won't be able to enjoy the country so much."

Another reason mentioned by many of my subjects was related to the important role played by English for their future career. "It makes you more employable", says one student, while another one gets into more details: "You can have a great shot on going in other countries for work just with English as a known language, even if you are in Germany, Poland, Hungary, or other European countries."

It is not at all surprising that, in addition to these more "serious" motivations, my subjects mentioned those interests which are characteristic of their age and of the modern era, too: the Internet, the electronic devices, movies, songs, and – why not? – establishing relationships with people from other countries. In all these cases, knowing this foreign language is essential, because, as a student explains, "English surrounds us".

2.2. Identity and English language learning

In the case of the relationship between learning English and the shaping of their identity as citizens of Europe or even of the world, the answers offered by my subjects fall into two big categories. On the one hand, some of them referred to an evolution they have undergone at mental level, to having gained a deeper understanding of how things are in the world they live in. In describing this process, the students confess, for example, that the study of English had the effect of developing the brain and of helping them understand other foreign people, that it changed their perspectives regarding other cultures, and that it even taught them how to appreciate the non-Europeans.

On the other hand, some subjects consider that a good knowledge of English is an instrument for acquiring all sorts of benefits that people from other countries normally have. One of them comments in this respect: "Knowing English is the first step. Everything else comes after".

What exactly do they expect to come later? Several things, as their answers indicate. For example, you can become a student in any European country, or you can get a well-paid job abroad. Moreover, one student hopes that he/she can hide their Romanian identity behind a perfect use of English: "Once you know to communicate well in English, people might forget about your nationality and the bad reputation it brings along."

Sometimes, the advantages brought by a good competence in English are the only ones that matter, as it is the case of a subject who said: "I have to admit that I do not care about being a citizen of Europe or of the world, I only care about my career, and, for my career, it is vital to learn English."

Anyway, this is just an isolated situation, while, in the vast majority of cases, my subjects pointed to the essential role played by English for the concept of "one Europe": "Before learning how to speak English, we are just the citizens of our countries, because our mother tongue separates us from people in other countries. Speaking English lets us ... work together in order to make Europe one strong community."

In this context, a student considers that knowing English is "a kind of duty to Europe", it is the way in which we can contribute to the maintenance of this community. His/ her opinion is actually in line with one of the provisions of European Commission's White Paper on Education and Training: "Languages are also the key to knowing other people. Proficiency in languages helps to build up the feeling of being European with all its cultural wealth and diversity and of understanding between the citizens of Europe." (European Commission, 1995: 47).

2.3. Formal instruction and the creation of multiple identities

The third aspect of interest for my research study refers to the students' perceptions with regard to the role played by their formal instruction – mainly, their English teachers, and the textbooks – for their becoming self-confident citizens of Europe/ of the world.

In this case, students generally agree that both the textbooks and the English teachers represent reliable sources of input in this respect. They even give examples of lessons which help them understand the specific of other cultures, and stress the contribution made by their teachers, who always complete the information in the textbook with useful and interesting details. There are, however, subjects who express their concern that the cultural knowledge they have received during the English classes might not be enough in the case of the real-life contact with another community, when the individual has to adjust to a new social context. One student said: "Even if I speak English very well, this does not mean that I know exactly what to say, and, especially, how to say it best, in a particular situation.", while another one stressed the fact that "the cultural information about the history and the art specific to a country or region is important, but does not help you very much in your daily interaction with the people living there".

I must also mention one subject, who considers that the role played by the teachers and by the textbooks should not be overrated, because, as he/ she explains, "it all depends on you, on how much you learn it, and how much you work for improving it." I think this is a very realistic observation, because, after all, the individual's desire and ability to adapt from one social situation to another represent valuable assets in the context of today's multicultural world.

Conclusion

About two decades ago, Graddol (1999: 57) prophesied that, in the future, English “will be a language used mainly in multilingual contexts as a second language and for communication between non-native speakers”. It is obvious that, today, this prediction is a reality, because English is used most often as an instrument of communication between speakers of other languages.

The question that my paper has tried to answer is whether the English teachers and the textbooks really prepare students for the contact with a multi-cultural world. The subjects of my research study seemed to be satisfied with what they have received so far during the English classes, but this does not mean that they will have no “cultural shocks” when they are faced with a new cultural context. A solution in this respect might be the concept of Multicultural Awareness Through English (MATE), which has been put forward as a new mission for the English Language pedagogy in an era of globalization (cf. Kostoulas 2011). The MATE-informed pedagogy is characterized by the equal use of cultural elements from a great diversity of sources, that is from communities where English is used as a first, second or a foreign language. This type of pedagogy also suggests that the multicultural identity can also develop more naturally by means of social interaction among learners from different cultural backgrounds. It might be quite difficult to be put into practice, but, interestingly enough, a similar idea was also suggested by one of my subjects, who said: “I believe we can never be prepared well enough to meet a different culture until we actually get to have a conversation with someone who lives there.”

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