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FROM BONFIRE NIGHT TO HAWAIIAN LEI DAY: THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ALL–YEAR-ROUND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION FROM THE EFL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: In this article, it is our intention to highlight the key importance that the subject of English as a foreign language has in raising the cultural awareness of our young primary and pre-primary students. We can choose among many actions and perspectives from which raise this cultural awareness but as our interest is mainly set on the education of young learners, we have opted to develop a frequently simplified aspect in the official Curriculum of the Foreign Language area: festivities. After a revision of the most important Primary English textbooks in the Spanish market, we realized that festivals were treated as a residual content. They are frequently presented in the last pages, for teachers to use them as “gap fillers” in their sessions and with no meaningful activities. So, we not only intend to invite the readers to a reflection on this issue but also want to show how we can use festivities to work beyond vocabulary or grammar by sharing the main findings and conclusions of a real school experience where an intercultural approach through festivities was carried out along the school year 2014-2015.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKING THE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE FROM THE EFL AREA

According to Mitchell and Myles (2004, p. 235) «language and culture are not separate, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other» therefore no wonder the intercultural perspective has placed itself in the limelight of language education. To make our students become not only linguistically but also interculturally competent we need to teach from a perspective which involves developing «learners critical cultural awareness of their own culturally-shaped world view and behaviours as well as the skills and attitudes to understand and successfully interact with people from other cultures» (HO: 2009, p. 63).

As foreign language experts it is our duty to make children aware of the language not only as a set of grammar rules but also as a way to interpret the world. Therefore, this knowledge of a foreign culture will offer them the opportunity to regard themselves as part of a culture and to develop understanding among people. At the same time, this cultural awareness will
have a positive effect in their language acquisition as long as there are expressions, ideas and concepts typical from a specific culture that cannot be translated or find an equivalent in another one as «language and culture are dimensions of each other, interrelated and inseparable» (FANTINI:1997, p.4). We find this last aspect important to be introduced at an early age in an intuitive way.

Many has been written about actions and perspectives from which we can raise this cultural awareness, although most of them focus on the pragmatic use of language (ways of greeting, courtesy and social functions of language, etc.) or on routines and – mainly British– ways of life (school timetables, eating habits, transportation, free time, etc.). This challenge is easier to face in the secondary level, as students have already acquired some notions of the concept of culture and have more cognitive skills to work these contents in an explicit way, so analysis and direct comparisons can be carried out with them. But when we deal with younger students, who are still in the process of building their own cultural identity, it is harder to introduce powerful enough aspects to call their attention in order to promote meaningful learnings from which to start pointing out cultural differences.

To start raising the cultural awareness of our youngest students we have chosen a frequently deprecated and/or simplified aspect in the official Curriculum: festivities. After a revision of the most important Primary English textbooks in the Spanish market, we realized that festivals are treated as a residual content, frequently presented in the last pages for teachers to use them as “gap fillers” in their sessions and with no meaningful activities to develop them in their full potential. We reckon that it is up to the teacher to create a set of interesting activities according to their students’ profile in order to work this aspect and that a textbook should not guide our professional practice. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. In this way we are wasting a precious opportunity to develop our students’ intercultural competence.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF FESTIVITIES IN PRIMARY BOOKS

Persuaded of the potential that festivals could have in developing language and intercultural skills in our students we decided to do some research on what publishers could offer before designing our project. As we have already mentioned, we know that teachers do have the last word in how they use these already prepared and scheduled materials, even in using them at all, and that they don’t imply an exact reflection of what it is happening in the English classrooms of our country, but on the other hand we believe that they can give us some hints of what the mainstream is.

We went through 4 of the most well-known publishers in the Spanish market who offer EFL primary textbooks. We revised a total of 20 titles, each of which is graded from level 1 to level 6. That makes a total of 120 books. The criteria we followed was to write down the type of festival and the number of times it appeared per title from level 1 to level 6. We also wanted to observe the place those festivals had in the book (as the main topic of a unit, at the end of every unit, at the end of the book, at the end of some units only).

The results of this revision in figures are the following:

A total of 8 titles didn’t work any festivity in their pages; from the 12 titles left (72 books in total) the frequency of appearance of festivities along the primary period is summarized in the following table:
From bonfire night to Hawaiian Lei Day: the importance of an all-year-round intercultural ...

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Over 30 times</th>
<th>Over 15 times</th>
<th>5 to 10 times</th>
<th>2-4 times</th>
<th>1 time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christmas (49 times)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Easter (10 times)</td>
<td>Peace day (4 times)</td>
<td>Birthdays</td>
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<tr>
<td>Halloween (19 times)</td>
<td>Carnival (7 times)</td>
<td>April Fool’s day (4 times)</td>
<td>Harvest festivals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bonfire night (6 times)</td>
<td>St. Valentine’s day (5 times)</td>
<td>Mother’s day/Father’s day (3 times)</td>
<td>Chinese New Year</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Environment day (3 times)</td>
<td>World Hello day</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>International children’s book day (3 times)</td>
<td>Poetry day</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thanksgiving day (2 times)</td>
<td>United Nations day</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>St. Patrick’s day (2 times)</td>
<td>Glastonbury Festival</td>
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<td>Edinburgh festival</td>
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<td>Cultural diversity day</td>
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<td>Courtesy day</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Summer solstice</td>
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<td>Culture day</td>
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<td>Music day</td>
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<td>May day</td>
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This revision backed our first hypothesis: festivals are treated as a residual content, usually set aside in textbooks.

It called our attention the fact that two very well-known festivities have a prevailing presence, namely, Christmas and Halloween. The first one is a common tradition among several cultures while the second, despite its foreign origin, has been quickly absorbed by the Spanish culture in the last decade. We don’t want to disparage the potential these two festivities may have when working in an intercultural approach, as they can be used as a common point to highlight the similarities different cultures may have or how certain celebrations have crossed borders making our children reflect on those traditions that have belonged to their culture for centuries and those which have been recently adopted. But we would like to point out the lack of intercultural value with which they are being presented in these didactic materials. We will let readers reach their own conclusions, but as far as we are concerned these are some of the most important implications we have found for what the reviewed textbooks can offer to the work of intercultural contents in the EFL class:

- Some festivals are repeated over and over along the primary period. This not only makes some contents redundant with very little meaningful novelties and the subsequent lack of interest on the students’ side, but it also takes away the opportunity of introducing other festivities which may benefit the development of the intercultural competence. This reflects the little interest shown in working language and culture through festivities.
- This repetition in a cyclic way is useful to work vocabulary, language drills or oral and written comprehension using the festivity as the main topic, but again, focus is set on just working language and not real cultural contents.
- Some of the festivities we have come across are very interesting and have a lot of potential but their presence is anecdotic (once or twice in 120 books).
- Their position in the books can also give us a clue of the importance they are still given in the curriculum. They usually appear all together in a block of festivities at the end of the book. In some cases they are scheduled as a short unit within the thread of the book to coincide with the time of the year when they are celebrated. The last most common case is to find them as a final cultural note in some of the units.
• The number of pages each one has devoted is no more than two.
• They are mainly focused on British and/or American traditions.

3. A REAL EXPERIENCE: OBJECTIVES, METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

So after these reflections, we will expose the main results of a real experience based on our project which we consider worth sharing and we will raise some conclusions to promote debate and give other teachers and experts some food for thought. This experience was carried out in a public school of the Valencian Community along the school year 2014-2015.

In our approach to festivities we decided to make a list of traditions that belong to the English-Speaking cultural environment and that are frequently alien to our students, to become the starting point from which we can «help learners transcend their singular world view through the learning of a foreign lingua culture» (LO BIANCO, J.; LIDDICOAT, A.J.; CROZET, C.: 1999 p. 115). We took into account that «many typical festivities from countries such as New Zealand, Canada or Australia, which conform an important part of the English speaking countries and therefore English speaking culture are often forgotten» (CARRETERO, A., SÁENZ, J.M.: 2005), so we made a list of some less-known festivities, namely Bonfire Night, St. Valentine’s day (worked as friendship week), St. Patrick’s day and Hawaiian Lei day.

Our two main objectives were working language (vocabulary, structures, and communicative skills) through festivities and to develop our students’ intercultural competence. The methodological approach was also key to reach these two goals. We didn’t work inside the classroom in an isolated way, but involved the whole school in the various activities we carried out all year round, not as an extra but as an important part in the thread of our year program. Another interesting methodological aspect was that we worked the same festival at a time adapting the contents and activities to each level and creating spaces of interaction between ages. The main focus was set on culture comparison and communicative skills.

After implementing all the set of activities we had planned, which are too extensive to detail in here, we analyzed the main results and summarized them as following:

• Meaningful learning of the contents and skills worked using festivities. After several months our students still remembered what they had learnt and showed how they could use this new acquired knowledge by connecting ideas and developing other aspects of the curriculum.
• This work was a positive first approach to the sense of being part of a culture and of language as a way to express this culture.
• Year objectives were achieved: language and communicative competence through cultural contents with activities students found motivating—videos, rhymes, songs, writings, arts and crafts, dances…
• Motivation was increased: after the experience, children are eager to work these type of contents in the English sessions.

Conclusions of using this festivities approach after a real experience

• This is a useful approach to begin working intercultural aspects with young students in a motivating way.
• Main communicative and linguistic objectives are not affected by giving festivities and cultural contents an important role when designing our year programming. What is more, they can be boosted and learnt meaningfully.
• An all-year-round, all-school-involved approach helps building strong bonds between levels and developing other competences and values which are desirable in pre-primary and primary education: solidarity, communication and understanding among people.

As a final note, we would like to point out that it is obvious that holiday celebrations are just one way for programs and teachers to create culturally appropriate learning and real experiences, that is to say that motivation should be an important element in every single activity we prepare, no matter the topic, the unit or the term we are in, and not just in the case of teaching culture. Nevertheless, we firmly believe that if not the only way, festivities celebration is a perfect way to get our pupils involved in the intercultural world of English, and that is why along the school year we can celebrate brand new holidays usually forgotten in the curriculum.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


