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Exploration Of The USA Culture By Mexican Language Students Through Reading Chicano Literature

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Abstract

Language students are expected to be conscious of the fact that the target language is an expression of the culture of those societies where it is used in everyday communication. Using literary texts is an important means of fostering and developing the learners' intercultural awareness. Chicano literature (written by those authors of Mexican origin who permanently live in the USA) can be of special help in this process. Chicano writers' experiences in their daily encounters with the North American culture can make it easier for language learners in Mexico to explore and understand this foreign culture, and to overcome their own prejudices and stereotypes towards it. Thus, a study was conducted among Mexican university language students to examine the possibility of increasing the learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) through reading literary texts. The survey participants responded to a questionnaire related to the concept of culture and their knowledge of the target culture. They also read and discussed a short story written by a Chicano writer paying special attention to different cultural topics covered in them. On the whole, the study has shown that the learners' sociocultural characteristics and experiences have an enormous impact on their perceptions of the North American culture. The results can help to optimize the process of choosing and elaborating didactic materials in English as well as class planning and methodology that would develop the learners' intercultural competence.

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1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language is widely considered to be a complex process in the sense that its progression and outcome depend on a number of crucial factors: cognitive, affective, social, biological, and personal (cf. Brown,

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2007). In fact, studying an additional language requires gaining different competences of both linguistic and non-linguistic type that help learners to hold a good command of the target language. In this regard, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (2011) distinguishes general competences and communicative language competences. The former encompass the language user's declarative knowledge, skills, existential competence, and ability to learn. The latter include linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competences.

Thus, a successful communication in a foreign language requires not only using properly its grammar rules and vocabulary, but also taking into account sociocultural aspects of the target language society. During communicative interactions of this kind, language learners get an opportunity to explore the culture of the "other" from their own cultural perspective. In order to benefit from such encounters, they need to reinforce their intercultural competence. It is necessary to stress that intercultural competence, together with linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competences, form intercultural communicative competence (ICC) that allows language learners to link a foreign culture with their own one through their ability to use the target language appropriately (Byram 2001).

2. Use of literature in language learning

For many language learners, an ideal path of increasing their understanding of the target language reality is reading literary texts in this language because this kind of material provides a direct access to other cultures. There exists a close relationship among literature, language, and culture. Actually, literature is a product of a particular culture; therefore, while reading it, people enhance their knowledge about the history, customs, and lifestyle of the members of a given culture. They also adopt an intercultural perspective in order to reflect properly on the human behaviour described in literary works. As literature portrays different societies in their historical moments, and expresses thoughts and philosophy of certain epochs, readers establish relations among different historical, social, and artistic events as well as identify moral and ethical issues that transcend diverse cultures and are often regarded as universal values and beliefs.

A peculiar characteristic of literary works is that they describe civilizations or communities from the viewpoint of their authors who try to influence directly or indirectly on their readers' vision of the world. Finally, each literary text is open to multiple interpretations; in other words, it is polysemic by its nature. It means that it is a product of a particular epoch, but at the same time it possesses some kind of intemporality because it often touches on universal themes and values such as love, death, anxiety, etc.

3. Reading Chicano literature by Mexican English-language learners

3.1. Objectives of the study

The previously mentioned ideas served as a base for designing and conducting a study among the students enrolled in English-reading comprehension courses in the Metropolitan Autonomous University, Mexico City, in 2014. The main purpose of this research was to examine the possibility of increasing the learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) through reading literary texts.

3.2. Research methods and procedures

The research consisted of two phases: theoretical (literature review and elaboration of methodology) and empirical (data collection, home tasks and classroom activities). The empirical part began with a survey among 92 students who responded to a questionnaire with close- and open-ended questions. The aim of this procedure was to determine the learners' attitudes towards English-speaking cultures, as well as the students' interest in exploring these societies through reading their literature.

The analysis of the obtained results has shown that the survey participants had general knowledge about the Anglophone world, but not too much about its cultural content. At the beginning of the survey, they were asked to give the names of four English-speaking countries, and the majority of them (83%) put the USA in the first place. Other countries mentioned in a descending order were England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Jamaica. The

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