

DECONSTRUCTING GENDER STEREOTYPING THROUGH LITERATURE IN L2

Leticia Yulita

University of East Anglia

l.goodchild@uea.ac.uk

<http://www.uea.ac.uk/lcs/People/Academic/Leticia+Goodchild>

While it is generally accepted that literature fosters (inter)cultural learning, few qualitative studies have sought to understand in what ways interculturality is developed. This article investigates the development of Spanish L2 students' intercultural awareness through the reading of a short story entitled "Norma y Ester" by Argentine writer, Carlos Gamerro, and partially reports on a two-semester action research project funded by the Higher Education Academy LLAS Subject Centre. The study draws its data from final year Spanish Honours Language undergraduates in multicultural classes at a British university, who were exposed to a literary text written in *rioplatense*¹ Spanish. This article describes students' responses and seeks to identify, describe and explain evidence of intercultural learning in their reactions and contributions through the pedagogies implemented. The results of the study indicate that Gamerro's story can bring out students' stereotyping of the remote, and not so remote, Hispanic *Other*, and provide opportunities for problematising gendered identities and deconstructing fixed essentialised notions of *Otherness*. Pedagogies for intercultural exploration through literature in L2 educational contexts are now being reconceptualised, therefore this study not only contributes to a growing body of research, but it also represents a slice of students' development of intercultural learning in flight.

INTRODUCTION

The present action research study, funded by the British Higher Education Academy LLAS Subject Centre, attempts to understand undergraduates' intercultural development by exploring links between the reading of a short story entitled "Norma y Ester" and their social and personal lives. The text was read in the students' L2 and written by the Argentinian writer Carlos Gamerro (2005, "Norma y Ester") in a language variety that most students were not familiar with: the *rioplatense* Spanish found in the speech of people from low socio-economic backgrounds in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. The research examines the student-constructed meanings, which intersect with the literary text in the third space - an in-between dialogical space where students take new positionings between the *self* and the *other* - and aims to find evidence of

¹ The Spanish language spoken around the Río de la Plata basin between Argentina and Uruguay.

intercultural learning, with particular reference to the ways the students understand Argentinian gendered identity as they deal with the situations experienced by the fictional characters in the literary text. The research site for this study is a seminar entitled *Interculturality*, which I run as part of two modules called *World Spanishes* and *Advanced Hispanic Studies* for British, Erasmus, and International language learners, and where Argentine literary texts, as cultural artefacts, are discussed with the aim of developing intercultural awareness. The study informed, and was itself informed by, action research, the issue under investigation stemming from a personal need to discover how my own students construct culture interactively through second language use in my classes. Through pedagogic action research, I developed my own understanding of the situation with a view to improving it whilst modifying practice in the light of the findings and evaluation, continually reviewing the modified action. The research sought to find answers to these questions:

- What, beyond the text, is being learnt in the widest educational sense by these final year Spanish Honours Language undergraduates through L2 literature?
- Is there any evidence of students' intercultural learning? If so, how can it be explained?
- How do my students understand their relationship with the remote, and not so remote, Hispanic *Other*?

In order to find answers to the above questions, I draw my understanding of culture from linguistic anthropology which views culture as a process or a conversation transmitted or mediated by language (for a detailed discussion, see Agar, 1994, and Risager, 2006, on notions of *languaculture*). Culture is not static, but a dynamic process. As such, it cannot be taught as something 'out there' to be learnt as a set of facts in parrot fashion. This type of teaching would only provide learners with an incomplete, decontextualised, stereotyped and misleading picture of the culture under study (Crozet & Liddicoat, 2000). Brian Street (1993) affirms that 'culture is a verb', and as such, it is enacted every time we speak or write, in interaction between people who are separated culturally, historically, geographically and socially. Language and culture cannot be taken as two distinct concepts to be compartmentalised and studied as separate entities. With regard to this, Phipps and González (2004) coined the neologism *languaging*, which they define as follows:

Languages are more than skills; they are the medium through which communities of people engage with, make sense of and shape the world. Through language they become active agents in creating their human environment; this process is what we call *languaging* [italics in original]. Languaging is a life skill. It is inextricably interwoven with social

experience - living in society - and it develops and changes constantly as that experience evolves and changes. The student of a language other than their own can be given an extraordinary opportunity to enter the languaging of others, to understand the complexity of the experience of others to enrich their own. *To enter other cultures is to re-enter one's own*, understand the supercomplex variety of human experience (Barnett, 2000) and become more deeply human as a result. [italics in original]. (p. 2-3)

I contend that there is a need to understand how language learners develop intercultural awareness through L2 as a *process*, as opposed to a *product*; to identify best pedagogical practices and to design intercultural tasks grounded in empirical data: three issues which this study sought to address.

METHODOLOGY

The emphasis in this project was placed on the use of ethnographic methods to allow for emic issues to reveal themselves and evolve in their natural setting and to bring together multiple views, perspectives and opinions through qualitative and interpretative inquiry. The project sought to capture the fluid nature of the development of interculturality through systematic data collection from 68 students' written productions (course tests, exams, essays and personal diaries), oral presentations, individual and focus group interviews, a personal log of reflections, participatory observation and digital audio recordings of class discussions of the literary texts. The learners, 54 female and 14 male learners from diverse nationalities (40 British, and 28 international students from Europe, Turkey, India, Malaysia) were in their fourth and final year of study, after having experienced a year abroad in a Spanish-speaking country, mainly Spain and Mexico. It should be noted that the undergraduates that participated in this study were language learners, not specialists in literature. Similarly, the teacher was a language educator, not an expert in literature. Thus, the approach developed with the literary text involved intercultural theories of language learning, and not literary theories. In addition, this project was with my own students; accordingly the power relation was likely to be perceived more strongly. Another limitation in this project was the translation of students' data, which was mostly in Spanish, except for the interviews. Most of these were carried out in English, however, there were a few occasions in which non-British students preferred to use Spanish. The action research project consisted of two phases of data collection with different groups of learners during the 2008 Spring (Jan-April) and 2009 Autumn (Sep-Dec) semesters. Data analysis followed each term where actions were planned and revised in the light of the findings.

The story

Gamerro's "Norma y Ester" concerns the relationships and experiences of two women from the impoverished suburbs of Buenos Aires, who wash men's hair in the back room of a salon. The text is set in a patriarchal social structure in the early 1990s, where Norma and Ester are taken advantage of by the customers at the hairdresser's, and shows how from a subordinate position they fight to gain more space and recognition in a male-dominated context. The reader first encounters Ester wearing revealing clothes and discovers that she has been instructed by her boss to dress this provocatively to please the customers. Indeed, the reader discovers that Ester is expected to give sexual favours to these men. Ester's best friend, Norma, has been dismissed from the same job for no longer giving in to the sexual demands of Víctor, the most valued customer of the salon. In an attempt to avenge her friend's misfortune, Ester manages to get the same job and plots to take revenge by strangling Víctor as she washes his hair in the back room. Víctor is depicted as an arrogant, powerful and sexist man who abuses women both verbally and sexually. Given the fact that these women come from a low socio-economic background, the reader is led to believe that Norma and Ester accept these working conditions for financial reasons.

FINDINGS

Phase One: Fixing Gendered Identity

The data gathered in phase one of this study are congruent with Delanoy's assertion that there "is plenty of empirical evidence that language students often arrive at a superficial, vague, rudimentary or distorted understanding of literary texts without being aware of the limitations of their response." (1997, 2.1. Text-reception as aesthetic response). A sample of students' appreciations of the men and women in Gamerro's story can be roughly summarised as these data demonstrate:

Víctor treats women as if they only exist to satisfy his sexual needs. (Aude, French)

The men in the story see women as no more than prostitutes. They want to control, dominate and own them. They use them as objects. They even choose their clothes. If the women don't obey them, they are cast aside. (Flora, English)

Víctor treats women as if they were his slaves. (Johnny, English)

Norma and Ester dress like prostitutes ... the colours Norma uses don't match with her make-up, which shows that she has no taste or sense of dress. (Sally, English)

I found the way the women in the story dress atrocious! We, English women, are a lot more conservative and dress with more style. (Elizabeth, English)

Norma and Ester are powerless. They are totally dominated and controlled by Víctor and Don Sebastián. (Linda, English)

In addition, in their interpretations of the attitudes of the characters, the students' identities construct and are constructed by their autobiographical histories during the reading process. Learners weave their own stories between their understandings of the attitudes of Don Sebastián (the salon proprietor), Víctor (the most privileged customer), and Norma and Ester, the two female characters. These autobiographical narratives fill the silences -- or indeterminacy gaps (Iser, 1978) -- that the text leaves and emerge as parallel stories, which are experienced anew from the vantage point of the present. There is sufficient evidence in the data collected to suggest that the themes that the literary text uncovers, act as a springboard for narrating related past experiences abroad, in addition to providing a forum for drawing comparisons with the students' own culture(s). Reflections on those experiences are triggered, as similar and dissimilar cultural practices and views are identified and juxtaposed. Evidence of students' fixing and essentialising of the Hispanic *Other*, mainly the Spanish and the Mexican, and in particular, the remote Argentinian *Other*, was found in their autobiographical narratives.

Students draw parallels between their own culture(s), year abroad experiences and the literary text. In so doing, they voice their essentialist beliefs about Argentinian gendered identity and do not seem to see beyond the dualistic thought and binary gender construction of Hispanic cultures. In the context of Gamerro's story, these generalisations can be summarised as:

Argentinian men	Argentinian women
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • need to spread their seed, so they have many women • feel this is a natural need so they do not apologise for their behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wear revealing clothes to please men and to get their attention because they want sex • are submissive, obedient, subservient and fragile

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cannot control their actions or emotions due to this internal urge • do not take into account women's feelings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are used to being sexually harassed • are not respected or listened to • lack self-confidence and so do not fight for their rights • are treated as sex objects
---	--

It was generally agreed that films, TV programmes, newspapers and magazines were key in constructing these images of Latin American men and women. In the words of one of the students:

texts such as the story "Norma y Ester" tend to reinforce these preconceived notions that we have due to the way the characters are portrayed, which reinforce our images.

Indeed, text choice in this study aimed at bringing these images to the fore for reflection and analysis, as a consciousness-raising pedagogical strategy. Delanoy (2005) and Bredella (2000) advocate plurality in text choice to include minorities, even if these are not portrayed positively; therefore "Norma y Ester" can be used to raise awareness of one's own thinking and the need to contextualise our viewpoints. Gonçalves de Veloso e Matos (2007) asserts that:

It is precisely the cultural imbalance displayed in a literary text that may foster reflection on that difference ... this cultural asymmetry present in any text (...) parallels the inevitable cultural asymmetry in an intercultural event. (p. 142)

Gamerro's text provokes intensely strong reactions for its negative depiction of the characters and the situations they are involved in, which encourage learners to voice their opinions. In this regard, "Norma y Ester" fits the pedagogical purpose of peeling back the layers of stereotypical thinking for the development of intercultural awareness.

All participants in this research study had spent their year abroad either in Spain or a Latin American country, mainly Mexico. The data collected with all cohorts of learners demonstrate that their stereotypes of the Hispanic *Other* had not been modified, and at times, had been reinforced, during their year-abroad experiences, as this student explains:

My year abroad did not change all the stereotypes I had before. In love relationships, I still believe there is inequality between Latin American men and women. In Salamanca [Spain], I talked to my Brazilian boyfriend and his friends from several South American countries about love and relationships. I was disgusted to find out that at the beginning of a relationship, men impose their 'rules.' For example, they can dictate to their girlfriend who they can go out with, who they can talk to and what clothes to wear. I found this very antiquated because in my own culture [British] a man cannot dictate what a woman can do.

In the same way as it 'is perfectly possible to act as an intercultural being without going abroad' (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004, p. 115), it cannot be assumed that after a period of immersion in a foreign culture, language learners automatically become intercultural mediators, which supports the pedagogical decision of creating a space in the classroom where stereotypical notions can be discussed and reflected upon. A selection of autobiographical narratives is presented in this article so that they might act as a window on how language learners' historical memories intersect with the interactions with the literary text and the characters of the story. The general consensus was that the Hispanic male *Other* tends to look at women openly and lustfully. Based on their Erasmus experiences, a few students commented that whilst British men might look at women too, they are never as obvious as the Spanish or Mexicans, for example. Students voiced their opinion that, generally speaking, Latin American and Spanish men are more 'hot blooded' than the English or German, and that Hispanic men feel they have the right to invade women's private personal space. For example, female students found it offensive that men wolf whistled at them in Mexico and noted that English women do not appreciate wolf whistling or verbal flirting and attention as much as Latin Americans appear to do, as the following comment indicates:

... during my year abroad in Spain, one day my friend and I were sitting in a bar when we met two Argentinian guys. They walked past our table and sat with us, but we hadn't met before. They got chatting with us. Then my friend and I went nightclubbing and they came with us, and danced with us without our permission. Argentinian men are very open and try to get sex whenever they can. (Nancy, English)

Other narratives illustrate the viewpoint that Hispanic men are disrespectful and inconsiderate to women, and that there is an expectation that women should be submissive and obedient to survive in such a society:

Latin American men have little respect for women. They think that women should be submissive and obedient. In my culture, if a man is disrespectful to a

woman, there would be serious consequences for the man, because we have managed to get the law on our side. (Laura, English)

During my year abroad in Spain, I lived with a Mexican guy. I noticed how much he disliked being contradicted by a woman. Everytime his mother came from Mexico, she would cook for him, make his bed, put his rubbish in the bin ... she would do everything for him. So we had lots of arguments. We were so different. He showed his lack of respect for me one day when he put some of his hair on my toothbrush. That's why I say that Latin American men have no respect for women. (Emma, English)

As can be gleaned from these autobiographical narratives, students voice their understandings of the cultures they have experienced and expose the stereotypes embedded in their perceptions. Some of their observations are simplified generalisations that arise from their limited encounters with the Hispanic *Other*, and at times display strong negative attitudes against alterity. At the time these data were analysed during the first stage of the action research project, it was decided that students' life stories would be utilised as educational tools for the next stage of the study. The aim was to use the narratives as a mirror for learners to see the *Self* through the eyes of the *Other* with a view to raising awareness of generalised, stereotypical, prejudiced and ethnocentric attitudes and reflect upon them. The underlying objective in using the students' narratives was to provide learners in the second phase of the study with the opportunity to turn the story "Norma y Ester" into a critique of the dynamic nature of gendered identity. What follows is an account of the main findings in the second phase of the research after the revised pedagogic actions were taken.

Phase Two: Problematizing Gendered Identity

In this stage of the research, the pedagogies aimed to encourage critical thinking and enhanced questioning of beliefs. To this end, the student-generated life stories, which stemmed from the short story during the first stage of the research, were transformed into pedagogic tasks. These served as the basis for the identification of stereotypical attitudes, taken-for-granted assumptions and implicit condemnation of *Otherness*, with particular reference to gendered identity in Argentina. Students were also asked to move back and forth from the short story to the student narratives with the aim of drawing comparisons between the lived and fictional experiences. The goal of the task was to find support in the literary text that challenged the stereotypes displayed in the narratives and to develop different viewpoints in the light of this newly found evidence through compelling questioning and critical thinking. The underlying principle of the task lay in the idea that gendered identity is a performative act (Butler, 1990), that is, a theatrical space where a multiplicity of identities can be freely adopted in different

contexts and at different times. In the light of this postmodernist conception of the social construction of gendered identity, the students were encouraged to deconstruct their own gender stereotyping of Argentinian culture in order to gain new insights into the roles performed by men and women in the literary text. Theoretical notions of stereotyping and identity construction were juxtaposed as the main criteria for students to use in their critical cultural evaluations.

The data collected during this stage of the study was with two different cohorts of students from phase one, and appear to indicate that learners add another dimension to their understandings of gender roles in Argentina. The intellectual effort students make to activate more finely tuned discovery skills in order to analyse the multidimensional construction of gendered identity in the text should not be underestimated. Even if sometimes students fall into another binary by looking at the other side of the coin - for example, women are powerful and men are powerless - this exercise can be taken as a step forward in their intercultural learning journey through the third space. Gonçalves de Veloso e Matos (2007) explains that:

This third space does not dismiss the original binary relationship but presents an opportunity to recombine them starting from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives. Thus, the presence of an Other (...) is a necessary element to trigger cultural dialogue, to help translate knowledge and experience into conscious reflection that ultimately may bring about change. (p. 155)

It is interesting to note that initially some students struggled to identify the stereotypical beliefs displayed in the narratives, but once discovered and after a period of uncomfortable silence, most of them admitted sharing the same beliefs as the autobiographical writers. Kramsch (2002) would describe this instance as a *telling moment* in the classroom, an unsettling realisation that produces discomfort, particularly in the presence of a teacher that comes from that culture. Crucially though, in their analysis of the life stories, students gained further insights and developed new perspectives which saw beyond and ignored their stereotypical lens.

The students appear to have developed new perspectives, which do not necessarily eliminate their initial viewpoints, but merely problematise their worldview through critical thinking. Holliday (2009) points out that:

There has been much discussion in recent times concerning the problems with stereotypes and essentialist models of culture. While varying degrees of cultural fixity are still projected in current thinking there seems

to be a strong movement in the direction of seeing them as only starting points from which to explore complexity. (p. xii)

The construction of these new meanings required an intellectual effort which involved self-questioning, reflection and dialogue with others. In the eloquent words of Luigi, an Italian student, the pedagogies helped him develop ‘a more three-dimensional idea’, in analysing the characters he could ‘visualise the situation in the story’ better. Another student, Sarah (English) admitted that when she compared her own experiences abroad in Spain with those in England, she discovered the way she viewed the Hispanic *other* and her own *self*, and adds that:

The story “Norma y Ester” does not help me to overcome the stereotypes I have with regard to Latin American men and women, but it has helped me to consider the generalisations that I make of the Hispanic *other* ... now that I am aware of my stereotypes, I will try to reduce them

The data suggest that students near *otherness* by positioning themselves outside their centre to enter a different, and at times uncomfortable, space. In other words, they move out of their mental structure to read the story from another angle. This exercise is a necessary step towards understanding in intercultural encounters. In the context of Gamarro’s “Norma y Ester”, an outline of the themes that emerged from the data as indicators of students problematising gendered identity is hereby juxtaposed:

Victor

On the first reading	After the intercultural tasks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strong and powerful • domineering chauvinist • unapologetic • inconsiderate • sees women as sex objects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • weak and powerless • the women turn the tables • begs for forgiveness • considerate & generous • emotional & affectionate

The readers witness, as one student noted, Víctor’s transition from a ‘predatory wolf’ [*un lobo feroz*] to a ‘lap dog’ [*un perro faldero*], becoming an emotional wreck towards the end of the story. They also observe that Víctor cries like a child, falls at Ester’s feet and

offers her all of his financial possessions as an attempt to beg for forgiveness. One of the student's contributions illustrates the views of the class:

The first impression that we get of Víctor fits the stereotype: he's the powerful, strong, sexist type ... With regard to women, on the surface they also fit the stereotype. For example, the clothes they wear communicate the idea that their main role is to serve and please men's desires ... As I focused on the instances in the characters' behaviours which would contradict these stereotypes, I gradually noticed a change in the roles that the men and women play in this story. For example, when Ester enacts revenge and strangles Víctor, she says to him "la pagarás con creces, te vas a arrepentir" (p.172). [*You'll pay dearly, you'll regret it*]. Ester wants, and in fact tries, to kill Víctor. Her words and actions show that Ester gains control and makes her voice heard. Her behaviour in this instance contradicts my stereotype that Hispanic women accept men's control passively and that Hispanic men are powerful and strong ... Víctor ends up a weak man ... without his money, he's a nobody ... when Ester appears not to be giving in to his sexual demands, he says "Let's see if you understand it. Everything here is mine, you know ... You even owe me the job, you see, if it wasn't because of me you wouldn't be here. I raise a finger and you go back to the street" (quote from "Norma y Ester," p.168). Although before they never spoke about money or power, Víctor introduces it into the conversation because he's fully aware that his power lies in his money, without it, he's a weak man ... towards the end of the story, Víctor is under Ester's control and offers her money because he doesn't know any other way to defend himself.

In addition, students point out that Norma sees the 'real' Víctor – a loving and sweet man who puts on a powerful and *macho* facade at the salon. This view is supported with evidence from the text, as this student demonstrates:

Here, on page 163 [in "Norma y Ester"], Víctor says [to Ester] "What do you want? I'll give you what you want" I think this means that he's lost everything, he's lost control ... but I believe he behaves this way because he's alone with Ester, he's not with his mates. When he's with his mates, he's totally different. He's sexist, strong and when he talks, he comes over as an evil man, but in this scene, he is all on his own with Ester, and he's desperate because he doesn't want to die and says things like 'I'll give you what you want' and cries. He's a totally different man. Notice what the text says 'crying, reaching out his hands to her like a baby asking for a cuddle' ... he's pathetic! He's only a *macho* man when he's with other men.

Students note that this male supremacy is all a vocal facade, which can be gleaned from the linguistic choices Víctor makes when he addresses Ester or talks about his sexual adventures in front of other men. Fredrik, a Swedish student, provides further evidence from the literary text by quoting Norma's words to Ester:

You know, Ester, he [Víctor] was not at all the way I told you. Deep down inside he is tender, you know, he takes me to the best places, he always asks after my children, sometimes he brings them a present. He has a daughter from his marriage. He promised me that one of these days when he has her, he'll bring her over so that I can meet her. Sometimes one misjudges people, not because of what other people say, but because we look at the surface and don't go deep. [quote from "Norma y Ester," p. 186]

In this part of the story, readers gain an insight into the human dimension of Víctor. A considerate, affectionate, emotional man who has developed feelings for a woman. They discover that he is respectful towards Norma: he takes her to the best restaurants in Buenos Aires and treats her like a lady. Víctor is also a father who shows consideration for Norma's children. An English female student, Gemma, makes reference to what is for her the most significant event in the story:

... the act of crying represents a loss of masculinity...he [Víctor] offers Ester all of his money, his credit and debit cards, that is, the principal source of his power. Accordingly, Víctor's identity changes radically as he loses his identity as a sexist rich man who takes advantage of women's vulnerability.

The data illustrate students' views that Víctor undervalues women and boasts loudly about his sexual adventures when he is surrounded by other men. This behaviour is due to social pressure to fit into a *macho* role, whilst at other times, it appears to show a decent man, enacting in this way the performative role of gendered identity. I take these insights from the students as *telling moments* in the class discussion. A space for reinforcing the notion that as 'intercultural mediators', contextualisation and particularisation are key elements to understand the 'cultural other'. The data indicate that students gain further insights into the multiple dimensions of a male character whom they had initially defined as an extremely inconsiderate *machista*.

With regard to the main female character, Ester, the emerging themes can be summarised as follows:

Ester

On the first reading	After the intercultural tasks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • weak and powerless • dresses provocatively to please men • powerless in society • submissive & obedient • passive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strong and powerful • powerful through her sexuality • agent of social change • exploitative & manipulative • controlling

At the onset, the initial consensus was that women from Argentina were submissive, subservient, obedient, fragile and lacking in confidence, as were the two fictional female characters Norma and Ester. With the newly constructed tasks, the class concluded that Norma and Ester were far from the powerless females they were initially believed to be, and that their strength lay in their resourcefulness to achieve their objectives.

There is enough evidence to suggest that students problematise their perceptions of the men and women in the story as a result of a more in-depth analysis. For example, on a first reading, most of the students admitted viewing the women in the story as completely powerless. It was through tasks that encouraged self questioning that a new dimension to the reading was added, as the data that follows demonstrate:

“Wait a minute” I thought. What is the function of women in this story? and I realised that everything revolves around the women in this story ... when I read it for the first time it seemed to me that the women were just instruments, but then I realised that they were in fact puppeteers, pulling the strings. On a first reading, without going deep into it, without thinking, it seemed that the women only did what the men wanted.

Students discover that the power also lies in the hands of the women in the story, who use their sexuality through the way they dress to achieve their aims. Norma and Ester adapt and manipulate man-made rules and the patriarchal system to their advantage as an instrument to exploit and control men. Thus, they develop strategies to dominate and to survive in such a society - Ester manages to strangle Víctor and enact revenge on the unfair treatment her best friend, Norma, received while she worked in the same salon, whilst Norma finds financial security by having Víctor as her lover. The gradual transformation of the learners' views of power relations becomes noticeable as they progress with the task and develop new insights which they had not been able to

initially. In proving the stereotypes wrong, the students become aware of their fixing gender roles, as this comment by one of the students illustrates:

On a surface level, it seems that the men and the women in the story have fixed roles ... the men have all the power and dominate the women, and the women are under men's control and have no voice in society.

A student uses the concept of the 'mask' to explain identity negotiation, and explains that 'we wear different masks depending on who we are with', whilst another one asserts that:

it can't be assumed that the characters in the story represent all the Hispanics ... We have to open up our minds to new possibilities because we can't generalise by just looking at one specific case. Gamarro's story made me aware of the stereotypes I have and helped me look beyond superficial understandings to explore more complex issues.

The data exemplify how students became aware of their own positionings in relation to the Hispanic *other* as they analyse the text and their own stereotypes. A student brings a theoretical concept which helped her understand some of her own views:

I was reading an article about culture and I learnt a concept which can be applied to this text. It says that it is normal for people to think of other cultures as more primitive ... [we] tend to assume that other cultures are more primitive than ours ... I have done this myself ... in my culture [British], where women are very independent and share everything with men, we tend to believe that our culture and way of life is more advanced than others... lack of familiarity and lack of interaction with the Hispanic cultures has made me generalise, and as a result of this, the distance between the cultures has been intensified.

A common theme running through these students' critical observations is the gradual understanding that both fictional men and women's identities are permanently being constructed in their interactions. Students witness the contradictory and fluid identities of the characters in the story, negotiated in relation to other identities and constantly changing. Given the fact that students were equipped with theoretical notions of identity construction, students were able to theorise the fluid nature of gendered identity in the story, as this student illustrates with her observation that

...the story can be described as a power struggle between men and women ... power has got a lot to do with identity ... it [power] cannot be physically owned,

but is constantly negotiated ... we see this in the story and in the change of identities that the characters undergo ... as the story unfolds we see how the power balance gravitates towards Ester ... in my opinion, Ester's behaviour produces a change in Víctor's identity because she makes a conscious decision to take power and stop being a victim ...

The data appear to indicate that the students gradually understand that identities are socially constructed and produced in interaction with others. In addition, students witness how Ester is capable of becoming an agent of social change through her actions, which destabilises the power balance and brings about a transformation in the gender roles played in the story.

As learners decentre and read the story from a different angle, they move away from the dichotomous practice of *othering* towards a more complex multi-dimensional understanding that encompasses the shades of grey. In this way, students learn an important lesson in intercultural education – that these selves are real at this point of time for the men and women in the story, and that as intercultural mediators (Byram 2008), sliding out of monolithic, rigid, frozen and essentialising views of cultural identity is a desirable learning goal.

ANALYSIS

The research questions that this study sought to answer concern the development of interculturality, with specific reference to Argentinian culture, in L2 learners. The project aimed to assist in the creation of theories of practice (Van Lier, 1994) that would help students discover the tools of cultural inquiry to understand *otherness* beyond the text, encourage them to interrogate their own beliefs, and to promote pedagogically sound “discovery” strategies in the classroom. The educational aims were intercultural in nature and concerned themselves with the development of critical cultural awareness. Adapted from Byram's definition, in the context of language, literature and intercultural education, critical cultural awareness can be defined as the ability to identify, critically evaluate and interpret explicit and implicit values in events, behaviours and language used by the characters or lyrical voices in a literary text on the basis of explicit criteria. In the present study, the students were clear about these criteria during their critical evaluation stage: concepts of stereotyping and theoretical notions of identity construction. In their journey to near *otherness*, Spanish Honours language undergraduates engaged in a highly challenging exercise to comprehend messages transmitted in a variety of L2 (*rioplantense* Spanish). Further, to arrive at the interpretations of the kind described in this article, students engaged in an active

mentally, emotionally and intellectually mind-stretching exercise – a much needed and desired skill in intercultural communication – to imagine the world of the fictional characters and view it through their eyes (Byram, 2008; Fleming, 2006).

Byram points out that the process of sensitising learners to other cultures should constitute one of the educational objectives in intercultural learning. A willingness to cross the border and a curiosity to experience the *other* are crucial steps in these endeavours. The students' interpretations demonstrate their willingness to view situations and events in new ways from other perspectives, as one of the students put it 'to avoid the possibility to overlook learning new things, we need to show interest.' In the course of the research, the recordings of pair, group and class discussions demonstrate how collaborative learning enhances intercultural exploration, whereby learners construct meanings to explore *otherness* and interpret situations that they have never experienced, and may never experience, through the eyes of the characters in the story. Pulverness (1996) acknowledges the students' authorial voice in constructing new viewpoints and advocates a Bahktinian dialogical approach to the use of literary texts as cultural artefacts in the foreign language classroom: "When the reader adds his or her voice to the host of voices present in the text, s/he experiences the peculiar intimacy of each reading and each reader constructs the meaning of the text afresh" (p. 73).

Through dialogical critical pedagogies, students seemed to perceive the cultural *other* from less distance and appeared, as a consequence, to develop critical cultural awareness. There is currently a dearth of teaching materials, methods and approaches readily available for classroom implementation with the aforementioned approach; hence this is an educational challenge that may be difficult to translate into practicalities in the language classroom.

Contextualisation is of paramount importance before any intercultural analysis can be undertaken. Tasks which enable learners to focus their attention on the personal circumstances the characters are immersed in, can 'situationalise' learners in such a way that they can be transported with their imagination to the salon in Buenos Aires. On this 'virtual' journey, it can be easier for students to appreciate the characters' emotional state and intentions at the moment of speaking, and how these variables affect the meanings conveyed by their linguistic choices. The development of tasks necessitates a rethinking of goals and purposes to include the appreciation of cultural variation in order to avoid generalisations that can lead to the formation or reinforcement of stereotypes.

Culture has been described as ‘messy, broken, unfinished, unable to be placed in an orderly box’ (Lengel & Talkington, 2003). It is not surprising then that learners embark on a risk-taking exercise in trying to make sense out of the language, behaviours and events in fiction. The complexity of this task lies in the ambiguity and uncertainty in trying to identify the characters’ underlying values and attitudes. As the students converse with the text and imbue it with meaning, they discover and explain the implicit meanings and learn to justify and support their responses with evidence from the literary text. In so doing, learners develop tolerance for ambiguity. Intercultural learning requires the development of high levels of tolerance to manage the ambiguous, the uncertain and the complex, in addition to a willingness to resolve these issues. Hence, educators need to adopt an approach which, according to Kramsch:

... is more interested in fault lines than in smooth landscapes, in the recognition of complexity and in the tolerance of ambiguity, not in the search for clear yardsticks of competence or insurances against pedagogical malpractice ... understanding and shared meaning, when it occurs, is a small miracle, brought about by the leap of faith that we call ‘communication across cultures.’ Language teachers are well aware of the difficulties of their task. But they often view these difficulties in dichotomous terms that unduly simplify the issues and prevent them from understanding the larger context. (1993, p. 2)

The development of intercultural competence involves dealing with attitudes, values, beliefs, perceptions – notions which can be unsettling for the language teacher for their vagueness and lack of clarity. This also means coping with issues such as the intangible intimate connection between language and culture, which requires the creative translation of theoretical concepts into teaching practicalities. This is an educational challenge which can be complex to undertake.

Crucially, the students need to be taught to recognise the limitations of the slice of culture under study. This intercultural reflective practice should be aimed at gaining insights into the social and situational variables that affect the characters’ behaviours and language. By engaging in this exercise, learners raise their awareness that culture is in a constant state of flux, so when they are confronted with a new situation outside the classroom, they hold the tools they have been equipped with in their process of becoming ‘cultural observers’ (Corbett, 2003) to engage in new critical cultural reflective practices.

CONCLUSION

The reading of Gamero's story "Norma y Ester" can bring gender stereotyping out into the open and provide opportunities for intercultural education. The pedagogies implemented aimed at creating opportunities for critical thinking about the modification of stereotypes and the strengthening of the ability to examine the complex and multifaceted nature of identity construction. The students' beliefs and schemata play a significant role in their interpretations and in what they read in the text. For example, if students believe that women in Argentina are submissive, obedient, fragile and powerless, they might find it difficult to find evidence in the text that challenges this stereotype because it does not fit into their schema. Tasks which help them look at events and situations from a different angle can provide a fertile forum for the conscious acknowledgement of the existence of such beliefs. Only after this step is taken, can these beliefs be challenged. Developing pedagogies that encourage learners to interrogate their own assumptions and ideas provides them with the opportunity to remove their mono-cultural glasses and view the world through an intercultural lens. Paving the way to the development of intercultural awareness is not an overnight business. It necessitates theoretical frameworks from related disciplines to assist L2 teachers and students to move beyond superficial understandings of issues such as race, ethnicity, gender, identity construction, stereotyping and ethnocentrism and engage us all – learners and practitioners alike - in the development of critical cultural awareness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Griselda Beacon, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina, for her helpful comments and observations as a critical friend for this research project and my husband, Jem, for his continued and unwavering support.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leticia Yulita lectures in Spanish at the University of East Anglia, UK. Her research focuses on the development of interculturality through literature in the British university context. Leticia is currently leading a British Council funded project to integrate intercultural education into the foreign language curriculum in the Uzbek university sector.

REFERENCES

- Agar, M. (1994). *Language shock. Understanding the culture of conversation*. New York, NY: William Morrow.
- Bredella, L. (2000). Literary texts and intercultural understanding. In M. Byram (Ed.), *Routledge encyclopedia of language teaching and learning* (pp. 382-386). London, England: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. London, England: Routledge.
- Byram, M. (2008). *From foreign language education to education for intercultural citizenship: Essays and reflections*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Corbett, J. (2003). *An intercultural approach to English language teaching*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Crozet, C., & Liddicoat, A. (2000). Teaching culture as an integrated part of language: implications for the aims, approaches and pedagogies of language teaching. In Liddicoat, A. & Crozet, C. (Eds.), *Teaching Languages, Teaching Cultures* (pp. 1-18). Melbourne: Language Australia.
- Delanoy, W. (1997). Teacher mediation and literature learning in the language classroom. *Literature, Media and Cultural Studies* (IATEFL SIG), 14. Retrieved from <http://www.wilstapley.com/LCS/articles/wd.htm>
- Delanoy, W. (2005). A dialogic model for literature teaching. *ABAC Journal*, 25(1), 53-56.
- Fleming, M. (2006). The concept of 'intercultural citizenship': Lessons from fiction and art. In Alred, G., Byram, M. & Fleming, M. (Eds.), *Education for intercultural citizenship: Concepts and comparisons* (pp. 130-143). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Gamerro, C. (2005). *El libro de los afectos raros*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Grupo Editorial Norma.
- Gonçalves de Veloso e Matos, A. (2007). *Literary texts: A passage to intercultural learning in foreign language education* (Unpublished PhD dissertation). Departamento de Línguas, Culturas e Literaturas Modernas. Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa.

- Holliday, A. (2009). Foreword. In A. Feng, M. Byram & M. Fleming (Eds.), *Becoming interculturally competent through education and training* (pp. xi-xiii). Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters.
- Iser, W. (1978). *The act of reading. A theory of aesthetic response*. London, England: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Kramsch, C. (2002). From practice to theory and back again. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 15(3), 196-209.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Lengel, L. & Talkington, B. (2003, December 16). A snapshot of intercultural communication courses: An international analysis. Paper presented at the IALIC/Subject Centre Pedagogical Forum 4th Annual Conference of IALIC (International Association for Languages and Intercultural Learning). Retrieved from <http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/paper/2047>
- Phipps, A. & Gonzalez, M. (2004). *Modern languages: Learning and teaching in an intercultural field*. London, England: Sage.
- Pulverness, A. (1996). Worlds within words: Literature and British cultural studies. In D. A. Hill (Ed.), *Papers on teaching literature from The British Council's Conferences in Bologna 1994 and Milan 1995*. The British Council Italy.
- Risager, K. (2006). *Language and culture: Global flows and local complexity*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Street, B. (1993). Culture is a verb: Anthropological aspects of language and culture process. In D. Graddol, L. Thompson, & M. Byram Eds.), *Language and culture* (pp. 23- 43). British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) and Multilingual Matters.
- Van Lier, L. (1994). Action research. *Sintagma*, 6, 31-37.
- Van Lier, L. (1996). *Interaction in the Language Curriculum: Awareness, Autonomy and Authenticity*. London: Longman.