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FOSTERING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN A UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM: WORKING ON HISTORICAL EMPATHY THROUGH THE WORK CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE *THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK*, BY CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

FOMENTANDO LA COMPETENCIA INTERCULTURAL EN EL AULA UNIVERSITARIA: TRABAJANDO LA EMPATÍA HISTÓRICA A TRAVÉS DE THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK, DE CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

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ABSTRACT

Historical empathy is defined as the process of cognitive and affective commitment that students acquire with historical figures to understand their experiences, decision-making and actions. Historical empathy involves understanding how people in the past

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thought, felt, decided, acted, and faced consequences within a specific historical and social context. In this way, historical empathy is a fundamental tool for the paradigm shift in historical teaching that connects three processes: historical contextualization, perspective taking, and affective connection. In this way, the proposal we present has two objectives: to work historical empathy from literature, a novel and unique approach, and to work it in a university classroom. We consider that due to the exclusion that women have traditionally suffered, their literature is the most pertinent for the development of this proposal. For this reason, we will use the short-story “A Private Experience”, included in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck*.

KEYWORDS: intercultural education, historical empathy, African Literatures, coeducation.

RESUMEN

La empatía histórica se define como el proceso de compromiso cognitivo y afectivo que los estudiantes adquieren con las figuras históricas para comprender sus experiencias, toma de decisiones y acciones. La empatía histórica implica el entendimiento de cómo las personas, en el pasado, pensaban, sentían, decidían, actuaban y afrontaban las consecuencias dentro de un contexto histórico y social específico. Esta es una herramienta fundamental para el cambio de paradigma en la enseñanza histórica conectando tres procesos: la contextualización histórica, la toma de perspectiva y la conexión afectiva. Así, la propuesta que presentamos tiene dos objetivos: trabajar la empatía histórica desde la literatura, enfoque novedoso y único, y trabajarla en un aula universitaria. Consideramos que, debido a la exclusión que tradicionalmente han sufrido las mujeres, su literatura es la

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más pertinente para desarrollar esta propuesta. Por ello, utilizaremos el cuento “A Private Experience”, de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, incluido en *The Thing Around Your Neck*.

Palabras clave: *educación intercultural, empatía histórica, Literatura Africana, coeducación.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The works of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have consecrated her as one of the best-known writers amid the so-called third-generation of Nigerian novelists. Despite her success, however, neither Adichie nor her Nigerian writer counterparts are recurrent figures within the literary canon of the English Studies curricula in the Spanish University System. English speaking authors who belong to colonized countries or are part of an ethnic minority are commonly set within elective subjects, and the histories of their countries are rarely mentioned in the History classes. Furthermore, the presence of female writers within these classes is still scarce. Obioma Nnaemeka (1994) asserts that, for a long time, women writers were absent from the African literary canon for three reasons: their lack of knowledge of the colonizers' language, the ideals of the colonial Victorian education for women, and publication matters. The end of the colony, however, did not bring a substantial change to the issue, and even nowadays, the Western universities' anglophone canon is mostly dominated by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (Kenya) and Chinua Achebe (Nigeria) (Zulfiqar, 2016). The literary tradition of African women is formed of an extensive oral literature and a more contemporary written approach, which is considered to have begun with the publication of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966).

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Many works of West African women writers show a perspective which challenges the Eurocentric views of African womanhood, which has traditionally portrayed them as poor hungry women who cannot take care of their children (Aidoo, 1992). These writers subvert this view and, further, “strive to create a more egalitarian culture and challenge the narrow-minded and patriarchal ethics of their respective societies” (Zalfiqar, 2016, pp. 9-10). Adichie’s writing reshapes the memory and history of these national cultures, and provides a personal perspective which envisions the multiplicity of the African experiences by incorporating women protagonists.

The short story “A Private Experience”, included in her collection *The Thing Around your Neck* (2009), continues the reconceptualization of the narratives in Nigeria by providing an encounter between Chika, a high-class Lagos based Medicine student and a Hausa market woman during the religious riots between Christians and Hausa Muslims in the northern Kanos state during the early 2000s. There are rarely any references to these conflicts within the courses related to the Histories of the English-speaking countries. Moreover, the narratives given in these classes are always related to the colonization of Africa by European countries. Consequently, we consider Adichie’s piece as a great source to put into practice the topic of historical empathy in an English Studies classroom, since this story produces a dual-dimensional and cognitive-affective construction of a rarely known historical event (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). Moreover, this teaching proposal is constructed from a coeducative methodology, with the aims of a paradigm change where there is room for the inclusion of the realities and knowledge of those minorities who have been traditionally silenced and misplaced (Subirats, 2017). Therefore, this proposal sets ground for the construction of an intercultural perspective in the university classroom.

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2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Fostering Interculturality in the classroom through a gender perspective

The idea of an Intercultural Education is in a constant locus of dispute towards its meaning and objectives. Adhering to Aguado's (2003) definition, intercultural practices in the classroom should provide equal opportunities directed to all the members in the society and, further, it should go beyond the classroom. Given that its major goal is the development of citizens with a critical stance towards their reality, it is expected that interculturality should be fostered within all the realms of education. At the university level, adopting an intercultural educational model should provide the creation of cultural, curricular, social and organizational models where equality will be central. Therefore, and as Benet et al. (2020) assert, the main goal in the classroom is to pursue inclusive values as those related to equality, rights, participation, sustainability, respect for diversity and positive valuation.

Walsh (2009) asserts that interculturality is a work-in-progress rather than a goal to achieve, since society and, consequently, our classrooms are dynamic and in constant change. Currently, the typical university classroom is homogenous, which reinforces more explicitly the need for diversity in their curricula. Literature is the perfect tool to construct a more diverse curriculum; as Handelsman states, "the role that literature has played and continues to play as a site of struggle based on the word or, if you will, from the power of language" (2021, p. 78). Literature is central to the integral development of the human being. Moreover, an intercultural literary education plays an essential role in the construction of the individual and collective identities of readers to understand not only their immediate reality, but also to understand the other diverse realities which surrounds them (Ballester & Ibarra, 2015).

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Literature offers a contesting space to critically analyze the multiple realities surrounding us. Still, the issue relies on the choices made regarding the literature that we select in the classroom. As we stated in the introduction, the canon in English studies still relegates certain texts to elective classes, being such the case with African Literatures. This reality, despite being 2022, remains pretty much similar to Thiong'o's experience while being an English Literature student in Makerere: "In short, most universities tended to ignore the vast literatures produced, although in European languages, outside the formal boundaries of Europe and Euramerica" (1993, p. 25). Ironically, Thiong'o is nowadays one of the very few African authors consecrated in the canon, while his female writer counterparts narrating the multiple realities of the African continent are invisible in the literature curriculums. Women writers, except for those erected in Bloom's Western canon, have been peripheral and subject to be protagonists as well in elective subjects (Showalter, 1971, 1998).

Even if Thiong'o and Showalter speak from their own oppression, each of these oppressions doubles in the case of African women writers. The intersectional lens allows us to recognize the categories of gender and race which intersect and perpetuate to oblivion the stories of women of color (including those in central spaces of power such as the United Kingdom and the United States). Intersectionality helps us reaffirm the necessity of including the writings of women of color in our classroom curriculums. Fortunately, the last decade has seen the rise of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as the one of the representatives of the new voices of the West African women writers. Her works move away from the previous "write back to the colonizers" ideology and are rather focused on exploring the human condition in their local spheres (Eze, 2016). The inclusion of her narrative in a "History and Culture of the English-Speaking Countries" provides not only an

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opportunity to learn from a rarely mentioned historical event in an anglophone country but, further, positions women's writing and *herstories* as central in the learning process. Thus, by analyzing Adichie's text and using her narrative as a tool to comprehend some of the historical processes which have taken place in Nigeria after its independence, we provide an intercultural and coeducational vision which aligns with the objectives of the current pedagogical and legal framework in the educative system. The visibility of women's achievements and stories in the classroom changes the structures in which knowledge has been constructed and, what is more, it allows a paradigm change in the way women have been perceived, identified and constructed (Subirats, 2017). The analysis of Adichie's short-story opens a window to learn about a historical event which took place in the early 2000's in Nigeria. The change of focus, where women are narrators and protagonists, sets in motion the works for a new lens in the study of this historical event by working on historical empathy.

2.2. Historical Empathy

Seixas and Morton define historical thinking as "the creative process that historians go through to interpret the evidence of the past and generate the stories of history" (2013, p. 2). Even if this definition, or the ways of acquiring this thinking amid the diverse theoretical schools vary, historical thinking has been key to the teaching of history globally and has completely changed its understanding (Seixas, 2017). Historical empathy is inherently related to the work of historical thinking and, in fact, some schools regard it as one of its foundations. It permits us the connection with the context of our research interest and helps us understand the historical processes and the people who were part of them. Historical empathy is defined as the process

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of cognitive and affective commitment that students acquire with historical figures to understand and contextualize the living of their experiences, their decision-making and their actions. Historical empathy involves understanding how people in the past thought, felt, decided, acted, and faced consequences within a specific historical and social context (Endacott & Brooks, 2013).

In order to put it into practice, it is necessary to use the historical method, by analyzing those sources who bear witness to that specific context. Its distinctive element is to include the emotional dimension within the process. There is a clear need to connect the context or subject of study and the student who researches, which can only occur by the comparison of experiences. As this individual analysis generates diverse degrees of empathy (Davis, 2001), this opens up the possibility of working in a cooperative manner to enrich the final result of the process. Additionally, secondary sources are also valid to work on historical empathy in the classroom, despite primary sources being the most accepted method of analysis (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). Furthermore, and due to the emotional dimension that is sought, the artistic sources, that by their very nature can appeal more directly to the student's emotions, take on a special value. As an example, cinema is one of the disciplines most commonly used to achieve this objective and has proven its value in engaging students as long as it is correctly used (Stoddard, 2012). More recent research has shown the good results obtained by using drama as a tool (Kisidaetl al., 2020). Fictional literature, which goes beyond Historical literature (Montemayor, 2008), has also demonstrated to be a good instrument to develop empathy. Even if its ability to pursue an empathic connection has been mostly used in intercultural education, its utility to develop the perspective and historical empathy in child and young adults' education has also been proven (Field, 2001).



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3. TEACHING PROPOSAL

3.1. Justification

The didactic proposal presented in this paper is contextualized within the subject “History and Culture of English-Speaking Countries” of the English Studies degree at the UPV/EHU. It is a compulsory course taught at the second year, and around 100 students are usually enrolled. The focus of the course is to instruct students in the major historical events occurring in the English-speaking countries, with a specific focus on the United Kingdom and the United States. As stated in the introduction, English-speaking authors who belong to colonized countries or are part of an ethnic minority are commonly set within elective subjects, and the histories of their countries are rarely mentioned in the History classes. Thus, including them within the compulsory curriculum is considered a step forward in developing a more complete and intercultural degree. Likewise, using literature written by women within this compulsory curriculum favors the inclusion of the gender perspective in the degree of English Studies.

3.2. Methodology

Based on Endacott and Brooks (2013), our proposal is structured in four phases: 1) an introduction to the historical situation; 2) an investigation phase with an analysis of the primary source material; 3) a display phase where students demonstrate the understanding they have developed (i.e. the analysis of the Adichie’s short story); 4) a reflection phase where they connect past and present events with their personal experience. These phases engage the students in a reflective and analytical process which are necessary to understand the three concepts of historical

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empathy: historical contextualization (phases 1 and 2), perspective taking (phase 3), and affective connection (phase 4).

This project will be developed using active methodologies such as flipped classroom and the puzzle technique. By following Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson, 2014), the activities which require a higher cognitive and analytical level will take place inside the classroom in order to enhance the social interaction in the teaching-learning process, and ameliorate the students' performance and the group integration (Traver & García, 2004).

3.3. Materials

Traditional classwork of historical empathy suggests the use of primary sources as the main focus of the study and the optional addition of secondary sources such as audiovisual and literary material (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). For the purpose of this proposal, however, and given that it is an English Studies degree, we consider essential positioning as the central source in our project Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short-story "A Private Experience", included in her anthology *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009a). This work provides the opportunity of not only researching on historical empathy, but also on establishing Nigerian women's narratives as protagonists in the History of their country in particular as well as in the History of the English-speaking countries.

In order to facilitate a reflection between past and present events with their personal experience (phase 4), we selected and connected a number of sources from the Biafran War in Nigeria and the Spanish Civil War. In order to work on the students' empathies on the reality in Nigeria, original testimonies of people who endured the Biafran War (collected in the project Biafran War Memories, n.d.) and

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testimonies of people who suffered the Spanish Civil War (collected in DARA (n.d.) and SIPCA (n.d.) Archives). In regards to the selected visual material, Gilles Caron and Don MacCullin's pictures in addition to Getty Images have been selected as sources to portray the Biafran War, whereas Pares Repository is the archive selected to show images from the Spanish Civil War (PARES, n.d.).

The analysis of all the sources, despite being recent in historiography, are of extremely importance to delve into recent history and the processes of memory. We consider photography to be essential in this analysis as the image/ document not only materializes the past, but also symbolizes those events that society has wanted to be remembered (Orenga, 2015). For this reason, in addition to the formal analysis, there will be an interpretive analysis of what photography represents as memory. Likewise, in the analysis of oral sources, a systematic analysis has been proposed that delves into the subject's experience, in the how, highlighting its value as memory (Llona, 2012). With the aim of delving into the gender perspective that works in the literary work, the testimonies of women that can be transmitted from the analyzed primary sources will be valued.

3.4. Teaching Objectives

As for the objectives related to this teaching proposal, we expect:

1. To train students in the analysis of historical thinking and memory, as means of becoming aware of the reality that surrounds them.
2. To use women's Literature as a tool to understand History, as well as to promote the values of critical thinking.
3. To develop the values of historical empathy by means of using real life material and fictional stories which account for real historical events.

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4. To promote the values of Intercultural Education by researching on those *herstories* condemned to oblivion.
5. To broaden their perspective on the reality around them, and to become aware of the necessity of opening up current world narratives.

3.5. Teaching Proposal

The structure of the teaching proposal is structured in three sessions of two hours each, which corresponds to a semester-long subject of 6 ETCS.

3.5.1. First session (phase 1): Previous judgements and opinions activation and historical contextualization

The session begins with a fifteen-minute-long literary gathering about Adichie's (2009a) short-story which will have been read at home. This part of the session will be recorded to be compared with the literary gathering which will take place at the end of the teaching unit. The objective is to allow students to self-assess their own teaching process. This literary gathering will also provide the opportunity to identify those students who are familiar with the historical context in which the story is situated so that they will become facilitators in the group-work.

Once the discussion is over, the class will be divided in groups of four, trying to have one facilitator per group. Each member of the group will be devoted to searching information about the following topics of analysis: gender and religious differences (student 1), borders and their historical construction (student 2), ethnic differences (student 3), and the construction of the historical narrative (student 4). Once each member has the corresponding information gathered, they will join all the students they share the number with in expert groups by using the puzzle technique and

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they will complete the information they researched on. After sharing with their expert peers, they will return to their original groups and share what they have learned collaboratively. Finally, the students will make a conceptual map that collects the work.

This teaching technique provides the opportunity of making students focus on a single category of analysis and on cooperating in order to obtain a complete learning experience. The sources selected for this study will include scientific articles (Heerten & Moses, 2014; Gaya & Rakodi, 2011), as well as audiovisual material (AlJazeera, 2010; Waggeh, 2013; Adichie, 2009b).

3.5.2. Session 2 (phase 2): Investigation phase with primary source material analysis

In this session, students will work with the primary sources offered by the teacher, following again the puzzle technique where, in small expert groups, students will analyze the same picture and oral testimony. We propose to create groups of experts who will analyze the same oral testimonies and photographs, having to analyze sources of both conflicts, the Nigerian and the Spanish ones. Due to the difficulty of the analysis, we would not recommend more than four sources per group. We have sought to confront direct personal testimonies to delve into the difference between historical empathy and perspective taking, something necessary to work on historical empathy (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). The first session permitted working on the latter concept when analyzing the sociohistorical context and, in this second session, there is an interest in going in depth on the feelings of these historical characters through the reading of their testimonies. Furthermore, by introducing questions about the personal experience of the students in the primary sources' analysis, the process of creating empathy is reinforced. Once the students have



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analyzed the historical sources in the first half of the class, they will pool the results from the experts' meeting. Finally, the class as a whole will draw conclusions from all the sources they have analyzed.

These are some tentative questions for an in-depth analysis of the primary sources (see table 1, based on Orenga, 2015; Llona, 2012). They try to promote the connection with the protagonists while working to raise awareness of the cultural/historical filters of the students:

Table 1. *Questions for an in-depth analysis of the primary resources*

Oral testimonies	Visual sources
Who is the interviewed person?	What does the image represent?
What does this person narrate?	What does this image narrate?
Where does the action take place?	Who are the protagonists?
Who are the protagonists of the story?	Where was this picture taken?
In which historical period does it take place?	Who took the picture? With which purpose?
How did this person live this event?	In which historical period did this take place?
How does this person remember the event?	Which elements help us locate this picture in this historical period?
Why do you think they say what they say?	How did this person live that moment?
How do you think this person felt at that moment?	What do you think she was feeling at that moment?
How do you think they feel now?	If they were still alive, how do you think they feel?
What has impacted you the most?	What impacts us the most from this picture?
How would you feel if you were in her shoes?	How would you have felt in that situation?
Each of the answers need to be supported by quotes from the interview.	Students should try to stick to the photographic document, without opening themselves to interpretative drifts about the protagonists.

Source: Adapted from Orenga, 2015; Llona, 2012

3.5.3. Session 3 (phases 3 and 4): Analysis of the short story and reflection

Adichie's (2009a) short-story will be central to this session. The analysis in the previous session of the primary sources allows the class to a new reading, where the knowledge acquired will provide a substantial change in the understanding of the text. Firstly, we will dedicate the first fifteen minutes of the class to watch the

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recording of the literary gathering. Afterwards, the teacher will invite students to reflect on the changes experienced in the students and their perception of the characters and their lives after knowing the context. In order to provide a more insightful and critical analysis, students will join groups and create two lists where they will write the characteristics which define the two protagonists of the short-story, Chika and the Hausa Market woman according to Adichie's description.

Once they are done with the activity, we will compare the fictional characters with the characteristics we have extracted from the analysis of the primary sources. This comparison will serve to evaluate whether students have gained a critical understanding of the sociohistorical context of this particular time. Furthermore, this session will help assess the two great risks when we work with empathy in the classroom: 1) "jumping to presentist conclusions; 2) engaging in "egoistic drift" by inserting their own affective positionalities into the historical figure's situation" (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). The final reflection, presumably, will set ground for a discussion on ethical concepts related to intercultural education and values, and it will also serve to make connections with the present lives of the students. As stated in the theoretical framework, teaching based on empathy and historical empathy provides tools for the students to delve into their critical thinking and become able to face current ethical dilemmas.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The didactic proposal presented in this paper aims at developing a more inclusive curricula in English Studies. In order to do so, we included the History of a colonized country (i.e., Nigeria) and its ethnic groups within a compulsory subject using the work of the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In this

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way, we aimed at fostering both the intercultural competence and the gender perspective.

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, historical empathy leads to positive outcomes within and beyond the classroom. Besides helping students achieve curricular goals, seeing historical figures as human beings help students evaluate their own beliefs and decisions using the perspective of history (Endacott & Brooks, 2013), promote understanding of complex ideas, decision-making and historical action (Doppen, 2000; Endacott, 2010; Foster, 1999), facilitate establishing connections between the past and present events (Brooks, 2011), and invites students to form moral and ethical issues (Levstik & Barton, 2011). These skills are fundamental in the development of critical citizens, a main goal in the Basque Pedagogical Framework *Heziberri 2020* and the European Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, which strive for an intercultural education where the values of diversity, equality and inclusion are central. Yet, in order to achieve the aforementioned skills, working with familiar content, paying particular attention to the selection of materials, maintaining a reflective approach through the proposal and structuring essential questions may be particularly worth achieving (see also Endacott & Sturtz, 2015).

Regarding the limitations of using this methodology, we should underline the possibility of sympathizing rather than empathizing with the historical figures proposed. In this way, presenting exclusively historical figures who experienced particularly traumatic situations may promote that students project their feelings of compassion instead of trying to understand them (Eisenberg, 2000). In order to avoid this type of circumstance, we propose balancing the type of historical figure presented in the didactic proposals by alternating figures who have experienced horrible situations, and figures who have provoked them.

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In this way, we would like to invite teachers to include the narratives traditionally excluded from the canon in their subjects, at the university level and in secondary and primary education. There is considerable need for attention to the positive outcomes that being in the shoes of others may foster. In this sense, we are hopeful that future education will update these curricula in order to include not only the narratives of colonized countries, but also the narratives of the students that today are part of our classrooms.

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