

A Collaborative Autoethnography on Raciolinguistic Experiences and the Construction of Linguistic Identities During an Intercultural Exchange¹

Una Autoetnografía Colaborativa sobre
Experiencias Raciolingüísticas y la
Construcción de Identidades Lingüísticas
durante un Intercambio Intercultural

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Abstract

The personal experiences of three of the authors of this document as Au Pairs in the United States exposed some issues related to social justice and discrimination that made the participants reflect on their identity as speakers and future teachers of English. This article shares, analyzes and interprets these reflections collaboratively in search of the contributions of this intercultural exchange to the construction of the identity of the participants, and how these experiences contrast with those lived as pre-service English teachers in a public university in the southeastern region of Colombia. Using a collaborative autoethnographic approach, the participants exposed situations of discrimination and inequality for not being native English speakers or for being Latin American. They analyzed them in the light of the theory on linguistic identity, raciolinguistics, and English varieties. The findings showed that the participants' negative experiences helped the participants consolidate their identity as teachers of English, allowing them to see the inequalities and injustices that exist within the English program and empowering them to propose changes within their immediate contexts in their country of origin. The article is intended to be a useful resource specifically, but not exclusively, for English teachers in training who plan to do cultural exchanges abroad but who also project themselves as English teachers.

Keywords: Collaborative Autoethnography; English varieties; Linguistic identity; raciolinguistics; teacher identity.

Resumen

Las experiencias personales de tres de los autores de este documento como Au Pairs en Estados Unidos expusieron algunos temas relacionados con la justicia social y la discriminación que hicieron reflexionar a los participantes sobre su identidad como hablantes y futuros profesores de inglés. Este artículo comparte estas reflexiones, las analiza e interpreta colaborativamente en busca de los aportes de este intercambio intercultural a la construcción de la identidad de los participantes, y cómo contrastan estas experiencias con las vividas como docentes de inglés en formación en una universidad pública de la región suroriental de Colombia. Utilizando un enfoque autoetnográfico colaborativo, los participantes expusieron situaciones de discriminación y desigualdad por no ser angloparlantes nativos o por ser latinoamericanos y luego las analizaron a la luz de la teoría sobre identidad lingüística, raciolingüismo y variedades del inglés. Los hallazgos mostraron que las experiencias negativas vividas ayudaron a los participantes a consolidar su identidad como profesores de inglés, dejándoles ver las desigualdades e injusticias que existen dentro del programa de inglés y empoderándolos para proponer cambios dentro de sus contextos inmediatos en su país de origen. El artículo pretende ser un recurso útil específicamente, pero no exclusivamente, para los profesores de inglés en formación que planean hacer intercambios culturales al extranjero pero que también se proyectan como profesores de inglés.

Palabras clave: Autoetnografía colaborativa; variedades del inglés; identidad lingüística; raciolingüística; identidad docente.

Resumo

As experiências pessoais de três dos autores deste documento como Au Pairs nos Estados Unidos expuseram alguns assuntos relacionados com a justiça social e a discriminação que fizeram refletir aos participantes sobre sua identidade como falantes e futuros professores de inglês. Este artigo compartilha estas reflexões, analisa-as e interpreta colaborativamente em busca dos aportes deste intercâmbio intercultural à construção da identidade dos participantes, e como contrastam estas experiências com as vivenciadas como docentes de inglês em formação em uma universidade pública da região sul-oriental da Colômbia. Utilizando um enfoque autoetnográfico colaborativo, os participantes apresentaram situações de discriminação e desigualdade por não ser anglofalantes nativos ou por ser latino-americanos, raciolinguismo e variedades do inglês. As descobertas mostraram que as experiências negativas vividas ajudaram os participantes a consolidar sua identidade como professores de inglês, deixando-os ver as desigualdades e injustiças que existem dentro do programa de inglês e empoderando-os para propor mudanças dentro de seus contextos imediatos em seu país de origem. O artigo pretende ser um recurso útil especificamente, mas não exclusivamente, para os professores de inglês em formação que planejam fazer intercâmbios culturais no exterior, mas que também se projetam como professores de inglês.

Palavras chave: Autoetnografia colaborativa; variedades do inglês; identidade linguística; raciolinguística; identidade docente.

Introduction

The process of becoming an English teacher is complex from the beginning. English teachers in training reexamine their beliefs about teaching and learning a language throughout their careers. However, some English language teaching programs do not offer many opportunities for an exchange abroad. That is why many English teachers in training take the option of becoming an Au Pair as an alternative to know first-hand what they have been taught in the classrooms related to English use. The cultural experience goes beyond using English to communicate. During their stay abroad, the trainee teachers lived experiences that helped them improve their communication skills and made them think and rethink their identity as English teachers.

In this paper, three pre-service teachers analyze their experiences as an Au Pair in the United States. The different situations gave rise to discussions and reflections on who they are as English speakers. Additionally, during the construction of the collaborative autoethnographies, they discussed the implications that this experience had on their identity as English teachers. Similarly, those situations that gave rise to critical incidents are evoked, which led them to rethink their preconceptions about who the native speaker is and the importance of recognizing English varieties.

This proposal to carry out a collaborative autoethnography study arises from the research seminar course carried out at the university. The professor in charge of the course guided the students in understanding the collaborative autoethnography methodology and provided the necessary advice to carry out this research (Castañeda-Trujillo, 2020). In this sense, the document is presented as a research report and offers a theoretical reflection of the research's most relevant aspects. The methodology used is explained later. Given that it is a narrative type investigation, by the very nature of autoethnography, the results are presented in the first person, in line with the poststructural commitments of this study. The subjectivities as participants are more visible, and fluid in the co-construction carried out for this study (Sultana, 2007). Finally, we state some conclusions and implications of the study.

Theoretical Framework

In this section, we describe the three main theoretical elements that constitute the foundations of this research: Linguistic identity, English and Englishes, and Raciolinguistic

Linguistic identity

Identity is a concept that many people have tried to define. The field of identity has been explored in many studies in recent years. Identity is crucial to our understanding of the relationships between us and our world's dynamics and how these relationships are built across time and space, including future projections and possibilities (Norton 1997, cited in Sarasa, 2016). This understanding is only possible through language, and language can be considered a marker of individuality. That is, language is loaded with traits and characteristics that are constituted through interactions.

In this way, as stated by Rovira (2008), “language is intrinsic to the expression of culture” (p. 66), and culture, formed by human experiences, is built from verbal and non-verbal language. Culture is an element of identity construction, and identity affects culture in that it is changing and adaptable to circumstances and time. This complex relationship between culture, language, and identity gives way to linguistic identity, understood as the series of characteristic features that constitute an individual's particularity or the community where it interacts (Edwards, 2009).

This study will approach those established by Bakhtin (1935) on the relationship between identity and language. For the author, this relationship occurs through the verbal and non-verbal presentation of the perspectives, beliefs, values, and principles of a community that characterizes them. Explicitly, individuals build different identities based on their place, the people with whom they communicate, and the customs or traditions they exchange during their encounters. From these interactions, language becomes a path towards the fusion of cultures.

English and Englishes

As au pairs, we had the opportunity to experience an environment where different varieties of our target language coexisted. We interacted with people from other countries whose first or second language was English. On the grounds of living in an English speaking country, we correlate Llurda's (2019) comment, who claims that being exposed to real English scenarios, enables you to acknowledge the different forms the language takes and which are acceptable. Besides, as Canagarajah (2013) advocates, “we should focus on language awareness rather than grammatical correctness in a single variety; strategies of negotiation rather than mastery of product-oriented rules; pragmatics rather than competence” (p. 8). Along the same lines, we did not have significant challenges to communicate since we tried to find the means to understand one another despite the differences in pronunciation, lack of grammar, not wide vocabulary, and regardless of how our own culture particularly made us perceive the language.

Since the Grand British conquest and the expansion of English due to globalization, local communities worldwide were adopting the use of the language influenced by their particular linguacultural background. It granted English special characteristics triggering the diversity of the language. To get a picture of English variety classification, we rely on Kachru's "three-circle model," where the English language in the world is divided into three categories. The first one, the "Inner circle," comprehends ENL countries, considered standard English. The second one, the "Outer Circle," encompasses ESL countries that have been historically related to English-speakers countries due to colonization, especially by British and Americans. These territories have established English as one of their official languages, and they have transformed it, remaining the "common core characteristics of Inner Circle varieties of English. Besides. It can be distinguished from them by particular lexical, phonological, pragmatic, and morphosyntactic innovations." (Brown, 1995, p. 234). The third one, The "Expanding circle," comprises the rest of the world. For instance, in Colombia, where English is considered a foreign language and has no official status, it is not commonly used in daily life.

Raciolinguistic

Raciolinguism connects with the idea that language and race are not separate autonomous entities. Language shapes our perception of race, and race shapes our perception of language. Statements about the nature of race and the superiority-inferiority dichotomy serve to protect certain groups' interest or hierarchical position. Flores and Rosa (2015) identify this group as white subjects who speak and listen from a monoglossic perspective. That is, they establish a unique linguistic standard to which others must aspire. This imposition is achieved by the diffusion of ideologies linked to nationalism and has spread due to neoliberalism and globalization.

These raciolinguist ideologies are strengthened in countries like the United States due to the appropriation discourses through which it is urged to continue with the standardization processes of English for those who consider themselves non-native speakers of the language, that is, those who are not owners from language.

Raciolinguism has even reached education. Children born out of the United States and who have a mother tongue other than English are discriminated against and rejected for speaking English with a foreign accent. However, Alim et al. (2016) state that as we enter "a new understanding that language varieties are not just lists of characteristics that belong to a given 'race,' even questioning the very notion of a fixed 'language variety,' we can move towards speaking in terms of the more fluid sense of 'linguistic resources'" (p.2). What the authors mention promotes the idea of the acceptance of variations of English, that is, dismantling the idea of standard English and the promotion of a single variety of the language (Rosa & Flores, 2017).

From our point of view, we consider that raciolinguists perceive language as a mirror in which societies and races are revealed. From experience, from our Basic Education in Colombia, we have been taught that the native English speaker (ENS) is considered the model of language. This ideology has led us to make feelings such as dependency, insecurity, and inferiority grow in us due to not being able to speak the language like ENS, considering our English as incorrect or insufficient. A feeling also fueled by a distinction due to our Latin English accent. It should be noted that in multiple circumstances, this conviction led us to racialized ourselves. It influenced us to avoid using the foreign language in public places to fear making mistakes and being detected for speaking differently from ENS.

Research Methodology

This research was conceived as an introspective study of three teachers' experiences as Au Pairs in training. As the main objective is to analyze the contributions of intercultural exchange to constructing the teacher's identity, we decided to use the collaborative autoethnography proposed by Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang (2010). Collaborative autoethnography places self-inquiry at the center stage. It also allows a group of researchers to work collectively and cooperatively to question a phenomenon that coexists in common. In this way, the participant-researchers obtained a deeper understanding of the context of the intercultural experience and ourselves through a critical and deep dialogue to position ourselves within the experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

We decided to follow the procedure suggested by Ngunjiri, Hernandez and Chang (2010) to construct collaborative autoethnography. In the first place, each participant made an individual reflection of what the experience was, highlighting the aspects that would have affected them the most in terms of language. Later, under the professor's direction, the writings were considered, and a dialogue was started aimed at looking for critical incidents common to the experiences. These meetings were repeated for three months, some accompanied by the teacher, others not. Subsequently, the analysis and interpretation of the experiences was carried out, resulting in a series of common themes, which are presented below.

Findings

Our story starts in 2018 at Dorado Airport, where we took off to the United States to immerse ourselves in a cultural exchange program as "Au Pair." The school training, located in Tarrytown, New York, was the first stop. It gathered plenty of young people

from different nationalities with the same eagerness for hunting the American culture's experience. Even though it was an interculturally productive environment where we had the chance to make friends from worldwide, we got closer to people who shared similarities in culture and language to feel confident and safe.

As I, Paula Mendez (PM), was discussing this issue with my cooperative peers in this ethnography, I stated that it was smooth and natural to get along with Latin people, as we shared many commonalities such as language, food, music, sense of humor, and so on. Thus I felt warm in the middle of the unknown reality. For her part, Paula Campos (PC) claimed that she decided to stay aside from non-Latin cultures due to a fear of rejection for making mistakes when speaking English. While discussing this issue, Stephany Garzón (SG) brought the term "Intercultural Competences" to the table that might cover what we faced at that moment.

Johnson et al. (2006, p. 530) defined intercultural competence as "an individual's effectiveness in drawing upon a set of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes to work successfully with people from different national cultural backgrounds at home or abroad." This statement led us to reflect on our lack of willingness to open ourselves and interact with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and acquire skills to handle breakdowns in communicative settings.

Besides, Olivares (2000) presents interculturality competencies integrated by two elements: The Social Skills Approach and The Holistic Approach. The first one refers to the social abilities necessary to flexibly adjust our behavior, fit with other identities properly, create and maintain satisfying relationships in intercultural encounters. The second conception alludes to such emotional and affective factors that build empathy and appreciation towards cultural diversity. Undoubtedly, we all three agreed on the low-level of intercultural competencies we brought from home. As we kept emerging and adapting ourselves to American culture while living with American families, we started feeling confident enough to respond to the diverse situations that implicate English use. Eventually, we met people from everywhere and felt curiosity for learning about their particular values, beliefs, and customs. It helped us to reduce cultural shock and to bridge the gap among divergent cultures.

Over the months, we made friends worldwide, and especially from Europe. We noticed their English proficiency was quite better compared to Latin people. In a general picture, these persons had been learning English since the beginning of their primary education, and no extra courses.

(SG) Once, a close friend of mine from Germany questioned why Latin Americans tended to have low English proficiency; from her perspective, that seemed to be a conformist behavior. Owing to the USA's large Hispanic community, they were apparently comfortable speaking only Spanish and limiting themselves to speak English when it was merely necessary. On my behalf, I denied it was not necessarily due to

a conformist behavior for not learning the language accurately. Still, unfortunately, from the school itself, the bases of the language were not well-founded. Indeed, from my own experience, at a public high school, I had English teachers who did not study an English degree program, yet, schools needed assigning teachers of other subjects to teach the language. Therefore, some teachers did not have much knowledge about it, and they would confine us to elaborate translations that were high-graded no matter the accuracy. In fact, I have noticed that some professors at college are not demanding and rigorous enough with students and their use of English as future teachers (...)

I (PC) considered that Stephany's friend perceived the mirror of a low-quality Education System in Latin America that continues implementing traditional methods, which are not preparing us for real-life contexts. Educational policy-makers and administrators must adopt innovative pedagogical strategies to build communicative skills that respond to social needs. For example, Europe has implemented strategies like teaching English to children from very young ages and promoting multilingualism in the general region. The appropriate instructions and management in their educational policies have granted effective outcomes in the English learning process. According to the last report (9th edition, 2019) presented by EF EPI (Education First - English Proficiency Index), European countries lead the ranking in assessing English proficiency around the world.

Meanwhile, Latin America was exhibited as a region with one of the lowest linguistic competencies with a 50,34 EF EPI score. In turn, Argentina is the first country on the regional classification list, while Colombia is the third-worst country. Besides, reports of EF EPI, from 2016 to 2019, have shown a tendency to decrease English proficiency in Colombia.

There is a vast gap between Europe and Latin America regarding national policies and investment in education. Latin America is barely investing one-third of the GNI per capita compared to the European region. This high level of inequality in the economy has obstructed efforts to enhance the English domain.

Likewise, Ariel Fiszbein (2017), the Education Program Director at the Inter-American Dialogue, remarks that

“En general la región carece de políticas nacionales bien desarrolladas. Esto, combinado con el bajo nivel general de los docentes, no ayuda a mejorar los niveles de bilingüismo, a pesar de los esfuerzos que se vienen haciendo en la región desde hace varios años.”

“In general, the region is short of well-developed national policies. This, along with the low general level of teachers, does not help improve bilingualism levels despite the constant efforts that have been making in the region since a couple of years ago”. (Translated verbatim by the researchers)

I (PM) would say we still have a long way to achieve a standard bilingualism level in the country. I observed one of my friends from Colombia, even though she was a professional and had studied English since high school and the mandatory English courses at college; she was struggling to comprehend and establish conversations in the target language. Due to this, it was easier for her to communicate through text messages with non-Spanish speakers. It was a reality that she needed to develop her English skills as she felt frustrated for her incapacity to express herself.

To enhance the educational system in our country, I believe we should attack the root of formal education. (SG) As I mentioned before, the issues due to the lack of rigorousness in teachers' English proficiency have been reflected in students whose linguistic competencies are not well-built to perform in a context beyond the classroom. Nonetheless, through our experience, we understood that linguistic competencies, if it is a factor to improve, there is another factor which we consider has not been addressed during the lessons, 'culture.' Living abroad led us to bear in mind the importance of learning English by developing cultural awareness. English should not only be taught for academic and professional purposes. That is why we teachers should prepare students to reduce linguistic barriers and encourage them to appreciate multiculturalism using English to gain an international understanding.

Our use of English in the real social context during our first months.

We all agree that our English level was good enough to make ourselves understood in the real context. It helped us to be confident when speaking. (SG) I remembered it was January 6th when I met my host family; they and their extended family were gathered to celebrate the holidays. That confidence when speaking English was actually favorable, and it worked for me on that first day, as I was in such an active and social environment. People told me that I spoke very well and could understand me, which encouraged me not to be afraid of interacting with them. But as the days were by, I realized it was not always easy to communicate everything just the way I wanted to. I felt I would need to learn English all over again (a feeling that we all three got).

All in all, we consider that our English learning process during primary school has focused on grammar structures and vocabulary, putting aside output skills practices to meet needs in a real context. We are given scenarios where we can simulate some daily situations, for instance, playing roles like eating out in a restaurant, buying an item in a shop, booking a flight, requesting directions, and so on. Yet, those opportunities are hardly ever carried out in the lessons. As Jo Budden (n.d.) states in his British Council Article, teachers should "keep the context real and relevant for students where they have to play as real to life as possible, having the opportunity to imagine and travel inside the classroom." In this vein, we believe those real-life performances should be

considered in the curriculum. As it has been said, the learning process takes place when the activities are designed to engage students and be memorable to them.

Moreover, these activities might be considered an assessment tool to examine what students can do with what they have learned. As teachers, we can provide students with theoretical English knowledge and practical and functional ability. On this, students, by their side, would be likely prepared to complete real-life tasks.

(PC) It brought to my mind an experience when I just arrived in the USA. I remember I had some troubles as I missed my flight, I lost my luggage, and I had to rebook my flight, etc. At that time, my English skills were not good enough to face sudden situations, making me feel frustrated and nervous. It took me to reflect upon the importance of learning English in a contextualized setting - constant practices of daily events in the classroom can lead us to achieve language fluency and reduce fears when facing these sorts of situations. Generally, communication and interaction in a real English social environment denote factors, like living and immersing in a particular English community. Following Tom Garside's analysis, he states: "Studies in neurolinguistics show us that setting a context effectively activates areas of the brain which relate to learners' experience in relevant areas, known as a schema." (The EfA Blog - TESOL 2019, May 21st). Hence, teachers must bring up situations, thematic, and discussion points to contextualize students before introducing new learning content. On a small scale, we educators should adapt the class to real scenarios; to grant learners the possibility to practice daily life events and language with slang, idioms, colloquial words, etc., to confront future linguistic shocks.

Being myself, what is my identity in an environment where I cannot express who I am?

In an instance, I (SG) started to worry and feel I was losing my identity since I could not be myself due to linguistic limitations. English instruction failure within a social atmosphere was a chief handicap to express my extroverted personality feasibly during my first months. Speaking with my fellows, it has come to light that our concerns were about our identity and how other Au Pairs, who barely speak the language, were reflecting their own. We believe this heavy feeling was tied to our role as English teachers who are continually seeking to reach the language's accuracy. Back in time, we thought of English proficiency as the key ingredient to hold our identity and show the real self. However, learning a new language implies seeing the world from a different outlook while acquiring a new identity (Lemke, 2002). Throughout time, language acquisition made us change how we figure, behave, and socialize with others. We did not retain the identity we brought from home, but the language led us to create a different one adapted to the world around us. In this order of ideas, every single language confers us with its particular identity, beliefs, and attitudes. In other words, the Czech proverb says, "Learn a new language and get a new soul."

From our reflection, the identity shift has been as cultural as linguistic, leading us to recognize that exposing ourselves to a target context has enriched our global insights regarding people's lifestyles. One begins building a different identity from appreciating interculturality throughout social encounters with our host families and friends worldwide; our thoughts, culture, taboos, and beliefs change to be adapted to the new environment and the people we share with. Furthermore, most of us were not being criticized for the way we speak our English, what we say, and how we say it, granting us the freedom to create our new identity.

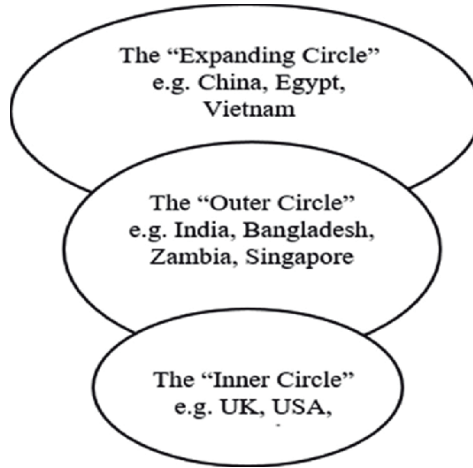
How does it change our perspective on the role of teachers?

As a result of multiculturalism in the USA, we reflect on the world English varieties and notice the acceptability of the world Englishes within the same community through our experience. For example, Japanese English, Indian English, Australian English, Canadian English, etc., were not pointed out as non-accurate English. "It is, rather, a different way of looking at the language, which is more inclusive, pluralistic, and accepting than the traditional, monolithic view of English in which there is one correct, standard way of using English that all speakers must strive for" (Matsuda, 2003 p. 727)

As teachers, we want to keep the Englishes varieties in the classroom as we introduce materials and content related to different cultures, expressions, and proper Englishes features. As educators, we should provide students a more comprehensive view of the world and understand how the language works to bridge the gap during the linguistic diversities that can emerge. English teaching should encourage students to be tolerant and appreciate linguistic differences to understand and perceive other conceptions worldwide.

The spread of English has triggered the study of world Englishes. In this sense, some models have emerged to classify the different varieties of the language. These models analyze how particular sociolinguistic contexts and multicultural backgrounds provide English specific features that differ from one place to another. One of the most prominent models has been Kachru's three-circle model (see Figure 1), which suggests three concentric circles:

Figure 1. Kachru's three-circle model of English



The fact that a group of people comes from different English circles does not prevent them from the communicative event. By way of example, (SG) I lived with a family who came from two other countries in the UK (England and Wales), the reason why their English was different. Additionally, the kids, who spoke British English, sometimes would come from school speaking American English. All this, including my Colombian English, brought up a variety of the language to the house, triggering particular accents, vocabulary, slang, and so on, which did not cause any communication breakdown as we could negotiate meanings through linguistic strategies.

In that respect, as we acknowledge that there are variations within the same inner circle, e.g., British English, American English, Australian English, and the like, and these variations do not discredit each other, we as teachers must also widen the recognition of outer circle Englishes and the appreciation of the traits that every culture in any territory bestows to the language.

Other than that, we should erase from students the idea of learning the language to go to an English speaking country or to communicate with native English speakers. Instead, we should extend the notion of the current English role as part of globalization. Thus, along with acknowledging world Englishes, learners can be better prepared to comprehend and communicate with natives and non-natives of the language. In this regard, educators will be able to grow significant self-confidence in apprentices effacing any inferiority feelings as they do not need to speak like an English native

to be proficient. Finally, students must be aware that their English is merely one of the world's several varieties. Thereby, it is rather crucial to communicate in the target language than make students get any standard English accuracy.

Was raciolinguistic present in this experience?

(PC) I traveled on a bus from Washington to Philadelphia when someone asked if anyone who spoke Spanish could help translate something for an older man. So, I raised my hand, claiming that I could do it, exposing myself as a native Spanish speaker. I was traveling at night, the reason why the driver said to turn down the brightness of the screen phone and to put on earphones if people need it. However, the indications were not abided by an Afro-American woman who was sitting next to me. I kindly asked her to turn down her screen phone's brightness because it was really bothering me, but suddenly she lost her temper and started shouting and insulting me, saying bad words. The strongest offense was "Bit*, go back to your country," which made me understand the rejection she had against foreigners. As she kept insulting me, I had to change my seat to make her stop. That was the worst humiliation I had in the USA in my two years living there.

I felt discriminated against because of my foreign accent since she did not see me as an ordinary person but pointed me out, straight, as a Latin immigrant due to my accent like it was an offense. I saw myself in a Raciolinguistic situation because, as Alim S. et al. (2016, p.1) claimed, "it was to view race through the lens of language, and vice versa," and it was actually what the woman on the bus was doing. I did not feel that discrimination in terms of my English skills or proficiency but in terms of my Latin culture's identity. Considering that most Americans stigmatize and diminish the Latin community as people who seek money and work for them, doing jobs they do not want to do.

Speaking of this, we notice this comment came from an African-American (AA) woman who is part of a community also discriminated against for their African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). As we acknowledge, the AA community has specific characteristics regarding their English accent, grammar, and vocabulary. It is even named African American English (AAE) or Black English. This idea is not for discriminative ends, but to remind that within the same territory is found different linguistic varieties because of conservation of origin or cultural background. This lack of recognition of Englishes varieties leads to the segregation of certain Englishes and privileges white communities whose English is considered Standard.

(PM) At the beginning of my experience, It happened to me that I was trying to avoid speaking both English and Spanish in public places, as I was afraid that they

would point out my Latin origin and would link me with negative perceptions they might have about it. Nevertheless, I myself never faced this sort of situation of rejection or discrimination. Under those negative conceptions, the Latin community is also acknowledged for not speaking English. This drove me to feel even more responsible for being proficient and prove that not all Latin people remain indifferent to the language.

Our traditional English language teaching has been underlain for an EFL pedagogy where proficiency means communicating as an English native speaker. Some scholars suggest modifying the standard concept of proficiency that has been instilled in us for a long time. For example, Mahboob and Ductcher (2015) maintain that 'being proficient in a language implies that we are sensitive to the setting of the communicative event, and have the ability to select, adapt, negotiate, and use a range of linguistic resources that are appropriate in the context...' 'is not based upon native speaker status but rather on one's ability to adapt to and negotiate different contexts' (p. 117). We deem this misconception of proficiency imparted in us has led to discriminating ourselves through the language.

This fallacy has also brought up negative feelings of anxiety, insecurity, inferiority, and so forth when speaking the language. In light of this, learners restrain themselves from exposing themselves to the target language in the classroom. In output activities during the class, many students avoid participating due to fears of failing in pronunciation, fluency, and the correct use of grammar. These events emerge as a consequence of rooting English teaching in Standard American English. If we teachers steer the ELT under a pluralistic view, students would have the opportunity to learn English freely and less deeply-rooted language structure, involving the variety of the language, appreciating and feeling sympathy towards different cultures and ours.

Discusión y conclusiones

Drawing from the lack of intercultural competencies, we saw ourselves striving to fit into the American culture initially, establishing fluent conversations, getting to know people, adapting to their lifestyle, and on. Back at home, our Foreign Language Program at university endeavors to design curriculums that integrate the practice of intercultural competencies, but it still ends up staying on paper. Our program offers students rare opportunities to exert the target language in real situations and learn how to handle cultural shocks. We suggest implementing strategies such as intercultural encounters through virtual exchanges/telecollaboration with foreign participants from our experiences. These encounters might encourage students to reach out to the competencies, which will boost them to communicate with others when the opportunity comes.

Benefiting from experiences and anecdotes learned that contributed to the development of our identities as future professionals in the ELT field, we no longer comprehend English as an academic matter but as a means of communication with the outness. Given this, our concerns as educators are not related to teaching academic English but conversational responses to the current communicative needs within an English speaking setting. Wherefore, we suggest reevaluating the curricular contents in which promote colloquial English. Replacing the traditional teaching of vocabulary such as father for dad, throw for a toss, very for quiet, a lot, so, pretty, and fine for good, well, great, etc., which is most commonly used during English conversations. Additionally, it will be convenient to diminish some stereotypes about gender, race, and whatnot that are still exhibited in the textbooks.

Nowadays, many communicative sceneries involve participants with different mother tongues who adopt English as a lingua franca. Our encounters with other au pairs from different countries were a clear example of using English as a vehicular language. We slightly registered communications barriers, despite the particularities that each mother tongue provides to their English. These events steered us to live and experience the spirit of the language variety since it was the means to learn about American culture and other cultures. We learned idioms, slang, sayings, jokes, costumes, etc., translated from other languages to English (as the Lingua franca) and, consequently, also assimilated it into our L1.

Now that we are back at home and reassume our role as professionals, it surges the need to let people know about the English varieties' existence and the preeminence of enhancing sympathy and appreciation towards these. We consider ELT should be more flexible concerning structure and pronunciation, training students to face real-life environments/situations. We would like to promote in students the recognition of their English as neither right nor wrong but as part of a wide variety of Englishes. We would promote social justice and equality among English users without giving hierarchies based on their native land.

Our teaching ideology is founded on developing interest and sensibility for diverse cultures, symbolized in materials and activities such as role-plays, songs, videos, etc. As a result, students could raise values towards other cultures and accept the different linguistic features of the language. In this manner, it is worth remembering that this new ideology arises from the experience of living for two years in one of the most multicultural countries in the world. Through this autoethnography article, we suggest teachers take a pause and reflect upon their teaching practices. What are they doing to empower students to communicate in English? Is their current ELT responding to the reality of the language? How are they providing a more vivid and realistic English environment in the classroom? Since we, as teachers, are students' main source of English, it is crucial to shift those traditional strategies to more context-bound and intercultural ones that meet today's needs and place the language as a means of co-construction of reality.

We would like to reflect and support those readers who have had the opportunity to live and work abroad while using English as their vehicular language. We hope to offer them an outlook of the most meaningful situations that we all three had in common during our intercultural exchange in the USA, as well as the reflections that sprang from these. For us, it was undoubtedly an experience that marks a milestone in our personal and professional lives in the field of foreign language teaching. Working on this article, we realized that the exchange program experiences allowed us to go from seeing the language in a structural way to seeing it in a pluralistic way and free of prejudices. We cheer teachers that travel abroad to witness the actual needs for which we learn a language in their individual capacity. In this sense, they would create a different perspective of the ELT and contribute to the gradual change of its traditional guidelines. By bringing those experiences to the classroom, students will approach the world's diversity; this diversity will end up joining cultures from the rise of interest, curiosity, and recognition of others.

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