Kramsch’s Dichotomies: Facing the Challenge

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Abstract

This paper discusses how to overcome the seven dichotomies that Claire Kramsch postulates as ruling the field of FLT. The authors will first summarize the theoretical concepts that help to come to grips with the oppositions manifested by this authoress. They will then proceed to describe an actual instance of the integration of language use, multiple literacies, and cultural studies in a sophomore course in the EFL Teacher Education Program at Mar del Plata University.

Introduction

In her book Context and Culture in Language Teaching, authoress Claire Kramsch sees the FLT field as dominated by seven dichotomies, subsumed under the antagonisms: teaching linguistic forms and skills vs. building up cognitive content strategies, and focusing on linguistic forms and functions vs. introducing cultural and academic knowledge in the foreign language. (Kramsch 1994: 2-11). These discrepancies are particularly urgent in the area of EFL Teacher Education, since prospective instructors first need to become aware of these oppositions in order not to replicate disciplinary disputes in their own classrooms. The questions stand: how can teacher educators blur the edges between content and form, action and reflection, language and disciplines? How can they respond to Kramsch’s dichotomies? This paper will explore these issues by expounding on the integration of language, culture, and a wide range of literacies in Overall Communication, a sophomore language course taught in the EFL Teacher Education Program at Mar del Plata University. To this end, the authors will show how a language course in their university Program is geared toward integrating the use of language with the teaching of cultural differences and multiple identities which
are the key to understand the present postmodern, postcolonial world. This blending is achieved by working interdisciplinarily with a variety of cultural products representing a myriad of discourses as well as plural authorial voices. To illustrate these views, the authors will explain how these cultural examples operate within their curriculum.

**Kramsch's Dichotomies**

Kramsch posits the view that foreign language teaching cannot avoid cultural issues, which have to do with difference, conflict, complexity, variability, and with multiple ways of viewing the world and talking about it. She argues that it is useless to consider the introduction of culture in foreign language teaching milieus in terms of “dubious dichotomies”. She identifies seven opposite unresolved views which generally dominate foreign language education:

1. *Learning by doing vs. learning by thinking*, or skills and action against content and reflection. This polarity involves two opposed conceptions of language: either as a tool devoid of intellectual value or as an academic subject and means of generating knowledge. This controversy has sometimes led to the reduction of foreign language learning to only one of the aforementioned two aspects, failing to understand that in academic settings language mediates content and expresses disciplinary genres (Hicks 1997: 466).

2. *Grammar vs. communication*, or reflection on rules and structure against action and focus on the message. This dispute concerning the value of either using language or thinking about it was exacerbated during the 1970s with the introduction of the communicative approach. Foreign language teachers were advised by experts and textbook writers to concentrate solely on actual messages produced in class. As
in the case of the first dichotomy, operating with language necessitates reflection about its use, manifested in the creation of a metalinguistic conscience. M. A. K. Halliday has pointed the way towards overcoming this opposition by considering language as social semiotic (McArthur 1992: 460).

3. **Teacher talk vs. student talk.** This contrast is viewed exclusively in quantitative terms, which involve the amount of time teachers and students take up in the classroom. For example, the learner-centered approach has been oversimplified by stating that the teacher must speak as little as possible in class, thus reducing the issue to a question of figures. In general terms, the qualitative worth of classroom conversations and teacher input have been overlooked. The profession needs to reconsider how meanings are cooperatively negotiated in the classroom, and how students learn to learn through actual educational conversations (Mercer 1997: 11-18).

4. **Reading to learn vs. learning to read,** or reading as strategy to decode information against an exercise in decoding form. This contradiction shows two differing views of reading: either as practice to reinforce foreign language grammar and vocabulary, or as an experience in decoding texts as sources of information. It does not address the issue of interaction between reader and text, a process through which they are both mutually complemented, recreated, and transformed (Devitt 1997: 460).

5. **Language vs. literature,** or forms against discipline. As the previous dichotomy showed the need for interpreting text meanings, it follows that literary works are valuable sources for teaching. However, disciplinary boundary disputes between literature and foreign language teachers have rendered the latter unwilling to introduce literature in their classrooms (Newell and Holt 1997: 18-19). Nevertheless, since language is the stuff literature is made of, language instructors must
find ways to help their students access a variety of literary texts. This approach would coincide with the current general reappraisal of the role of narrative in teaching.

6. **Language vs. culture**, or form against civilization background. When foreign language courses introduce the culture/s of the native speakers of the target language, they usually do so with the purposes of presenting colorful information. Seldom do they attempt to generate intercultural knowledge or to enhance crosscultural understanding. The contradiction lies in the fact that the use of language cannot be dissociated from the creation and transmission of culture. Language and culture are permanently engaged in a dialectical relationship. The socio-cultural meaning of language must be made explicit in the foreign language classroom, if students are to construct their own intercultural competence (Pulverness 1998: 68-69).

7. **The ideal native speaker vs. the non-native speaker.** These are two rather vague, and probably artificially created, linguistic constructs (Medgyes 1992: 340). In the foreign language classroom, this simulated, perfect L₁ user seems to come alive in order to intimidate the non-native teacher and to inhibit students. In contrast, Kramsch sees the study of foreign language as a social practice positioned between the borders of two cultures. Thus, she puts forward the hypothesis that in the socio-linguistic reality of the foreign language classroom, a third culture is born, where the contours of both types of speakers are blurred.

Kramsch (1994: 14) actually proposes establishing a dialectic relationship involving a dialogue between these seven contradictory standpoints:

“In the course of this dialogue, each party comes to understand the other’s position from a broader, less partial perspective, which does justice to the substance of each
point of view, but allows the search for a common ground. It is in the course of this search that understanding between people may emerge, based on a recognition of difference and an acceptance of continued dialogue despite these differences.”

This paper will now describe how the cultural products introduced in the course *Overall Communication*, and the teaching approach underlying instruction, strive to resolve these dichotomies.

**Working with Language, Culture, Literature, and Content**

Language, culture and literature are explored and constantly redefined in the course of the three units *Overall Communication* proposes. Literature stands as the re-presentation of a society, since literary productions give voice to cultures, and those are the sounds Overall Communication intends to listen to and elucidate. Its first unit, called “A World of Multiple Identities,” introduces a variety of socio-political and cultural issues affecting the current reality of different English-speaking peoples. One of the first short stories the students read is Bharati Mukherjee’s "The Management of Grief". Its main character is Shaila -an Indian Canadian mother who loses her family at a Sikh terrorist airplane bombing. Shaila says (Mukherjee in Carol Oates 1992: 707):

"I am trapped between two modes of knowledge. At thirty-six, I am too old to start over and too young to give up. Like my husband's spirit, I flutter between worlds."

This assertion reflects that the *fluttering between worlds* could be taken as a metaphor on its own. “The Management of Grief” is intensively read and discussed in oral sessions, which allow for argumentation, presentation of conclusions drawn, and sustaining of opinions. The character of Shaila embodies the big metaphors of the cultural images of the turn of the century. Along these lines, postmodernism is understood as the condition of the times of late capitalism. How do cultural manifestations respond to such a condition? Through the construction of imaginaries in which the *in-between*, the *syncretic*, the *juxtaposed*, the *interstitial* become essential motifs which...

“[…] a central notion to literary and psychoanalytic theory and in general to contemporary cultural criticism (...) is the notion of border. The border, as it is well known, is the simultaneity of that which articulates and separates: it is the line between Culture and Nature, Law and Transgression, Conscious and Unconscious, Masculine and Feminine, Same and Other. (...) It is also the line between territories, material and symbolic: national, ethnical, linguistic, subcultural, racial.”

Shaila’s quoted words are just an instance that reveals this constant duality. First, both the author and the main character share a common multicultural background: a mixture consisting in the meeting of two different nations and two opposed philosophies – India and Canada, the West and the East. The two worlds from where they speak – an authorial and a narrative voice – or the places where they simply are, become the interstitial areas giving presence to the story. Second, this text offers another element manifested in two complementary ways: the use of English – the language of the colonizer – to give voice to the experience of the post-colonized. In other words, this is an author writing in her national language but not in her mother tongue. The “other” expresses herself, in this case, through the language of the colony, reversing the cultural construction of images of the colonized by the colonizer in the grand narratives of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Consequently, this story represents the Commonwealth’s recovered voice, yet, paradoxically, using the means (i.e. language) of the colonizer. In this way, cultural awareness and language practice take place with students putting ideas forward, and arguing in preeminently oral exposure with the prompt of culture in context, namely a literary text.

**Overall Communication’s** second unit is called “A World of Multiple Cultures” and deals with Irish cultural re-presentations as a way to illustrate the cultural plurality of the UK. The instructors have selected contemporary authors as, for example, William Trevor and his short story “Death in
Jerusalem.” His work points to certain components that pertain both to Ireland’s idiosyncrasy and to this story in particular. The Catholic element, a tension between cosmopolitanism and localism with its consequent value clash, immigration into America, and the cultural variations between both countries, are some of the constituents deployed to raise cultural awareness and to create instances of language practice within the context of this story.

There are two main characters: Paul is a Catholic priest who has emigrated to the US, and decides to take his brother Francis, who runs his local Dublin business and looks after their old mother, to the Holy Land. First, the story abounds in settings: America, Ireland, and Israel. These three spaces become relevant because of the implications each one entails for both brothers. It is specifically in Jerusalem where this powerful contrasting image around which the story is written reaches its climax. This trip, and their mother’s concurrent death in Ireland, reveal the gap between both brothers, something that is hinted at by their very names: Paul, the Roman prosecutor who converts to the Christian faith and Francis, the humblest and most austere among saints. Their contrasting behaviors and their observations throughout make this story rich in cultural signs from the Irish. The approach to religion can be one of them, since both characters are the products of a deeply rooted perspective that has commonly represented Ireland – even at the risk of stereotyping. The issue over Catholicism and its system of values can certainly be traced in this narration. Thus, the story becomes an excellent resource to work with one of the functions in essay writing: i.e. comparison and contrast. Once more, cultural literacy has allowed for the development of students’ communicative competence.

The third unit, termed “A Postcolonial World, aims at exposing students to the cultural productions of this so-called “world”. The text chosen is The Remains of the Day, usually taken as a seminal paradigm in postcolonial literature. However, readers often wonder to what extent this story told by Stevens, a traditional English butler, becomes such an exponent of the
cultural tenets of contemporary times. The key lies in the authorship and the point of view along which the novel is told. Kazuo Ishiguro, born in Japan but residing in Britain and writing in English, successfully depicts pre- and post-WWII England as it affects and informs the life of the narrator, the butler at Darlington Hall. Therefore, the novel constitutes the dismantling of imperialistic England through a mirroring element, namely Lord Darlington’s diplomatic projects. In this sense, Ishiguro’s text becomes postcolonial by definition. It is a whole politics of contra-modernity which seeks to obliterate the totalizing and oppressive metaphors of colonialism. If this novel allows for a historical reading of the facts as they sustain the narration, a more literary perspective will reveal, borrowing Kramsch’s words, conflict, variability, and multiplicity when reporting the world from the point of view of a contemporary author. The distance established in The Remains... between the author – positioned in post-modern, post-colonial cultural spaces –and the narrator– adhering to colonial tenets from Victorian times- seems to account for the complexity of this novel, as much as its diversity of genres does. In this respect, Sarlo and Altamirano (1990: 53-56), argue that "in contemporary literary theory and criticism, it is an admitted fact that genres are just a convention." Equally obvious, but paradoxically convenient to this approach to The Remains..., is their assertion that the twentieth century has given to the somehow arbitrary taxonomy of literary genres’ variability and multiplicity, with "...an incessant promotion of brief and changing generic forms." Including this novel in the Overall Communication syllabus means allowing students to become aware of the complex juxtaposition of elements present in the cultural manifestations of these times. Discussing, exemplifying, and illustrating foster the “integration” among the seven dichotomies previously debated here. This is achieved by exposing students to culture and communities as a means to communicate, to connect bodies of knowledge; and to establish comparisons leading to a more solid overall competence in the target language.
Fostering Visual Literacy

*Overall Communication* also uses films to integrate language, culture, and content throughout its three units (Williamson and Vincent 1999: V-VI). Although movies provide an excellent chance of listening to a great variety of accents, dialects and voices, they offer much more than the possibility of developing listening comprehension skills. Movies bring the world of the target cultures into the classroom and constitute an interesting and highly motivating language learning resource, since they provide not only language but also cultural information essential to function in the foreign language societies. Thus, *Overall Communication* aims at developing media literacy, which can be defined as “the ability to comprehend information that is contained and conveyed through a variety of non-print media”, involving complex cognitive processes that go beyond the mere fact of understanding the language being used (Krueger 1998: 17). Students are constantly encouraged to sharpen their observation skills and to develop critical thinking strategies through activities which intend to reveal information about different aspects of the target culture, and to encourage comparison and discussion of how these options and patterns may be similar to, or different from, those of their native cultures.

The British motion pictures *Brassed Off* (Channel Four Films 1996) and *The Full Monty* (Twentieth Century Fox 1997) are chosen to deal with some of the social issues presented in the first unit. *Brassed Off* is based upon the pit closures of the early 1990s in the UK. It is the story of a group of brass-playing coal miners who enter into a national music competition to fight off the threat of their pit closure in an imaginary colliery town in the north of England. The development of the coal mining industry in Britain, labour conflicts both in Britain and in Argentina, the vocabulary of industrial action and strikes, and the features of different types of thematic discourses and sources are explored through a variety of activities. For instance, to find out about labour
conflicts in Britain and to explore the style of her press, students examine newspaper headlines and articles. First, the meaning and grammar of headlines are analysed, since they follow grammatical rules different from those of other genres. Students explain the use and frequency of articles and the verb to be, tenses used to express different times, expression of complex tenses, and construction of the passive voice, among other characteristic features. The content, format, and grammar of articles related to the main topics of the movie are also exhaustively discussed. Students first scrutinize the six questions that most newspaper articles answer -What?, Who?, When?, Where?, Why?, and How?- to later elucidate the basic plan followed by most news reports in both popular and quality newspapers, and to reflect on the grammar of the articles. These activities prove to be successful not only because they enhance students’ reading strategies, but also because they provide them with elements to write their own articles. Thus, they may engage in the writing of an article that could have been published in an English newspaper the day after the brass band won the finals in the Albert Hall, or one describing a topical labour conflict, or the plight of the unemployed in their country. In this way, cultural awareness is raised, while students are exposed to a variety of sources and activities that simultaneously enhance their language competence.

*The Full Monty* was shot on location in Sheffield. It is the tale of some Sheffield steelworkers who have been made redundant and decide to become strippers to earn their living. Here, discussion and tasks are based upon the development and decline of the iron and steel industries in Britain, the issue of unemployment and welfare in both the UK and Argentina, and the image of Sheffield provided by the movie and other print and media sources. The lexical areas of unemployment and welfare are exploited before watching the film, since familiarisation with this vocabulary enhances understanding and becomes essential in the post-viewing discussion sections. For this purpose, semantic webs become valuable tools to sort out related words and phrases.
into different categories. As stated above, students are also exposed to different sources which provide more updated information about Sheffield, and are guided to compare and contrast such images with those conveyed by the film. Addressing different learning styles, the activities proposed thus encourage the exploration of a variety of cognitive skills. They not only aim at knowledge and comprehension but they also call for the application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of that knowledge.

The Irish production *In the Name of the Father* (Universal Pictures 1993) is chosen to exemplify some of the issues concerning cultural plurality in the UK presented in the second unit of the course. This film is based on the true story of Gerry Conlon and three other Northern Irish people -known as “The Guilford Four”- who were wrongly identified as IRA terrorists by the British police, and given long sentences for crimes they did not commit. Seven relatives of Conlon -the Maguire Seven- were also punished for having allegedly collaborated with the Four. In this case, the historical background to “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland, the vocabulary and characteristics of the legal and judicial system in Great Britain, and the director’s choices in staging a fictional production out of a true story, become central to film analysis. Reflection and discussion, based on the reading of several film reviews and opinions downloaded from the International Movie Database online, also prove very enlightening. The students engage in activities intended to analyse the positive and negative aspects considered by the reviewers, and to critique the film’s departures from reality. For instance, the movie shows the Maguire Seven on trial with the Guilford Four, while their respective cases were tried separately. Likewise, Gerry Conlon is made to share a jail cell with his father, although the two were often not even in the same prison. Barrister Gareth Pierce plays a heroic role, when in fact she was a minor figure, and another male lawyer deserves most of the actual credit for freeing the Four. All in all, activities are once again intended to foster students’ critical thinking and reflective viewing habits.
In the third unit, the screen version of *The Remains of the Day* (Columbia 1993), in which, as stated in the previous section, the butler James Stevens recalls his days of service under Lord Darlington during the years leading up to WWII, is chosen to *visually* explore postcolonial issues. In addition, students analyse the similarities and differences between the novel and the movie, and the director's choices in scripting and shooting Ishiguro's text. For instance, the students consider the different endings of the novel and the film, and the elements in the movie which are missing or different from those of the book. Contrariwise, the film incorporates parts the novel lacks. Finally, students are encouraged to examine a passage from the book which is missing in the movie, and to script it for the purposes of dramatization. This is the textual scene in which the then incumbent British Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, and the German Ambassador gather at Darlington Hall in 1936 with the purpose of arranging a meeting between King Edward VIII -who had shown sympathies for the Nazis- and Hitler. In the picture, instead, the director has added another scene, including the same officials later in office and taking place in 1938, which shows the negotiations leading up to the signing of the Munich Agreement. This is, again, another example showing that in *Overall Communication* language is not used as a tool devoid of intellectual value, but as an instrument to enable students to establish connections with other bodies of knowledge and to develop academically-oriented cognitive strategies.

**Discussion**

The authors would like to conclude by stating their strong belief that cultural contents and linguistic manifestations mutually complement each other in the teaching of the English language at advanced levels for prospective language instructors. Those teacher educators who consider language and culture as inextricably bound must find a systematic rationale for their -mostly intuitive-
faith that cultural studies do have a significant impact on learners’ linguistic competence. To this end, rigorous educational research has to be articulated with educators’ instinctive conceptions in order to provide a theoretical underpinning for experiences such as the one illustrated in the case of Overall Communication. Those investigations would constitute the basis for a new agenda (Shanahan 1997: 168) in the field of EFL at the turn of the millennium, collectively and cooperatively examining the relationship between foreign language learning and culture, while socially and dialectically integrating educators’ disciplinary knowledge base with their experience and personal opinions. This would be a possible methodical way of overcoming Kramsch’s seven dichotomies. Undoubtedly, it agrees with her plea addressed to foreign language instructors concerning their dialogical need to search for understanding and new knowledge in their profession.

3813 words

References


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