# The Educational Purpose of Language Teaching at University: Giving Voice to Native Communities

## El propósito educativo de la enseñanza de lenguas en la universidad: dar voz a los pueblos originarios

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This paper reports the findings of a case study carried out in an English for specific purposes class with student tour guides at an Argentinean university. The main objective of this research project was to analyse how the teaching practices in the English language classes favoured intercultural exchanges. Data were gathered through document analysis, surveys, and interviews with students and with core-subject professors. Results were analysed qualitatively. We conclude that we must foster a friendly and safe learning environment to give voice to learners from native communities so that they can express their own identities and thus give way to enriching intercultural dialogue.

*Keywords:* education, English for specific purposes, foreign language instruction, intercultural communication, native communities

Este trabajo informa sobre los resultados de un estudio de caso en una clase de inglés con propósitos específicos con estudiantes de guía universitario de turismo en una universidad argentina. El objetivo principal del trabajo de investigación fue analizar el modo en que las prácticas áulicas en las clases de inglés favorecieron los intercambios interculturales. Los datos fueron recolectados a través del análisis de documentos, encuestas y entrevistas a estudiantes y a docentes de las materias específicas de la carrera. Los resultados se analizaron cualitativamente. Concluimos que debemos propiciar un ambiente de aprendizaje amigable y seguro en el cual los aprendientes de pueblos originarios tengan voz para expresar sus identidades y así enriquecer el diálogo intercultural.

*Palabras clave:* educación, comunicación intercultural, enseñanza de una lengua extranjera, inglés para propósitos específicos, pueblos originarios

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to report the findings of a case study carried out in an English for specific purposes (ESP) class with student tour guides in Argentina. The main objective of this four-year research project was to analyse how the teaching practices in the English language classes favoured intercultural exchanges; how pedagogical interventions considered students' beliefs, expectations, and prejudices towards the learning of English; and how teachers could give voice to every student in the class (Tavella & Fernández, 2019a).

Over the years, our ESP courses at university have gradually moved from a more traditional standpoint towards a more context-sensitive approach. In doing so, we started to reconsider the theoretical background of our teaching practices in light of content and language integrated learning (CLIL), intercultural competence, and post method pedagogies.

## Theoretical Background

Within our ESP practices, needs analysis (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998) has always been considered when designing our syllabi; however, in recent years we have additionally revisited our materials and teaching practices to suit our specific situational context. In doing so, we decided to abandon the use of textbooks, for we adhere to Tomlinson's (2008) concepts about mass-produced course books. These materials do not foster strong personal and affective relationships between content and learner, as they usually select insipid texts with the purpose of avoiding culturally controversial themes. They suggest literal interpretations from the learners, instead of aesthetically intense and singular readings.

### Content and Language Integrated Learning

CLIL and its four Cs (Coyle, 2007)—content, cognition, communication, and culture—has paved our path towards the reformulation of our classes. *Content* was selected considering the curricula of core subjects, which are: natural resources, historical and cultural heritage, tourism as a social practice, recreation, professional practices, tourist organisations, social and group psychology, and first aid. *Cognition* is fostered through the design of meaningful activities aimed at promoting the development of thinking skills, namely, the activities and practices are situated. Just to mention an example, when dealing with interpretive stops,[1] we go around the town and the students carry out their guided tours trying to use the L2 to interpret[2] their local heritage. Afterwards, we take some time for reflection upon linguistic and non-linguistic needs (language and content). *Communication* is enhanced through the choice of relevant linguistic items meant to convey meaning. For example, when dealing with historic buildings in town we anticipate students' language needs by providing them with specific lexis and grammar. Finally, *culture* is embedded in all teaching practices to fit the particular class identity. In any guided tour, students' cultures are represented in their utterances, for they choose what to say and share, how to express it, and what to omit. Many times, it is only when they present a topic of their choice that students from native communities share aspects related to their origins and identities.

We adhere to the concept of intercultural communicative competence, defined by Byram et al. (2002), as the "ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and [the] ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality" (p. 10). This notion is the result of considering the close interdependence between language and culture and thus, the impact on language teaching and learning. Classroom activities

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1 According to Gutiérrez et al. (2004; Chair of professional practice at the university where the study took place), an interpretive stop can be a monument, building and/or a natural element with heritage value at the time it is selected, analysed, and included within the tourist attractions of an area.

2 Interpreting in tourism refers to the contextualization of the natural or cultural resource and the multiple relations this may have with the environment. This means that students not only describe the natural or cultural attraction but also interpret its context.

are chosen considering this interrelation; for instance, when dealing with local Mapuche stories students are given the choice of *which* story to retell and *how* to tell it. Each student in our English classes chooses among their multiple identities which one(s) to share in order to generate appropriate understanding.

Furthermore, the post method approach and its three parameters (particularity, practicality, and possibility) have also enlightened our analysis. Particularity refers to the idea of considering the specific context in which teaching and learning take place. "Situational understanding" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006) is a key issue and a guiding principle when selecting, designing, and adapting the materials to be used in our classes. It has been our main aim to choose and design tasks relevant to the specific context in which we are immersed. Typical flora and fauna of our national parks are dealt with, historic buildings are interpreted in terms of the historic period in which they were built, and natural processes that affected the area are also tackled. Thus, the post method teachers reflect, monitor, and act in their own teaching context (practicality) and they are aware of what a good practice implies. This parameter is clearly reflected in our research questions: How the teaching practices in the English language classes favoured intercultural exchange; how pedagogical interventions considered students' beliefs, expectations, and prejudices towards the learning of English; and how teachers could give voice to every student in the class. As revealed in the research questions, teaching practices were regularly self-monitored, with a deep awareness that all of them are always tainted with teachers' and learners' ideas concerning the learning of a foreign language in particular (possibility; Tavella & Fernández, 2019b).

## Further Research Areas

Our research areas were expanded considering English as a lingua franca (ELF; Jenkins, 2007) and postcolonialism, discourse as symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991; Butler, 1997; Kramsch, 2011; Weedon, 1987) and

language teaching with educational purposes (Porto & Byram, 2015). These lines of research arose as a result of giving voice to students' own perspectives as regards material design, choice of words, and teaching practices. Regular feedback from students was taken into account to select context-sensitive content, to rethink and reformulate materials and teaching practices, and to reflect upon the denotation and connotation in the choice of words and utterances.

We adhere to the concept of ELF from a pluricentric approach (Jenkins, 2009, p. 202), which implies that the learning of a language should favour intercultural communication and that there is no idealised target culture to reach. The implications of learning English in particular cannot be disregarded as the English language teaching tradition has always tended to rely on methods and teaching practices pervasively linked to the ideology of native speakerism (Holliday, 2005). Within this paradigm the learner has been considered an outsider, a "linguistic tourist" (Graddol, 2006) who seeks the approval of the target community. According to Kumaravadivelu (2012), "the non-English speaking world learns and uses the English language more for purposes of communication than for purposes of cultural identity formation" (p. 7).

In the case of future tour guides, the search for freedom to express their local identities brings about the development of local linguistic varieties which in traditional approaches would be considered as interferences in the development of the target language. In our multicultural context, students come to English classes with varied linguistic codes, different ideas of what is correct and appropriate (Kramsch, 2014). As stated by Seidlhofer (2007), nowadays, communities of practice share particular registers, with English being the most used code.

In line with ELF insights, our practices have been revisited so as to listen to the plurality of voices present in our classes. Feedback sheets are distributed regularly in order to listen to our students' opinions on the materials,

the choice of topics, and the way of approaching local/regional content. In a similar vein, reflection upon the situated syllabus is triggered. In addition, the texts and activities about Mapuche traditions, local stories, and *rukas*[3] were assessed by students of Mapuche origin in terms of choice of words, ways of addressing the topics, and respect for the Mapuche people's cosmovision; and they were modified when necessary. In this context, it is important to understand discourse as symbolic power (Kramsch, 2011) as it reveals aspects of social identities, collective memories, emotions, and aspirations. As stated by Sapir (1929), "language is a guide to 'social reality' . . . it powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes" (p. 209). Consequently, the choice of words to express ourselves is revealing of our ideas, feelings, and values.

This research intended to foster the notion that the teaching of a foreign language should be intertwined with a deep respect for intercultural citizenship. The reformulation of our teaching practices made us transcend the instrumental purpose of the teaching of English to promote intercultural dialogue and consider its educational purposes (Porto & Byram, 2015). According to Kumaravadivelu (2012), although learners can see the importance of speaking English, they are also aware of the need to preserve and protect their linguistic and cultural identities, as is the case of the target population in this study.

## Method

The research team was multidisciplinary; there were four teachers of English as a foreign language, a teacher of a content subject (natural resources), the administrative coordinator of the course of studies, two graduate students, and an undergraduate belonging to a native community (Mapuche) in Patagonia.

This project lasted four years and was designed as a case study defined by Yin (2018) as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 15). In our study, the boundaries can sometimes be blurred as we are teacher-researchers carrying out research upon our own context of practice.

### Context and Target Population

This research study was carried out at one of the campuses of a state-run university in Argentinean Patagonia between 2017 and 2020. This campus welcomes students from all over the country each year. As described in Tavella and Fernández (2013, 2017), the course of studies started in San Martín de los Andes in 1992, and the groups have usually been composed of students who come from Mapuche[4] communities in Patagonia, students who have been born and raised in the town, and other students who come from around the country. They come from diverse backgrounds and with varied concepts and pre-concepts about English.

The target population of this research project in particular was student tour guides belonging to the above-mentioned native Mapuche communities. These students, in turn, come from varied backgrounds. Some of them spend their childhood with their families within native communities located in the countryside, in the mountains, or in the Patagonian steppe. The lands they inhabit have generally been assigned to these peoples by the provincial government after many years of conflict. The children usually go to rural primary schools[5] and then commute to the secondary schools in the nearest towns. There are also cases of students who attend

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3 Dwelling places in Mapuche communities.

4 Native peoples who live in the territory of Argentinean and Chilean Patagonia. In Argentina, they inhabit Neuquén, Río Negro, Chubut, Santa Cruz, and Tierra del Fuego, the region of Antarctica and South-Atlantic islands. The university has campuses distributed along Neuquén and Río Negro provinces.

5 The teaching of Mapudungun (Mapuche people's ancestral language) as a foreign language is included in the curricula of rural schools in Neuquén province. This was incorporated as a means to promote the use of Mapudungun, which is gradually disappearing, especially among younger generations.

primary and secondary state-run boarding schools and return home at weekends. Some others live in Patagonian towns and attend urban schools. When the students coming from native communities graduate, they usually go back home to help their people offer better services to tourists and use the additional language to share aspects of their own culture with visitors from around the world who are not always native speakers of English (Tavella & Fernández, 2019a, p. 19).

Before starting our research, we had noticed that the percentages of university students representing each of the three groups mentioned above (students of Mapuche origin, local students, and students from around Argentina) varied every year. Yet, what remained unchanged, year after year, was our concern about our teaching practices: Did they give voice to minority groups?

### Data Collection

During the first year, we gathered information about interculturality from university documents. For the revision of bibliography on intercultural teaching practices and CLIL, we received guidance from two experts in these fields who were the project's external consultants. We also designed and carried out students' surveys. They were completed by the students who were finishing their first and third semester of the English course. All students in the English class (a total of 37) participated in the survey. The following year, our work was mainly devoted to the analysis of the surveys.

In the same year, the three student-participants—who had volunteered to be part of the project after an open call carried out by the Chair—regularly carried out classroom observation tasks. As follow-up, informal interviews took place, and students shared their notes about classroom practices connected to the issues under research: content developed and omitted during the class (intercultural considerations) and how this content was tackled (intercultural considerations and teaching practices), plus the way in which language teachers addressed students (intercultural considerations

and teaching practices). In the two remaining years, interviews with 11 teachers from the content subjects mentioned above were carried out. The corpus (document analysis, classroom observation notes, surveys, and interviews) used for the project was heterogeneous and we will describe and explain the data obtained from its analysis qualitatively (Mertens, 2015) considering different standpoints.

### Data Analysis

#### Document Analysis

The curriculum, the profile of graduate students, and the university initiatives were looked into in terms of intercultural practices. In its introduction, the course curriculum describes the profession of the tour guide as a social one.

> The tour guide's performance is closely linked to the environment and the expectations of those who visit the tourist site. Then, this social activity is crossed by its diversity. Groups are diverse in terms of age, nationality, interests, financial situation, and personal stories. Tour guides are diverse as well and that diversity is present in the heart of the hosting community. (Our translation)

Within the professional profile, the document states that

> the tour guides will have a sensitive attitude, will be engaged in and respectful of the local development and the local values. As regards the sociocultural, historic, physical, and financial dimensions, they will adopt a critical mindset and will be responsible for the needs and interests of the groups of tourists. They will also respect the features of the place where they will be guiding. (Universidad Nacional del Comahue, 2006; our translation)

After the analysis, the question to pose was whether these concepts were mere theoretical claims or if there were institutional policies to promote diversity and respectful practices.

In this sense, most recently there have been university initiatives that include the intercultural aspect among the issues to be considered in order to foster the development of institutional capacities to cater for people with special needs (Secretaría de Políticas Universitarias, 2016). Our university has started to include intercultural principles as a means to abandon monocultural practices and promote its insertion in the context in which it is settled. One of the actions implemented is regular visits to small villages in Northern Patagonia and to Mapuche communities. These visits are aimed at informing prospective university students about access to the free-of-charge university education offered by state-run universities in our country; the wide choice of courses of studies in the different university campuses; the features of and requisites for the different scholarships; plus, the chance of using students' dormitories as dwelling places throughout the course of studies.

After analysing the curriculum, the profile of graduate students, and the university initiatives, we concluded that our university policies have gradually started to promote interculturality and inclusion.

### Surveys

Students' responses were analysed and relevant segments of the responses were underlined. This constituted the initial coding phase (Mertens, 2015); then two broad categories emerged: intercultural considerations and teaching practices. The students' mother tongue (Spanish) was used for the design of the questions and for their responses. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on those answers that enlighten the analysis.

**Intercultural Considerations.** In the responses, students refer to diversity in terms of place of origin and individual characteristics and how these different identities mark the features of the class. Most of the answers refer to the wide variety of hometowns and provinces present in the class, which covers the five-thousand-kilometre distance of our vast country. Students also mention their diverse socio-cultural backgrounds as an asset to their professional development.

Within this context, it is relevant to mention that in the English class most students from Mapuche communities do not dare to share their origin. In many cases this could be related to instances of discrimination they have suffered. This constituted a major constraint throughout our research project.

Of special interest is that in the surveys, students in general do not make a distinction between their cultures and the Mapuche's, only some of them mention the fact that our university is made up of students from different origins and thus, possess different identities. There is one response that we consider worth analysing for the aim of the present contribution: "We deal with *their* traditions, legends, and this helps us understand *their* culture a bit more" (Student A,[6] our translation and emphasis). The choice of words in this answer could be interpreted as an instance of an intercultural exchange as described by the Council of Europe (2016), a "dialogue that takes place between individuals or groups who perceive themselves as having different cultural affiliations from each other" (p. 6). At the same time, this response could also show that the student places themself as being an outsider, not belonging to the Mapuche community. The student refers to the activities in the English class as being inclusive because the Mapuche culture is dealt with. The use of "their" to refer to another culture which is not their own may reflect the student's inability to get familiar with the unfamiliar, unable to place themself from the perspectives and worlds of the other (Porto et al., 2016).

**Teaching Practices.** Teaching practices were not directly addressed in the students' answers. The only relationship we can establish between their answers and the category of analysis is when they emphasize group work as a type of pedagogical intervention, which

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6    To protect students' identities, we will use letters to differentiate them.

promotes attitudes such as respect and understanding of others. They stress the time shared with different people with different ideals and knowledge; plus, group work conceived as a means to promote interaction and to learn from others. They point out the possibility of exchanging varied standpoints with people of varied origins with varied ideas and cultures. In one of the answers there is a transfer of this particular teaching practice to the tour guide's specific field: "We can share different knowledge from different viewpoints; group work helps provide more experiences that build up social identity" (Student B, our translation).

### Interviews With Student Participants

From the unstructured interviews carried out with student-participants, we will refer to the responses given by one of the female students. The reason why we selected this interview in particular is because of its relevance for the present study in terms of the experiences she went through as a member of a Mapuche community in the Neuquén province.

The interviewee was asked about why some members of the Mapuche community were reluctant to share their origins. Student C explicitly stated that many did not do it because they were afraid of being discriminated against. She told us the story of a university classmate, a member of a Mapuche community in the province, whom for the aim of this account will be called Student D. When referring to Mapuche people, Student D talked about "them,"⁷ excluding themselves from that group; deliberately choosing the pronoun "they." As stated by Lakoff (2001), language choice "legitimizes power, and power permits the blanketing of all conduits with the messages of one group, to the exclusion of others" (p. 310). Student C spoke about the social burden of belonging to native communities in the region and referred back to her personal experience in the building

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7   The terms are deliberately written between inverted commas as they are translated quotes of the terms used by Student C.

of her pride to belong. She shared some childhood experiences in an urban school where some peers made fun of her origins teasing her with pejorative terms. At this stage of the interview, she made a point about the role of her family in the construction of her identity as a descendant of two Mapuche families. Student C rejects the use of "we" and "they," "they" being the Mapuche people. In her view these pronouns are words that index social identity; she is showing social reality through speech; thus, expressing dislike for being seen as one of "the others."

Consequently, it is of utmost importance to seriously consider the selection of words. Power is exercised through the choice of language. Language is arbitrary; it is not just a code. It always indexes something; something which is different for each individual. In this particular case *the others* index the Mapuche community, the ones that are being discriminated against. Therefore, it is important to understand discourse as symbolic power (Kramsch, 2011); it reveals aspects of social identities, collective memories, emotions, and aspirations.

During the interview, Student C talks about "suffering," "getting distressed," and "being hurt." These words arise when referring to some experiences encountered during school and university life. She tells us the story of a comment made by a teacher: "People from your origin have difficulties in acquiring university knowledge" (our translation). In this particular case, Student C is being wounded, this utterance has had a strong effect on her as it was performed by one in a position of power and, as Butler (1997, p. 26) states, it has the effect of resubordinating those who are already in a subordinate position.

As has been previously mentioned, language produces effects. Student C has been injuriously addressed and affected by the professor's utterance. Language can wound:

> Language can act in ways that parallel the infliction of physical pain and injury . . . Certain words or certain forms of address not only operate as threats to one's

physical well-being, but there is a strong sense in which the body is alternately sustained and threatened through modes of address. (Butler, 1997, pp. 4–5)

### Interviews With Core-Subject Teachers

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in which all content teachers participated. The interviews focused around three key points: the concept of interculturality, the approach taken by each Chair, and the role of the tour guide.

Regarding the concept of interculturality, through the interviews we could conclude that teachers have varied standpoints. From the professors' stances, the term was depicted as a social construct which depends on the socio-cultural and historical context. It was associated with culture, with cultural diversity. It was also considered a complex and difficult concept to define, sometimes confusing, not easy to tackle. It was linked to the understanding of other people's cultures and it was also connected to respecting one's own culture. It is worth mentioning that all respondents associated interculturality with the Mapuche communities in the area. Just to mention an example, the professor of historical and cultural heritage pointed out the limitations of talking about other peoples' cosmovision when one feels like an outsider.

As for the way of addressing intercultural matters in each subject, the answers showed that all teaching practices included these issues either as specific curriculum content or as an aspect to be covered across each subject. Some teachers stated that university experiences empower the students from Mapuche communities, give them voices, and strengthen their identities. For instance, one of the teachers of recreation pointed out that students shared their childhood experiences when recalling the games they used to play. In this account, their students' own culture was evidenced even when the concept was not directly addressed. The professor of social and group psychology pointed out the impor-

tance of dealing with the concept of interculturality all throughout the subject, and to relate it to the students' future professional role.

In reference to the role of tour guides, it was asserted that they were key agents when sharing their insights with others. Professors stated that there were different ways to interpret realities framed within the perspective of each tour guide. More specifically, the respondents referred to the role of the tour guide in our region as intercultural and interethnic informants. The standpoint of the professor of professional practices is to be mentioned. She stated that

in a Mapuche [people's] display at a museum, when a student that is a member of that community is guiding, they place their own stamp; their beliefs are revealed in the organisation of the speech and in the choice of words. (Our translation)

From the analysis of the professors' interviews, we can say that intercultural issues were covered in all subjects. In addition, we can conclude that, in general, students from Mapuche communities are reluctant to share their origins. In this context, giving voice to learners from native communities can foster a friendly learning environment in which they can safely express their own identities; thus, giving way to enriching intercultural dialogue.

### Concluding Remarks

Turning back to the research questions, the project was conceived on the assumption that our language classes were planned placing intercultural exchanges at the core. They were intended to foster respect for students' identities, individualities, previous knowledge, ideas, and pre-concepts, and to give voice to all students. Through surveys and students' feedback, interviews, and document analysis, we started to question our pedagogical interventions so as to evaluate whether all our students were given voice in our classes.

The scope of the research was widened to the development of intercultural dialogue and the enhancement

of tolerance and responsible citizenship. This new line of research was due, on the one hand, to students' feedback and surveys, and, on the other, to the above-developed interview with the student member of the Mapuche community. Both reveal that individual identities are respected in the English classes. However, we still believe that there is a need to cater to every student's needs and to give voice to learners belonging to native communities. It is only when students of Mapuche origin dare share aspects of their own being that we feel we are giving voice to every student in our class and that our teaching practices really become inclusive.

In the present study, explicit actions were taken to listen to the voice of students from Mapuche communities by trying to analyse our own teaching practices from their perspectives. This is backed by Porto et al. (2016) when they assert that the difficulty in approaching the otherness lies in the fact that in order to get familiar with the unfamiliar, to reach the minds of the others and hear their inner voices, we need to evaluate the actions and beliefs of others from the perspectives and the world of others. If language teachers are willing to transcend the instrumental purposes of language teaching, their practices should favour intercultural dialogue and consider their educational aims (Porto & Byram, 2015).

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## Acknowledgements