Exploration of Classroom Cultures in EFL

Olga Dolganova
Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences
119571, Moscow, Vernadsky Avenue, 82
ovdolganova@gmail.com

Abstract

This article documents an investigation of classroom cultures within the context of teaching English in a Russian university and aspires to shed light on the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Russia. This investigation, involving an ethnographic move with a series of narrative interviews and lesson observations, reveals that although some similarities can be traced, the participant teachers create their own ‘small’ classroom cultures that largely represent their personal understandings of the communicative classroom and their role. The exploration shows that the teachers’ understanding of their classroom cultures is shaped by their pedagogical beliefs about what constitutes ‘good’ teaching enacted through an apprenticeship of observation experience and influenced by the ‘large’ culture’s beliefs about teachers, teaching, and learning, the institutional culture of learning, and the international culture of English language teaching. The teachers’ beliefs about good teaching and about their students, while serving to ‘filter’ macro influences, enable these teachers to create classroom cultures where students feel comfortable and respected. Echoing previous research suggesting that classroom contexts are co-constructed, this study accentuates the role of students in their implicit impact on the construction of classroom cultures. The findings reveal that for these teachers, the students are the main point of reference in their desire to establish and maintain a classroom culture that is comfortable and supporting. Tensions that arise in the classroom trigger processes of negotiation between the teacher and the students and, although these negotiations are mostly implicit, they encourage the dynamic nature of classroom cultures. Due to these negotiations, the teachers manage to acquire the students’ acceptance of their rules, and this appears to be considered a ‘validation point’ for the teachers, which, in turn, facilitates the development of the teachers and their respective classroom cultures.

Key words: proficiency; cognitive process; ESL writing; writing performance; text production processes; writer’s resources

Introduction

A growing body of literature has recognized the importance of exploring the contexts where learning and teaching occurs. Without such an understanding, it is difficult to comprehend why teachers teach in the way they do (Allwright, 2003; Bax, 2003; Borg, 2003; Burns et al., 2015; Cortazzi & Jin, 2013; Cross, 2010; Golombek, 2015; Holliday, 1996; Johnson, 2009; Wedell & Malderez, 2013). Consequently, such an awareness of the context can provide a way to understand how new practices for teaching English can be introduced and adapted to local contexts and thus potentially improve the broader learning process. The exploration, discussed in the article, contributes to a growing understanding of what happens in the classroom and
how it is shaped by a specific context, and the role that teachers and students play in creating their classroom cultures.

Classroom cultures of learning

Breen (2001, p. 125) argues that the classroom should be positioned as a social phenomenon ‘through which teachers and learners can be viewed as thinking social actors and not reduced to generators of input-output’. This implies that discussing a classroom as an ‘experimental laboratory’ whose primary function is to provide a learner with input that should facilitate desirable outcomes and that comprehension of input is the catalyst for language development does not take the social context of learning and teaching into consideration. It likewise implies that successful output not only depends on the methods and materials used in the classroom, but also on what goes on inside and between the teacher and students in a language classroom (Wedell & Malderez, 2013, p. 134). In other words, what is needed is an understanding of ‘the day to day rationalisation of what is to be done in the classroom, why and how and in what way the social forces shape what is happening in the classroom as a result of interaction of an individual mind with external linguistic and communicative knowledge’ (Breen, 2001, p. 134).

Classroom cultures are complex, and their complexity is compared to a ‘coral garden’ and the interrelated myriad life forms that a coral reef contains. This complex multiplicity is hardly seen on the surface, and we can see only the upper part of the socio-cognitive coral reef; rather, the complexity lies beneath the surface and belongs to the invisible dimension of a classroom culture (Wedell & Malderez, 2013). This implies therefore that a classroom culture is a social construct that constitutes practices which are constructed through interaction and communication between teachers and students and the operational context where learning takes place (Hodkinson et al., 2007). These practices involve a dynamic web of meanings which are in constant interaction with each other (Anderson-Levitt, 2002), including beliefs, attitudes, expectations, values, the rules and norms about learning in this context that dictate the division of power in the classroom, and the way participants evaluate one another owing to the fact that the classroom is a nominative and evaluative environment. Consequently, although the culture of the classroom is highly conservative, each new classroom group reinvents ‘the rules of the game’ in ways that reflect the group members’ understanding of what the rules should be. Briefly, the culture of the classroom has a reality and a mind of its own, which is not ‘the sum of the individual psychological orientation of teacher and learners’, but rather the group’s values and meanings as a distinct entity (Breen, 2001, p. 131). In other words, it implies that each classroom culture is a unique, genuine ‘small’ culture (Wedell & Malderez, 2013, p. 42).

According to Holliday (1999), the notion of ‘small’ culture does not imply scale, but deals rather with different social groupings and with processes as they emerge in order to explain cohesive behaviour within those groupings. On the contrary, the notion of ‘large’ culture supports a view of the world in which there are clearly established boundaries of material nations whose representatives bear concrete separate behaviour and refer to people of other nations as ‘others’. In the ‘small’ culture the central aspect is its dynamic nature, as each ‘small’ culture grouping may comprise people of different nationalities and ethnic groups and therefore is influenced by ‘interrelated overlapping cultures of different dimensions’ (Holliday, 1994, p. 28), such as host institution culture, professional cultures, national culture and international cultures. Furthermore, participants may bring to this ‘small’ culture their own beliefs, expectations, assumptions, and attitudes, which also impact the group’s dynamics.
Since every ‘small’ culture considers the complexity of various influences, including ‘large’ cultures’ influence, and also individual agency, a ‘small’ culture approach is proposed in this exploration to study classroom cultures. In viewing and discussing the classroom as a unit of ‘small’ culture, this approach enables the researcher to avoid stereotypically interpreting teachers from the reductionist, essentialist viewpoint, which the ‘large’ culture approach prescribes. Moreover, the application of this approach enables the researcher to break the analysis into interacting ‘small’ and ‘large’ cultures and thus obtain a complex notion of the interaction of different cultural forces. This eliminates the possibility of accounting for a cultural action happening in educational setting solely from the national, large culture perspective in which this educational setting is situated (Atkinson, 2004).

The literature states that although both parties, teacher and students, explicitly and implicitly contribute to creating the ‘small’ classroom culture (Wedell & Malderez, 2013), it is the teacher who works through this in order to help to develop group harmony and efficient ways of working (Breen, 2001; Dörnyei & Malderez, 1999; Holliday, 1994). This means the teacher affects every aspect of classroom life, and therefore understanding teachers’ visions of their classroom is crucial for understanding what happens in the classroom and why it happens in this way. Owing to this understanding, the following research questions guided the exploration discussed in the article:

1. What are the classroom cultures that teachers in an EFL classroom create?
2. What shapes the teachers’ classroom cultures and how do the teachers make meaning of these influences?

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework in this study has a complex nature. It took a ‘small’ culture perspective (Holliday, 1999), as it helped me to approach a classroom as a unique emerging culture and to avoid interpreting the findings of this research as a generalisation for the whole nation. Furthermore, in order to gain deeper insights into the nature of the classroom cultures, it is essential to understand the macro influences; in other words, how the classroom cultures have been shaped. As noted, every classroom culture of learning as a small culture is placed within a wider complex of cultures that influence it; therefore, every classroom is a ‘microcosm’ of that broader context and ‘reflects in fundamental social terms the world that lies outside the window’ (Bowers, 1987, as cited in Holliday, 1994, p. 15). Therefore, in order to understand the classroom culture, we need to look at it in terms of other interrelating and overlapping cultures that merge in the classroom and give birth to the classroom culture.

The research, while aiming to gain understanding of how the microcosm of a classroom culture is influenced by macro cultures, was guided by the argument of Wedell and Malderez (2013, p. 52) that it is hardly possible to identify and take into consideration all existing cultural influences, and therefore ‘any such process will be imperfect and incomplete’. However, as they argue, because cultures ‘underpin’ all behaviour, thinking and decision making, this process is crucial for examining a context. Therefore, in order to understand the classroom cultures and consequently shed light on the context, this study followed the model of ‘invisible’ context that takes account of macro cultural dimensions (Wedell & Malderez, 2013, p. 24), which will contribute to how teachers view good teaching, classroom relationships and how
interactions happen. Taking into consideration the above, the diagrammatic understanding of the conceptual framework of this study is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The diagrammatic understanding of the conceptual framework

Note: A-classroom culture; B-institutional culture; C-local attitudes (to education); D-regional educational culture; E-national belief system; F-balance of power, philosophical tradition; G-human-ness. (Based on the layers of the invisible Place context from Wedell & Malderez, 2013, p. 24)

It should be noted that dimensions C (local attitudes to education), D (regional educational culture), E (national belief system) and F (balance of power and philosophical tradition) will be discussed together under the national, ‘large’ culture label. The final, outer dimension, G, is defined as human-ness, which, according to Wedell and Malderez (2013, p. 20), accounts for human beings as different from other life forms on the planet and how it is human to use language as a mediator of learning from one generation to another, a process which nowadays takes place in formalised systems we call ‘education’. I position the international English language teaching culture within this global dimension, as this dimension provides a frame for discussing ELT as the global wave that comes with the status of English as a global language (Crystal, 2012) and emergence of methodological drivers from the West that have influenced ELT worldwide.

Research Design

For this qualitative study, narrative interviews and participant lesson observation methods were adopted for data generation. Combined with the ethnographic move, these methods enabled me to approach the teachers’ classroom cultures with ‘acute awareness of the myriad layers of social context’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 251).

In order to gain a better understanding of the participants’ world, the data collection commenced with the ethnographic participant observations of the university and the
department’s settings in order to obtain the data to situate the study. The term ‘participant observation’ literally means blending in with the researched teachers and participating in their activities ‘in order to observe and experience what those being researched experience at first hand’ (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p. 13). I spent two weeks at the university before the interviewing process started doing and writing my participant observations, during which the department’s meetings were held and the teachers came to the office to prepare for the lessons so that I could participate in the meetings and discussions.

Participants

In this study, volunteer and purposive sampling was applied to select the participants to take part in the research (Cohen et al., 2000). I was looking for teachers who have gone through all the stages of the English language teaching profession’s construction in Russia, namely, teachers with a degree in TEFL from Russian universities and who are in-service teachers with several years of teaching experience. These specific criteria were important as I aspired to explore how these experiences shaped the teachers’ visions of the classroom. I sent an email with a brief description of the research to the teachers of the English department in order to invite them to participate in the study. One teacher answered me by email and expressed her consent, and another teacher contacted me via social networks to express her verbal consent. I decided to approach the teachers who were in my list of potential participants but who did not answer my email personally, as I had an assumption that they could be helpful to get the most productive sample to answer the research questions. Eventually, four teachers expressed their consent to participate in the study. In order to comply with ethical requirements and to observe anonymity, I identified the participants by their pseudonyms throughout this paper.

The participants’ profiles

Luda is a female teacher in her forties. She has been teaching at this University for more than ten years. Her route into teaching English was not direct; she started her teaching career as a chemistry teacher, and only after several years of teaching at a secondary school did she receive an undergraduate Degree in Teaching English from Moscow University.

Polina is a female teacher in her fifties. She is one of the most experienced teachers in the English department. She got her undergraduate Degree in Teaching English in the eighties and then worked as a secondary school teacher for a number of years before joining the English department at the university twenty years ago. The reason for choosing this teacher was that she has the longest teaching experience in this department, and she could bring valuable data to the research.

Kate is a female teacher in her thirties and she is the youngest participant of the research. She used to teach English at a secondary school before she joined the Department of English in this University. She volunteered to participate in the research and I accepted her, as I wanted to have representatives of different age groups.

Lara is a female teacher in her late forties. She has a Specialist Degree in Linguistics. Lara has been with the university for more than ten years. I asked her personally if she could take part in the research and she accepted my request. I chose her due to my reasoning that she is a very experienced teacher; thus, her experience could bring a valuable contribution to the study.
Instruments

While doing the ethnographic observations, I discussed the possibility of having narrative interviews with the participants and eventually the schedule for the narrative sessions was completed. I sent them personal emails with an attached participant information sheet and the interview questions for their perusal, in order to give them time to become familiar with the participant information sheet and to make the procedure of interviewing more straightforward for them. Additionally, it helped them to recall their experiences before the interview. Eventually, two rounds of individual narrative interviews with the participating teachers were scheduled and conducted. Each interview lasted an hour and a half.

The first round of narrative interviews

In the first round, open-ended questions enabled me to structure the narrative and elicit the information on the teacher’s visions of their teaching. At the same time, the questions were focused on the context and students, which gave insights into their classroom cultures. Specifically, I asked the teachers to share their stories about their prior language learning experiences, their pre-service teacher education, and the context of these experiences, which shed light on how their visions of their classroom culture evolved and developed, and at the same time helped me to define their initial cognition about teaching and how that had shaped their instructional decisions (Borg, 2003). I also asked them to tell me about their present teaching practice, which included describing the context and their students; what the teachers think of good teaching; what their understanding of good scholarship is; how they interact with their students; how they view their role in the classroom; and what teacher-student relationships they establish in the classroom.

The second round of narrative sessions. It was conducted after the audio recordings of the first interviews were transcribed and sent to the participants with a request to read them through and identify what after-thoughts could be added. In these narrative sessions, I asked them to give me further explanation on the themes that I wanted them to develop, and which were important from my point of view. I also asked them if they would like to tell me more about their teaching experience. Some open-ended questions were prepared in order to obtain rich explanations and obtain more data from the participants.

Lesson observation and follow-up interviews. The next round of data collection was conducted using a lesson observation method with follow-up interviews. Lesson observations, in combination with interviews, enabled me to illuminate the teaching and learning process currently being used more fully. In addition, lesson observations allowed me to discover things that teachers might not want to discuss in interviews. In order to make my observations meaningful for my study and to obtain the necessary data, I wrote a class portrait for each lesson in my researcher journal, which was not a mere description of the lesson in every detail but rather consisted of my answers to a number of questions in my pre-prepared template. The template was the same for every teacher and every class, whereas my notes varied each time. I tried to garner insights into the context of every class and to gain a diverse portrait of every teacher.

Lesson observations and class portraits enabled me to identify themes to elaborate on in the follow-up interviews. In order to make it more effective in terms of getting the teacher to think and talk about teaching, open-ended questions related to aspects of the lesson were asked. It is...
important, according to Woods (1996), not only to find out specifically what a teacher thinks about a particular moment of the lesson in these sessions, but also to use these concrete points to elicit stories about teaching in general, which could shed light on their beliefs, expectations and assumptions.

The lesson observation stage lasted for four months. The duration of follow-up interviews varied with each teacher and with each lesson. Most of the time, the teachers wanted to speak about the lessons and the students, and it was when they thought that it was a good lesson. However, there were also lessons, which they were reluctant to discuss and wanted to wrap the after observation talk up as soon as possible. If I felt that the teacher did not want to talk after the lesson, I followed my ethical judgment and did not force them. All post observation interviews were recorded and then transcribed for further analysis.

Data Analysis

Due to the diverse nature of the data in this research project, for the data analysis I used Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) structural model of narrative in tandem with the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) for analysing the narrative interviews, while the lesson observation data and the post-observation interviews were analysed using the thematic analysis solely because of the nature of that data. The following diagram shows the steps of the analysis:

Figure 2

Stages and steps of the analytical process
Note: It should be noted that my research journal’s notes represent a record of events and my thoughts about this study, which include detailed accounts of the research settings and the participants, constituting thorough descriptions of the data generation and data analysis processes. Although these notes were not used as data, they helped me in the write-up stage, as they were informative and helped me to produce a comprehensive report that illuminates all the details of the research process.

Results and Discussion

Vision of good teaching: The teacher should be knowledgeable

The literature states that beliefs and expectations about a ‘good’ teacher lie at the heart of every culture of learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013). In this study the analysis reveals that the teachers believe that a good teacher should be a model of expert knowledge who can answer all students’ questions. Due to this belief, making a language mistake constitutes a loss of face for these teachers and therefore responding with ‘I do not know’ to a student’s question is considered a public failure. One of the teachers, Polina, also attributes this to the teacher’s fluency in English and knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary. Her image of a knowledgeable teacher prescribes her to speak English with what she describes as a native speaker’s proficiency. Following this assumption, for her, making language mistakes is not professional, even shameful, and she therefore assumes that she loses face in the eyes of her students. Another teacher, Lara, admits that due to this belief she plans her lessons meticulously to make sure that she can explain every word to the students and answer all their questions. She strongly believes that a good teacher should not demonstrate any uncertainty in the classroom. For her, feeling confident in the classroom is important as it gives her a feeling of good teaching and helps her look professional in her students’ eyes.

However, exploring further the teachers’ narratives, it is possible to assume that they see varying possibilities to deal with the situations when they cannot answer students’ questions and their students play a very important role in this process. The teachers acknowledge that the students do help them to deal with these situations in a confident way. They state that there is an important moment in their classroom when they have got awareness of the students’ acceptance of their view of the classroom culture and, importantly, recognition of them as good teachers. This validation of the teachers’ self-beliefs boosts their confidence and inspires them to ‘take risks’, thereby opening possibilities for development for the teachers and their classroom cultures. For instance, Kate, while believing that she should always anticipate the students’ questions, is aware that it is not always possible to predict what students will find to question when technologies that provide online access are being used in the classroom. She states that after she became certain that the students had accepted her and her vision of teaching, she became more creative and adventurous in using technology in the classroom than she had initially been, and she even felt confident enough to answer with, ‘I don’t know’ to certain students’ queries without fear of losing face. Similarly, Polina, who appeared to be most concerned about exhibiting a lack of confidence in using the English language and being unable to answer all the students’ questions, notes that she became more confident in introducing new communicative activities upon realising that the students had accepted her and her classroom culture. Moreover, this development helped her to adopt a new strategy when the students asked questions to which she did not know the answer – she started readdressing the question to the group. Lara usually prepares meticulously for the lessons and anticipates the students’
questions regarding vocabulary and grammar, but she learned to answer, ‘I don’t know’ if the students’ queries are subject specific in her English for specific purposes module.

**Teaching methodology**

This study has indicated the considerable impact of the international English teaching methodology, specifically the communicative approach, which originated in Britain, America, New Zealand and Australia, on the teachers’ classroom cultures. It is apparent from the findings that the teachers in this research look up to this approach and, moreover, they view it as a progressive, advanced methodology, in stark contrast to the traditional Grammar Translation Method. This stance represents the international English teaching culture in some exclusive way - the teachers view it as an ‘authority’ which influence on them is powerful.

Although this view on the hegemony of an optimal method for English language teaching has been widely criticised in the literature (Atkinson, 2004; Bax, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Littlewood, 2004), these criticisms do not trigger any negative emotions on the participants’ behalf. On the contrary, they acknowledge that more exposure to the methodologies that come from the English-speaking world would be beneficial for them. In relation to this, in the interviews both Luda and Kate mention their intention to complete a CELTA (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) course, assured that the knowledge obtained will advance their teaching skills and make their classes more effective for their students (although this international certification is by no means compulsory for teaching English in Russia).

The teachers’ understandings of their own approach as being ‘communicative’ are distinct, shaped by a web of the external macro-cultures in addition to internal pedagogical beliefs about good teaching and learning adapted and evolved through the diverse and specific matrix of shaping influences which each teacher has undergone. Despite these diverse shaping influences, a number of common themes emerge from a detailed analysis of the influences that mould the teachers’ visions of their communicative classrooms and how the teachers make meaning of them.

Apprenticeship of observation as a source of pedagogical beliefs about a classroom culture

Previous studies have recognised the powerful shaping influence of teachers’ previous learning experience, or apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975), on their classroom pedagogy. Teachers tend to replicate methods from their language learning experience and integrate them into their teaching practice, at the same time consciously rejecting the techniques which they did not find effective as learners (Davin et al., 2018; Hayes, 2005; Hamphries & Burns, 2015; Moodie, 2016; Phipps & Borg, 2009).

This research concurs with the above view in stating that the participant teachers likewise reflected on their learning experiences of classroom methodology, that is, the Grammar Translation Method, and rejected it as ineffective and inappropriate for their classrooms. Furthermore, the study’s findings suggest that the participants’ understanding of what constitutes a communicative classroom could be in part explained by their apprenticeship of observation. Thus, in their narratives about their visions of the classroom, the teachers reflect on their own language learning experiences as examples of good and bad teaching that informed their pedagogical beliefs about what a communicative classroom entails. For instance, Lara, while speaking about her present classroom and her vision of communicative teaching, refers back to her school days, where discussions in English in the classroom were a
common practice and teachers spoke only English to the students. As it worked well for her, it is a significant aspect of her present classroom culture. Therefore, she is adamant in the view that she should speak only L2 in the classroom as it is an important motivating factor for her students and encourages them to use the target language. Kate reports that her understanding of the communicative approach stems from her pre-service teacher-training university course at a university. Thus, during her pre-service training, she was taught with a method that excluded translation and which she names the communicative approach. It was useful for her and since that time she has been convinced that this is the most effective approach to learning for her own students.

It is, therefore, possible to conclude that for these teachers their pedagogical beliefs about a teaching approach were conceived during their apprenticeship of observation experience. They draw on these pedagogical beliefs in their present classrooms although they have also evolved through the impact of the other influences. What is also important to note is that the analysis of the teachers’ data reveals that they reflect on the nature of the teacher-student relationship in their prior learning experiences, and these reflections enable them to create their understandings of relationships in their classrooms. Importantly, they view the teacher-students relationship as an integral part of their communicative classroom cultures and their students as the central point of reference.

Teacher-students’ relationships: apprenticeship of observation as a source of pedagogical beliefs

The analysis shows that the participant teachers exploit their authority to build their classroom culture by relying on the traditional understanding of teachers’ power emanating from the national, ‘large’ culture. However, the findings reveal that this national culture belief is not integral to the teachers’ perceptions of the teacher-student relationship; rather, their visions are based on their beliefs about their communicative approach in which they aspire to establish a trusting, respectful and equitable classroom relationship. According to the analysis, these visions came with their previous learning experience.

When speaking about their relationships with their students, the teachers refer to their own positive and negative experiences when teachers at school were friendly towards them or, on the contrary, were strict and punished them with bad marks for making mistakes or, even worse, shouted at and humiliated them. For instance, Luda and Kate express negative feelings about their earlier language learning experiences and these negative experiences went on to influence their beliefs about good teaching and inform their teaching practice. The affective and cumulative power of that negative feeling underpins their present belief that students should be treated with respect, although they position themselves as strict teachers in the classroom, not for the sake of arbitrarily exercising power but rather for instrumental reasons such as bringing students to understand the seriousness of the learning process. For Lara, on the contrary, her school experience was positive, and she draws on it as a model for cultivating relationships in her classroom culture. She believes that the teacher should not be strict; thus, in her classroom culture she creates a stress-free environment that serves to encourage the students to develop their speaking skills.

These observations denote that the apprenticeship of observation works not only by replicating the methodology that teachers experience in their prior learning, but also by creating a learning environment and building teacher-student relationships in the classroom. The participant teachers admit that reflecting on negative experiences and avoiding them is uppermost in their minds when contemplating the kind of the classroom culture they wish to build. At the same
time, positive memories serve as models and are drawn on by the teachers when they generate their classroom cultures and construct an image of a desirable teacher-student relationship, one that reflects their visions of good teaching and are intrinsic to their classroom pedagogy. All four teachers aspire to create classroom cultures that are comfortable and stress-free environments for their students, and they therefore build their relationships with the students based on respect, trust, equality, and cordiality. They would like their students to be aware that the classroom is a safe space where they can speak without fear of making mistakes and where the teacher will always be there to help.

The ways of building relationships

The ways in which the teachers establish a good-natured and empathetic relationship in the classroom is unique to each one. For instance, Lara believes that her positive outlook, body language and jokes in English can engender a positive attitude in the classroom, and she therefore always strives to have an amiable and affable demeanour with a soft, calm and friendly voice when she interacts with her students, creating a stress-free environment. Although Luda, on the contrary, rarely smiles outwardly, she does create a classroom culture built around her students’ needs, which entails negotiating what materials the students favour, thereby enabling them to feel that they are hierarchically almost level with their teacher. In her opinion, it makes her classroom space appealing and comfortable for the students. Moreover, she mentions that she never punishes students for mistakes with bad marks, as in her view this could hinder their speaking skills. Likewise, Polina likes to engage the students in small talk about their out-of-class activities and this, in her view, helps the students to understand that she cares about them as individuals and that she is interested in their lives. This approach, she believes, creates a culture of empathy and support. In contrast to the other teachers, Kate considers herself a strict teacher; however, she also recognises the need to establish a supportive environment in the classroom where each student’s needs are being met.

When establishing rapport with the students within their classroom cultures, all the participant teachers practice an individualised approach to encouraging reticent students to engage in speaking actively in the classes. They tend to approach the quieter students and have one-to-one individual chats with them during the lessons. Luda, for example, may sit with an individual student and do a speaking task with her while other students are busy with reading tasks. In the same vein, Lara approaches the students’ desks during the lessons and discusses the tasks with them. The teachers position themselves close to their students in the classroom space, and this proximity might likewise help them to show their willingness to be available and accessible to the students and eager to help. It could be assumed that this helps them to encourage individual students who are reticent to speak while at the same time facilitating a broadly positive disposition in the classroom. This in turn is confirmation for the teachers that the students enjoy their classes, confirming in their eyes that they are succeeding as ‘good’ teachers.

Classroom interactions

As noted, the teachers in this study desire to be progressive teachers who follow the communicative approach in their classrooms; therefore, all the participant teachers’ classroom cultures are constructed under the umbrella of a ‘communicative’ label. The findings reveal that although the teachers’ understanding of this approach varies, certain shared understandings can be traced.
Evidence of the sound of L2 only

According to the analysis, it is a prerequisite of the institutional culture that every teacher in the English department should use only the target language in the classroom. However, it also reflects the teachers’ own beliefs about the communicative approach and about themselves as good teachers. A close look at the data reveals that the teachers’ understanding of a communicative classroom involves seeking to maximise L2 use in the classroom, considering it the primary characteristic of the communicative approach. Indeed, for these teachers, their students’ oral use of L2 is paramount and, importantly, they view enhanced student talking time in the target language as ‘an important measurement of a good lesson’ (Holliday, 1994, p. 170). Particularly, they are convinced that their lesson is successful if there is abundant student use of L2 and, conversely, a failure if either the teacher’s speaking dominates the lesson (even in L2) or the students use their native tongue. Thus, Polina, when reflecting on a lesson in which the students exploited significant opportunities for speaking, noted that she enjoyed the lesson for that very reason. Similarly, Luda reports that she is satisfied when student-talking time is enhanced and she considers the lesson a failure if she did much of the talking and/or explaining in the lesson. Kate and Lara also articulate a need for enhanced student talking time in quite the same way and believe that students should speak in the target language as much as possible, and this belief is reflected in their English only policy. It could be also assumed therefore that the evidence of L2 being used by the students and themselves is the key validation for them that they are performing well as teachers.

Although in observations the teachers strongly adhered to this L2 rule in their own use of language and their explicit stance (something not always reciprocated by the learners), they introduce this rule in the classroom in different ways. To be precise, the teachers’ attitudes when they establish this rule ranges from ‘unsure’ to ‘demanding’. Luda, for example, has an ‘unsure’ attitude. She talks to her students in English even though they ask questions in their mother tongue. She does not comment on their use of L1 but answers their questions using the target language, presumably to remind them that they should only speak English. However, when she reflects on her students’ reluctance to communicate solely in the target language despite her stated preference, she expresses doubts about the effectiveness of this ‘target language only’ approach in the classroom. Sensitive to her students’ expectations and needs, Luda is aware that using L2 only can be difficult for students who have experienced a culture of learning in which using Russian in English lessons was the norm and that some students may not feel comfortable (i.e. may be more reticent to be involved in class activities) in an ‘English only’ culture.

Lara and Polina are more assertive about not using L1 in the classroom and they demonstrate more teacher authority when dealing with this issue. While following the same strategy as Luda at the beginning of the course, which includes not commenting on the students’ use of L1 when they ask questions, they also patiently remind the students not to use Russian in the classroom. Lara, in her interactions with the students, if they stubbornly resort to their mother tongue, politely notes that if they are interested in the Russian translation of some terms, they can look them up at home. As she is inclined to avoid any confrontation and sees cultivating a friendly atmosphere as paramount for her lessons, she does this in a friendly demeanour. In contrast with the other teachers, Kate is more demanding regarding using the target language in the classroom, firmly stating that ‘Russian is not allowed here’ if the students use their mother tongue. Her teacher authority is on evident display when dealing with this rule. However, despite her strict stance, she acknowledges this tension and finds ways to resolve it, explaining to her students why it is challenging for them to use L2 only and how they can benefit from
using it in the classroom. By doing this, she aspires to reach a consensus on this issue and win her students over, as according to her vision of the classroom culture it is essential if not to negotiate her classroom rules with her students openly, then to justify them in order to enable the students to understand that her rules ‘make sense’ and they are designed solely to ensure their academic progress.

Although the teachers in this study demonstrate their power in the classroom, there is also evidence that awareness of this power and their desire to establish a comfortable, cordial learning environment do stand in tension in the classroom. This tension triggers mental negotiations on the teachers’ side about how to establish rules and norms and bring the students round to them in order to maintain harmonious and comfortable culture. It would be possible to hypothesise that although these teachers generally accept and comply with the authoritative role, there is a tension between this ‘large’ culture belief and their visions of good teaching and classroom cultures in which progressive and humanistic values are prioritised. This tension facilitates the dynamic nature of their classroom cultures. Due to this tension, which causes mental negotiations regarding how to balance expressions of authority with modern, progressive values on behalf of the teachers, their pedagogical beliefs about who they want to be in the students’ eyes, encourage the teachers to take decisions in accordance with their understanding of what constitutes a humanistic classroom culture. The participant teachers are sensitive to the students’ attitudes and feelings and thus they seek out ways to establish their vision of the classroom as smoothly as possible, so it eventually comes to be accepted by the students as for everyone’s benefit and essential for ensuring academic progress. This acceptance denotes for the teachers that the students validate their vision, which covertly makes them co-constructors of the classroom culture.

The role of the teacher

The role of the teacher is an important dimension of the teachers’ classroom cultures. In the interviews, they choose to describe themselves as facilitators; however, how their perception of themselves as facilitators manifests itself in action does not exactly correspond to how the literature conceptualises it. Literature suggests that its application in the classroom shifts the focus of attention from teacher to students. Teachers become facilitators who are not an omnipotent, omniscient source of wisdom and error correction but rather guides whose role is to bring students to challenge themselves and think critically about their own assumptions about how learning should occur, engendering a novel way of thinking, solving problems, evaluating evidence, analysing arguments and other factors which are essential for mastering a subject. This type of teacher facilitates the communication process between students and between students and materials, and acts as an independent participant within the group (Richards, 2006).

The interview data reveal that in the participant teachers’ understanding of the facilitator role the main thing is being sensitive to the students’ needs and expectations, caring about every student. The lesson observation data confirm that the teachers apply this vision in the classroom and their cordial, respectful classroom cultures appear to be a manifestation of it. However, the lesson observations also reveal that, while claiming that they are facilitators, they do occupy a central position in the classroom and, to varying degrees, ‘control’ proceedings. For instance, in her postgraduate classroom Lara tends to stand in front of the students during the lessons
and always appears to be monitoring the entire class by expecting her students to participate in open-class question-answer activities with her asking questions, a scenario which places her at the centre of the class. For her, the focus on how to make her classroom comfortable for her students seems to be the main feature of her understanding of the facilitator’s role. Luda’s application of the facilitator’s role differs in her postgraduate and undergraduate classrooms depending on the students’ expectations. In her postgraduate classroom Luda uses a significant amount of pair and group work. She also engages her students in the sourcing of materials, allowing them to function as co-designers of the course unit, which enables her to perceive her role as a facilitator. However, with her undergraduate students, Luda, despite defining her role as a facilitator, exercises a more traditional, teacher-centred role, as evidenced in her monitoring the whole class and avoiding pair and group work, allowing her to assume control over the classroom. She also expresses concern that her undergraduate students are not willing to explore the language by themselves, but rather prefer to rely on her instructions. This could imply that she aspires to be a facilitator in her undergraduate classroom too; however, her awareness of the students makes her adopt a more teacher-centred culture in that classroom.

In the same vein, Kate has sought to play very much a central role in the classroom since her first encounter with the students. She draws the students’ attention, to a great extent, to herself and tends to control the students closely. However, despite her central role in the classroom, she believes that her facilitator’s role involves being aware of every student’s needs and how to respond to them in order to help each student to enhance learning outcomes. Polina uses pair and group work discussions extensively in her classroom. At the same time, she admits that she never relaxes her attention in the classroom and is always at the centre of proceedings to keep the students within the range of her control. She reports that ideally she would like the students to be engaged in speaking L2 every moment of the lesson as it is good for their learning and she feels nervous if they are distracted or using their mother tongue when discussing the task. In order to avoid this, she tends to maintain a fast pace in her lessons. However, in the classroom, she does not perceive herself as controlling; rather, she views herself as someone who is like a mother-kind, caring and understanding.

It is evident that the participant teachers, while aspiring to a role as facilitator, have created their own understanding of what a facilitator should be in the classroom, and have swathed the term in such beliefs as being ‘caring’, ‘friendly’, and ‘helpful’, which is linked to their vision of a facilitator. At the same time, they dominate classroom proceedings in a way which is very much antithetical to the authentic nature of facilitator: the teacher-facilitator enables students to negotiate meaning without the teacher’s direct control and intervention, thus creating ‘learner-centeredness’ (Humphries & Burns, 2015; Littlewood, 2007). For the participant teachers, playing a central and controlling role in the classroom’s activities has become so ingrained as a result of the influence of the overbearing ‘large’ culture that it does not come as a contradiction to their desire to play (and to the belief that they are playing) the role of facilitator. The imperative of the large, national culture is such that it has discursively structured the teachers’ understandings of how the good teacher should behave in the classroom, overtly central to procedures and processes and making the students dependent on the teacher’s ordering of proceedings.

Conclusion

The present study has highlighted the concept of ‘small’ culture (Holliday, 1999) as an approach to explore classroom cultures. This approach enabled me to look at the culture from the bottom up, that is from the teacher’s perspective, thereby avoiding having to account for
what happens in the classroom solely from the national, ‘large’ culture perspective (Atkinson, 2004). Thus, the particularity of the participant teachers’ understanding of the communicative approach and their facilitator’s role in the classroom makes it plausible to propose that a ‘small’ culture stance on English language teaching is required to reduce global claims regarding appropriate methodologies to the classroom perspective in order to understand why teachers teach and behave in the classroom in a particular way.

The teachers in this research are guided by certain pedagogical beliefs about their students allied to the belief that in their classrooms they are aspiring to use the communicative approach, that is, to teach students to be able to use the English language for communication purposes and assuming that this corroborates the students’ ultimate goal of learning English. In their communicative approach, these teachers choose techniques and ideas ‘from the universal, transnational pool’ (Littlewood, 2012, p. 354), which involve their own learning experiences and evaluate them, not in relation to any theoretical underpinning, but according to how they might work in their particular context for the benefit of their students.

It is also plausible to conclude that ‘large’ culture beliefs continue to exert a significant influence, and the teachers in this research enter their classrooms with this historically conditioned cultural knowledge about the teacher’s role in mind. The teacher is still expected to be a figure of authority in the classroom who cannot simply ‘step aside’ to allow learning to take place, but must rather be central to the whole teaching and learning process (Ter-Minassova, 2005). However, in their ‘small’ classroom cultures they place the students central to their visions of their communicative classroom cultures and, moreover, they place their students central for their self-estimations, which opens possibilities for development for these teachers and their classroom cultures.

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**About the Author**

**Dr. Olga Dolganova** is a Senior Lecturer of the English Department at Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences. She has been teaching English as a foreign language for twenty years there. She earned PhD in Education from the University of Manchester (UK). Her research interests involve cultures of learning and classroom cultures in EFL contexts. (email: ovdolganova@gmail.com)