

## ***Teaching English in an intercultural perspective***

### **INTRODUCTION**

Very often teachers overlook the fact that teaching English as a foreign language constitutes in its own right an intercultural event. This means that not only languages, their structures and functions must be contrasted, but also cultural topics ought to be included and given relevance in our teaching. The purpose of this paper is to show through some examples how LET can contribute to the intercultural education of the students

Although cultural aspects have always been taught, we consider that nowadays applied pragmatics is acquiring more relevance, as the result of the globalization of economy and business, and the interchange of people from different origin, classes and educational background. Also the spread of tourism and other activities related to this industry in Cuba and other countries are demanding more training and knowledge of social and cultural aspects. An increasing interest in this aspect has also become apparent.

Course designers and teachers are thus paying more attention to applied pragmatics, because it is essential that the students (the future professionals) will be able to interact in different situations, places and spheres.

We believe, however, that whenever we teach the habits and values prevailing in those English speaking nations, we should reinforce our own habits and values. Teachers should be as objective as possible because it is true that some students usually idealize those foreign patterns as perfect or superior.

Summarizing – the students should be taught how other people live and behave in a given situation. The foreign language teacher should be prepared to debate such issues in class. It is our objective to give the teachers of English as a Foreign Language a useful tool to teach English in an intercultural perspective.

### **DISCUSSION**

It is a fact that in the UK, USA, Canada and other English speaking countries there is an important and increasing number of immigrants. They bring with them not only their mother languages, but also their own culture and experience. They all make a contribution to the culture of English speaking countries. For instance, the influence of Indian music on the music of the early 60's in England, is a well known fact. That was the case with Beatles' Magical Mystery Tour, where the use of Indian instruments produced a surprising result.

There is always an important contribution of very diverse language to English. To illustrate this, we may mention the word *bistro* commonly used in England for small and cheap restaurants. This word comes from the Russian language. There are different cultures constantly interacting.

In the following chart we can find a taxonomy developed by H.H. Stern<sup>1</sup> of ways we can look at other cultures.

## COMPONENTS OF CULTURE

1. The family unit and the personal sphere
2. The social sphere
3. The economic sphere
4. The environmental sphere
5. The political sphere
6. The religious and ideological sphere

Different examples can illustrate these five components. In different societies there prevail different values, although we should say that there are values which are present in all societies as solidarity and friendship.

An election day in different countries can illustrate the political sphere of culture and promote discussion in class.

## PEACEFUL CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflicts are often resolved by peaceful means. However, sometimes people resort to forceful or violent conflict resolution. If both sides in conflict recognize that they have a different perception of the problem, the probability that a conflict can be resolved peacefully is improved.

Students usually give their point of view. What is really difficult is that they pay careful attention to a different opinion and give a proper response.

Attitudes can affect the outcome of a conflict. Let's have a look at these two examples:

### EXAMPLE 1

You went to bed early at night after working all day. You are awakened at 2 o'clock by young people listening to music and shouting. You threaten them, they insult you. You call the police.

The above situation is a lose-lose one. The young people's party is over by the police, because they didn't have a permission, you couldn't sleep and now those young boys and girls hate you.

The following example is a win-win situation. Both win.

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<sup>1</sup>Smith, David C. Teaching English in a World at Peace, pp.171-187.

## EXAMPLE 2

You are working with a hammer. An old man knocks at your door and also you stop working because he can't sleep. He seems a nice person. You apologize because you thought it was earlier.

We should educate the future generations in order that they appreciate peace-keeping in all levels. "Long term peace implies permanently low levels of conflict and prevailing attitudes of loving, caring and peacefulness among persons and also nations around the globe".<sup>2</sup> (Harman, p.153)

"Peace is striving towards an ideal of harmony at the personal and social levels. It involves organizing our world under the principles of justice, equality and human rights".<sup>3</sup> (Havelsruud, p. 341)

There are many activities that lend themselves to understanding and appreciating the cultures of the people who speak English. The festivals and holidays celebrated by a country usually can be revealing. There are always events or other significant elements of culture. For example, what people dress or eat in those holidays. Similarities and differences are easily explained in that way.

Popular music often expresses the concerns, the happenings and the aspirations of people in a society. Music and songs have proved to be effective when appreciating the differences and similarities among peoples and their different languages.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The English teacher can help to build a better world and a better understanding among different peoples.
- Intercultural teaching implies the teaching of values, and a positive attitude when discussing.
- Values such as justice, tolerance, knowledge and creativity can help to build peaceful families, peaceful communities and a peaceful world.
- We recommend to teach English in an Intercultural perspective giving great relevance to the aspects outlined in this paper, to promote better citizens in the future Cuban society.

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<sup>2</sup>Loc. Cit.

<sup>3</sup>Loc. Cit.