Critical activities in the Spanish classroom:
A qualitative study

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to analyze the implication of integrating activities driven from critical pedagogy into the curriculum of a Spanish language classroom using a critical ethnographic research methodology. The activities used in this course were out-of-class activities, multicultural activities, analyses of written and visual texts (textbooks and mass media analyses), mini-ethnographic projects, and personal journals in English. My guiding hypothesis is that using activities driven from critical pedagogy early in language instruction helps to build a cohesive speech community, challenges the participants' cultural values, and guarantees the relevance of the course content. The fieldwork for this study was conducted in a 4-credit second semester of a two-semester Intermediate Spanish sequence. Data were collected through participant observation and the review of primary documents (students assignments). Findings show that relating the course content to students' realities and analyzing mainstream interpretations of culture facilitated the development of critical thinking skills, helped deepen students' understanding of the target groups, and encouraged students to identify their own cultural values and believes. Data suggests that a cohesive speech community aids reserved students establish their voices within the learning community.

> One of the goals of critical pedagogy is to create engaged, active, critically thinking citizens, that is to say, political subjects who can participate as decision-makers in the organization of their socio-cultural realities

While critical pedagogy has several roots, it is most strongly associated with Paulo Freire, who during the 1960s conducted a national literacy campaign in Brazil that promoted knowledge through the critical examination of existing social conditions (Freire, 1970). One of the goals of critical pedagogy is to create engaged, active,

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critically thinking citizens, that is to say, political subjects who can participate as decision-makers in the organization of their socio-cultural realities (Freire, 1970, Giroux, 1992). Critical pedagogues approach language as a necessary resource in the negotiation and performance of social identities (Leeman, Rabin, & Roman-Mendoza, 2011).

Critical pedagogy has been adopted throughout the United States and abroad since the 1960s with minority students using this pedagogy as a tool to empower them with a voice and critical thinking skills (Freire, 1970; Hooks 2003; Shor, 2012). Also, authors have tried for decades to address students' negative attitudes toward the Spanish language and target cultures studied in the Spanish classroom (Leeman et al., 2011; Schwartz & Kavanaugh, 1997).

By engaging in a critical ethnographic research project based on my own teaching, this study analyzes the implication of integrating activities driven from critical pedagogy into the curriculum of the second semester of a two-semester Intermediate Spanish sequence taught at a medium-sized public research institution. The activities used were out-of-class activities, multicultural activities, analyses of written and visual texts (textbooks and mass media analyses), mini-ethnographic projects, and personal journals in English. In this study, I use these activities to help students better understand the Spanish language class and target cultures while learning a language.

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Critical ethnography attempts to identify strategies for empowering individuals and ultimately works toward social change (Kincheloe, 2003). When related to second language acquisition (SLA), critical ethnography has usually been applied to enhance heritage Spanish speakers and minority students (for instance, Latino students in the U.S.) to give them the tools to function as decision-makers in the society in which they live (Morrell, 2002; Trueba & McLaren, 2000). However, in the area of SLA in the U.S. there is a need for applying critical ethnography to facilitate cross-cultural awareness toward the target cultures. My guiding hypothesis is that using activities driven from critical pedagogy early in language instruction helps to build a cohesive speech community, challenges the participants' cultural values, and guarantees the relevance of the course content.

Critical Research

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Critical research encourages self-reflection as a tool for identifying the ways that social constructs such as gender roles or racial attitudes are shaped by the perspectives of the dominant classes. Within the field of education, critical researchers challenge interpretations of school practices in which teachers are perceived as mere transmitters of prepackaged material and students are seen as passive consumers of knowledge (Kincheloe, 2003).

Critical activities in the Spanish classroom

Educational issues are political and ethical in character because the teacher, the institution where teaching takes place, and the educational system as a whole are driven by political and cultural values. This is to say that what teachers and institutions choose to do in the classroom and what they include or leave out of the curriculum are fundamentally political decisions. For instance, including a work by Toni Morrison in the syllabus and teaching it without making any reference to race and gender is not an interrogation of the biases conventional canons establish, but only a superficial attempt to maintain a liberal appearance (Hooks, 1994). In the same way, studying aspects of Latino cultures in the U.S. Spanish language classroom without critically exploring the differences and similarities across cultures might result in overgeneralizing and stereotyping.

Until recently, socio-cultural issues in the language classroom have not been addressed (Block, 2007). A consequence has been a widespread lack of teacher preparation for critically approaching cultural issues (Milner, 2003; Nieto, 2002; Walsh, 1996; Wink, 2000; Wolk, 1998). As a result of this lack of preparation, teachers often fear that approaching teaching from a critical standpoint makes their work less "objective" and therefore less valuable. Hooks (1994) explains that the lack of traditional formality associated with fostering critical classrooms, in which students acknowledge each individual's political point of view, frequently is perceived by some teachers and students as a lack of seriousness. However, such a perception is a step to questioning one's own world-view in order to understand that of others, which can eventually raise cultural awareness. According to Freire (1985) "educators must ask themselves for whom and on whose behalf they are working [because] there are no neutral educators" (p. 180).

The very tight relationship that exists between personal values and practice within this inquiry approach inevitably raises questions about objectivity. As Carspecken (1996) emphasizes, the fact that critical researchers acknowledge that they are value-driven does not mean that the researcher's values will determine the results of the study. On the contrary, acknowledging that no educator or researcher is neutral helps to examine the data in context.

Finally, in critical research, theory and practice are tightly interconnected. Critical theorists in the field of education invite teachers to become researchers and to develop their own inquiry based on their personal practice (Carr & Kemmis, 2003). Therefore, teacher/researchers are encouraged to develop their own action research in schools as a form of inquiry.

Critical Pedagogy in the Spanish Classroom

Critical theory and practice guide this project because it can frame the language classroom as a progressive space for learning about foreign cultures. Data for this research project were collected through participant observation and the review of primary documents. In this study, I was a complete member-observer (full participant) because, as the teacher, I was a member of the classroom community. I observed a second semester of a two-semester Intermediate

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Spanish sequence that I taught (a total of 45 classroom hours), and maintained daily field notes. Furthermore, copies of all students' written assignments were gathered for use as primary documents; these provide helpful information not only on students' language learning progress but also on their cross-cultural and critical thinking development. Finally, I videotaped class debates in English and oral activities in Spanish, primary data sources that assist in the triangulation of the data. In order to achieve credible findings the researcher has to analyze all of the data collected, as well as triangulate different types of evidence, which entails assessing data from different sources to achieve valid results (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006).

Participants and Course Curriculum

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in a 4-credit second semester of a two-semester Intermediate Spanish sequence composed of 17 female and 12 males students.

To design the curriculum of the class, I was asked by the departmental to use the established syllabus as a guideline to guarantee that the students attending this section would cover the same level of grammar as students attending other sections. Therefore, students studied the grammar using the same textbook used by the department, but then they applied the newly acquired grammatical structures in activities driven from critical pedagogy.

Activities

As Hooks (1994) explains, certain prerequisites are necessary to conduct critical pedagogy successfully. Critical theorists suggest a number of activities to develop critical thinking and to raise cultural awareness. Some of these activities are particularly appropriate for the language classroom and include, among others, out-of-class activities multicultural activities, analyses of written and visual texts (textbooks and mass media analyses), mini-ethnographic projects, and personal journals in English.

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Out-of-class activities. Ensuring that the course content is relevant to students is usually the responsibility of the teacher's and/or language department. Traditionally, teachers achieve relevance by providing material to which students can relate. For this study, one of the ways I ensured relevance was by requiring students to choose the activity they wanted to conduct and create their own texts. The implication of this practice is to link the Spanish classroom to the students' worlds, to help them understand that they are exposed to Latino cultures in their daily life and that its influence is not limited to the Spanish classroom.

Traditionally, the class in which this study was conducted was a 4-credit course with three hours a week allocated for grammar and content, and a forth hour dedicated to conversational/ computer-based activities. The forth hours was scheduled in the catalogue at specific times, took place in the language lab with a different Spanish teacher, and was worth 15% of the students' final grade. When I designed this course the language department allowed me to deviate from

this practice. Hence, I asked students to conduct independent work to satisfy the requirement. For the out-of-class requirement, students could watch movies related to Latino cultures, read books, magazines, and comics, attend Latino dance-classes, concerts, lectures, go to Latino restaurants or clubs, or conduct other activities related to the target cultures. In order to obtain credit for the out-of-class requirement, students were requested to submit a one-page reaction paper in Spanish describing each activity and share their reaction papers with their peers. This practice set the ground for students to relate the course content to the world that surrounds them, defining language learning as an active process that is linked to their daily lives.

Multicultural activities. Multicultural education conceptualizes the school as a social system in which all students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, language, or ability, will have an equal chance to succeed academically (Banks & Banks, 2009). Activities that can be useful in SLA to help students understand aspects of the target cultures, and to make them relevant to their lives are *Woman of Puck; A Parable: An Introduction to Cultural Values*; and *Cultural Incidents*.

Woman of Puck—a famous perceptual illusion consisting of a double picture. Depending on what part of the picture students focus on, they see an old woman or a young woman (Appendix A). The goals of the activity are to get students to not always believe what they first see and to demonstrate how perceptions are determined by cultural values.

The students were given a handout (Appendix A) and asked to fill it out individually while viewing The Woman of Puck. Next, the handouts were collected, shuffled, and handed back to the class (no students received their own handout). Students worked in groups and discussed the answers on the handouts. Some students volunteered to describe the woman they were seeing and, at the end, students discussed the objectives of the activity. For instance, they analyzed the cultural values associated with youth and old age.

The Parable: An Introduction to Cultural Values— a short story involving five characters, in which the behavior of each character is intended to represent different values (Hoopes & Ventura, 1979). The goal of this activity is to demonstrate how individual choices are determined by cultural values, to question the dominant ideology that a culture is formed of merely one set of values, and to acquaint students with specific cultural differences and similarities held by class members.

The story was read aloud in class and students were asked to select, in rank order, the characters whose behavior they most approved of and to discuss their different choices (Appendix B).

Cultural Incident— a short skill-directed exercise (Kohls & Brussow, 1995) in which students are given an incident described in a non-judgmental, neutral way (Appendix C). The goals of the activity are to demonstrate how beliefs are determined by cultural values, and the ability to change attitudes by adapting to new situations, in addition to stimulating cultural awareness.

Students were first presented with a short incident that ended with a question: "How would you help Ms. XXX understand what happened?" Following the

incident there were possible answers/explanations. In groups, students discussed which explanation they thought was most plausible. Then students were presented with a rationale for each alternative explanation, showing why or why not each answer might make sense. An open class discussion followed. For the first written assignment students created their own cultural incidents and presented them to their peers.

Analyses of written and visual text. Another method to encourage critical thinking and to develop cultural awareness is to examine the discourse of written and visual texts to which students are usually exposed. Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak (2011) analyze different dimensions of the relationship between power and discourse. They state that "discursive practices may have major ideological effects: that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic groups, through the ways in which they represent things and position people" (p. 358). Power can be exercised through discourse in "one-sidedness" relations. This is what Fairclough (1989) calls hidden-power, and it is performed through the discourse of the mass media, television, radio, film, textbooks, and newspapers (p. 49). In this case, power is indirectly exercised and the individuals and organizations that the media and publishers portray often do not equally represent all social groupings in the population (Ramirez Berg, 2011). Analyzing textbooks that students have used in the past and visual texts to which they are exposed in the mass media are useful activities in the Spanish classroom to explore the power behind discourse in society. For instance, traditionally all language textbooks contain a chapter dedicated to family. However, very few textbooks make reference to different types of family such as single-parent families or gay family, much less to the fact that gay marriage was legalized in Spanish speaking countries such as Spain, much earlier than in the U.S. Likewise, students might analyze popular shows such as Breaking Bad to explore in what ways Latinos are portrayed, or if there is a balance between "good" and "bad."

Finally, at the pedagogical level, mass media representations are considered authentic material in that they are "not designed solely for classroom use but rather for native speakers" (Ciccone, 1995, p. 203) and beneficial for language learning (Wallermire, 2008). As Ciccone illustrates, not exposing students to authentic material at the beginning and intermediate levels hinders their language learning. It might also increase their later frustration due to their lack of early exposure to the processing strategies necessary for decoding authentic language.

Textbook analysis. To introduce this activity, students working in pairs created a list of what they expected to find in a language textbook, and what they usually like and dislike about language textbooks. Then, students' answers were shared with the class. Each pair of students picked one of the 15 textbooks I brought to class, and skimmed it to see if the textbook met their list of expectations. Students were told that the textbooks were formerly used in Spain to teach English as a Second Language to Spanish students. While skimming the books, students analyzed:

Critical activities in the Spanish classroom

- the title of the book,
- if the book was appealing and why,
- in what language the instructions were written,
- if it had pictures or drawings,
- if it portrayed diversity (gender, ethnic, age...),
- if culture and grammar were integrated and in what ways.

As a follow-up activity students brought textbooks they had used in previous Spanish courses, and I brought a selection of books for those students who did not have access to their old textbooks, and they skimmed them using the previous criteria. Finally, each student chose a textbook and wrote a textbook analysis assignment (Appendix D).

Mass media analysis. For this activity, students watched episodes of different Spanish sit-coms, which caricaturized characters from Spain, the U.S., France, Russia, and Japan. Following this, there was a class discussion on the stereotypes observed, stereotypical images of these prototypes held in the U.S., and the reasons why stereotypes vary in different cultures. The follow-up assignment was to write an episode of a sit-com portraying the first day of a Spanish exchange student in the U.S.

Next, students read articles translated to Spanish and adapted for the classroom that illustrate the under- and misrepresentation of Latino actors, actresses, and characters in movies and TV shows in the U.S. (Ramirez Berg, 2011). These articles also provided students with the vocabulary needed for their written assignment on mass media analysis.

Finally, students chose a movie or TV show made in the U.S. in which one or more Latino characters were presented and wrote a two-to-three page analysis. Students presented their mass media analysis to their peers, and screened short segments of the visual representation to illustrate their analyses.

Mini-ethnographic projects. To develop mini-ethnographic projects students are given the freedom to explore their own interests in relation to the target cultures. These projects "are open, long-term, integrative inquiries done in a social setting that are created and/or developed with much student input and ownership" (Wolk, 1998, p. 96). These projects make the material relevant while providing students the opportunity to become meaning makers, not merely meaning consumers:

Ethnography is a method used to obtain cultural information from the native's point of view to explore how people within the target culture group prioritize their language experiences. The fieldwork is done by interviewing a native speaker in the community who can provide an inside account of a specific topic (Rodriguez Pino, 1997, p. 4).

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The importance of conducting mini-ethnographies in the Spanish classroom as a final project is significant. First, students get to practice everything they have learned during the semester in a final project (both at the level of content and at the level of structure). Second, students get to choose the topic of study. Third, students are

instructed in ethical issues when conducting qualitative research with human subjects, bringing together cultural awareness issues that already have been studied. Fourth, students learn how to conduct the different stages of the project (identify thesis, write interview probes, report findings). Finally, they practice decoding authentic language in a real situation with a native speaker. Students presented their mini-ethnographies to their peers.

Personal Journals and Debates

When applying critical pedagogy to a beginning or intermediate language classroom, the teacher may provide time during which students can express themselves in their own language. Allotting time for English debates and journals is an effective way to avoid (1) student frustration when they are discussing culturally sensitive issues in another language and (2) students' wanting to switch to English during a Spanish discussion because they cannot find the words to express themselves. It also allows them to express complex ideas without suffering what authors have reported as language learning anxiety and the barrier of the second language (Ewald, 2014). Journals that are focused on listening to the students' concerns should always be followed by a discussion or debate in which students and teacher arrive at an agreement.

During the semester in which this study was conducted, students wrote three journal entries in English in class. A debate in English followed each journal entry. English journal entries and debates were scheduled in the syllabus and were not graded. English debates where videotaped.

Results and Discussion

Data suggest that using activities driven from critical pedagogy in a Spanish classroom helps to build a cohesive speech community, it challenges the participants' cultural values, and it guarantees the relevance of the course content, enabling students to raise cross-cultural awareness while learning the language.

Building a Speech Community

This course required students to periodically discuss their cultural values. This was favorable for building a new speech community, in which students' engagement brought them together as a group early in the semester. The students who were often absent had a harder time fitting in when they attended class, which led some to eventually drop out (out of the 29 students who initially enrolled in the class, only 24 remained by the end of the semester).

A significant factor that increased the sense of community in the class was the ability for students to express their opinions and create individual voices. At the beginning of the semester, six females and two male students noted how they found it difficult to participate and share their opinions in class, although the vast majority of them eventually overcame their shyness based on their increased participation in the last activities. For example, a student who had a very hard time establishing her voice in the class community, yet overcame the obstacle early in the semester was a female student who wrote me an e-mail message saying:

Critical activities in the Spanish classroom

> The reason I do not participate more is because of activities such as today's, where everyone has to analyze and criticize every sentence that comes out of your mouth. This makes me very nervous. I also think of something to say and someone else is usually quicker to say it. It is not that I don't want to participate.

She is referring to a peer correction activity in which I showed anonymous excerpts of students' written work and as a group, the class corrected them. It seems obvious that more reserved students might feel insecure about their language skills and are threatened by the idea of such an activity, and for this reason the creation of an inclusive class community becomes so imperative. Data suggest that it was the sense of community that eventually made this student feel at ease in the class. Two weeks after her message, I sent her an e-mail asking her if she was going to attend the organized out-of-class session scheduled for the following week:

> Are you going to come Monday at 1 pm to our extraordinary session? Your cultural incident was very good (with few mistakes that students will correct in class) and I need to know if you want to present it to the other students to make transparencies.

Although I made it clear that students were going to correct her mistakes she answered, "I would be happy to come." This student became an active member of the class community, was in permanent contact with me and the other students through e-mail, and ended up presenting all of her written assignments to her peers throughout the semester.

Another female student who appeared to feel challenged with the prospect of speaking at the beginning of the semester, but who made a dramatic change by the end was from Italian-Hispanic descent and had a better command of Spanish than most of her peers. Still, at the beginning she remained non-communicative and refused to perform orally in most sessions. On the first videotaped session she did not say a word during the whole class. I asked her on several occasions if she had any comments, to which she shook her head and stared at the floor. In her second journal entry she wrote:

> I like that the class is very open and people don't get embarrassed by their mistakes. I am a shy person sometimes, especially when I do something I am aware of, for example speaking Spanish. However, this class makes you get over it because it is the only way to succeed. I have not held up my contract very well. I have already had two absences and my participation is very low… I try on very few days to get my voice out there, but I get embarrassed easily.

Two months into the semester, she decided to present for the first time one of her written assignments surprising her peers and herself with her oral presentation skills. As the term progressed, she increased her oral participation in the class, becoming one of the most vocal students by the end of the semester. As the following excerpt of her last journal entry suggests, fostering a critical classroom environment can improve the chances for reserved students to confront their fears:

I found it easier to participate in this type of class format, even though it took some time, when I did begin to participate I felt confident in my answers. The Spanish debates and oral activities allowed us to be more active and express our opinions. It was important to know where others stood.

Her reference to "where others stood" is an important element in the creation of a class community and reflects the manner by which class participants learned to respect their peers' voices.

The oral activities and debates were helpful in aiding students establish their voices within the community. Four students declared in their second journal entry that the debates enabled them to confront their fears of speaking in public, while two students said in their third journal entry that a positive aspect of a critical classroom is that students have a voice that is heard. Students' positive opinions about the debates increased throughout the semester. In the second journal entry, only two students claimed liking the debates. By the end of the semester, in their last journal entry, fourteen students talked about the debates and the oral activities as being enjoyable and a useful tool to improve language learning and argumentation skills.

Challenging Cultural Values

> Cross-cultural awareness ideally leads students to see the members of the target cultures through a positive lens making visible their differences and similarities within a continuum of human characteristics.

While conducting multicultural activities, different cultural assumptions were challenged in our quest for promoting cultural awareness. Cross-cultural awareness ideally leads students to see the members of the target cultures through a positive lens making visible their differences and similarities within a continuum of human characteristics. Furthermore, cross-cultural awareness entails self-awareness, which helps participants perceive themselves as cultural beings. The cultural assumptions that emerged in class were related to mainstream interpretations of culture and stereotypes, such as the belief that all members of a society share the same cultural values. Participants discussed how societies are composed of different cultures, which accounted for the contrasting cultural values and misunderstandings that arise in human interactions.

For instance, when we conducted the multicultural activity *A Parable: An Introduction to Cultural Values* (Appendix B), an interaction occurred that illustrates the simplistic assumption of cultural homogeneity that is, the common belief that all members of a society share the same cultural values. After ranking the characters in order, starting with the one they respected most, students needed to explain their choice. A group consisting of only female students ranked Rosamaria and Regina in the first and second place because their behavior was driven by their desire to help. They ranked Paco next for not helping, followed by Esteban who asked for an unreasonable amount of money in exchange for help, and finally, Felipe for rejecting his friend. Another group formed by two females and two

male students were divided. The female students had made the same choices as the previous group, and the male students ranked Rosamaria last because she was a thief and they explained that the ends do not justify the means. Esteban was ranked in first position because he was merely taking care of his business.

Next, I asked students to identify the cultural values that had risen from our interpretations of the story, and the values that emerged included friendship, support, loyalty, and hospitality as positive values; and greed and capitalism as negative values. Six female students insisted that it is acceptable to break the law for good causes, while three male students disagreed, contending that the law should never be broken. I summarized the discussion saying that different cultures might hold opposite values, and I gave as an example that some female students had ranked Rosamaria's stealing as a positive value, but a few male students had labeled it as negative. To that, a male student said that he disagreed with my interpretation because in the classroom everybody shared the same culture.

This comment gave us the opportunity to discuss the dominant ideology that a culture is formed of merely one set of values, those held by the dominant classes. Students brainstormed on the different cultural groups that form society in terms of gender, race, age, sexual orientation and other social constructions, analyzing a society as a compound of different micro-cultures. Students finally agreed that our Spanish class was composed of different cultures, which accounted for the contrasting cultural values that had risen from this activity.

Another cultural assumption was related to unmarked social traits, such as those associated with the middle class. For example in her textbook analysis, a female student wrote:

> *En los dibujos y las fotografías, hay diversidad en raza etnia, y genero. Hay mexicanos, estadounidenses y muchos otros. Hay chicos y chicas. La mayoría de la clase social pertenece a la clase media… esto no es bueno o malo…[en conclusión] los estereotipos que se encuentran en otros libros de texto… no están en este libro.*
>
> [In the drawings and pictures there is racial, ethnic and gender diversity. There are Mexicans, U.S. citizens and much more. There are boys and girls. The majority of the social class is the middle class… this is not good or bad… [in conclusion] stereotypes that are found in other textbooks… are not found in this book.]

This excerpt does not analyze the exclusion of all social classes other than the middle class as a cultural misrepresentation, because middle class traits, as the characteristics of the mainstream population, are unmarked in students' perceptions, and therefore universalized as the norm. Consequently, students do not perceive the imposition of what they consider the norm as detrimental to the cultural representation of a society.

Data suggest that when students are asked to identify stereotypical traits of the U.S. culture, they more easily recognize traits related to what is marked as working class. In this way, students fail to recognize the mainstream middle-

class (with which most of them identify) as bearing any particular cultural and socioeconomic qualities, rendering it an unmarked, universal identity.

Finally, a recurrent assumption that was questioned in class was the cultural misconception that certain stereotypes are true because some individuals held the traits that characterize the stereotypes. The following excerpt from a female student's analysis of the NBC sit-com *Will & Grace* illustrates this idea:

> *La actriz latina en* Will & Grace *es muy estereotípica de las latinas. Primero, el nombre de Rosario es muy estereotípico. Ella es una latina que trabaja limpiando, es ilegal, tiene una personalidad fuerte y roba. Pero creo que algunas características son la verdad de las latinas. Porque mi mamá es latina y como Rosario tiene una personalidad fuerte. Mi mamá es muy emocional y cuando ella está enojada nosotros vamos a otro lado. Y cuando mi mamá vino a Estados Unidos, limpió casas también.*
>
> [The Latino actress in Will & Grace is very stereotypical of Latinas. First, the name, Rosario, is very stereotypical. She is a Latina who works cleaning, she is undocumented, she has a strong personality and she steals. But I think that some of the characteristics are true for Latinas. Because my mom is Latina and, as Rosario, she has a strong personality. My mom is very emotional and when she gets angry we flee. And when my mom came to the US, she cleaned houses too.]

> *... stereotypes are the generalizations of characteristics held by individuals, which should not lead to the conclusion that some stereotypes are true, even if there are people with these characteristics.*

In class it was extensively discussed that stereotypes are the generalizations of characteristics held by individuals, which should not lead to the conclusion that some stereotypes are true, even if there are people with these characteristics. Data suggest that by the end of the semester the majority of the students understood that portraying stereotypical representations of certain cultures creates images in a person's unconscious that are difficult to identify and deconstruct. Students reported these reflections in their third journal entry, in which 11 students asserted that the multicultural activities had facilitated the questioning of assumptions previously taken for granted, helping them to deconstruct stereotypes of which they were not aware. As a student wrote in her last journal entry:

The multicultural activities and questioning of cultural assumptions made Spanish much more than just a language class. This class not only helped me improve my Spanish but it made me aware of many stereotypes and prejudices that I haven't always recognized. This class has helped me to be more open-minded and aware of the world.

Furthermore, two students specified that challenging their cultural assumptions to understand the target cultures better had facilitated the understanding of their own culture. Moreover, the vast majority of the students reflected similar opinions in their mass media analysis, and mini-ethnographies, as the following excerpt illustrates:

Critical activities in the Spanish classroom

Las películas de los tiempos actuales en los Estados Unidos frecuentemente contienen papeles estereotípicos de personajes latinos. También, la población latina de este país no está representada bien ni en la televisión ni en el cine; hay pocos papeles latinos en los programas y las películas estadounidense… pero la situación esta mejorando. En las películas Traffic *y* Blow *por ejemplo, los latinos comercian con drogas y dan la idea al público que esto es una característica de la cultura latina. Es necesario que nuestra sociedad de una impresión correcta de los latinos, y que los represente bien en cuanto al número de latinos en los Estados Unidos y sus estilos de vida.*
[Today's U.S. movies frequently portray stereotypical Latino characters. Also, the Latino population is not well represented either on TV nor in movies; there are not many Latino roles in programs and movies in the US… but the situation is improving. For instance, in the movies *Traffic* and *Blow*, Latinos deal with drugs and this tells the audience that this is a characteristic of the Latino culture. It is necessary that our society show a correct image of Latinos and that they be correctly portrayed in terms of the number of Latinos in the U.S. and their lifestyles.]

Finally, when examining the positive and negative stereotypes that students identified in their mass media analyses, it is critical to note that the positive Latino representations which students identified were played by non-Latino actors and actresses.

The positive stereotypes were found in five movies or TV shows: *The Cosby Show, Evita, The Mask of Zorro, Resurrection Boulevard*, and *A Walk in the Clouds*. All of the positive male representations were found in *The Mask of Zorro* in the character played by Anthony Hopkins. Moreover, the majority of the positive female representations were found in the above-mentioned movie in the character played by Catherine Zeta-Jones, and in Evita in the character played by Madonna. Participants examined these positive images as a step forward in the ways Latinos are portrayed, but we all failed to realize that often when Latinos are represented positively, the role is played by an Anglo actor or actress.

Finally, students discussed extensively the limited representation of Latino characters in the mass media, and the ways in which these representations influence our cultural perceptions at an unconscious level. As a reaction to these discussions a female student wrote in her Mass Media Analysis conclusions:

Cuando miré la película por primera vez, no vi los estereotipos. [Ahora] veo las mismas cosas en todas las películas que representan la cultura latina. Por ejemplo, no es probable que ellos tengan un trabajo notable, [siempre] vivan en una familia muy grande, sean pobres.
[When I watched the movie for the first time, I did not see the stereotypes. [Now] I see the same things in all the movies where the Latino culture is represented. For instance, it is not probable that they have a good job, they [always] live in a big family and are poor.]

This was one of the 20 students who admitted in her last journal entry that prior to the course, she had not realized the ways in which her cultural perceptions were

affected by commonly-held social assumptions. When she watched Fools Rush In for the second time as an assignment for the course she perceived many negative stereotypical representations that she had overlooked the first time. Likewise, prior to this activity, I had not realized that often, when Latino characters are portrayed in a positive manner, the roles are played by mainstream non-Latino actors and actresses, transforming the Latino persona into an unmarked mainstream character. In fact, I realized it when analyzing the data for this study.

Students also specified that challenging their cultural assumptions to understand better the target cultures facilitated the understanding of their own culture making them more self-aware:

> The best part of the class was the intercultural activities and discussion of stereotypes. In the beginning of the semester, the class was very segregated and I feel that through discussion of our opinions of stereotypes (not just Hispanics, but the skits we did that involved stereotypes of African Americans, the video we watched that stereotyped Chinese and American people, etc.) they were broken down and this united us.

Relevance as a Learning Tool

Relevance is a key element of the learning process because if the material is not relevant, the learning process is usually hindered. One of the multiple ways in which relevance was achieved in the classroom was when students created their own texts and shared them with their peers, which allowed them to learn from each other and develop presentational skills.

Eight out of the 24 students who wrote *Cultural Incidents* also connected their life experiences to the course material, using relevance as a learning tool. For instance, a female student worked in a retirement home and her incident was based on the conflict that occurred when her Honduran friend visited her job-place and could not comprehend why U.S. families sent their elders to these homes. Another example came from a male student who always dressed in black and based his incident on the 'Gothic style' shared by many U.S. young people. An African-American student from Baltimore, wrote about her experience as a first-year college student in Louisiana, and the cultural shock she suffered. Yet another male student focused on the Maryland crab-feast tradition and the reactions it could provoke in outsiders. Relating the class content to students' own reality proved to be a very useful learning tool.

Relevance was also achieved by using authentic material to which students had access. This practice links the Spanish classroom to the students' worlds, helping them understand that they are exposed to Latino cultures in their daily life, and that their influence is not limited to the Spanish classroom. This link was made apparent to some students who acknowledged that the first time they saw movies such as *Fools Rush In*, they did not realize how stereotypically the Latino characters were portrayed. Furthermore, many students seem to be unaware of the exposure they had to the Latino community in their daily lives. As a student wrote in her third journal entry: "In doing the ethnography and mass media

project, I clearly observed the Spanish community around me that I once never paid attention to."

Relevance between course content and students' realities was also ensured when students took an active role in their learning process, making the connection between the class content and their daily lives. Students related the class material to their own realities drawing upon previously acquired knowledge as a learning strategy. When conducting their mini-ethnographies, students used their social networks as a strategy to facilitate their work. Eighteen out of the 24 students who completed this assignment interviewed family, friends, and acquaintances of Latino decent. Some interviewees were family-related (a mother, a grandmother), some work-related (a co-worker), some community-related (the woman who cleaned her mother's house, a neighbor), and many were school-related (college friends or former teachers).

The few students whose social network did not include Latinos suffered some anxiety at the initial stages of the assignment. These were two female students who, until they actually conducted the interviews and enjoyed them, constantly complained about the requirement. When they informed me that they did not have an interviewee I told them that they could interview the regular camerawoman and me, but both disliked the idea and said that they would look for somebody else. As they failed in finding anybody else, they ended up following my suggestion. Their final reactions are illustrated in the following excerpt:

> *Aunque este proyecto estaba muy difícil, creo que he aprendido mucho. Aprendí primero que tengo mucho que aprender de español, pero también que es muy importante aprender sobre otras culturas y personas. Me gustó mucho hablar con XXX. Es una mujer muy inteligente y amable y estaba muy abierta sobre sus experiencias. Creo que con su ayuda yo he cumplido el objetivo que me fijé con esta entrevista: estudiar los conflictos afrontados por una extranjera en los Estados Unidos.*
>
> [Though this project was very difficult, I have learned a lot. First I learned that I have still a lot of Spanish to learn, but also that it is very important to learn about other cultures and people. I loved to talk to XXX. She is a very intelligent and kind woman and she was very open to talk about her experiences. I believe that with her help I have accomplished the objective I set for myself for this interview: to study the obstacles faced by a foreigner in the U.S.]

Another student whose social network did not include Latinos decided to go to a downtown Latino diner and try to interview construction workers. I advised him against this method but he insisted on trying it and failed in finding an interviewee. When he went to the diner he stood up and asked for volunteers for his project, and no customer responded to his call. He reported in his ethnography the difficulties and obstacles he had encountered in his attempt.

Also, for their out-of-class requirement, many students wrote about activities that were part of their daily lives, relating their own lives to the class content. Examples of reports students wrote were: Cristina, a talk-show a student regularly

watched, and the Latino night-clubs she attended; salsa lessons a student was taking; the Latino children a student tutored on Saturday mornings; the music store where a student worked and the Latino influence on U.S. music trends; or a collection of children's short-stories a student had and one of the stories she translated to Spanish. Finally, some students attended lectures on Latino topics held at the university that I would periodically announce.

Also, many students reported that because of the class content, they had decided to continue their Spanish studies. For instance, in her third journal entry, a female student wrote:

> The ethnography was extremely informative … I learned a lot and felt very immersed in the culture. The person interviewed showed me Spanish magazines and told me all about Puerto Rico and I believe this has had an effect on my decision to take Spanish next semester.

From the 24 students who completed the course, 10 took the next Spanish level the following semester, and five more informed me in the personal interviews I held with each of them at the end of the semester that they would be taking Spanish later in their undergraduate years. Therefore, relevance was also achieved in that the course influenced the students' decision to make the study of Spanish part of their lives in future semesters.

Conclusions

The literature suggests that there is a need in the U.S. to create alternative ways of teaching about target cultures in the foreign language classroom.

The literature suggests that there is a need in the U.S. to create alternative ways of teaching about target cultures in the foreign language classroom. This critical ethnography responds to the challenge through the design and implementation of a Spanish course that emphasizes the development of critical thinking skills along with language learning. The participants in this study critically approached the target cultures while learning the language, using activities driven from critical pedagogy. The objectives of these activities were to introduce students to the notion that each culture creates its own set of distinct values, and to encourage students to identify their own cultural values. They were designed to help students realize that their beliefs are determined by cultural values, to stimulate awareness of problems in transmitting one's own ideas by listening to others, and to develop the ability to change one's attitudes by adapting to new situations.

The importance of using activities driven by critical pedagogy in beginning and intermediate Spanish courses is twofold: it encourages critical thinking and promotes cultural awareness earlier in the language learning process. Furthermore, students use their own work to practice speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills by creating original texts and presenting them to their peers.

Relating the course content to students' realities facilitated the understanding of the target cultures and the development of critical thinking skills. The most significant consequence of this practice was that students started relating the

content of their Spanish class to other courses they were taking, cross-referencing knowledge among the courses of their major. Furthermore, 50% of the students informed me that they were going to continue their Spanish studies partly as a result of the positive experience of this course, and 10 out of the 24 students who completed the course, also completed the subsequent level of Spanish.

The learning process was facilitated by examining the connection between students' daily lives and the target cultures, and by deconstructing the misperception that the study of Latino cultures is confined to the Spanish classroom. Therefore, participants realized the extent of their exposure to the Latinos who live among them, which helped students understand the importance of learning Spanish, and helped me become more aware of the resources that are available to contextualize the course content in ways that are motivating for students.

Throughout the semester the analysis of cultural assumptions increased in complexity and depth. Findings show that participants increased their critical thinking skills analyzing mainstream interpretations of culture that related positive stereotypes with unmarked social traits, and negative stereotypes with marked characteristics. All of the participants, including myself, admitted having enriched their knowledge and understanding of the cultures examined in class, gaining not only cultural awareness but increasing each participants' self-awareness of their own culture. Therefore, participants analyzed common cultural assumptions, which helped deepen their understanding of the social, political, and cultural realities of the target groups. In this way, a critical pedagogical approach can interrupt conventional identity discourses by exposing how differences are produced against the unmarked mainstream norm.

Finally, critical pedagogy encourages the creation of a new speech community based on students' individual voices. Class activities provided occasions to analyze our roles in the classroom community, roles that were modified throughout the semester depending on students´ personal journeys. Activities driven from critical pedagogy were favorable for building a new speech community, in which

> *... critical pedagogy encourages the creation of a new speech community based on students' individual voices.*

reserved students could confront their fears of speaking in public. Participants learned to negotiate the cultural content by creating and respecting the individual voices that formed the class community.

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Appendix A

Hill, W. E. "My Wife and My Mother-in-Law." *Puck 16*, 11, Nov. 1915.

Instrucciones: Mira el dibujo y elije la respuesta correcta según tu opinión. Luego, comparte tus respuestas con tu compañer@. Explica tus respuestas.

1. *La mujer es*　　　　*a. joven*
　　　　　　　　　　b. vieja
2. *Ella es*　　　　　*a. soltera*
　　　　　　　　　　b. viuda
3. *Su ropa es*　　　　*a. elegante*
　　　　　　　　　　b. descuidada
4. *Ella es*　　　　　*a. de clase alta*
　　　　　　　　　　b. de clase baja
5. *Ella es*　　　　　*a. rica*
　　　　　　　　　　b. pobre
6. *¿Es bonita?*　　　*a. Sí*
　　　　　　　　　　b. No
7. *¿Es inteligente?*　*a. Sí*
　　　　　　　　　　b. No
8. *¿Confiarías en ella?*　*a. Sí*
　　　　　　　　　　b. No

Critical activities in the Spanish classroom

> 9. *¿Querrías que fuera tu madre?*   *a. Sí*
>   *b. No*
> 10. *¿Es posible que la encontraras*   *a. en un restaurante?*
>   *b. en la calle?*
> 11. *¿La invitarías a cenar?*   *a. Sí*
>   *b. No*

[Instructions: Look at the picture and chose the correct answer. Then share your answers with a classmate. Explain your answers.

1. The woman is old/young; 2. She is single/widow; 3. Her clothes are elegant/ unkempt; 4. She is upper class/lower class; 5. She is rich/poor; 6. Is she pretty? Yes/ No; 7. Is she smart? Yes/No; 8. Would you trust her? Yes/No; 9. Would you like her to be your mother? Yes/No; 10. Would you see her at a restaurant/in the street? 11. Would you invite her to dinner? Yes/No.]

Appendix B

Una Parábola: Introducción a valores culturales

Había una vez dos amigos que vivían juntos en una casa en un pueblo a las orillas de un río muy peligroso. Siempre estaban juntos y, un día, a Felipe se le rompieron las gafas. El pobre de Felipe no podía ver nada sin sus gafas. Rosamaría se sentía muy mal por Felipe y quería ayudarlo. Felipe le dijo que sólo había una solución: encontrar unas gafas nuevas. La única oculista que él conocía vivía al otro lado del río. Rosamaría debía cruzar el río (que estaba lleno de cocodrilos) para ir a ver a la oculista.

Rosamaría buscó día y noche a alguien que la ayudara a cruzar el río. No había ningún puente. Sólo encontró a un hombre llamado Esteban, que tenía un barco. Rosamaría le pidió que la ayudara a cruzar el río y Esteban aceptó pero pidió $20.000 a cambio. Rosamaría no tenía tanto dinero y le rogó que la dejara pagarle poco a poco, a lo largo de cinco años. Esteban se mostró implacable: o todo el dinero o Rosamaría tendría que cruzar el río nadando. Rosamaría estaba muy confundida y fue a visitar a su amigo Paco. Le explicó toda la historia: las gafas, los cocodrilos y el dinero. Paco le contestó que era su problema y que tenía que solucionarlo ella sola.

Rosamaría decidió que tenía que ayudar a su amigo Felipe. Una noche entró en la tienda del pueblo, robó el dinero, cruzó el río, y volvió con unas gafas nuevas. Cuando le contó a Felipe toda la historia él se enfadó muchísimo. Felipe le dijo a Rosamaría que tenía que irse de la casa porque él no podía vivir con una ladrona.

Rosamaría estaba descorazonada. Fue a ver a su vecina Regina y le contó lo que había pasado. Tras escuchar la historia, Regina le dijo que aunque no fueran amigas, podía irse a vivir con ella.

Escribe el orden de los personajes (Rosamaría, Felipe, Esteban, Paco, Regina) según el respeto que sientes por ellos. Escribe la razón por la cuál respetas o no respetas a cada personaje.

_____

_____

_____

_____

[Adapted and translated from: Holmes, H. & Guild, S. (Eds). (1971). *A Manual of Teaching Techniques for Intercultural Education.* New York: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.]

[A Parable: An Introduction to Cultural Values

Once upon a time there were two friends who lived together in a house in a village near a very dangerous river. They were always together and one day, Felipe broke his glasses. Poor Felipe couldn't see a thing without his glasses. Rosemary felt terrible for Felipe and wanted to help him. Felipe told her that there was only one solution: get new glasses. The only eye doctor that he knew about lived at the other side of the river. Rosemary had to cross the river (that was infested with crocodiles) to go see the eye doctor.

Day and night Rosemary looked for someone who would help her cross the river. There were no bridges. She only found a man called Esteban who had a boat. Rosemary asked him to help her cross the river and Esteban agreed but he asked for $20,000 in exchange. Rosemary didn't have that kind of money and begged him to allow her to pay in small installments, throughout five years. Esteban refused: he would get the whole amount or Rosemary would have to cross the river swimming. Rosemary was very confused and went to see his friend Paco. She explained the whole story: the glasses, the crocodiles, and the money. Paco's response was that this was not his problem and that she had to solve it by herself.

Rosemary decided to help her friend Felipe. One night she broke into the village shop, stole the money, crossed the river, and returned with new glasses. When she told Felipe the whole story, he was furious. Felipe told Rosemary that she had to leave the house because he could not live with a thief.

Rosemary was heartbroken. She went to see her neighbor, Regina, and she told her what had happened. After hearing the story, Regina told her that even if they were not friends, she could stay with her.

List, in rank of order, the characters whose behavior you most approve (Rosemary, Felipe, Esteban, Paco, Regina). Explain your answers.]

Critical activities in the Spanish classroom

Appendix C

Incidente Cultural: CONVERSACIÓN O ACOSO

El jefe de Jane en Washington D.C. le pidió que fuera a México D.F. a representar a la compañía en una conferencia. Jane estaba muy contenta de tener esta oportunidad y de poder visitar otro país. Todo estuvo bien, el viaje a la ciudad y la llegada al hotel, hasta la fiesta que hubo la noche antes de la apertura de la conferencia. En la fiesta, una joven ejecutiva de IMB en México, Dinorah, se presentó a Jane. Al empezar la conversación, Jane pensó que Dinorah se acercaba demasiado. Cada vez que Jane intentaba poner una distancia entre las dos, Dinorah se acercaba más. A los cinco minutos, Jane se encontró arrinconada contra una pared. Dinorah siguió hablando muy cerca de ella. Como Jane se sentía muy incómoda, educadamente se excusó y volvió a su cuarto en el hotel y no volvió a aceptar ninguna invitación a ninguna fiesta. ¿Cómo ayudarías a Jane a entender este incidente?

1. *Dinorah quería tener una relación sexual con Jane.*
2. *No es frecuente en México que una mujer represente a su compañía. Dinorah quería ser la única mujer e hizo todo lo posible para que Jane se sintiera incómoda y se fuera.*
3. *La distancia que mantienen dos personas mexicanas es distinta a la distancia que mantienen dos estadounidenses.*
4. *Dinorah nunca había conocido a una extranjera y sentía tanta curiosidad que quería tocarla.*

Razonamientos para las distintas explicaciones

1. *Aún en el caso de que Dinorah fuera lesbiana, no es probable que acosara a Jane en un evento laboral. No hay pruebas para mantener este razonamiento. Por favor, elija otra vez.*
2. *Actualmente en México hay muchas mujeres ejecutivas al igual que en EE.UU. Hay una mejor respuesta, por favor, elija otra vez.*
3. *Esta es la respuesta más probable. En México y en otros países de cultura latina, la distancia que mantienen dos personas cuando hablan es más corta que la que mantienen dos personas en EE.UU. u otros países anglosajones. En EE.UU. la distancia adecuada son unas 18-20 pulgadas mientras que en México son unas 10-12 pulgadas. Ambas mujeres, Jane y Dinorah, estaban intentando mantener la distancia aceptada en sus culturas.*
4. *En México hay mucha inmigración de otros países, incluyendo de EE.UU. Es muy improbable que una ejecutiva de una compañía multinacional no haya conocido nunca a una extranjera. Por favor, elija otra vez.*

[Cultural Incident: Conversation or Assault

Jane's boss at Washington D.C. asked her to go to Mexico D.F. to represent the company at a conference. Jane was very happy for this opportunity and for being

able to visit another country. Everything went well, the trip to the city, the arrival at the hotel, until the party the night before the conference opening. At the party, a young executive from IMB Mexico, Dinorah, introduced herself to Jane. When they started talking, Jane felt that Dinorah was standing too close to her. Every time Jane tried to put some distance between them, Dinorah would step closer. After five minutes, Jane found herself cornered against the wall. Dinorah kept talking really close to her. As Jane felt extremely uncomfortable, she politely excused herself and returned to her hotel room. She did not accept any other invitations to attend parties. How would you help Jane understand what happened?

1. Dinorah wanted to have sex with Jane.
2. In Mexico it is not common for a woman to represent a company. Dinorah did not want any competition and did all what was in her power to scare away Jane.
3. The appropriate distance to keep between two people is different in Mexico and in the U.S.
4. Dinorah had never seen a foreigner and she was so intrigued by her that she wanted to touch her.

<div align="center">Rationales for the different explanations</div>

1. Even in the hypothetical case that Dinorah had been a lesbian, it is not probable that she would harass Jane in a professional event. There is no evidence for this explanation. Please, try again.
2. Currently in Mexico there are many female executives as in the U.S. There is a better explanation. Please, try again.
3. This is the most probable answer. In Mexico, as well as other Spanish speaking countries, the distance kept between two people when they are interacting is shorter than the distance kept in the U.S. and other English-speaking countries. In the U.S. the appropriate distance is 18-20 inches while in Mexico it is 10-12 inches. Both women were keeping appropriate distances for their cultures.
4. There is a lot of immigration from other countries, including the U.S., to Mexico. It is very unlikely that an executive from a multinational company had never met a foreigner. Please, try again.]

Critical activities in the Spanish classroom

<div align="center">

Appendix D

Instructions to Analyze Textbooks

</div>

Requisitos:
    (1) Cover Page:
        - Student's name
        - Class
        - Activity's name
        - Title of the Textbook
        - Objective of activity
    (2) Pages 1, 2 and 3:

You have to write a two-to-three-pages essay analyzing the textbook you have chosen. Use the handout filled out when analyzing the English textbooks as a guide. And please, CHECK YOUR SPELLING, AGREEMENTS AND CONJUGATIONS. Use a DICTIONARY to double check spelling. Check the uses of *SER* and *ESTAR* and the uses of the SUBJUCTIVE in our textbook. You may want to edit each other's essays before you turn them in. Also, proofread it yourself a couple of times before you turn them in.

I would like you to analyze the cover of the book (*la portada*), the pictures (*las fotografías*), drawings (*los dibujos*), the cultural activities (*las actividades culturales*) and the grammar (*la gramática*). Analyze the language used, if the grammar and the cultural activities are integrated and how they are integrated. Please, give examples.

If there is no diversity in the pictures, or if there is, I would like you to explain why that is good or bad. Likewise, if there is no diversity in the language, or if there is, I would like you to explain why that is good or bad. If the grammar is integrated I would like you to give examples. If the culture is represented in a stereotypical manner, I also want you to give examples.

I want you to check if the textbook (*el libro de texto*) has a table of contents (*un índice*), glossaries (*glosarios*), dictionaries (*diccionarios*) and if you think they are good or bad and why. Also check at the beginning of the book if it has supplementary materials such as a video (*un video*), a tape (*una cinta*), a workbook (*un libro de trabajo*) ... and if they seem good or bad and why.

Finally, I want you to structure your essay cohesively. You need an introduction (*introducción*) where you present the textbook and you explain how your essay is going to be structured (i.e., *Primero voy a analizar las ilustraciones del libro. Luego, analizaré el idioma usado en este texto...*). Then you need a development (*desarrollo*), divided in paragraphs for your different sections (you may use titles and subtitles if you wish). Finally, you will need a conclusion (*conclusión*) where you may want to give recommendations (using the subjunctive) to improve the textbook you have analyzed.