

La literatura como representación de la cultura mexicana para hablantes de español como lengua extranjera

*Literature as a representation of Mexican culture for speakers of Spanish as a
foreign language*

*Literatura como representação da cultura mexicana para falantes de
espanhol como língua estrangeira*

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Resumen

La literatura, como manifestación viva de la lengua y expresión de la riqueza cultural de una sociedad, ha utilizado diversas estrategias lingüísticas y narrativas para construir historias que se desarrollan en un contexto específico. Si bien los elementos propios de la cultura mexicana pueden resultar conflictivos para los hablantes de otros países hispanos, son todavía más complejos para los hablantes de una lengua extranjera. En esta investigación se pretendió observar cómo estudiantes de español como lengua extranjera se acercan a la lectura de textos literarios que contienen frases o diálogos propios del español mexicano, así como situaciones particulares de la vida cotidiana. Esto con la finalidad de analizar la manera en que la literatura les permite construir representaciones de la cultura nacional. Para este trabajo se contó con la participación de siete estudiantes extranjeros de intercambio de Inglaterra, Francia y Corea del Sur, con nivel de español equivalente al B2, quienes leyeron el cuento “Depende” de Guillermo Sheridan. Los alumnos compartieron los retos que representan las lecturas que incluyen elementos propios la cultura popular mexicana y cómo se aproximaron hacia la comprensión del texto.

Palabras clave: cultura, enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, identidad, representación.

Abstract

Literature, as a living manifestation of the language and expression of the cultural richness of a society, has used various linguistic and narrative strategies to create stories developed in a specific context. Although elements typical of Mexican culture may be conflicting for other Hispanic countries' speakers, they are even more complex for a foreign language speaker. In this research we intend to observe the way students of Spanish as a foreign language approach the reading of literary texts that include phrases or dialogues typical of the Mexican speech, as well as particular situations of daily life. We propose to analyze how literature allows them to build representations of the national culture. This work had the participation of seven foreign exchange students from England, France and South Korea, with a Spanish level of B2, who read the story "Depends" of Guillermo Sheridan. They shared the challenges represented by the readings that include Mexican popular culture and how they managed to achieve the understanding of the text.

Keywords: culture, foreign languages teaching, identity, representation.

Resumo

A literatura, como uma manifestação viva da linguagem e expressão da riqueza cultural de uma sociedade, tem usado diferentes estratégias lingüísticas e narrativas para construir histórias que se desenvolvem em um contexto específico. Embora os elementos típicos da cultura mexicana possam ser conflitantes para os falantes de outros países hispânicos, eles são ainda mais complexos para os falantes de uma língua estrangeira. Nesta pesquisa, pretendeu-se observar como os estudantes de língua espanhola como língua estrangeira leem textos literários que contenham frases ou diálogos típicos do espanhol mexicano, bem como situações particulares da vida cotidiana. Isso com o objetivo de analisar a maneira pela qual a literatura permite construir representações da cultura nacional. Para este trabalho, sete estudantes estrangeiros da Inglaterra, França e Coréia do Sul compareceram, com um nível de espanhol equivalente ao B2, que leu a história "Depend", de Guillermo Sheridan. Os alunos compartilharam os desafios representados pelas leituras que incluem elementos da cultura popular mexicana e como eles abordaram a compreensão do texto.

Palabras-chave: cultura, ensino de línguas estrangeiras, identidade, representação.

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Introduction

Learning a foreign language implies knowledge of new customs, traditions and ways of thinking. Language classes use different strategies to introduce students to a culture different from their own, such as history, art or folklore. Literature can become one of the main tools for the teaching of a language, not only because its form of expression is written language, but because in it we find narrations and dialogues, as well as descriptions of characters and situations.

In this work we are interested in analyzing the cultural reading that a group of students of Spanish as a second language makes about the story "Depend" by Guillermo Sheridan. We worked, as a case study, with a group of exchange students from the University of Guadalajara from European and Asian countries, with a level of Spanish equivalent to B2. Since we consider the learning of a second language in its interaction with art as a manifestation of the ideological constructions of a people, this research has a linguistic and cultural focus. Having said that, we enunciate our research question in the following terms: How do art and literature contribute to understanding cultural and linguistic elements necessary for learning a second language?

The approach of the students who speak Spanish as a second language to the "Depends" story by Guillermo Sheridan allowed us to observe the way in which cultural products, such as literary works, allow students to appropriate elements of Mexican culture mainly through two great categories: linguistic aspects and life in Mexico. The first category aims for participants to comment on popular speech and Mexicanisms; the second will allow them to observe everyday situations. In this way, students discussed and learned about Mexican culture through their literature.

Development

The communicative competences proposed in the common European framework comprise three components: the linguistic, the sociolinguistic and the pragmatic (Council of Europe, 2001). For this reason, curricular contents for learning a foreign language include not only grammatical rules but also topics related to the culture of the countries where the language is spoken. This research work was aimed at speakers with a level of independent in the domain of the language; Due to its ability to understand complex texts, we proposed the use of literature for the approach to Mexican culture.

Theoretical framework

Krashen (2009) states that there are two ways to develop the linguistic competence of a second language. The first is through acquisition, that is, through an unconscious process similar to how children appropriate their mother tongue. The second is learning, which occurs when the individual is aware of the knowledge and the process of speaking another language. Nakai (1997) considers that these two forms correspond to the age of the students: in general, children acquire a second language while adults learn it.

Most methods for learning a second language start from the general to the particular; they begin by exposing the norm of a language and then present the characteristic elements of different places. In this way, the idiomatic expressions and the approach to the cultural aspects of the countries that speak a language constitute complex knowledge that is studied at the most advanced levels. Once again: learning a foreign language requires not only the domain of lexical and grammatical contents, but also cultural knowledge, especially to understand and use regional idioms and constructions.

The concept of culture is too extensive. Although today the tendency to "restrict its denotation to the highest forms of a people's life, such as philosophy, religion, art, science" has prevailed (Megale, 2001, p.19), still The majority of human actions continue to be considered cultural manifestations. In this work we have focused on two main elements: language and daily life. Because they are elements that can easily be observed by speakers of a foreign language.

The effectiveness of the communication resides significantly in the adherence to the rules set for a language. The normative criterion suggests the use of the standard language to facilitate the exchange of clear or precise ideas among speakers, especially among speakers of different linguistic contexts. However, everyday speech is full of idioms, regionalisms and

particular expressions of a region or even of an individual. Hence, a part of our study is focused on the observation of the linguistic particularities of Mexican Spanish. Gómez de Silva (2001) defines the Mexicanisms as "a word, particle or locution, of Spanish or indigenous origin, characteristic of the Spanish of Mexico, especially if it does not share it (if it contrasts) with the Spanish of other Latin American countries or with the one in Spain "(p.4).

Velarde (2006), taking up Goffman, defines daily life as "our daily experiences, full of meanings, interests and strategies (...) understood as that series of behaviors that allow us to create the personal network of paths through which we daily walk. and we build our social relationships "(paragraph 3). In this sense, the text will allow students to reflect on situations and actions of the national context.

Problem Statement

The Common European Framework of Reference handles a multilingual approach to language learning. From this perspective, the acquisition of a foreign language allows an individual to develop "a communicative competence to which all knowledge and linguistic experiences contribute and in which languages are related to each other and interact" (Council of Europe, 2001). This concept allows us to overcome the idea of a multilingual speaker who expresses himself in one or another language to introduce a multilingual speaker who uses knowledge of several languages to express himself and achieve effective communication. In this way, language is considered as a living, dynamic and flexible element that each individual appropriates to imprint its particular character.

The books and support materials for learning Spanish as a foreign language focus on grammatical rules and the use of a standard language. As the level of language proficiency increases, the topics include a greater number of specific contents such as idiomatic expressions, false cognates, specialized jargon or, on the contrary, popular language and regionalisms, among others. Likewise, contents related to the history, customs, traditions and way of life of the countries where the language is spoken are introduced. The approach to cultural content through literature was aimed at students identifying and discussing the management of language and everyday life in Mexico.

The expressions of Mexican Spanish included in the story "Depend" by Guillermo Sheridan allowed us to observe, on the one hand, the degree of knowledge of the speaker with respect to the Spanish language in particular, recognize the strategies used to understand its

meaning and analyze the particularities that foreign students identify in Mexican popular speech; On the other hand, the situations that the characters go through contribute to raising issues of the national context and what is the perspective of the other in these situations. The purpose was to confront the students with a mirror narration of the Mexican bureaucracy's speech, vocabulary difficult to interpret even for native speakers of Spanish from other countries, to observe the degree of understanding of the text as a representation of Mexican culture.

For university students the mastery of several languages is a necessity to achieve professional, work and personal goals. The learning of a second language allows them to have access to direct sources, to make academic mobility, to develop different linguistic competences, as well as to know aspects of different nations. In this context, we consider it important to return to the use of materials typical of a country's culture to delve into linguistic and social knowledge from its practices, discourses and products.

Method

The techniques of production and data collection were based on a focus group (Comas Arnau, 2008) conformed by seven exchange students of the University of Guadalajara, coming from England (5) France (1) and South Korea (1), between 20 and 24 years old, with an average of between four and seven years of experience as speakers of Spanish and with a humanities profile. It was based on the assumption that this group constituted a microcommunity whose expressions represent an "analytical point where the social and the linguistic are reproduced and changed" (Pozo, 1999, p.124). The research had a qualitative approach, understood as the process by which the collected information is organized to establish relationships, interpret, extract meanings and conclusions (Spradley, 1980, p.70). Likewise, discourse analysis was used, since it refers to the study of language in a contextualized way, as well as being a theoretical tool that allows us to investigate the interactions produced in the classroom as social microcosms (Van Dijk, 2005).

The investigation had the following steps: a vertical reading (general description where the data were questioned), identification of topics (establishment of codes as heuristic mechanisms), grouping of topics by each code (categorization) and reading of the material by codes (Taylor and Bogdan, 1987, p 158). We should point out that the work material was a story from the book *The Golden Finger* by Guillermo Sheridan (1996), namely, "It Depends".

This text was chosen because of the presence of Mexicanisms, expressions of popular speech and situations typical of the bureaucracy.

Results

Our work is focused on two elements for the cultural approach through literature: popular speech and daily life. We consider the linguistic aspect because part of the learning of a language consists in understanding popular expressions and regionalisms. Table 1 presents the localized elements of popular speech in Mexico.

Tabla 1. El habla popular mexicana

Elemento	Explicación	Estrategias para su comprensión
Reproducción del lenguaje oral	Los personajes utilizan el habla popular y esto se refleja en expresiones que simulan la expresión oral cotidiana.	Repetición de la oración en voz alta para focalizarse en el sonido, en lugar de la escritura.
Solecismo	Para imitar la fluidez del diálogo oral se suprimen algunas vocales, por lo cual se cambia el género de algunas palabras; asimismo se emplean adverbios en plural o diminutivo.	Se recordaron las reglas gramaticales para establecer la concordancia en español. Este aspecto permitió discutir sobre la lengua hablada y la escrita.
Pleonasma	Para caracterizar personajes con un nivel cultural bajo se utilizan construcciones consideradas erróneas según el habla culta.	Para algunos alumnos fue difícil reconocer los pleonasmos dado que en su lengua estas expresiones son correctas. Esto les permitió reflexionar sobre las particularidades de cada idioma.
Mexicanismo	El texto se ubica en la ciudad de México, debido a esto el autor recrea palabras y expresiones propias del habla mexicana.	Algunas palabras las entendieron por el contexto; otras, por la semejanza al español estándar; otras más tuvieron que explicarse y hacer referencia a su uso histórico o metafórico. Los estudiantes enfatizaron el uso de diminutivos en el habla mexicana.

Fuente: Elaboración propia

The story "Depends" by Guillermo Sheridan focuses on the cultural element of the bureaucracy behind the window and the phenomenon of influence in Mexico, as well as the trickery of the characters in charge of government paperwork. Table 2 exposes these social phenomena.

Tabla 2. La vida cotidiana en México

Fenómeno	Explicación	Comentarios de los estudiantes
Desinterés del burócrata	La deixis es frecuente en el diálogo cara a cara; sin embargo, en el texto se utiliza para mostrar el desinterés y crear un clima de confusión.	La primera opinión acerca del asunto del texto es que resultó muy irritante. Pudieron sentir la frustración de los personajes e identificarse con ellos.
Coyotismo	El término <i>coyote</i> se entiende como el intermediario ilegítimo de trámites burocráticos (Gómez de Silva, p. 68).	Se cuestionó sobre su oficialidad. También se reflexionó sobre su función en el sistema y cómo son causa y consecuencia de la burocracia.
Corrupción	“El abuso de un funcionario o empleado público en el ejercicio de sus funciones o con motivo de este, con el propósito de obtener beneficios, ganancias o utilidades a los que no tiene derecho” (Flores Medina, 2001, p. 74-76).	Vincularon este aspecto con la inseguridad en México. También les permitió hablar de sus propios contextos de procedencia.
Horario de oficina	Aunque la mayoría de las oficinas del Gobierno manejan horarios de mínimo cuatro horas, por la cantidad de gente y la lentitud de los trámites, debes llegar muy temprano o, incluso, pasar la noche.	Rememoraron sus experiencias personales en los trámites mexicanos, en cuanto al papeleo de las visas. También establecieron comparaciones con sus países.
Desorganización y el ajeteo de las oficinas	La burocracia tiene como fundamento la mala organización, por lo cual los personajes se enfrentan con	La desorganización la observaron en el manejo de las ventillas. También señalaron las descripciones sobre la comida y la música de los empleados.

	verdaderos “laberintos kafkianos” (Zavala, 2000, p. 38).	Observaron que esta desorganización también se refleja en las acciones de los solicitantes.
Influyentismo	El tráfico de influencias es medular para la burocracia, pues es necesario conocer a “alguien” para realizar cualquier trámite.	Destacaron la respuesta de los personajes quienes, por una parte, mostraban su inconformidad; mientras, por la otra, se sentían superiores al ser beneficiados.
Amabilidad del desconocido	El prototipo del mexicano es el de una persona amable, como lo avalan tantas frases de cortesías que forman parte del lenguaje cotidiano.	Les pareció interesante la diferencia de las actitudes de los personajes dentro y fuera del espacio burocrático.
Corrección del lenguaje	A pesar de que los personajes pertenezcan a un nivel cultural bajo y hablen con errores léxicos o sintácticos, señalan los errores de los otros, sean reales o no.	Se observa que este fenómeno es una manifestación de la jerarquía entre los personajes.
Referencias religiosas	Otro de los estereotipos del mexicano es su apego al catolicismo.	Se comenta que en los países de habla hispana existe un fuerte apego a la religión. También observaron que este fenómeno es más fuerte en los adultos mayores.

Fuente: Elaboración propia

Discussion

One of our initial hypotheses was that the proper expressions of Mexican Spanish did not represent obstacles to the comprehension of the text, given that the interpreter attends primary to the general content and uses his previous knowledge to complete the information. However, the Mexicanisms are terms that cause confusion in the reader, because they are outside their social, cultural and historical contexts. On the other hand, due to the fact that students worked in a language class, they showed great interest in understanding each word and comparing the different meanings that it may have.

Regarding the representation of everyday life, our hypothesis indicated that students would resort to cultural stereotypes of the Mexican, since the formation of stereotypes allows to establish an identification of one's own and a discrimination of the other. This dichotomy, identification / discrimination, constitutes an essential element for the conformation of a national identity, for the characterization of ourselves and others (Todorov, 1991). Although the students alluded to the pre-established constructions of the Mexican character to understand the situations of the bureaucracy in the country, the tendency to look for similar examples with the daily life of their places of origin could be observed. The work with the story by Guillermo Sheridan showed that to teach-learn a second language, the contextualization of the studied language with social, cultural and historical aspects is particularly important.

Conclusions

Reading literature implies recognizing features of a culture, for this reason it becomes an ideal instrument to analyze linguistic features and aspects of daily life. Foreign students noticed elements characteristic of the Mexican, including some regionalism and stereotypes. The elaboration of meanings by the readers was manifested as a core point between reading and group discussion, and literature was clearly a fundamental element in the understanding of a culture.

These analytical views developed throughout this investigation of the study of Spanish as a second language contribute to the awareness of the foreign reader regarding linguistic, cultural events and the social history of the Mexican people. In addition, it allows us to understand that literature as a cultural construct presents endless relationships between the symbolic of language and culture and the reality of human life. Therefore, the way is left open

to investigate, continue or look for other analytical perspectives where literary reading is deepened and its links with the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language.

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