

THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN FOCUS

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ABSTRACT: The question of identity was seen for a long time as something steady and well defined, in this perspective, the future is seen as the work of fate with no possibilities of change. Teachers adapted to this vision tend to simply describe the world so that students are able to memorize and reproduce it. This way of teaching does not take into account the subjectivity and desires faced in the classroom. Teaching English is not just about the language, but it involves complex issues of identity. It encompasses actions of inclusions and exclusions; it implies in telling what one is and recognizing what one is not. Therefore, “every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are also constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (NORTON, 1997, p.410). Thus, it is important to perceive identity as a process that is constantly being (re)built through the discourses people engage in, as well as, the idea that language teachers influence the construction of who people are in the social world and how they see themselves. In this sense the aim of this paper is to lead teachers to reflect on how to make a difference in language classes focusing upon the individual’s perception of self in relation to others; the relationships between multi-ethnicity, cultural diversity and identity.

1 ABOUT IDENTITY

From the moment we are born, there is the need to identify individuals, who receive a name, which is the representation of their identity. With time, the

activities the individuals take part become part of their identity, as well as, the meanings shared by society. Concurrent, they start to become conscious of themselves in the process of becoming aware of the others, thus the identity assumes different forms. Ciampa (1987, p. 135) points out that at this time the subject is not something anymore; he is what he does.

The urgency in communicating creates the precision and interpretation of the language, making it a constitutive element of the identity. In Freire's words (1997, p. 13) "with the social invention of the language, side by side with the operation on the world, we lengthened the natural world, which we did not do, in a cultural and historical world, which is our product, that we became animals permanently inscribed in the process of learning and searching". In this sense, at the same time individuals transform their environment and their interlocutors, they are transformed by them.

Therefore, the construction of identity is linked to the concept of alterity, that is, every social being interacts and depends on other individuals. In this perspective, the subjects are recognized as fragmented identities that are constantly changing in a world where the references are more and more altered and fragmented and in which fixed and perennial models cease to exist (GRIGOLETO, 2006). The individuals identity is (re)modeled everyday by different discourses, different choices they have to make, the context and position they assume as well as the image that are expected from them.

In this conception of identity, it is not an acquired data, it is not a property, and it is not a product, it is a site of fights and conflicts. These tensions and conflicts come alive due to the image the subject presents to the others, the way they want to be seen by them, the image they have from themselves, as well as the image other people expect from them. This image, according to Pollack (2002, p. 5), is not constructed "free of changes, of negotiation, of transformation due to the others"; it is a phenomenon that happens through the relation established in the society, determined by factors of acceptability, credibility, which occur via negotiation with others.

The subjects are seen and also show themselves in different ways in different situations depending on the context. Woodward (2009, p. 30), quoting

Bourdieu, mentions that individuals live within “social fields”, which refer to a great number of institutions, such as family, group of mates, educational institutions, group of co-workers, political parties. In each of these institutions, the individuals practice “a diverse degree of choices and autonomy, depending on the positions that one can take or not. The places from where the individuals can position themselves and speak are constructed by discourses and representations available in the society.

The subject, for example, when performing their role as a teacher, assumes certain postures in front of their students, which are not noticed when performing their role as a friend, spouse, etc. This way, in agreement with Ciampa (1987, p. 157), one identity can appear as “the articulation of several characters, articulation of equality and differences, constituting and being constituted by a personal history”, these characters are also influenced by the social structure and by the current historical moment. In Woodward’s words (2009, p. 11) “One of the forms in which identities establish their claims is through the appeal to historical background”, although seeking the past, a new identity is built, owing that all the meaningful practices happen over the life of the subject, being part of their memory that can be inherited or acquired.

Identity cannot be understood apart from difference. According to Silva (2009, p. 74), identity and difference are in a close relation of dependency, for example, when it is referred to the Brazilian identity, several denials are made, such as not being Argentinean, not being Chinese, and so on. Therefore, “stating the identity means delimiting borders, it means making distinctions between what stays inside and what stays outside” (SILVA, 2009, p. 82).

Blatyta (2005, p. 64) quoting Bourdieu, mentions that People tend to act in a certain way, pursue certain objectives, approve certain expenses, etc, due to the habitus, that is, people are predisposed to act in a certain way, follow certain objectives, etc, because of the habitus. People are influenced by a group of tendencies that make them act and react in certain ways generating practices, perceptions and attitudes that are regular without being consciously coordinated and governed by rules. Ciampa (1986, p. 163) complements this idea saying that there is “a general expectation that people must act according

their predications and, consequently, be treated as so” and, when one notices how he is seen, internalizes the character that is expected from him and ends up identifying himself with it.

Yet, Grigoletto (2006, p. 22) mentioning Ellsworth, states that these identities required by the society mistake due to the fact that the projection made from them is below real, leading to a conflict between what is expected from the individual and what they actually become. The author also states that “this perspective points to a subject structurally divided that is constituted without ceasing the tension between what is expected from them – and even of the image they make of themselves, from the look of the others – and the failure (needed) in the process of identification.

Although there is the temptation to personify a model of identity, as mentioned by Perrenoud (2002), it is not possible to control the processes of projection or identification each subject evoke. The subject’s identity reflects the social roles performed by them, the perception of their place in the society. Thus, the construction of identity results of the interaction among several experiences: personal, social and cultural, this is part of the daily life of the individuals.

It is through interaction and discourse that subjects build and negotiate meanings, assuming their social roles and building their social identity. The moment a subject engages in a discourse, he influences the (re)construction of his interlocutor’s identity as well as is influenced by his interlocutor. Social identity is, therefore, seen as a process. Hall (1990) states that instead of thinking identity as a concluded fact, we should think about identity as a ‘production’ that is never complete, that is always in process, always constituted inside and not outside representations.

The comprehension of how, through language, social identities are formed in the discourse and how meanings are constructed in the society places the subjects as participants of this process, enabling them, according to Moita Lopes (2006, p. 55) “positions of resistance in relation to hegemonic discourses, that is, power is not taken as monolithic and identities are not fixed”.

2 THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY AND THE CLASSROOM

It is noticed the importance of the teacher in the social construction of identity in the classroom. Moita Lopes (2006) argues that the role of the language teacher goes beyond grammar knowledge or discursive structures of narratives; it helps to “build the sense of who we are in the social world. The teacher is the one who can stimulate students curiosity, which is a characteristic of the human being and, according to Freire (2001), it is this professional who can make the naive and spontaneous curiosity change into a epistemological one, that is, in a curiosity that orients students capacity of learning critically.

With reference to the English teacher, its importance lies on the fact that the English Language is used for the communication among countries, however, as already mentioned, it is not just about learning a language, the teacher has the duty to teach, together with the language, the differences among cultures, without elevating one culture or the other, leading student to reflect over these differences, understand them, as well as, respect its own culture, removing, with information, the naive perception students might have of the other culture, seen with the uninformed look of those who seek for better opportunities. Freire (2008, p. 35) states that the “alienated being do not look for an authentic world. This causes nostalgic feelings: one desires the other country and regrets having been born in his own. This person is ashamed of his reality. He lives in another country and tries to imitate it and believe being more refined the less native he is.

Paulo Freire (2008) when alluding to the fact that there are subjects that are ashamed of their reality and believe being more refined the less native they are, illustrate the need of well-prepared language teachers in relation to the formation of conscious and critic citizens, who comprehend and respect the differences of each country and that reflect over them, and also participate in the society trying to contribute in a positive way to the construction of it without the maintenance of the relation among countries that dominate and the ones that are dominated.

It is indispensable the knowledge of other people and other cultures, but not with the naive view that everything from the other culture is better, as well as it is in undebatable the importance of learning another language; however, this learning has to happen in a reflexive way, students have to be considered active and critic beings, that listen but also speak. This way, learning contributes to better understand, evaluate, participate and change the globalized world of today.

Nowadays, in the globalised world, languages are suffering the influence of one another in a great scale. Hall (2006) declares that the more the social life is mediated by the global market of styles, places and images, by international trips, by images from the media and by the globally interconnected communication systems, the more identities become detached from times, places, histories and traditions and seem to float freely. We are confronted by several different identities (each one claiming different parts of us), among which seem to be difficult to choose.

The exposition to the culture is inherent to the language learning and it is very enriching. However, this contact with other cultures leads the student to a resignification of values and, consequently, to a (re) construction of identity, due to the fact that when students try to acquire a language and develop intercultural competences, they also acquire other values, attitudes and feelings. It is of extreme importance that educational strategies are defined in favor of a personal reflexion about world values, as well as, intensify the possibility of a genuine sharing among students.

In this sense, it is urgent to understand the process of language learning of a foreign language as an essential part of the process of identity resignification. Languages are the expression of the identities of those who acquire them, so people who transits among several idioms are redefining their identity (RAJAGOPALAN, 2003). According to the same author (2003) "It is necessary to dominate the foreign language, make it part of our own personality; and never let it dominate us".

Oliveira (2006, p. 27) argues that "the fact of recognizing and respecting the singularities of each culture, community, group in a globalized society

cannot hide the fact that the differences that exist in each of them are passed over through social values, that is, the other – the interlocutor or someone's else discourse – is also cleaved and valued socially in a different form”.

Teaching a language has been, for a long time, understood as a system of symbols and due to the long practice of methodologies centered on the figure of the teacher and worried exclusively in the acquisition of the language, the English teaching has been happening in a very mechanical way, facing the act of teaching as a neutral space, deprived of ideologies, what is an illusion, once ideology takes place through the construction of meanings in the discursive practices, appearing in several forms in different groups. Fairclough (1992, p. 63) suggests that the “discourse is a mode of action, one form in which people may act upon the world and especially upon each other, as well as a mode of representation”.

Nowadays, it is longed more reflexive and critic professionals in the area of teaching, so that the pedagogical practice when talking about languages can offer more room to reflection, leaving out the more traditional way of teaching, which ends up taking the student to build preconceived ideas and stereotypes concerning their own culture or the other, this may happen through the depreciation of their own culture and the super appreciation of the other or undervaluing everything that belongs to the other culture due to an exaggerated patriotism. Hall (2006) argues that these are consequences of the event of globalization over cultural identities. According to the author, the three possible consequences of globalization are:

National identities are disintegrating, as a result of the growing of the cultural homogenization and of the “global post-modern”;

National identities and other “local” identities are being strengthened through the resistance to globalization;

National identities are in decline, but new identities – hybrid – are taking its place.

(p. 69)

This way, the teacher has to be prepared not to reinforce preconceived ideas and stereotypes and contribute to the maintenance of an alienated

society, but guide students to comprehend their reality. Freire (2008, p. 35) points out “the alienated being does not look to the reality with personal criteria, but someone else’s eye. That’s why they live in an imagined reality and not their objective one.

3 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The English teacher has to be well prepared not to let the admiration for the language or culture studied be seen as a naive and inadequate fascination of a colonized mind (LEFFA, 2003). It is necessary to see English as a language that surpass geographical boundaries and not just attached to the United States or England. Nowadays, with the globalization, not knowing the English language limits not just the access to information, but also its transmission. Leffa (2003) declares that from each three people that speak English, two are non-native speakers, this attests that the English language reflects the cultural diversity. However, it cannot be denied the dominant ideology of the imperialist countries over the peripheral ones, at this point comes up the function of the conscientious and critic teacher that takes students to notice all this factors and uses the language in a good way without letting them be influenced by the dominant forces.

Taking into consideration that “the choice of our multiple identities do not depend on our will, but is determined by the discursive practices, impregnated by power, in which we act although we can resist to them” (MOITA LOPES, 2006, p. 37) and that the discourses in the classroom have great influence over students perception of who they are in the society, how can English teachers contribute to the (re) constructions of students identity?

Having in mind the social implication of the discourse in the classroom, the social constructionist perspective of the discourse and the social identity is a good try. Its relevance lies on the fact that on the one hand, it is necessary to make students aware of how language is used in society, that is, what people use the language for and, on the other hand, the urgency to link the classroom to the external world of practices.

In this sense, in this approach it is possible to put students in contact with a variety of discourses, as well as activate their own knowledge of the world, it is possible to use the classroom as a site to (re) describe or (re) construct social identity through the conscience of how language is used to participate in the social world at the same time people build themselves, the others and the world (MOITA LOPES, 2006)

It is important in this perspective to understand the activities worked in class as a discursive practice in a determined context, in a determined culture and history. The way the teachers position themselves also contributes to the maintenance of certain beliefs and meanings.

When dealing with the acquisition of a foreign language, generally, it is paid attention to the cognitive aspects, and emphasis on the structure of the language is given; however, it is important to pay close attention to the role of reflectivity, that is, students have to talk about the language, the culture and be able to bring their experiences from the real world and incorporate in their narratives.

It is necessary that teachers keep in mind that “every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are also constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (NORTON, 1997, p.410).

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