

TOPIC 4.

VALUING THE KNOWLEDGE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES AS AN INSTRUMENT OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PEOPLE AND PEOPLES. INTEREST IN LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY THROUGH THE KNOWLEDGE OF A NEW LANGUAGE AND ITS CULTURE

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is a fact that modern European societies show an increasing concern for population to have access to an effective acquisition of foreign language (FL), enabling people to satisfy their communicative needs. In this sense, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001) intends to overcome the barriers of languages, providing a valuable framework through methodological guidelines and a common basis for the description of evaluation indicators and content. Besides, our State Legislation, in **LOMCE 8/13, 9th December**, for the improvement of quality in Education and **RD.126/14, 28th February**, establishing the basic Curriculum for Primary Education; are also enclosed in the Official Curriculum of the Autonomous Community of (reference to regional curriculum), which considers the knowledge of a foreign language and the development of basic communicative competence as one of the main objectives to be achieved along this stage. The term communicative competence refers to enabling the learners to use the language as an instrument of communication through oral and written means, which implies using it to express and exchange meanings with the aim of applying different strategies and skills.

Given this, it cannot be denied that our Spanish Educational System has gone through diverse changes along history, affecting the approaches to teach a foreign language, from the learning chunks of language by heart and large lists of vocabulary in isolation; to new communicative ones focused on using the language to communicate and interact in diverse contextualized situations. In this regard, we should point out that the teaching of foreign languages has been strongly affected by technologies in the last few decades. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the internet have not only provided FL teachers with a massive amount of motivating resources to implement the use of the English language as a means of communication in the FL classroom, as we will see in what follows; but also with the possibility to get students to make real use of the language in different familiar contexts.

In this sense, throughout this topic we shall deal with the importance of FLs in our society and cultural dimension of English in the world. Then, we will analyse culture in the FL class. A conclusion summing up all the information relates to this topic will follow to end up with the bibliography consulted for its elaboration.

2. VALUING THE KNOWLEDGE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES AS AN INSTRUMENT OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PEOPLE AND PEOPLES

The next point to be developed in this paper makes explicit reference to the **appreciation of the FL** as a useful instrument to communicate, solve problems, face tasks, and the like. Notwithstanding, getting learners to see this usefulness; and what is more, getting them to develop a taste for the FL area may turn into a hard nut to crack, unless we consider that it is the teacher's role to **motivate students** and create the appropriate conditions for this kind of practical learning to take place.

In the field of FLL, **motivation** is widely recognized as one of the key factors that determine the learners' attainment of the intended goals; in this case, the development of a certain degree of communicative competence. Indeed, motivation serves as the driving force that permits teachers generate learning and helps learners sustain the long and usually hard journey of acquiring a FL. In this sense, the word "motivation" is typically defined as the forces that account for the arousal, selection, direction, and continuation of behaviour; or in other words, the factors within an individual which arouse, maintain and channel behaviour towards a goal.

On the other hand, experienced FL teachers are aware of the fact that children do not come to the English lessons like blank sheets of paper; but rather they have views about and **attitudes** towards learning English. According to **Moon** (2000), these attitudes are formed by the social environment in which they grow up and by the people around them. In this sense, it is of utmost importance to be aware of these attitudes as they can influence pupils' desire and motivation to learn and ultimately their success in learning a foreign language.

In more specific terms, **FL learners' attitudes** in Primary Education are mainly influenced by the teaching methods, which may turn the FL area into a fun, active and engaging task; by the need

of using the FL outside the class, for example by using the classroom blog to listen to a song; or by personal preferences. It seems clear that children vary widely in their attitudes; however, it is also likely that their attitudes can change according to their experiences. In accordance, the **teacher's role** is undoubtedly a decisive factor in the development of our learners' positive attitudes and motivation. Some prime examples may be the selection of appropriate learning materials, planning interesting learning activities and creating a positive classroom environment.

In what follows, we introduce a **framework for the implementation of motivational teaching practice**, analyzing several main elements:

Creation of basic motivational conditions. In this regard, the FL teacher is in charge of promoting a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom; and a cohesive group's relations through appropriate norms. There is no shadow of a doubt that the creation of a positive learning environment may be the difference between success or failure in the implementation of an active methodology. In **Carol Read's** (2007) words, "children don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care". These words entail a whole conception of the teaching action at early ages, in which the volitional factors play a key role, accepting that learning can be more productive and indeed take place more easily when there are positive attitudes. In Read's particular framework ("The C-Wheel"), she considers the role of the **context** in which children will carry out activities, which needs to be relevant and allow for discovery and construction of meaning; the learning **coherence**, ensuring that the sequence of activities range from simple to more complex and demanding; the development of the learners' **curiosity** and **sense of community**, so that children feel challenged, but at the same time supported by the teacher, their peers and accepted by the learning community; and finally **care**, as children need to feel they are cared about as individuals.

Generating initial motivation and maintaining a positive attitude. At early stages of FLL, children are especially receptive to the fun component and the surprise element. In this sense, introducing lessons through familiar and contextualised learning scenarios is indispensable to engage them and attract their interest. Therefore, as we shall subsequently illustrate, the use of games, stories, songs and playful interactions is at the heart of motivating teaching practice in FLT. Notwithstanding, there is an intrinsic value in the teaching of FLs which can be associated to the learners' interest.

Dörnyei (2001) suggests a simple framework to arouse students' expectancy of success:

Provide sufficient preparation. The perceived likelihood of success does not depend only on how difficult the task is, but also on how well the learners are prepared for the task. Pre-task activities have become standard features in modern language teaching methodologies, and these tasks increase success potential.

Offer assistance. If the students know that they can count on the teacher's ongoing guidance and help while they are engaged in a learning activity, this knowledge will naturally increase their expectation of success.

Peer's help. One reason why cooperative, small group tasks are particularly motivating is that students know that they also have their peers working towards the same goals.

Make the success criteria as clear as possible. Students can only expect to be successful with confidence if it is quite clear what 'success' means in the particular context. The criteria for success need to be obvious to them from the beginning of learning if they are to know which elements of their performance and production are essential.

Provide motivational feedback to increase the learners' satisfaction. The use of caring and supportive language, together with a friendly attitude on the part of the teacher, are crucial factors that influence the learners' motivation. These strategies include the consideration of **error** as a natural and indispensable factor that must be accepted as intrinsic to the learners' construct of the foreign language. As experienced FL teachers would acknowledge, there is no point in trying to engage students in a real communicative situation, if we stop the exchange of meaning at every error they commit.

Nevertheless, maintaining interest requires an adequate level of **challenge**. In this regard, we must consider a balance of linguistic and cognitive challenge, building up activities not too easy, nor too difficult. At this point, the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), based on Vygotsky, is especially helpful to design activities which bridge the gap between what children are able to carry

out without any help or support and what is simply out of reach for them and, consequently, cannot be attempted.

The initial idea of getting learners to value the **FL as a useful instrument of communication**, must go through the application of adequate learning contexts which recreate real-life situations. Additionally, these learning contexts should entail some kind of fun component, considering the age range in Primary Education. In this sense, we know that **songs** and **games** are invaluable resources to stir learners up, getting them to practise with the FL in a “hidden way”. Apart from being intrinsically motivating, games are a source of “authentic” contexts, because children need to use the FL with a purpose embedded in the game itself. This “**hidden practice**” is actually one of the greatest advantages of using games, as children are engaged naturally in them, whether they deal with any of the four skills and require an effort on the part of the students. Besides, playful activities add variety to the range of learning situations, they “**lighten**” **more formal teaching** and can help to renew pupils’ energy, and they help create a **fun atmosphere**.

As a final remark to this point, we cannot forget the use of **Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)** to provide a communicative framework for learners to communicate. This communication can be highly effective if we set a partnership exchange with another school. This activity can be motivating for learners to develop an interest towards real use of the FL and the FL culture. Some European programs like **e-twinning** or **Erasmus+** may provide a safe digital environment for students to meet other European children and share some experiences that enrich their communicative and sociocultural competences. The experience of implementing European programs in the FL class, entails practising the language communicatively; but also meeting new aspects from the FL culture in a highly motivating way.

3. INTEREST IN LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY THROUGH THE KNOWLEDGE OF A NEW LANGUAGE AND ITS CULTURE

The Spanish educational lawful framework stresses the cultural fact in the learning of FLs in its different curricular elements. In this sense, **RD 126/14, Feb 28th** establishes that the different content blocks must cover **sociocultural and sociolinguistic aspects** (i.e. courtesy norms, customs, values, beliefs and attitudes, non-verbal language, and the like). Moreover, the evaluation criteria and learning indicators which develop the curriculum in our Autonomous Community (**regional curriculum**) comprise the set of abilities that students should mobilise in communicative situations contextualized in the FL culture.

The **linguistic diversity** of the English language is a fact that students meet in plenty of occasions in their listening tasks. This reality may lead to an immediate question: **Which variety to focus on?**

In England there are some speakers who do not have a local accent. One can tell from their speech that they are British (and very probably English) but nothing else. This non-localizable accent of England is what phoneticians refer to as **Received Pronunciation (RP)**. It is characteristic of the upper class and (to an extent) of the upper-middle class. Yet this does not involve that the linguistic aspects of this variety make it better than the rest. In the United States, it is true not just of a small minority, but of the majority, that their accent reveals little or nothing of their geographical origins. They are the speakers of **General American (GA)**. This is a convenient name for the range of the United States accents that have neither an eastern nor a southern “sound”.

From a **methodological perspective**, we know that **the communicative approach** is not focused on reproducing one of these traditionally considered models of pronunciation; but rather to get their meaning across, in spite of the accent of the interlocutor. According to **Harmer (2001)**, it has become customary for language teachers to consider that **intelligibility as the prime goal of pronunciation teaching**. This implies that the student should be able to use pronunciation which is good enough for them to be always understood. If their pronunciation is not up to this standard, there is a serious danger that they will fail to communicate effectively.

If we want our FL students to become effective communicators in English, we should ensure that students are provided with variety in accents, hence the importance of presenting different models. As **Brewster, Ellis and Girard** (1992) note, we know that our students' pronunciation will only be as good as the **models** they hear and their main model will always be the FL teacher. Nevertheless, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) has brought about a massive amount of possibilities for FL teachers to gather authentic models in order to introduce students to a great variety of English accents. Seen in this light, in modern FL teaching, the teacher should not be the only model. Rather, we should open our students' possibilities through the introduction of different varieties of English through models from different backgrounds.

On the other hand, the **cultural component** represents a source of linguistic knowledge, motivation, learning contexts, etc. In broad terms, the different things we know and know how to do, determines our culture. Our culture also includes the ways in which knowledge is acquired and communicated, formulated and stocked. Culture largely defines our social identity, which is conferred by virtue of our membership of the various social groups and sub-groups which exist within society.

The wide term culture and its relation with the FL can be approached through the concept of **socio-cultural competence**.

According to **Celce-Murcia** (2007), "**sociocultural competence** refers to the speaker's pragmatic knowledge, i.e. how to express messages appropriately within the overall social and cultural context of communication. This includes knowledge of language variation with reference to sociocultural norms of the target language". To complete this definition, **Celce-Murcia** (2007) highlights several sociocultural **variables in this competence**:

- **Social contextual factors:** the participants' age, gender, status, social distance and their relations to each other.
- **Stylistic appropriateness:** politeness strategies, a sense of genres and registers.
- **Cultural factors:** background knowledge of the target language group, major dialects/regional differences, and cross cultural awareness.

As **Savignon** (2002) points out, **sociocultural competence** implies a broader view of Canale and Swain's sociolinguistic competence and extends beyond linguistic forms to the social rules of language use. Therefore, the development of sociocultural competence requires understanding of the context in which the FL is used, including the roles of the participants, the information they exchange and the function of the communicative act. In a multicultural communicative situation, participants are not only exposed to the cultural meanings involved in the language itself, but also to social conventions such as appropriateness of content, nonverbal language and tone; which influence the way messages are understood and interpreted.

Nevertheless, cultural knowledge is not the only variable to take into account in sociocultural competence. Instilling some **cultural sensitivity** in our students, generating empathy and openness towards other cultures, is essential to develop this competence. By doing so, we will be fostering willingness to participate in active exchanges of communication, considering and accepting the cultural differences which emerge in language use.

The main methodological consequence in relation to the development of **sociocultural aspects** in our FL curriculum is that they **must be integrated in the different elements of the FL programming**. In fact, in many regards, **culture is taught implicitly**, embedded in the linguistic activities that students carry out. Sometimes, depending on the age of the students, FL teachers make them aware of the cultural features reflected in the language they are learning.

However, it is the teacher's task to define which aspects of the English speaking countries may be attractive and appealing to our students. In what follows, we suggest some possibilities:

- Popular traditions and celebrations: Halloween, Thanksgiving, Guy Fawkes....
- Popular songs and tales.
- Names of important people and cities.
- Customs: timetables, typical breakfast, etc.
- Holidays and Vacations: Independence Day, Thanksgiving, Halloween, etc.
- Hobbies and leisure activities: popular sports (cricket, baseball, etc...).

The FL teacher may provide these cultural aspects through contextualized activities where the learners feel they are doing something with some purpose; and there are some aspects that facilitate the integration of sociocultural aspects in the FL class, amongst them:

- Familiarity of students with English speaking countries (particularly the USA) and some of their cultural features due to TV, music or the internet influence.
- Many students feel attracted by sociocultural elements of other countries.
- The extraordinary amount of resources available to FL teachers through information and communication technologies.

A final question may be: how to take culture to the FL class in an integrated way? FL teachers must design activities to enable the learner to develop sociocultural awareness, encouraging comparative analysis with the learners' culture. The strategies may include the use of **role-plays** (i.e. some students act as visitors to their own country and meet with Spanish people acting as themselves). Amongst the advantages of roleplaying, we may highlight that it provides **experiential learning** and real and purposeful use of the FL.

The **choice of topics** for comparative study of sociocultural aspects requires careful selection. As an example, we can work on **Halloween** and relate it to different traditions in our country, i.e. All Saints Day. In fact, these comparisons can be taken to nearly any topic: music, sports, traditional food, going shopping, hobbies, etc.

Similarly, we cannot forget the use of **Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)** to provide a communicative framework for learners to meet the FL culture in real contexts. This can be highly effective if we set a partnership exchange with another school, for example. This activity can be motivating for learners to develop an interest towards real use of the FL and the FL culture. In this sense, some European programs like **eTwinning** or **Erasmus+** may provide a safe digital environment for students to meet other European children and share some experiences that enrich their communicative and sociocultural competences. The experience of implementing European programs in the FL class, entails practising the language communicatively; but also meeting new aspects from the FL culture in a highly motivating way.

To round off this point, it is worth illustrating with a methodological proposal to enhance the cultural component. **Holiday project:** Projects offer students the possibility to collaborate and share their knowledge using the FL. In addition, through "investigation tasks" learners may discover relevant facts and aspects of the FL culture. In this activity, students in groups are preparing a journey to some English speaking capitals (i.e. London, New York, Canberra, etc). Therefore, they shall search and scan some pre-selected websites to gather information about interesting places, food, traditions, etc. Before getting students to work, the teacher must provide them with clear instructions. To do so, each group shall be given clues on the type of information required and some tips to make the search easier. Once they have collected the data, they write down relevant information in a chart considering different aspects (i.e. interesting places in London: The Houses of Parliament; typical food: fish and chips; some other activities: a ride in The London Eye, etc).

Finally, with the help of the teacher, students can report back to their classmates and present through the Interactive White Board (IWB) some photographs of the places they have chosen.

4. CONCLUSION

As we have seen along this topic, getting learners to **appreciate the knowledge of a FL** requires creating appropriate and **attractive learning** scenarios which result motivating. This contextualized learning is an ideal framework to apply communicative tasks in which the FL culture is covered implicitly. We have also exposed that learning a FL does not only deal with linguistic aspects, since sociocultural competence will be a fundamental element of the students' learning process as they are learning a language, not just a list of vocabulary.

As a final consideration, language and culture cannot be approached in isolation, since the bonds between them rely in their very nature. Indeed, all these aspects shall eventually give shape to our learners' **communicative competence**.

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