Cultural understanding in foreign language teaching in Colombia: Reflections from the Expanding Circle[1]

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Abstract

In this paper I intend to highlight some important points relevant to the implementation of cultural understanding (henceforth CU) in Colombia as a means to achieving a cultural competence in foreign language learning. It is suggested that CU must depart from the concept of self-awareness in terms of the revaluation of our cultural values. In this sense, it will be noticed the way how the concept of 'competence' may conspire to mislead teachers' and students' action as to what extent the actual learning of the foreign language should involve the inclusion of the cultural dimension of language (Risager, 1994) in the classroom. A close examination of the type of language associated with CU is also made. The overall question addressed in the article can be summarised as follows: What is it, and what could possibly count as culturally relevant from a global/international perspective in Colombia.

Keywords:
Colombia, Cultural understanding, cultural competence and awareness, internationalisation, globalisation, national identity, language processing, spoken English

1.Making sense of the turbulent and the violent

O what tangle web we weave
When first we practice to deceive!
Sir Walter Scott

Pour soulever un poids si lourd
Sisyphe, il faut avoir du courage.
Je ne manque pas du coeur à l'ouvrage
Mais le but est long et le temps est court
Par Irène Némirovsky pour Irène Némirovsky

In Colombia, language has been used to engage in blatant displays of selective memory. Thus, the main paradox of Colombian educational system- and of the social system in general-- is that change does not depart from a reflection on past mistakes. This flawed purposefulness is thus divorced from rationality and intentionality resulting in general misunderstanding of what we want and, essentially, of what we need to do in order to attain our goals. Consequently, Colombians are unable to understand themselves. The very idea of a nation has been reduced to national symbols or (in Witozsek's terms [1998:14]) to 'kulturspesiffikke eller "nasjonale" memer' [2]. In this vein, nothing is said about what being Colombian or Latin-American really means. This impaired self-awareness has become fertile ground for inequality and co-optation of citizen participation by greedy politicians who invoke democratic values only when election time comes around - which, strangely, has not contributed to their estrangement. Therefore, although Colombians hate their politicians, they still need their protection and they are willing to pay any price to be protected... Indeed, cronyism and chummy deal-making have always been prioritised over serious policy formulation. This model has developed a momentum of its own, modelling a social template replicated at all levels of interaction. Which is part of the problem. Since education no longer

1. The 'Expanding Circle' corresponds to the countries and territories where English is spoken as a foreign language. The term is used by Kachru (1997) in his concentric circle model.
2. 'Culturally-specific or 'national' memes'. Witozsek's formulation (1998: 14) draws on Dawkins's coinage (1976/1989): 'Kort sagt er memer karismatiske bilder, fortelinger, melodier og ritualer som forplanter seg gjennom flere generasjoner i forskjellige kulturelle tekster, former og genrer. De kan bli skabt anonymt av et samfunn, en gruppe eller en skoleretning, eller av en enkelt person'. (In short, memes are charismatic representations, stories, melodies and rituals that implant themselves for generations into different cultural texts, forms, and genres. They can be created anonymously by a society, a group, a school tradition, or a single person. (*My translation*).

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guarantees social mobility, as it once did, the new system of values favours all forms of antisocial behaviour justified by an alleged right to outwit either the corrupt central State or the next-door neighbor. Everybody--individuals and institutions-- has gotten caught up in this mentality, the so called 'cultura del atajo' or 'cultura del todo se vale'. On the other hand, the easy money trend has become an embracive phenomenon that has replaced the hard-work culture leading to the creation of a euphemistic, sanitised version of society. Admittedly, Colombian Spanish (with its extensive use of metaphors of denial) has been used as a tool to place reality in a safe distance from its speakers, who view themselves as one-dimension peripheral characters with no accountability. These are not metaphors to unite concepts across different contexts of experience. Nor is our use of euphemistic language a strategy to cope with unpleasant facts.

No wonder Colombia ranks high in The Corruption Perceptions Index as one of the most corrupt countries in the world (this ranking is based on how corrupt a country's or territory's public sector is perceived to be on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean).).

In such a context, Cultural Understanding (in capitals) represents much more than another approach to language teaching. It is intended to reshape self-awareness and identity through the medium of language. It is also a reflection from a country in which education has traditionally borrowed theories and practices with no real applicability to our context. In this sense, my agenda here is not to bring into the foreground all the problems of the Colombian educational system (cf. for example Torres Martínez, 2009). My intention is rather to call the attention to the necessity of promoting reflective thinking in a country in which teachers are confronted with a number of cultural fractures, violence, and uncertainty that surpass their knowledge and their decision-making skills. Thus, the reflective thinking invoked earlier elaborates on informed reason. As Parfit (2010: 31-32) puts it:

We can have reasons, I shall say, of which we are unaware. Suppose that I ask my doctor, "Since I'm allergic to apples, do I have any reason not to eat any other kind of food?" If my doctor knows that walnuts would kill me, her answer should be Yes. This fact gives me a reason.

Thus, my writing of this paper is a fact with a reason: it seeks to provide substance for a non-existent field of endeavour, namely CU from a Colombian perspective. Such a definition draws on three pivotal assumptions: firstly, that the multicultural character of today's world no longer accepts the traditional notion of national or local culture; secondly, that any approach to CU should depart from the speakers' ability to empathise with other people's cultural background (cultural competence/awareness); thirdly, that local cultural manifestations are the linchpin of a global perception of culture and hence a primary element for the construction of self-awareness.

The shift that characterises these premises is no longer an optional theoretical construct in our country. Whether we like it or not, we must accept the increasing global nature of human relationships, consistently propelled by economical and ideological interests. It is obvious at the same time, that the effective implementation of culture-oriented approaches to language instruction are still vague and almost fallow in many ways, whereas the ultimate goal—viz to close the gap between the target culture and learner's own culture- is still far from being attained and articulated to current learning necessities. As Ehlich (2009: 37) aptly notes 'to date, there is no comprehensive theory of the interrelations between culture and language'. This is also evident in the context of foreign language teaching in Colombia in which educational policies have been designed on the basis of imprecise assumptions regarding the treatment of culture, with no clear definable goals and often as a key to an objectified learning of grammatical structures:

> Developing a renewed understanding of language within an intercultural orientation is complex for at least two reasons. First, in languages education, the relationship among language, culture, and learning is always dynamic. Second, developing a renewed understanding does not mean discarding past under standings but reecologizing them within a more complex and integrated framework of understanding language. (Scarino 2010: 317)

Furthermore, language teaching tradition in Europe and in North America has also determined to different degrees the nature of the materials used as well as the methods and techniques applied in the classroom particularly the vision of idealised national paradigms:

Within the ideal-typical national paradigm, topics and discourses only deal with the target language countries (implicitly: first language contexts) and study and exchange trips also only go to the target language countries, in order to experience 'authentic' cultural and social relations. (Risager: 2008).

It scarcely needs to be said that cultural competence also carries a number of political and ideological implications determining the re-contextualisation of foreign cultural traits that look back to the necessity of the improvement of foreign language teaching as a vehicle for making communities sensitive to and tolerant of cultural diversity. This is especially true in times of social crisis and transition:

It is often in times of critical societal change that questions about purposes come to the fore, and a tension between "educational" and "functional"/"utilitarian" purposes appears in general debate about schools and society. (Byram, 2010: 317-318).

2. The nature of cultural understanding

'I am self only in relation to certain interlocutors'
Charles Taylor, 1989

Let me introduce this section by asking three questions: What is the role of language in our self-understanding? Are we closer to ourselves when we speak our mother tongue? Or, do we betray ourselves a little by speaking a foreign language? Taylor's reflections do not make a clear reference to either of these questions. Yet, it is clear that we are not quite ourselves to any interlocutor who we deem, belongs to a different community, even if s/he speaks our language. Precisely, I posit in this paper that foreignness and otherness are constructs that we elaborate in order to create a recognisable picture of ourselves with the clear intention to create common ground with our native community. Since contact with other cultures is a part of our own self-awareness, what we call foreign or strange are parts of our identity that needs to be explored. Now, if we think away the practical utterance exchange between members of different cultures, language seems not to play the paramount role we assume it has, which is not to belittle the role of language in human communication: 'Without that shared, impersonal basis for tying utterances (as means to ends) to intentions (to achieve some end), there could be no communication'. (Sanders, 2013:114).

There have been numerous attempts at defining the scope and nature of CU. To start answering this question we must say that cultural awareness (defined in terms of sociocultural agency)[3] is not likely to be achieved if, at the outset, we fail to define purposes other than those of culture as an 'appendage' of language learning. In this sense, it is necessary to include at least three 'non-linguistic' aspects: knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour (Risager: 94):

[T]hese three aspects are interdependent. Feelings and attitudes have, for example, links with the knowledge one has, and one's behaviour is partially determined: "[T]hese three aspects are interdependent. Feelings and attitudes have, for example, links with the knowledge one has, and one's behaviour is partially determined by one's knowledge and ability to empathize. On the other hand, the behaviour one displays forms the basis for the development or one's knowledge and emotions."

These aspects should be then introduced and implemented at different stages of the language learning and with different emphasis degrees: knowledge comprising the practical savoir faire associated with cultural and social aspects of the language studied and involving, in turn, a comparison between the target culture and learner's own culture; attitudes encompassing those attitudes and feelings as well as the reference towards one's own culture and the target culture; and, finally, behaviour, comprising cultural rules and conventions about both the target culture and one's own culture (clothing, eating, communication, etc.) as well as a contrast (search for differences) and a comparison (search for similarities) between the contexts studied.

A common error consists in reducing these three elements of culture to knowledge aspects only, ranging from simply checking differences in way-of-life patterns (lists of outward cultural differences: how do they make beds?!!?) to the analysis of the target culture by means of interpretation of behaviours and categorisation of responses as correct or incorrect and even shocking (which behaviours would probably shock a member of the target culture in a specific situation?)

At this point of our reflection, we are confronted with the necessity of defining the sort of approach to be applied in order to outline a comprehensive model for raising cultural awareness in Colombia beyond homogenising views of what counts as culturally relevant. Such paradigmatic shift entails,

A recognition that these largely homogenizing ways of conceptualizing culture do not adequately account for porous boundaries between cultural groups or substantial individual differences within them has led to an emergence of critical perspectives that separate conceptualizations of culture from social groups and look instead to ways individuals' values, beliefs, and actions are shaped by cultural experiences. (Wood et al. 2012: 123).

3.According to Van Canpernole and Williams (2012: 237-238) sociolinguistic agency can be defined 'as the socioculturally mediated act of recognizing, interpreting, and using the social and symbolic meaning-making possibilities of language. It consists of an understanding of how the use of one linguistic variant or another simultaneously reflects and creates the context in which it is used, is a performance of one's social identity at the time of utterance, and affects one's environment and interlocutor(s). Sociolinguistic agency is neither a trait characteristic nor a property of an individual; instead, it is enacted from moment to moment, from utterance to utterance, between people at the local, contextualized level'.

3. The assessment and testing of cultural understanding

The above discussion has provided us with some elements to attempt a definition of cultural understanding as the ability to actively and successfully cope with foreign cultural phenomena, as well as the capacity to empathise with foreign cultural manifestations departing from local cultural traits. This entails the integration of concepts such as difference and diversity. These are particularly relevant to our country where intolerance plays a major role in Colombia's soaring violence. Hence, it would be simplistic to analyse CU from a linguistic viewpoint only:

> [N]ot only social identities emerge when conversation is exchanged between persons, but different ideas about cultural values too. Unfortunately, even when we learn an L2, we often assume that our own views about appropriate language use are universal. But they are not. Each culture has at least some different views as to the "proper" way to greet people, to offer them hospitality, or to carry on any conversation in general. (Myers-Scotton, 2010: 177-178

On the other hand, the inclusion of cultural elements in the foreign language classroom must be responsive to specific levels of language proficiency according to the characteristics of the target language use in specific situations and contexts. In this sense, it is necessary to define specific descriptors for language-specific knowledge (grammar) as related to culture awareness (cultural skills). Prior to this, we need to define to what extent a communicative situation is 'authentic'[4] and whether it is situationally and interactionally responsive to specific communicative purposes. In this sense, there is a big difference between being culturally competent and being literate in foreign language for functional purposes. Thus, concepts like 'bialfabetización' falls short in enabling communities to construct their own identities. This is a very common mistake in a country where the concept of culture is as vague as that of identity:

> La construcción del sentido de comunidad exige a directivas, docentes, estudiantes y padres de familia plantear medidas que promuevan la construcción y consolidación de nuevas identidades, relaciones y prácticas colectivas en y fuera del aula y de las instituciones. Para tal fin, los autores creen pertinente estudiar la implementación de lo que se ha llamado 'bialfabetización', término que usualmente se comprende como el fortalecimiento de las habilidades de lectura y escritura en las dos lenguas. (Fandiño-Parra et al. 2012: 372)

In this sense, the definition of 'authentic' responses should be determined by the empowerment of local communities through the medium of language. This is a variation of what Bachman (1991) defined as situational authenticity, realised by the explicit relationship between tasks' characteristics (what is to be done) and the features of tasks in the target language (language as responsive to a task in context). Interaction, on the other hand, will be used here not as the interaction of specific purpose language ability with a classroom task, but as a pragmalinguistic exchange (native/non-native, non-native-non-native) in a communicative/culturally-endowed situation, as well as the ability to effectively engage in L2 communication, the output of which can be measured by means of descriptors defining acceptable responses related with context awareness, cultural awareness, discourse, and pragmatically-appropriate language use. These components are grouped under one main category: OUTPUT. Furthermore, the above components are configured under two INPUT categories, all of which determine a clear field of competence: prompt (setting, participants, tone/strategic competence), and register.
It is important to note that descriptors, as related 'to the nature of a communicative event' (Douglas: 2001) involve the definition of objectives, procedures for responding, structure, format, time available, and evaluation criteria. Against this background, a distinction is to be made between two aspects of input: prompt and input data. Douglas (2001) points out that prompt refers to 'specific purpose contextual information necessary for the language user to engage in a communicative task: establishing the setting, participants, purpose, and other features of the situation'. (ibid: 55-56). According to Douglas, input data 'consists of visual and/or aural material to be processed during a communicative task'. (ibid: 57). The four elements of assessment in which both cultural and linguistic criteria components are integrated can be summarised as follows:

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3. The concept of authentic language use refers to the notion of English as a foreign language (EFL). It is important to clarify that the type language use invoked here does not entail a replication of native speakers' language usages. In point of fact, the focus on what natives do implied in CU -and also predominant in EFL teaching- is now being challenged by an emphasis on what L2 learners need to be equipped with so that they might understand sociolinguistic phenomena and respond accordingly by means of context-oriented communication. More importantly, there is a pressing need for English to be associated with local identities, while the model of L2/L2 speaker communication is gaining momentum (Cogo, 2012).

a- Contextual awareness, in which proficiency is realised in terms of the extent to which a response is appropriate (pragmatically-contextualised) for the context described in the setting.
b- Cultural awareness represents the level of reciprocity in the interactive processes with the participants (native-non-native, non-native-native).
c- Discourse provides information about the extent to which learners have successfully completed a task with an appropriate tone and showing an acceptable level of strategic competence.
d- Appropriateness of language is related with the register used.

As we can see, discourse and language appropriateness are highly situational, whereas context and culture awareness are best determined by the interactional levels of proficiency reached by the participants in a given situation. What this tells us is that the pair context-culture is not always susceptible to being tested in a traditional way, but assessed. This assertion is derived from the assumption that , for example, context is not necessarily an external collection of imposed features, but the result of a communicative event determined by learners/users, in other words, 'a dynamic social/psychological accomplishment'. (Douglas: 2001: 43).

4. A pragmalinguistic model to the teaching of CU

One important aspect of the type of CU described here is the clear definition of the pragmalinguistic functions associated with spoken interaction. This entails the design of differentiated stages of learners' exposure to input, providing distinct processing phases of linguistic information. With this goal in mind, I have designed a hybrid model of pragmalinguistic development inspired in Thomas (1983) leading to the construction of 'interactional competences' (Hall, 1993, 1995). This process entails a special type of input modelled on the pattern of constructionist categorization and form-context-mappings. In this sense, Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis is in line with an information processing model according to which knowledge is consciously-constructed. According to Schmidt (1990), noticing is the conscious detection of the input's form leading to intake (and subsequent language acquisition). Schmidt's is view opposed to Krashen's dual system hypothesis (1981) of unconscious acquisition according to which conscious learning is only a 'monitor' or an 'editor' of a subconscious base of knowledge (Robinson, 1995). I claim that conscious detection (and the subsequent modelling of input leading to intake) is complementary to construction-based pedagogy. Clearly, both noticing (conscious registration of events) and construction (understanding and application of categories) underpin the structure of input in the teaching of conversational grammar in the context of CU. Because form-function-context mappings take time to become internalised (see for example longitudinal studies by Belz and Kinginger 2003, and Barron 2002), it is clear that tasks drawing on pragmalinguistic functions only (based on feedback from core participants, for example native speakers or non-native speakers) are not enough to develop pragmatic competences. One of the reasons of this is the uncertainty whether noticing tasks involve equal amounts of awareness when learners are exposed to different kinds of input (see Leow, 2001). In this sense, precise categorisation of linguistic input is also needed. Thus, the teaching of concrete-abstract pairings plays a facilitative role by fostering learners' understanding of form-function rules. In other words, noticing is the conscious detection of underlying principles, while constructions is the categorization leading to further generalization of those principles to create novel structures.

The awareness of pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic knowledge (referred to as pragmatic development) involves the ability to link pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic knowledge with face-to-face production, leading to precise syntactic and lexical processing conveying intentions (form-context-function mappings). As Jung (2005: 11) puts it:

> (…) communicating effectively and efficiently in any given language requires more than just linguisticknowledge. The ability to use this linguistic knowledge appropriately in the given socio-cultural context is also essential. Hence, pragmatics is an indispensable aspect of language ability in order for second language (L2) learners to understand and be understood in their interactions with native speakers (NSs).

To this end, it is necessary to design clear steps aimed at replicating communicative episodes whereby interactional competences of co-construction take place. These competences are different from communicative competences in that the latter are essentially context-dependent, while the former are specific to practice and, hence, embedded in interactive episodes. As Jacoby and Ochs (1995) observe, interactional competence is 'the joint creation of form, interpretation, stance, action, activity, identity, intuition, skill, ideology, emotion, or other culturally meaningful reality' (p. 171). Interactional competences are thus developed from both pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic knowledge.

5. Phases of instruction

In principle, this model of language acquisition for conversational grammar in the context of CU presupposes three phases leading to the production of interactional competences: A conceptualization phase, a realisation phase, and a consolidation-integration phase. These stages configure a flowing dynamic system facilitating a continuous development of pragmalinguistic knowledge via the interplay of pragmatic constructs with interactional competences. In this phase, the consolidation of a culture of social cooperation takes place thanks to the interaction of peripheral and core participants, who bolster each other in the learners' acquisition of pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic knowledge.

Thus, the teaching of speech elements can be summarized as follows:
(a) Teachers define speech elements such as hedging strings, vagueness tags, etc.
(b) These elements are associated with specific pragmalinguistic strategies (formulae, hedging, etc.).
(c) These categories are defined in terms of constructions (concrete-abstract pairings) presented to learners by means of both low-variance (skewed) and high-variance input, as well as noticing instances.
(d) Learners elaborate on consciously-formed input to produce pragmatic functions: pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic knowledge used in online production.

Although I intend to bypass any classification of the instructional model described in this article, my rationale for the placement of spontaneous speech grammar within the foreign language curriculum can be construed to be form-focused instruction (FFI), coupled with Meaning-focused instruction (MFI). It is evident, on the other hand, that my detailed description of input structuring in a previous section places the emphasis on form (at least at the beginning of the process) resulting in type of FFI usually referred to as 'focus-on-forms' (Ellis, 2001).

5.1. Conceptualization phase

In this phase, learners elaborate on skewed input (low-variance samples of conversational English). The content is explicitly presented to the learners by the teacher who controls both topic introduction and lesson pacing. The instruction is divided into two main parts: (a) identification (guidance) and (b) contextualisation (guided practice). Such an orientation towards categorisation provides learners with explicit frameworks for structural analysis of linguistic structure endowed with pragmalinguistic function: Firstly, learners identify form-function relation (skewed input: concrete-abstract pairings) between specific syntactic constituents; secondly, learners associate form with context ; thirdly, learners are allowed to explore the pragmalinguistic functions of language, a process that spurs them on to engage in further categorisation.

5.2. Realisation phase

This phase presupposes the development of three pragmatic constituents: comprehension of implicatures, recognition of pragmatic appropriateness, and production of pragmatic functions. These constituents ground up through the interpretation of interactional competences defining the scope of the pragmalinguistic output. Classroom activities for this phase draw on high-variance input (i.e. further categorisation of the pragmalinguistic function of language) supported by a copious interaction and cooperative work (expert-novice/peer relationship). In this sense, learners are encouraged to draw from their own identity and cultural background as resources from communication.

5.3. Consolidation-integration phase

There is admittedly an overlap of different types of tasks (noticing and categorising)[7] in this phase. All activities are aimed at familiarising learners with pragmalinguistic contexts of use through the deployment of conversational functions in form of pragmatic constituents leading to interactional competences in specific learning cycles.

There seems to be an inevitable gap between the pedagogy of conversational grammar and its possible applications to promote spontaneous speech interactions in the classroom. This concern accords with the complexities intrinsic to the process of implementing task-as-workplan (i.e. the actual classroom tasks, according to Breen, 1989), requiring form-function tasks leading to the development of pragmalinguistic competences.

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5. Noticing is the way in which hearers bring into conscious or unconscious focus certain language production facts (Preston 2013: 95).

In a similar vein, the structure of the input described earlier in this paper, demands a certain amount of syntactic 'correctness' that could create tensions in between teachers' expectations and those of learners during the task-in-process (ibid.1989). Since the purpose of the class is to facilitate the learners' engagement in conversation (talk-in-interaction), teachers are supposed to contribute to maintain the interactional dynamics of meaning negotiation observed in actual spontaneous speech. Speech functions such as shared context, real-time processing, restricted repertoire, and reference reduction could hardly be replicated in the classroom if teachers were to control prescriptively every aspect of learners' interlanguage while engaged in conversational activities. It is thus evident, on the other hand, that learners' socio-cultural background has a role in the process. Members of extended-family cultures like Chinese, Korean, or Latin-American, are very cautious language learners deploying a range of face-saving strategies. Anglo-Saxon cultures, on the other hand, foster active participation and interactivity in the classroom. These variables must be considered as a lens through which to explore the pragmalinguistic dimension of multilingualism as well.

6. Internationalisation or globalisation?

Up to this point of our analysis, we can conclude that any approach to culture must involve the three aspects of cultural understanding, namely knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour; second, that the study of cultural aspects must provide the learner with an empathetic view of the national aspects of the target culture as well as with a comprehension of transnational processes; and thirdly, that assessment is the most suitable way to account for a process of cultural awareness and contextual construction.

In this sense, the inclusion of intercultural aspects as a part of cultural understanding has become a necessary redefinition to suit a highly complex global reality. Admittedly, the trend is to construe cultural phenomena as a series of macro (global) variables interacting with sets of micro (local) variables of highly unpredictable nature. This does not necessarily entail the destruction of national cultures as a somewhat homogeneous set of inherited, cultural values historically associated with a territory and a language, but also the inevitable transformation of social identities: 'The sociological axiom is 'all differences are evaluated and ranked" in the dynamics that generate and reproduce societies'. (Weigert, 2010: 250).

As a matter of fact, the terminology used in fields other than education, foreign language teaching, second language teaching, etc., reflect this mentality. As an example we could mention relatively new coined terms such as cross-cultural awareness, issued specifically from the business world. Thus, cross-cultural training has become a must for business people or managers with international action. Such a specificity draws on a reduction, namely the characterisation of culture as possessing either internal (attitudes, values, beliefs, thoughts, etc.) or external features (architecture, clothing, body language). Consequently, the pressure of economic variables has turned cultural aspects into an appendage of economic concerns in a deterministic framework of economic advantage measured in terms of Culture Intelligence as a prerequisite for international leadership:

> Cultural intelligence (CQ) is an individual's capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings (…). CQ is a state-like malleable capability that can be enhanced by education and experience. (...) (G)lobal competence such as being able to manage in situations characterised by cultural diversity is a precondition for effective international leadership. (Kim and Van Dyne, 2012: 273).

The divisive effect of macro-economic variables and the resulting standardisation of cultures have been justified by the necessity of international acceptability, which has led, in turn, to numerous conceptual misinterpretations placing the cultural question under the shadow of concepts such as globalisation and internationalisation. The divisive effect of these macro trends and their demand for standardisation has come into conflict with the necessity for international acceptability and competitiveness.

Interestingly enough, the apparent differences between the terms appear to be negligible next to their striking intrinsic similarities. Indeed, this relation could possibly be best defined in symbiotic terms, the internationalisation being a more politically correct term, and at the same time compensating for the origins of globalisation as a concept issued from the economical and sociological theory (a quarter giving rise to the 'international dream'). We could argue that internationalisation is an independent strategy having an impact on the educational field. Even if we fail to find a common ground with the ideological character of the acceptations of terms like internationalisation or globalisation, it is clear that the nature of the national states, the pervasive influence of media, and the international system itself, determine the status quo demanding further development in the global agenda of capitalism.

Going back to the notion of cultural competence, it is evident that an argument for it may be based on several distinctive factors: first, the undeniable global character of all sorts of information exchange; secondly, the implicit or overt assumption that the Western civilization does not convey a sort of more refined or sophisticated set of cultural forms; thirdly, the fact that the society in the multicultural world is better understood as a homogeneous conglomerate of differing ethnicities, cultures, beliefs, etc. ,

striving for a consensus; fourth, the economical component of the global question backing up the spread of more powerful and efficient media and forms of communication; and finally, the role of world languages vis-à-vis their cultural load and influence (cultural colonialism). In sum, it would appear that the complexity of the variables reviewed above makes it difficult to implement strategies leading to the implementation of the cultural dimension of language. We can however trace some lines of action departing from the following premises:

1. The local culture as a sum of human diversity.
2. The global culture-language pair as a means to better understanding cultural differences and similarities.
3. The local culture as mirroring a fundamental part of the global.

This stage of development involves a redefinition of cultural items in terms of their relevance for both the local and the target culture.

7. Conclusion

Thoughts, like fleas, jump from man to man. But they don't bite everybody'
Stanislaw Lec

As the attentive reader must have noticed, I have not used the term 'bilingual' in this paper. Admittedly, I want to distance myself from a term that has become a byword among language teachers, policy-makers, and L2 learners as a means to refer to specific levels of proficiency in English. 'Bilingualism' has thus become an all-purpose tool used by nearly everyone both in the public and the private sector, either as a promise of professional success , oftentimes, wrongly associated with English for Academic Purposes, EAP. Hence, the separation from comprehensive theoretical frameworks for language instruction (what should be taught) and practical needs (what our population needs to learn) can be explained by the idiosyncrasies of our educational system (cf. Torres Martinez, 2013: 40).

It turns out that this form of bilingualism lacks a structurally consistent acquaintance of local communities, especially those that have been historically underrated (creoles, indigenous communities, African-American). This failure in turn gives rise to one-dimensional constructions of culture with no allegiance to local cultural practices and traditions. In the final reckoning, it appears that we have gotten the short end of a double-end stick by embracing a manipulated version of a prestigious language variety shot, stuffed, and mounted for us by the British Council. The fundamental issue in the adoption of such rigid associations of specific language varieties (RP English) with particular base camps (The UK), is that both learners and teachers are viewed as recipients having general measurable amounts of linguistic abilities irrespective of their intellectual diversity and individual uniqueness.

As for local practitioners, they have been unable thus far to put a lie to the assumption that 'nativelikeness' is the ultimate goal of English language teaching in Colombia. In this sense, appeals for a 'more pluralistic view of the professional development of EFL teachers that values local knowledge' (González Moncada, 2009: 183), or for an 'equitable plan (...) that respects local knowledge and culture' (Usma, 2009: 19), sound to glib, too bitter, and too phoney to be useful. Such remarks are driven by void academic pursuits and the lazy luxury of relief after writing politically-correct papers 'unveiling' what is obvious without providing real substance conducive to context-bound solutions. The best proof that this impression is genuine is the paucity of research in the field of Applied Linguistics in Colombia. Thus, studies concerning language learning strategies, cognition, pragmatics, or EAP literacy, capable of yielding truly novel insights into the way we actually learn foreign languages, are missing. As we can see, the most serious threat to our educational system comes from within. Unfortunately, no one sees this vulnerability coming down the road, especially from the safety of the academic ivory towers, turned into a quicksand of market-driven, pseudo-scientific thought, bureaucracy, and shameless dishonesty.
There is comfort in that. This is probably a decision motivated by denial, the pretention that you are not part of the problem, or that it does not affect you. I do prefer constructive confrontation, the exploration of alternatives to make a change. The road to the accomplishment of some essential social or intellectual goal (of perfection, if you like) entails a healthy amount of imperfection and disappointment. But perfection, though flawed, can never be reached with inaction. That is as good as it gets.

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