

Teachers' perceptions on culture teaching in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

The present research project focuses on the investigation of the teachers' perceptions on culture teaching. This study addresses issues regarding the promotion of culture teaching in the primary schools in Portugal. On one hand, it is important to establish whether teachers consider teaching culture alongside with language, and on the other hand, to know if knowledge of cultural references and culture related issues, facts or aspects contributes to cultural awareness.

Conducted on a small scale, the interviews were examined using Laurence Bardin's proposals for content analysis, namely in terms of processing the information that is subliminal to the messages (Bardin, 1977). After, the discussion of the findings of the study tries to dissect the information given by comparing the textual data, verifying the existence of the consensus or disparity in the teacher's opinions.

The study analyses the results of five semi-structured interviews, comparing the perceptions of five teachers of English in the Portuguese primary school system and focuses on the conceptualization of culture and how important culture is in the foreign/second language classroom.

The participants in this study, convey the idea that understanding the cultural context of the target language, will facilitate the conditions for an effective language learning environment. The teachers consider Culture a vital component in language teaching and they also believe that learners that benefit from culture teaching will respond positively to the cultural differences they encounter later in their lifetime. These participants make use of different methods, avert textbooks and invest in their own materials to fit their lesson plans.

Keywords: English language teaching, teachers' perception, culture teaching, intercultural awareness

A percepção de professores/as sobre o ensino de cultura na sala de aula do 1º Ciclo do Ensino Básico de Língua Inglesa

Resumo

O presente projeto de pesquisa deriva de uma investigação necessária para a conclusão da Unidade Curricular Prática de Ensino Supervisionada, inserida no Mestrado em Ensino do Inglês no 1ºCiclo e tem como objetivo questionar em que contexto a cultura é ensinada e perceber a perspetiva dos docentes. Numa tentativa de compreender a motivação que guia os professores de Língua Inglesa, questiona-se como pode ser promovida a interculturalidade. Este documento encontra-se dividido em cinco capítulos. O primeiro capítulo apresenta as fundamentações teóricas sobre o papel da cultura no ensino de língua e a investigação efetuada na Europa sobre o ensino da cultura no contexto do ensino da Língua Segunda ou Língua Estrangeira. O segundo explica a metodologia e os objetivos da investigação. O capítulo seguinte expõe a análise dos dados, nomeadamente das respostas das participantes. O quarto capítulo retrata a discussão dos resultados e o último capítulo apresenta as conclusões do estudo.

O relatório do projeto de investigação pretende revelar as percepções dos professores e das professoras sobre o ensino de cultura e as exigências que a tarefa requer. Numa tentativa de responder às questões da investigação, o estudo direciona a sua atenção para a promoção do ensino da cultura. É importante perceber, por um lado, se os docentes ensinam cultura aquando o ensino da língua. E, por outro lado, se os conhecimentos socioculturais transmitidos contribuem para uma consciencialização cultural. O estudo resulta da análise de cinco entrevistas realizadas a cinco professoras de Inglês no 1º Ciclo no contexto português.

Para este efeito, é apresentado o enquadramento teórico, resultante das diversas pesquisas efetuadas no âmbito do ensino de uma língua estrangeira, nomeadamente o Inglês, e no contexto do ensino de cultura no sistema escolar europeu.

Para reunir a informação necessária para a investigação, foi concebida uma entrevista semiestruturada com o objetivo de perceber as percepções destes profissionais, de acordo com as seguintes diretrizes: como conceptualizam a cultura, como avaliam a relevância do ensino da cultura na aula de Inglês, como avaliam os manuais enquanto fonte de conteúdo cultural,

como promovem a diversidade cultural, como lidam com os estereótipos e como encaram o papel do professor nativo para ensinar cultura.

Conduzido sob a forma de um estudo em pequena escala, o terceiro capítulo contempla a análise do conteúdo de cinco entrevistas efetuadas a professoras de Inglês no 1º Ciclo do Ensino Básico em Portugal. As participantes expõem as suas conceções e como desenvolvem a cultura ou interculturalidade na sala de aula. Através das suas explicações é possível perceber as preocupações e ambições que as motivam. As entrevistadas concordam que a aprendizagem se torna efetiva quando os alunos compreendem o contexto cultural. Consideram o ensino da cultura vital no ensino de uma língua e, desta forma, os aprendentes beneficiam da sua aprendizagem ao compreenderem as diferenças culturais que os circundam. A abertura dos horizontes dos alunos no que concerne à aceitação, tolerância e compreensão de outras culturas é entendido pelas entrevistadas como uma das vantagens do ensino de cultura.

Ao conjugar diferentes técnicas na transmissão de cultura, estas participantes evitam os manuais e investem nouro tipo de materiais, adequados para cada aula. Enumeram canções, histórias de autores ingleses, poemas, fotografias, revistas ou até mesmo materiais que criam para as aulas para desenvolver as perspetivas dos alunos no que concerne à diversidade cultural que os rodeia.

Os estereótipos são considerados redutores e, embora os manuais continuem a focar as mesmas informações, já conhecidas dos alunos e das alunas, as participantes alertam para outro caminho a percorrer, pois aconselham que se deveria ir para além deste conhecimento e encorajar a perspetiva intercultural. Confessam que tentam evitar corroborar ideias pré-concebidas da turma, mas reconhecem que estas associações permitem a sua identificação com o país ou países de expressão inglesa.

O professor não nativo da Língua Inglesa é encarado como estando numa melhor posição para ensinar cultura por conseguir promover a interculturalidade, criando um paralelismo entre a cultura de origem e cultura da língua que estão a ensinar.

Nas entrevistas as professoras demonstram serem sensíveis à problemática. Preocupam-se acerca das representações culturais por via dos estereótipos, procuram estratégias para os combater e promovem a interculturalidade e tentam, ainda, não se cingir aos materiais, adequando-os às características das turmas.

Torna-se imprescindível que futuras investigações sejam efetuadas no âmbito do ensino da cultura, contribuindo, desta forma, para o desenvolvimento de competências interculturais e por uma compreensão cultural mais informada da língua que estão a aprender.

Palavras-chave: ensino da língua Inglesa, percepção dos professores, ensino de cultura, consciencialização intercultural

Introduction

This research project stems from the supervised teaching practice (STP) of the Master's degree in English teaching. During the STP a research project was implemented within the context of the teaching practice. During this process, one of the questions that crossed my interest was how culture was taught and how it was viewed from the teachers' points of view. They were fundamental for this investigation as they are the key participants.

Ever since I began my journey in English teaching, I wanted to teach about cultural aspects to my students. So, to make my students understand the cultural meaning of the English language, I would introduce to them songs, movies, cartoons, books and images. When I began to study for my Master's degree, I wondered how much attention English teachers allocated to culture and why. There comes a time in the English Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) classroom when it is imperative to determine whether culture can be taught. Studies show the concerns that language teachers have regarding the promotion of cultural awareness gained by one's attitude (Kramsch, 1993) or by comparing features between cultures (Önalán, 2005). This investigation focuses on the concerns that Portuguese language teachers have. This research project tries to unveil the teachers' perceptions on culture teaching and the demands that such task requires.

This study attempts to explore teachers' perceptions and understand how they view and promote culture in their primary EFL classroom. In order to fully comprehend the assignment, several research questions were posed:

- *How do teachers conceptualise culture?*
- *How important is culture in the foreign language classroom?*
- *What role does culture play in the way they teach the language?*
- *What kind of resources are used where culture is present?*
- *How can cultural diversity and intercultural competence be fostered in the classroom?*

In order to answer these research questions, this study addresses issues regarding the promotion of culture teaching in the primary schools in Portugal. It is important to establish, on one hand, whether teachers consider teaching culture along with language,

and on the other, if socio-cultural knowledge contributes to cultural awareness. The study analyses the results of interviews to five teachers of English in the Portuguese primary school system. The issues, concerning the purpose of the study, focus on the conceptualization of culture and how important culture is in the foreign/second language classroom.

This research project is divided into six chapters. The first chapter provides the theoretical framework that is crucial to provide the conceptual scaffolding of this study. The theoretical framework includes the definition of culture by several scholars, the link between language and culture, the cultural awareness, the intercultural communicative competence, which ensures the shared understanding that is critical to communicate effectively, the teaching of culture in the EFL classroom and the importance of being a native or non-native teacher. This chapter also reflects on the investigation on teaching culture in an EFL classroom. Scholars like Önalán (2005), Bayyurt (2006), Baker (2012), Choudhury (2013), Kramsch (2013) or Mahmoud (2015) reveal the concerns about culture teaching in an EFL/ESL classroom and focus their studies on teachers' perceptions, either positive or negative ones.

The second chapter contemplates the research methodology, justifying the use of the interview to better explore teachers' perceptions. This study was applied to 5 teachers of English in the Primary School System in Portugal. This chapter presents the research questions which derive at the centre of this research. The textbooks adopted by the schools balance the seven domains unevenly, for the attention is on vocabulary and grammar neglecting quite often the cultural aspect. Consequently, a question arises. How do EFL teachers think about including cultural information in their teaching and how will it affect the learners? The semi-structured interview intends to understand the interviewees' point of view as they verbalize their ideas on the subject. The interview was planned to answer the research questions above mentioned and the interviewees were selected according with their teaching skills and proximity to the investigator. The object of the investigation was presented and the relevance of the questions were explained to the interviewees.

In the third chapter the data is analysed. The information provided by the five interviews shows their opinions on culture teaching. The analyses of the content of the interviews tries to interpret and comprehend the information provided. Furthermore, it consists on processing the information that is subliminal to the messages (Bardin, 1977).

The fourth chapter presents the discussion of the findings of the study, tries to dissect the information given by comparing the data, verifying the consensus or disparity in the opinions of the teachers interviewed. This chapter tries to explain the results and the implications suggested by the participants regarding their classroom. Since the interviewees agree on the importance of culture teaching, it is important to perceive how they promote cultural content in their lessons. Here we can relate some aspects of studies developed about culture teaching and the present study. The studies on teachers' perceptions that were analysed show that language and culture are deeply connected (Mitchell and Miles, 2014) and that an EFL classroom can be an access to other cultures (Önalán, 2005). This is also a common opinion of the teachers interviewed for this study.

The final chapter is the conclusion and presents the considerations for this investigation and the implications of these findings. Culture is considered a vital component in language teaching and EFL teachers acknowledge cultural awareness as a positive factor to the learning environment. This research project intends to show “the multi-dimensional relationship” (Önalán, 2005, p.215) of language and culture teaching and the effect that learners experience (Baker, 2015; Young, Sachdev and Seedhouse, 2009; Yesil and Demiröz, 2017).

The goals of this study are to understand the teachers' perceptions on culture teaching, based on the following guidelines:

- a) Culture concepts;
- b) Advantages on teaching culture;
- c) Textbooks as a source of cultural information content;
- d) Resources to promote cultural diversity;
- e) Role of stereotypes;
- f) Native or non-native speaking teachers.

I. Literature review

a) The role of culture in language learning

In 1871, the anthropologist Edward Tylor described culture as a “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as member of society” (1871, p.1) and although the concept was always complex and unstable, still there are difficulties in pinpointing specifically what culture is (Hall, 1959). To this day, researchers and scholars tried to provide a definition of culture. Culture is difficult to define (Bayyurt, 2006; Choudhury, 2013) and that can be due to the shift of the concept from arts and literature to the way of life (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey, 2002; Mahmoud, 2015). In her work, Kramsch (1998) has defined culture as “membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history” (p.127) accentuating language as communication bound with culture in “multiple and complex ways” (p. 3).

Correspondingly, Johnson and Chang (2012) debate about the definition of culture but add the premise that the learners need to understand the cultural meaning to belong to the community. Since culture can be delineated engulfing all sorts of different perspectives, in the end, all of the definitions are accurate and acknowledged. Nunan and Choi (2010) outline culture as “the artifacts, ways of life shared by a group of people” (p. 5) and Mahmoud (2015) comprises the term culture as “knowledge, art, traditions, history, religion, customs, norms and values” (p. 66). Önalán (2005) defines culture as “vital part of the communication process” revealing that “learning a language without its culture is a recipe for becoming a fluent fool” (p. 216). Nonetheless, researchers lean on the argument that culture can be branched in two types of culture: culture with a small c and Culture with a big C (Choudhury, 2013; Kramsch, 2013). Small c culture is presented as the culture of everyday life, such as habits, beliefs, food, celebrations and customs. Big C Culture refers to history, literature or arts. When Yesil and Demiröz (2017) summarize culture as ideas and actions certainly they have a similar perspective to Kramsch (2013) that states

Without language and other symbolic systems, the habits, beliefs, institutions (...) would be just observable realities, not cultural phenomena. To become culture, they have to have meaning. It's the meaning that we give to foods and ways of life that constitute culture (2013: 62).

Here she explains the need for meaning, relying on the meaning of things to establish culture. Tomalin and Stempleski (1993) suggest a mixture of small “c” culture and Big “C” culture when teaching the target culture. Several authors that focus their studies on culture and culture teaching, suggest that culture and language have an intrinsic link. “A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language” (Brown, 2007, p. 189), demonstrating the intertwined connection of language and culture. Being more specific, according to Kramsch (1998), “language is a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value” (p. 3). Therefore, language personifies the cultural reality of the speakers. When one speaks of culture one cannot dissociate it from language. Once again, researchers mention the intertwined nature of culture and language (Nault, 2006; Johnson and Chang, 2012; Baker, 2012; Gonen and Saglam, 2012) and question the possibility of separating one from the other (Nunan and Choi, 2010). Thanasoulas explains that by speaking, the learners accept the social and cultural aspects (2001) and for that reason, language acts as bearer of culture (Farnia and Suleiman, 2009; Yesil and Demiröz, 2017).

Mitchell and Miles (2014) explain that “language and culture are not separable, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other” (p. 235). Can this be possible while referring to a second language learning? The path for proficiency in a foreign language requires the constant presence of culture (Nault, 2006) as acquiring knowledge and recognition of the culture might lead to a successful communication (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). Learners need to be aware of culturally correct ways to approach people of other languages (Choudhury, 2013). As Valdes (1990) stated, “there is no way to avoid teaching culture when teaching language” (p. 20). Byram and Feng go further by acknowledging that culture learning needs to be empirical and reveal that technologies cooperate in reducing distance and offering learners the possibility to interact with native speakers (2004). To sum it up, culture benefits from its connection to the language and what it represents, and foreign language learners can obtain multiple advantages while dominating the cultural aspects of the language. And today, with all the possible gathering of information that technologies provide, learners and teachers are able to experience a whole new world.

As a pathway to other cultures (Önalán, 2005), EFL allows learners to develop the necessary skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading) and adds a 5th skill named intercultural awareness (Baker, 2015). Baker (2015) stated in his work that “culture is a central part of intercultural communication and intercultural competence and cannot be dealt with in isolation” (p. 9). According with the Council of Europe’s *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (henceforth CEFR) (2001), intercultural awareness comprises the “knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation between the ‘world of origin’ and the ‘world of the target community’” (p. 103). Earlier, Kramersch (1993) had discussed the role of language as a social process determining that “understanding a foreign culture requires putting that culture in relation with one’s own” (p.205). Moreover, Choudhury (2013) suggested the teacher could help build “bridges between their own and the foreign culture” (p. 20) because learners acquire knowledge and the understanding of the target language by mastering “the cultural contexts in which the language occurs” (p. 21).

Cultural awareness becomes an unavoidable issue to take into account in the EFL classroom. Johnson and Chang conducted a study in ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom in 2012, suggesting that the teacher should implement culturally conscious teaching creating an all-encompassing space for learners boosting cooperation and learning. Önalán (2005) reports that cultural information is an essential part of language teaching and learning shifting learners’ beliefs. While learning a foreign language, learners require both grammatical competence and knowledge of the language (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey, 2002) and, in order to assist language learners to interact with foreigners, the teachers should develop their intercultural competence. According to Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002), “intercultural competence is the ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities” (p. 5) and Choudhury (2013) considers it as the “ability to communicate and operate effectively with people of another culture” (p. 23). So, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) suggest that the learners need “knowledge, skills and attitude” (p. 7) to prepare them to interact with people of other cultures.

The intercultural dimension emerges in the CEFR (2001) establishing that “the language learners becomes plurilingual and develop interculturality” (p. 43) providing “greater openness to new cultural experiences” (p. 43). In Portugal, the Ministry of Education and Science homologated the *Metas Curriculares de Inglês* in accordance with

the A1 level. This document mentions seven domains: Listening, Reading, Spoken Interaction, Spoken Production, Writing, Intercultural Domain and Lexis and Grammar. The Intercultural Domain learning aims are focused on knowing oneself and the others, developing the learner's knowledge of the world, including festivities. However, it does not make reference to cultural aspects until Year 5. Kramersch (1983) advised that culture would be seen as "mere information conveyed by the language" (p.8), but made very clear that culture awareness was an educational objective that would lead to language proficiency. Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) alerted to the risk of stereotypical icons and indicate authentic texts, textbooks and the Internet to promote intercultural dimension. Teachers should seek for the best materials to integrate world cultures into their lesson plans. By using authentic material, teachers are providing their learners with the understanding of the context and the intention of such materials. The intercultural dimension of the materials lead learners to share their knowledge with each other, comparing their cultural background with the target culture context.

The perspective of intercultural sensitivity indicates the concerns that scholars have about different points of view and different cultures in language learning. Educators and students find themselves surrounded by different backgrounds. Being able to acknowledge the importance of intercultural communication contributes to their education. Nault (2006) considers that teachers should rethink the aims for culture teaching, as they should include culture in their lesson plans, by choosing materials that show the link between culture and language. While selecting situations where learners need to communicate, teachers should include not only the ones with native speakers of English, but also with non-native speakers of English. This author suggests that teachers should promote a more cosmopolitan point of view that shows other realities beyond Great Britain or United States. This way, teachers are encouraging "true linguistic/cultural awareness and international understanding among themselves and their students" (2006, p. 325).

Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) developed an important work to guide language teachers in the development of the Intercultural Dimension. The work of Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) presents itself in the shape of a handbook for language teachers containing questions that could be asked by language teachers and the advice they give to those questions. This handbook highlights "the role of the language teacher is therefore to develop skills, attitudes and awareness of values just as much as to develop

a knowledge of a particular culture or country” (p. 9). These scholars also acknowledge that the best teacher may or may not be a native speaker, but is the one who can aid learners to better understand themselves and the others. Furthermore, the teacher’s task is to “help learners ask questions, and to interpret answers” (p. 12). As far as stereotypes are concerned, these scholars suggest that they should be challenged, as they consider it to be a unique way to develop an individual capable of discovering and understanding the other.

The teaching of English became curricular and obligatory for students of Years 3 and 4 in Portugal from 2015. Twice a week a teacher comes in and shares knowledge about the foreign language with the help of a precious resource, the textbook. Textbooks play an important role in the English classroom because they provide visual support of the language, presenting texts and images, with or without cultural content (Choudhury, 2014). The teachers’ task is to guide the learners into an understanding of both cultures, their own and the target culture (Kramsch, 1993; McKay, 2003; Yesil and Demiröz, 2017). An interesting question emerges. In EFL, should the teacher be a native speaker, or a non-native speaker? Will this aspect represent an obstacle or an advantage in language teaching? Bayyurt (2006) and Monfared, Mozaheb and Shahiditabar (2016) developed studies to examine the teachers’ perspectives on culture in EFL classrooms. These studies revealed a positive outcome and described that being a non-native English speaker is an advantage, both culturally and linguistically. Bayyurt (2006) indicates that learners view the teachers as their model and can identify themselves with the non-native English language teacher. Byram, Gribkova and Starkey suggest that the best teacher is the one that can help the learners to connect their culture with the target culture.

b) Investigation about the teaching of culture in the Foreign Language classroom

Several studies show the concerns that teachers have when faced with teaching specific cultural information. Furthermore, teachers manifest some apprehensions when to teach and what effect will it have on the learners (Önalán 2005; Bayyurt, 2006; Gonen and Saglam, 2012; Breka and Petravic, 2015; Yesil and Demiröz, 2017).

Other more specific studies regarding teachers' perceptions about including culture in language teaching in an EFL classroom were analysed to look into the groundwork that has been developed in the field.

A study by Thanasoulas (2001) was conducted on the importance of culture teaching in the foreign language classroom and focused on effective communication while promoting cultural understanding towards other cultures. It debates the relationship between culture and language and why culture should be a part of the curriculum. Thanasoulas considered the teachers' task to be to encourage learners' interest in the target culture in order to increase their knowledge to "make learners aware of speech acts, connotations, etiquette (...) as well as provide them with the opportunity to act out being a member of the target culture" (2001, p. 19).

Önalán (2005), in his study on teachers' perceptions and the place of culture, introduced the foreign language learning as a pathway to other cultures and explain that, by introducing culture, teachers help to "develop a global understanding of other cultures and people" (p. 227). This scholar emphasized that it is crucial to have cultural information to better communicate, since foreign language learning opens new perspectives and establishes connections with other cultures. However, the teachers are apprehensive about including too much cultural information as it could demotivate the learners. For these teachers, reading and vocabulary still play a central role in the classroom, therefore, putting culture aside. This research points out that the teachers include cultural background for motivational purposes. Their intention is not to change behaviours, but to boost cultural awareness in learners. Motivation constitutes a big issue in language learning, especially in an EFL classroom. Dörnyei (2005) argues that insufficient motivation is not enough to lead learners to ensure their achievement.

Studying a second language is affected by cultural factors that influence positively the learning (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). Önalın (2005) adverts that there are some conclusions relevant to EFL teaching and states that culture and language are connected. Teaching culture should be attuned to the learners' ages and proficiency levels in order to build an effective EFL classroom.

Bayyurt (2006) conducted a study on the teachers' perspectives on teaching local culture or target language culture. The information gathered from this research aimed to identify the teachers' concept of culture, the cultural information in the EFL classroom and the importance of a native or non-native teacher regarding the cultural information that could pass on. Bayyurt (2006) concluded that "the context of teaching and the background of individual teachers influenced their attitude towards the incorporation of culture in their language teaching" (p. 243). In this study, the teachers did not agree on whether culture should be taught, but they explained that culture had been present in their English classrooms at some point. Her investigation shows that the teaching of culture depends on the language teacher's view, as it is up to the teacher to choose what cultural elements to teach. Furthermore, having a fruitful non-native speaker could guide learners in their learning process (2006).

Nault (2006) carried out an important study that questioned the introduction of culture in the methods and materials that teachers would use in their classrooms. Nault suggested the reassessment of the aims of culture teaching, providing learners with other cultural perspectives and realities, other than the British or American cultures. Questions arise on what cultural elements to teach or what materials should be selected because at the end of the day, speakers communicate in English with other non-native speakers and the reality is that they need to be understood, communicating efficiently (Nault, 2006). Nault explained that the learners would benefit from materials where the intention would be to communicate, regardless of the teachers being native or non-native speakers. He acknowledged that English teachers benefit while promoting a point of view focused on other ways of life and types of thought because English culture is constantly changing. This is why researchers consider authentic materials to be a good a strategy to teach language and culture (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey, 2002; Peterson and Coltrane, 2003; Nault, 2006).

In 2010, Young and Sachdev organized a study on teachers' beliefs and intercultural communicative competence. This study centred its attention on the

intercultural approach that the CEFR (2001) presents and on the teachers' classroom priorities, only to find that teachers were not prepared to effectively teach culture in their classrooms. The CEFR states that language learning promotes the learners development, validating the "personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness" (2001, p. 1). Teachers need to be prepared to manage different activities in their classroom to provide learners the necessary skills and know-how to develop the intercultural communication competence.

Johnson and Chang (2012) conducted a study about the diversity in culturally responsive teaching. This study focused on how teachers regard culture and gender in their classrooms. Even though this study addresses adult learners of English as a second language, their point is important because it acknowledges the need to understand the cultural meaning of the words they are learning. This helps the learners to acquire the skills to become a member of the community, as Kramsch (1993) advocates in her work. Johnson and Chang (2012) firstly suggest strategies such as the use of ethnic holidays or experiences of everyday routines and, secondly, recommend teachers to actively contribute "in creating activities, exercises and curriculum that contribute to an inclusive learning environment that empower their students (p. 23).

Choudhury (2013) developed a paper that questions the importance of addressing target culture in the EFL classroom, discussing the obstacles that teachers face when they include these aspects. The objective is to address all cultures and not only the British or American culture in the EFL classroom. This scholar debates intercultural competence and defines it as the ability to ask questions; listen and interpret; negotiate and find a mutual understanding; and avoid cataloguing others. Foreign culture "should provide the mirror to the learners in which he can see his own culture reflected" (Choudhury, 2013, p.23). So, when learning a foreign language culture, the learners are provided with information that helps them to understand the others and consider the similarities and differences.

In 2015, Mahmoud wrote a paper on whether culture should be taught in an ELT classroom. The issue at hand concerned the local culture and the target culture and its pertinence in the classroom. The author shows that conflicts might arise that lead to misunderstandings, when the local culture is integrated in ELT. The learners' cultural background should be addressed and taken into account to help them develop effective communication. Teachers have an important role in selecting what culture to teach to a

specific group of learners, so as not to “clash with the learners’ culture, from religious and sociocultural viewpoints” (Mahmoud, 2015, p. 71).

Monfared, Mozaheb and Shahiditabar (2016) conducted a study on teachers’ perceptions on the cultural content of ELT materials and on how it should include local and target culture. This study suggests that teachers play an important role in the pedagogical changes that occur in the classroom, providing learners cultural and linguistic awareness of the different varieties of English. Most of the participants of this study agree that non-native teachers of English can raise learners’ awareness and play this important role.

Yesil and Demiröz (2017) conducted a study on the connection between teachers’ perceptions and learners’ motivation while integrating cultural aspects of the target language. This study focused on the teachers’ definition of culture; whether target culture had a place in an EFL classroom; incorporating culture increased students’ motivation; and how much time teachers allocate to culture teaching. The study was based on interviews and the results showed that the participants refer to the importance of culture in the EFL classroom, as fundamental, but still consider themselves not to be well-informed about every cultural aspect of the target culture. The participants refer the need to assist learners to develop positive views and attitudes towards others while addressing the target culture without undermining their own culture. In this study, teachers felt apprehensive about going beyond what they have learnt in language teaching, referring the social and cultural differences which might lead to stereotypes.

However, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) defend that stereotypes should be questioned, leading learners to “discover the essence of «others» in members of other culture and understand the complexity they embody” (p. 29). Still, several researchers have debated the use of stereotypes, not knowing what the best approach would be to avoid or refer to it (Kramsch, Cain and Murphy-Lejeune, 1996; Byram, Gribkova and Starkey, 2002; Önalın, 2005; Farnia and Suleiman, 2009; Yesil and Demiröz, 2017). Kramsch (1983) argued “the informed teacher will be aware of this danger and remind the students of the individual, regional, social differences inherent in those personal process” (p. 445). This concern is not new and teachers still struggle to overcome the obstacles that might appear in their classroom. If the teacher is acquainted with the information, then he/she will be better equipped to transmit it to the learners. Thus, the

teachers have the ability to communicate in intercultural situations with the proper knowledge, skills and attitudes.

II. Research Methodology

Research in language learning is believed to benefit teachers either from the research of others or to involve themselves in research (Nunan, 1992). Nunan presents several methods that have been designed to help develop plans of action based on pedagogical questions and problems that derive from their own reality. The author enumerates the experimental method, case studies, classroom observations, diaries, surveys, questionnaires, interviews and action research as some methods that can be applied according to the output data.

Based on the output, there are two approaches employed in education research, namely the quantitative and qualitative ones. The quantitative approach is a structured and standard approach that involves creating research hypotheses which are later subjected to measurement procedures (Burns, 1999). The qualitative approach gathers the information from the observation and interprets it from the participants' perspectives. The qualitative research, according to Anne Burns (1999) aims "to offer descriptions, interpretations and clarifications of naturalistic social contexts" (p. 22). The researchers' observations and insights are a part of the research findings. Questionnaires are tools mostly used in a quantitative approach, whereas interviews are typical of the qualitative approach. For this study, a qualitative research is the best approach because it is a personal interaction which allows the discussion of the participants' perspectives about specific information related to the research questions.

According to Bell (1987), a qualitative research seeks to understand a person's perception. The approach adopted for this research and the methods of data collection were selected due to the nature of the inquiry and the type of information required. A qualitative research includes collecting information from a semi-structured interview and analysing it for its content (Dörnyei, 2007).

Furthermore, interviews are, according to Quivy and Campenhoudt (1995), not to verify hypothesis or collect or analyse specific data, but to strike a balance between the reflections and aspects of the issue at hand. Interviews allow the researcher to be aware of the dimensions of the problem, resulting in the "opportunity to gain verbal insight into ELT teachers' perceptions about the integration of cultural elements into their classes"

(Yesil and Demiröz, 2017, p. 85). There are three types of interviews: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews. A semi-structured interview permits flexibility to both the researcher and the interviewee (Nunan, 1992). This type of interview focuses on the individual's story and perception, necessary for this study (Dörnyei, 2007).

For this particular research project, a semi-structured interview was outlined based on the following questions:

1. What is your idea of culture?
2. In your opinion, what are the advantages of teaching culture in your classroom?
3. Do you think that the textbooks are a good source of cultural information content?
4. What other resources do you think we could use in the classroom to promote cultural diversity?
5. What is the role that stereotypes play in the teaching of English?
6. Do you think a native speaking teachers would be in a better position to teach culture? Why?

All the interviews were conducted in Portuguese and lasted from fifteen minutes to half an hour. Prior to the interviews, the participants were presented with the theme and the purpose of the study. The objectives of the interviews were explained to the participants and they agreed on the recording of the interviews. The selection of the interviewees was based on the fact that they are teachers of English in the Primary School from different parts of Portugal and because it was possible to have direct access to them.

The years of teaching experiences of the interviewees ranged from 13 to 22 years. The information was collected on audio. Each participant was informed of the purpose of the interview and give their consent under the condition of confidentiality. Three interviews were conducted face-to-face and, due to logistical restraints, two interviews were conducted through Messenger. All of the participants are qualified English teachers holding either a graduation or an MA in English teaching. More specifically, three participants are graduated in English teaching and two have a Master's degree in English teaching in Primary school. Four of the interviewees are non-native speakers of English and the other one is a bilingual English teacher.

The opinions conveyed in the interviews were analysed using the tools of Bardin's content analysis. Content analysis can be described as a set of techniques that allows to infer knowledge from the information passed on, for instance, through an interview (Bardin, 1977). The researcher will then try to build the knowledge based on what is said, how it is said and what that might mean. This investigation technique can be applied to different people under the same context.

For this study an individual interview is the best option because it is designed to obtain the interviewee's understanding and perspective on the topic. This way, the researcher can know more about the contextual factors that influence the teachers and their experiences.

III. Data analysis

Ideas of culture

When asked about their definition of culture, the participants either revealed a very secure definition of the word, or gave a vague explanation. Participant A described culture-related classroom activities where culture is limited to the notions of events that occur in England and in the USA and other cultural aspects that denote the British and/or American presence. Participant B views culture as a “conjunction of ideas, information and values which surrounds the individual from birth until death”¹. This opinion reflects a universal representation and a sense of community, setting the limits on culture, viewing it a constant presence in the life of the individual. Participant D characterised culture as “all that defines us as a language, as a country”. This definition tries to simplify the term culture, as a whole, which, again, is a generalisation.

Participant C views culture in terms of the gastronomy, religion, music and ways of dressing. In a similar vein, Participant E explains that culture is “a set of traditions, beliefs and ways of dressing of a particular group of people with the same interests and ways of thinking”. The first idea relies on culture as something that has a physical and a visual presence, in terms of, for example, food, religious artefacts, music and clothes. These phenomena are seen as demonstration of someone’s culture. The second idea offers an inner perspective of culture, relying on the attitudes to denote cultural identifications and belongings.

¹ All quotations in English were translated from Portuguese by me.

Advantages of teaching culture in the English classroom

The participants of this study agree that there are advantages to teaching culture and they are unanimous in their answers. Participant B refers that “it is easier for the child to accept the other, to accept the difference between them”. This message implies that the understanding of other cultures can provide the learners with a sensibility towards others. This teacher is also concerned about the children not reacting negatively towards what might seem to be different from them. Participant C sees culture as “an instrument of awareness of a new language” and explains that learners “want to know why some words are what they are and why is connected to any cultural aspect”. Associating language with the cultural background indicates that understanding the words will be more important than memorizing them.

Most of the participants stand for a greater awareness of the cultural differences, as it gives learners a more comprehensive knowledge of the language they are learning. As Participant D mentions, “it is inevitable to teach culture while teaching a language”. This idea underscores the connection between language and culture and is intertwined with the perspective shared by many scholars.

The participants mention the future need for the learners to relate with others, to tolerate and accept their differences. Participant E believes that “teaching culture in the classroom helps learners become more tolerant towards others, and to accept differences”. The answers to this question emphasise the importance of opening the students’ horizons to the acceptance, tolerance and understanding of other cultures.

In methodological terms, Participant A refers that the content should be taught in a simple way, seizing as many opportunities as possible to teach cultural aspects.

Culture is considered to set the tone for next school years, as these participants argue that being familiar with the cultural aspects will heighten learners’ awareness and understanding. These teachers work with young learners, they are the pioneers in their English learning adventure.

Textbooks as good source of cultural information content

Regarding the textbooks as a source of cultural information content, the feedback given by the participants differs significantly. The majority of the participants do not consider the textbooks as proper source of cultural information, and they all agree that learners benefit more from the use of other materials. However, Participant B thinks textbooks are a good source of cultural information, but textbooks should not be the only resource to be used in class. Participant A explains that textbooks still focus mainly on the linguistic and grammatical aspects, leaving the cultural features of the language aside. This idea indicates that teachers still feel textbooks are not doing their part in the teaching process, as far as culture teaching is concerned. Participant C acknowledges the effort of some publishers to supplement cultural information by sending it to the teachers, and stresses that, currently, the English textbooks designed for primary education in Portugal are not adequate. Nevertheless this effort, according to this participant, can denote a growing concern of some publishers to meet the needs of the English teachers.

Two other interviewees, Participant D and Participant E, clarify that textbooks, instead of teaching culture, fall into stereotypes and focus mostly on the four skills (writing, speaking, listening or reading). Nevertheless, textbooks are considered a good starting point, as Participant E refers that “textbooks can give, for someone who does not know how to start, some tips” but still has insufficient cultural information. Yet, Participant E remarks that “trying to focus on the different cultures in the classroom would be more helpful than just using the textbooks”. These two participants have a different idea of the use of textbooks and their pertinence in the classroom. They claim that they create materials, which demonstrates their sense of creativity and their willingness to change routines. These participants have recently concluded their master’s degree dissertation on intercultural awareness and, for that reason, they reinforce the importance of exploring the cultural diversity that surrounds their learners.

Resources to use in classroom to promote cultural diversity

In order to promote cultural diversity, the interviewees suggest the Internet as one of the best resources to search for cultural information. The participants enumerated the resources they use in their classroom, namely songs, stories by English authors, poems, photographs, magazines, and even materials that they themselves create. Participant A and B suggest “storybooks by English authors” as a good source of authentic materials to be used in the classroom. Participant C mentions songs (including those of pop stars such as the Beatles and Michael Jackson) because she considers them “a teaching starting point for everything else” and also because “children love them”. This shows how important it is for teachers to maintain the learners’ attention focused on the lesson.

Participant D does not use the conventional textbook, and challenges herself to produce the materials to use in the classroom, saying that by doing so “one can convey much more about the target culture with our own creations than with what the textbooks provide”. She teaches at a private school and does not use a textbook for her classroom. The other participants, on the other hand, work in public schools and work with the selected textbooks and do so on a daily basis. When creating the materials, teachers have a more inquisitive perspective than the ones that limit themselves to the textbook and to the suggestions for activities that this kind of material offers.

Several participants highlight the use of music, because it is considered an asset in motivating the learners and, as Participant A refers, “helps to memorize the vocabulary”. When teachers think of teaching a song in an English class, they do so because in the learning process it is an effective learning strategy based on repetition and musicality. A renowned psychologist, Howard Gardner (2006), identified eight different intelligences: musical (that is said to have been the first identified intelligence), linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. These intelligences can justify the selection teachers make. If the activity covers different intelligences, it is more likely to succeed.

Along similar lines, Participant A adds that “during evaluation, I hear them singing and mimicking the gestures, because it helps (them) and I have had that experience for years and it works”. Thanks to years of working with young learners,

teachers can take advantage of their teaching experience and narrow their activities down to the ones that have demonstrated positive outcomes.

Nevertheless, Participant E suggests that the “best resource for cultural diversity is the students, for we can utilize their culture and the cultures that interest them”. The idea here is to begin from what learners already know and proceed towards other information.

The role that cultural stereotypes play in the teaching of English

When asked about the role that cultural stereotypes play in the teaching of English, the participants are cautious in their answers. Participant C warns that “teachers must have an open mind and should try to avoid stereotypes showing that there is more than one reality”. Participant B considers that “it is helpful for them, the learners, to identify and associate those images of the culture and to the country”. However, she mentions that “usually I do not associate the references and try to alert for the difference”, because she believes it is far more important “to transmit the positive and not highlight what is negative”. This participant claims that she makes an effort to tell her students about the cultural differences between the target language and the local language, while trying to address the positive aspects, rather than the negative ones.

Participant E considers stereotypes to be restrictive. They oversimplify the cultural aspects of the target language. She states that “initially these icons would serve to identify the culture but it goes beyond the five o’clock tea and the Big Ben and the Tower of London”. Participant D acknowledges that stereotypes are present in the textbooks and comments that “continuously textbooks explore what it is typically British, if someone speaks of Britain, explores once again what it is known” and warns “that what is important is to convey culture, and I think that textbooks do not”.

On the other hand, Participant A enumerates a long list of the cultural stereotypes that are associated with the British and American cultures and that learners mention when they are in class. She states that “the learners associate the stereotypes to the Big Ben, the colour red, the colours of the flag, the food, the cold and the foggy weather” and those ideas are very much present in their minds. Furthermore, Participant A acknowledges that students are curious about the cultural aspects, questioning her about more information. In order to satisfy their needs, she claims that she “tries to talk about traditions, not only from the USA and England, but also about Australia and South Africa”.

In the light of these statements, cultural stereotypes still have a strong presence in the current textbooks, and are very present in the students’ minds. Although some participants try to avoid these pre-conceived ideas, Participants A and E acknowledge that these associations make it easy for the students to identify the country of the target language.

Native speaking teachers vs non-native speaking teachers

Regarding this last question, the participants agree that the English teacher does not have to be a native speaker to teach culture in the language classroom. Participant B acknowledges that “native speakers may have more specific knowledge of certain aspects but cannot build a bridge between the English and the Portuguese culture”. Participant A states that “a teacher that is not from England can still have more extensive knowledge”.

“Whilst native speakers may be fluent in speaking”, Participant C explains, “this does not represent an advantage for a primary English teacher”. Participant D refers that “in terms of establishing a relation between the English culture and the Portuguese culture” a non-native speaker is better prepared when comparing to a native speaker. This participant explains that non-native speakers can provide a parallel between the target language culture and the students’ culture, helping to develop their intercultural competence.

A participant of this study, Participant E, a bilingual teacher, refers “to be embedded in the Portuguese culture and has experienced other ways of being in the world” and for that matter, considers that a native speaker knows more information when compared to a non-native, referring that the non-native speaker would have to seek for the information.

Opposed to this opinion, the majority of the participants acknowledge that it is not necessary to be a native English speaker to be an expert on the target language culture. And as Participant D mentions “the non-native speaker can create that parallel and above all, not fall into stereotypes”. Furthermore, this idea highlights that having the knowledge of both cultures is considered to be a substantial gain.

The participants justify that being a non-native speaker is an advantage because they dominate the learners’ culture and the target culture. However, Participant E felt the need to include, when regarding this topic, that a non-native teacher still can perform a good cultural experience to the learners.

IV. Discussion

The analysis of the interviews, even a small scale study as the present one, shows that teaching culture constitutes a concern within the English primary teachers.

While focusing on the idea of culture, the interviewees display their notions of culture, including several cultural aspects. The participants focused mainly on the traditions, rules, ways of dressing, food and colours associated to Britain and/or the USA's flags. The teachers included ideas and particular aspects that interest learners and stereotypical values that surround the individual in society.

Overall, the participants believe that teaching culture is important because it can provide learners with a wider perspective of the world. Besides, they consider that it is inevitable to teach culture while teaching language. The results underline the importance of promoting intercultural awareness among learners and determine the cultural differences between their culture and the target language culture. The participants acknowledge the enthusiasm that learners show during their lessons, revealing curiosity for cultural aspects, making teachers to seize this opportunity to teach the target language culture.

This study also focuses on whether textbooks are a good source of cultural content and the majority of the participants consider textbooks to be insufficient when it comes to teaching culture. The arguments for this inefficiency sets on the lack of cultural information and the perils of stereotyping. It is unanimous that the teachers should not rely on the textbooks only, but also search for information, for instance on the Internet.

The participants consider that their learners benefit from different activities and materials to integrate cultural elements. The interviewees make reference to songs, stories, photographs, poems and podcasts from native speakers. This kind of activities are considered, by the participants, to be appealing and easy to memorize. As a result of the analysis of the interviews, the variety of materials presented can be considered as a reliable strategy to integrate culture in the foreign language classroom. The possibility of creating materials is also considered. They can be suitable for that specific classroom, thus avoiding the use of standard materials provided by the publishers.

Since textbooks, according to the participants, are still loaded with stereotypes and with unclear information, the teachers' concern is to avoid learners' assumption that the target culture is just a handful of condensed cultural tips. The participants point out the

necessity to show learners the reality of the target culture, avoiding the negative points of view, reinforcing the positive ones. Even though the teachers interviewed are aware of these stereotyped information that learners possess, they seek to alert to the different realities that may constitute the foreign.

In this study, the participants were aware of the necessity to comprehend the target culture in order to draw a parallel between cultures. The interviewees, divided on the advantages that native English teachers might have, understand that having the knowledge of both cultures is a bonus and a valuable asset.

V. Conclusion

Scholars that debate culture teaching and the effects on the learners agree that it will develop a positive attitude towards other cultures (Breka and Petravic, 2015; Byram and Kramersch, 2008; Morozova, 2014; Thanasoulas, 2001; Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993). Furthermore, cultural knowledge entails to cultural awareness that manifests to be essential to learners.

Teaching culture is a concern amongst language teachers and should be more than just teaching cultural aspects of the target language. Language learners need to develop their linguistic competence as well as their intercultural competence. This way, communicating with other people will be easier and less awkward. Once the intercultural communicative competence is achieved, the learners will be engaged in the communicative interaction with people of other cultures. The teachers who participated in this study offer different points of view concerning this topic. Nonetheless, a common point of view between the participants rests on the premise that culture is a vital component in language teaching and learners that benefit from culture teaching will respond positively to the cultural differences they encounter. This is the opinion of scholars that have explored these issues, and we can find a correlation with the findings provided by this investigation.

Researchers have tried to show the importance of teaching culture, not limiting it to local or target culture. The participants express their wish to teach the target culture, drawing a parallel with the local culture.

Another concern, expressed by the participants, regards the textbooks, on how this resource has sufficient information to be taught in an EFL classroom. In fact, today, textbooks still influence the cultural aspects to include in the EFL lesson plan, and show an incomplete approach to the subject.

This study tries to look into teachers' perceptions on culture teaching and the effects on their own teaching experience by merging different techniques. These participants avert the textbooks and invest in their own materials to their lesson plan.

The findings of this study show the concern that EFL teachers have while providing a culturally responsible teaching, juggling the extensive curricula. Even though this study was conducted in a small scale, it contributes to exhibit the insight of five

different English teachers in Portugal. Further investigation is needed to perceive teachers insights into this subject.

Moreover, we suggest future research to address culture teaching in the English classroom in Portugal, formulating a research in a bigger scale, aiming for more participants. This research problem could be addressed in a different setting and conduct a questionnaire survey.

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