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Critical Cultural Analysis and Reflection (Written Paper)

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Part I: Critical Cultural Analysis

This critical cultural analysis considers the cultural similarities and differences among the three subjects: Cecilia J. (“neighbor”), an accountant originally from Guayaquil, Ecuador; Francisco R. (“teacher”), a retired bilingual textbook editor and current English as a Second Language instructor originally from Havana, Cuba; and myself, a linguist and translator originally from Beckley, West Virginia. All three subjects currently reside in the city of Miami, Florida.¹ Although several cultural similarities were noted in addition to the subjects’ current shared city of residence, viz., religion (Christianity)², language (Spanish), class (solidly middle), and status as professionals, far more cultural differences were discerned. The most salient cultural differences identified by the analyst included native language (Cecilia and Francisco are native Spanish speakers; Richard is a native English speaker), ethnicity (Cecilia and Francisco are White Hispanic; Richard is White non-Hispanic of Anglo-Irish descent), English proficiency and the role that English plays in the subjects’ lives (Francisco and Richard are fluent and dominant in English, whereas Cecilia has struggled to achieve a basic level of English proficiency), primary cultures and countries of origin (*supra*), educational backgrounds

¹ It should be noted that while the vast majority of the Miami metropolitan area’s 5.5 million residents live in suburban or peri-urban areas (United States Census Bureau 2011), all three subjects live within the city limits of Miami, Florida, the most urbanized portion of the three-county metropolitan area.

² I believe that our shared religion is a fundamentally important cultural characteristic, as it unites us in terms of core values (e.g., our understanding of moral concepts such as “right” and “wrong,” “just” and “unjust”), beliefs (e.g., the place of humankind in the universe, the reason for our being, the existence of a supreme deity), cultural traditions and practices (e.g., religious celebrations such as Easter and Christmas, and the very fact that we view both as primarily religious rather than secular observances) and constitutes an important “community of practice” to which we all belong. Moreover, I believe the fact that both Cecilia and Francisco spoke at length about their religious beliefs or affiliations during their interviews is a significant indicator of the importance of this cultural characteristic.

(Francisco and Richard have both earned master's degrees, while Cecilia completed her *bachillerato*, equivalent to a high school diploma), family dynamics and the role that family plays in the subjects' lives (Cecilia is very close to her immediate family, which is the nucleus of her social network, whereas Francisco and Richard have limited contact with family members), degree of cultural hybridity (very strong for Francisco, strong for Richard and moderate for Cecilia), "rootedness" and "openness"³ (Francisco and Cecilia are both more "open" than Richard, who is more "rooted") and of course the distinct and diverse life experiences of all three individuals. As to the question of why I noted more cultural differences than similarities among the three subjects, I cannot be sure whether it is because such differences actually exist, or if it is instead an artifact of my own personal values, biases and stereotypes, which may have led me to perceive differences where none exist or to perhaps exaggerate differences that are in actuality minor or insignificant. One possibility that must be considered is that I harbor hidden stereotypes of Hispanic persons or even communities to which I belong that may have skewed my interpretation of the data or in the case of Cecilia and Francisco biased the questions I asked during the interviews.

The cultural similarities and differences that I have been able to identify among the three subjects can be understood as originating from two sources: *reality* (in which case the similarities

³ A fellow classmate posted a comment to my Critical Cultural Analysis and Presentation regarding my assessment of each subject's "rootedness" and "openness" in which she noted that she had understood the concepts as continuous rather than discrete, as my analysis implied to her (the instructor posted a similar comment). While I agree that we all have varying degrees of each quality (and that no person is entirely "rooted" or entirely "open") and did not intend to imply that "rootedness" and "openness" are mutually-exclusive categories or polar concepts, I nevertheless believe that it is appropriate to describe an individual as being "more rooted" or "more open" based on his or her life experiences and personal choices (see Kumaravadivelu 2008, pp. 167-169).

and differences actually exist) and from my imperfect *perceptions of reality*, colored by my own values, biases and stereotypes (in which case it is impossible for me to know whether the similarities and differences are real or merely perceived). In any case, those cultural similarities and differences that do in fact exist primarily originate from our distinct global, national, social and individual realities⁴; similarities and differences in our primary cultures and the cultural communities and communities of practice to which each of us belongs; the fact that all individuals are unique and have unique life experiences; differences in our degrees of cultural hybridity; and, given the complexity of culture, likely many other factors of which I am not aware. As a final reflection on the question of our cultural similarities and differences, along with the role that individual perspective plays in not only the questions we ask but how we interpret the answers, I wonder how my cultural (auto)ethnography might have differed had Cecilia or Francisco conducted it.

I have long been aware that I hold certain cultural values, biases and stereotypes that originate from my own life experiences, family background, cultural identity and the various communities to which I belong (or have belonged). While I was cognizant of certain personal biases and stereotypes before conducting the interviews and analyses that are the subject of this paper,⁵ I

⁴ Based on my interviews with Cecilia and Francisco and my own cultural autoethnography, I believe that the three subjects share fairly similar global and national realities (after all, we live in the same international, multicultural city and practice professions greatly affected by globalization) yet have quite distinct social and individual realities (consider, for instance, the very different roles that family and the English language play in our lives).

⁵ My strongest personal biases involve negative feelings toward certain religious groups and political affiliations. The stereotypes I hold are varied and numerous, and relate to both the “Self” (i.e., communities to which I belong) and the “Other.” As a result of my early upbringing and a fairly widespread general bias against the dialect, I harbor a strong negative stereotype of my native speech community (the variety of Appalachian English spoken in southern West Virginia). Due to social pressures and the general social stigma attached to this speech variety, I

uncovered what may be an additional personal bias in favor of Hispanic non-native speakers of English over other non-native speakers of English, which manifested itself in my very choice of subjects, both of whom are native Spanish-speaking Hispanic persons. I believe that I have formed this bias over many years of exposure to Hispanic culture (both in the United States and in Mexico), interaction with Hispanic persons, and familiarity with the Spanish language, which I have spoken fluently since late adolescence; consequently, I have come to view Hispanic persons as less “Other” than other ethnic or ethnolinguistic groups to which I do not belong. This realization has important implications for my teaching, as I will have to be careful not to favor Hispanic students over students of other ethnicities.⁶ It has also allowed me to understand that the concepts of “Self” and “Other” are themselves dynamic, complex and multifaceted; there are degrees of “selfness” and “otherness” (these concepts form a continuum), and what one perceives as belonging to either category at a given point in time is subject to change. From my own cultural autoethnography, I have learned that in many cases what I perceived as “Other” earlier in my life I now perceive as “Self,” and vice versa; this is especially true for the communities of practice I have joined as an adult living in a very urban setting and the gradual eroding of my connection to West Virginia over the years. My cultural identity has changed markedly throughout my lifetime as my environment, which has significantly determined the

usually exert strong efforts to accommodate to the phonological and grammatical norms of Standard American English when interacting in formal, professional and educational contexts.

⁶ Such inappropriate favor could take many forms, from unconsciously giving more attention to Hispanic students in class to grading their assignments more leniently or not providing appropriate correction. One conceivable scenario related to the latter problem would involve ignoring language mistakes or treating serious language mistakes as minor due to my knowledge of Spanish (which could allow me to understand the student’s intended meaning, whereas a non-Spanish speaking teacher may be more likely to treat the mistake as serious and correct as necessary if she could not understand the student’s intended meaning).

cultural communities and communities of practice available to me, has shifted from rural, monolingual and ethnically and culturally less complex to urban, multilingual, multiethnic, multicultural and culturally more complex.

Finally, this critical cultural analysis can inform, and improve, my teaching by encouraging me to confront the following questions, each of which incorporates a critical dichotomy: Will I position myself in the language classroom as my students' *superior* or as their *equal*? Will I be merely *tolerant* of those different from myself, or will I instead be *open* to new ideas, cultures, and ways of seeing myself and others? Will I *consciously work* to ensure that my personal values, biases and stereotypes do not perniciously inject themselves into my pedagogy (even if that requires emotional discomfort on my part), or will I *ignore* them? Will I *first* develop my own global cultural consciousness, so that I can *then* help my students to develop their own? And finally, will I treat my students as *cultural informants* by being, as Francisco put it, "just as interested in their culture as they are in mine," or only as mere *vessels* to be filled with knowledge?

Part II: Reflections on *Cultural Stereotypes and Motivation and the Adult Language Learner*

Cultural Stereotypes

Cultural stereotypes are socially constructed images or beliefs we hold about individuals or groups of individuals that tend to be passed down from one generation to another (Kumaravadivelu 2008, p. 50). Cultural stereotypes are usually simplistic generalizations about individuals or groups whom those holding the stereotype have "otherized" and about whom they know relatively little. Cultural stereotypes provide those who hold them a way of simplifying the world and making the unmanageable or unknown more psychologically manageable and are a manifestation of the human mind's unconscious impulse to categorize and label the entities in

our environment. However, the sense order and control we seemingly gain from clinging to cultural stereotypes is almost always illusory, as most cultural stereotypes are gross simplifications and overgeneralizations or exaggerations of a small number of traits (often insignificant ones, such as physical features or linguistic characteristics) that are used to typify all members who belong to the group in question. Once we have formed a stereotype of an individual or group, we then tend to ignore individual variation among members of that group and fail to understand (or even care about) their cultural complexity (Kumaravadivelu 2008, p. 51).

Understanding the nature of cultural stereotypes and, more importantly, becoming aware of the stereotypes that I hold is a critically important component of my development as an English language teacher, for while certain stereotypes may be relatively harmless and may even in fact be true, at least in part (e.g., “most Hispanic Americans speak Spanish,” “women tend to make better teachers than men”), many if not most cultural stereotypes (e.g., “Asian students don’t like to speak in class for cultural reasons” or “Italian students love to talk”) are unhelpful if not downright obstructive of effective pedagogy and in extreme cases can lead to prejudice and discrimination. Stereotypes cause us to simplistically view others as members of groups instead of as individuals; if I view my students as mere members of some or another group instead of as unique individuals with complex cultural identities (either out of convenience or unknowingly), I will be much less likely, if not entirely unable, to effectively address their *individual* learning needs and will certainly fail in my goal to treat my students as cultural informants instead of vessels to be filled.

Motivation and the Adult Language Learner

The motivations that drive adult language learners, particularly those learning English, are varied and complex. Many migrants to the United States believe that they must acquire English in order to successfully assimilate to American culture, while learners in countries from the so-called “outer” and “expanding circles” (see Kachru 1992) often feel compelled to learn English to achieve upward mobility in their countries of origin in our ever globalizing world in which English is becoming a near universal lingua franca (see Baker 2009). The extent to which either belief is really accurate is debatable (Tollefson 2000). Based on my personal experiences, not all learners are strongly motivated (some, for example, learn English because they are compelled to do so by an employer, while others attend ESL classes on a student visa in the United States and must achieve certain attendance benchmarks as a condition of their visa, often finding greater motivation from their visa than their English language studies). Moreover, any given individual’s level of motivation is subject to change over time and is shaped by his or her own individual realities, life circumstances and cultural identity. The language instructor also plays a key role in determining each student’s motivation.

Understanding that students have diverse sources and varying degrees of motivation, and especially that the instructor is a crucial piece of the motivational puzzle, can empower English instructors such as myself to adopt an activist approach to learner motivation (see Rost 2006). Although teaching each lesson with skill and enthusiasm, along with fostering a supportive learning environment are a good start, they are unfortunately insufficient to maximize the instructor’s ability to positively influence his students’ motivation. Indeed, research informs us that implementing culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies that address students’ cultures and cultural selves in tandem with the target linguacultural context can have a particularly potent positive effect on learner motivation (Brooks-Lewis 2009). I believe that developing and

implementing engaging classroom activities that draw on each student's individual "funds of knowledge" and unique cultural identity as a vehicle for presenting language structures, functions and vocabulary are an effective pedagogical strategy (Moll et al. 1992).

Throughout the semester, you've been very insightful and thoughtful in your blogs and reflections and I think you've made a strong move towards analysis in this paper. The reality vs. perception issue is an interesting dilemma to consider and most especially for those conducting qualitative research. I don't know if the dilemma is so significant for the purpose of the investigations for this course because the goal was more individual, personal learning rather than objectifying the realities of yourself and others, but important to reflect on nonetheless. I wonder if you've considered further academic work beyond this certificate program? A doctoral program? You seem to demonstrate a talent for conceptual analysis and have strong writing skills and you certainly have the life experience and background to give you valuable insight into L2 learning, languages, culture. It was great to have you as part of the group!

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