

THE SOCIAL POWER OF A LANGUAGE: A REFLECTION ON THE POWER OF SOCIAL DIALECTS FOR A NATION'S IDENTITY

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INTRODUCTION

This paper has as its main objective reflect on the power of social dialects, historical, cultural and social aspects of the English Language with the purpose of investigating how high-school learners, on 12th grade, honors, are able to establish the link between their language and its use, being aware of how its identity has been built through their cultural history, leading them to understand the link between Literature and Language Use.

In order to make this reflection possible, it is related an experience taken place at a Public High School in The United States of America, during an internship period experienced as a High-School English Teacher Intern, as a demand of a program sponsored by The US Government called International Leaders in Education Program – ILEP – which offers scholarships for a school term in US for teachers of Basic Education to take some classes in Masters level and also observe and teach in a selected public High School.

The main idea of the program is to provide teachers worldwide with the opportunity to compare the two school systems, that is, the American and the foreign country one, in order to make it possible for both systems involved search for similarities and differences, trying to understand these differences and improving good practices, especially concerning cultural aspects.

Here in this article the main idea is to describe the process of investigation through observation and class management skills, from both the American and Brazilian teachers, aiming at providing students with a reflective learning experience, by comparing the cultural differences between British English and American English, by the use of one piece of a well-known Literature work - *The Canterbury Tales*, by Geoffrey Chaucer - *The*

Prologue - for British English and *Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain, for American English. The last piece of Literature work was part of the curriculum and had been read and analyzed by all students, since passages of it and critical analysis were part of a unit of their textbooks.

The reason for using those pieces of Literature was due to the fact that at that stage of learning, English for native speakers was ministered through the reading comprehension of American Literature, and it was observed by the researcher that during all the four months spent as an intern no English Literature works had been shown for them.

Another reason for showing them both Literature pieces of work was also because in the researcher's trajectory as an English teacher and professor, five years of her career were dedicated to English Literature teaching for Letters Course at a college, for learners who were or wished to be English teachers.

Hence, the idea was use Literature as a tool to show learners the historical, cultural and social differences between both English dialects and their influence on the English Language use in the two different countries.

Therefore, using observation and taking notes as instruments of research, it was possible to notice that that specific piece of Literature work – the book *Huckleberry Finn* – might be a very good tool to work with the students on an interdisciplinary approach and also show them that knowledge is universal, without borders, and even a teacher from a so-called “underdeveloped country” would be able to rise up another perspective of learning their own language and culture.

Using the Genre Theory principles, class was divided into 2 different moments. The theoretical basis served to help students distinguish the social role of Textual Genres and Textual Sequence, based upon the principles of Jean-Michel Adam's theory, who asserts that

genres regulate the textual practice through two apparently contradictory principles: a principle of identity, oriented for the repetition and the reproduction, and a principle of difference, oriented for the innovation and the variation (ADAM, 2002, p. 38 apud).

Actually, the idea of distinguishing textual genres and textual sequences was just to make students understand the social purpose and discourse intention, besides comprehending that a text is related to any expressed ideas, verbally or non-verbally, and that sometimes a non-verbal message can communicate more than a lot of words.

As the researcher used pictures of places in their locality, the purpose of it was encourage them to infer from those pictures their own historical and social identity and also help them understand the powerful meaning of those significant images and messages.

PROCEDURES

First of all, by observing and noticing that students had a very passive behavior in classroom and that some of them appeared to be bored with the current methodology, repeated every class, with no other resources use but the textbook, oral explanations and reading-comprehension activities, always in the same way, as a foreign teacher, who was supposed to observe more than teaching and “learn methodology and improve the language skills” by observing, with just a few moments of cultural aspects of the country explained, the insight of trying to teach with a different methodology and approach came up and insisted on doing something interesting and profitable for the students. Actually, the foreign teacher had to offer to teach the topic and submitted the lesson plan steps to the American teacher, who got excited with the idea of bringing something challenging to them.

So, class was prepared with powerpoint presentation, starting with brainstorming activities using pictures to provoke students to infer the historical periods, the cultural aspects of those periods, focusing on social standards. The concept of non-verbal texts was also explained and so, they were supposed to look at each picture for a while and then, think about what they could express to each of them, by taking notes or just keeping ideas on mind. The exposure to non-verbal texts, all of them pictures taken by the researcher during her visits and tours provided by the program, called students’ attention because most of the places shown in the pictures were unknown for the majority of them, although all of

them were American citizens living in or near the US localities shown. They really liked the idea of sharing their guessing among the fellows and suddenly they felt excited with the interaction in classroom, something that they were not used to have during their ordinary classes.

Concerning the importance of interaction and motivation, Yoon, 2002, asserts that

teacher-student relationships have a significant influence on various outcomes, investigations into how the relationships are shaped and what determines the quality of those relationships are of great importance for intervention efforts to foster nurturing, warm relationships between teachers and students. So far, a number of student characteristics have been linked to teacher-student relationships (p. 1).

Then, as a second step, after the sharing of opinions about the pictures, they were told to open their textbooks on the page where they had read last class with their own teacher and asked to reflect on the period written on the page that served as the starting point for that class:

“Just as Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales is the first significant work written in English, Huckleberry Finn is the first novel of world rank to be written entirely in American”

From that time on, the focus was directed to the reflection on the saying and the non-verbal texts they had tried to infer social standards. They were also given a handout of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury’s Tale Prologue* with the language used in the VIII century and, in groups, they discussed how language might contribute for the identity of a group of people, by searching for typical examples of social patterns on both handouts.

The third step of the class was presenting social dialects in both British and American English in a powerpoint presentation and some of the groups were invited to volunteering present their reports.

To reinforce the knowledge and as a follow-up activity, for the following class, students were asked to read the passages and look for more social dialect and pattern examples.

FEEDBACK FROM THE AMERICAN TEACHER AND THE STUDENTS

The same class, with some variations required, according to the level and the interest of each group, was ministered. There were two Honors groups and another “regular” 12th Grade. This last group, whose time was split because of lunch time, had much more difficulties to follow the purpose of the class and moreover there were some misbehavior students, considered special needed and there was a collaborative teacher in classroom who was supposed to collaborate with discipline and knowledge but was usually useless.

Class as it was designed couldn't be utterly ministered and demanded many changes, although they took part of it with a lot of interest and this specific group had a very good affective interaction with the researcher.

It is very important to highlight that, since from the beginning of the researcher's idea to manage the class, the American teacher got excited but expressed his concern on the higher level of challenge that class could bring to students. When he was told that the sort of interactive and challenging class was a regular procedure in the researcher's daily routine with her students in her country, he got surprised.

The first group was considered “the best” in knowledge level, had the advantage of studying English as their two first classes, and was really very interested in learning as well. Thus, as expected, the involvement and the knowledge occurred smoothly and, after the class, some students thanked the researcher for the different approach used and for their accomplishments.

The second group was considered the one in the average and the results were good. However, interaction was a matter that took both teachers time and effort to get, considering that some of the students were not interested at all in interacting with some of their classmates. The kind of activities and their procedure, nevertheless, provoked them and, making use of classroom management techniques, it was possible to work well.

That class was one the last students had, before the end of the school year, trying to get acquainted to them, the researcher took pictures with the three groups, interacted with them on a closer way, asking them to call her for the first name, showing them pictures of her country, and also picking up their Facebook display names to create a Facebook account for them, promising to put them in contact with her own students.

CONCLUSION

As a trial to conclude, but, just using this space of a reflection stage, both researcher and native teacher, as well as students realized that interaction, engagement and compromise linked to creativeness and willingness can make a big difference in the way meaningful learning may occur.

Although students were used to study passages of Literature pieces of work, just little criticism could be provided to them through the use of the same boring strategy. The idea of bringing an interdisciplinary approach to them as well as visual aids and meaningful texts helped them understand that language is a cultural-historical-social manifestation and that the use of a language is dynamic and full of intentions, purposes and social power. The appropriate use of a language can make all the difference in communication when users are aware of its power.

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