

Self-(Re)Presentations in the EFL Classroom

Angeliki Ypsilanti and Ioannis Karras

ABSTRACT

To self-present in the EFL classroom is a key productive skill for an EFL learner whether beginner or advanced. To self-represent is an empowerment option for the student who would rather ward off arbitrary identity attribution judgements. Given the critical role played by the EFL classroom as host to a complicated network of cultural backgrounds, identity acknowledgment does not have to be solely commensurate with curriculum-related obligation disclosures in an ELT context. The following ethnography in TEFL was conducted at a Greek High School in a town of a border island with the object of observing how languaculture interferes with peer interaction. The EFL teacher-inquirer via walk-through observation monitored how students negotiated their linguistic profile in conformance with Trompenaars' five-dimension cultural framework. The outcomes show that interactants created what they perceived as a "third space" where a choir of voices laid the foundations for the rapprochement of different cultures.

Keywords: Intercultural Activity, Languaculture, Self-Representation, Trompenaars, Walk-Through Observation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This study explores how a NNS EFL teacher in state oriented TESEP (Tertiary, Secondary, Primary) English language education has initiated a process of stressing the need for acknowledging and accommodating multiculturalism in the EFL classroom. Pooling from Hofstede's "large culture" approach and Holliday's "small culture" ideology has warranted the appropriacy of a "culture-sensitive methodology" for the culture-sensitive teaching context (Fay 2008, p. 348) of the General Lyceum of Plomari. In light of this, Trompenaars' (1993) cultural dimensions framework, which gives emphasis to the way people relate to each other, has been deemed suitable for underscoring the teacher's primary responsibility to embrace the need for a more integrated, holistic approach in dealing with the students in the classroom.

The English language classroom in the General Lyceum of Plomari is home to a network of cultural components conforming to Holliday's "Host Culture Complex" on account of the variation in the number of social contexts brought into contact (Holliday 1994a, p. 29). In Holliday-terms, the "host institution", viz. the state school under consideration, is part of the TESEP sector as far as English language instruction is concerned which is why it is not considered to have a clearly "instrumental" purpose as do exam-oriented private language schools which are part of the BANA (British Australasian North American) sector (Holliday, 1994b). Holliday gives emphasis to the division in the way English language education is delivered because the hegemony in BANA language education tends to have a

brainwashing effect on teachers, students, and parents. In fact, this BANA-TESEP distinction remains a contentious issue often deliberated upon in relation to addressing and adapting to local needs and priorities (Mugford, 2022). In Plomari, which is a popular tourist hub, private-sector language schools have a higher status because of prioritizing native speaker level, whereas state schools are often thought of as being at a comparative disadvantage. This imperialistic ideology is often perpetuated by word of mouth, especially by students and parents who tend to express their low academic expectations from the state school laying the blame on the high level of heterogeneity (linguistic, social, and cultural) of the English language classroom.

Apart from the BANA-TESEP culture division in the ELT classroom, other factors, such as the students' cultural origin and social status come into play. With respect to the linguistic profile of the students, for most of them Greek is their L1 while for the remaining student population it is Albanian, Danish and Lingala. With respect to the determination of social status, the student-oriented criterion seems to be the place of residence. Living in the centre, which is the town of Plomari, is indicative of high status, whereas living in the periphery, which is the surrounding mountainous area, is indicative of low status. To take the discussion further, not only can students living in the centre afford private language tuition, but they also have easier access to private language schools. Singer (1998) addresses the issue of the ascribed identity as negotiable between the self and the others because it is laden with preconceptions and stereotypes. It is no surprising fact that, when views and perceptions of identity

vary, mismatches between self-perception and attribution judgments occur on a regular basis. For instance, there may be cases of low-income Albanians who live in the centre, have native-speaking fluency in Greek but can neither write nor speak their language of origin making Greek their primary language of identity and English their aspired L2. This random example of a composite cultural identity, which conforms to no prescribed norms, shows how linguistic skills may be unconnected to social status.

The NNS EFL teacher is in an ongoing process of offsetting the effects of her disadvantaged position as a NNS language teacher by showing how holding the enhancement of intercultural competence in higher regard than linguistic competence can set the tone for a significant change in the "attitude to teaching culture" (Medgyes, 2020, p. 33). To this end, by attempting modifications to the teaching material she purports to encourage the development of the productive skills around themes that call for "an intercultural and critical perspective" (Byram *et al.*, 2002, p. 21). Her interest in the intercultural dimension of her English classes stems from her intention to give voice to cultural difference. Her aspiration is to have students with different cultural backgrounds assert their personal and social identity via "languaculture" which entails drawing cultural meaning from their available reserve of linguistic resources and applying it to both written and oral communication (Agar, 1994).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Large Culture Versus Small Culture Approach

Central to a more solid grasp of how an individual relates to culture are notions such as "ethnocentrism" and "ethnorelativism" which are associated with one's perception of the world during their enculturation and/or acculturation process (Bennett, 1993). What counts as a first contact with culture also constitutes an individual's acquisition of a cultural identity. Because home culture is the first culture with which someone comes into contact, it is understandable, at least up to a certain point, why familiar home culture schemas would provide them with a ready-to-hand perspective on a rudimentary sense of cultural identity (Nishida, 2005). Ethnocentrism is thence perforce inherent in the enculturation process, while its opposing term – ethnorelativism – is linked to the acculturation process which is about encountering other foreign cultures and "seeing society/culture as being one of many equally valid ways of viewing the world" (Fay, 2008, p. 225).

The need to develop a scale for measuring cultural difference has been felt by Hofstede who experimented with weighing and evaluating the consequences of the impact of national culture on the individual through his cultural dimensions' original theory (Hofstede, 1991;1994). Having come down to a total of four cultural dimensions, Hofstede's "large culture approach" resides in detecting "cultural tendencies" on a national level instead of focusing on the individual sense of cultural difference. Although his findings come from empirical research, the mere fact that the relativistic nature of the term "tendency" has been aligned with the logic of generalization makes such approach arguably lacking in small-scale trustworthiness (Karras,

2020).

Hofstede's national-scale cultural dimensions – Power Distance (PD), Individualism/Collectivism (I/C), Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) and Masculinity/Femininity (M/F) (Hofstede, 1991/1994) – are transferable to the TESOL classroom context, but they are neither as "context-sensitive" nor as "methodologically appropriate" (Fay, 2008, p. 265) as Holliday's dimensions which follow the "small culture" approach focusing on the reasoning and practice of small-group observation in the form of ethnographic action research. Contrary to Hofstede, Holliday is more interested in the "emergent cultures" of the classroom which either manifest themselves as a response to specific triggers or are constantly remoulded as part of the students' ongoing identity formation and community building. That being the case, the students' personal tendency to form identity groups for self-identification reasons creates additional classroom space for the emergence of different cultural voices. This is the space which Bhabha (1990) calls the "third space" because it is the outcome of the intercultural communication among students. Karras (2018) points out that it is within the ambit of this hybrid space that cultural identities are manifested, formed, and reformed. This explains why the reflected fluidity of the borderline between evolving cultural identities is intrinsic to small cultures, known also as "microcultures", in contrast to the fixed unalterable pattern of the large culture, usually referred to as the "national culture" (Jandt, 2018).

Holliday (1996) steers teachers' attention towards observing the nature of the learners' social interaction in the classroom before opting for the most appropriate methodology. Apart from looking for didactic approach differences to accommodate different learning styles, defining the way that students manage their personal relationships is equally important because it can be reflective of an intricate network of interdependent ideas, feelings, action tendencies and extrinsic influence factors. This network is what Holliday (1994a) refers to as the "Host Culture Complex" whose corollary aspects are the teacher's job to disentangle during the lesson. Choosing the right teaching attitude for the disentanglement process entails setting a number of self-goals such as adopting an attitude of openness, developing cultural awareness, and cultivating empathy before addressing the cultural complexity and uniqueness of the student as an individual (Singer, 1998).

B. Trompenaars' Cultural Dimensions Model into Small-Culture Practice

In the classroom environment, the teacher and the students are in essence the two ends of the authorized spectrum controlling and implementing a start-up process on the tasks to be carried out in close collaboration. On one end is the teacher who, as an agent of change, is required to do self-work before deciding on the ways of aiding students to advance their skills in intercultural competence. On the other end, the students who engage in purposeful social interaction need to have shared expectations to carry out writing and speaking activities in a nonnative language. In the case of EFL practitioners, responsibility falls upon their shoulders not only to guide but also to train students into consenting to a mutually accepted framework of attainable standards.

Holliday (1996) proposes ethnography in international

English language education as the best teaching practice to derive meaningful and robust conclusions about what takes place between students in classroom time and, more specifically, cultivation of skills at observing “culture in situ” to lay the groundwork for the functionality of intercultural communication (Grbich, 2007). Concomitantly, this study proposes Trompenaars’ five cultural dimensions – “universalism versus particularism”, “communitarianism versus individualism”, “neutral versus emotional”, “diffuse versus specific”, “achievement versus ascription” (Trompenaars, 1993, p. 29) - crafting a relationship framework in order to: firstly, raise cultural self-awareness; secondly, promote “intercultural attitudes (*savoir être*): curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own” (Byram *et al.*, 2002, p. 12). The chosen small-culture practice is ethnographic research through observation involving both parts (student-participants and teacher-facilitator) in the development of the above process.

Although Trompenaars’ cultural dimensions have been developed in a business context to find practical solutions to cultural dilemmas affecting business relations, they are also applicable to a teaching context because all students have their share of cultural baggage, noticeable or not, which they are eager to unload in a structured learning environment for the sake of reciprocity and trust. An EFL context is not only required to provide the appropriate circumstances for the unhindered development of intercultural communication if students are to culturally discover themselves and the others but is also susceptible to a change of cultural mentality for the sake of the advancement of language skills. The object of examination in the following section is how the “skills of discovery” followed by those of “interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*)” (Byram *et al.*, 2002, p. 14) can reform the EFL context in General Upper Secondary Education through Trompenaars’ cultural dimensions theory and Holliday’s small-culture observation practice.

III. THE STUDY

A. The Intercultural Activity

The multicultural synthesis of the second grade of the General Lyceum of Plomari, where apart from 13 Greek students, there are one Congolese, two Danish and four Albanian students raised in Greece, had been posing classroom management difficulties to the EFL teacher before making up her mind to resolve them through Trompenaars’ cultural dimensions interpretive lens. To achieve her goal, she decided that the best course of action would be to provide them fertile ground for interacting in a guided way by asking them to write a self-presentation essay. The minimum basic requirement to be met was application of their “*languaculture*” to act as a particular spur, stimulus, and goal for self-ascription. Further to the self-documentation in writing, the students formed multicultural groups of four and negotiated their perception of self in speech while the teacher kept to her observer’s role functioning as a facilitator upon request. Finally, the students reported their conclusions about each other back to the class. Trompenaars’ cultural dimensions were expected to emerge naturally due to the

systematized multicultural group synthesis during the speaking activity only to come under scrutiny in the post-activity phase when students received follow-up, including debriefing of their thoughts and feelings through rationalization processes.

B. Pre-Phase

As a preparatory task, the teacher assigned students the writing of a self-presentation essay where they were allowed considerable freedom to include any information deemed necessary in order to foster a shared understanding of a real-life meet-up. The only guideline was to make good use of their linguistic repertoire to be used in the following stage as a springboard for group discussion. Student response to the above task varied from student to student. Three out of four Albanian students wrote the essay in both Albanian and English, whereas the fourth Albanian wrote it in English highlighting with a marker the words he considered common between the two languages because of a rudimentary and fragmented knowledge of his L1. The two Danish students wrote the essay in perfect English without so much as making any allusions to their L1. The Congolese student went as far as to try justifying himself as a speaker of six languages by writing a short paragraph in English, French, Spanish, Swahili, Lingala, and Greek with the aid of Google Translate as he was publicly observed doing so in break time. The Greek students wrote the essay in English providing an accurate description of their linguistic skills accompanied by the relevant exam certificates as if they had been asked to update their biographical note.

C. While-Phase

The students formed five groups of four with each group including at least one NNS of Greek. Each student group was asked to pass their essays around so that everyone got knowledge of every essay before moving on to the oral presentations. The only guideline was to read aloud the other foreign languages as well in the case of the Congolese and Albanian students. The teacher remained a passive observer intervening occasionally and only upon student request for vocabulary contribution. The three Albanian students were pleased to be given the opportunity to read Albanian to a prepared audience while the Albanian student who did not have Albanian speaking skills felt that he had lost face in comparison to his compatriots. The surprising fact was that the whole classroom fell silent while the three Albanian students were reading aloud Albanian in an unfamiliar accent. It is worth mentioning that a Greek student remarked that Albanian had an unexpectedly beautiful sound when pronounced by the Albanian girl. The Danish girl presented herself in fluent English with British-like pronunciation while the Danish boy put his hood over his head as if wishing to be cut off from the rest of the class, a reaction which attracted negative criticism by the other group members. The Greek students allowed more talking time to the NNS of Greek triggered by a conscious decision to include appraisal comments and enquiry questions.

D. Post-Phase

Students were asked to share their thoughts and feelings about taking part in this new type of activity. The Albanian students expressed their satisfaction about taking the stage to

publicly speak Albanian and encouraged their fellow students to choose mastery of Albanian as an additional language. The Danish boy felt the need to explain that he had a persistent headache which prevented him from speaking even in the debriefing phase. Two Greek students took a stand against what they perceived as an impassive attitude by commenting that group-work participation was obligatory while one of his Greek friends adopted a sympathetic stance by pointing out that everybody is entitled to a bad moment. The Albanians refrained from making any personal comments on other student behaviour keeping their opinions to themselves. The Danish girl expressed her approval of the activity for strengthening the links between hands-on experience and lesson objectives. The Congolese student expressed his appreciation of the teacher's intercultural initiative but pointed out, not in so many words, that the value of the emergent linguistic resources could have been promoted in a more coordinated way.

IV. DISCUSSION OF METHODOLOGY APPROPRIACY

As far as the universalism-particularism dimension is concerned, the teacher surmised that the Albanians responded promptly to the task not solely out of eagerness to conform to the classroom rules that dictate active participation in group work but also because the incentive was strong enough to activate them. At the same time, the teacher made a mental note of the fact that the Danish student's Greek friend aligned himself with the particularist reasoning that friendship is above all and that the right thing to have done was stand up for his friend even though he had disrupted the effective and efficient implementation of the group activity. As for the communitarianism-individualism dimension, it should be noted that the Albanians regretted being obliged to change their seating arrangements for the sake of group formation. And even worse, the Albanian student who could neither write nor speak Albanian felt excluded from the communitarian sense of identity and ended up suffering loss of face for the rest of the lesson. The Danish boy showed individualist signs towards social interaction asserting his status as an individual with inviolable boundaries. With regard to the neutral-emotional dimension, most students, regardless of ethnic origin, expressed their emotions about each other with the Greeks being more eloquent in their evaluations and the Danish expressing themselves a little too matter-of-factly than would have been expected of them after their long-term sojourn in Greece. The diffuse-specific dimension was not very evident in anyone's reactions to the activity which could be interpreted as an indication that maybe it is not a transferable dimension to the teaching environment. Finally, as far as the achievement-ascription dimension is concerned, Greek students presented their formal qualifications with a view to giving prominence to their personal achievements proving thereby that personal achievement takes priority over ascribed identity.

Walk-through observation in a classroom setting from the perspective of focused ethnography on student behaviour captured cultural habits and speaking practices that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. Unhindered by any curriculum-based cultural agenda to favour one type of English language learner and discriminate against the other,

the EFL educator commenced a cycle of transforming classroom practice through prompted self-representation. The results showed a strong association between the intended discovery and the final creation of a shared space where culture-specific behaviour became a direct input for negotiation, review, and follow-up. On the intercultural front, the teacher-inquirer's experimental orchestration of cultural dialogue frameworks opened the road to building linkages on prospective classroom activities, whereas the students' response to assigned roles and responsibilities enforced self-accountability coupled with accountability to others as integrable values of the lesson's objectives.

V. CONCLUSION

Using "languaculture" as a self-introduction essay prompt in the EFL classroom has revealed not only the students' resourcefulness in overcoming intercultural communication obstacles but also their empowerment in claiming and receiving public acknowledgement of their diverse cultural and linguistic background. However, all this would not have been possible without the teacher's solidarity which for the purpose of the successful implementation of the intercultural activity has paradoxically entailed keeping to her non-interventionist ethnographer's role to avoid "reproducing hegemonic and exclusionary ideologies" as it so often happens with "EFL pedagogies" (Awayed-Bishara, 2021, p. 743). In this respect, the educator and the educational context have acted as agents of educational change whereas the students have activated the potential of this activity by bringing in the factor of assertive self-representation to the expectations of a type of activity often classed as a plainly good case of an "ice breaker". The manifestation of Holliday's "emergent cultures" is thus partly due to the EFL teacher's approach to student diversity and partly due to the students' response to accept her call to display "emergent behaviour" rather than silently succumb to reiterated explanations of "prescribed ethnic, national or international difference" in the EFL classroom (Holliday, 1999, p. 237).

What can be derived from the above is that an English lesson should have intercultural objectives apart from purely linguistic ones as long as the learning environment has been trained to respond positively. State school has a lot to offer in that respect because project-based learning can provide the time and space for the application of new approaches to teaching. The proposed intercultural activity can lead students to become aware of and overcome their cultural awkwardness by giving a solid form to their personal and social identity via interaction. Furthermore, it fits into Trompennars cultural dimensions framework mainly for feedback reasons since the EFL teacher is in the preliminary stage of creating the appropriate circumstances for the development of intercultural competence.

A cultural awareness raising activity is a good starting point for students to become more open to cultural difference and develop curiosity about its carriers. The English language classroom can lend itself to the shaping of new attitudes by motivating students to reintroduce themselves to one another not only in English as a lingua franca but also in one's own perception of 'languaculture'.

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