
Language, culture and identity at a crossroads. Chicana literature, reflections and borders

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ABSTRACT

In her collection of seminal essays titled *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa acknowledges that “for some of us, language is a homeland”. The idea of language as a territory to inhabit, and as a space that belongs to those who speak it remains a constant throughout this paper. In order to identify and reflect on some of these issues, we present a didactic sequence carried out in the context of classes of English as a foreign language in a secondary school in the Province of Buenos Aires. Our starting point is the figure and work of Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros (b. 1954) and our aim is to disentangle some of the connections between language, culture and identity. The tasks which make up the sequence seek not only to foster communicative and discursive competence in the English language, but also to promote processes of reflection and creative and critical thinking. We have chosen to explore the relations between language, culture and

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identity through literature because, as Chicote (2013) points out, literary texts are not just samples of language in use; they show how people relate to one another and how communities process experience, remember the past and project the future. As the tasks unfold, we dare ask some crucial questions: What English/es do we teach and learn? Who does it/do they belong to? What role do the languages we know and/or speak play in the construction of our identities? And most importantly, in what ways can (or should?) the English class contribute to raising awareness in relation to these issues?

Introduction

Teaching English in secondary schools in the Province of Buenos Aires has traditionally meant following prefabricated units from textbooks - most of which are aimed at an international audience. At first sight, these textbooks may appear to be a practical, easily available choice for teachers, particularly if they are in charge of several courses in different schools. However, as critical professionals, once we start using EFL textbooks, we often realize that we may spend quite a lot of time selecting and redesigning the tasks because they do not necessarily adapt to the context of our classes.

The sociocultural background, the linguistic needs and the interests of our students are not always met by textbooks which have been designed for a much larger audience. As a result, we often find ourselves questioning their topics, tasks and overall aims in an exercise of reflection about our own teaching practices. Why do we teach a (foreign) language? What definition of language do we have in mind? Whose English are we trying to teach? In his essay “Palabrería para versos”, Jorge Luis Borges claims that language builds realities (“la lengua es edificadora de realidades”). What realities can our students build with English as a foreign language? How can we make English a language they may feel their own?

After all, we may regard language as a territory to inhabit, and as a space that belongs to those who speak it. This conceptual framework has become the basis to design teaching materials for our daily lessons in the secondary schools where we work. These teaching resources intend to be as authentic and meaningful as possible despite the grading needed to cater for our students’ ages and levels of proficiency in English.

We have designed the didactic sequence presented in this paper for students in 6th year in a secondary school in the Province of Buenos Aires. In this school, 6th year students have a two-hour English lesson once a week and we expect to cover the sequence in approximately three lessons.

Different approaches to EFL teaching serve as a framework for designing the tasks that make up this didactic sequence. First, the Communicative Approach which adheres to a constructivist notion of language acquisition promotes the use of activities that foster the development of communicative competence and communicative performance (Canale and Swain, 1980). The former refers to the relation and interaction between the grammatical competence and the sociolinguistic competence. The latter focuses on the actual use of language for authentic communicative purposes (Canale and Swain, 1980:6).

We have taken our definition of task from Rod Ellis, who defines it as “a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of content (rather than language)” (2003: 64). Therefore, students are expected to focus on both form and meaning because the aim of a task is that the language outcome resembles language used in the real world.

The combination of these two approaches is useful for us to deal with language in the classroom as a means of communication as well as an object of study. Our fundamental aim is that students can use English as a means to express meaning they find culturally relevant and that they can engage in tasks which promote creative and critical thinking and enable them to express their own identities.

In this way, we attend to the overall aim presented in the Curricular Design for English as a foreign language at secondary school level in the Province of Buenos Aires: "The presence of English as a foreign language in this level aims at the development of critical thinking so that students can adopt a broader perspective of the world through reflection about the English language and their own. We aim at contributing to the education of secondary school graduates who will know and respect the spirit of diversity and other cultures without risking their own identity."¹

We would like to add that, in our opinion, not only does the work we carry out in our English classes not put the identities of our students at risk, but is a means for the promotion and free expression of these identities.

Alongside with the focus on critical and creative thinking, our curricular design expects syllabuses to cover a range of lexico-grammatical aspects of the language which we also deal with in our didactic sequence.

The didactic sequence

This didactic sequence is built around the topics of language, culture and identity. Following Vernet (2019), literature is an invaluable source of authentic input for teaching and learning English, especially to present concepts and lexico-grammatical aspects in a meaningful context. To this end, we have chosen Sandra Cisneros, a Chicana writer whose work gives voice to the minoritized Mexican communities in the US. As Cisneros points out in an interview: "I can influence people by staying home and writing. I have the power to make people think in a different way. It's a different way of defining power, and it is something that I don't want to abuse or lose. I want to help my community." (Tabor, 1993). We believe that this author's work provides us with innumerable paths from where to tackle the topics we intend to discuss as well as a very rich variety of discourses and linguistic elements we seek to introduce.

"No speak English" is one of the vignettes that composes the coming of age collection *The House on Mango Street*. Through the eyes of Esperanza Cordero, a young Mexican girl, Cisneros portrays the events, characters and feelings of the people who live in the neighborhood. We find that our students often relate to

¹ La presencia del inglés como lengua extranjera en este nivel tiene como propósito desarrollar el pensamiento crítico de los alumnos para que ellos puedan adoptar una visión amplia del mundo, mediante la reflexión de los códigos de la lengua inglesa y los trabajados en Prácticas del Lenguaje acerca de su propia lengua. Se trata, entonces, de contribuir a la formación de un egresado de escuela secundaria que conozca y respete el espíritu de otras culturas y la diversidad, sin poner en riesgo su propia identidad.

Esperanza as a young girl who questions her life and is eager to decide on her own destiny. In relation to this, in another fragment of the interview we quoted above, Cisneros says "I don't want young people in the barrios to see me as a kind of an example. I really want them to question the educational system and the whole system that is created to keep them from becoming what I became. I'm the exception, not the rule." (Tabor, 1993). This is precisely the kind of critical thinking we want to foster in our students as well.

The story also serves as a valuable trigger to discuss the topics our sequence is designed to reflect on: language, culture and identity through a series of tasks that focus on enriching the linguistic and discursive repertoires of our students as well as their language learning skills.

Stage 1: Preparation for the story

The sequence starts with a short reading activity to look up information about Sandra Cisneros. Our students are familiar with biographies as a genre and, although we suggest some possible sources on the Internet to refer to, students work independently to answer some questions and find out key elements in Cisneros's life.

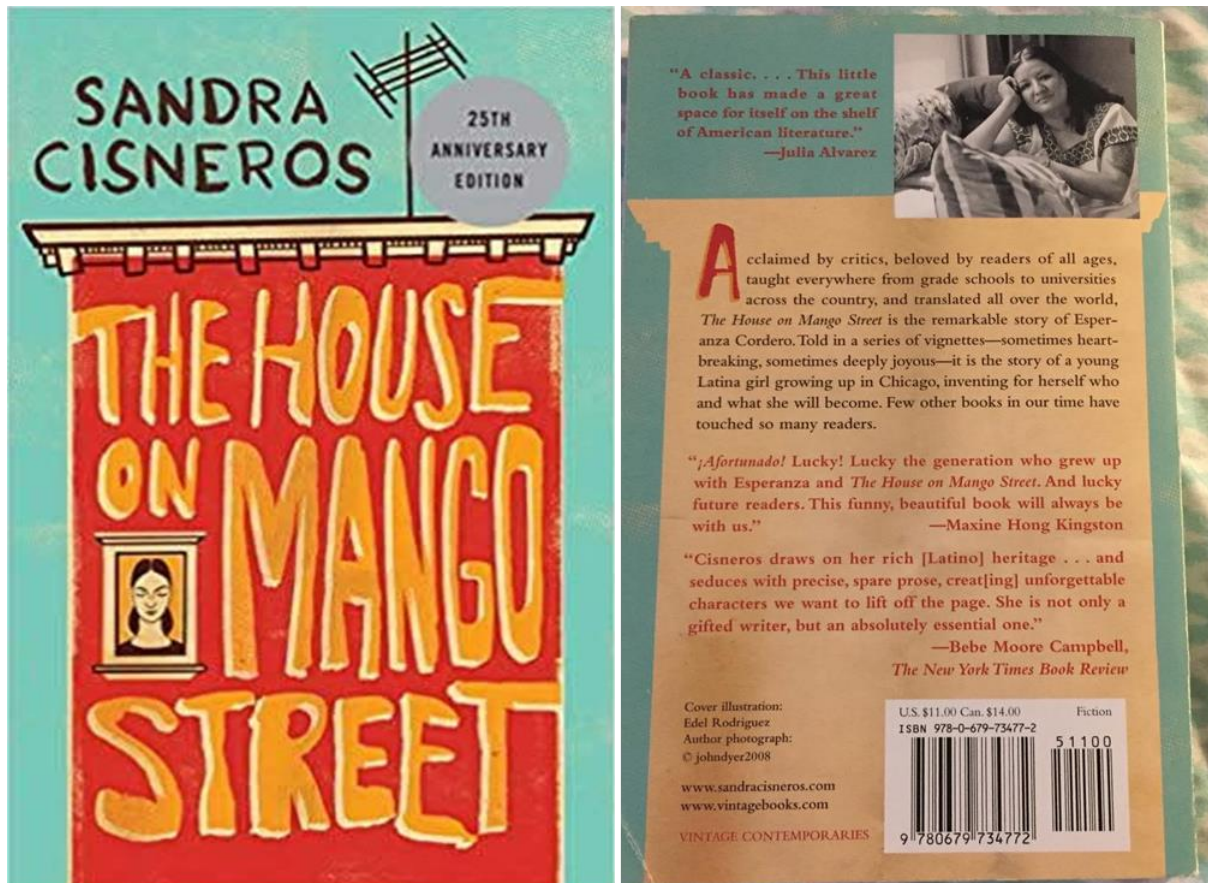
We are going to read a story called "No speak English" by writer Sandra Cisneros. Before we get down to the story look up information about the author:

- Where and when was Sandra Cisneros born?
- What kind of books does she write?
- What is her family like?
- What other information is relevant about her life?

After discussing some main events and information about the author, the students focus on a series of activities to learn more about the book we are going to read from: *The House on Mango Street*.

These are the front and back cover of one of her novels: *The House on Mango Street*. Identify the information you get from the covers:

TITLE - REVIEWS - BLURB - PUBLISHING HOUSE - AUTHOR - ILLUSTRATOR - WEB PAGES



The blurb tells us that the story is told in a series of vignettes. What is a vignette?



The House on Mango Street consists of what Cisneros calls "lazy poems," vignettes that are not quite poems and not quite full stories. The vignettes are sometimes only two or three paragraphs long, and they often contain internal rhymes, as a poem might.

Go through the blurb again and let's set the context for the vignettes:

- Who tells the story?
- What is she like?
- Where does the story take place?

Here is more information about the book. What is the story about?

The House on Mango Street is a 1984 **coming-of-age** novel by Mexican-American author Sandra Cisneros. It is written from the perspective of teenage Latina, Esperanza Cordero, who **struggles** with her life in a **Chicano** and Puerto Rican neighborhood of Chicago. Esperanza **wishes** to escape her **impoverished** life in her small red house on Mango Street to then return one day to rescue her loved ones as well.

Now, match the words in bold with the definitions below:

- to make a big effort to face difficulties in life:
- made poor:
- to have a strong desire to do something:
- the transition into adulthood:
- words used to refer to people of Mexican origin who live in the US: and

One more thing before we get down to our story. Watch Sandra Cisneros talking about *The House on Mango Street* and take down notes on the following²:

the character (Esperanza):
autobiographical elements in the book:
the neighborhood:
why young people are attracted to the novel:

Stage 2: No speak English³

Students read and listen to the story. Then they work in groups to answer the following questions:

1. Who is Mamacita? How does the narrator describe her?
2. What does Mamacita do all day?
3. Why do mamacita and the man argue?
4. What is home for Mamacita and what is home for the man?
5. The title No speak English appears twice in the story. Does it mean the same in both situations?
6. Who do you think is the narrator? Can you guess anything about them?

The answers to the questions are shared with the whole class and the teacher goes back to the text and explains anything that was unclear or the students need help with.

As a next step, the teacher proposes the following discussion questions:

- Why do you think Mamacita and her husband moved to the US?
- Mamacita is homesick. Have you ever been homesick?
- Can you imagine living in another country? What do you think you would miss? Do you think you would adapt easily?

² Video disponible en: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Pyf89VsNmg>

³ Versión en audio: <https://esl-bits.net/ESL.English.Learning.Audiobooks/House/30/default.html>

Close reading and work on expression: This is the moment Mamacita gets off the taxi cab. In pairs, read the extract and answer the questions below.

Out stepped a tiny pinky shoe, a foot soft as rabbit's ear, then the thick ankle, a flutter of hips, fuchsia roses and green perfume. The man had to pull her, the taxi driver had to push. Push, pull. Push, pull. Poof!

All at one she bloomed. Huge, enormous, beautiful to look at from the salmon-pink feather on the tip of her hat down to the little rosebuds of her toes. I couldn't take my eyes off her tiny shoes.

Up, up, up the stairs she went with the baby boy in a blue blanket, the man carrying her suitcases, her lavender hat boxes, a dozen boxes of satin high heels. Then we didn't see her.

- What catches the narrator's attention?
- When the story begins, the narrator says: "Mamacita's name could be Mamasota". Why?
- When the narrator says that Mamacita "bloomed". What is she comparing her to?

Now, let's do some vocabulary work. In pairs, read the extract again and complete the word webs:

parts of the
body

clothes &
accessories

adjectives to describe physical appearance

Read the last part of the story again ("¿Cuándo ...ears")

- "¿Cuándo, cuándo, cuándo?" What do you think Mamacita is asking?
- "We *are* home. This *is* home." Why does the narrator use italics?
- "Mamacita, who does not belong..." What is it "to belong"? Why doesn't Mamacita belong?
- How does Mamacita feel when the baby speaks English?

Stage 3: Language, culture and identity. Back to you!

In this stage, students are invited to reflect upon their own realities in relation to the questions of language, culture and identities.

According to the narrator, Mamacita is afraid to speak English. What is your own relationship with the English language? How do you feel about learning it and speaking it? Have you ever been afraid to speak English?

Language is more than a code. It is deeply connected to culture and identity. Do you agree? Why? Can you think of examples and situations that show these connections between language, culture & identities?

Can you imagine what happened to Mamacita and her family? Write an epilogue for the story.

Students will share their answers to the questions on a collaborative wall on Padlet and will read each other's work and react to it.

Final remarks

Through the tasks in this didactic sequence, we have sought to offer a way to teach English as a foreign language in secondary schools that uses literary texts in order to enrich the contexts in which the language is taught and learnt. We have also appealed to the work of a Chicana writer, which gives voice to marginalized groups and communities, showing that language also takes place at the borders, as Gloria Anzaldúa often reminds us. Finally, we intend to show that the English class is a privileged territory to explore our own ideas in relation to culture and identities and that it can also become a space to express new, enriched identities.

Of course, we understand that this is just a series of tasks and activities. Still, we hope that they can get us thinking creatively and critically upon our teaching practices and that we dare ask ourselves the questions: What English/es do we teach and learn? Who does it/do they belong to? What role do the languages we know and/or speak play in the construction of our identities? And most importantly, in what ways can (or should?) the English class contribute to raising awareness in relation to these issues?

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