

Rethinking the Role of Intercultural Skills in English Teaching at Colombian Universities



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Abstract

There seems to be a worldwide crisis in education in terms of developing imagination, critical thinking, and empathy in students given the dominance of economic models that see profit and economic impact as the priorities of education (Nussbaum, 2010). This article argues that the aforementioned qualities can be developed by university English professors at Colombian universities by ensuring that English courses have a sufficient focus on the development of intercultural skills. It is important to ensure that there is sufficient breadth and depth of intercultural knowledge and that discussions that will allow students to do a cultural comparative analysis take place. Educators must also do some self-reflection to avoid the negative influence of linguistic imperialism and coloniality in the classroom to avoid that positive and negative stereotypes deprive students of intercultural skill development. This article will start with an introduction of the Colombian ELT (English Language Teaching) context, followed by a description of the purpose and chosen methodology. The theoretical framework will then be presented and it will lead to two discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of intercultural learning in the university classroom and the best practices associated with the development of intercultural skills in students, and a conclusion.

Key Words: English language teaching, Colombian universities, intercultural skills, native English-speaking teachers, non-native English-speaking teachers

Überdenken der Rolle der interkulturellen Kompetenz im Englischunterricht an ko- lumbianischen Hochschulen

Abstract

Es scheint eine globale Krise der Bildung in Bezug auf die Entwicklung von Vorstellungskraft, kritischem Denken und Empathie bei Studierenden zu geben, angesichts der Vorherrschaft von Wirtschaftsmodellen, die Profit und wirtschaftliche Auswirkungen als die wichtigsten Prioritäten der Bildung sehen (Nussbaum, 2010). In diesem Beitrag wird vorgeschlagen, dass die oben genannten Fähigkeiten von Hochschullehrkräfte für Englisch an kolumbianischen Universitäten durch eine Erweiterung des Englisch-Lehrplans durch Kurse, die sich auf die Entwicklung von interkulturellen Fähigkeiten konzentrieren, entwickelt werden können. Es muss sichergestellt werden, dass es eine ausreichende Breite und Tiefe an interkulturellem Wissen gibt und dass Diskussionen stattfinden, die es den Studierenden ermöglichen, eine kulturvergleichende Analyse durchzuführen. Lehrkräfte müssen auch eine gewisse Selbstreflexion vornehmen, um den negativen Einfluss des sprachlichen Imperialismus und der Kolonialität im Klassenzimmer zu vermeiden, damit positive und negative Stereotypisierungen den Studierenden nicht die Entwicklung interkultureller Fähigkeiten rauben.

Stichwörter: Englischunterricht, kolumbianische Hochschulen, interkulturelle Kompetenz, muttersprachliche Englischlehrer, nicht-muttersprachliche Englischlehrer

Repensar el papel de las habilidades interculturales en la enseñanza del inglés en universidades colombianas

Resumen

Parece haber una crisis mundial en la educación en términos de desarrollo de la imaginación, el pensamiento crítico y la empatía en los estudiantes dado el predominio de modelos económicos que ven las ganancias y el impacto económico como las prioridades más importantes de la educación (Nussbaum, 2010). Este artículo plantea que las mencionadas cualidades pueden ser desarrolladas por profesores universitarios de inglés en universidades colombianas a través de una expansión del plan de estudios de inglés en cursos que se enfoquen en el desarrollo de habilidades interculturales. Es importante asegurarse de que haya suficiente amplitud y profundidad de conocimiento intercultural y que se desarrollen discusiones que permitan a los estudiantes hacer un análisis cultural comparado. Los educadores también deben hacer algo de autorreflexión para evitar la influencia negativa del imperialismo lingüístico y la colonialidad en el aula para evitar que los estereotipos positivos y negativos priven a los estudiantes del desarrollo de habilidades interculturales. Este artículo comenzará con una introducción al contexto de la enseñanza del idioma inglés colombiano, seguido de una descripción del propósito y la metodología elegida. A continuación, se presentará el marco teórico que dará lugar a dos debates sobre las ventajas y desventajas del aprendizaje intercultural en el aula universitaria y las mejores prácticas asociadas al desarrollo de habilidades interculturales en los estudiantes, y una conclusión.

Palabras clave: enseñanza del idioma inglés, universidades colombianas, habilidades interculturales, profesor nativo, profesor no nativo

Repenser le rôle des compétences interculturelles dans l'enseignement de l'anglais dans les universités colombiennes

Résumé

Il semble exister une crise mondiale dans l'éducation en termes de développement de l'imagination, la pensée critique et l'empathie chez les élèves étant donné la supériorité des modèles économiques qui considèrent le profit et l'impact économique comme les priorités les plus importantes de l'éducation (Nussbaum, 2010). Cet article propose que les qualités susmentionnées puissent être poussées par des professeurs d'anglais universitaires dans des universités colombiennes par un élargissement du programme d'anglais aux cours axés sur le développement de compétences interculturelles. Il est important de s'assurer que les connaissances interculturelles soient suffisamment vastes et approfondies et que des discussions aient lieu pour permettre aux étudiants de faire une analyse comparative culturelle. Les éducateurs doivent également faire une certaine autoréflexion pour éviter l'influence négative de l'impérialisme linguistique et de la colonialité dans les salles de classe afin d'éviter les stéréotypes positifs et négatifs qui privent les élèves de compétences interculturelles.

Mots clés: enseignement de l'anglais, universités colombiennes, compétences interculturelles, enseignants natifs de langue anglaise, enseignants non natifs de langue anglaise

Ripensare il ruolo delle abilità interculturali nell'insegnamento dell'inglese nelle università colombiane

Risassunto

Sembra esserci una crisi mondiale nell'educazione, se si considera lo sviluppo dell'immaginazione, del pensiero critico e dell'empatia negli studenti, dato che vi è il predominio di modelli economici che presentano il profitto e l'impatto economico come le priorità del sistema educativo (Nussbaum, 2010). Questo articolo propone che gli aspetti menzionati possano essere sviluppati da professori universitari d'inglese in università colombiane attraverso un'espansione del piano di studi d'inglese, che si centri sullo sviluppo delle abilità interculturali. È importante assicurare che ci siano una sufficiente ampiezza e profondità della conoscenza interculturale e che si dia spazio a discussioni che permettano agli studenti di fare un'analisi culturale comparata. Gli educatori devono anche favorire l'autoriflessione per sottrarsi all'influenza negativa dell'imperialismo linguistico e della colonizzazione nell'aula, per evitare che gli stereotipi positivi e negativi privino gli studenti dello sviluppo delle abilità interculturali.

Parole chiave: insegnamento della lingua inglese, università colombiane, abilità interculturali, professore madrelingua, professore non madrelingua

Repensando o papel das habilidades interculturais no ensino de inglês em universidades colombianas

Resumo

Parece haver uma crise global na educação em termos de desenvolvimento da imaginação, pensamento crítico e empatia nos alunos, dada a prevalência de modelos econômicos que vêem o lucro e o impacto econômico como as prioridades mais importantes da educação (Nussbaum, 2010). Este artigo propõe que as qualidades mencionadas podem ser desenvolvidas por professores universitários de inglês em universidades colombianas por meio de uma expansão do currículo de inglês em cursos que enfoquem o desenvolvimento de habilidades interculturais. É importante garantir que haja amplitude e profundidade suficientes de conhecimento intercultural e que sejam desenvolvidas discussões que permitam aos alunos fazer uma análise cultural comparativa. Os educadores também devem fazer uma auto-reflexão para evitar a influência negativa do imperialismo linguístico e da colonialidade na sala de aula para evitar estereótipos positivos e negativos que privam os alunos do desenvolvimento de habilidades interculturais.

Palavras-chave: ensino de inglês, universidades colombianas, habilidades interculturais, professor nativo, professor não nativo

Introduction

ELT has a long history in Colombia. English education in Colombia began to grow at a tremendous rate as neoliberalism came into Colombia in the 1980s. Neoliberal and globalization forces have contributed towards a prioritization of Global English which has led to a tremendous boom in English education at all levels (Phillipson R., 2014). The teaching of English at Colombian universities is of great importance because the Ministry of Education requires that students take the national Saber Pro test (which has an English section) to graduate and the government provides scholarships and recognition for those students who place well in the test (OESE, 2019). Because ELT at universities is focused on preparing students to pass the Saber Pro test, the development of critical qualities such as imagination, critical thought, and empathy in students (Nussbaum, 2010) receives minimal focus.

Despite the high priority that is given to ELT at the post-secondary level in Colombia, the results obtained in the national Saber Pro tests have not met expectations. According to Jiménez et al (2017), the Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN) adopted the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and put forth a goal of a B2 level in the national Saber Pro test for students graduating from post-secondary studies. Tertiary graduating students that take the Saber Pro test can receive a score of A-, A1, A2, B1 or B+ (Alonso et al, 2015) and as Jimenez et al (2017) summarize, the majority of students (around 80%) meet the A levels while a small percentage (around 8%) actually achieves the desired B2 level. It is important to point out that the Saber Pro test English section only measures reading, grammar, and vocabulary skills and as a result, speaking, listening, and writing are not evaluated. Another reason why students are not meeting the standard could be related to the fact that according to a British Council report (2015) of a survey they did of 1,000 Colombians mostly in the ages of 19 to 35, Colombians study English because of academic or employment requirements and not due to personal reasons such as traveling or widening social networks. If university students were taught more intercultural skills, they would be able to see that English can help them with their personal development and this could lead not only to imagination, critical thought and empathy, but also greater motivation and better test scores.

Purpose

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that imagination, critical thinking, and empathy in students can be developed by university English professors at Colombian universities by ensuring that English courses have a sufficient focus on the development of intercultural skills.

Methodology

Given that the purpose of the research study is to demonstrate that imagination, critical thinking, and empathy in Colombian university students can be developed with a sufficient focus on the development of intercultural skills in English classes, the methodology will be centered around qualitative research because the research will not be focused on statistical procedures (Mackey & Gass, 2005) and will primarily utilize the instrument of document analysis. The focus will be worldwide academic articles and non-government publications about intercultural skills and ELT so as to realize the purpose of the study.

Theoretical Framework

According to Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002), students of the English language not only need knowledge and grammar skills but also competence in using the language in social and cultural contexts successfully. Concepts such as intercultural awareness, intercultural skills and existential competence are very important and one of the goals of language teaching should be to help learners of a specific language to interact with speakers of other languages on a level playing field. This requires that learners have self-awareness about their own identity and the identity of those whom they interact with. By becoming “intercultural speakers”, the goal becomes not only that language learners can successfully communicate/exchange information but that they can connect at a human level with others, leading to the establishment

of relationships with people of different languages and cultures. When interacting with others, it is important to remember Kachru's (1981) idea of the three concentric circles (inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle) and to realize that speakers from the inner circle culture (e.g., U.S. and U.K.) must challenge any superiority biases that they may have when dealing with outer circle speakers from places like Hong Kong and India or expanding circle speakers from places like Colombia and China. It is also very important that speakers from the outer circle and from the expanding circle question any inferiority biases that they may carry as a result of linguistic imperialism discourses associated with the superiority of the English language and culture (Phillipson R., 2014) or coloniality ideas of inferiority and superiority from colonial times (Barrantes-Montero, 2018).

Byram et al. (2002) explain that when two people speak to each other, the interaction is not just a transactional exchange of information but there is also a consideration for social identities related to group membership (e.g., teacher versus student) and this influences what and how things are said and what type of responses are expected from the interlocutors. Communicative competence is therefore highly relevant because the focus is not just on semantics (which is focused on the literal meaning of communication through conceptual meaning, vocabulary, and grammar) but knowledge of what language is appropriate in different contexts (pragmatics). It is important to also note that people quite often see themselves as being part of a cultural group or another reference group as part of their social identity and this means that they have values, beliefs, and behaviors in common with individuals from those groups. Although group membership affects social identity, it is important not to view people simplistically or superficially because people have many other parts of their identity that may be visible or hidden. To properly communicate in an intercultural way, speakers must look for visible aspects of social identity with an understanding that to truly get to know someone, they must discover those hidden aspects while also keeping an open mind and not stereotyping people based on group identity.

The traditional focus of cultural learning has been on the acquisition of knowledge about facts about a specific culture or country. Byram (1997) developed a model of intercultural communicative competence that broadens the role of the language teacher beyond knowledge to the acquisition of skills, attitudes, and value awareness. Byram believes that it is critical to have intercultural attitudes (curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and beliefs about one's own culture), skills of interpreting and relating (the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own culture), skills of discovery and interaction (the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction) and critical cultural awareness (the ability to evaluate, critically and based on explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products in one's own culture and other cultures and countries).

With an understanding of some of the literature around intercultural skills, we must look at the university classroom and ask ourselves a very important question: can intercultural learning occur in the university classroom?

Advantages and Disadvantages of Intercultural Learning in the University Classroom

The university classroom has some advantages in terms of the development of intercultural skills of university students. According to Kramsh (1993), the classroom is a safe environment where students can explore culture without the fear of making a mistake that can have long term consequences. Students can learn from the teaching that occurs but also from the personal experiences of the teacher and other students to have a broader picture of cultures. As a result, students are more likely to feel confident at interacting with native English speakers (NESs) and non-native English speakers (NNEs) and they can also develop positive attitudes toward the English language and its learning (Smith, 1971). A positive attitude towards the English language will lead to greater motivation and most likely greater advancement in English proficiency and intercultural skills over time. Students get the benefit not just of learning about other cultures, but they will also be able to appreciate the similarities and differences between cultures and will therefore have a more objective view towards their own local customs and ways of thinking (Corbett, 2003). Given that local teachers sometimes lack foreign cultural knowledge, having a foreign teacher that is knowledgeable about a wide variety of English cultures can help with the development of intercultural competence (Byram, Esarte-Sarries, & Allatt, 1991) if the focus of the course in question prioritizes English-speaking cultures.

Despite the advantages listed above, there are also areas in which the classroom has some disadvantages when it comes to the development of intercultural skills. Krashen (1982) states that the classroom is conducive to the learning of rules but not to the acquisition of language or culture. Kramsh (1993) points out that it is not an easy task to achieve a consensus on what version of a target culture should be taught in an EFL environment given the existence of a lot of different perspectives within a culture. Kramsh (2013) discusses how it is difficult to determine whether one should teach “big c” culture (highly visible and most common aspects of culture) or “small c” culture (less visible and less common aspects of a culture). An additional issue is that NESTs (Native English-Speaking Teachers) and NNESTs (Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers) are usually knowledgeable about the culture of their own country but not others. Many NESTs who teach in Colombia usually learn about local culture from real-life social interaction with their students, other teachers, and society in general which is beneficial but they are likely to have had little or no real-life exposure with other Latin American cultures or even English speaking cultures other than their own. Many Colombian NNESTs have had little or no real-life exposure with an English-speaking culture or with a variety of English speakers and they are likely to have had little or no real-life exposure with other Latin American cultures other than their own. Because it is important to use *Castellano* when needed during English classes, the lack of *Castellano* knowledge of NESTs can create an environment where monolingual practices dominate (Anderson, 2018) and can limit the types of cultural conversations that can be had which is the key to developing a deeper understanding of culture. The lack of intercultural knowledge of both NESTs and NNESTs and the lack of *Castellano* knowledge of many NESTs can lead to teaching positive and negative stereotypes and can lead to limited discussions that can rob students of intercultural skills.

Best Practices for Intercultural Learning

Despite the above disadvantages, it is possible to have English language courses that help with the development of imagination, critical thought, and empathy through a focus on intercultural skill development. To begin with, NESTs must ensure that when teaching English-speaking culture in the classroom, that they do not only teach that of the U.S. and the U.K. but that their coverage is the entire English-speaking world (Crystal, 2014) which is difficult given that most NESTs are knowledgeable about the culture they come from and given that NNESTs may have no real area of English-speaking culture expertise. Teachers must teach not only “big c” culture but “small c” culture (Kramsh, 2013) as previously mentioned. Teachers must understand that the goal of intercultural skills is not only to learn about English-speaking cultures. Educators can teach about all of the cultures in the world in the English language and this is critical since intercultural skills are not limited to any culture or group of cultures. Teachers can also teach about local cultures in the English language since students may only know about their own culture and this will also help with the development of intercultural skills. The one advantage of teaching about the English-speaking world is that it is easier to find resources that are in English but this should not be a limiting factor since teachers can translate resources or even use translators or technology to find cultural resources from the non English-speaking world in English.

When developing intercultural skills, students are also developing language skills and it is important that the focus is on intelligibility and comprehensibility (Murphy, 2014) to ensure that the linguistic focus does not take away from intercultural development. Teachers must be guided by intelligibility and comprehensibility and explain to students that although many inner circle organizations push standard English in the outer circle and expanding circle (Phillipson, 2016), there are non-standard varieties of English worldwide that they must also become familiar with. By developing students’ communicative competencies in English (standard and non-standard), the possibility that they will reach out to native and non-native speakers of English increases and this will lead to greater intercultural competencies and greater language competency. When students develop intercultural skills, the possibility of misunderstandings decreases and this increases the chance of successful interaction with native and non-native speakers of English. Because the intercultural focus of classes can and should include a wide variety of English and non-English speaking countries, students will be able to interact in a more effective way with other Castellano speakers or with NESs and NNESTs from all over the world. It is important to remember, however, that learning about other cultures is useful not only in the development of a global mindset and positive attitudes, but it also helps students to appreciate similarities and differences between cultures and helps with the development of a more objective view towards the students’ own local customs and ways of thinking (Corbett, 2003).

Byram et al. (2002) believe that the role of the teacher in developing intercultural competence is not about the development of knowledge but the development of skills. As a result, the role of the teacher is not to be a cultural expert but to facilitate the process of helping students to ask questions and interpret answers. The focus of classroom activities is to en-

courage a comparative analysis of the local and foreign culture by doing activities such as role-plays and simulations to engage in experiential learning that gets students thinking about how foreigners might perceive their culture while at the same time learning more about their own identity. Students become better at observing a wider range of cultural behavior and this helps them to be better prepared to communicate with individuals from other backgrounds and to tolerate and understand differences. As a result, students will develop greater curiosity and openness, an improved ability to interpret documents and events from another culture relative to one's own, better skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997).

Teachers can also create opportunities for direct encounters with English speakers from English and non-English speaking cultures and even with *Castellano* speakers (although on a limited basis since the focus is also on developing English language skills) but there must be a sufficient diversity of speakers in terms of the social characteristics that lead to language variation such as gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic factors, level of education, and discourse context (Geeslin & Long, 2014). Educators must explain to students that although they are taught standard English in school, there are many native and non-native English-speakers who speak non-standard varieties from the outer circle and expanding circle (González-Moncada, 2007) and that they must be familiar with these “Englishes” (and even with other “Spanishes”). Teachers can help to prepare students with question preparation for English and non-English speakers so that the questions asked are not simply about facts (knowledge) but about how the speakers perceive their own countries as well as the students' own countries. This is powerful because students can learn a lot of surprising things that they may have never thought about such as the importance (or lack of importance) of punctuality in some English and non-English speaking countries or differences with how a foreigner views a culture with a more/less relaxed view of time. When teachers teach about the entire English-speaking world (cultural breadth) as well as the entire world, and about “big c” and “small c culture (cultural depth), they will create a great deal of interest and naturally stimulate student imagination. By teaching in a way that creates a comparison between the students' culture and that of others, intercultural competence skills will be developed which will also likely lead to critical thinking and empathy in the classroom.

When students are taught about the different cultural traditions of English and non English-speaking countries, it not only leads to imagination, critical thinking, and empathy but it also helps with the development of positive attitudes toward the local language/foreign languages and their learning (Smith, 1971). It is important to again mention that although it is possible to develop imagination, critical thinking, and empathy through intercultural skills (as well as greater motivation and positive attitudes towards the English language), one of the goals of intercultural skills is on the application of these skills in real-life settings for those students who can travel to different countries and/or engage with native and non-native speakers of other languages. Intercultural skills and linguistic skills go hand in hand and it is important to help students to develop intelligibility and comprehensibility to increase the chances of successful linguistic and cultural interaction. Galante (2015) shows that intercultural skills in ELT allows

students to express their worldviews and identities and that this helps students to better understand the cultural identities of others and themselves.

Whether professors are native English-speakers or not, they must realize that culture is a complex topic that requires a non-superficial perspective to avoid positive and negative stereotypes that rob students of intercultural skills. Byram et al. (2002) believe that teachers need not be experts about cultures because the focus is on intercultural skills development and although being a cultural expert is not the goal, educators must have a sufficient amount of understanding about English-speaking cultures because cultural knowledge and cultural skill go together just as much as linguistic competence and cultural competence do. NESTs and NNESTs must realize the importance of continuously developing greater breadth and depth of knowledge about the various English and non-English speaking cultures that they teach about and that they have access to a wide range of culturally knowledgeable people that they can discuss issues with to avoid superficiality and the subsequent development of positive and negative stereotypes that prevent the development of intercultural competence.

One last point about NESTs and NNESTs is important to conclude the discussion. Just as it is important that speakers from the inner circle, outer circle, and expanding circle challenge any superiority or inferiority biases that may have been caused by linguistic imperialism discourses (Phillipson R., 2014) or coloniality ideas (Barrantes-Montero, 2018), it is very important that teachers also reflect on these biases and that they do the necessary work to ensure that they do not contribute to linguistic imperialism or coloniality. NESTs and NNESTs have been influenced by a wide variety of domestic and foreign individuals and groups in developing their worldview and teachers must develop an awareness of how they have been impacted by them. Educators must not perpetuate the unproven discourses about the benefits of learning the English language such as that 1) learning English is in everyone's best interest (Phillipson R., 2014), 2) English invariably leads to economic prosperity (Skutnabb-Kangas T., 2016) and 3) only English allows for knowledge access (Guerrero C. H., 2010). Teachers must not blindly follow the influence of hegemonic forces in ELT that aim to maintain inner circle dominance through influencing the development of curricular plans, materials design, teaching methods, standardized tests, and teacher preparation (Kumaravadivelu, 2016). When looking at intercultural skills research and English teaching research in general, teachers must take into account that some Western research is biased towards inner circle interests (Phillipson R., 2012) and that this in turn influences research in the outer circle and expanding circle.

Conclusion

The development of imagination, critical thought, and empathy in Colombian university students is possible through English courses that include a focus on intercultural skills education. Professors need to ensure that they have good cultural breadth and depth when teaching about a wide range of English and non-English-speaking cultures while also teaching about “big c” and “small c” culture. Comparatively teaching about culture allows for the development of intercultural competence skills, critical thinking, and empathy while also helping students to learn more about their cultural identity. Teachers must focus on the intelligibility and com-

prehensibility of the English language to ensure that a linguistic focus does not take away from intercultural development. Both students and teachers must question their biases to ensure that linguistic imperialism and coloniality discourses do not enter the classroom and deprive students of the development of intercultural knowledge and skills.

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