DISCOVERING ENGLISH[ES]: THE EXPERIENCE OF *OTHERNESS* THROUGH LITERATURE*

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At its very beginning, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* [CEFRL] (2001) states that foreign language teaching should help develop the learner's sense of identity through the experience of *otherness* (p. 1). In this respect, students of English as a foreign language seem to associate that experience with learning a restrictive language carrying essentially either British or American values. However, they fail to realise that learning English goes beyond this. English conveys the patchwork reality of emigration, interculturality, and hybridity. As an English teacher in an *Escuela Oficial de Idiomas*, it is my responsibility to teach the language from this broad-minded perspective. Consequently, I would like to share how my B2 level students were encouraged to rethink their concept of English by reading two stories of *The Thing around your Neck*[1] by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian writer telling about immigrants in the United States.

Keywords: cultural identity, feminism, hybridity, immigration, language learning, teaching English as a foreign language, World English[es]

Al principio del *Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas* [MCER] (2001) se establece que la enseñanza de idiomas debe contribuir al desarrollo del sentimiento de identidad del alumnado a través de la experiencia del *otro* y del contacto con su lengua y su cultura diferentes (p. 1). En este sentido, los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera tienden a asociar este

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proceso con el aprendizaje de un idioma restrictivo, impregnado esencialmente de valores británicos o estadounidenses. No obstante, deben darse cuenta de que aprender inglés va más allá de esa percepción limitada. La lengua inglesa contribuye a expresar la realidad caleidoscópica de la emigración, la interculturalidad y el hibridismo. De este modo, el profesor de inglés en la *Escuela Oficial de Idiomas* debe asumir la responsabilidad de enseñar este idioma desde una mentalidad abierta e integradora. Dado mi convencimiento de la importancia de este compromiso, me gustaría compartir una actividad que realicé con mi alumnado del nivel B2 y que estuvo encaminada al replanteamiento de su visión del inglés. Se basó en la lectura de dos historias incluidas en el libro *The Thing around your Neck*, escrito por la autora nigeriana Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, en las que se narran vivencias de la inmigración en Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave: identidad cultural, feminismo, hibridismo, inmigración, aprendizaje de lenguas, enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera, inglés[es] del mundo

1. INTRODUCTION: LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (1986) stated that "[l]anguage carries culture, and culture carries . . . the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (p. 16). Therefore, language is a crucial part of our identity. Learning a foreign language is widely believed to involve the development of a series of linguistic skills that allows students to understand and produce both written and oral texts in a new code. However, this is an incomplete perception of the process, since it fails to consider that foreign language learning also means an initiation into another culture, which is definitely transforming and will prevent learners from being the same anymore. After all, language defines and conveys our individual and collective essence.

As foreign language learners, not only do we interact in a borrowed language, but we also discover difference, identify the *other* and realise who we are and who we may become by being in contact with other cultures and their corresponding native tongues (Hall, 2000, pp. 22-23). What is more, this cross-cultural awareness helps interpret new communicative situations and develop the suitable linguistic strategies to participate in specific contexts without much strain. Consequently, foreign language learning is a source of linguistic exchange and adaptation as well as of identity creation and renovation. It is clear that one's self-concept is permeable, ever-changing and positional and language is one of the elements that shapes it.

In order to make foreign language teaching effective, it is teachers' responsibility to include both linguistic and cultural concerns in syllabuses so that students succeed not only in achieving [full] communication in different circumstances but also in creating bridges, not gaps, between their interlocutors and themselves. Needless to say, if foreign language teaching fosters critical thinking and makes students call their beliefs and principles into question, the learning challenge will prove to be even more rewarding for both students and teachers.

From my experience as an English teacher of B2 level in an *Escuela Oficial de Idiomas* [EOI], the use of literature in the classroom allows foreign language learning to be made an enriching thought-provoking process, as above described. Reading "The Thing around your Neck" and "The Arrangers of Marriage" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie let my students debunk English as a *Global Language* while paradoxically using it as a means of communication in the language they aimed to improve. It also contributed to raising consciousness of both the importance of cultural sensitivity and diversity and the necessity to be cautious about the "danger of the single story" (Adichie, 2009b). In sum, what seemed to be a not too ambitious task at first held the key to what language lessons should provide and encourage: language education, cultural curiosity, self-reflection and social commitment.

2. TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH IN EEOOII

In Europe, it is the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* [CEFRL] that sets the guidelines for foreign language learning and establishes the specific levels of achievement at each stage of progress [from A1 to C2 level]. It champions a communicative and plurilingual approach to language learning, which involves the development of a repertory of linguistic and cultural competences and abilities that, as a result of constant interaction, may be modified or deconstructed. Then, languages are not kept "in strictly separated mental compartments" (CEFRL, 2001, p. 4); they are complementary and even influence each other. This conception of language learning "contributes to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how. It also enables the individual to develop an enriched, more complex personality and an enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new intercultural experiences" (CEFRL, 2001, p. 43). Hence, according to the CEFRL, there is not a model of mastery to aspire to or a unique culture to imitate; and although language form deserves attention, developing useful tools for effective communication is the ultimate goal.

In Spain, *Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas* [EEOOII] are state-funded institutions which are dependent on the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports and provide language education. Adults from the age of sixteen and very different backgrounds can learn a foreign language there, improve their knowledge and skills and/or obtain certification of their levels of proficiency [A2, B1, B2 and C1] as defined in CEFRL. *Multilingualism* is fostered in these schools since there is a wide range of languages to choose from and many students learn more than one. Since, as stated in CEFR, *plurilingualism* should be the target to achieve, teaching is approached from a communicative and culture-conscious perspective.

From the basic to the intermediate levels [A1, A2 and B1], learning in EEOOII is encouraged by textbooks, real language tasks, realia and classroom interaction and students tend to be exposed to a standard variety of English [mainly British or American] as stipulated in CEFRL. Despite the institution's plurilingual teaching philosophy, this apparently contradictory emphasis on standard at the early stages

of learning answers to a need to provide students with a much-needed benchmark so that they feel more confident about their communicative and understanding abilities. However, this tendency is temporarily referential due to two reasons. First, self-learning and learner autonomy are encouraged by these schools and students are advised to practise their English with external resources which are often far from standard (films, series, blogs, articles, songs, literature, etc.). Second, students start having their first language experiences out of the classroom and, hopefully, come into contact with other foreign or native speakers of English abroad. Then, they realise that academic language not always matches that used in real life, that there are different varieties of English and that other extra-linguistic elements play a vital part in successful communication (body language, facial expressions, cross-cultural awareness, mimics, proxemics, kinesics, code-switching, etc.). Therefore, not until students live the previous revealing experiences first-hand do they become aware of the fact that English as a world language is not as normative or constrained as presented so far.

The above mentioned eye-opener marks a turning point for students not only in the learning process but also in the "development of … their personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture." (CEFRL, 2001, p. 1) What is more, this milestone usually comes at the time they are at the advanced levels [B2 and C1], which lets teachers disclose English from a more open-minded perspective, be more creative and innovative in methodology, use a broader range of materials and topics which can be controversial and demand more abstraction and critical analysis from students.

3. THE VIRTUES OF READING LITERATURE FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Extensive reading is about reading out of the classroom for pleasure and it is widely known and accepted to bring many benefits to language learners. According to Jeremy Harmer (2007), it allows them to skim and scan texts as well as to aim at detailed comprehension. Besides, it helps expand and consolidate vocabulary, improve spelling and writing skills and create subsequent interactional

contexts where to explore the subjects dealt with in the texts (pp. 99-102). Needless to say, it also contributes to self-learning.

In this respect, reading literature is an even more valuable experience, especially if texts are original, unabridged and wisely chosen. After all, students react not only to form and construction but also to content in such a way that their feelings usually become engaged by plots, characters or settings. Literature may then be extremely motivating to the extent of becoming cathartic. Furthermore, owing to their artistic merit and intellectual value, literary texts can be used at advanced levels to pose challenging but accessible tasks. Reading is a receptive skill which generally means higher mastery than that expected from learners at their respective levels. For instance, B2 students, as indicated in CEFRL, are assumed to be able to read, understand and work on texts "concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints, … [as well as] contemporary literary prose" without any problem but they are also likely to "appreciate distinction of style" although this is a *can do* descriptor belonging to C1 level (p. 27).

Since reading is one of the major strengths of students, it should undoubtedly be regarded as a key source of both language improvement and critical reflection as well as a confidence booster. With regard to literary tasks, they can certainly be both appealing and inspiring for students, especially for the most demanding ones, because they prompt satisfying progress outside the comfort zone far from stress or frustration. According to Mike Brown (2008), challenge with a degree of manageable difficulty is one the most favourable conditions for learning to take place whereas undertakings that turn out to be unattainable to students lead to a feeling of incompetence which is destructive and traumatic (pp. 10-11).

4. "THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK" AND "THE ARRANGERS OF MARRIAGE" BY CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

4.1 Making a Wise Choice of Literature

As an English teacher of B2 level in an EOI, *multiculturalism* is one of the topics you have to work on as it is included in the

curriculum followed by the institution. The famous TED Talk *The Danger of a Single Story* (2009, July) delivered by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was one of the resources I selected for designing a listening comprehension task for the academic year 2015-16. It revolves around the risks of approving of whatever is presented to us as definitive without any reservation or questioning. Adichie uses revealing examples of her personal life to illustrate how biased and distorted our perception of Africa is as a result of social prejudices and misconceptions often spread on purpose. She starts her speech by describing herself as a storyteller, which unexpectedly gave me the clue about my choice of literature for the year too. *The Thing around your Neck*, her collection of short stories published in April, 2009, would become my students' reading challenge. It entailed an opportunity to both introduce African literature, heritage and concerns into the classroom and lead students to a critical approach to socially-constructed categories such as culture, language, class and gender. As a teacher, it is my duty to show some social, cultural and ethical responsibility through my choice of materials and language learning should never be dissociated from this commitment.

Adichie's self-definition as a storyteller at the beginning of *The Danger of a Single Story* (July 2009) is a straightforward assertion of her identity as an African woman. Although relegated to the household, "orature[2] has been women's daily struggle to communicate, converse, and pass on values" since pre-colonial times (Wilentz, 1992, p. xvi). Luckily, this tradition still survives nowadays in the form of written short stories and authors like Fatima Dike bluntly warn against romanticising their creations as they have a totally critical nature: "We don't tell *bedtime* stories to put people to sleep; we want to scare the shit out of them and wake them up" (as cited in Gilbert, H. & Tompkins, J., 1996, p. 137). In addition, contrary to what some sociologists believe, literature can be a reliable mirror of social concerns and short stories are used by African women writers to voice their truth for the empowerment and dignification of their sisters. In her TED Talk *We Should All Be Feminists* (2013, April), Adichie described herself as a feminist, which is a significant statement for an understanding of her literary work. She publicly condemned both the social deprecation of the term and possibly, from my point of view, the sometimes fruitless disagreements among feminisms around the

world on subjects such as motherhood, leadership, priorities, designation or the role of men. These series of controversial issues should be approached in different ways depending on the context women are in, although what appeared to be clear to Adichie was that sexism is another *single story* that affects all women without exception everywhere. Therefore, another powerful reason to make students read her stories was that they would discover storytelling as a female tool to express cultural identity and feminist commitment. In fact, "The Thing around your Neck" and "The Arrangers of Marriage" portray the different experiences of two Nigerian women who move to the United States because of a male character, which allows readers to explore the multiple effects of diaspora on immigrant people, mainly women.

As a teacher of English, the language used in Adichie's stories was another appealing factor to consider. English is generally accepted to be the worldwide means of communication, (so-called *Global English* or even *Globish,* to quote Jean Paul Nerrière), and, as such, it brings a sense of standardisation and simplification at both linguistic and cultural levels which worryingly equates with a neo-colonisation of minds and identities. From this viewpoint, the universal references to look at are British and mainly American. Hence, many postcolonial writers using English in their literary work have always shown worry about their decision to do so. For instance, Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe (1975) regarded English as one of the most important vehicles for imperialism, but, at the same time, anticipated it as a malleable artefact contributing to future inter-culturality. That is why he warned ". . . let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English for we intend to do unheard of things with it" (p. 7) and he also added that, by using English, he wanted to "[infiltrate] the ranks of the enemy and [destroy] him from within" (as cited in Talib, I., 2002, p. 91). Indian writer Shashi Deshpande admits that using English as her language in literature has allowed her to reach an international audience. However, she also regrets this, because she has somehow fostered the amalgamation of the different Indian literatures and her writings have become inaccessible to her fellow countrywomen, the audience she depicts through her characters and really longs for (Navarro-Tejero, 2005). In this respect, English as presented in *The Thing around your Neck* is a non-standard variety and relies on code-

switching at times. It supports the stance of hybridity and encourages combinations of elements of different languages for task accomplishment (CEFRL, 2001, p. 134). This kind of English is not deemed to be *Global* but to represent the *World*. The term *World English[es]* was coined by Braj Kachru and has been embraced by other linguists such as David Crystal. It is an inclusive indigenised language that incorporates the different varieties of English resulting from the heterogeneity of local features and cross-cultural diversity (Crystal, 2014-15, p. 11). It obviously embodies the spirit of a communicative and intercultural approach to foreign language learning.

From a pedagogical point of view, choosing short stories such as Adichie's as the starting point for language practice and reflection was not a coincidence, either. As they are naturally brief, stories can be read in a single sitting and, as a consequence, their intensity and impact are high, immediate and far from gradual. Besides, although stories might be difficult to interpret, the feeling of reaching completion after reading just a few pages deceives students into making the effort to approach them more carefully and analyse them more in depth without driving themselves to exhaustion. This is very positive for adult students leading hectic lives, as they perceive this kind of compulsory reading as not so time-consuming or demanding.

4.2 Towards a Literary Meeting in the Classroom

One of the goals of B2 level in EEOOII is that students learn how to write a thorough literary review, in fact, they might be required to do so in the end-of-the-year test so that they prove their degree of achievement in writing. Although this task is common to all levels, it turns out to be quite repetitive and off-putting for students. Thus, when I presented "The Thing around your Neck" and "The Arrangers of Marriage" as mandatory reading, I omitted to say that writing that type of text would be one of the final goals of the activity they were about to participate in. Besides, the titles of the stories were removed and their writer's name was not revealed either, which not only awakened students' interest in the unknown texts but also prevented them from looking up external information that might colour their personal opinions and conclusions. Needless to say, critical thinking is desirable when learning a language since it boosts both written and

oral participation in class and helps students find some inspiration for academic tasks and common discussions in real life.

In order to provide students with some guidance on how to approach the stories, I created a worksheet including six questions that would allow them to understand and interpret the texts. These questions were applicable to both stories, so students were asked to answer and use them as a reference for a comparative analysis in search of points in common. Since *multiculturalism* as a topic had already been dealt with in class during previous lessons, I also reminded them of the fact that retrieving their previously learnt vocabulary [hybridity, assimilation, diversity, integration, sexism, prejudice, discrimination, host culture, racism, minority, etc.] would help them to express their ideas when working on the sheet that they would use as a reference for group oral discussion in a future literary meeting. The questions were the following and students were allowed one month and a half to think about them:

Who do you think has written the stories?
Disappointment and anxiety are obvious feelings in the stories. What circumstances do you associate them with?
Why is language a characteristic feature and motif in the stories?
Food and hair. What do they stand for?
What part do men play in the stories?
Have the endings lived up to your expectations?

The day of the literary meeting, groups of four students with different analytical skills were formed. I wanted the lesson to be truly learner-centred so that they became the main givers of knowledge. They commented on their notes about the different questions posed and wrote down the different viewpoints expressed by their partners. I acted as a facilitator, an observer, a resource and only intervened to provide feedback on form when necessary. After group debate, whole class discussion started and I turned into a prompter and participant at times. I rephrased some of their reflections so that everyone could understand them properly, asked several questions to help students be more accurate in their interpretations, remarked on important aspects that had gone unnoticed and added some facts on post-colonial theory so that they could round off their conclusions. As is evident, it

was a very rewarding cooperative task based on interaction among students and between students and the teacher too. As a result, when they were afterwards asked to write a review on the story they had liked best, they were not so reluctant to do it because they had built up strong arguments and could justify the ideas they intended to develop.

4.3 Interpretations and Viewpoints

The following are the ideas shared and the conclusions reached as a group during the literary meeting.

1. ***Who do you think has written the stories?*** Students did not have any difficulty creating the writer's profile. As for nationality, there were references to Nigeria in both stories and, in "The Thing around your Neck", to the different ethnic groups in the country [Igbo, Yoruba and Fulani]. What is more, students spotted the Igbo words interspersed in the texts.

Regarding sex, both protagonists were clearly women and, although they showed much concern about the general consequences of migration, it was clear to students that the feminist perspective of the experience pervaded the story. Unfortunately, no student knew Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and it was not until they saw *The Danger of the Single Story* (2009, July) that they discovered her name and physical appearance. All of them confessed they were not familiar with any other names of African women writers either.

2. ***Disappointment and anxiety are obvious feelings in the stories. What circumstances do you associate them with?*** Students agreed on the fact that disappointment was the result of living the American Dream as a fake. It was far from promising, it concealed arrogance, ignorance and hypocrisy and only deceived immigrants into renouncing their identity. It definitely took more than it gave as especially depicted in "The Arrangers of Marriage".

As for anxiety, students pointed out that the protagonist of "The Thing around your Neck" suffered from it because her uncle abused her sexually. As I pointed out, she also felt distress later on due

to her hybridity. When the main character started a new life and became more receptive to the American experience, she felt an unhomed *in-betweener*. Homi Bhabha (1994) explained what that state is like: "[U]nhomeliness is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations . . . In that displacement, the borders between home and the world become confused; and … forcing upon us a vision that is divided as it is disorienting" (p. 9). The main character in "The Thing around your Neck" had to cope with the conflicting opposition between her African background and the new American values she was being exposed to. She had to redefine essential categories such as good and evil and, by extension, social constructs such as gender, in a different cultural context. Therefore, she would endure the psychological impact and isolation of a delicate middle position which undermined the main pillars supporting her original identity.

3. ***Why is language a characteristic feature and motif in the stories?*** Students recognised the practice of code-switching and found it easy to realise that many of the Nigerian words used in the story corresponded with typical food or dishes of the African country. These cultural references could not be translated into English accurately since they were non-existent realities in the United States [*garri*, *dawadawa*, *onugbu*, *egusi*, *uziza*, etc.]. Besides, code-switching was considered to be the characters' means to reflect mood and perform identity acts. Women changed from English into Igbo to express solidarity and assert their roots. However, men rejected their mother tongue and insisted on the use of American vocabulary only for the sake of being accepted in the United States at any cost, which was especially evident in the "The Arrangers of Marriage". I suggested that the conflict over the use of American or British terminology in this story might also represent a struggle between these two superpowers over their degree of influence in the world. At any rate, what is certain is that the language resulting from the mixture of Igbo, American and British English supported the concept and essence of a *World English* and debunked the homogenising nature of a *Global English*.

4. ***Food and hair. What do they stand for?*** Apart from pointing at code-switching, students became aware that food revealed cultural prejudice and identity in different respects. In "The Thing around your Neck", African people were claimed to eat squirrels as a sign of

their savagery. Its protagonist also disclosed that food was key to understand the different concepts of beauty in Africa and the United States. In the former, being overweight was still associated with prosperity, but in the latter, the wealthy were thin whereas the poor were fat. In "The Arrangers of Marriage", Ofodile's willingness to have American food instead of Nigerian showed his effort to leave his African heritage behind.

As regards hair, I had to make students reread Nia's description in "The Arrangers of Marriage" to help them interpret its meaning: "It was not just her hair … a natural Afro puff, that I found beautiful … it was her skin the color of roasted groundnuts, her mysterious and heavy-lidded eyes, her curved lips" (Adichie, 2009a, p.181). It was evident that hair, the same as the other features highlighted in this quotation, depicted African beauty. I told my students that Adichie had confessed in different interviews that her constant reference to African hairstyles in her literary work was an identity act and a celebration of African women's natural beauty.

5. ***What part do men play in the stories?*** Students indicated that African men were portrayed in both stories as abusers and an important source of mental and physical subjugation for women. With respect to American men, although they went unnoticed by students, they were not really painted in a better light, since the protagonist's boyfriend in "The Thing around your Neck" was patronising to her and to immigrants in general. Hence, African women protagonists were the victims of a double oppression due to both their sex and race and so they represented the *other* twice over.

6. ***Have the endings lived up to your expectations?*** Students agreed on the fact that both stories seemed to be open-ended, which some of them did not like. They also added that they were not sure whether stories finished on a hopeful note or not. In "The Thing around your Neck", it was only the protagonist who made the decision to leave, thus proving she had gained some independence. However, it was not totally clear if she was coming back home because she really wanted to or out of some feeling of guilt or indebtedness toward her family and nation that did not allow her to make a fresh start. Neither could it be predicted if she would return to the United States to work or to

continue her uncertain relationship with her condescending white boyfriend. In "The Arrangers of Marriage", Chinaza's necessity of the green card made her stay with her husband but it was not evident if it was forever or until she obtained the necessary work permit, became independent and created a new future for herself. I added that the author might have decided to write open-ended stories with the intention of claiming that it was about time African women were allowed to write their own stories and destinies. They have the right to be emancipated individuals, free from the sometimes suffocating burden of their collective identity as Africans and the oppression of sexism.

5. CONCLUSIONS

After the literary meeting, I played Adichie's TED Talk *The Danger of a Single Story* (July 2009) in order to round off the activity. At almost the end of her speech (2009b), she stated: "Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity". That inspiring message made me remember Claire Kramsch's words:

> Group identity is not a natural fact, but a cultural perception …. What we perceive about a person's culture and language is what we have been conditioned by our own culture to see, and the stereotypical models already built around our own. (1998 p. 67)

The main idea behind the last two quotations is twofold: to warn against the manipulated versions of life as presented by irrational discourses such as racism, sexism, colonialism or capitalism and to show that there is always a possibility of challenging prejudices and reification.

All things considered, the literary experience with my B2 students helped me conclude that language teachers should show some social responsibility and commitment, which can easily be achieved through an appropriate choice of materials. Besides, if students come from heterogeneous environments, we should try to meet their different interests by providing alternative sources of

knowledge and practice and stimulating critical thinking. Reading under guidance is definitely a good option as literature has both artistic merit and intellectual value and engages readers emotionally. Although English as the language of literature might be a tool to spread the "single story" at times, it also encodes an ever-changing world and celebrates difference and diversity. Learning English as *World English* and from an open-minded perspective broadens horizons, allows students to experience *otherness*, represents cross-cultural interaction, contributes to embracing new realities and fosters solidarity.

NOTES

[1] *The Thing around your Neck*, Adichie's collection of twelve short stories, was named by the writer after one of them. In order to distinguish the collection from the story in the present article, references to the former will come with the title in italics (pp. 1, 6 and 8) and to the latter with the title between inverted commas.

[2] *Orature* was originally coined by Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu in the sixties and later used by authors such as Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o as an alternative to *oral literature*. The latter term was considered to be contradictory in itself since normally *literature* is associated with writing only, thus diminishing the value of orality as the expression of cultural knowledge. *Orature* has subsequently adopted other meanings and refers to a multi-generic type of performative literature, according to many scholars.

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