

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM:
WHAT MONICA'S GANG COMICS CAN TEACH US

LÍNGUA E CULTURA NA SALA DE AULA DE INGLÊS:
O QUE AS HQS DA TURMA DA MÔNICA PODEM NOS ENSINAR

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at investigating the relation between language and culture in Monica's Gang comics in the classroom of English as a foreign language. Another important objective was to verify if the students of a public school in the suburbs of Goiânia could develop an intercultural competence through the reading of Monica's Gang comics in English. This research is characterized as a case study (LUDKE; ANDRÉ, 1986; MOREIRA; CALLEFE, 2006) and is based on the theories about interculturality and the process of intercultural communication in the foreign language classroom (DAMEN, 1987; KRAMSCH, 2001a; FIGUEREDO, 2007). The data discussed were obtained through activities done in the classroom and interviews. The results reveal that the English version of Monica's Gang undergoes some linguistic and cultural changes to be meaningful to representatives of the English language and its cultures. Also, the findings point out that the learners under investigation need more significant knowledge about English as a language-culture as well as about their own cultures involved in the dialogue with the English language learning process.

KEY WORDS: Interculturality. Monica's Gang comics. English language learning process.

RESUMO

Este estudo tem como objetivo inicial investigar a relação entre língua e cultura na versão em inglês das histórias em quadrinhos (HQs) da Turma da Mônica em sala de aula de inglês como língua estrangeira. Outro objetivo importante foi verificar se os alunos de uma escola pública na periferia de Goiânia eram capazes de desenvolver uma competência intercultural por meio da leitura das HQs da Turma da Mônica em inglês. Esta pesquisa é caracterizada como um estudo de caso (LUDKE; ANDRÉ, 1986; MOREIRA; CALLEFE, 2006) e é fundamentada nas teorias sobre interculturalidade e o processo de comunicação intercultural em sala de aula de língua estrangeira (DAMEN, 1987; KRAMSCH, 2001a; FIGUEREDO, 2007). Os dados foram obtidos por meio de atividades de sala de aula e entrevistas. Os resultados revelam que a versão em inglês da Turma da Mônica passa por alterações linguísticas e culturais de modo a fazer sentido para os representantes da língua inglesa e suas culturas. Além disso, os dados apontam que os aprendizes sob investigação precisam de um conhecimento mais significativo do inglês como língua-cultura estrangeira, bem como de suas próprias culturas envolvidas no diálogo com o processo de aprendizagem do inglês.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Interculturalidade. HQs da Turma da Mônica. Processo de aprendizagem de língua inglesa.

Introduction

Language and culture cannot be dissociated. Therefore, teachers and students are concurrently producing cultural representations in the second/foreign language classroom. According to Kramsch (2001, p. 8), "language is not distinct from the way people think and behave, but, rather, it plays a major role in the perpetuation of culture. In this sense, culture plays an essential function in the English language classroom.

Although most English teachers are aware of the importance of culture acquisition in the second/foreign language learning process, they find it a difficult task. Therewith, the use of authentic materials, as comics for instance, is a good way to lead students to a closer encounter with the target language cultural phenomena. Since the Brazilian Portuguese version of Monica's Gang is widespread in Brazil, it is possible to infer that students have a prior knowledge of the characters and features of

the gang. Thus, they can read the English version of the stories they already know in their first language (L1) and think about the cultural differences and similarities between the English and the Brazilian Portuguese version.

This research investigates how the understanding of these comics leads the student to reflect on the culture of others and their own. So, we consider this theme relevant to the area of Applied Linguistics as this study aims at reflecting upon the intercultural dialogues that might occur when Brazilian students read Monica's gang stories in English.

As Monica's Gang comics are originated in a Brazilian context and translated into another language, this study aims at verifying how language and culture influence the English version. In addition, it is investigated whether it is possible for learners of English to develop an intercultural competence through the reading of these stories. Accordingly, this study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. Since language and culture come together and are inseparable, how does the relation between language and culture is constituted in the English version of Monica's Gang comics?
2. To what extent does the reading of Monica's Gang stories in the English language help learners of English as a foreign language to develop an intercultural competence, taking into account that these stories and their characters are from their macro Brazilian culture¹?

This paper is structured in four parts. Firstly, we define language and culture and show how these two concepts are related according to the theoretical ground used in this research. Secondly, we discuss the second language reading process, the reading of comics in the foreign language classroom and the teaching-learning process based on an intercultural approach. Thirdly, we provide an overview of the methodology used in this research and the context where it was carried out. Then, we finally report the results of this study by discussing the data collected and its contributions to our understanding of the teaching-learning process of English as a foreign language.

Language and culture

As we are going to analyze Monica's gang comics from an intercultural perspective, it is of central importance to define culture. Damen (1987, p.80), in the fifth chapter of the book *Culture Learning: The Fifth Dimension in the Language Classroom*, points out that the concept of culture is so complex that the definition or discussion of its role in communication and language learning should not be reduced to only a few dimensions. Indeed the term *culture* has been formulated and redefined for anthropologists, linguists, sociologists and other scholars many times without finding the perfect answer. On the contrary, "each definition was valid and revealed one or more of the many facets of the concept" (DAMEN, p.80).

The definition selected to guide this work is provided by Kramsch:

¹ Figueredo (2007) defines macro-culture as the knowledge shared by the people inside a bigger community. In this research question, we mean macro Brazilian culture as the national culture shared by all the Brazilian citizens.

culture can be defined as membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings. Even when they have left that community, its members may retain, wherever they are, a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting. These standards are what is generally called their "culture" (KRAMSCH, 2001a, p. 10).

This statement implies that culture is socially and historically constituted by discourse communities². Thus, there is a set of standards divided by all people identified as members of a certain discourse community, which is shared through the interactions with other members of the same group. However, these set of standards are not fixed, on the contrary, it changes synchronically and diachronically, as Kramsch explains:

[in] the social, the historic, and the imagined dimension, culture is heterogeneous. Members of the same discourse community all have different biographies and life experiences, they may differ in age, gender, or ethnicity, they may have different political opinions. Moreover, cultures change over time (KRAMSCH, 2001a, p. 9-10).

But how is culture created and changed in a discourse community? According to this author, language is responsible for creating and shaping culture. Furthermore, she reinforces the connection between language and culture by saying that "language is not a culture-free code distinct from the way people think and behave, but, rather, it plays a major role in the perpetuation of culture, particularly in its printed form" (KRAMSCH, 2001, p.08).

Language is clearly related to culture. Spradley (1979, p.99) sees language as "the primary symbol system that encodes cultural meaning in every society". In the same way, Damen (1987, p.120) states that "a language reflects and reinforces the value and belief systems that form such a large part of the subjective reality shared by members of the same culture. Our culture remains alive in our proverbs, mottos, songs, and metaphors – all shared by means of language."

Jiang (2002, apud FIGUEREDO, 2007) presents a metaphor in which the relationship between language and culture is illustrated. In other words, he compares communication (language + culture) to a transport by saying that language is the vehicle and culture is the traffic light. Figueredo (2007, p.17) clarifies this metaphor by saying that "language makes communication easier and quicker; culture regulates it: there are moments in which it promotes the communicative action, and there are moments in which it makes the communicative action difficult." Thus, culture is transmitted through language in the same way that language reflects cultural patterns.

However, it is important to emphasize that "we are, then, not prisoners of the cultural meanings offered to us by our language, but can enrich them in our pragmatic interactions with other language users" (KRAMSCH, 2001a, p.14). Bringing this issue to the teaching field, we consider that the second/foreign language classroom context might also be a place where students enrich their

² Kramsch (2001a) postulates that discourse communities refer to the common ways in which members of a social group use language to meet their social needs.

cultural meanings, in other words, a place to learn the language as well as the culture of its representatives. Besides, it is important to work on the understanding that language and culture are inseparable in the teaching-learning process. The discussion about the integration of these two concepts specifically in the classroom environment will be retaken later. For the time being, after presenting the relation between language and culture, we are going to introduce the components that underlie the process of reading in a foreign language.

The foreign language reading process

According to Rubin and Thompson (1994, p.91), “reading is an active information-seeking process in which readers relate information in the text to what they already know.” They explain that this relation is established in two ways: while reading, we identify the forms and meanings of the printed words and sentences and activate our knowledge of the world and of the subject matter to comprehend the text. Therefore, a successful reader possesses an adequate level of language proficiency and uses what he already knows in order to make inferences about the text.

In addition to the previous knowledge and the language skills, Holden (2009) presents other two perceptions that can be used in the act of reading: textual and non-textual perceptions. The former refers to the recognition of the different types of texts, which leads the reader to create expectations about what he is going to read; the latter is related to the illustrations, colors, page layout and other components that integrate a text. These perceptions may help the reader to predict what the subject of the text is and make inferences about it. For instance, by looking at a page with separated panels representing scenes in which there are dialogs in word balloons, one reader can use his textual perception and infer it is a comic strip. Consequently, he might expect to read a short story that will entertain him. Depending on the colors of the pages, the illustration and the facial expressions of the characters in this comic strip, the reader may deduce that it is a funny, scary or romantic story as a result of his non-textual perception.

Besides arousing our background knowledge, the reading process also promotes learning. Mokhtari and Reichard (2004, apud SABOTA, 2012, p.118) remark that, “similarly to what happens in the native language, reading in a second language favors the acquisition of new information about the language, culture or about the world.” Thus, reading is an interactive process in which we offer our previous knowledge and language skills to the text while getting in contact with the information presented there (SABOTA, 2012). However, our previous knowledge is sometimes insufficient to authentically comprehend a text in a foreign language because of cultural differences. In this case, Chaistain (1971, apud BADA, 2005, p. 74) contends that it can be attained through learning the culture of the native speakers of the target language. The scholar states that

[a]lthough grammar books give so called genuine examples from real life, without background knowledge those real situations may be considered fictive by the learners. In addition, providing access into cultural aspect of language, learning culture would help learners relate the abstract sounds and forms of a language to real people and places.

Finally, the reading process is constituted by the interaction between the reader's previous knowledge and perceptions plus the content presented by the text. Thereby, we make use of different kinds of knowledge and personal perceptions in order to comprehend a text, including those regarding the cultural aspects of the language.

As the focus of this research is the reading of comics in the foreign language classroom, it is fundamental to turn our attention to the use of this textual genre in the L2 learning, which will be further discussed in the following section.

Using comics in the foreign language classroom

One of the difficulties found by L2 learners is reading in the target language. Holden (2009, p.58) argues that "students who are not used to constantly reading in their native language tend to look at a text in foreign language and just see a group of obscure words which they cannot understand". Thereupon, the reading of comics seems to encourage the learner in this task, since it is composed by visuals that make the reading process more enjoyable and comprehensible. As Sones (1944, apud DROLET, 2010, p. 124) postulates, they are authentic materials that depict real language and culture and "employ a form of visual language that is almost universally understood".

Mcloud (1993, p.9) defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer". Eisner (1985, apud VALDES, 2012) has termed it as "telling a story with pictures in such a way that these two elements are interdependent". In this kind of art, the visual aspects are as important as the words to the understanding of the story.

Regarding the foreign language classroom, Valdes (2012) points out that comics can be used with all kinds of students, that is, native or non-native speakers of the target language. He lists some advantages of using them with the students. For instance, the access to idioms or regional forms of expressions shown in the stories and the learning of new words, grammar or spelling in an enjoyable way. In addition, he mentions the use of comics to show similarities and differences between cultures, since they provide an authentic reflection about the country that produces them. Davis (1997, apud DROLET, 2010, p. 124) corroborates these advantages: "because of their interplay of visuals and words, comics are easily accessible to non-native speakers of English. Moreover, comics have been recognized for their broad appeal to almost any age group or learner level because they depict real dialogue and culture." Thus, the use of comics facilitates the learning process, makes it more interesting, and gives students the opportunity to be exposed to social and cultural situations and to be in contact with the target language and culture.

The English teaching-learning dialectics from an intercultural approach

Language and culture learning are bound in the same way that language and culture are. So, because they occur together, "there can be no question as to whether culture should be taught or not. The fundamental questions in relation to bicultural instruction have to do with the selection of content and approach" (Damen, 1987, p. 212). The unquestionable relation between these two concepts in the second language classroom requires from foreign language teachers the development

of their roles as facilitators of the culture learning process. However, it is not an easy task. Damen (1987) explains that teaching culture means to deal with values, beliefs and world views that permeate students' subjectivity and, therefore, it can lead to feelings of discomfort or even shock³. Ultimately, she postulates that it can cause change in the individual and force the transcending of native culture patterns. Thus, the encounter of different interpretations of cultural meanings may create conflicts in the foreign language classroom. This facet can discourage some teachers from engaging themselves in the task of teaching culture. However, a classroom that functions as a stage for an intercultural approach brings great benefits to students in return. For example, Figueredo (2007, p.242) claims that "a positive contact with the points of view from the "outsiders" leads us to create new cultural perspectives and start appreciating the differences and similarities among human beings."

Damen (1987) points out that culture learning involves the internalization of the knowledge needed to function in a native or secondary context. Enculturation is the term given to the process in which a person learns his first and native culture, only once, in childhood. On the other hand, the process of learning patterns of an unfamiliar cultural group from a secondary context is called acculturation. The latter means to recognize the cultural aspects of another discourse community, although it is important to mention that learning a second culture does not imply to abandon or deny one's first patterns. In this respect, Brown (2001) argues that second language learners do not have to be taught to think again, on the contrary, they can use their previous experience to facilitate the learning process, trying to keep what is useful to his second culture and language learning. Nevertheless, the question remains: what does it mean to teach culture? About this issue, Figueredo (2007, p. 57) provides an interesting point of view:

[f]irst, it is extremely important to assume that the learner of English as a FL/SL should not only be exposed to simple information such as rituals, holidays, beliefs, food, folklore and statistical data, usually from the principal countries of the inner circle, like the United States and England. Unlike this perspective, the teaching-learning process of English must cover a sphere of interculturality in which individuals can consider and reflect on their own language-culture towards the foreign language-culture.

Concerning the term *intercultural*, Kramsch (2001a, p.80) defines it as "the meeting of two cultures or two languages across the political boundaries of nation-states" or within the boundaries of the same language, "between people from different ethnic, social or gendered cultures". The former relates to the meeting of people from different macro-cultures, while the latter refers to different micro-cultures. In this regard, it seems that Figueredo (2007) defends the adoption of an intercultural approach in the language classroom, in other words, a teaching practice that aims to conduct the students to the reflection on the culture of the other as well as their own. If they are able to critically understand their cultural patterns, without considering themselves inferior or superior, but "building a

³ Culture shock is part of the culture learning process. Harris and Moran (1979, apud DAMEN, 1987, p.226) consider that it is "neither good or bad, necessary or unnecessary. It is a reality that many people face when in strange and unexpected situations."

bridge that connects both sides⁴”, that is, the relation ‘us-them’, it means that an intercultural competence is about to be developed. With respect to this last construct, Figueredo explains that

an intercultural competence achieved by the L2/LE learner is related to his/her ability to critically understand a foreign culture, or to be able to understand the cultural situation both departing from an external perspective, in which he places his/her own culture, and from an internal perspective, in which he/she seeks to understand the viewpoint of the “other” from the target language (FIGUEREDO, 2007, p. 60).

Specifically in the English language classroom, the meeting between learners and authentic texts written in English can be one of the ways of promoting the contact with the culture of the English language representatives and, therefore, this encounter might develop foreign/second language learners’ intercultural competence.

On the following session, we present the methodology chosen for this study as well as the context where it was carried out.

Methodology and the research context

Different from the quantitative approach, which does not allow the interference of beliefs and values of the community involved in the research, the qualitative approach demands the observation of the social practices in the process of investigation (CALEFFE; MOREIRA, 2008). To be more specific, the aim of the qualitative interpretive research methodology is to understand and interpret a social phenomenon placed in a context (BORTONI; MORIS, 2008). By following these conceptions, the case study shows itself as the most suitable investigation method as the focus of the research is on the studying of a particular situation, where the researcher is interested in the process features as well as on how the participants involved interpret the process in which they are inserted (LUDKE; ANDRÉ, 1986).

Our research is characterized as a case study and was developed in a third grade classroom of a public school, situated in a suburban area of Goiânia. The English classes were conducted in that group once a week, on Thursdays, before the break. The participants were aged 16 to 17, so those who agreed to participate were instructed to ask their parents to sign written consent forms. Seven students volunteered for it, and their pseudonyms are Juju, Ana Clara, Paula, Larissa, Rafa, Marcos and Joãozinho. Three classes with the duration of fifty minutes were necessary in order to carry out the research. In this study, we made use of a semi-structured interview as well as the audio recording of students’ interactions and discussions during the classes.

The material chosen to be part of the lessons was a serialized story called *The Witch of Blue*, from Monica’s Gang comics. This story has specifically an intertextual relationship with the movie *The Blair Witch Project*. This American horror movie relates the story of three students who decide to film a documentary about a local legend called the Blair Witch. They are never seen again, but their camera is found one year later, along with some scenes shot before their disappearance. In

⁴ Figueredo (2007) argues that by becoming aware both of the cultural bias that rule their beliefs and attitudes and also the “other’s behaviour”, the classroom members are able to build a bridge that connects both sides, which promotes a mutual intercultural learning.

the comic book, Monica, Maggy, Jimmy Five and Smudge found a map that guides to the Witch of Blue's house when they are role-playing the movie. Suddenly, Smudge disappears while the rest of the group finds a strange house with witchcraft symbols on the wall. Smudge is found there, and after a while they are surprised by Monica's father, who says that place is the boys' clubhouse. At the end, Monica's real father arrives, so the gang discovers they were talking to the Witch of Blue.

Data discussion

In a group of seven students, only two had never read Monica's Gang in Brazilian Portuguese, although they were aware of the name of the characters and their characteristics. All the students who had read Monica's Gang before admitted enjoying the stories. It shows how Monica's Gang is popular and welcomed in Brazil. On the other hand, none of them had read or heard about the English version. Indeed, five students brought forward they did not have the habit of reading in English, and they usually justified it by saying that it was a difficult language to learn and not always understandable. This explanation was a little contradictory, taking into consideration that those students had been studying English for more than three years at school and should have at least the basic knowledge of the language.

Before reading the comic book *The Witch of Blue*, there was a pre-reading activity in order to discuss the characteristics of a witch. The following excerpt shows the dialogue produced by this brainstorm:

Excerpt 1

S.: *Todos são de culturas estrangeiras.*

T.: *Todos concordam?*

S.: *Yes.*

S.: *Sim.*

S.: *Yes.*

T.: *Então, essa bruxa descrita por vocês não faz parte da nossa cultura?*

S.: *Não.*

S.: *No.*

T.: *E no Brasil, tem alguma bruxa que faz parte do nosso folclore?*

S.: *Keka.*

S.: *Tem a Cuca.*

S.: *A Cuca.*

T.: *E como é a Cuca?*

S.: *Ela é um jacaré.*

T.: *Ela é diferente da bruxa que nós descrevemos aqui no quadro?*

S.: *Yes.*

S.: *Sim.*

S.: *Ela é loira.*

S.: *Mora na caverna.*

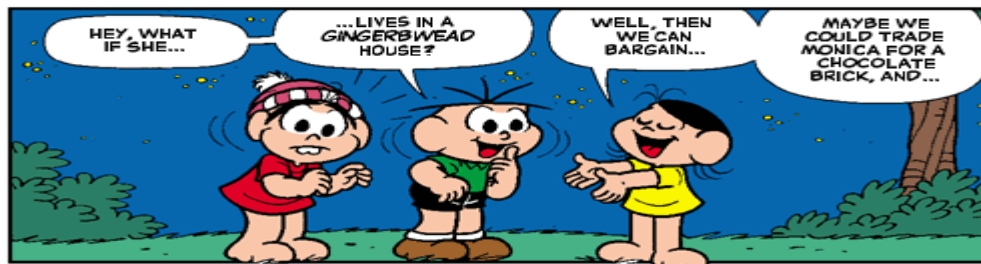
T.: *Tem vassoura?*

S.: *Não.*

S.: *Acho que não.*

The objective of this activity was to conduct the students to reflect on the culture of the "other" as well as their own, which is the basic assumption for the development of an intercultural competence according to Figueredo (2007). The discussions conducted in the third lesson led the students to notice differences between the English and the Brazilian Portuguese version of *The Witch of Blue*. In the cartoon below, for example, there is the expression "gingerbread house":

Picture 1 – The Witch of Blue –the gingerbread house



In the original story, there is the expression *casa feita de doces*, which would be literally translated as “candy house”. However, it would not convey the original idea of the Brazilian Portuguese version to the readers of the English version. So, this expression was adapted to “gingerbread house”, for it makes more sense to the representatives of the English language.

Picture 1.1 – Versão em Português Brasileiro



Initially, the students were asked what gingerbread house was. As they did not provide the answers to the question, a picture of a house made of candy was shown so that they could understand its meaning:

Excerpt 2

T.: “Gingerbread House” é isso daqui. O que vem à mente de vocês ao ver esta figura?

S.: João e Maria.

T.: Vocês lembram da história de João e Maria?

S.: Sim.

S.: Eles ficam perdidos na floresta.

T.: E como ficou essa mesma palavra em português? Por que eles não traduziram ao pé da letra?

S.: Porque gingerbread não faz parte da nossa cultura.

T.: Sim, não faz parte da nossa cultura. Vamos tentar traduzir ao pé da letra... casa de pão de gengibre. Vocês entenderiam se colocassem dessa forma?

S.: Não.

S.: Não.

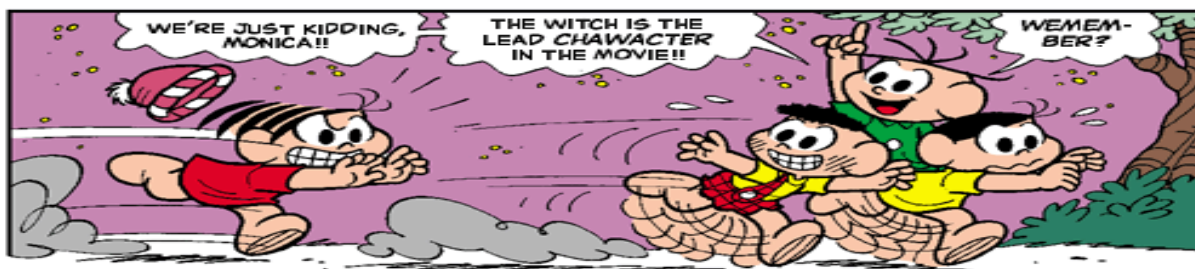
S.: Nem achariam saboroso.

In this excerpt, the expression “gingerbread house” draws its meaning from its connotation. Kramsh (2001a) explains that the words with connotative meanings are linked to the many associations they evoke in our minds, which turn the linguistic signs into cultural signs. “Gingerbread house” did not evoke anything in the students’ minds because it is not part of their Brazilian culture. Without the picture to remind them of Hansel and Gretel’s story, this cultural sign would not make sense. This expression fits as an example to what Spradley (1979) states about the fact that language encodes cultural meaning. Thus, the cultural aspects of the representatives of English had to be taken

into account during the translation of *The Witch of Blue*, as in the example above. In the excerpt 2, when one student says that '*gingerbread não faz parte da nossa cultura*', he is able to point out the interference of the relation language-culture in this situation.

Besides the connotative meanings, the characters' names and the letters replaced by Jimmy Five because of his speech impediment were changed in the English version:

Picture 2 – Jimmy Five's speech



Picture 2.1 - Versão em Português Brasileiro



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Excerpt 3

T.: Vocês notaram alguma diferença entre a versão em inglês e em português?

S.: Os nomes foram modificados.

T.: Os nomes. Como ficou o nome do Cebolinha?

S.: Jimmy Five.

T.: Por que?

S.: Por causa dos cinco fiapos na cabeça.

T.: E de outra coisa também...

S.: Do cumprimento.

S.: Gimme Five.

T.: Então, por que vocês acham que houve essa modificação nos nomes dos personagens?

S.: Por causa da cultura deles.

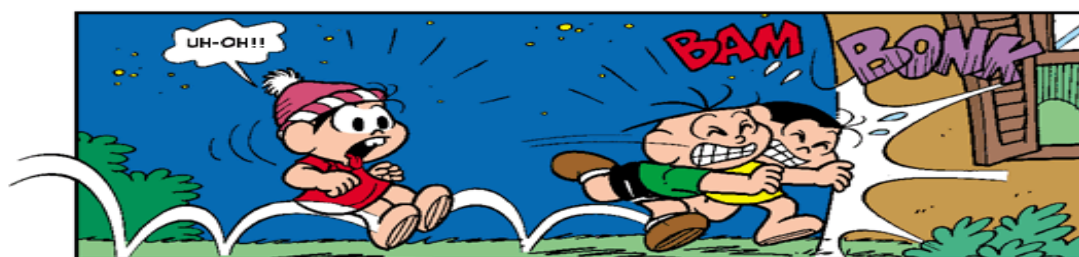
T.: Mais alguma coisa? A fala do Jimmy Five ficou igual na estória em inglês?

S.: Não.

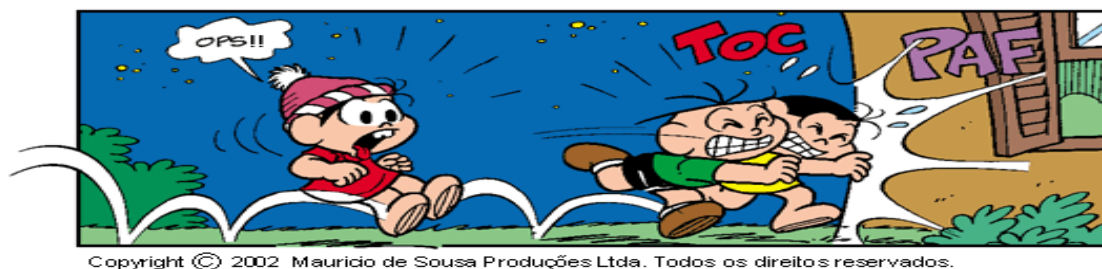
S.: Ele troca o R pelo W e não o R pelo L.

Furthermore, the influence of the language-culture relation was also found on the onomatopoeias:

Picture 3 – The onomatopoeias



Picture 3.1 - Versão em Português Brasileiro



Examples of onomatopoeias in the comics were elicited from the students, aiming at comparing them to the Brazilian Portuguese ones in order to make the students reflect on their own culture towards the foreign culture. As explained by Kramsch (2001a), onomatopoeias have an iconic meaning, so they do not only refer to emotions or actions as they imitate them. Each society imitates them differently depending on the way its members encode their experience. In other words, “it is these meanings that make the linguistic sign into a cultural sign” (KRAMSCH, 2001a, p. 18).

Excerpt 4

T.: Agora eu quero que vocês procurem nessa história em quadrinhos exemplos de onomatopéia, ou seja, essas imitações de sons.

S.: Splosh.

S.: Smack.

T.: Certo, vamos tentar pensar nessa mesma história em português. Vocês acham que as onomatopéias seriam as mesmas?

S.: Não.

S.: Não.

T.: Por que vocês acham que são diferentes?

S.: Porque os sons são diferentes.

T.: Então, vocês acham que temos sons diferentes na língua portuguesa?

T.: Como nós reproduzimos o barulho de uma batida? Suponhamos que eu bata a minha cabeça nessa parede...

S.: Faf.

S.: Pow.

T.: E qual é a onomatopéia utilizada na história “The Witch of Blue” para essa situação?

S.: Baf! Bof!

S.: Tem Bam-Bam.

T.: É verdade, quando a Monica bate no Cebolinha...

The differences noticed in this lesson were also mentioned by some students in the interview:

Excerpt 5

- Os nomes dos personagens, as onomatopéias, tipo...pow!, paw! (Larissa – source: interview))

- O Cebolinha troca o W pelo R. E no jeito de falar também...casa de doce. Porque pão de gengibre, assim, dá a impressão de ser ruim, a pessoa não ia gostar. Agora quando fala casa de doce, todo mundo já interessa. (Juju – source: Interview)

After the students discussed the differences between the English and the Brazilian Portuguese version of “The Witch of Blue”, it could be noticed that “language is not a culture-free code distinct from the way people think and behave, but, rather, it plays a major role in the perpetuation of culture” (KRAMSCH, 2001, p.08). Due to the influence of culture, the onomatopoeias, the characters’ names or features (Jimmy Five’s speech impediment, for instance) and expressions with connotative

meanings were modified from Brazilian Portuguese to English. Therefore, “*The Witch of Blue*” gave the students an opportunity to see the cultural meanings of another language and to think about their cultural meanings at the same time. In other words, it served as a chance for the students to understand the cultural situations shown in the story by both departing from an external perspective, in which they placed their own culture, and from an internal perspective, in which they sought to understand the other’s viewpoint (FIGUEREDO, 2007).

Concerning the interview carried out with the seven students, their perceptions were crucial to determine if they had developed some intercultural competence. All of them found the classes with comics interesting. Most of them mentioned the vocabulary learning as a positive aspect, and Juju complained of the side talk in the classroom:

Excerpt 6

- *As conversas que atrapalham. Muitos não estavam, vamos dizer, envolvidos lá. Mas foi bom. Aprendi novas palavras que eu não conhecia.* (Juju – source: interview)
- *Aprendi palavras que eu não conhecia, que ficou na memória. Aprendi mais inglês, vocabulário.* (Larissa – source: interview)
- *Foram boas porque aprendemos várias coisas diferentes, palavras, significados diferentes também.* (Rafa – source: interview)
- *A história é bem legal (...) tipo assim, não entendo muito de inglês. Achei interessante, achei legal, a gente fica um pouco curioso pra saber o que está falando. A gente interage mais.* (Marcos – source: interview)
- *Foi boa porque deu para interagir bastante com a turma, aprender mais.* (Joãozinho – source: interview)
- *Foi legal, eu aprendi várias palavras que eu não sabia.* (Paula – source: interview)
- *Assim, deu para entender a história da Mônica, eu não conhecia, aí eu comecei a entender mais ou menos a história. Achei interessante.* (Ana Clara – source: interview)

When the students were asked if the experience of reading a Monica’s Gang story had influenced their English learning process, most of the participants remarked again on how they had learned new words. Some of them pointed out that the use of comics stimulated them towards learning, which is in accordance with what Davis (1997, apud DROLET, 2010) postulates, that is, comics have been recognized for their broad appeal to almost any age group or learner level because they depict real dialogue and culture.

Excerpt 7

- *Foi uma forma diferente de aprender. Porque a gente só vê em português, em inglês é um pouco diferente. (...) Influenciou. As novas palavras que aprendi.* (Juju – source: interview)
- *Sim, deu para entender um pouco de inglês, porque eu não entendia nada de inglês antes.* (Ana Clara – source: interview)
- *Eu acho que influenciou assim, no sentido de que realmente eu aprendi outras palavras, outros significados que com a outra professora eu não aprendi. E influenciou, até chamou mais atenção para ler mais histórias assim.* (Rafa – interview)
- *Sim, aprendi mais inglês, vocabulário.* (Larissa – source: interview)
- *Sim, porque o fato de ser história em quadrinhos, a pessoa se interessa mais. Se fosse só texto, essas coisas, aí o pessoal não ia gostar.* (Joãozinho – source: interview)

As defended by Brown (2001), the previous experience can be used to facilitate the learning process. As it was expected, the participants activated their previous knowledge of Monica’s Gang in Brazilian Portuguese and used their non-textual perceptions in order to make inferences about the text:

Excerpt 8

- *O conhecimento prévio das histórias em português ajudou a reconhecer os personagens, o jeito de cada um deles, então ajudou bastante.* (Rafa – source: interview)

- O Cebolinha fala algumas palavras erradas, e na versão em inglês também aparece, né. Em inglês fica um pouco mais diferente. (Marcos – source: interview)
- Ajudou muito. Tipo assim, a Magali é comilona, o Cascão é lá no meio do lixo, o Cebolinha fala enrolado, ele troca as letras, né. E a Mônica, como sempre, bate em todo mundo. (Larissa – source: interview)

In this first part of the interview, no one referred to the cultural aspects presented in the story and discussed during the classes. Thus, until this moment, the participants only noticed improvement in their language learning, specifically regarding vocabulary. In the second part of the interview, more specific questions were asked in order to make the interviewees reflect on the reason why there were differences between the two versions of “*The Witch of Blue*” story. As displayed previously, the students noticed differences in the onomatopoeias, the names of the characters, the letters changed by Jimmy Five and in the words with connotative meaning. Although none of the participants mentioned the influence of the cultural aspects on the changes found in the English version, some of them could perceive the need of adapting words to a public different from us:

Excerpt 9

- É porque na versão em português ele (Cebolinha) troca as letras, então na versão em inglês eles queria fazer da mesma forma pra parecer um pouco com a história em português. (Rafa – source: interview)
- Porque pão de gengibre, assim, dá a impressão de ser ruim, a pessoa não ia gostar. Agora quando fala casa de doce, todo mundo já interessa. (Juju – source: interview)
- Porque se fosse na nossa língua eles não entenderiam muito bem como eles entendem na língua deles. A gente entende, está acostumado com a versão inglesa, tipo de gibi, desenho, mas eles não entenderiam a nossa língua. (Larissa – source: interview)

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These students were able to think about their language and make inferences about the English representatives. Rafa comments on the need of keeping the personal characteristics of the characters, but he knows it was not possible to maintain them exactly the same way in both versions. Juju noticed that the translations are not equivalent all the time, but some adaptations are necessary in order to keep the real meaning of the words. Larissa pointed out the influence of the English language in the Brazilian Portuguese version of comics and cartoons, for example in onomatopoeias, but she knows it would be difficult to an English native speaker to understand our onomatopoeias, since they are not used to reading texts in Brazilian Portuguese. On the other hand, Ana Clara, Joãozinho and Paula did not indicate any change and, consequently, they could not answer this question. Marcos was not able to find reasons to the changes.

When the participants were asked if they could see the culture of the English representatives through the reading of “*The Witch of Blue*”, only one participant who answered positively was able to justify his answer with one example:

Excerpt 10

- Sim. O estilo americano, que nem o estilo da bruxa, porque no Brasil não tem aquele estilo de bruxa. A bruxa é deles. (Rafa – interview)

Rafa remembered the first class, in which the characteristics of a witch were brainstormed, and the last class, when the students saw the witch in Monica’s Gang story and discussed if she had Brazilian characteristics or not. Based on all these speeches, it seems that Rafa, Larissa and Juju started thinking about their cultural patterns and the others’ cultural patterns, but it is not possible to

say that they were able to critically understand the culture of the English representatives as well as their own, which is fundamental to the development of some intercultural competence (FIGUEREDO, 2007).

The last questions of the interview had to do with the participants' opinions about the importance of discussing cultural aspects of the English language representatives in the classroom. Regarding the concepts of culture revealed through the students' speech, it is possible to see that Larissa and Rafa conceive culture as "facts" when they reveal a restricted concept of culture that is limited to dances, music and behaviors of a group, which is, according to Kramsch (2001a), a vision of culture that favors daily pieces of information.

Excerpt 11

- *Eu acho que conhecer mais as cidades, as culturas, o modo como as pessoas vivem, eu acho que é importante a gente conhecer não só a língua, mas como eles realmente vivem. (Rafa – source: interview)*

- *Sim. Ritmos de dança, músicas, essas coisas assim seriam interessantes. (Larissa – source: interview)*

On the other hand, Juju matches language to culture when she talks about the importance of showing the cultural diversity of the English speakers in order to recognize each group through its language:

Excerpt 12

- *Tem várias diversidades (culturais), aí estudando um pouco de cada um é melhor porque, até quando for falar com outra pessoa, já relacionar (a cultura), é bom a gente estar sabendo. (Juju – source: interview)*

All the students agreed on the importance of learning culture. However, it can be inferred through Juju's statement that such classroom does not seem to be open to meaningful culture learning, as she states:

Excerpt 13

- *Eu sugeriria que mudassem a forma de dar aula. Porque a professora passa uma atividade no quadro e já vem respondendo. Ela não deixa os alunos pensarem em responder o exercício. Ela passa e ela mesma já faz. Ah, e ela mudasse também...ousar, coisas novas, falar sobre outros países, outras questões, o que está acontecendo, assim, pra gente ir pensando mesmo no dia-a-dia. (Juju – source: interview)*

When we think about what Damen (1987) argued regarding the need of training our teachers as cultural guides, we can understand what led Juju to say it. This speech shows that the English classes in that school are normally focused on the attainment of linguistic competence. By complaining about the lack of exposure to the everyday life of the English speaking countries, Juju demonstrates the need of promoting an intercultural communication with the English representatives in that classroom.

Considering the concept of intercultural competence presented by Figueredo (2007), which is the student's ability to critically understand a foreign culture from both an external and an internal perspective, we can say that three lessons were not enough to promote this kind of critical understanding. Although Larissa, Juju and Rafa proved to have reflected on the cultural differences, they did not demonstrate to have developed some deep critical understanding of the cultures

presented in the story. By taking into account Juju's speech, it is possible to infer that, for the first time, those students were led to critically think about the cultural bias that rules their beliefs and attitudes and also the other's behavior (DAMEN, 1987; KRAMSCH, 2001a; FIGUEREDO, 2007). Therefore, it would be necessary more classes based on an intercultural approach to promote a real comprehension of the viewpoints the other from the target language can have.

FINAL REMARKS

The first research question that guided this study was: since language and culture come together and are inseparable, how does the relation between language and culture is constituted in the English version of Monica's Gang comics?

From the analysis of the discussion conducted in the third lesson and the interviews with the students, we could notice that Monica's Gang stories undergo some changes when they are translated into English. It is true that the personal features of the characters and the plot of the comics are maintained. However, the following linguistic elements were modified in the English version of "*The Witch of Blue*":

- the onomatopoeias, since the English speakers represent the imitation of actions and emotions differently from us;
- the words with connotative meanings, which are cultural signs, such as "gingerbread house";
- the characters' names, Jimmy Five for instance, that had to be changed in order to make sense to the English readers;
- The letter "R" is replaced by "W" instead of "L" in Jimmy Five's English speech.

All the changes mentioned above were made due to the influence of the culture. As declared by Kramsch (2001a, p.13), each discourse community cuts up reality or categorizes experience in a different way, so "language expresses cultural reality". Therefore, as language is the element responsible for expressing culture, the linguistic code has to be linked with the cultural meanings that are part of each discourse community. Thus, Maurício de Sousa's group had to make some adaptations when translating the stories from Brazilian Portuguese into English, which is the case of "*The Witch of Blue*", in order to make it accessible and understandable to the English readers. Keeping this in view, we see that although Maurício de Sousa (Monica's Gang creator) has declared the stories published in Brazil and abroad are the same (SOUSA, 2009, 2011; PRODUÇÕES, 2011), the interference of the relation language-culture in the English version of the stories cannot be denied.

Concerning the second research question, which was: to what extent does the reading of Monica's Gang stories in the English language help learners of English as a foreign language to develop an intercultural competence, taking into account that these stories and their characters are from their macro Brazilian culture?

We concluded that three participants, Rafa, Juju and Larissa demonstrated the beginning of an intercultural sensibility, since they could notice some differences between the two versions and reflect on the reason why they were necessary. However, they did not reach a deep critical

understanding of the culture of the English representatives as well as their own. In other words, these participants, as well as the others, did not show an involvement with the comics to the point of recognizing the positive and negative aspects of their culture and the other's culture, which can be free of ethnocentric judgments. To sum up, as the seven participants of this research did not perceive the dialogue between the cultures clearly, we cannot say they developed a significant level of intercultural competence after the lessons under investigation.

Although the research questions have been answered, we must acknowledge the limitations of this study, especially because it was carried out in only three classes of fifty minutes. For this reason, we believe that it would have been better if it had been done in a longer period of time, which would certainly give the students more opportunities to get critically involved with the cultures encompassed in the story, increasing the chances to the development of an intercultural competence. Despite this fact, we strongly believe in the efficacy of Monica's Gang comics as a tool to promote discussions about language and culture in the teaching-learning dialects of English as a foreign language in the classroom context. As all the participants defended the importance of teaching and learning culture in the English classroom, we hope the lessons which focused on comics can bring forth the beginning of a new teaching practice in that school, by which the foreign language classroom members (teacher and students) can be more engaged in the development of their intercultural competence. Though this study has been done in a short period of time, its results show that it is possible to open the classroom environment to meaningful culture and language learning through Monica's Gang stories. The data also draw our attention to the importance of leading foreign/second language learners to develop more significant knowledge about the target language-culture so that they can understand better their own cultural dimensions.

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