



Affirming diversity through reading*

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Abstract

In this article I will summarize a small scale project carried out at a private university in Bogotá, with eight undergraduate students. The project aimed at finding out what their oral discourse informed me about their beliefs regarding gender and ethnicity. It also had two other purposes: First, to give the students the opportunity to reflect upon the complexity of the world we live in and the many perspectives involved in this complexity and second, to make students active participants in a democratic society. To achieve these goals a selection of texts written by non-canonical, female and Afro-American writers was given to the students. I conducted five informal interviews, which were audio-taped. The analysis of the responses given by the students showed that there is an internalisation of the values which characterises the Western society we live in. A society ruled by dichotomies such as male/female, white/black and rich/poor, who perpetuate power relations that favor certain groups over others.

The students became active participants by becoming more critical and making decisions about how to improve further editions of the textbook they currently use and suggesting the editors to create a more inclusive book.

Key Words: Multicultural education, canonical and non-canonical literature, praxis, sexism, dichotomies.

Resumen

En este artículo describiré un mini-proyecto llevado a cabo una universidad privada de Bogotá con ocho estudiantes de pregrado. El proyecto apuntaba a encontrar que información arrojaba el discurso de estos estudiantes en cuanto a sus creencias sobre género y raza. El proyecto también pretendía darle a los estudiantes la oportunidad de explorar la diversidad del mundo en el que vivimos y lo que esto implica. También se buscaba hacerlos miembros activos en la creación de una sociedad democrática. Para alcanzar estos objetivos se hizo una selección de textos literarios no canónicos escritos por mujeres y Afro-Americanos y Afro-Americanas. Se llevaron a cabo cinco entrevistas informales, las cuales fueron grabadas. El análisis de las respuestas dadas por los estudiantes demostró su internalización de los valores que rigen la sociedad occidental. Una sociedad regida por dicotomías tales como macho / hembra, negro / blanco y rico / pobre las cuales perpetúan relaciones de poder que favorecen unos grupos sobre otros. Los estudiantes se convirtieron en participantes activos lo cual se puede observar en una actitud más crítica hacia su texto guía y el deseo de contribuir a su mejoramiento en ediciones posteriores mediante la creación de un texto más inclusivo.

Palabras claves: Educación, multicultural, literatura, canónica y no canónica, praxis, sexismo, dicotomías

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Introduction

According to Luis Gregorich (2004) “the term canonical literature was coined after the publication of the text *“The Western Canon. The books and School of ages”*, written by Harold Bloom nineteen years ago. In this text, there is a list of authors considered by Bloom models of imitation”. The list includes dead white European males such as Dante and Shakespeare amongst others. Gregorich also states “that this list is a way to show people, which books are “good” and should be read”. Besides that, Gregorich adds that “the canon is created by institutions such as universities and schools which decide what has to be read and how literary texts should be written”. By doing so, “these institutions impose limits, and set a standard of measurement of what is good and bad in literature”. In this way, any text that does not fulfil the standards “can not be considered part of the canon and, of course, is not considered good”. To sum up, canonical writers are those who are highly recognized and are models to follow, and are dead white European males within the categorization made by Bloom.

I have always wondered why textbooks only bring samples of canonical literature and usually do not bring samples of the non-canonical one. Why teachers and students only hear one voice, when we live in a world that is ethnically, racially and linguistically diverse. Many textbooks designed for current and future teachers devote little attention to issues of difference, and even less to a critical perspective in teaching. I became concerned with this issue when analysing the textbook students were using at a private university in Bogota. That textbook has a section called Literature Corner that includes only male British and American canonical writers such as Hemingway, Dickens and Shakespeare, among others. It does not include any female, Latin-American or Afro-American writer. So, I decided to create my own non-canonical literature corner because I wanted to give students the opportunity to explore different perspectives. I also did this because I was conscious that the textbook unintentionally or not is making invisible the significance of women, Latin-Americans and Afro-Americans, and that “what is excluded is often as telling as what is included” (Nieto, 2001 p. 43). There is evidence of this in the book, since the only type of literature selections included in the text are mainly written by male European- American.

Since the textbook the students bring to class, has some selections of literature that include texts written by canonical authors such as Hemingway, Kipling and Dickens, I wanted to include some non-canonical authors (not listed



in Bloom's text), such as Sandra Cisneros, Audre Lorn and Langston Hughes, as a way to show students the diversity of the world we live in, to allow, not only them, but also myself to explore different ethnical groups and women's production and see how it affects our vision of the world. In order to do this, an observational study was conducted with eight undergraduate students at a private university in Bogotá. The students were given a corpus of literature written by canonical and non-canonical authors. The canonical writer was Edgar Allan Poe, male and a very well-known author. The non-canonical ones included Sandra Cisneros, a Chicana Mexican descendant female writer, and the Afro-Americans Audre Lorne and Langston Hughes. After reading these texts, students were engaged in discussions where they presented their opinions, reactions and comments to the texts. They were recorded in order to find what their oral discourse informed us about their beliefs regarding gender and ethnicity. Each recording was transcribed and analysed. Transcriptions and analysis were made once a week during five weeks. Participants' opinions were categorized according to what they showed in terms of gender beliefs and ethnicity beliefs. The constructs of this project were multicultural education and gender analysis in the classroom.

Theoretical framework

This small scale project was based on two main concepts. The first one is multicultural education. The second one is gender analysis, based on the findings of researchers such a Cameron (1995), Poyton (1989) and Jones (1995).

Multicultural education

Multicultural education is based on the principles of social justice and critical pedagogy and it is defined as "a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender among others) that students, their communities and teachers reflect" (Nieto, 2001).

In language teaching education, multicultural education represents a way of transforming and enriching students' acts of knowledge by showing them the multiplicity of the world we live in. This is a key aspect since the English program followed by the students engaged in this project is based on



a monoculture text.

Multicultural education recognizes that knowledge is neither neutral nor apolitical and that “all the decisions we make, no matter how neutral they may seem, have an impact on the lives and experiences of our students”. (Nieto, 2001 p.43). This is why, by adopting a new literature corner that includes the perspective of the unpopular and disempowered groups, we are developing a multicultural approach that values diversity and encourages critical thinking, reflection and action from the part of the students as well as the teachers.

Gender analysis

In her article “Studies on Gender and Writing”, Guzzetti (2000) summarizes the findings of some studies that examined gender differences in and through students’ writing carried out in the U.S.A by Brown (1997), in Canada by Rebecca Luce-Kapler (1999), in the UK, in Australia by Kamler (1994) and in the Caribbean, by Susan Hunt (1995), amongst others.

From these studies three main topics arose. The first one was that writing is a gendered social practice. Researchers presented evidence that male and female students wrote differently and described how gender affected the evaluation of students writing. The second topic arose from experiments with minority groups. When students belonged to minority groups, their writing hints at how gender interacts with ethnicity and social class to produce different views of gender. The writer indicates that this was probably due to their minority status within a dominant white middle-class society. The third topic was writing gender within sites of possibilities. Some students were asked to participate in specific conscious-raising activities that were designed to develop awareness of the relationship between language and gender.

After reading this article I reflected upon the importance of broadening our students’ minds by exposing them to different kinds of texts, teaching them to analyse discourse and creating a good atmosphere in the classroom. Guzzetti (2000) emphasizes the fact that more research should be done on the process of changing writing in school and what happens when teachers and students engage in activities such as discourse analysis, and students begin to become aware of how gender is represented in texts. I was interested in the written texts produced by non-canonical writers especially women and Afro-Americans as their production has not been included in canonical lists and because I think



it is necessary for teachers and students to explore the written production of the ones who have remained voiceless. This is how our students and I became engaged in discourse analysis through reading.

Research method

The study was conducted over a period of 8 hours in an adult educational EFL classroom at a private institute in Bogotá, Colombia. The observations took place in a class of 8 students whose ages ranged from 17 to 21 years old. The class was composed by three women and four men. They were chosen because most of them had a good command of English which enabled them to discuss and express opinions in a fluent way. It also allowed them to interpret literary texts at a higher level. Those who did not have the same level were hopefully enriched by their interaction with others and the vocabulary learned from the readings given.

The participants were given a selection of readings. The selections included canonical and non-canonical writers as the purpose was to find out students' opinions about these texts in terms of gender and ethnicity. Another purpose of the project was to introduce an innovation by replacing the literature selections incorporated in the textbook used by the participants of the study with a contrastive canonical and non-canonical selection of texts. The canonical writer was Edgar Allan Poe, American male and well known and his story *The Oval Portrait*, the non-canonical writers were Sandra Cisneros, a Chicana-Mexican descendant female writer and her story entitled *Eleven*, two Afro-Americans: Audre Lorde with *Harriet* and Langston Hughes with *I, too sing America*. *The Oval Portrait* is the story of a painter and his wife. The woman dies little by little as her husband is painting her. He does not notice that his wife is dying as he is embedded in his job. *Eleven* tells the story of a girl who is experimenting the changes any adolescent goes through. *Harriet* is a poem about two girls who are segregated because they are black and *I too* is a poem about segregation, as well.

There were five sessions of two hours each, in which students read the text. After that, they were led to give their opinions and comments about the text through some questions. Their opinions and comments about the texts were audio-taped. Each recording was analysed after the session in order to find out what the participants' gender and ethnicity beliefs were. The study



addressed the question that follows.

Research question

What does students' discourse inform us about their beliefs in terms of gender and ethnicity?

Findings

In the following sections, data collected from the interviews recorded showed that students have internalised the values of a society ruled by dichotomies that lead to stereotypes and the reinforcement of power relations that favour some groups over others.

The perfect lady never swears

According to Payton (1989), "There is no single stereotype of how women and men talk in this society, but there are a number of stereotypic portraits on the basis of which a few generalisations have been made..." Some of these generalizations are that "men swear and use slang more than women", and that "women and men talk about different things" (p.75). Even though these generalizations are made about a culture different from the Colombian one, I would say they are applicable to our context as some of the comments made by the participants showed this.

The two generalizations described above were identified in the student's responses when asked if "Harriet" was written by a man or a woman. Four students (two boys and two girls) affirmed that it was written by a man. According to the girls the words "evil" and "crazy" were "strong words" attributed to men's speaking. The boys stated that as the poem talked about someone who is being segregated if it had been written by a woman, it would have shown her crying somewhere. This links women with "emotion". This assumption incorporates the notion of man in control of his feelings. "If was a woman...in the reading...any moment...they cry...because is...more sensible (meaning sensitive) (S1 I#8). However, "Harriet" was written by a woman.

During the fourth interview one of the students stated that "Eleven" was written by a woman because of the way she described the girls which implied a comparison between her and other girls. According to the student, "Las



mujeres viven más pendientes de eso. Se viven comparando. Siempre dicen “Ay mire como es esa”. Los hombres no. Los hombres siempre andan en grupos y no hablan de eso. Siempre hay un líder y no hablan de eso.” (Women are always comparing among themselves. They always say “Look at that one and her appearance”. Men always belong to groups, there is always a leader and they do not talk about things like that)(I#4 S6). This discourse is also a sample of stereotype. The student’s tone shows that comparing each other is in some way undesirable. “Ay mire como es esa”. ‘The word “esa” “that one” is derogative. Another student said that the main character (confused with the author) was rude when addressing other girls; if it had been a man addressing girls, he would have been more polite. Another stereotype that shows how “people believe words to be male appropriate, or female appropriate” (Cameron, 1995 p.36).

Women versus men the “Inevitable” “Obvious” “Biological” difference.

We were born in the Western society. That implies that there are certain patterns that rule our ideology. Most of us think of the world divided in dichotomies such as white and black, rich and poor, men and women. If we had been born in the Eastern society our patterns would have been different. The dichotomies described above imply a series of power relations based on the oppositions implicit. The first words in each dichotomy dominate the second. For the purpose of the project described here I will focus on the dichotomy men/women. This very dichotomy involves a cluster of associated meanings. Men are associated with reason, active, knowledge, instrumental, competence, action and culture, whereas women are related to emotion, passive, expressive, speech, incompetence, nature and ignorance. (Payton, 1989 p. 19).

In the first interview, I asked the students what classical authors they knew. They only mentioned male writers such as Homer, Shakespeare and García Márquez. When I asked the students why they did not know any female writers, some of the answers given were, because “most of the ones who won the Nobel...prize were men” (I#1 S2) and that women do not write because they are more “reservadas con todo lo que experimentan en su vida” (more discrete about their experiences in life (I#1S3 p.21). Another answer was because we are in a “male chauvinist society”. These answers show the invisibility of women’s’ written production. The authors known by the students were the



male canonical ones: Garcia Marquez, Shakespeare and Homer. Only one student mentioned a woman “Agatha Christie” because, according to him, he had been reading a book about British literature.

The responses given concerning the concept of Classical literature showed students associations’ with male production. Students related knowledge and philosophy with men. This was the case of S3, whose answer in the second interview reveals this connection: “el que enseña la filosofía en el libro es un hombre”. (Philosophy is taught by a man in the book). This quotation allows us to see the ideological dichotomy of woman opposed to man and its associations. Men are usually associated with “knowledge” and “culture”, whereas women are associated with “emotion”, “expressive”, “speech” and “nature” (Payton 1989 p. 17).

Students’ reasons to answer if a text was written by a man or a woman made more visible the dichotomies mentioned above. In “The Oval Portrait” some of the reasons why all the students thought it was written by a man were: the use of language in relation to the way a man describes a woman, power relations because the story was written in first person. It was also associated with a group of men travelling, who were in some way adventurous. Other gender oppositions mentioned by Payton (1989) are that men are more “active”, whereas women are more “passive”. The answers summarized above show a general perception of this dichotomy. Another interesting trait (maybe due to the way the question was posed) is the fact that there is an affirmation of heterosexuality. The interaction between S3, 4 and 5 in the third interview and their explanation of the way a man would describe a woman might evidence in some way a rejection to a gay genre in literature.

T: ¿Cómo describiría una mujer a otra mujer? S3: More...

S4: Romantic S5: Nooo! S4: Less...Less romantic.

When characterizing texts written by men or women the explanations given were very similar to those given when identifying if the text was written by a man or a woman. These were that a text written by a man would have “strong words”, and that women tend to be more “expressive” and “descriptive”. This expressiveness was related to a kind of resentment women have. All of this indicates once more the internalisation of the values that characterise the Western capitalist society we live in. A society ruled by dichotomies male/female,



white/black, rich/poor, in which there is always a subordinate group that “is only evaluated positively insofar as it lives out its subordination in the ideological terms that have been set up for it” (Payton, 1989 p. 20). Nevertheless, there were also two students who stated that there were no difference between men and women when they write and that it was very difficult to identify if a text was written by a man or a woman.

An invisible kingdom

One of the main concerns of this project was to give the students the opportunity to explore the diversity of the world we live in. Some of the answers given to the questions about the writers’ origin made evident that students only associated cultural production with Europe or the USA.

The question for origin posed after the reading of “Eleven”, “Harriet” and “I too”, showed different answers. When asked where the girl in the poem was from, one of the students said she was from Italy and another from France. Their associations were done in the case of “Eleven” because of the words “papa” and “mama” and for the connections they made between cheese and countries like Switzerland and France. In the poem “Harriet”, two students thought about a kingdom, perhaps England or Scotland, because of the words “queens” and “warriors”. One student said the woman could be from any country associating segregation with a worldwide practice and five of the students answered the U.S.A. as the U.S.A was thought of as a highly racist country for them.

It is interesting to note that the participants associated the kingdoms with Europe. There also used to be kingdoms in Africa. However, none of the students made an association with a kingdom and Africa even though the poem was highlighting the fact that its protagonist was Afro-American, African descendant. It could be said that this trait is a sample of the invisibility of African history in our culture. A cultural gap. Marvin Lewis (1987) states that by writing African descendant authors attempt to “bridge the gap with the spiritual earth mother”. (p. 2). Their texts are also an attempt to recover an identity different from the Euro-centred paradigm. As indicated by Jones (1995), when writing the Afro-American woman “claims a place for herself against a past that had been charted for her”.

With the poem “I, too” answers were very similar. Five students said the



man was from the U.S.A for this country is seen as a very racist one by learners. Two students said he was a Latin-American and one from Colombia as we usually say that we are Americans too. This respondent (a female student) brought the problem of power relations into light. The U.S.A calling their citizens Americans has a lot of ideological, economical and political implications clearly understood by the students. Calling ourselves Americans too is a way to protest against imperialism. I would like to highlight two important aspects here. The fact that students had chosen “Eleven”, “Harriet” and “I too” as their favourite texts shows how in some way the problems described in these texts are very related to our problems as Latin-Americans and also it shows the universality of the texts in terms of their topics. Anyone can become victim of discrimination any time. Becoming an adult can be a painful experience for anyone as it is the case of “Eleven”.

A Universal writing

Students seemed to have privileged women’s texts in the sense that they were their favourite ones. The reasons given were that these texts were more related to their lives. In this way these texts become more universal.

When the students were asked which text they like best between “Eleven” and the “Oval Portrait”, they answered “Eleven”. The reasons given were that the reading was easy to follow and the vocabulary was easier than the one they found in The Oval Portrait. Another reason for this preference was the fact that the story was closer to their own lives; some of them said that it reminded them of some of the experiences they had been through at this age. When the same question was asked about “Harriet” and “I too” the answers were even, four students liked Harriet and four “I too”. The reasons for the preference of the former were basically the content and the use of metaphors. Some of the answers described the poem as one through which you could “understand the pain” (S4 I#6) and “sadness” (S8 I#6). The students who liked “I too” based their choice on language and easiness to follow the reading and one of them on the ability of the author to synthesize his ideas “quiere decir muchas cosas...de forma muy compacta” (wants to say a lot of things but in a very concrete way) (S5 I#6).

As it was mentioned before, the students preferred “Eleven”, “Harriet” and “I too” over “The Oval Portrait”. Some of their reasons for this, in the case of



“Eleven” were language, and that the experience told in the short story was related to their lives. In the case of “Harriet” and “I too”, the reasons were the content and lexis, which were easier to understand. Again I would like to highlight the fact that students connected their lives with “Eleven”. The difficulties experimented by adolescents is a universal topic in the story. Segregation is a universal topic as well.

Other interesting topics arose from this process. They have to do with gender differences in terms of back channel signals, turn-taking and participation in class. Due to time constraints and the fact that these items are not part of the research questions they won't be analysed here. However, they could be the topic for further research.

The innovation was evaluated through a questionnaire that consisted of four main questions (see annex). From students' answers it could be said that the innovation had a positive impact on them, as they saw it as a different way to do the class, learn about Afro-Americans, and learn English and literature at the same time. However, there were some drawbacks such as the difficulties to interpret some of the interviews due to the quality of the recording and to the fact that one of the students did not want to participate in some of the sessions as she did not feel confident enough to speak English and recorded at the same time.

In what follows I will include some reflections about the process carried out and mention some pedagogical implications of the innovation. I will also mention why I consider it relevant for my setting and language teaching in general. I finally, will draw some conclusions about the whole process my students and I went through with this experience.

Conclusions and pedagogical implications

The results of this study about the students' beliefs about gender and ethnicity including an innovation with non-canonical writers showed somehow that there is an internalisation of the values which characterise the Western capitalist society we live in. A society ruled by dichotomies such as male/female, white/black, rich/poor. These dichotomies shape our expectations of how men and women must behave, be and even talk. These dichotomies also perpetuate power relations that favour certain groups over others. In cultural terms,



this means that arts and specifically literature (which is our focus here) may flourish but within definite limits. This might be one of the reasons why the literary works of Afro-American and Latin-American male and female writers have remained unknown. This is evident in our student's responses who did not know any women writers and whose answers regarding authors' origins were always associated with Europe. Because of that, students should be made aware of the diversity of the world we live in. However, being conscious of diversity is not enough.

Good education connects theory with reflection and action, which is what Paulo Freire (1970) defined as *praxis*. Developing a multicultural perspective means learning how to think in more inclusive and expansive ways, reflecting on what we learn, and applying that learning to real situations. In this regard, during the last interview students were invited to help the editors make his book reflect a more pluralistic perspective. As a result of this invitation students sent an e-mail requesting the inclusion of men and women from different ethnicities. The students' received an answer from the editors in which they apologized by saying that they did not want to offend anybody with their literature selection.

To sum up, this experience enriched not only the students but also my self. I had always thought that as an EFL teacher my job was reduced to teach some language structures and to develop the four skills listening, reading, speaking and writing. Nevertheless, I discovered that language and culture are linked in numerous ways and that by introducing reforms to the textbooks, hand in hand with the students; we are contributing to create a culture in which all the voices can be heard.



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Annex 1

EVALUATION OF THE INNOVATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Through this questionnaire I would like to know your opinion about the non-canonical literature corner we developed in class. Please read the questions carefully. Thanks for your cooperation.

1. Did you like reading non-canonical literature?

Yes _____ No _____

Why? _____

2. What did you learn from this experience?

3. Tick the text or texts you liked best.

The Oval Portrait _____ Harriet _____
Eleven _____ I, too _____

4. Would you recommend reading the text(s) you ticked for next semester?

Yes _____ No _____

Why? _____

5. Would like to add anything to this questionnaire?

