

# WHAT CAN MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE DO FOR THE EFL CLASSROOM?

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## ABSTRACT

The final aim of this paper is to raise awareness regarding multiculturalism in our classrooms. In EFL settings, target culture is constantly redefined and enriched with new ways of seeing and thinking portrayed by students' pluri-L1s. We think that would-be teachers need a special training in these issues at tertiary level. That's why we feel the urge of developing a multifaceted approach for a cross-cultural understanding of peoples around the world. To develop the above mentioned approach, we have worked with multicultural folktales from different parts of the globe in our classes. In this paper we present an instance from India chosen on a non-biased basis and bearing in mind our target group's interests. We looked very much forward to training our students in cross-cultural issues; familiarizing them with new ways of interpreting reality; approaching multicultural literature from a humanistic perspective; and growing them multiculturally friendly.

## 1. Introduction

If you read only what mirrors your view of yourself, you get locked in. It's as if you're in a stupor or under a spell. (Rochman, 1993)

Nowadays, it is a truism that we live in a multicultural world. Peoples from all over the world are coming together in an attempt to develop their selves in contact with multiple ways of seeing and perceiving reality. However, new generations need special training to overcome problems derived from culture contact and potential inappropriateness in cultural decoding. When we are taught to rely heavily on one's first culture and not trained to be in other's shoes, then we may be lead into cultural misunderstandings instead of cultural richness. An assumption to hold the call for crossing cultural borders is that coming to know other cultures results in self-growing and relativism of the mainstream culture. As Cai (2002) states, "we need to cross cultural borders to broaden our vision and shape ourselves to fit into a pluralistic world."

Schools are the perfect setting to introduce multicultural topics. Children need to develop cultural awareness from the earliest stages of learning. Teachers should select and use multicultural-laden readings and tasks in order to deconstruct potential prejudices in those generations. Down (1992) affirms that "... from reading, hearing, and using culturally diverse materials, young people learn that beneath surface differences of color, culture or ethnicity, all people experience universal feelings of love, sadness, self-worth, justice and kindness."

## 2. Objectives

The objectives we pursue with this paper are:

- (1) **Envisaging other cultures as enriching sources of knowledge.** Multicultural approaches give us the opportunity of increasing world knowledge and raising a positive awareness towards the Other.
- (2) **Developing students' cultural awareness.** It is necessary that our would-be teachers develop a sense of cultural sensitivity and that they are well aware of its importance within the language classroom. Approaching a new culture wakes up the awareness of our own system of beliefs, of values, of being. We relativize our closest reality and learn to swap places with the Other.
- (3) **Training students in cross-cultural issues.** If we want our future teachers to develop and transmit positive attitudes towards multiculturalism, then it is imperative an implicit training in these issues. Teacher trainers need to believe in what they say in order to train their students successfully in cross-cultural matters.
- (4) **Raising awareness towards cultural differences.** We should not envisage difference as an enemy but as an ally. Understanding of differences means understanding of the Self.
- (5) **Developing students' critical thinking.** Learners will approach multicultural issues in a more thoughtful and effective manner. We will enable them to ask more and better questions about other cultures and participate in the learning process itself. Students will also develop the skills necessary to evaluate the resources that they consult to become acquainted with multicultural issues.
- (6) **Approaching multicultural literature from a humanistic perspective.** We place the focus on the Self. We want to make them aware of the importance of their perception of their experiences. It is an approach which enhances personal growth and change.
- (7) **Working with literature that transcends stereotypes.** The stories have to be carefully selected and presented in order to avoid the transmission of stereotypes (gender or cultural stereotypes).
- (8) **Moving students from informing to empowering.** The use of multicultural literature in the EFL classroom needs to go beyond simply informing. Multicultural literature should be made an important part of the curriculum rather than an add-on.
- (9) **Growing students multicultural-friendly.** We strongly look forward to growing multicultural-friendly new generations where respect and understanding prevails.

## 3. Literature and education in values

*The Common European Framework for the Teaching of Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) stresses the importance of literature in the language classroom for the education in values. Literature, in this sense, is tackled from a linguistic and aesthetic viewpoint. Within these imaginative, artistic or aesthetic uses of language, we embrace tasks to develop expression, comprehension, interaction or mediation expressed orally or in the written form. These tasks would include.

- singing: infant songs, popular songs, pop songs...
- listening, reading, telling, or writing imaginative texts (tales, songs...) including audiovisual texts, cartoon stories, illustrated tales...
- performing plays with or without script.
- attending or acting out literary texts as, for example: reading and writing texts (short stories, novels, poetry...); representing and attending poetry recitals, plays, opera...

Then, literary education ranges from aesthetic awareness to educational, intellectual, moral, emotional, linguistic, and cultural aims. The success, however, also depends upon the talent, educative, literature and personal awareness on the part of the teacher.

As just stated above, benefits derived from literature are not limited to the linguistic or cognitive levels. We go a little bit further: we pursue an education of the whole person. In this way, if we pay attention to the values portrayed in literary texts, students develop positive attitudes towards them. In addition, in a parallel process, they define and redefine their own values. They can also learn to express their feelings and thoughts and, what's more important, to share them with their peers. In this way, the use of multicultural literature in the EFL classroom can be highly motivating for students since they become well acquainted with their inner world.

Following this premise, literature appears as a system which draws together values within a society or culture acting as support for the expressive developing of it. It enables us to grasp complexities, problems and meanings of values of that society with the purpose in mind of understanding the meaning of Others. This is of great value for the coexistence of people and a correct civic-mindedness. That it, the understanding, acceptance, and involvement of the Other through tolerance and otherness. It is an essential mean to reflect those conflicts which are grounded on ethnic, culture, gender, religion, or social status problems which affect the Other. Finally, literature functions as cultural glue which gives sense to a specific community.

#### **4. Premises to work with multicultural literature**

Each culture "lives by and through" the stories it "creates and preserves". (Henry Louis Gates, Jr)

A truly understanding of our modern society entails the acceptance of multiculturalism as a growing reality. Multiculturalism is the passport for achieving equality, keeping one's identity, taking pride of our ancestry, and having a sense of belonging. Once we surpass the barrier of mainstream culture as the only acceptable, we are able to develop solid feelings of affectionate esteem and self confidence. Experience has shown that multiculturalism encourages racial and ethnic harmony and enhances cross-cultural understanding.

In the ever challenging task of growing a society multiculturally friendly, we need to take into account several factors. First of all, teachers have to believe in multiculturalism. From our point of view, this is the basic pillar in the process of developing positive attitudes. If we don't believe in what we say, then we are doomed to fail in the raising of multicultural children. Secondly, we have to feel what we say. Children need to experience that the teacher's feelings are in accordance with his or her

thinking. Finally, the third pillar would be behaving multiculturally, i.e. putting into practice all you believe and feel in the theory. If are able to encompass these three key elements of an attitude, then we can say we are coherent selves.

Rena Lewis and Donald Doorlag (1995) present the following reasons for developing multicultural education:

- 1) Commonalities among people cannot be recognized unless differences are acknowledged.
- 2) A society that interweaves the best of all of its cultures reflects a truly mosaic image.
- 3) Multicultural education can restore cultural rights by emphasizing cultural equality and respect.
- 4) Students can learn basic skills while also learning to respect cultures; multicultural education need not detract from basic education.
- 5) Multicultural education enhances the self-concepts of all students because it provides a more balanced view of the U.S. society. (*For our context, we can extend this statement to European societies*)
- 6) Students must learn to respect others.

## **5. Reading multiculturally**

According to McGinley *et al.* (1997, p. 43), “stories can be a means of personal and social exploration and reflection – an imaginative vehicle for questioning, shaping, responding, and participating in the world”. This is the basic theory underlying our approach of working with multicultural stories (at this stage of the research, only popular folktales). Students are given the opportunity of exploring new territories and reflecting upon them.

The introduction of multicultural literature in the curriculum entails challenging the dominant ideologies (in our context, Spanish culture) and affirming the values and experiences of historically underrepresented cultures. Learners, on the other hand, develop attitudes to foster acceptance and appreciation of cultural diversity, develop sensitivity to social inequalities, and encourage transformation of the self and society. (Cai, 2002, p. 134).

Sims Bishop (1994) argues that through reading multicultural, students are exposed to multiple perspectives on the world and, hence, are challenged to look at themselves and the world differently. Rasinski and Padak (1990) state that we also develop an ability to identify and critically analyze cross-cultural problems. At the same time, we are empowered to solve those cultural problems or ethnic differences.

## **6. Instance of multicultural reading: *Kanai the Gardener***

In the subsequent lines, we portray an example of multicultural reading to be used in our language classroom. It has been taken from the Indian folklore in order to provide learners with other realities and literatures where English is also a cross-cultural means of communication.

### **6.1. Description of the fairy tale**

*Kanai the Gardener* was originally published by William McCulloch. He collected his stories in verbatim shorthand during the late 1880s, mostly from “a very

intelligent young Brahman, and orthodox Hindu, whose home was in an extremely out-of-the-way village, and who, when I first became acquainted with him, had been little in contact with Europeans. He possessed fine gifts, both as a talker and a *raconteur*. Yet I found no reason to doubt his oft-repeated assertion that he told me the stories exactly as he heard them." This story, in which Kanai hitches a ride up to heaven with the god Indra's elephant, Airavata (here, Oirabot), is a homely village reworking of a tale in Somadeva's original *Ocean of Story*, in which the means of ascent is the bull of Shiva; flying elephants are reasonably common in Indian folklore. (Ness, 1995: 119).

In the fairy tale, we come across Kanai, the Rajah's Gardener, who was very fond of plants. He loved talking to plants as he worked. Kanai's garden had trees, shrubs, and flowers from all over the world. The garden, thanks to Kanai's special care, was a paradise. However, there was something which disconcerted him greatly: each night the ripest fruits were eaten by a mysterious creature.

At sunset, he normally left the garden. One night he decided to unveil the mystery and stayed until midnight in his workplace. Suddenly, the earth seemed to shift underfoot and Kanai hid behind a tree. A huge elephant came down from the sky. He was supposed to be Oirabot, a heavenly white elephant which carries Lord Indra. While Oirabot walked among the plants pulling up the tenderest shoots and picking the choicest fruits, Kanai followed it in the shadows. When the elephant was about to leave, Kanai grasped its tail and clung on grimly. Oirabot started flying upwards without noticing his passenger. As soon as he arrived in heaven, Kanai strolled around. Everything was much bigger than in the Rajah's garden. As everything was extremely cheap, he got some stuff for his wife and gorged himself until he was full. Then, he looked for the elephant to find his way back to earth. Once they arrived, he hurried home to see his wife. She was worried because of her husband's absence from home for two days. But all worries faded away as soon as she saw the mango and betel nut Kanai brought her from heaven. The gardener explained her the whole story but asked her to be very discreet and not to tell anybody about how cheap and plentiful food was in heaven. But, unfortunately, she trusted the secret to her best friend, who trusted her best friend, who in turn told her best friend... At the end, everybody in the village knew about the wonders in heaven. So, Kanai thought of a way of taking everybody to heaven. The gardener seized the elephant's tail and they all formed a chain. When they were almost past the seventieth star, Kanai's wife best friend asked how big the betel nuts were in heaven. She passed the question to her husband who begged her to wait, but as they were too impatient, Kanai stretched his hands out to show the size. Consequently, he released Oirabot's tail and they all ended up went head over heels down to earth.

From the linguistic point of view, this story wouldn't hinder our students' intrinsic motivation and they would be able to cope with any formal constraints imposed by the text itself. Contextual clues would help them greatly in the articulation of meaning at sentence level. Cognitively, the central topics of kindness, givingness, caring, trustfulness, envy, having, ignorance, and material happiness should wake up subjects' interest and active involvement.

## **6.2. Exploitation of the fairy tale**

This story is a perfect instance to address the meaning and implications of caring, trustfulness, and happiness in schools (in particular), and in society (in general). Besides this, we can raise discussion over the importance of these values/attitudes in our

closest environment and the reasons why they are overemphasized or overlooked in the teaching training process.

The form and content depicted in *Kanai the Gardener* may bear some resemblance with variations of the fairy tale in their home culture. We asked them to think about tales with a similar teaching even though the action and the characters had nothing to do with the ones pictured in the Indian version. Something which struck them greatly was the fact that reading about flying elephants. Though in the European popular folklore is not common to have this type of flying animals, it is a recursive one in some Asian cultures. The participants made a list of flying animals according to their popular lore and established links with the meaning depicted by those animals in both cultures. Regarding the tasks proposed to our volunteers, we have:

- Ask students to brainstorm any ideas they have about India (or the Indian).
- Ask students if they are aware of the fact that English is spoken in many parts of the world other than the United Kingdom and the United States. Mention the specific case of India (though also explaining the fact that there are eleven official languages in this country).
- Raise awareness concerning the concept “English Literature” versus “English Literatures” which would embrace literatures from all English speaking countries.
- Identify what type of folktale it is (fairy tale, myth, legend, tall tale, fable, religious story).
- Write down different ways of starting and ending folktales in the foreign language and in your first language. Compare them and draw conclusions.
- Rewrite a fable in modern times and situations (using elements from your cultural background). Learners will update the story to reflect a modern tale which gives the same lesson but represents the learner’s environment or setting.
- Discuss with your peers how “materialism” is featured in the story. What implications does it have for achieving happiness? Relate it to the concepts of plentifulness and moreness.
- Cultural note: look for information about the meaning of elephants in the Indian culture.
- Cultural note: look for information about the God Airavata (also known as Oirabot). Re-read the story and use the new information to go a step further in the multilayered interpretational dimension.
- Cultural note: look for information about the eight guardian deities who preside over the eight point of the compass.
- What do you think would happen after they fall back to earth?

### **6.3. Discussion**

Our students could focus their discussion on the following topics:

- Discuss the topic of “trustfulness” in our western society.
- The teacher chairs a debate about the importance of keeping secrets vs. gossiping.
- Discuss with the learners the lessons taught in the folktale.
- Discuss with students different ways of interpreting reality (according to their cultural backgrounds).

## 7. Conclusion

Through this paper, we have intended to highlight the need of educating multiculturally new generations. We have to consider our social reality from a multilayered cultural perspective because multiculturalism means richness and it should be maintained, preserved and even strengthened.

Developing a heightened sensitivity to and an understanding of people from various cultures and traditions is a basic goal of education for our children. Would-be teachers need to be directly trained in this issue since they play an important role in the education of children at schools. They have to fight against cultural stereotypes and teach them to look through the eyes of many children. Empower them to be cross-culturally minded, to critically analyze cultural misunderstandings, and to take action to solve these problems. In a word, they should help children learn how to live in a diverse society and strive for common goals toward peace. All this can be a reality if we foster dialogical tools in the classroom and bring their voices into interaction with others' voices. To put all these ideas into practice we envisage literature as a way to experience vicariously the sensations of Others.

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