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Intercultural Views on Gender

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This project is the first experience carried out between students from New College of Florida (US) and UMET (Argentina). These students are learning Spanish and English, respectively, as Foreign Languages. The main purpose is two-fold: we aim at developing the intercultural skills of our students by discussing current gender issues and, by doing so, enhancing their linguistic skills. This has been done from an interdisciplinary point of view, bearing in mind that the students that take part in the project are currently studying in different areas, ranging from Physical Education to Social Management. Our proposal involves working in the classroom as well as online. The topic will be approached from different perspectives, the input being authentic material and diverse cultural artefacts. In the case of the local students, the material is discussed in class and then during video calls with the American students. Within the scope of the project, we deemed the following subtopics as the most relevant ones: language and gender, gender violence, reproductive rights and, finally, the connection between gender and each course of studies. This project is a work-in-progress, therefore conclusions are partial.

Key words: Higher Education; Inclusive Education; Foreign Languages; Intercultural Skills; Interdisciplinary



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Introduction

Given the context we are immersed in, it seems highly important to discuss issues related to Gender Studies in Higher Education. Most of our students belong to the Fourth Wave of Feminism; they attend demonstrations as well as are active in social media. This is part of our reality and, as such, we cannot leave it out of the EFL classroom.

Participants

This project is a work in progress which involves members from UMET (Argentina) and New College of Florida (US). The proposal was designed during the first term of 2019 and presented during the Research Week at UMET at the beginning of the second term (August 2019)ⁱ.

On the one hand, it was decided that four classes of English VII were given the possibility to take part in the project. Out of the four classes, one showed more interest and commitment, which is why it was selected to conduct a series of video conferences. On the other hand, a reduced group of students from New College of Florida joined the project as an extra activity to practise their Spanish.

Methodology

In order for the video conferences to take place, we deemed necessary to give our students tools to be able to develop their speaking, intercultural and critical thinking skills. It is important to take into account that, being a relatively new university, this is the first time that we carry out such an experience. Needless to say, for most of the students it was the first time they could communicate with peers from an overseas higher education institution.

As their professor, the approach to classroom practice was that of discussion of controversies mixed with discourse enquiry (Nelson as cited in Gray, 2019), always encouraging collaborative work. My first step then was to bring up the subject of gender in class and see what their reaction was. Interestingly enough, the feminist movement that took over the streets entered the classrooms. Following bell hooks and her admiration for Paulo Freire, I believe in “education as the practice of freedom” (hooks,

ⁱ Even though it is carried out within the scope of the Department of Languages at UMET (Universidad Metropolitana para la Educación y el Trabajo), members of both the area of Research and the Library of the University have contributed to the development of this experiment.



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1994, 6). This is why I wanted to create a space in which I could pass on my knowledge on gender as well as listen to my students' opinions.

From the very beginning, we thought of the project as an interdisciplinary one to benefit from the students' different backgrounds. In the classes at UMET, there is an interesting range of courses of studies: Tourism, Social and Cultural Management, Social Communication, Intelligent Buildings and Physical Education & Sports. The latter is probably the most interesting case, since they already have experience in teaching practice and have gone through different situations regarding gender issues at schools. On the part of the New College of Florida, there are students of Sociology, Maths, Economy and Environmental Sciences. All of them study Spanish, some focus on literature and two of them have experience in teaching English in Spanish-speaking countries.

Tasks and contents

The first step was to create a closed Facebook group using the function of social learning provided by the platform, which allows to organise the material in different units. Since the project is carried out in both English and Spanish, the rule is simple: comment in the language of the post.

Secondly, two lessons were devoted to eliciting information from students and providing them with an overview of terms and history of the feminist movement. In the first lesson, the trigger was a couple of videos from the book *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*ⁱⁱ. After that, key terms and pioneers of feminism were taught, stressing the fact that we are currently experiencing the Fourth Wave.

Finally, a series of video calls were conducted. In each of them, a topic within the scope of Gender Studies was discussed. As regards timing, it was decided to spend between 30 and 45 minutes speaking in each language.

1. Language and Gender

“Oppressive language [...] must be rejected, altered, and exposed”

Toni Morrison

As Marx and Engels argued in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), the oldest form of oppression is that of men over women (Cudd, 2006). Language has played a relevant role here, since we cannot conceive the idea of a woman performing something typically assigned to men if there is no word to express it. In this sense, both

ⁱⁱ “If Cinderella were a Guy” and “Bropunzel”.



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English and Spanish are patriarchal languages and have been experiencing a series of changes related to this.

Thus, the topic of our first debate (October 4, 2019), and one that students were very excited about, was gender-neutral language (English) and inclusive language (Spanish). Since it was the first attempt, UMET students were provided with a series of questions in case they needed them.

Before the date of the debate, both groups had read an article on the history of the use of “They/them” as singular pronouns, and listened to a radio interview about the use of inclusive language at a school in Buenos Aires.

One of the main differences found during the discussion was related to gender identity and language. The students from New College of Florida have a different experience of this, since they are asked what pronouns they want to use when they enrol, whereas the students from UMET concluded that they would like such a question to be asked.

Finally, all students agreed that in order for these changes to actually take place they need support from their teachers and the educational community in general. For them, it is not enough when teachers or authorities say ‘you may use inclusive language at school, but I am definitely not going to’.

It is important to highlight that not all students were confident enough to speak at our first videoconference, so the rest of the group performed two activities: some took notes and then wrote a report on what happened, others were in charge of social networks. For the first meeting, they chose the hashtags #MiradasInterculturales and #NoLinguisticSexism.

2. Gender Violence

“[...] otro ejemplo de violencia capitalista y patriarcal,
llamando, por ende, a subvertir el orden.”

(Unamuno, 2018: 111)

Previous to the second meeting (October 11), information was shared about statistics in both countries. One of the issues discussed was the fact that Ni Una Menos was seen by US media as a consequence of Latin American macho culture without taking into account their own cases, which are referred to as isolated cases of domestic violence (Pitchon, 2018). In fact, statistics reveal that in the period 2010-2015, the femicide rate was higher in the United States than in Argentina.



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The students from UMET explained the case of Lucía and the implications of a male-centered justice. Furthermore, a comparison was made between the meaning of the hashtags #miracomonosponemos and #MeToo.

In addition, students discussed how gender violence is portrayed in fiction as well as the way gender stereotypes are reinforced through advertising. Finally, it was highlighted that there are artists who express their support through their songs.

3. Interdisciplinary Debate

For the third meeting (October 25), students were asked to prepare a brief speech in the target language.

First, the group of Social Management spoke about Women and Work, referring to *glass ceiling*, sexual harassment and job opportunities. Secondly, the Physical Education teacher trainees selected three topics: the National Women's Meeting recently held in La Plata, which led to the students proposing a gender violence protocol to be established at University; as regards teaching practices, they presented the cases of women's futsal and an LGBT inclusive swimming team. Thirdly, the group of Social Communication introduced the topic of The Role of Women in Cinema, followed by examples of gender violence in series.

Finally, the students from New College of Florida disserted on topics ranging from an essay by Alice Walker to the gendered construction of women and soft sciences vs men and hard sciences.

Conclusions

Even though at the time of writing this paper there is still one last meeting to be held, it is possible to say that students have been able to engage in intercultural communication, developing their competencies and an understanding of the Other culture. This has meant sharing signifying practices in two diverse educational settings. From the point of view of teaching a foreign language, a unique group dynamics was paramount to the success of this project. All in all, as a teacher I was able to address issues related to gender in an educationally meaningful way which also linked with the students' life experience and practices.

Most importantly, the creation of this space was the trigger for the students to feel more empowered to take action on issues that need to be transformed in our educational community.



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