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e-TEALS no. 7 | 2016

An e-journal of Teacher Education and Applied Language Studies

Foreign Language Education in the 21st European Context: Exploring New Directions in Intercultural and Plurilingual Approaches Using Anzaldúa's Border Epistemology

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Abstract | This article considers the reformulation of foreign language classes as spaces of cultural politics, dynamic social activism and holistic education, in order to enable schools, teachers and students to set the foundation for a more inclusive society. It starts by recognizing some of the challenges of the 21st century European context, addressing the need to explore new directions in the intercultural and plurilingual approaches in Foreign Language Education. Using Cultural Studies as a starting point, it will be argued that Gloria Anzaldúa´s cultural, feminist, queer and linguistic concepts, with a focus on the crossing of different borders, the forging of relational strategies between groups, and a holistic view of the world, can contribute to current debates on interculturalism and plurilingualism, providing an alternative framework for educational practices that empower students from diverse backgrounds with self-knowledge and tolerance towards alterity.

Key words | Anzaldúa, migration, foreign language education, interculturalism, plurilingualism

Citation: Patrícia Lobo, "Foreign Language Education in the 21st European Context: Exploring New Directions in Intercultural and Plurilingual Approaches Using Anzaldúa's Border Epistemology." *e-TEALS: An e-journal of Teacher Education and Applied Language Studies* 7 (2016): 70-86. ISSN 1647-712X

DOI: 10.1515/eteals-2016-0008

Introduction

The Eurozone has never been as pressured as now to start a reformulation of its educational practices, rethinking Eurocentric beliefs that fail to respond to some current problems. While cities become huge contact-zones[1] (Pratt, 1992) and third spaces[2] (Bhabha, 1994), and multicultural and hybrid identities[3] emerge as a norm rather than an exception, Europe is also facing an unparalleled migratory influx and cultural clash, consequently attempting to integrate into the school system a growing number of refugee and migrant children and youngsters, who are often marginalized and translated as culturally "other". The recent experience with mass migration has brought forward a sense of urgency in debating the multiple differences and similarities between natives and newcomers. With such an accelerated change of global migration patterns, the ethnic diversity of western school population increases and intercultural[4] relations has become a pressing issue for teachers and students.

After decades of debates on the interrelation of postcoloniality, racism, identity politics, and multiculturalism, Eurocentrism is still naturalized as common sense and often goes unnoticed (Shohat and Stam, 2014). The difficulty in coping with students´ multicultural, multilingual and hybrid realities in European schools is a reflection of how society is still unprepared to set a balance between its own identity and the migrants´ identities[5]: on the one hand, the mere adoption of non-eurocentric curricula in schools, without the promotion of intercultural education, leads to feelings of "white guilt" among students of the dominant culture (Dilg, 2003); on the other hand, with the lack of a plurilingual[6] approach, students from backgrounds of different languages are unlikely to succeed in an educational system designed by and for the dominant society several decades ago, in a very different European context. The inability to find means to migrants´ positive integration in the school system, as well as the failure to reach a balance between native and refugee/migrant identities during compulsory school years puts both the dominant and the minority groups in a vicious relationship, insofar as students become adults unprepared to negotiate with alterity, perpetuating social instability.

Recent Challenges of Foreign Language Education

Schools represent the most powerful instrument for shaping the development of future generations of citizens, thus one of the challenges of the 21st century is the reformulation of education policies and curricula towards practices that enable "the development of a society with models of peaceful coexistence and multilateral cooperation across nationality, race, gender and religion" (Gomez-Peña 70). In the light of the current refugee/migrant context, European schools are often the only place where migrant children and youngsters share a daily experience with dominant groups, being side by side for some hours in a learning environment. In this context, Foreign Language Education (FLE) assumes great importance: first, when receiving refugee/migrant children and youngsters, one of the first measures of European educational systems is to provide native language lessons, so that newcomers are able to function in the host school environment and society, and which are often the first monitored contact these students have with the new culture; second, while integrated in a specific school level, refugee/migrant students attend foreign language classes together with native peers, which frequently become one of the few school subjects in which both groups feel equal and connected, as foreigners to the language being taught.

Traditional approaches to cultural diversity, such as multiculturalism, have been considered as non-adequate to 21st century societies, characterized by an unprecedented and ever-growing heterogeneity in terms of ethnicity, culture, language or religion. In recent decades, several scholars have been developing valuable research on interculturalism and plurilingualism in FLE, recognizing the transformative role this subject can have in promoting skills and competences for a critical citizenship so that different groups can "live together-in--difference" (Ang 141). However, in practical terms, foreign language classes seem to be mainly addressing the need for an immediate functional communicative competence through the learning of vocabulary and linguistic structures, consequently neglecting an intercultural and a plurilingual approach: on the one hand, some foreign language programs still fail to acknowledge that language conveys attitudes and values, which can either reinforce social roles

and power relations among different groups, leading to models based on stratification, or encourage tolerance for alterity and the acquisition of mediation skills and different ways of perceiving reality (Trudgill, 2012); on the other hand, most foreign language teachers are not undertaking the role of transformative intellectuals (Guilherme, 2002) by providing meaningful intercultural learning, which will promote critical thinking about cultures, consequently contributing to a more tolerant society and the acceptance of alterity.

Interculturalism and Plurilinguism in the 21st Century European Context

In the last decades, both the Council of Europe and scholars from a wide range of disciplines have asserted interculturalism as critical to the reconstruction of a social and cultural model that corresponds to the idiosyncrasies of a fast-changing world and provides individuals with models of living within culturally diverse societies, acknowledging human rights and dignity, as well as fundamental freedoms (for example, Novinger, 2001; Opatija, Declaration 2003; Council of Europe, 2008; Council of Europe, 2012; Flynn, 2014; Demenchonok, 2014). Skills for intercultural dialogue are identified as being essential for a free, tolerant, inclusive society, with models of equality and solidarity among different groups. These skills and competences are to be transmitted and supported by policies, authorities, the media, religious communities and education professionals.

In this context, Intercultural Education has been addressed in recent years and applied to different school levels within a multidisciplinary approach (see Gundara, 2000; Keast, 2007; or UNESCO, 2013). FLE scholars have been widely contributing to this debate, not only through publications of the Council of Europe, acknowledging the urgency of an intercultural approach in 21st century European schools, but also through research studies, exploring the cultural politics of foreign language classes, with examples of practices, activities and materials that may be used with intercultural objectives, in order to provide students with valuable insights about the target languages and cultures, teaching them skills of interpreting and (re)negotiating otherness (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey, 2002; Sercu, 2006;Byram and Fleming, 2009; Corbett, 2010;

Matos, 2012; Guilherme, 2013; Risager, 2014; Byram, 2014; Zhu, 2015; Jenkins and Wang, 2016; *inter alia*). Several approaches to intercultural education use postcolonial concepts of in--between spaces of languages and cultures, for example accounting for language classes as a third space (Maniotes, 2005; Gutierrez, 2008; Kramsch, 2009; Witte, 2014), insofar as language, rather than a mere identitary space, can become a third space of cultural identity negotiation, an area for cultural examination and reflection, struggle and transformation, as well as a tool of resistance (Ashcroft, 2009). Moreover, teachers are believed to be in position to act as intercultural mediators (Sercu, 2006; Kohlar, 2015) and transformative intellectuals (Guilherme, 2002), using foreign languages as a bridge to help their students to understand a multiplicity of realities, promoting values of tolerance towards alterity, as well as harmonious forms of social integration[7] and social stability at micro and macro levels.

In the current context of cultural super diversity (Vertovec, 2007; Jørgensen et al., 2011; Cogo, 2012), recent studies also consider the need for a multilingual education, or even a plurilingual education, as languages not only coexist, but also interact and interrelate, equally contributing to the communicative competence of the speakers and their success in the educational systems and society (Gogolin and Neumann, 2009; Vollmer, 2009; Council of Europe, 2009; Makoni and Pennycook, 2012; Cook, 2013; Jenkins, 2015; Garton and Kubota, 2015; Menken, 2015). “School failure and failure of school” (Gogolin 241) are believed to be interrelated, as Eurocentric perspectives tend to dominate the school curricula and institutional racism is inherent to a myriad of school policies (Lambert and Morgan, 2010; Harris, 2013; Stamou et al., 2014; Hall, 2014), for example through monolingual or ethnic practices that contribute to higher school dropout rates among minorities and lead to racial self-consciousness (Landsman and Lewis, 2006; Gillborn, 2008; Little, 2010; American Psychological Association, 2012). For some scholars, matters of interculturalism and plurilingualism are, therefore, interconnected as far as recent studies on FLE are concerned, and both areas can provide the framework for a desirable preparation of youngsters for life as critical citizens (Vollmer, 2009). Moreover, some scholars state that the hybridity that characterizes this century encourages

other forms of literacy based on translingual practices, common inside communities but still avoided in classrooms, which should be incorporated in FLE practices (Pennycook, 2007; Gutierrez, 2008; Canagarajah, 2013; García and Wei, 2014; Kalocsai, 2014; Creese and Blackledge, 2015).

Though valuable research has been developed in terms of interculturalism and plurilingualism in FLE, there are several reasons why this framework should be further explored and different perspectives promoted. First, in practical terms, the aforementioned concepts have not been translated into educators' practices within western multi-ethnic school contexts, for example due to the lack of specific measures promoting intercultural relations, language policies, failure to interrelate the different school subjects, little cooperation among language teachers, outdated teaching practices, lack of training and information about recent studies, the perception of languages as isolated from communities, or even an unwillingness to see the world through the language-culture of the other (see Vollmer, 2009; Fonseca-Greber, 2010; Baker, 2015); consequently, it is necessary to find new ways of bridging scholars´ work and real school contexts. Second, the unexpected migratory configurations European societies are enduring bring added pressure upon school populations in terms of integrating migrant/refugee newcomers, who represent not only significantly different cultural and linguistic paradigms, but also opposite perceptions of sexuality, gender, religion or acceptable social behavior. Third, guidelines for specific hybrid practices in FLE are still limited and are not applied, though they may be used with specific aims and reflect a bourgeoning reality. Fourth, the intercultural and plurilingual approach to FLE fail to incorporate a holistic perspective of the world, which would enable students to achieve self-awareness, providing them with a sense of belonging to a wider social and planetary context; such sense of interrelation could also contribute to the prevention and regulation of students´ misbehavior, as well as to the resolution of conflicts within the class.

Exploring New Directions in FLE Using Anzaldúa´s Border Epistemology

Even though scholars have been widely quoting and applying postcolonial concepts to their research on FLE, this article asserts a deeper contribution of Cultural Studies, reframing FLE

using the concepts of the cultural theorist and social activist Gloria Anzaldúa, which are based on an intercultural, plurilingual, hybrid and holistic experience and perspective of the world.

With a clear purpose of reflexive and critical citizenship and social activism, Anzaldúa´s Border Epistemology (1981-2004) focuses on the crossing of different borders - geographic, cultural, linguistic, class, sexual, gender, religious and spiritual borders, embracing hybrid configurations, especially in terms of culture, language, placement and gender. Though Anzaldúa´s writings have already been explored within the fields of Literature, Culture, Ethnic Studies, Linguistics, Gender Studies and Post-Colonialism (for example, Yarbro-Bejarano, 1994; Alarcón, 2002; Keating, 2005; Castillo, 2006; Cantú, 2011; Mignolo, 2012; Lobo, 2015), as well as in publications within the field of Education and Pedagogy (Fránquiz and Salazar, 2004; Fránquiz, Salazar and DeNicolo, 2004; Walsh and Townsin, 2015), they have not yet been applied to FLE, with the purpose of generating new practices to be implemented in classrooms, in order to cultivate spaces of social activism and critical citizenship, where alliances between different groups are learnt to be built halfway, as Anzaldúa claims in the preface of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987): “today we ask to be met halfway” (n. pag.).

Though Anzaldúa´s most known and discussed concepts are part of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, the author´s early concept of El Mundo Zurdo (1981), the concepts on the basis of Path of *Conocimiento* (2002), and the concepts of New Tribalism (2000), Nos/otras (2002) and Spiritual Activism (2002), as well as writings from her unpublished work available in the archive *Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa Papers 1942-2004* (University of Texas at Austin), also concentrate on the forging of relational tactics between groups, exploring the interconnection of the self and the other, and relating one´s actions with the planet context, in a clear holistic view of the world. Taking this framework into account, the main question addressed by FLE would be: how can foreign language classes become spaces of cultural politics and dynamic social activism, helping to foster a more inclusive European society? The application of this framework to the intercultural and plurilingual approaches in FLE could promote practices to empower students from diverse backgrounds with skills to negotiate

alterity, enabling them to cross different borders - may they be of place, culture, language, class, sexuality, gender, religion or others. Such practices would emphasize self-awareness and self-change as means to social change, compelling students to forge relational tactics and alliances with other groups.

Moreover, reframing FLE using Anzaldúa´s Border Epistemology would necessarily take into account the incorporation of hybrid configurations into classes. Spaces of translingualism could therefore be explored with specific pedagogical objectives, to forge ways of bridging the migrant students´ communities and the host society, creating a sense of equality and social justice. The possible pedagogical applications of these hybrid language practices, common inside students´ communities, would acknowledge students´ multilingual lives and the different levels of interaction among the languages they use. Students with hybrid identities could be used as mediators between opposing groups during classes, bridging different experiences, not only in what cultures and languages are concerned, but also in terms of religion, gender or other experiences. In this context, language teachers would be taking on a role of both social activists and intercultural mediators, and promoters of critical thinking, reflection and self- awareness about students´ own place in the world, developing lesson plans with the aim to encourage different border crossings and affinity tactics, underlining the interdependence of every group as part of the planet and their responsibility and contribution to the global context.

In fact, in both form and content, Anzaldúa´s work uses language as means to social activism and intercultural mediation. The author employs examples of plurilinguism and translingualism to underline that language is like a border: on the one hand, it can unite or divide people, allowing or preventing empathy and social mobility; on the other hand, it is a fluid space in a constant evolution and negotiation. Living in-between the Mexican and the American realities, Anzaldúa abolishes linguistic boundaries, claiming that her linguistic hybridism is an expression of her cultural hybridism, consequently emphasizing translingual practices as intrinsic to her concept of Borderlands (1987): spaces inhabited by those whose identity is an intersection of different paradigms, potential transformational spaces, where opposites converge,

clash and transform. By decentering language from its standard varieties, Anzaldúa transforms her texts into spaces of resistance to the dominant culture, as she considers linguistic repression, which she labels linguistic terrorism (1987), an identitary repression. Furthermore, she invites her readers to experience the feeling of living among worlds, questioning pre-established cultural beliefs and perception patterns of reality.

Anzaldúa is, therefore, an intercultural mediator between her culture and that of her readers, taking on the role of the New *Mestiza* (1987), i.e. a female entity who is a product of multiple systems and inhabits opposing worlds by reason of her gender, sexuality, color, class, body, personality, spiritual belief or life experience, and who takes on a tolerant and global vision of reality. Anzaldúa also functions as a Neplantera (2002), developing skills not only of mediation, but also of action upon society, inventing relational theories and tactics as keys to personal and social liberation. These concepts can be applied to develop a different theoretical framework to FLE, in terms of teachers´ role and classroom practices, at a time when dogmatic notions of identity based on biological, historical, cultural, linguistic, religious or gender stereotypes no longer apply and are constantly evolving while interacting with diverse groups, as western societies are moving towards gigantic Borderlands.

Anzaldúa believes that the use of language not only reflects reality but also has the power to transform it, claiming a (re)appropriation of language that will enable individuals to (re)create the self and the society they aspire, as inner change is the first step to social change. When formulating Nos/otras concept (2002), the author reflected upon what she considers *desconocimientos*, the ignorance that splits people from others and from their own spirituality, the fear of the unknown which builds and maintains walls between groups, which causes and justifies different kinds of oppression. These *desconocimientos* can be gradually overcome through educational practices that use language to underline the interrelation and interdependence of different groups, with the promotion of intercultural and plurilingual skills that point out that “we are them and they are us . . . the border is a concept that is fast going obsolete and in actuality it no longer exists, it only exists as an idea” (Gloria E. Anzaldúa Papers, n. pag.).

FLE intercultural and plurilingual practices would take into account forms of New Tribalism (Anzaldúa, 2000), an affinity based approach, characterized as an alternative to both assimilation and segregation, where distinct groups cooperate, resist old narratives and create new ones, producing relational tactics that emphasize commonalities instead of differences. According to the author, New Tribalism will disrupt identity classifications imposed by the dominant culture in order to maintain its privileges, as communities will learn to work together in coalition. Nonetheless, Anzaldúa acknowledges that to achieve this transformative worldview, individuals and society will undergo a process of advances and retreats, transitional phases and the discomfort that precedes a new level of knowledge, thus formulating the Path of *Conocimiento* (2002). In the light of the current refugee/migrant context, inside European schools, both students from the host society and refugee/migrant students are now experiencing the several stages of this path, as both groups are losing their old system and trying to create a new one: when their reality falls apart they feel *El Arrebato*, they experience the discomfort of Coatlicue State; in-between systems, they find themselves in Nepantla; some already feel the need of a new system, experiencing The Call, and are trying to rebuild their identity as in Putting Coyolxauqui Together; some students continuously collide while negotiating their identity with the newcomers as in The Blow up; hopefully, both groups will be able to reach the last stage of Shifting Realities. This process is similar to that of learning a foreign language, since in FLE students also undergo (and expect) most of these stages, while confronting themselves with a different language and culture. This similarity can be explored to transform foreign language classes into spaces of intercultural citizenship and dynamic social activism, taking on concrete conscious practices leading to students´ self-awareness, while relating them to the society, to their community and ancestors, and to the next generations, in what Anzaldúa calls Spiritual Activism (2002).

Conclusion

More than ever, this century brings forward the need to teach students to think critically and to live together with alterity. Acknowledging that Anzaldúa´s Border Epistemology combines ideas

of in-betweeness, interculturality, plurilingualism, and translinguism, also providing keys to positive practices of interaction among different groups, this conceptual framework can be applied to explore new directions on interculturalism and plurilingualism in FLE, offering perspectives that can be used to help educators to solve problems the current situation presents, fostering a long term balance between native and refugee/migrant students´ identities. In order to accomplish this, foreign language classes have to be reformulated to become intercultural citizenship spaces of dynamic social activism, leading to a greater understanding of the role of each individual in society, focusing on different border crossings and using commonalities as catalysts for transformation.

Notes

[1]The term "contact zones" refers to social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today (Pratt, 1992).

[2]Bhabha uses this concept to describe a space of conflict and negotiation between languages and cultures, a space characterized by hybridity (1994).

[3]In this article, hybrid identity refers to the confluence, intersection and fluidity of multiple elements - in terms of culture, ethnicity, language or gender - within an individual.

[4]Interculturalism refers to cross-cultural dialogue and interaction between cultures, involving moving beyond multiculturalism, in terms of the mere passive acceptance of cultures coexisting together.

[5]When using the concept "identity", this article takes into account the interaction of nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality, language, gender, sexuality, history, beliefs and education, following Scott and Marshall´s definition (2009).

[6]Plurilingualism is the use of several languages, even though it may not mean a perfect command of all of them: one uses linguistic knowledge and skills to communicate with others in a multinational and multicultural society, due to similarities and differences between languages and cultures.

[7] Social integration refers to the principles by which individuals are related to another in society (Scott and Marshall, 2009).

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