

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 [CEFR] states that foreign language teaching should help develop the learner's sense of identity through the experience of otherness. Students of English as a foreign language seem to associate that experience with learning a restrictive language carrying either British or American values. However, they fail to realise learning English goes beyond that. English conveys the patchwork reality of emigration, multiculturalism 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" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian writer telling about immigrants in the USA.

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Introduction

Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o states 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" (1986, 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). 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, language learning is a source of linguistic exchange and adaptation as well as of identity creation and constant renovation.

In order for foreign language teaching to be highly effective, teachers should include both linguistic and cultural concerns in syllabi for students to succeed in both getting communication in different circumstances and creating bridges, not gaps, between their interlocutors and them. 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 a Spanish *Escuela Oficial de Idiomas*, the use of literature in the classroom allows to make foreign language learning 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 the global language, while paradoxically using it as the language of communication they aim to improve. It also contributed to raise consciousness about the importance of cultural sensitivity and diversity, and the necessity to be cautious about the dangers of the single story (Adichie, 2009b). In sum, what seemed not to be a too ambitious task at first held the key to what language lessons should provide and encourage: language education, cultural curiosity and social commitment.

Language Learning: A Cumulative Process of Revealing Meaningful Experiences

In Europe, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFRL) sets 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 rather complementary, influencing 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.

Spanish Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas are state-funded institutions that are dependent on the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports. Adults from the age of sixteen and very different backgrounds can learn a foreign language, 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, nevertheless, as stated in CEFR, plurilingualism should be the target to achieve, so teaching is approached from a communicative and culture-conscious perspective.

From the basic to the intermediate levels [A1, A2, B1], learning in the Official Schools of Languages is encouraged by textbooks, real language tasks, realia and classroom interaction. Students tend to be mainly exposed to a standard variety of English [British or American]. Despite the institution's plurilingual teaching philosophy, this apparently contradictory emphasis on standard at the early stages of learning is for the sake of providing 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 supported 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 come into contact with other foreign or native speakers of English hopefully abroad. They then realise that academic language not always matches real language, that there are different varieties of English, and that other extra-linguistic elements play a vital part in successful communication, namely body language, facial expressions, cross-cultural awareness, mimics, proxemics, kinesics, or code-switching. 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, it usually comes at the time they reach 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 which can be controversial and demand more abstraction and critical analysis from students.

The Virtues of Reading Literature for Language Learning

Extensive reading, reading out of the classroom for pleasure, it is widely known and accepted to bring plenty of benefits to language learners. According to Harmer (2007), it allows learners to skim and scan texts as well as to aim at detailed comprehension. It also helps expand and consolidate vocabulary, improve spelling and writing skills and create subsequent interactional contexts where to explore the topics dealt with in the texts. Needless to say, it also boosts self-learning.

In this respect, reading literature is an even more valuable experience, mainly 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 the one expected from learners at the level they actually are. For instance, B2 students, as indicated in the 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 problem but they are also likely to “appreciate distinction of style” although this is a “can do” descriptor of C1 level (2001, p. 27).

Reading, then, should undoubtedly be regarded as a key source of both language improvement and critical reflection, as well as a confidence booster. Literary tasks can certainly be appealing and inspiring for students, because they prompt satisfying progress outside the comfort zone. According to Brown (2008), challenge with a degree of manageable difficulty is one the most favourable conditions for learning to take place, whereas unattainable undertakings may lead students to a destructive and traumatic feeling of incompetence.

***The Thing around Your Neck*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

As an English teacher of B2 level in an *Escuela Oficial de Idiomas*, multiculturalism is one of the topics that I have to work on as part of the curriculum of the institution. The famous TED Talk *The Dangers of the Single Story*, delivered by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, was one of the resources I selected for listening comprehension for this academic year. It revolves around the risks of approving whatever is presented to us as definitive without reservation, and not questioning its assumed uniqueness. She 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 this year. *The Thing around your Neck*, her 2009 collection of short stories would become my students' reading challenge. It entailed an opportunity to both introduce African literature, heritage and concerns into the classroom, and expose students to a critical perception of socially-constructed categories such as culture, language, class and gender.

Adichie's self-definition as a storyteller is a straightforward assertion of her identity as an African woman. Although relegated to the household, “orature 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 in the form of written short stories nowadays, 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 and Tompkins, 1996, p. 137). In addition, contrary to what some sociologists believe, literature can be a reliable mirror of social concerns. 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*, Adichie describes herself as a feminist, a significant statement to interpret her literary work. She publicly condemns both the deprecation of the term and the sometimes fruitless disagreements among feminisms on issues such as motherhood, leadership, priorities, designation or the role of men. These series of controversial issues should be approached in different ways. However, what seems clear to Adichie is that sexism is another single story that affects all women without exception. Therefore, another powerful reason to make students read her stories was their disclosure of 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 moving to the USA because of a male character. This allows 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 as the universal means of communication, the so-called *Globish* by Nerriere. As such, it brings a sense of standardisation at both linguistic and cultural levels worryingly equated with neocolonisation of minds and identities. From this viewpoint, the universal references are either British or American. Hence, many postcolonial writers using English in their literary work have been worried about their decision. For instance, Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe regarded English as one of the most important vehicles for imperialism, but, at the same time, anticipated it as a malleable artefact contributing to interculturalism. 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” (1975, 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, 2002, p. 91).” Indian writer Shashi Deshpande admits that English as her language in literature has allowed her to reach an international audience. However, she also regrets it, because she has somehow fostered the amalgamation of the different Indian literatures, and her writings have turned to be 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 is 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; 2015) and embodies the spirit of the communicative and intercultural approach to learning instilled in the Spanish Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas.

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

***The Thing around your Neck and The Arrangers of Marriage:
Towards a Literary Meeting in the Classroom***

One of the goals of the B2 level in the Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas is that students learn 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. As this task is common to all levels, it turns 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 that writing that type of text would be one of the final goals of the activity. Besides, the titles of the stories were removed and the writer's name was not revealed either. This not only awakened students' interest in the unknown texts, but also prevented them from looking up external information that might have corrupted their personal opinions and conclusions. Needless to say, critical thinking is desirable when learning a language, since it boosts both written and oral participation and helps students find inspiration for the tasks to be developed in their future examinations.

To provide students with guidance on how to approach the stories, I created a worksheet with seven questions. The questions were applicable to both stories, so students were asked to answer and use them as a reference for a comparative analysis. Since multiculturalism as a topic had already been addressed in class, I also reminded them that retrieving their already learnt vocabulary would be helpful when using the sheet as a reference for group discussion in a future literary meeting. Students were given a month and a half to respond to the following questions:

1. Who do you think has written the stories?
2. Anxiety and disappointment are obvious feelings in the stories.
3. What circumstances do you associate them with?
4. Why is language a characteristic feature and motif in the stories?
5. Food and hair. What do they stand for?
6. What part do African men play in the stories?
7. Have the endings lived up to your expectations?

The day of the literary meeting, groups of four students were formed. I wanted the lesson to be learner-centered so that they became the main providers of knowledge. They reflected on the questions in their notes and wrote down the viewpoints of their partners. I acted as a facilitator, an observer, and a resource, and only intervened to provide some feedback when necessary. After the group debate, a whole class discussion started, and I turned into a prompter and participant at times. I rephrased some of their reflections in order for everyone to understand them properly, asked questions to help students be more accurate in their interpretations, and added facts on post-colonial theory so that they rounded off their conclusions. Overall, it was a very rewarding cooperative task. When they were later asked to write a review on the story they had liked best, they showed strong argumentations and justifications for their ideas.

Feelings and Ideas in the Literary Meeting

The following are both the ideas shared and conclusions reached during the literary meeting.

Students did not have any difficulty creating the writer's profile. As for nationality, in both stories there were references to Nigeria and, in *The Thing around your Neck*, to the different ethnic groups in the country [Igbo, Yoruba and Fulani]. Besides, students spotted the Nigerian words interspersed in the texts. Regarding sex, both protagonists were women and, although they showed concern about the general consequences of migration, a feminist perspective of the experience pervaded. No student knew the name of the author and it was not until they saw *The Dangers of the Single Story* that they discovered her identity. All of them confessed they were not familiar with any other names of African women writers either.

Students agreed on the fact that disappointment was the result of the fake American Dream, which was not as promising as depicted, only deceived into renouncing the African identity and it took more than gave in *The Arrangers of Marriage*. They also pointed out that anxiety derived from the protagonist's unpleasant experience with her uncle in *The Thing around your Neck* but, above all and as I helped them realise, from her hybridity. When the protagonist started a new life and became more receptive to the American experience, she felt an unhomed in-betweener. Bhabha (1994) explains the condition as: [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 (9). The main character has to cope not only with the conflicting opposition between African and American values, but also with the social antagonism created by gender (female and male). Therefore, she has to doubly endure the consequences of a delicate position that entails much isolation as a result of a dualism that pervades the two main pillars sustaining identity, that is, culture and gender.

Students identified code-switching and found it easy to realise that most of the Nigerian words used corresponded with typical dishes or food and, as a consequence, were cultural references that could not be translated into English. They were non-existent realities in the USA [garri, dawadawa, onugbu, egusi, uziza, etc.]. Code-switching was also considered to be both a kind of mood language expressing feelings, mainly solidarity and distance, and a sign of identity assertion. In the case of *The Arrangers of Marriage*, the conflict between American and British terminology was not clearly understood by students at first. They were let to know that it represented a fight between the traditional static poles of language identification as portrayed by American and British cultures and the globalising values they transmitted. Their power was overrated and needed to be debunked by the kind of English used in Adichie's stories, a World English, as defined in the previous section.

Students became aware that food revealed identity conflict and deprecation in different respects. In *The Thing around your Neck*, Africana were said to eat squirrels as a sign of their savagery (Adichie, 2009a). The protagonist also remarked that food established a different interpretation of beauty between the USA and Africa. In Africa, being overweight is still associated with prosperity; however, in the former, "rich Americans were thin and poor Americans were fat" (Adichie, 2009a, p.119). In *The Arrangers of Marriage*, American food involved Ofofodile's will to assimilate and leave behind his African heritage.

As for hair, students did not manage to find a clear interpretation, so I pointed at Nia's description as a clue: "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, similarly to other features previously highlighted, depicted African beauty and a celebration of its essence. Adichie has confessed in different interviews that her constant reference to African hairstyles in her literary work is an identity act.

Students indicated that African men were portrayed as abusers and as an important source of mental and physical subjugation for women. In addition, they showed more willingness than women to assimilate. The African women in the stories were the victims of a double oppression due to both their sex and race and so they represented the *other* twice over. However, I told my students that

American men were not painted in a really better light, since the protagonist's boyfriend in *The Thing around your Neck* was patronising.

Students agreed that both stories seemed to be open-ended, something some of them did not like. They also added they were not sure whether stories finished on a hopeful note. 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 guilt or indebtedness feelings toward her family and nation. It could not be predicted either whether she would return to the USA to work or to continue her uncertain relationship with her condescending white boyfriend. In *The Arrangers of Marriage*, Chinaza's need of the green card made her stay with her husband, but it was not clear if it would be forever or until she obtained the necessary permit to work, become independent and create a new future for herself. The author might have decided to write open-ended stories with the intention of claiming that it is 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.

Follow-up: *The Dangers of the Single Story*

Adichie's speech *The Dangers of the Single Story* was used as a starting point for two listening tasks following up to the literary meeting on *The Thing around your Neck* and *The Arrangers of Marriage*. A shortened version of the video played in class gave students the chance to see the writer for the first time.

Watching the TED Talk by Adichie helped students confirm that she had transferred her own experiences and concerns as an immigrant, an *in-between* or *hybrid* to the stories they had read. In fact, her final words conveyed the message she wanted readers to draw from her literature: "When we reject the single story, when we realise that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise" (Adichie, 2009b). That statement allowed me to finish the lesson by revealing the idea behind my choice of literature for the academic year. I wished to warn them against the manipulated version of life and people presented by racism, sexism, capitalism and imperialism. As Kramsch (1998) explains: "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." (p. 67). Therefore, I tried to make students become aware that English transmits at times the values of the single story and neocolonialism. However, fortunately enough, English also encodes an ever-changing world and celebrates difference. Learning English from an open-minded perspective broadens horizons, contributes to embracing new realities and fosters solidarity.

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