

Unveiling multi-transcultural readings in the language classroom

RAÚL RUIZ CECILIA
Universidad de Granada

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é aumentar a consciencialização sobre o multitransculturalismo nas salas de aula de línguas. Nos contextos de EFL (Inglês língua estrangeira), a cultura-alvo é constantemente redefinida e enriquecida com novas formas de ver e pensar, retratadas pelos alunos de várias línguas maternas (pluri-L1). Acreditamos que os professores em formação inicial e contínua precisam de uma preparação especial nessas questões. É por isso que sentimos a necessidade de desenvolver uma abordagem multifacetada para uma compreensão intercultural das culturas em todo o mundo. Para convocar essa prática na sala de aula, trabalhamos com contos populares multitransculturais, de modo a que os alunos aprendam como interagir e entender as pessoas que são étnica, racial e culturalmente diferentes de si mesmas.

Palavras-chave: literatura multitranscultural, ensino de línguas, EFL, leitura.

1. Introduction

World societies are growing fast in terms of multi and transculturalism mainly due to the fact that globalization has narrowed distances and blurred physical borders. This means that peoples are losing their cultural «homogeneity» and gaining in intercultural understanding. Knowing other cultures leads to self-growth and this is very important for developing attitudinal competence among future generations. From our point of view, we consider of paramount importance the introduction of this topic in schools at early years. Schools are important educational scenes where changes must be introduced if we aim at «healing» the prejudiced-current-world. In this context, multi-transcultural literature emerges as a valuable learning tool since it helps teachers and students to cross cultural borders and shape themselves to fit into a pluralistic world.

Throughout this paper, we depict some ideas to introduce these topics in the language classroom. Firstly, we offer the European framework within which our approach is embedded. In subsequent sections, we tackle the premises to work with multi-transcultural literature and principles to choose multi-transcultural-based readings. Finally, we provide some intercultural readings we have used in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language.

In order to gain an insight into this issue, educators must become cognizant of seemingly similar culture-related terms, i.e. intercultural, multicultural, cross-cultural and transcultural. Intercultural is oftentimes taken as a synonym for multicultural, cross-cultural, and transcultural. Extant literature defines multicultural as cultures in coexistence (for example, different peoples living within the same borders/context) (Ruiz-Cecilia, 2012: 226). Relative to cross-cultural, it can be loosely described «as the mutual understanding across cultural

(extended meaning includes nuances of the words multicultural and transcultural)». (Ruiz-Cecilia, 2012: 226). With regard to transcultural literature, we advocate for Norton's definition (2005: 2) «children's books that portray peoples, cultures and geographic regions of the world that exist outside the reader's own country». The terms multicultural and transcultural permeate the overall idea of this paper.

Whenever we peruse multi-transculturalism at schools, we are bound to deal with three kinds of cultural borders:

physical borders, borders of differences (reluctance to accept others' ways of behaving, being or doing), and inner borders (developed by the individual as a result of his/her former social experiences or education/upbringing). Notwithstanding, inner borders are the most difficult to re-conduct and/or re-consider. They have been settled in the Self for years and, consequently, they are deeply rooted in the personality through a process of acculturation (usually, the minority group succumbs to the beliefs and behaviours of the dominant group in an attempt to gain access to social privilege. Sometimes, they belittle the richness of their original culture and develop a sense of shame towards it). (Ruiz-Cecilia, 2012: 226).

We firmly believe that infused inter-multi-cross-transcultural education helps them to cross these borders.

Considering the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001 and 2018), our reading program espouses existential competence or *savoir-être*. The objectives are: (1) to develop students' cultural awareness; (2) to train students in multi-transcultural issues; (3) to raise students' awareness toward cultural differences; (4) to develop students' critical thinking; (5) to approach multi-transcultural literature from a humanistic perspective; (6) to work with literature that dispels stereotypes; and (7) to help in the growth of multi-transcultural-friendly students.

All these objectives parallel the agreement reached by the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1992):

1. Understanding and respect for each child's cultural group identities;
2. Respect for and tolerance of cultural differences, including differences of gender, language, race, ethnicity, religion, region, and disabilities;
3. Understanding of and respect for universal human rights and fundamental freedoms;
4. Preparation of children for responsible life in free society; and

5. Knowledge of cross-cultural communication strategies, perspective taking, and conflict management skills to ensure understanding, peace, tolerance, and friendship among all peoples and groups.

Through multi-transcultural literature, children who belong to marginal communities or ethnic minorities develop and value their own cultural identities. Furthermore, to know stories of marginalized people who have been able to solve their problems may be highly motivating and will reinforce their self-esteem. At the same time, students will recognize in multi-transcultural characters real people who are able to feel, who have emotions and have similar needs of their own, i.e. they are individual human beings and not stereotypical characters.

2. The existential competence within the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001 and 2018) sets four general competences to achieve overall language proficiency. Besides the traditional *savoir*, *savoir-faire*, and *savoir-apprendre*, they add a newly redefined dimension: *savoir-être* or existential competence. As important is *to know* as *to know how to behave* in social interaction with others. The Other must be envisaged within its own system of beliefs, social context, and cultural attitudes.

Language is culture-bound and, hence, learning it from the point of view of the outsider (in this case, the learner of the foreign language) needs explicit guidance in order to avoid misunderstandings. Learning a Foreign Language implies a parallel process of re-interpretation of cultural facts and of sensitization of one's mindsets. Attitude formation in this respect should be an objective in itself within the language classroom.

CEFR defines Existential Competence as the «sum of individual characteristics, personality traits and attitudes which concern [...] self-image and one's view of others and willingness to engage with other people in social interaction.» (Council of Europe, 2001: 11). That is, it tackles the need of training students to become interculturally competent and to develop sensitiveness towards other ways of viewing, no matter how irrational they may seem to the learner's eyes.

Following some of the principles of the Existential Competence as dealt with in the CEFR of Reference, teachers should pave the way for the learners to develop:

- openness towards, and interest in, new experiences, other persons, ideas, peoples, societies and cultures.

- willingness to relativise one's own cultural viewpoint and cultural value-system.
- willingness and ability to distance oneself from conventional attitudes to cultural difference. (Council of Europe, 2001: 105).

Our transcultural program is intended to be embedded within these three basic principles. We want to use literature for promoting respect for different cultures, for erasing stereotypes, for engaging critical reasoning and self-reflection, and for developing their curiosity towards other cultures and their own because *knowing you is knowing me*.

3. Premises to work with multi-transcultural literature

A truly understanding of our modern society entails the acceptance of multi-transculturalism as a growing reality, which might entail surpassing the barrier of mainstream culture as the only acceptable and being able to develop solid feelings of affectionate esteem and self-confidence. Notions of teaching and learning garnered from experience have shown that multi-transculturalism encourages racial and ethnic harmony and enhances cross-cultural understanding.

Great strides have been given in the ever-challenging task of growing a society multi-transculturally friendly. Educators have begun to believe in this approach and schools are starting to organise cultural activities on a regular basis. This is translated into heightened sensitivity towards the Other, whenever teachers align beliefs and practices more effectively.

Rena Lewis and Donald Doorlag (1995) present the following reasons for developing multicultural and, by extension, transcultural education:

- 1) Commonalities among people cannot be recognized unless differences are acknowledged.
- 2) A society that interweaves the best of all of its cultures reflects a truly mosaic image.
- 3) Multicultural education can restore cultural rights by emphasizing cultural equality and respect.
- 4) Students can learn basic skills while also learning to respect cultures; multicultural education need not detract from basic education.
- 5) Multicultural education enhances the self-concepts of all students because it provides a more balanced view of the U.S. society. (*For our context, we can extend this statement to European societies*)
- 6) Students must learn to respect others.

4. How to choose multi-transcultural readings

In order to develop positive attitudes and respect for individuals with different cultural backgrounds, children need to be given opportunities for reading (or listening to) multi-transcultural stories. However, we have to exercise a great deal of caution when selecting the texts specially to steer away from stereotypes. Harper and Trostle-Brand's checklist (2010) might be of great interest to education practitioners. At the grass-roots level they pinpoint:

Author

- Are the author/illustrator qualified to write or illustrate material relating to the culture(s) portrayed? How?
- Have the author/illustrator conducted related research? If not, have they lived among (either as a member of or as a visitor to) the groups of people represented in the book?

Story

Characters

Setting

Plot

- Is the story interesting to children?
- Does the story contain authentic language?
- Are factual and historical details accurate?
- Overall, is this a high-quality story, independent of its multicultural aspects?
- Are characters believable?
- Are universal human emotions, attitudes, needs, and experiences reflected?
- Do characters represent people from a variety of cultural groups?
- Are life styles realistic?
- Are females as well as males depicted in leadership roles?
- Does the story reflect a variety of places and times?
- Are urban, suburban, and rural settings represented realistically?
- Are cultural settings and geographical features represented accurately?
- Are real situations depicted?

- Are rigid boundaries of class, culture, religion and ethnicity dismissed?
- Are various conflicts presented for children to explore and discuss?
- How are conflicts resolved?

Theme

- Does the story offer children a variety of situations, concepts, and new ideas on which to reflect, question, and consider?
- Are values explored, rather than preached?
- Are there lessons to be learned?
- Are children exposed to multiple perspectives and values?
- How does the story promote understanding of our diverse society?

Illustrations

- Are diverse populations represented?
- Is there diversity represented within cultural groups?
- Are characters realistically and genuinely represented?
- Do the illustrations avoid reinforcing societal stereotypes?
- Do the illustrations and text use authenticity to demonstrate respect for other cultures?
- Do the illustrations and text convey characteristics common to all people and cultures?

Developmental Appropriateness

- Is the story age appropriate; can children understand what is presented?
- Is the story individually appropriate in terms of children's family backgrounds?
- Does the story reflect the social, linguistic, and cultural contexts in which children live or to which they can relate?
- Will the story encourage meaningful and relevant discussions?

Norton (1993: 565) considered a plethora of questions for the selection of multi-transcultural stories:

- Does the book go beyond physical appearance stereotypes and depicts characters as unique individuals?
- Does the book transcend stereotypes in the appearance, behaviour, and character traits?
- Does a book suggest that all members of an ethnic group live in poverty?
- Are there characters from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, educational levels, and occupations?

- Does the author avoid depicting Asians as workers in restaurants and laundries, Hispanics as illegal alien unskilled labourers, Natives as bloodthirsty warriors, Africans as menial service employees, and so on?
- Are minorities respected for themselves or do they have to display outstanding characteristics to gain approval from the white characters?
- Is the physical appearance stereotyped (exaggerated facial features, non-white characters all look alike)?
- Is the culture of a racial or ethnic minority group accurately portrayed? Is it treated with respect, or is it depicted as inferior to the culture worthy of representation?
- Is the non-white culture represented in an exceedingly romantic or exotic way?
- Are social topics or problems of the minorities oversimplified?
- Are white characters always the benefactors?
- Are non-whites glorified, especially in biographies?
- Is the setting of the story realistic or idealized?
- Are the illustrations authentic and non-stereotypical in every detail?
- Does the book reflect an awareness of the changing status of females in all racial and cultural groups today?
- Does the author provide role models for girls other than subservient females?

In addition, Shioshita (1997) bears in mind nine important points to select multi-transcultural stories. The first one is about «general accuracy». Books should contain correct and current information. We should discard books where pictures seem isolated. Modern stories should acknowledge recent events. Moreover, stories should not force artificially happy endings. The second point deals with «stereotypes». We must avoid the reinforcement of stereotypes. Books reflect individual people's lives rather than assigning general personality behaviours or physical appearances to an entire group. Thirdly, the «setting» is important too. Stories should include accurate settings and prevent students from stereotyping cultural groups. Shioshita also considers «language» as a key factor to take into account when approaching multicultural readings. If a book includes the language of a specific culture, the actual language should appear, not nonsense words or an invented language that mimics the authentic one. «Epithets» which insult people of a particular race or ethnicity are to be avoided at all costs. «Illustrations» should convey the reality that members of any ethnic group look different from one another. «The author's perspective» is a controversial point. There are some researchers who advocate an intra-writer culture (writers writing from within the cultural group) or inter-writer culture (writers writing from an outsider's perspective). The stories have to be appealing if we aim at

motivating students to read stories. If they are not properly motivated, we will not succeed in multi-transcultural goal. Themes like friendship, family and school catch students' interest within and outside of the target culture. Stories with a strong plot and believable character development will be worth revisiting again and again. Finally, this author mentions «tough issues». By these, he means that in handling difficult topics, writers should present the complexity of them and offer multiple perspectives.

5. Multi-transcultural stories

In this section we provide some stories which conform to the criteria addressed in previous sections. They have already been used in EFL contexts (university pre-service teachers and primary education students) and have successfully fulfilled a twofold task. First of all, they contributed to the learning of an L2 through tales with appealing plots and imaginative prompts. They perfectly suited oral approaches to languages where storytelling was one of the pillars. Secondly, genuine multi-transcultural literature helped students to overcome inner borders or deep-rooted bias and prejudice.

The Drum (India) by Cleveland and Wrenn (2006)¹

This story from India is an example of a chain tale where the various trades the boy makes are connected to one another like the links of a chain. This story is a perfect example to teach the meaning of generosity, happiness, kindness, family, cultural values, and a giving nature. The folktale begins with the boy's mother bringing home a magical stick. The boy takes the stick with him on his wandering and finds people in need of help. He offers them what little he has and they repay him with whatever they have in return.

Why Hare is Always on the Run (Ghana) by Milord (1995)

This is an example of an explanation tale, a story that explains something about the natural world – in this case why hares always seem to be running. Inhabitants from the eastern part of Ghana (Ewe people) have a different reason for telling this folktale. They use it to remind each other how all members of a community must work together, even make sacrifices together, for the good of the community. This story fosters, extols and upholds values such as cooperation, democracy, solidarity, social justice, and responsibility.

¹ The stories *The Drum*, *Why Hare is Always on the Run*, and *Lighting the Way* are part of a study first published by Ruiz-Cecilia and Guijarro-Ojeda in 2007.

Lighting the Way (Australia) by Milord (1995)

This tale is told by the tribesmen of Arnhem Land, the Aboriginal reservation located in Australia's Northern Territory. Their culture is rich in myths about the natural world. They tell many tales about supernatural spirits that lived long ago during a time they call «alcheringa». This particular myth explains why the morning star shines so brightly. Axiologically, this story is a perfect example to instil values such as friendship, loyalty, family, kindness, and respect in students.

All peoples around the world have stories, tales, myths, legends, or folktales which try to explain why certain phenomena happen. The introduction of this reading into the language classroom may serve as prompt the student to initiating interaction with different cultures.

Ballerino Nate (Gender) by Brukaker (2006)

Nate is determined to become a ballet dancer but as soon as he unveils his inner desire, his brother Ben teases him. «Boys don't dance» turns into a mantra and his fear grows when he is told that he will have to wear pink shoes and a tutu. Even though the teasing makes Nate anxious that «only girls» can dance, he is not deterred, and with support from both his mother and father, he follows through and takes classes anyway. This is a great story about the fluidity of gender roles.

Arnie and the New Kid (Disabilities) by Carlson (1990)

This is a book about bullying and special needs. There is a character in the story that is in a wheelchair (Philip) and a bully (Arnie) who does not accept the new kid. After Arnie injures himself, he begins to realize what it means to be compassionate and welcoming. At the end of the story they become inseparable friends. It is a great story to teach children that we should respect and care for others even if they are different from us.

A Family Alphabet Book (family diversity) by Combs (2000)

This book harnesses the alphabet to teach that the concept of family is much broader than the model depicted on textbooks. The book addresses a plethora of situations to show that the ideal family is a myth and serves as fodder for further discussion on the topic. From our experience, it works well in educational contexts where new families are part of the community.

All Families are Special (family diversity) by Simon (2003)

The way the author seamlessly weaves together the stories of a classroom full of students' different families into one smooth narrative with a clear message is quite engaging. It portrays two-parent families, single-parent families, adoptive families, foster families, divorced families, two-mum

families, small traditional families, children living with grandparents, and blended families. So, this book informs children that people and families come in all different shapes and sizes.

6. Conclusion

As we have discussed above, using multi-transcultural literature is an efficient tool to cross cultural borders. Teachers need to bring these issues to the front in order to enrich the educative process through multiple manners of seeing and believing. As Rochman (1993) pointed out, if we only read what mirrors our view of ourselves, we get locked in. It is as if we were in «a stupor or under a spell». The truthfulness of our culture needs to be relativized, questioned and redefined in contact with other ways of being. This process of relativization would strive for the promotion of tolerance and respect towards the Other and awareness of the fact that we all can be Others at any moment. We must steer our students in this adventure which aims mainly at making Earth a better place to live in.

7. References

- Brukaker, B. K. & Alley, R. W. (2006). *Ballerino Nate*. New York, NY: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Carlson, N. (1990). *Arnie and the New Kid*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Cleveland, R. & Wrenn, T. (2006). *The Drum. A folktale from India*. Atlanta: August House Story Cove.
- Combs, R. (2000). *A Family Alphabet Book*. Ridley Park, PA: Two Lives Publishing.
- Council of Europe (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe (2018). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Companion Volume with New Descriptors*. <https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989>.
- Harper, L. J., & Trostle-Brand, S. (2010). More alike than different: Promoting respect through multicultural books & literacy strategies. *Childhood Education: Journal of the Association for Childhood Education International*, 86(4), pp. 224-233.
- Lewis, R. & Doorlag, D. (1995). *Teaching Special Students in the Mainstream*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Milord, S. (1995). *Tales Alive! Ten Multicultural Folktales with Activities*. Charlotte, Vermont: Williamson Publishing.
- Norton, D. E. (1993). *Through the Eyes of a Child*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Norton, D. E. (2005). *Multicultural Children's Literature. Through the Eyes of Many Children*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Rochman, H. (1993): *Against Borders: Promoting Books for a Multicultural World*. Chicago, IL: ALA Books/Booklist Publications.
- Ruiz-Cecilia, R. (2012). Narrowing cultural boundaries in the EFL classroom: Fairy tales from India. *RESLA*, 25, pp. 225-243.
- Ruiz-Cecilia, R. & Guijarro Ojeda, J.R. (2007). Teaching cross-culturally: Integrating multicultural literature in the language classroom. In T. Schmalzer, G. Apfethaler, K. Hansen & R. Singh (Eds.), *Intercultural Communication Competence. Implication for Learning and Teaching in a Globalized World*, pp. 110-125. New Delhi: MacMillan India.
- Shiohita, J. (1997): «Beyond Good Intentions: Selecting Multicultural Literature». In *Children's Advocate Newsmagazine*.
- Simon, N. (2003). *All Families are Special*. Morton Grove. Illinois: Albert Whitman & Company.
- United Nations (1992). *Convention of the Rights of the Children*. New York, UN