



## Relational teaching: A way to foster EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence through literary short stories

### Enseñanza relacional: una forma de desarrollar la competencia comunicativa intercultural de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera a través de cuentos literario

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Citation / Para citar este artículo: Gómez, L. F. (2014). Relational teaching: A way to foster EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence through literary short stories. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*, 16(2), 135-150.

Received: 16-Mar-2014 / Accepted: 8-Aug-2014

#### Abstract

This article presents an action research study<sup>2</sup> in an advanced EFL class of the language program at a public university in Bogotá, Colombia in 2011. The study suggests that the inclusion of authentic multicultural short stories from the U.S. fosters learners' critical intercultural communicative competence (ICC) through the implementation of the Relational Teaching approach. The collected data demonstrated that learners developed critical intercultural skills through *commonalities* (a concept proposed by Relational Teaching) when they read literary short stories. Findings show that applying new teaching approaches and literature in EFL might contribute to create critical intercultural awareness.

**Keywords:** EFL (English as a Foreign Language), intercultural communicative competence, commonalities, multicultural literary texts, Relational Teaching.

#### Resumen

Este artículo describe un estudio de investigación acción realizado en una clase de inglés avanzado perteneciente a un programa de lenguas modernas en una Universidad pública en Bogotá, Colombia en el 2011. El estudio sugiere que la inclusión de cuentos multiculturales de USA en el contexto de inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE) desarrolla la competencia comunicativa intercultural de los estudiantes mediante la implementación del enfoque "Enseñanza Relacional." Los datos recogidos muestran cómo los estudiantes desarrollaron habilidades interculturales críticas a través de temas comunes o *commonalities* (un concepto propuesto por la Enseñanza Relacional) cuando leyeron los cuentos literarios. Los hallazgos muestran que la aplicación de nuevos enfoques de enseñanza en el contexto ILE puede contribuir a crear conciencia intercultural crítica.

**Palabras clave:** Enseñanza Relacional, competencia comunicativa intercultural, cuentos multiculturales, ILE (inglés como lengua extranjera), temas comunes.

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2 This research was named "The Inclusion of Multicultural Literary Texts of the U.S. with the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language: A Pedagogical Convergence to Foster EFL Learners' Intercultural Competence." This pedagogical research was approved and sponsored by the Department of English at Illinois State University, USA, as part of the requirements for the completion of the Ph.D. program in English Studies.

## Introduction

The growth of intercultural communication among people from different nations in this ongoing globalized world has led the area of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to consider the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the language classroom over the last two decades. EFL scholars and teachers are placing more emphasis on the idea that one of the fundamental goals of foreign language teaching is not only to study language forms and communicative functions, but to enable learners to communicate and act effectively with people coming from diverse cultural backgrounds. That is to say, one teaching goal is to prepare learners with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to become critical intercultural speakers of the world (Banks, 2004; Byram, 1997).

However, after several decades, the development of ICC has been restricted in the EFL context (Byram, 1997, Lázár, 2003) because, on the one hand, teaching practices have focused on studying grammatical rules. On the other hand, teaching has centered on elements of surface culture including tourist places, food, holidays, and famous people. Atkinson (1999) asserts that the EFL area has adopted a "received view" of culture which understands culture as a static and homogenous entity. Sooner or later this fixed view of culture results in creating stereotypes and false representations of diverse communities. Therefore, these scholars urge EFL teachers to embrace a transformative and changing view of culture in which learners are encouraged to deal with contentious concepts of identity, power relations, social differences, injustice, exclusion, and resistance, instead of hackneyed topics of surface culture. Also, there is the need for EFL teachers to find appropriate teaching approaches and strategies that might help them to guide learners to develop critical ICC.

Building on the context mentioned above, this article reports the findings of a qualitative

research study that explored how EFL learners developed critical ICC through the study of multicultural literary short stories in an English class at a public university in Bogotá. I propose that one suitable teaching approach that can be applied in the EFL classroom and that might foster critical ICC is Relational Teaching, an instructional practice suggested by (Ana Louise Keating, 2004), an influential author in the area of multicultural education in the United States. As a researcher, I articulated the theoretical principles of Relational Teaching, ICC, and multicultural literature, and implemented them in the EFL classroom as a teaching alternative to foster learners' ICC in my English classes.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Relational Teaching*

In the humanities area of the U.S. educational system, Keating (2004) introduces Relational Teaching as one classroom approach that observes literature and cultures through history in a critical and objective way, in which the past is the result of an intimate link of what happens to individuals in the present. In Keating's opinion, one of the main mistakes in the teaching of history and literature is that many teachers have been trained to regard history in a similar fashion: as a linear time line that clearly separates the present from the past and "us" from other people. Our history is reduced to "a series of fixed points on an abstract historical continuum" Keating, 2004, p. 98 that prevent us from recognizing how the past continues to influence the present or how populations interact. When we talk about the past, we separate ourselves from the historical conflicts that have brought distressing consequences in the present such as violence, exclusion, and indifference. For instance, Keating notes that students in general have very little knowledge of indigenous histories, cultures, and literatures and of those ethnic groups considered

minorities. In the educational system, students see minority groups (native-Americans, black people, and immigrants) in a romanticized and ahistorical way, almost as if they were imaginary individuals who lived long ago or far away from our context in the present. With the use of Relational Teaching, teachers and students are invited to recognize the impact of the past on contemporary life through a process of cultural critique and self-reflection. Students read authors across time and space without necessarily following a strict chronological time line. For instance, students may come to recognize their own coexistence with other contemporary peoples that belong to diverse cultural backgrounds.

Relational Teaching is a procedure that begins with *commonalities* and takes multiple interweaving historical directions. By commonalities, Keating refers to complex points of connection that enable students to negotiate sameness, similarity, and difference. Although students might be part of diverse cultural groups, likely having dissimilar experiences, histories, ideas, and beliefs, they might discover that they actually share similar historical traditions which were shaped by the events of the past. This is essentially a teaching practice that can be implemented in the EFL classroom as well in order to foster intercultural competence among students who are learning English as a foreign language and who, for sure, have to relate with classmates from diverse cultural backgrounds in their own country or abroad in the future.

In Keating's classroom, *commonalities* have taken various forms such as region, genre, topic, or theme. One example she provides is discussion about the American Dream. It is a *commonality topic* which is accompanied with historical and contemporary texts written from diverse perspectives. In class, she discusses with her students the ideals of the American Dream from four frameworks: students' images of America, definition and success within the American Dream, formulas for achieving the

goals of the American Dream, and the exploration of historical and contemporary texts related to the topic. With commonalities like the American Dream, students are engaged in transformational self-reflection as they reexamine their own presuppositions and world views and make connections with the reflections of others.

*Commonalities* have three main purposes. First, they offer effective entry points into class discussion because students are given topics that are familiar to them, at least in part. Second, *commonalities* encourage learners to develop reflective thinking as they converse with other cultural narratives by relating their own perceptions of the world to the perceptions of others. And third, exploring *commonalities* prepares students to distinguish between the notion of "difference" and the concept of "deviation." Keating affirms that the western cultural system has always trained students to see everything that is different as a deviation from the norm. According to Lorde (1984), the mythical norm America has adopted corresponds to being "white, thin, male, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure" (p. 116). Any difference from this model is consciously or unconsciously regarded as deviant and abnormal, hence, shameful and inferior.

The three purposes that Keating points out can also be achieved in the EFL classroom through the study of literary texts so that language learners have the possibility to critically discuss *commonalities* through which they relate the notion of "difference" and "deviation" addressed in the literary texts to their own or others' experiences. Through *commonalities* such as gender, social class, human rights, and free development of one's personality, common topics for all of us, EFL learners can discuss similarities and "deviations" in regards, for instance, to social class struggles, racism, prejudice, homophobia, misogyny, and xenophobia in the cultural environments of themselves and of others.

One of the interesting characteristics of Relational Teaching is that it proposes that the

study of multicultural literature should not always be a celebratory experience. Celebratory or “congratulatory” (Hames-Garcia, 2003) refers to the idea that contents are studied in commemorative, romantic, and even idealistic terms, missing the objective truth about the historical atrocities and deeds among nations and among people throughout history. By contrast, Keating argues that the teacher should make sure that the texts and topics discussed in the classrooms are not necessarily safe or celebratory spaces from which students may return unchanged. It is teacher’s job to lead students to discover real events of history and to disrupt the discourse of dominance. In other words, teachers can challenge students to respond objectively to real situations of the world in order to produce *transformational* experience, even though it might be disturbing for them to confront reality.

Keating therefore coins the phrase *transformational multiculturalism*. This idea does not imply a naïve and idealistic celebration of the plural voices and viewpoints of literary manifestations. Instead, it initiates a critical exploration of the cultural identities embedded in American literature, a literature that has always been characterized as multicultural. As a pedagogical strategy, transformational multiculturalism supports Relational Teaching because it aims at changing oppression, injustice, misconceptions of deviation, and attitudes of power and superiority through a process of self-conscious reflection in which all members of a multicultural society participate. Keating demonstrates that transformational multiculturalism must be carried out in the classroom through the study of literary creation in order to produce change.

Since the world is becoming a more globalized society, and one in which the English language has important ties to power that must be viewed in a critical context, Keating’s theory of Relational Teaching and transformational multiculturalism can be adopted in the EFL

classroom as well. EFL learners need to be encouraged not only to study language, but to change and disrupt what Kramersch (2001), in the field of EFL, and Keating in the field of multiculturalism, have deemed the status quo. These authors, from two distinct areas, strongly believe that teachers interested in pedagogy and multiculturalism and/or interculturality, must help students to challenge, transform, and improve the traditional beliefs and fixed attitudes of our unjust, prejudiced, exclusive, and discriminatory societies. In short, the classroom must be a dynamic place of resistance to the status quo by addressing discussions on issues of race, sexuality, inequity, exploitation, and interculturality as well as literary creativity and aesthetic accomplishments. Expanding on this point, students may well bring resistant attitudes to the study of English, as well as the cultures about which they are learning in EFL classrooms. Resistance can serve as highly productive resources for critical dialogue and learning.

### *Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)*

The Relational Teaching approach—supported by transformational multiculturalism—can enable EFL learners to foster ICC, which is defined by Byram, Nichols, and Stevens (2009) as “the ability to interact with ‘others,’ to accept other perceptions of the world, to mediate between different perspectives, [and] to be conscious of their evaluations of difference” (p. 5). Byram (1997) explains that ICC is formed by three main aspects:

1. *Knowledge* about “social groups and their products and practices in one’s own and in one’s interlocutor’s country” (p. 35) as learners become acquainted with aspects such as beliefs, relationships, values, etc. It highlights the acknowledgement of cultural products, and written documents such as literary texts as a means to acquire intercultural knowledge.



2. *Skills*, which he divides up into the skill of interpreting (the ability to adopt a position and provide a critical meaning of a situation or cultural expression), the skill of relating (the ability to establish common or uncommon grounds, that is, in Keating's words, the ability to identify *commonalities*, deviations, and differences); and the skill of discovering (the capacity of "building up specific knowledge as well as the understanding of the beliefs, meanings, and behaviors which are inherent in particular phenomena, whether documents or interactions" (Byram, 1997, p. 38).

3. *Attitudes* such as openness, empathy, tolerance, readiness, and curiosity for cultural expressions that may be similar and even strange to learners. These attitudes resist frequent damaging attitudes such as prejudice, hatred, intolerance, and discrimination which very often generate cultural misunderstanding.

*Knowledge, skills, and attitudes*, as proposed by Byram, are aspects that help learners to foster *critical* cultural awareness which is the ability to critically evaluate both the "commonalities" and differences among people's beliefs, practices, and lifestyles from varied cultural backgrounds in the past and present. It involves being able to resist, challenge, and transform homogenous views of culture into heterogeneous, diverse, and even "deviant" experiences of human existence through history.

Therefore, articulating the aspects of ICC and the principles of Relating Teaching in the EFL classroom through the reading of literary texts, learners may be capable of becoming more critical intercultural individuals.

### *The Inclusion of Literature in EFL*

Many scholars in the area of EFL believe that literature is a salient authentic material that not only contributes to help EFL learners to learn vocabulary and language forms, but to develop critical ICC. Parker (2002) and Zafeiriadou

(2000) claim that reading literary texts that are culturally relevant provides routes for students to acquire knowledge and to establish cultural connections thus affirming their own culture and learning about cultures other than their own. In our contemporary world in which progressively globalized and multiethnic societies have come to amalgamate together, there is a striking new call for the promotion of interculturality and cross-cultural awareness through authentic literary texts. Zafeiriadou (2000) indicates that works of literature are the relics of culture and through their study, students understand and appreciate cultures and ideologies different from their own in time and space. Following this same logic, McRae (1996), Sihui (1996), Savviduo (2004), and Paran (2006) have proposed to teach literature in the EFL classroom to not only help EFL learners improve their language level, but to become aware of intercultural knowledge. For this reason there is a current drive to seek out appropriate teaching approaches, like Relational Teaching, and adequate literary texts for non-native speakers of English through which they can respond meaningfully to literary expressions. Carter and Long (1991) and Amer (2003) point out that literature is a resource to promote meaning negotiation, interpretation, and cross-cultural awareness. Literature cultivates empathy for diversity as learners are invited to understand cultures and ideologies different from their own. Such is the case of Gómez Rodríguez (2012) who applied several constructivist approaches such as the Transactional Approach and the Inquiry-based Approach in an EFL classroom through which learners were able to read and interpret American literary short stories. Learners were very critical in regards to issues of deep culture, naming gender differences, individual ideologies about family heritage, cultural loss, and social discrimination. The Common European Framework of References to Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) also considers that literature helps to promote pluriculturalism in the EFL classroom through

aesthetic uses of language such as the production, reception, interaction, or mediation of oral or written literary language. Therefore, literature plays a major role in this research because its incorporation into the EFL language classroom is likely to support the development of ICC.

### *Criteria for the Selection of Literary Texts in EFL*

Since the purpose of this investigation was to observe how a group of EFL learners developed critical ICC through literary texts, the literary works chosen were multicultural short stories of the U.S. Multicultural literary texts ([26] Sanders, 2009) constitute a body of literature that focuses on underrepresented groups whose racial, ethnic, religious, and social conditions have been marginalized by a dominant culture. Therefore, Native-American, African-American, Latino/a, Jewish, working class, and immigrant literary works belong to this kind of literary production which has recently been recognized by the mainstream<sup>3</sup>. The goal of multicultural literature (Cai, 2000) is to give voice to those who have been historically silenced in order to avoid perpetuating erroneous stereotypes and misconceptions of other cultural groups. Iscoff (1994) and Varga-Dobai and Wilson (2008) assert that reading multicultural literature expands students' knowledge of the world and helps them to connect to it, to open doors to other cultures, to introduce them to ideas they would otherwise not encounter, and to see the *commonalities* across cultures, a thought that strongly relates to Keating's proposal of Relational Teaching to promote interculturality through commonalities. Thus, multicultural literature promotes equality, justice, respect for differences

and similarities, and enables learners to become critical intercultural beings in this more and more inclusive contemporary world.

For the implementation of Relational Teaching, I decided to have my students read three multicultural literary short stories that belong to three main cultural groups of the U.S. They are authentic language creations without suffering any adaptation or simplified version. A brief description of the stories is presented in Table 1.

### **Context and methodology for the Research Study**

This study was carried out in an advanced English class of the Modern Language Program at a public university in 2011. This academic program prepares EFL learners to become qualified English teachers in public and private schools in Colombia. Students are learning English as a foreign language to teach it later in their careers. Therefore, learners have to become proficient enough to dominate English in terms of grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and communicative functions as well as to be well-prepared with the pedagogical tools and approaches to teach English. One of the main emphases of the courses offered by the EFL area in the Language Department is that these learners must become knowledgeable of aspects related to cultural topics from different countries as a strategy to create cultural awareness and foster ICC. Consequently, during this action research, learners were expected to become aware of the teaching approach used for the reading of literary texts (Relational Teaching) and of issues related to ICC, as the ones explained previously (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) through the reading and discussion of multicultural literary texts.

### *Participants*

A group of 23 advanced EFL learners of seventh semester, ages 18 to 22, took part in this research

<sup>3</sup> Mainstream refers to the principal and privileged cultural group that dominates and governs a nation. This term usually refers to the western culture whose people and literary authors are white, Christian, educated, and economically stable. They differ from ethnic minority groups that are often portrayed as outsiders because they are the poor, the non-white, the uneducated, and the immigrants, all living on the margins of the exclusive mainstream society.

study. They had studied English, guided by the communicative English textbook *Top Notch* (Saslow & Ascher, 2005) in their previous English courses. Although participants were in an advanced level, they had several problems with grammar, pronunciation, and spelling due to the fact that they were still going through a learning process. They had worked on simple culture projects in class to study cultural aspects of the U.S., the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. The cultural contents they addressed were mostly surface factual information about those Anglo-Saxon countries including celebrations, food, tourist places, geography, and historical events. Furthermore, they had never studied culture through the implementation of authentic multicultural short stories. The inclusion of this type of literary material was new for them as they reported at the beginning of the research that they had never had the opportunity to read authentic literary texts in the target language.

### *Pedagogical Intervention*

As already stated, this research incorporated the teaching of multicultural literary texts of the U.S. through Relational Teaching (Keating, 2004) in order to foster learners' critical ICC as they established and discussed *commonalities* among their own cultural background and others represented in the literary selections. The reading and discussion of each story took place in the first term 2011. We met twice a week on Mondays and Wednesdays from nine to eleven in the morning.

Students came to class having read the material, and they had answered a study guide which included key questions to help them see the short stories from a more critical standpoint. Through Relational Teaching, students critically discussed the themes that the authors developed in those multicultural literary texts and related them to their own cultural background and to their life through a process of interaction and self-reflection. For instance, when reading the short

story "Woman Hollering Creek," written by the female Chicano author Sandra Cisneros, students were able to recognize and discuss social issues related to the position of women in patriarchal societies and, more specifically, about how abusive husbands triggered domestic violence in their wives, a *commonality* that they found in both the Mexican-American community in the U.S. and in Colombia. Likewise, when the students read "The First Seven Years," a Jewish-American short story, they discussed two main commonalities or points of connection that enabled them to negotiate similarities and differences. The first was the problem of the generation gap between parents and kids: the female character in the short story, Miriam, decides to resist the authoritarian imposition of her father, Sobel, when he wants to force her to marry a man she does not love based on radical Jewish traditions. This was an interesting point that allowed learners to talk about similar problems they had with their parents. The second *commonality* was the problem of immigration, as students were able to relate one of the character's situation, Sobel, who lives illegally as a refugee in the U.S. to real stories of immigration of people they knew.

When participants read "Shame," an African-American short story, they related the way the main character, Dick, suffered from his teacher's social discrimination because of his poverty to personal situations in which students had been victims of their teachers' oppression and rejection in the past. This constituted another *commonality* that they found in the multicultural literary texts and the real world. Through the implementation of Relational Teaching in the EFL classroom, learners became more critical of these complex *commonalities* and were able to develop ICC. The way they developed ICC in this pedagogical intervention will be addressed in the findings section. During the discussion of these *commonalties*, students worked in small groups and then held class discussions in which they presented their critical views regarding the intercultural issues reflected in the stories. Other times, students gave short presentations

about the topics they had identified as important for class discussion and analysis. Participants also wrote brief critical response papers about the topics addressed in class for each story, dealing with aspects of interculturality as the ones described in Table 1.

*Research Design*

**Research question.** Supported by three main theoretical principles, Relational Teaching, critical ICC, and multicultural literature, this qualitative action research was led by the following research question: How might advance learners foster ICC through the inclusion of multicultural short stories mediated by the Relational Teaching in an EFL classroom at a public university?

*Data collection instruments*

To answer the research question, I focused on a holistic approach through four main data collection instruments: (1) I took field notes each class in which I completed entries about students'

interaction with the literary texts, including the commonalities they discussed and the aspects of ICC that they developed during the reading and class discussion based on my observations. (2) I collected three journals from students in which they reported their experience with each multicultural short story. Each journal was collected immediately after the study of each short story. (3) I used a semi-structured interview held at the end of the pedagogical intervention in which I inquired as to the intercultural knowledge participants had learned and which aspects of ICC (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) they had developed. (4) I also collected participants' response papers (artifacts) in which they wrote their critical views about the topics and commonalities they had discussed orally. These artifacts were expected to reflect participants' level of critical ICC because they presented their positions about the themes treated in the multicultural stories. The whole data collection procedure consisted of observing and detecting participants' critical reactions, responses, and opinions about the cultural commonalities

**Table 1:** U.S. multicultural short stories read in the advanced English level

Ethnicity	Author	Short story	Plot/ characters / intercultural themes
U.S. Mexican-American	Sandra Cisneros	"Woman Hollering Creek" (1992)	Cleófilas, the main character, is beaten by her chauvinist husband, Juan Pedro. She is a victim of domestic violence and the impositions of a patriarchal society in a Latino community in the U.S. She depends on her husband emotionally and economically. This story deals with the situation of working class Chicanas living in the U.S. Themes: marginalization, patriarchy, domestic violence, poverty, women's rights, and resistance to males' power.
Jewish-American	Bernard Malamud	"The First Seven Years" (1989)	Feld wants his daughter Miriam to marry Max who is the man of his choice. However, she is in love with Sobel, an underprivileged Jewish immigrant who has escaped from the Holocaust. Themes: discrimination, materialism, cultural identity, immigration, problems of generation gaps between parents and their children, and cultural conflicts between Jewish and American cultures.
African-American	Dick Gregory	"Shame" (1964)	Richard, a young black boy, suffers from shame because of his extreme poverty. He is rejected by his teacher and his community because he is poor and does not have a father. He mostly lives on peoples' charity and donations. Themes: social class struggle, loneliness, poverty, physical and psychological shame, discrimination, and repression at schools.



discussed in class, as well as observing which knowledge, skills, and attitudes they personally fostered when reading multicultural pieces. Qualitative research (Stake, 2010) seeks people's points of view, opinions, and thoughts about a teaching experience or research intervention. It takes verbal forms, including qualitative judgments and appreciations from the perceptions of those from whose lives the data are drawn (Candlin, Hall, & Hall, 2002).

### *Data Analysis*

After the pedagogical experience was complete, and having the research question in mind, I did a qualitative analysis of the data I had gathered from the four data collection instruments. I analyzed data in order to find similar information or patterns (Patton, 2002) in regards to the aspects of ICC (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) that participants believed that they had enhanced during the reading of multicultural literature. I also identified important *commonalities* that students addressed during the teaching experience. That is to say, by using the grounded approach method (Freeman, 1998), patterns and commonalities emerged from the data. I read and examined the field notes first and divided the data into meaningful *units of analysis* such as short sentences and segments of students' opinions that helped me answer the research question. Then, I examined the journals which I had kept in a folder, and compared patterns and findings among them. After that, I identified similar patterns in the interviews by relating them to the previous instruments (field notes and journals) through a process of triangulation to confirm findings. Finally, I reviewed participants' response papers to determine what critical opinions they had written in relation to the stories they had discussed. This comparative process of triangulation assures the internal validity of the research process. In this sense, units of analysis became frequent patterns shared among the

participants. Units of analysis allowed me to formulate definite *commonalities*. In other words, from students' critical reflections, I formulated commonality topics in such a way that those topics globally represented those common critical reflections. Participants' identity and comments were protected by assigning fictional names to them in the findings report.

### **Findings**

#### *Commonality No. 1: Gender roles and women's marginalization in patriarchal societies.*

When applying Relational Teaching in the EFL classroom, one salient point of connection or *commonality* that students discussed in class was gender roles. Data revealed that students referred critically to unequal gender roles between women and men in patriarchal societies when they read "Woman Hollering Creek," a story written by Chicano author Sandra Cisneros. Learners debated that Juan Pedro's violent treatment of Cleófilas is a clear picture of many Latin American males who overlook their wives just because they are women. Instead of viewing the problem of violence towards women in a romanticized and ahistorical way as if this situation were distant to them, learners became reflective when they stated that Cleófilas represented many submissive women in many Latin American countries, including Colombia, who were imposed to obey their husbands' orders. They asserted that Juan Pedro obliged his wife Cleófilas to stay home and prohibited her from having friends. One example of unequal gender roles was demonstrated when students explained that Cleófilas had to cook, clean, and take care of her child while her chauvinist husband did not do anything for the house, but went to taverns, drank beer, and had love affairs with other women (field notes, May 4th, 2011).

Interestingly, field notes show that not only female, but male students in the EFL classroom became sympathetic with Cleófilas, and reproached Juan Pedro's destructive behavior against his wife. They criticized Juan Pedro's irresponsible role as a father, his alcoholic problems, and over all, the brutal way in which he used to beat Cleófilas. This finding indicates that students became aware of the consequences that unjust abuse brings when there are relations of dominance between men and women (field notes, May 4th, 2011).

Students' response papers or artifacts also show EFL learners' critical comments about the *commonality* topic of unequal gender roles and relations of power as depicted in "Woman Hollering Creek:"

Even though the situation of women has changed throughout time, they continue being dominated and controlled by men in Patriarchal societies. Latino machismo imposes women's submissive condition to silence and abuse them. The story shows how Cleófilas is an obedient wife who is beaten and disrespected by her husband, and she does not do anything to change her situation because she thinks she was born to please her husband as many other Latina women. (Taken from Erika's response paper, May 7th, 2011).

This example of how one student saw the problem of female submission can be analyzed under Keating's concept of transformational multiculturalism. Instead of reading the story in a congratulatory and ahistorical way, the student became very critical when she explained that patriarchal power still prevails in contemporary societies in which marginalized women live under men's offensive control through intimidation and fear. The student seems to have changed her view about gender roles and points out Cleófilas' resignation and passiveness as wrong options to survive in a patriarchal society.

Furthermore, as suggested by Keating, learners were able to establish similarities among the

short story and their personal experience as this example suggests:

Cleófilas's situation made me aware of me as a woman because sometimes one allows men to tell us what to do and we never object because we were educated to obey their rules. Cleófilas was a kind of mirror for me because she taught me to resist abuse from men. Women should resist violence in Colombia. (Interview, June 6th, 2011)

This opinion points out that during the discussion of gender roles and relations of power between men and women as a commonality topic, this student was encouraged to develop reflective thinking as she related her own experience to the social denunciation Cisneros presented in her short story. She realized that she has undergone marginalization, and that it is important for her to resist unjust authority from some male figures in her life. This fact indicates that this student related Cleófilas's humiliating situation in the story to her personal experience as a woman in Colombia.

The topic of gender roles addressed by participants as explained above equally reveals that students developed critical ICC. Students were able to compare and criticize cultural constructs of patriarchal societies between Mexican-American communities living in the U.S., as provided in the story "Woman Hollering Creek," and their own cultural background in Colombia:

In "Woman Hollering Creek" I saw that women's position in Mexican-American communities is similar to women in Colombia. I felt identified with the story because some girls think that a kind of charming Prince is going to save them [from their desperate lives] (Journal, May 11, 2011).

In light of Byram's aspects of ICC, students acquired knowledge about the present situation of many women in Mexican-American communities, enhanced the skills of comparing and interpreting

as they established meeting points and similarities between male hegemony and female marginalization in distinct geographical locations. In this example, the participant expresses the idea that young women are taught by their culture that they will find happiness with the protection of a man, but eventually they will find that some male companions only cause sadness and disgrace in their lives. This comment becomes resistant and disruptive thinking against traditional cultural constructs imposed by patriarchy. This and the previous examples also evidence that learners created positive attitudes of sympathy and readiness to understand the commonality topic mediated by the multicultural short story. In this sense, they fostered ICC.

### *Commonality No. 2: discrimination and prejudice*

Both Relational Teaching and the discussion of the African-American story "Shame" allowed EFL learners to address issues of social discrimination and prejudice, attitudes which still exist in contemporary societies and affect intercultural relationships. Data show that the commonality topic of discrimination was clearly discussed in class when learners referred to the different ways in which Richard, the main character of "Shame," was seen as an inferior being because of his socio-economic situation: he did not have anything to eat because his family did not have money, he lived on donations, and he had to wash the only pairs of pants and socks every night to go to school the next day. One student explained that Gregory criticizes the social effects of poverty as Richard feels affected by his impoverished condition when he says, "I was pregnant with poverty." Another learner claimed that Richard suffered social rejection because he was economically underprivileged. He was dirty and smelled, and his physical appearance made people turn away. These situations made Richard feel miserable

because people categorized him as a poor boy in his town (Field notes, May 30th, 2011).

One participant argued that the character in the story was not only socially discriminated at school and by his own community, but was also not given the opportunity to demonstrate that he could improve his poor living conditions. He was already "stigmatized" by being poor and, therefore, any effort he would make to change his life for the better, such as demonstrating to others that he could also contribute with a donation, were considered impossible (Field notes, May 30th, 2011). This argument shows that learners critically discussed important social issues such as the concern that when people are prejudiced, they are forever tarnished and condemned to keep that disgraceful condition, and it is very difficult for them to demonstrate that they can change. Data from interviews also display some critical understanding of the dangers of prejudice to social differences when reading "Shame" as these examples show:

Martha (S9): "Shame" by Dick Gregory is a ... very interesting short story because it [deals with] the psychological [problems] that a child has to face just because he is black and poor (Interview, June 6th, 2011).

Felipe (S2): I knew a few things about slavery, but I didn't know about African-Americans' situation after the Civil War. I mean, I didn't know what had happened to them . . . in spite of the fact that slavery had been abolished; repression and discrimination against African-Americans continued (Interview, June 6th, 2011).

As reflected in the data, Relational Teaching also allowed learners to discuss and reflect in groups about prejudice when the boy in the story had to suffer for being labeled with offensive terms such as an "idiot," "troublemaker," and "poor" at school. Learners emphasized critically that the school may become a place where attitudes of discrimination toward

impoverished students can be generated by their classmates and teachers. In particular, one student explained that Richard was a victim of social humiliation when his teacher treated him inferiorly because he did not bring his homework:

What the teacher did not know was that one of the reasons for not bringing his homework, was that he had not food to eat, and his responsibility as a student was being affected by his physical weakness and hunger (Journal, June 1st, 2011)

In this sense, students commented that Richard is completely rejected when he is forced to occupy the lower level of social status because he has been prejudiced as a bad student, a troublemaker, a poor boy, and, over all, a person who will never improve his condition. He has been labeled as an unprivileged person for the rest of his life. In this sense, as Keating and Byram suggest, students discovered real events of history and disrupted the discourse of dominance and prejudice. EFL learners responded objectively to real situations of the world in order to produce *transformational* views of culture.

One interesting finding in the data suggests that Richard's situation in the story "Shame" stimulated students to talk about similar situations in which they had been discriminated by other classmates and teachers at their schools and the university. They related personal stories in which they had experienced prejudice for being poor, shy, slow in doing class activities, doing poorly in their English classes, or not having both parents (Field notes, June 1st, 2011). This *commonality* enabled students to evaluate and criticize why people easily reject and judge those who are different. Keating's notion of "difference" and "deviation" was addressed in this class, and students realized that the cultural system has always taught them to reject everything that is different and deviated from the norm.

Learners indicated a similar case of realization of unequal social differences and prejudices

with the short story "The First Seven Years." One student said that Sobel, one of the characters, suffered from exclusion because he was poor and Jewish. He indicated that Germans had excluded Sobel because he was Jewish, and therefore, had escaped from the Holocaust, and the Americans rejected him for being an immigrant and, as a result, he was an illegal citizen in the U.S. Furthermore, Feld, who was also Jewish, looked down on him because he was impoverished and uneducated (field notes, May 16, 2011). In that sense, the student recognized that in many instances human beings discriminate and exclude people from their own cultural or a different cultural background because people have internalized radical prejudices based on social class, economic position, and race.

As it happened with the commonality of gender roles and women's marginalization, the commonality topic of discrimination and prejudice fostered EFL learners' critical ICC. Data illustrate that EFL students were able to produce personal, critical views about social and cultural topics as they discovered, compared, and interpreted issues of race and social struggle in the multicultural stories and connected them to their own lives and stories they had heard from reality. This constituted a major finding in this research, because students not only expressed their opinions, but created positive attitudes similar to those that Byram proposes in his model of ICC: tolerance, curiosity, and readiness. They became aware of intercultural conflicts and injustices as depicted in the literary short stories.

### *Commonality No. 3: conflict between parents/adults and children*

One salient *commonality topic* that promoted ICC and transformational multiculturalism was that the multicultural stories revealed conflicts between parents/adults and young people. Data revealed that, for instance, in the Jewish-American short story "The First Seven Years,"



learners discussed that the father, Feld, who was Jewish, wanted to force his only daughter, Miriam, to marry the man he had chosen for her. Learners discovered that in the Jewish tradition, the father decides the future of his children and children must obey. However, in the story, Miriam, who had been raised in the U.S. and was influenced by the American lifestyle at school, wanted to make her own decisions. Thus, Miriam resists her imposed Jewish traditions and his father's orders in order to marry the man she is in love with. She loves Feld, an immigrant who has neither money nor a good job, but professes sincere feelings for Miriam. The conflict between parents' authority and children's decisions was a significant but complex *commonality topic* in class discussion as students were both in favor of and against the struggle of cultural ideologies between Feld (the father) and his daughter Miriam. It was difficult for learners to decide if Miriam should obey her father and the strict precepts of her Jewish culture or disobey them and follow what her heart dictated (field notes, May 16, 2011). These examples show that students were able to recognize diverse cultural traditions that dealt with the conflicting generation gaps among parents and children:

Daniel: In the case of "The First Seven Years," we interpreted the story in terms of family [relationships] and women's role in society. For me, it was unfair that Miriam could not marry Feld just because her father thought that Feld was ugly, poor, and uneducated. (Interview, June 6th, 2011).

A similar situation took place when students discussed "Shame" and "Woman Hollering Creek." According to some students, the first story describes the way Richard, an African-American boy, is humiliated by the disdain of his teacher who discriminates him because he belongs to a low social class and who is defenseless to resist because he is a child. In the response papers, learners wrote:

Juan: Richard's teacher is an example of the misunderstanding between adults and children. The teacher humiliates Richard because she has the power and cannot believe that Richard has brought a little money to help the impoverished children of the town. For her, Richard is poor and cannot change that situation . . . The teacher thinks that Richards' intention is not to help, but to make fun of her and of the class. (Taken from Miguel's response paper, May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

In regards to the second story, children also commented critically on the fact that Cleófilas's father forces her to marry a strange man who takes her away from her Mexican town to live in the U.S. without taking into account her consent. Because parents and adults decided what Cleófilas should do with her life, she becomes a victim of her husband's violence. She is marginalized in the U.S. because she does not speak English and is unable to ask for help from the U.S. authorities. These facts in the short stories empowered students to establish connections with their own lives, as they discussed situations in which they had argued with their parents due to the fact that their parents sometimes imposed rules that students believed were unfair in relation to the friends they had, the career they wanted to study, or the person they were in love with (field notes, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011). Through Relational Teaching, learners were able to assume a critical position about how people are sometimes controlled by the social *status quo*, and must resist culture in order to defend their personal ideals and decisions. Through their opinions, students challenged and disrupted strict traditional beliefs and fixed attitudes of our unjust, prejudiced, exclusive, and discriminatory societies.

As can be observed through the three *commonalities* developed above, findings in the data revealed that EFL students, as suggested by Keating in her teaching approach, discovered contradictory, prejudicial, and unfair real events of history and everyday life that were also

portrayed in the multicultural stories they read. Those unjust events empowered them to disrupt the discourse of dominance in regards to what is supposed to be “deviant” from the norm. In other words, through the literary short stories, students responded objectively to real situations of the world such as gender roles, power relations, marginalization, discrimination, social class differences, and social injustice among varied cultural sites in order to produce *transformational* criticism, even though those topics might have been disturbing for them to confront reality.

The critical explanation of the commonalities or points of connection that participants identified in the short stories also contributed to strengthen their ICC. Interviews and journals show that learners became aware of their critical performance in class discussion toward intercultural realities. Through the readings, they realized that the authors of those stories do not show a naïve and “celebratory” multicultural vision of culture, but a resistant view of multiculturalism in which contestation and cultural conflict take place in order to help readers realize the necessity to accept and respect differences in a multicultural societies.

Alex (S8): It's good to try to find different interpretations [of the literary texts.] . . . We tried to express our own ideas, I mean, trying to say what we think, to show what we understand about the stories . . . to find the meaning and analyze the stories (Interview, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

Camilo (S20): The stories helped us to interpret the short stories from different perspectives such in the case of “The First Seven Years.” We interpreted the story in terms of family [relationships], women's role in society, and also social differences. (Interview, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

Mercedes (S2): I think that I became more critical and analytical about how some people dominate and abuse others through violence and power . . . I consider that seeing reality from another point of view [through multicultural

literature] gave me the possibility to analyze and realize about our situation as Latino people [in the U.S.] (Journal, June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

A meaningful discovery in this research is that learners themselves recognized that they had fostered the skill of interpreting (an aspect of Byram's model of ICC) as a crucial part during their reading and analysis of the multicultural stories. Therefore, Relational Teaching allowed them to develop intercultural competence by means of making sense of controversial but significant cross-cultural meanings, values, beliefs, and issues contained in the literary texts. As a researcher, I realized that participants were critical when discussing issues of racism, intolerance, domination, and social indifference addressed in the short stories. They became multicultural critical readers who show disagreement and resistance to issues of exclusion as when they talked about Feld's self-hatred and discriminatory attitudes toward Sobel in Malamud's story about physical and psychological violence toward Latina women in Cisneros's work, and about social prejudices in Dick Gregory's short story.

One relevant aspect of this research is that students became critical intercultural speakers in the target language, and this fact implies that the teaching of English in the EFL context should not just be oriented to teach grammar forms, vocabulary, and communicative functions. Through topics related to culture, social conflicts, and interculturality, learners can improve their English language level more meaningfully while at the same time enhance their critical skills by addressing related topics that involve their culture and other ethnic backgrounds.

## Conclusions

This research study has shown that the application of Relational Teaching as a pedagogical approach in the EFL context through the integration of

authentic multicultural literary texts became a potential motivating means to help EFL learners to develop critical ICC. The experience reveals that they expressed their own critical thoughts and opinions when they were stimulated to interpret and discuss diverse literary selection in a foreign language through the identification of *commonalities* or topics of connection among diverse cultural locations.

One of the most outstanding results is that learners became aware of the intercultural connections they were able to evaluate and criticize, and that these points of connection (gender roles in patriarchal societies, discrimination, prejudice, and conflicts between children and parents) allowed them to foster their critical ICC in the English classroom. Data revealed that learners reported in their comments the intercultural knowledge they acquired, the skills they developed (discovering, comparing, interpreting), and the attitudes they created when they read multicultural selections.

Another significant finding is that students became critical and resistant advocators of unfair and radical cultural constructs. Instead of studying the literary short stories from a naïve, congratulatory, and even "safe" perspective, they disagreed with, disrupted, and argued against socio-cultural demonstrations of discrimination, racial conflict, and power relations that still exist in many cultures. By establishing connections through *cultural commonalities*, they pleaded and defended equality, human rights, and respect. Their voices suggest that they became aware of the necessity for social change in order to build a more just and better world, since they were able to detect that issues of injustice, indifference, hatred, and deviance are not only the situations of others, but are part of their own life and their own nation.

This research study also shows that students' voices contribute significantly to improve teaching practices. As this study suggests, the English classroom can be a place in which learners and the teachers can foster critical ICC, create social

awareness, and promote resistant multiculturalism, as suggested by Keating. The EFL classroom should not only be a place to study grammar and language skills in a congratulatory way, but a place to promote critical interculturality through authentic language use.

## Future Research

This study suggests that interculturality still requires further exploration in EFL education since there is not enough published research resulting from the implementation of teaching methods, instructional materials, and topics that might address critical intercultural issues in the foreign language. For example, there is a need to do research on how non-native English teachers can be prepared to teach foreign culture, which teaching methods might support the study of deep culture, not just surface culture, and how to choose and design culture-based materials suitable to promote critical, not only descriptive views of culture.

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