

New English cultures and learner autonomy for intrinsic motivation and democratic empowerment in the Chilean context

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ABSTRACT: Chilean youth are currently demanding access to better-quality education for all: greater democracy and curricula that respect the country's indigenous cultural roots form part of their petitions. This article puts forward a twofold pedagogical proposal for English Language Teaching intended to foster intrinsic motivation and democratic empowerment through a combination of meaningful cultural content taken from the New English cultures and autonomous learning, including technology-supported student participation and self-reflection. Rather than alienating learners by presenting "traditional" English-speaking cultural content, emphasis is placed on cultural expressions originating from indigenous and postcolonial contexts, many of which parallel the Latin American experience. A case study based on a first-year course of an Initial English Teacher Education program at a Chilean university shows that learners participate actively, make immediate connections to their own country's reality and arrive at powerful conclusions for their own future as teachers.

KEY WORDS: Blogs, culture in language learning, empowerment, English as a foreign language, learner autonomy, motivation, reflection, technology-supported interaction.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Chilean school and university life has been strongly affected by the student movement, which can be seen as part of a global counter-movement questioning neoliberal reforms in education management (cf. Giroux, 2012). Two of their demands are of interest here: greater democracy in the educational system, especially in higher education (Petitorio CONFECH, 2011); and a curricular reform aimed at educating integral human beings with values and principles necessary for the making of a society, through an education that is conscious of the environment and the indigenous cultural roots of the country (Petitorio de Secundarios, 2011).

Although English language teaching might not be the most obvious domain in which these petitions are taken up, we consider them as an opportunity to identify a pedagogy that adapts to local demands. On a worldwide level, a variety of approaches have been described to meet the challenge of teaching English in contexts that are considered both local and global. Largely following the principles of Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy (for example, Freire, 2004, 2008; Giroux, 2012; McLaren, 1995), ELT professionals have developed an increasing consciousness of the implications of linguistic and cultural imperialism for their pedagogical undertaking (for example, Canagarajah, 1999; Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005; Pennycook, 1999; Phillipson, 1992). In this vein, researchers are seeking to "relocate TESOL"

(Kumaravadivelu, 2006) to avoid the perpetuation of dominant, Anglo-centric and whitening discourses that are often present in the textbooks offered on the worldwide ELT market (cf Gray, 2002).

In Chile, critical curriculum scholars (for example, Peralta Espinosa, 1996; Pinto Contreras, 2008) have made the case for culturally more “pertinent” curricula and transformative practices for education in general; interestingly, their proposals are aimed at the whole of Latin America, visualising its common cultural roots and post-colonial experiences. However, critical research into appropriate content and methodologies in English for the Latin American context is scarce (for example, Álvarez, Calvete & Sarasa, 2012; Friedrich, 2002; Glas, 2013; McKay, 2003; Menard-Warwick, 2008). A consequence of this might be the widespread use of inappropriate, alienating English curricula, possibly leading to a lack of student motivation (cf. Glas, 2013).

In this paper, we put forward a didactic proposal that addresses the students’ petitions from the area of English teaching. It is based on two different fields of ELT research: autonomous learning as a methodological option (Benson, 2007; Dam & Legenhausen, 2010; Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007; Little, 2007; Ushioda, 2011) and “new English” cultural content as a curricular component of English language teaching (Alvarez, Calvete & Sarasa, 2012; Eisenmann, Grimm & Volkmann, 2010; Matsuda, 2002; Rubdy, 2007; Wildburger, 2006). As student-centred learning arrangements can help learners develop a sense of agency, and culturally pertinent learning contents can help them develop a sense of ownership, the combination of these two approaches could enhance both intrinsic motivation as a potential condition for meaningful learning and democratic empowerment as a global learning aim. Learners’ critical reflection (cf. Mezirow, 1998; Little, 2007; Kitchenham, 2008) was part of the case study presented below, as a means to help students make explicit and thus become aware of their learning processes within the course and simultaneously provide the teacher-researchers with feedback on the effectiveness of the didactic proposal.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bringing together methods and content (two areas often dealt with separately in ELT research), this theoretical framework clarifies the central concepts of our proposal, learner autonomy and new English cultures. Pointing out how both might relate to each other, we will also explain their connections with intrinsic motivation and democratic empowerment, our leading learning goals. As reflection seems a powerful mediator between method and contents, a third section will review contributions that have been relevant for the analytical framework of our case study.

Learner autonomy

Benson (2007) defines three types of autonomy: technical, psychological and political autonomy. Of interest to our work are psychological autonomy, which is connected to intrinsic motivation, and political autonomy, which relates to notion of democratic empowerment. In psychological terms, autonomy and intrinsic motivation are seen as related concepts in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory has

informed a great deal of learner autonomy research and defines intrinsic motivation “as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 56). Human activities that are intrinsically motivated are those that provide satisfaction of “the innate needs for competence, *autonomy*, and relatedness” (p. 56). In this sense, apart from perceived competence, people must “experience their behaviour to be self-determined if intrinsic motivation is to be maintained or enhanced” (p. 58). Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira (2007) emphasise that “autonomy is not a matter of all or nothing” (p. 5) and highlight instead the notion of learner control as a continuum, which can range from short breaks from otherwise relatively teacher-centred classrooms to radically independent and self-directed learning forms. Beyond Holec’s classic definition of learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (1981, cited in Benson, 2007, p. 22), Jiménez Raya et al. put special emphasis on its political side and define learner autonomy as “the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation” (Jiménez Raya, Lamb, & Vieira, 2007, p. 1).¹

Benson (2007), in turn, makes an explicit link between learner autonomy and the idea of democracy, as autonomous learning forms are considered as helpful or even necessary for individuals to develop those characteristics that are needed for taking part in democratic societies. Thus, democracy as an ideal of society should not only be preached, but actually lived and experienced in classrooms. To translate the abstract concept of “autonomy” into specific language learning tasks, Little (2007) presents three interacting pedagogical principles: *learner involvement*, *learner reflection*, and *target language use*. Accordingly, learners should, for example, get involved in establishing personal learning agendas, selecting materials and activities, and evaluating their own progress. All these processes require reflection, which can be fostered by specific “autonomous” learning resources and procedures, such as learning journals (Jiménez Raya, 2006) and portfolios, peer tutoring, or authentic target-language class conversations on the perceived learning outcomes (Dam & Legenhausen, 2010).

Contrasting learner autonomy with teacher-controlled classroom practices that restrict students from negotiating, participating, sharing and evaluating their own experiences and ideas in the target language, Ushioda (2011) stresses that encouraging learners to (autonomously) “speak for themselves” can make an important contribution to both the formation of “adaptive identities” and to “motivational trajectories” of language learners (p. 22). Thus, though without specifying content, learner autonomy researchers like Ushioda and Little hold that both the “how” (the procedures and settings of an autonomous classroom) and the “what” (the contents on which learners communicate in autonomous language use) should harmonise in order to support motivation and autonomy: “If learners are to establish a personal agenda for learning, the content of their learning must be relevant to their perceived needs and interests and thus accessible to them” (Little 1994, p. 439).

¹ In fact, their ‘Pedagogy for Autonomy’ framework uses this definition to include both learner *and* teacher autonomy, as academic discussion has recently put great emphasis on the idea that a teacher will not be able to develop learner autonomy optimally if she/he is not autonomous her/himself (cf. Benson, 2007; Lamb, 2008).

Learner autonomy theory suggests that learners select their own learning content. However, in ELT theorising there is also a growing body of research that identifies content as specifically relevant for the development of critical thinking and democratic empowerment, especially under the umbrella of the teaching of English as an international language (Kachru, 1992; McKay, 2002).

New English cultures

Typically, content in ELT follows a functional approach in which language is taught within “aspirational” (white) upper middle-class Western settings (Gray, 2002); alternatively, including cultural aims, they focus on the life, institutions and literature of Great Britain and the USA. Already in 1988, Prodromou noted how “Anglocentric” cultural content could make learners feel alienated and demotivated. As a counter-movement, some textbooks especially produced for the local context (for example, Elsworth, Rose & Mugglestone, 2002) use “source culture contents” (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; McKay 2002, 2003), where English is used to show the students’ own national culture, often as an essentialist and over-simplified cultural entity (Glas, 2013). This, in turn, forecloses the possibility for students to gain an understanding of what it means to be a citizen of a globalised world, of accessing *different* experiences through the new language.

In contrast, recent developments in the area of culture learning in EFL have taken Postcolonial and Cultural Studies as their referents (for example, Alvarez et al., 2012; Eisenmann et al. 2010; Matsuda, 2002; Rubdy, 2007; Wildburger, 2006). The new agenda has moved towards the inclusion of linguistic and cultural expressions from various English-speaking contexts, such as Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa, or the Caribbean, where English has been adopted as a second or first language by the colonised peoples. Although not without controversies, the use of English (instead of native languages) for creative literary expression has made it possible for indigenous individuals and communities to make their voices heard on a world-wide level. Their stories tell of the brutal impact of the contact with the “white” world (for example, Pilkington Garimara, 1996), the experience of migration, or the difficulties of finding one’s own place between different, contradictory cultures (for example, Anzaldúa, 1999; Delanoy, 2006; Alexie, 2007).

The arguments brought forward to include such content is its special capacity to promote a change of perspectives, sensitivity towards the needs of marginalised social groups, empathy and cross-cultural understanding, breaking down stereotypical notions of a “powerful”, “superior” North (or West) and “inferior”, disempowered South (or East). Many of these attitudes and abilities are also quoted as the bases for education for democracy and civic agency, together with critical thinking, and an awareness of the relationship between individual and collective experience (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1996/2004). Finally, the notion of *self-determination* is not only present in psychological proposals for more intrinsically motivating and autonomous teaching and learning settings, but also in “postcolonial theory which is concerned both with the critique of the oppressive colonial ideologies and regimes of the past, and with the assertion of the rights of political and cultural self-determination and self-representation for non-European peoples in the present” (Young, 2001, p. 81).

Critical reflection

Critical reflection is often seen as one trait of learner autonomy (for example, Benson, 2007; Jiménez Raya, 2006; Little, 1994). It has also been dealt with as a key element of *transformative learning* (cf. Mezirow, 1998, 2000), a theory committed to understanding adults' learning processes of autonomous thinking. Language and discourse are used as a means to make tacit assumptions explicit and accessible for critical reflection. Mezirow distinguishes *critical reflection of assumptions* from *critical self-reflection of assumptions*, both of which are emancipatory dimensions of education as they challenge what people (collectively and individually, respectively) usually take for granted. The questioning of cultural canons and ideologies is especially important here. According to Mezirow, their existence can "impede development of a sense of responsible agency" (2000, p. 8). Thus, transformative learning can make a contribution to participatory democracy; as critically reflecting learners are more empowered, they tend to make informed decisions and stand up for them (Benson, 2007; Mezirow, 1998, 2000).

An emphasis on the educator's commitment to the creation of safe and collaborative learning environments, in which all students feel that their discourses are included, highlights the individual *and* social dimension of transformative learning. The quality of the "pedagogical dialogue" between teachers and learners (cf. Freire, 2008) is crucial for the development of critical reflection. If the pedagogical dialogue is superficial and one-way oriented, reflections become sterile and fruitless, hence chances for transformation are scanty. Therefore, *critical reflection about learning* is seen as a key opportunity for learners and teachers to dialogue and to consensually decide what is best, not only for the learning experience, but for the mutual growth of each of the stakeholders involved (Kitchenham, 2008). Teachers need to stimulate discussions of critical issues and enter in dialogue with their students to understand how students' previous experiences have shaped who they are and who they want to be as autonomous citizens. This can gradually lead to students' emancipation from teaching practices that have traditionally minimised their sense of agency. For critical reflection about learning to be successful, guidance for students and teachers is necessary to connect their experiences and challenge their beliefs and assumptions about class materials and learning experiences (Ash & Clayton, 2004).

THE PROPOSAL

The didactic proposal we put forward in this paper aims at bringing together the *how* and the *what* of English learning in a combination of motivating and empowering methodologies with context-sensitive, meaningful content for learning English as an international language. Its main aim is the autonomous participation of (future) citizens in discourses that contribute to a fairer, more democratic world for all. Thus, our proposal responds to the principle of "inherent aim-orientation" by formulating a coherent learning project in which learning objectives, content, and methods form an inseparable unity (Meyer, 2010, p. 26f.).

We aim to foster intrinsic motivation by including "new English" cultural content, addressing learner identity as a psychological need. The research on the use of such content usually puts more emphasis on the opportunities to develop *intercultural competence* than on motivational issues (for example, Delanoy, 2006; Eisenmann et

al., 2010; Matsuda, 2002; Rubdy, 2007; Wildburger, 2006; for empirical studies, for example, Burwitz-Melzer, 2001). However, we see their motivating potential for Latin American students in the learners' opportunity to identify with colonial histories and postcolonial situations. Rather than perpetuating the North-South divide between the presentation of a "developed first world" and the learners' everyday surroundings marked by social and racial injustices, this new canon offers opportunities to students to look for similarities and differences in the way in which various postcolonial societies have dealt with ethnic and social diversity. Students can be afforded opportunities for participation by including asynchronous technological platforms, where they can access part of the content in out-of-class Internet use and comment on them. This may allow learners to engage with cultural content, the new media and other course members autonomously, thus creating a space in which they can express themselves freely and without peer pressure.

Our proposal promotes democratic empowerment by challenging assumptions spread by the more mainstream canons (Mezirow, 2000) and offering "food for thought" to students through texts and movies that deal with the struggles of previously colonised peoples whose right to self-determination was violated. The learning forms in which this content is accessed, interpreted and discussed rely on the same notion of self-determination in learning. This is operationalised by giving students the opportunity to select topics of their own interest for class discussions and presentations, for written reflection assignments and for technology-supported participation, and in the voluntary keeping of a reflective journal. This combination of objectives, content and means aims to foster the critical capacities and positive attitudes necessary for active, autonomous participation in civic life, in which individuals can think, express their own opinions and act free of the authoritarian control imposed by others, while respecting others' rights to do the same.

THE CASE STUDY

As a means to identify the effectiveness of this didactic proposal, we conducted a qualitative exploratory study with 89 first-year students enrolled in a culture class, taught as part of an Initial English Teacher Education program at a research-leading Chilean university.

The context

In the transitional phase from high school to university, intrinsic motivation can easily be undermined, and learner autonomy is not always developed. In our context, many first-year students present high degrees of dependency on teacher guidance as a result of the controlling school settings in which they have been trained. Regular, harshly graded activities are often perceived as extrinsic incentives to keep students actively involved into their learning process. In terms of language use, our program has traditionally put great emphasis on *accurate* language production. Thus, students' initial enthusiasm at being accepted into a prestigious program often wears off after receiving low grades on their first assignments, which can also lead to anxiety and frustration, especially among students whose linguistic preparation at school was deficient.

The course

“Introduction to Cultural Diversity in the English-Speaking World” is a first-year course that runs in parallel to the language component classes. It is taught in a 16-week period scheduled in two ninety-minute sessions, with additional movie sessions distributed over the semester. At the end of the course students should “show interest in and know about cultural manifestations of the English-speaking world for their intellectual, cultural and professional development”.

The syllabus of the course is structured into five units. The first unit, “What is culture?”, examines some concepts derived from Cultural Studies, with a discussion of cultural, ethnic and national stereotypes and the importance of breaking these down. The second unit, “Geography”, deals with maps of the English-speaking world and introduces a change of perspective by discussing the implications of “upside down” world maps. The following unit is a historical overview of the spread of English with a focus on three milestones in the history of the English-speaking world: the initial phase of colonial exploration and expansion during Elizabeth I’s reign; the encounter between colonisers and Aborigines in Australia; and the US Civil Rights Movement as a powerful step towards ending the racial segregation inherited from slavery. The last two units aim at understanding cultural diversity in contemporary English-speaking countries and look at literary and cultural production in “World Englishes”, especially in postcolonial Africa. The movie sessions² that run in parallel to the class aim at future autonomous engagement with entertainment media. Although the development of linguistic proficiency is not a stated aim of the course, the course is taught in English.

Participants

The participants were 89 learners of English aged between 19 and 24 enrolled in the above-mentioned course, taught in 2012. The participating students were taught in three mixed-proficiency and co-educational parallel courses (see Table 1).

Sex		Language proficiency*		
Female	Male	Elementary A2 level	Lower intermediate B1 level	Upper Intermediate B2 level
66	33	34	28	27

*Level determined after students completed the Oxford Placement Test Online

Table 1. The participants

Data collection and instrumentation

² *Elizabeth, The Golden Age* (2007); *The Tempest* (2010); *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002); *Thunderheart* (1992); *Bend it like Beckham* (2002).

The data analysis results were from three data sources: a collaborative blog, a written reflection assignment and a researcher-generated feedback survey. For the collaborative blog, students were required to initiate two entries throughout the semester on a culture-related topic of their choice and respond to a minimum of two entries from their classmates. Students were trained on how to use the blogging platform and a sample task was set up to ensure that all learners knew how to use it well. The written reflection assignment given in week 12 of the course asked participants to respond to four questions about the two most important things they learned from the course; the course components that helped them learn; how their experience in the course affected them as English language-and-culture learners; and how their experience in the course was going to influence them as a future English teachers. The researcher-generated feedback survey gathered data about the participants' perceptions with regard to the content of the course, the methodologies and the assessment procedures. From this survey, we report only on the section of open-ended questions.

Data analysis

After complying with ethical procedures, our analysis followed systematic procedures of qualitative inquiry (Miles & Hubberman, 1994). The complete data sets from the three data sources were coded and re-coded in three main rounds of analysis. In round one, two coders analysed the data independently. While coder 1 identified emerging categories from the written reflections, coder 2 identified emerging categories from the blog entries and the open-ended questions from the survey. In round two, the coders worked collaboratively and grouped categories and defined themes and associated factors for each data source. In round three, coder 2 identified overlapping themes and factors across data sources and emerging categories were coalesced and re-defined. Upon a refinement of the coding protocol, coder 2 analysed the complete data sets across data sources. A list of coding categories along with number of coding entries is summarized in Table 2.

Themes	Factors	Blogs	Written reflections	Survey
Motivating aspects of the course	Content	15	17	6
	Materials	19	31	7
	Interaction opportunities & collaboration	18	54	19
	Free topics selection	1	11	9
	Language learning	8	33	38
Democratically empowering aspects of the course	Selection of content	12	26	6
	Reflection	1	11	9
	Freedom to express viewpoints	14	11	16
	Balanced participation	0	16	13
Lessons for future teachers	Social responsibility	13	12	0
	Educating instead of teaching	7	30	0
	Educating for diversity	17	37	2

Table 2. Summary of coding categories and coding entries

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first of the two themes that emerged from our analysis, *motivating* (1) and *democratically empowering aspects* (2) of the course helped us identify if the main aims established for the proposal were met in our context. The third theme, *lessons for future teachers*, indicates the extent to which our participants considered parts of the proposal viable for other contexts.

Theme one: Motivating aspects of the course

Motivating aspects of the course are defined as the elements that students reported as encouraging their interest and enjoyment in the course, leading to meaningful learning. Five factors make up this theme: *content*, *materials*, *opportunities for interaction and collaboration*, *free topic selection* and *language learning* (Table 3).

Factor	Definition of factor	Sample data
Content	The exposure to contents that according to the students was new, engaging, and relevant to the Chilean reality.	“I personally believe that learning about ethnic minorities during this class has been great to realise the struggle that some people have to face just because they are different, but we should not forget that some of us (Latinos) also are discriminated not only in the US, but all over the world” (Bp3-22). ³
Materials	The variety of materials used in the course: ppts, worksheets, readings, short-readers, songs, videos, poems, and films.	“Everything I learned was through the assistance provided by the teacher, her opinion and explanation about the things that we don’t know specially concepts, the materials such as: videos, poems, songs, readings was interesting and interactive and very useful for develop [sic] my knowledge about important topics” (WRp1-13).
Opportunities for interaction and collaboration	The opportunities students had to express and listen to other opinions in a supportive and respectful environment.	“My classmates helped me to expand my vision of things. Their comments made me realise that there are other points of view in different topics and to discover other things that I wouldn’t have thought by myself. I hope I have helped them in the same way” (WRp2-32).
Free topic selection	The freedom given to students to discuss, write about and reflect on a variety of culture-related topics of their interest	“[The blog] gives you great freedom when it comes to choosing and developing a topic of your own interest” (Sp3-24).
Language learning	The perceived opportunities that the students had to improve their L2 language abilities in a stress-free environment	“This course helped me a lot for practice my speaking and my English, not just in grammar also in daily conversation, in this class I could speak in English with my classmates about the contents of the class, so it helped me a lot” (WRp2-9).

Table 3. Theme one: Motivating aspects of the class

A key motivating aspect of the class, as reported by the participants, was the *content* they were exposed to. Interestingly, not the “new English” cultural content in itself

³ WR= written reflections, B= blog entry, S= Survey, and p= parallel. Thus, WRp1-2 corresponds to a quote from a written reflection, from parallel class number 1, participant number 2.

was mentioned as motivating, but the *combination* of this with more traditional content under a critical lens; it made students “see English from a new perspective” (WRp1-23). Novelty was important here; participants noted that content such as the stolen generation in Australia and “upside down” maps of the world had not been covered in their high-school classes. In relation to course *materials*, findings indicate that most participants appreciated the variety (slideshow presentations, readings, songs, poems, music videos, and film) used to introduce new content and to complement class discussions. Especially films were seen as great motivators triggering insightful discussions given their multimodal affordances. Also, the findings indicate that activities on media awareness at the beginning of the semester equipped the students with sufficient elements to critically analyse film scenes, for example, in blog entries that discussed the veracity of historical events in *Elizabeth the Golden Age*.

Opportunities for interaction and collaboration refers to the variety of instances in which students could express and listen to others’ opinions in a supportive environment: pair- and group-work and plenaries, both face-to-face and through the blogging platform were much appreciated. A perceived advantage of using technology-supported interaction was the freedom learners had to interact and learn about other viewpoints on topical issues. The fact that the groupings, together with teacher guidance, allowed learners to autonomously experiment different working styles was also considered motivating. The factor *free topic selection* (within umbrella topics) was based on the positive comments students made about their freedom to discuss and reflect on culture-related topics of their own interest, which they felt acknowledged their individuality as each person makes different mental connections. To illustrate, after watching the movie *Bend it like Beckham*, ten participants wrote blog entries about topics related to Hindu culture, including inter-cultural marriage, reincarnation and vegetarian food. Finally, *language learning* is defined as the perceived opportunities that the students had to improve their vocabulary and fluency in speaking and writing in a stress-free environment. For example, in the blogging tasks, as learners were writing to a “real” audience, they pushed themselves to search for and discuss topics that were relevant and engaging for their classmates.

The mostly positive responses we received in written reflections and the survey and the students’ active participation in the blog seem to be strong indicators that the course indeed worked as a motivator for our students. What caught our attention was that in this context, several students reported on some kind of personal transformation. One student reported on new, more autonomous and intrinsically motivated study habits:

...this course makes me be interested in search (sic) for my own. Before this course I never look for information just to know, but after this course I can say that it woke up my curiosity and my desire to learn just for do it. (WRp1-11)

Another comment used a similar phrasing, this time referring to a perceived change in personal identity: “The experience in this course makes me think that I belong to the English-speaking world” (WRp1-23), thus reflecting on and transforming the assumption that as a non-native speaker she was *not* part of the English-speaking world. Several participants made connections between increasing self-confidence in speaking and cultural awareness. This suggests that contrary to experiences where students have interpreted teaching materials as alienating (for example, Prodromou,

1988; Canagarajah, 1999), the participants of our study were able to develop a sense of ownership of the language (cf. McKay, 2002).

Theme two: Democratically empowering aspects of the course

Democratically empowering aspects of the course are defined as those features of the course that either allowed students to make connections between class topics and the society they live in, and thus form and express their opinion on topical issues, or those features that foster student participation in decision-making with regard to activities and content as part of the class syllabus. Four factors inform this theme: *selection of content, reflection, balanced participation, and freedom to express viewpoints* (Table 4).

Factor	Definition of factor	Sample data
Selection of content	The richness of the content and materials used in the class that encouraged students to think critically and/or autonomously, to have a personal opinion and to make connections to their own country's reality.	"I think that the most important that I learned was the way that we as student see and apply this topics, and be able to have a based and structure opinion, it was the main important thing that I learned in every class, because for me is very useful have a opinion of some issues, and have an autonomous thinking about difficult and controversial issues that is hard to comments or speak" (WRp1-13).
Reflection	The instances in which deep thinking was encouraged through the type of contents and type of questions asked in class.	"As for the change of mindset, I must honestly confess that I started the course with a lot of prejudices towards certain sectors of the Chilean population. Now it's not that I don't have those prejudices anymore, but I certainly try to avoid them whenever I can." (WRp1-25)
Balanced participation	The balanced opportunities offered to the participants to speak up and be heard regardless of their proficiency level and/or their ability to use spoken or written language; cooperation among classmates.	"I think that everyone worked together and contributed in the learning process." (WRp1-5)
Freedom to express viewpoints	The opportunities the students had to express their opinions in a safe and respectful environment	"... for me the two most important things that I learned was lose the shame and respect the ideas from each other. These are very important because, to be a teacher should be able to express myself to the rest and also respect the infinity of opinions in the classroom" (WRp1-4).

Table 4. Theme two: Democratically empowering aspects of the class

According to the data, the *selection of content* encouraged students to make connections to their own country's reality and thus form an informed opinion. Participants highlighted the fact that instead of focusing on dominant cultures in the UK and the US, the course emphasised minority and native cultures, thus allowing class members to make connections to the Latin American reality. On the blog, ten

entries connected class content (for example, the movie *Thunderheart*) to the Mapuche conflict in Southern Chile. *Reflection* is defined as the instances in which deep thinking was encouraged through the type of content and questions asked in class. Stereotypes, mentioned by 24 students in the written reflections, was a major theme that permeated their responses here. Reflections ranged from aspects to do with foreign and home culture, metacognitive reflection on their own learning processes, to their future role of teachers as agents of change. Students explained how the course got them out of their comfort zone, making them really “think”.

Balanced participation refers to the opportunities offered to the participants to speak up and be heard regardless of their level of English. They highlighted the way in which the teachers encouraged everybody to participate, especially the lower-proficiency students. Participants also noted that the blogging platform gave a voice to “shy students” afraid of communicating orally in class, as they could draft their entries before submitting them. Finally, in relation to *freedom to express viewpoints*, participants especially highlighted their gradual loss of inhibition to share their opinions in the learning community, because of the safe learning environment they experienced.

The data coded in this category shows that the course met its aim to democratically empower learners in various ways: participants made connections between studied experiences of other peoples and social groups that suffer from discrimination in Chile, such as the Mapuche and the gay community. This finding suggests that the materials presented in class were powerful enough to trigger reflections on the relationship between individual and collective experience, and on the need for social change in a world where established power relations need to be reviewed and contested (Freire, 2004; Giroux, 2012). Also, several of the responses in written reflections, the blog and the survey point to the notion that students effectively perceived an inherent link between the discussed topics and the way in which they were worked on in class, particularly in a classroom atmosphere where mutual respect and collaboration was encouraged. This is best summarised by one of the participants:

At first, I excluded myself from my classmates because I thought they would exclude me for being from a lower level (...). As time passed, (...) the first contained [sic] about discrimination and stereotypes (...) helped me understand things better applying them in my life. I realised that my classmates and teacher were not as bad as I thought. The teacher never said anything bad when I didn't know a word and my classmates instead of laughing at me for forgetting something, helped me remember it. (...) I had a “stereotype” in my mind that didn't let me see that I could enjoy the class and take full advantage of it. It was an opportunity to grow. (WRp2-24)

Thus, students perceived “taught culture” content to be fused with the “classroom culture”; their class was a learning *experience* in which cognitive and socio-affective aims reinforced each other (cf. Eisenmann et al., 2010, p. 206ff.). The sample data in Table 4 also suggest that the combination of thought-provoking topics and spaces for interactive participation both among students and with the teacher was of great importance to generate dialogue, personal involvement and deep reflections (cf. Freire, 2004; Kitchenham, 2008). Students' references to *changes of mindset* (see Table 4) or of *vision* can be interpreted as traits of critical reflection of assumptions that can not only lead to personal transformation, but also to social transformation (Mezirow, 1998). This finding is especially important considering that our

participants are pre-service teachers preparing themselves to educate future generations.

Theme three: Lessons for teachers of future generations

We defined the third theme as the lessons learned with regards to the participants' future role in society as teachers, potential agents of social change. Three factors explain this theme: *social responsibility*, *educating not just teaching*, and *educating for diversity*.

Factor	Definition of factor	Sample data
Social responsibility	The perception that the participants' work as future teachers needs to benefit the society at large.	"[A]s teachers we will be looking to promote the principles of brotherhood tolerance and free inquiry to reach a better and more united society" (Bp2-1).
Educating not just teaching	The need to move from teaching content only to educating in values and behaviors.	"As future teachers of English we must be people with a big sense of diversity and tolerance because the language is an opportunity to expand borders beyond race, religions, systems, etc. This course contributed in how I perceive the value in the differences that people have. I hope I'll be a teacher who gets my future students into the knowledge that they'll need but more than that gives (sic) them ideas about respect, empathy and understanding to each other" (WRp2-7).
Educating for diversity	The connections made by the participants between the contents discussed throughout the course to the reality of their country with regards to racism, discrimination and lack of tolerance.	"I believe that this course it's for open our mind, because knowing about other cultures, avoiding stereotypes and so on, help us to do it and I think that are really important elements in our process as teachers because one of the foundation of this career is see the diversity as a positive thing, and this course was exactly about it. For example the presentations about Native Americans were really useful to understand and stand out the respect not only for them but also for our Native people." (WRp1-9).

Table 5. Theme three: Lessons for teachers of future generations

Social responsibility refers to attitudes and knowledge that teachers think they should have, such as a "global vision about life" (WRp1-5), or knowing what is "truly going on in the world" (WRp2-3); it also includes the awareness of aspects of society that are to be improved. An instance of this is apparent in blog entries about the disastrous consequences of stereotyping and how they pervade diverse social classes and contexts. *Educating not just teaching* is seen as an urgent need to move from teaching linguistic content only to educating in values and behaviours. The participants' apparent dissatisfaction with teacher-centered methodologies that over-emphasise "grammar, vocabulary and phonetics" (WRp2-2) permeates their written reflections and is manifested in their aspirations to become more "complete" and motivating teachers who are knowledgeable about world cultures. One participant wrote: "I will be able to teach my students to see how beautiful, interesting and amazing culture can

be, and through that, I can also teach them values like tolerance and respect because that is one of the objectives of education” (WRp2-32). *Educating for diversity* refers to the idea that future teachers should take on the responsibility to educate citizens able to adapt to, accept and collaborate with people of differing beliefs, traditions and sexual orientations in order to combat problematic issues including racism, discrimination and lack of tolerance. It also includes the call for more inclusive classrooms where the opinions of different class members can be heard.

The students’ reactions to the experience of the course were very positive. The repeated idea that students wanted to replicate some of its parts, especially the inclusion of cultural content in their future lessons, in order to *motivate* their own students in the future and to *educate* them for a more tolerant, inclusive and better society showed us that our aims were largely achieved (see Table 5). In this sense, it seems that the course provided students with a space for critical reflection and thus helped them to imagine *alternatives* for their future professional lives (cf. Mezirow, 1998) – essentially, a cultural canon and interactive patterns different from what they had previously experienced as students and what most of them had up till then taken as “normal” in language education. We consider the instances for reflection (in all their limitations, due to the learners’ restricted linguistic tools to express more complex thoughts) essential for turning the class into a potentially transformative experience. Obviously our intention was not for the participants to “uncritically assimilate” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8) a methodological innovation. On the contrary, we as teacher-researchers found the dialogue with and feedback from our students crucial to question our own assumptions about the most appropriate and empowering ways to teach English in our context.

CONCLUSION

The qualitative data from our case study seem to support our didactic proposal. The combination of stimulating and thought-provoking cultural content with learning forms that respond to the students’ psychological need for autonomy tends to positively influence intrinsic motivation and encourage empowering, possibly even transformative, reflection processes. Being able to show this through an empirical study is especially relevant for research on cultural content in ELT, which has traditionally been literature-based and consists of the preparation and explanation of didactic suggestions and materials, without much support from classroom-based research. This experience also challenges the preconceived idea that English cultural content inherently perpetuates Anglo- or Eurocentric worldviews, and emphasises the possibility to identify and empathise with human experiences in other continents (for example, Eisenmann et al.) It suggests that a careful selection of texts that shows target cultures as complex and diverse entities can get students to create their own, nuanced responses to their “source culture” (or home culture) without falling into blunt national stereotypes; rather, they are able to make sharp observations about cultural diversity in their own context.

Despite the apparent success of the implementation of our didactic proposal, a few questions remain unexplored, mainly in relation to learner autonomy and meaningful learning outcomes. On the one hand, we seem to have evidence that the instances for critical, autonomous reflection were used to the students’ benefit, and that in the

learner-centered settings teachers were perceived as non-intrusive. These arrangements appear to have fostered positive collaboration among classmates, leading to an increase in self-confidence and enjoyment of the learning experience. On the other hand, we had our doubts about the relationship between the active fostering (and exigency) of learner autonomy and the necessary support and scaffolding to reach deeper learning, both in respect to language and culture. The idea that autonomy can only be learned through opportunities to “try out” autonomy might be countered by our observation that, for example, blog participation was much richer and more meaningful in one of the parallel classes, where the teacher regularly reminded the students about its importance, than in the other two, where it was assumed that students would use this as “their own, autonomous” platform, intrinsically motivated by the attractiveness of a technological tool and the opportunity to interact with their classmates in a format that was presumably familiar to them (Cárdenas-Claros & Glas, 2012).

With regard to culture learning, we question the depth of processing opportunities that students may actually have when exposed to a greater number of more diverse cultural contexts, including content that they research autonomously. Could this lead to more superficial, “stereotypical” processing, in spite of the dangers of stereotypes being explicitly discussed at the beginning of the course? In line with this, we observed that motivation was often roused by the novelty of certain “exotic” cultural aspects (such as the Māori Haka Dance, one of the “free topics” presented). But in order to foster “deep” culture learning, would it not be necessary to afford some more intense inquiry into the complexity of a foreign culture? Bearing these contradictions in mind, we believe that they might be countered by focusing on universal themes as they appear in different socio-historical contexts, for example discrimination against people of different skin colors, ethnic origins and sexual orientations.

For future research, we suggest that the applicability of this didactic proposal be explored in other, possibly more complex learning-teaching environments, for example, secondary school settings, where the call for intrinsic motivation and democratic empowerment might be even more urgent. We are also interested in a more complete exploration of our students’ reflections, especially in the question of how to promote deep reflection and “alternative visions” of future educators in a globalised world (cf. Giroux, 2012; Mezirow, 1998, 2000).

On a final note, we hope to enter into dialogue with other teacher-researchers who share our conviction that teaching English in our times is more than the functional development of communicative competence; who are interested in experiencing, together with their learners, a classroom-microcosm in which the idea of a “democratic society” is enacted in day-to-day interactions; and where communicative competences are developed through topics that create awareness of the need to continue working towards the development of a truly democratic global society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are deeply grateful for the helpful suggestions of colleagues, students and the autonomous reviewer who read previous versions of this paper.

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Manuscript received: June 29, 2013

Revision received: November 23, 2013

Accepted: December 1, 2013