



Teaching EFL with a hidden agenda: Introducing intercultural awareness through a grammar lesson

Guest post by Paola Giorgis

Is there anything more standardized than grammar? How can it then work to dismantle the standard, favoring non-standardized and non-stereotypical readings and representations of individual and collective cultural identities, and promoting intercultural understanding?

Here's a brief example of an actual unit of two lessons, which I conducted some years ago, on simple past during a course on English as a Foreign Language.

The context

- a vocational high school with an art curriculum in Turin, a city in the northwest of Italy
- a class of 25 students, the majority of Italian origin, a couple of students from Morocco, another three from Romania, and two from Peru. Most of the students of Italian origin came from families who had experienced migration, belonging to the third generation of what is known in Italy as the “internal immigration”, a phenomena which, from approximately the Fifties to the Seventies, moved families and work force from the south of Italy to the industries of the north.

The prequel

Observing the students' behavior in asides in class, as well as in the liminal spaces/times of the school (in the corridors, during breaks, etc.), I had noticed that these adolescents tended to shape and re-shape groups (as well as couples) according to multiple changing variables that had nothing to do with criteria such as descent or origin, but rather depended on affiliations, usually related to some youth subcultures (music, in particular hip hop; some explicit codes regarding clothing and hairstyles, or implicit codes like special ritual gestures, etc.). Though many were the signals of these new affiliations, the creation of in- and out- groups was mainly linguistically marked through the practice of code-switching, language crossing and cross-linguistic interactions.

The motivation

In this class there had been no episodes of intolerance between groups from different nationalities or ethnicities. Actually, the most marginalized student was an Italian girl coming from a small village in the mountains nearby the city. Her naive and rural style contrasted with the urban attitudes, clothing and behavior of her peers, both of Italian and of non-Italian origins. Thus, the motivation to structure a unit with intercultural features did not come from any urgency to address a specific problem, but rather from the opportunity to make students aware that, in one way or another, we are all migrants – the girl from the mountains included.

The lesson and the assignment

In the students' book, the unit on simple past began with a reading in which a teenager was speaking about the adult he most admired: his grandfather, an Irish emigrant to the USA. In three short paragraphs he explained why he liked him, drawing a general outline of his life – and using the simple past.

So, after reading and commenting on these paragraphs by only referring to the structure of the simple past, I invited my students to go home and write three short paragraphs with the same structure: identifying an adult they admired, the reason why they admired her/him, and some information about her/his life. The three paragraphs were to be written on a separate piece of paper with no name on it. As I expected, students came out with stories about their grandparents or aunts/uncles – apparently, parents are not generally much appreciated by this age group, while grandparents or other significant relatives are.

The overt assignment then was “practice-the-simple past”, and not “tell-the-class-about-the-story-of-your-family”. So, students focused on grammar, but they were actually working on several other issues: discovering or recollecting family stories, interviewing uncles, listening to their grandfathers, etc.

The language

Foreign language, of course, played a fundamental role. The fact that English was *equally* foreign to all students presented many advantages. First of all, it put all students, both native Italian and non-native Italian, in the same condition of disadvantage – or, to be more explicit, disadvantage in access to language repertoire depended on factors which had nothing to do with nationality or ethnicity. In this way, as it is often reported in literature (Kramsch 1993, 2009; Witte & Harden 2015), by detaching students from their mother tongue, the experience of a foreign language can allow them to develop a meta-linguistic awareness of how far linguistic and cultural features are situated and constructed, “opening up linguistic and intercultural spaces, that is, the de-familiarization and alienation of the familiar, taken-for-granted ways of talking, thinking, feeling and behaving” (Witte in Witte & Harden 2015: 20). Moreover, by separating students from their

usual language, the new linguistic and symbolic territory of the foreign language decenters them from their usual self, allowing them to explore new identities (Giorgis 2013). Finally, in this particular case, the foreign language permitted students to recollect and report on family stories in a more freely and in a less emotional way.

The Discussion

The following lesson, I collected all the anonymous papers, shuffled them, invited each student to pick up a story randomly, and then read/tell it to her/his classmates. So, it happened that an Italian student read the story of a Romanian aunt, or a girl from Peru read the story of an old couple from the south of Italy.

While still focusing on the grammar structure (use of simple past for regular and irregular verbs), students began realizing that something else was emerging: all the stories they were telling were migration stories.

Some regular patterns surfaced – how migrants tend to settle in the same neighborhoods, how they felt perceived by the natives, the problems they encountered, the strategies they adopted to integrate, etc.

But some differences emerged too. I invited students to avoid highlighting only similarities between cultures or migration patterns (see Kubota's criticism on acritical celebrations of multiculturalism), but rather to read critically in between the lines and patterns, as well as to reflect on what these differences could tell us about broader issues.

As in a study with adult newcomers to Canada “traditional language learning activities such as a grammar lesson can be organized in such a way as to explore larger questions of identity and possibility (...) exciting opportunities for linking the microstructures of the text with the macrostructures of society” (Norton & Toohy 2004: 6). In our work too, differences in the micro opened some larger questions. Gender difference, for example, emerged as evidence: while the internal migration of the Fifties and Seventies had mainly involved male workers, who were later followed by their families, the immigrations of the Nineties often saw women coming first, and alone, to work as caregivers. That difference reflected a pivotal change in the broader society, which had moved from an industrial to a post-industrial pattern, from the production of goods to that of services, from rather structured and guaranteed work contracts, to the plethora of unstructured and non-guaranteed jobs of today. Differences in societies mean differences in socialization, too: working in a factory meant being with other fellow workers, a situation which offered the opportunity to confront, blend and share cultures, opinions, languages, dialects, food, ideas. Caregiving, on the other hand, is a solitary, and often silent, even silenced, work, with little, if any, opportunity for socializing or connecting with the wider society.

From the students' reflections on their family stories, there emerged discourses on gender and on how different was the society met by former immigrants versus new comers, as well as on how new migrations can cast a light on some repressed memories and stories of older migrations (Gobbo

2007: 20). That led to a critical view on how intercultural interactions are, first and foremost, an opportunity to consider our own stories and observe what we take for granted from a different perspective.

And, by using them in a relevant and meaningful context, yes, students learned irregular verbs too!

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