

Developing Students' Intercultural Competence through Children's and Adolescent Literature¹



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ABSTRACT:

Various professional associations have commented on the essential role of intercultural competence within the foreign language curriculum (i.e. MLA, 2007; ACTFL, 1996; 2014). This article takes up the call of these organizations by exploring elementary-level university Spanish students' perceptions of the development of their intercultural understanding while reading children's and adolescent literature in Spanish. As part of a second-semester Spanish course in a large land-grant university in the American Southwest, seventy-six students read two children's and adolescent novels in Spanish as part of the course curriculum and documented their developing understandings of Latino culture through journal entries, surveys and compositions. Analysis of students' responses indicates that the children's novels played an essential role in their emerging understandings of various aspects of Latino culture. While reading *Me llamo María Isabel*, numerous students noted the developmental nature of the main character's trajectory as she strove to forge ties with her Puerto Rican ancestry while also negotiating her cultural identity in the United States and were able to appreciate the struggles immigrants experience as they learn the cultural traditions of the new homeland. Reading *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* helped students perceive similarities between Latino culture and their own mainstream American culture by comparing and contrasting aspects of Latino culture with their own.

KEY WORDS:

children's literature, culture, culture acquisition, intercultural competence, literature

0. INTRODUCTION

Scholars have increasingly highlighted the central role of culture in language learning in recent decades as advances in anthropology, sociology, psychology and other disciplines have encouraged educators to consider ways to promote cultural competence alongside communicative competence. This interest achieved a crescendo in 1996 when the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) published the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning*. This document (also known as "the 5 Cs") centers language learning on five goal areas of language learning: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. With respect to the *Cultures* goal area, the *Standards* explain that students should gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures through learning language and that, in addition to learning the target language, students should also learn about the cultural contexts in which the target language occurs (p. 3) by examining the practices and products of the target culture and how these practices and products relate to the cultural perspectives of the target culture (p. 4). The *Comparisons* goal area asks students to be

¹ A condensed version of this manuscript was previously published (Hibbs, 2015).



able to identify similarities between their first language/culture and the target language/culture. The *Communities* goal area encourages students to participate in multilingual communities both at home and abroad in a variety of contexts in culturally appropriate ways (p. 3).

More recently, language professionals have extended ACTFL's efforts in the *Standards* by asking students to move beyond comparing and contrasting target cultures and their own and, instead, understand and operate between cultures. Several scholars have commented on the goal of this third movement of culture teaching in language education. For example, Byram (2000, p. 10) defines intercultural competence as the ability to "see relationships between different cultures — both internal and external to a society — and to mediate, that is, interpret each [culture] in terms of the other, either for [himself] or for other people". He suggests that intercultural competence involves "critical or analytical understanding of (parts of) their own and other cultures — someone who is conscious of their own perspective, of the way in which their perspective is culturally determined" (*ibid.*). Other scholars have argued that becoming intercultural competent involves working beyond the traditional boundaries of one's own culture and the target culture towards what has been called a "third culture". Third culture can be understood as an "emergent space in between cultures" (*ibid.*) in which students engage in a "symbolic process of meaning-making that sees beyond the dualities of national languages and national cultures" (Kramersch, 2011, p. 355). This third culture helps students become "aware of contradictions and ambivalences [between cultures] and find a way of living and learning with [the] hybridity and diversity" of working between and across these cultures (Kramersch, 2009, pp. 240–241). These scholars demonstrate that intercultural competent students not only recognize and appreciate cultural differences but are also able to negotiate between other cultures and their own.

In 2007, the Modern Language Association's ad-hoc committee of foreign languages (MLA, p. 3) published a report contending that foreign language programs should cultivate "educated speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence", which the ad-hoc committee defines as "the ability to operate between languages [and between cultures]" (*ibid.*, pp. 3–4). The MLA (p. 4) defines transcultural understanding as "the ability to comprehend and analyze cultural narratives". In 2014, the ACTFL board of directors approved a position statement on global competence which echoes many of these ideas. The statement indicates that global competence involves "examining one's own perspectives as similar to or different from the perspectives of peoples with whom one is interacting" and "be[ing] alert to cultural differences in situations outside of one's culture" (ACTFL, 2014, p. 1). The emphasis of the MLA's 2007 report on cultural narratives has led to a fourth movement of cultural teaching in language education, namely using literature to facilitate the development of students' intercultural competence.

1. CONTEXTUALIZATION

Numerous scholars have explored the role of literary texts in promoting students' understanding of other cultures. Short (2011, p. 131) argues that literature "provides

a means of building bridges of understanding across countries and cultures". She suggests that literary texts do so in several ways. Firstly, literature allows students to move beyond a superficial view of other cultures towards understanding other cultures at a deeper level. By immersing themselves in the story worlds found in literature, readers are able to learn about how people of other cultures live, think and feel, and develop more empathy and understanding towards these cultures. Additionally, literature helps students learn about other cultures as well as their own by providing them with opportunities to see similarities they share with other cultures while also valuing the unique differences of each culture.

Scott and Huntington (2002) propose a model for the development of intercultural competence via literary texts. At the center of the model is the student, whose affective awareness and cognitive flexibility contributes to the development of his/her intercultural competence. The outer circle is the C2, or the target culture, and the literary text is in a two-way interaction between the student and the C2. The text is thus a vehicle through which the student learns about the target culture and, as a result, meaning is created and co-constructed through the interaction of the student and the target culture via the text.

More recently, scholars have affirmed the specific role that children's and adolescent literature plays in promoting intercultural understanding. For example, Lütge (2013, p. 104) contends that children's literature "offers a fascinating platform for exploring questions of identity, values and worldviews, the basic ingredients for intercultural learning". She notes that "raising an awareness of different levels of otherness is one of the big potentials of children's and young adult literature in second language education" (*ibid.*, p. 103) because students see the world through the eyes of the characters and experience other cultural perspectives. Alter (2013, p. 156) concurs, noting that experiencing otherness "lays the foundation for the development of intercultural competence" because students encounter other cultural worlds they may not be familiar with. Reichl (2013, p. 112) points out that, through reading children's and adolescent literature, students engage in the process of "doing identity", which she defines as the process of a person "identifying other people around [him/her] and learning about the world and about cultural connections in the process". She suggests that students can "do identity" by reading children's books which explore characters' experiences in intercultural encounters and reflecting on the characters' experiences as preparation for their own future intercultural encounters. Lee (2013) observes that young adult literature promotes intercultural understanding by encouraging students to compare and contrast their own cultural values with those of young adult characters and thus expose students to other cultural perspectives. Moffitt (2003) maintains that picture books tend to reflect the social reality of other cultures through the didactic role they play in promoting children's socialization and thus provide a window into the values and belief systems of the target culture. Additionally, Kidd and Castano (2013) conducted a series of experiments to investigate the impact of reading fictional texts and other genres on subjects' ability to maintain empathic responses to others (affective Theory of Mind) and their interpretation of others' beliefs and intentions (cognitive Theory of Mind). Results from their study consistently showed that reading fictional texts enhanced





both types of subjects' Theory of Mind when compared with reading other textual genres. Consequently, Kidd and Castano (2013) argue that fictional texts sharpen readers' Theory of Mind because reading such texts refines their capacity to construe and interpret others' beliefs and intentions just as they would normally do in interpersonal interactions.

A number of researchers have investigated the function of literary texts in building students' intercultural competence. For example, Gómez (2012) found that Colombian university students who read short stories in English simultaneously acquired communicative competence and intercultural knowledge and that discussion of the short stories encouraged students to compare opinions, life experiences and cultural references in the stories with other classmates, thus constructing and expanding their intercultural competence. Scott and Huntington (2002) determined that introductory-level French students reading poetry by Véronique Tadjo showed a greater level of affective awareness and cognitive flexibility with respect to the culture of Côte d'Ivoire in comparison with students who read sheets detailing cultural facts about the country. Students reading Tadjo's poetry related ideas, images and emotions from her poems to their own lives, empathized with the linguistic struggles of the poet, and questioned their own views of the country; consequently, students' intercultural competence increased by establishing connections between the culture of Côte d'Ivoire and their own. Hecke (2013) ascertained that high school and university students in Germany who read graphic novels from Iran (*Persepolis*) and Mexico (*La Pérdida*) gained new perspectives by learning more about other cultures and thus reducing stereotypes they had previously held about these countries. Additionally, in García's (2007) study, fourth-semester university students studying Spanish who read Latin American legends and folktales reported that reading these texts increased their knowledge of Hispanic culture. They indicated that the texts helped them develop new attitudes towards Hispanic culture by "contain[ing] so much cultural value" (*ibid.*, p. 122) which helped them be "more accepting of [other] beliefs" (*ibid.*, p. 124).

Although the research studies cited above are essential in demonstrating that literary texts promote the development of students' intercultural competence, several research and curricular gaps emerge from an analysis of these studies. For example, the participants in Gómez's (2012) study were not elementary-level students and read short stories instead of longer-length texts. Similarly, the students in García's (2007) study were students learning Spanish at the intermediate level and read folk tales that were relatively short in length. Although the participants in Scott and Huntington's (2002) study were elementary-level students, they read a short text (a poem) and were exposed to literature for only a brief period of time (one twenty-minute class session); consequently, students neither read longer-length texts nor interacted with the poem in a deep and profound way. Additionally, Hecke (2013) included graphic novels as part of an after-school reading program, not as an integral part of a language course. The present study aimed to fill these research and curricular gaps by including two longer-length texts (children's novels, in this case) as part of an elementary-level language course.

2. METHODS

2.1 RESEARCH CONTEXT

The goal of this research study was to document second-semester university Spanish students' perceptions concerning the role of children's and adolescent literature in deepening their understandings of Latino culture. The study was conducted with students in three second-semester Spanish courses at a large university in the American Southwest: two courses in the fall 2008 semester (Classes #1 and #2) and one course in the spring 2009 semester (Class #3). 78 students were enrolled in the three Spanish courses for which the researcher was the instructor, and 68 students consented to participate in the study. All participants in the study were college-age students.

2.2 SYNOPSES OF CHILDREN'S NOVELS

Students read two children's novels in Spanish as part of the study: *Me llamo María Isabel* [*My Name Is María Isabel*] and *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* [*Baseball in April and Other Stories*]. The main character in the first book is María Isabel Salazar López, a nine-year-old girl from Puerto Rico who moves to the United States with her family. When she introduces herself to her new teacher on the first day of class, the teacher changes María Isabel's name to Mary since there are already two girls named María in the class. The book traces María Isabel's experiences in school during the fall semester and explores issues of self-identity through the significance of her name and her family heritage in negotiating her cultural identity in a new country. The second book consists of eleven short stories in which the characters are Latino adolescents living in California. The stories use small events of daily life to elucidate themes common to all adolescents such as love, friendship, youth, growing up, success and failure. Students read two stories from the book. In the first story, "Béisbol en abril" ("Baseball in April"), two brothers, Jesse and Michael, decide to try out for the local baseball team, Los Hobos. In the second story, "El Karate Kid" ("The Karate Kid"), Gilbert is frequently picked on in school because of his small size. Inspired by the film *The Karate Kid*, he decides he wants to enroll in a karate class to learn how to defend himself, but the class does not work out as Gilbert anticipates.

2.3 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data for the study were collected through periodic journal entries, two surveys and one composition in Spanish. Students in all three classes wrote a one-page journal entry in English approximately every two weeks. The objective of the journal entries was to have students periodically reflect on their experiences and explore their thoughts, feelings and perceptions as they read the children's books. Students in Classes #1 and #2 read both *Me llamo María Isabel* and the two short stories in *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*, while students in Class #3 only read *Me llamo María Isabel*. Therefore, Classes #1 and #2 completed two surveys, while students in Class #3 only completed one survey. The first survey was administered in the middle of the semester





in Classes #1 and #2 and at the end of the semester in Class #3 after students finished reading *Me llamo María Isabel*. The purpose of the survey was to give students an opportunity to evaluate their experiences reading the book and identify connections to culture they made after having read the book. The second survey was administered in Classes #1 and #2 at the end of the semester after students finished reading *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*; this survey was not administered to Class #3 since students in this class did not read the book. The purpose of the survey was to provide students with a moment to summarize their experiences reading the book and note connections to language and culture they identified after having read the book. Additionally, as part of the course curriculum, students wrote a composition in Spanish in which they described the significance and importance of their names. For this study, in addition to the requirements for the composition, students were also asked to compare and contrast the value of their names to those of María Isabel in order to help them make connections between María Isabel's experiences about her names and their own.

The data collected for the study were analyzed using the following process. First, the researcher read through the journal entries, surveys and compositions and made initial notes on important or significant themes contained within them. He then began doing an initial analysis of the data by writing an initial analysis memo with a short title of the theme, a brief explanation of the theme, and several quotes taken from the data sources that exemplified the theme. Subsequent data analysis involved a re-reading of the data in order to triangulate these themes across all three data sources.

3. FINDINGS

Two major findings emerged from analyzing the data for the study. *Me llamo María Isabel* helped students understand and appreciate María Isabel's efforts to maintain her Puerto Rican heritage while also forge her cultural identity in the United States. Additionally, *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* guided students as they constructed connections with Latino culture by identifying values shared by both Latino culture and their own through comparisons of their life experiences and those of the characters.

Several abbreviations will be used when presenting students' quotes. "C" refers to the class the student was enrolled in, "J" refers to journal entries, "S" refers to surveys, and "CP" refers to the composition. All students' names are pseudonyms.

3.1 NEGOTIATING CULTURAL IDENTITY

The first step in the process of María Isabel's identity formation is the identification and recognition of the importance of her names. When María Isabel introduces herself to her teacher for the first time, her teacher decides to change her first name to Mary since there are already several students in the class whose first name is María. This event triggers María Isabel's exploration of the origin of her names: «María» for one of her grandmothers, «Isabel» for another grandmother, «Salazar» for her father, and «López» for her mother. Numerous students noted María Isabel's discovery of her names as a first step in the development of her cultural identity and asserted

that the decision of her teacher to change her name to Mary is indicative of mainstream culture's intention to deny the existence of immigrants' own cultural backgrounds. For example, Savanna notes that

... it is easy to forget, as Americans, that we need to welcome people from other countries and help them learn about our culture. It was plain to me that María [Isabel's] teacher did the opposite when María came into her classroom. She took away María's identity by giving her a different name. She failed to realize the importance that name had to María, in feeling like a unique individual with a personal connection to her family members (C#3, S#2).

These students noted that, as a result of her exploration of the provenance of her names, María Isabel begins to connect with her Puerto Rican heritage in important and significant ways. For example, Lydia suggests that "it was interesting to read how important her real name (not Mary) was to her. I think that is a good thing because she takes pride in her name, representing her family, ethnic background and traditions" (C#1, S#2). Angela also remarks that "María Isabel is proud of her name and was enthusiastic when she presents herself as María Isabel" (C#1, CP).

An important consequence of recognizing the significance of her names leads to the second step in the development of María Isabel's cultural identity formation. At the beginning of the novel, when she feels uncomfortable in her new surroundings, María Isabel has flashbacks of her life in Puerto Rico and remembers various scenes from her past such as playing with her friends and making candy with her grandmother. Certain students commented that this was one mechanism which María Isabel uses as she works to fuse her Puerto Rican ancestry with her new identity in the United States and that reflecting on her life in Puerto Rico was a way to come to terms with her cultural identity in a new country. These students observed that María Isabel's nostalgic reflections on her previous life in Puerto Rico were demonstrations of pride in her cultural heritage. For instance, Mia explains that "María [Isabel] was very proud of where she came from. The Hispanic culture is strong and the people within are proud of their history. María was very proud of her family history" (C#2, S#2). Students like Mia concluded that, by identifying the significance of her names, María Isabel waxes nostalgic about her previous life in Puerto Rico, which leads her to treasure her Puerto Rican ancestry as she forges her cultural identity in a new country.

While María Isabel acknowledged her Puerto Rican ancestry through the discovery of the origins of her names and fondly reflected on her past life in Puerto Rico, she also experienced difficulty adapting to a new way of life in the United States. The result of this phenomenon was the creation of a "third space" in which María Isabel struggled to identify with either country. Numerous students identified this third step in the process of María Isabel's identity formation. For example, Keith maintains that "there are many times when María Isabel did not feel like she fit in with everyone else" (C#2, S#2). Amy noted that "I connected to the fact that she [María Isabel] felt out of place and didn't feel like she belonged because of her background" (C#2, S#2). Similarly, Damian remarked that "it seemed like she was stuck between her old culture and America's culture" (C#2, S#2).





As the school semester progresses, María Isabel gradually begins to find her place in her new home. Evidence of her success in maintaining her Puerto Rican heritage while also negotiating her cultural identity in the United States occurs towards the end of the novel when María Isabel teacher calls her by her full name in Spanish and asks her to participate in the school's Christmas play by singing "The Candles of Hanukkah". Various students were able to observe this fourth and last step in the development of María Isabel's cultural self by commenting on María Isabel's ability to mediate her cultural identity despite the difficulties she encountered while doing so. For instance, Damon remarked that "I learned that it is hard for a little girl to go to a different country and try to speak their language. María [Isabel] wanted to quit so many times, but she stuck through it and made it to the end" (C#2, S#2). Several students noted that the process of cultural negotiation can be particularly difficult for children who immigrate to a new country. For instance, Wyatt concludes that "[María Isabel] comes to this country, and it seems to her that she is an "outsider", which must be a lot to deal with, especially for a little girl" (C#3, J#2). Likewise, Teresa observes that "[María Isabel] seems to have all the usual childhood worries about new schools, as far as making new friends. But in María Isabel's case she also has the added stress of a new school AND a new language (emphasis in original)" (C#3, J#2). These students noted María Isabel's perseverance in striving to understanding her cultural origins while also learning to adapt to the cultural mores in a new land.

3.2 IDENTIFYING SIMILARITIES BETWEEN MAINSTREAM AMERICAN CULTURE AND LATINO CULTURE

A second finding emerging from this study is that, as a result of reading the children's novels, students were able to recognize and identify similarities between Latino culture and mainstream American culture by establishing connections between their own personal life histories and those of the characters. They were thus able to appreciate important parallels between Latino culture and their own cultural backgrounds.

Firstly, numerous students could identify with María Isabel's feelings when her teacher changed her name to Mary. They commented on the loss of identity that must have resulted from this teacher's actions and how they would experience comparable sentiments in a similar situation. For example, Parker explains that "I think my feelings would be similar to [those of] María [Isabel] if I had to adopt a different name than my own" (C#3, J#2). Similarly, Sabrina affirms that

I think that María Isabel likes her name but it is difficult for her to protect her identity when her teacher doesn't call her by her real name. For me, my name is not only my identity. I am all my experiences, my personality and my thoughts. But I still do not like it when someone calls me by a different name. I think it is the same for her. I understand the frustrations of María Isabel (C#3, CP).

Secondly, various students noted similarities between their home cultures and Latino culture through a comparison of the characters' scholastic experiences with their

own. Such comparisons led them to reflect on their memories being new students in unfamiliar surroundings. For instance, Ethan asserts that

in the first chapter of [*Me llamo*] *María Isabel* I found myself reliving experiences from the past. Her story reminded me of my first day of school after I had just moved up into a new school district. Obviously I didn't have the change in culture or language like María [Isabel] had, but it was a very big change for me at such a young age. I can only imagine how much worse María might have felt (C#3, J#2).

Thirdly, many students identified with children from Latino backgrounds as they discovered that the characters in both novels engaged in childhood activities similar to those they participated in as children. This allowed them to realize that, while cultures around the world differ from each other in significant ways, cultures also share important values. As an illustration, Tim remarked that

I really connected with the culture in “*Béisbol en abril*” because of baseball and sports in general. I played baseball when I was young and I have played sports my entire life. This allowed me to really relate to the story and what the characters were experiencing (C#2, S#3).

One student, Gabriella, noted that the activities the characters participated in helped her better understand the prominence of these activities in Latino culture:

I learned more about the importance of sports in Hispanic culture, particularly baseball... I've always thought of baseball as such a strictly American sport — ‘America's favorite pastime’ — but this [book] [*Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos*] helped me realize its influence on Hispanic culture and Hispanic culture's influence on it (C#2, S#3)

Lastly, *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* details the emotional peaks and valleys of Latino adolescents growing up in Fresno, California. Although these teenagers do not come from a mainstream American cultural background, students noted that the book contained numerous American cultural references they were familiar with, including the movie *Karate Kid*, the snack Cracker Jacks, the children's game show *Double Dare*, and the convenience store 7-11. These cultural references helped students establish significant connections between their own backgrounds and those of the characters through the identification and recognition of these cultural symbols.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Results from this study revealed two essential findings about the role children's and adolescent literature can play in contributing to the development of language learners' intercultural competence. First, while reading *Me llamo María Isabel*, students traced the development of the construction of the main character's cultural identity





throughout the book. As a result, they were able to empathize with her struggles to maintain her Puerto Rican heritage while also working to establish her own cultural identity in the United States. Second, by comparing the life experiences of the characters in both books with their own, students established connections between Latino culture and mainstream American culture by recognizing and appreciating important values both cultures share. Consequently, the children's novels facilitated the development of the students' trajectory to becoming transcultural learners as advocated by the MLA report (2007). By reading both books, students went beyond merely acquiring knowledge of Latino culture and truly experienced Latino culture by entering the story worlds of the children's books and living Latino culture through the experiences of the characters (Short, 2012). Drawing on their own life experiences helped them begin the process of developing their intercultural competence by becoming aware of cultural perspectives other than their own and seeking to understand these differences.

The children's novels promoted the development of students' intercultural competence by helping them become aware of other cultural perspectives through the recognition of similarities and differences between mainstream American culture and Latino culture. Although students identified congruencies between both cultures, they did not attempt to "translate" or map the values of mainstream American culture onto those of Latino culture but instead attempted to understand certain aspects of Latino culture on their own merits. Reading *Me llamo María Isabel* helped students develop an appreciation for the difficulties Latinos face as they attempt to negotiate their own cultural traditions and those of mainstream American culture. Reading *Béisbol en abril y otros cuentos* helped students understand that, while mainstream American culture and Latino culture are not identical, they do share specific cultural values.

While reading both children's novels, students observed the main characters' endeavors to negotiate their own cultural identities and, as a result, the novels supported students' intercultural growth as they observed the characters' trajectories in doing the same. In other words, students were able to recognize and acknowledge the evolution of the characters' intercultural competence while simultaneously identifying the same growth within themselves. Students' comments demonstrate that their intercultural competence increased as a result of reading the children's books because the novels enabled them to identify and subsequently compare and contrast distinct values in both Latino culture and mainstream American culture.

Many students noted that the children's novels bolstered their knowledge of Latino culture in significant ways. One possible explanation for this finding is that, as Short (2012, p. 11) argues, stories are the principal way we as humans make sense of our world since "literature illuminates what it means to be human and makes accessible the most fundamental experiences of life...". Rosenblatt (1995, p. 226) concurs, noting that literature is "a potential means for social understanding" and that "literature offers not merely information, but experiences" (*ibid.*, p. 236). In other words, literature provides readers with opportunities to experience other worlds vicariously through the characters. It is therefore arguable that the children's novels augmented students' knowledge about Latino culture because they were able to enter the story

worlds of the books and live through the identical experiences as the characters because “literature provides the opportunity to ‘live through’, not just have ‘knowledge about’ life” (*ibid.*, p. 13).

Short (2012) contends that reading literature provides students with opportunities to see the world from different perspectives by living other lives through the characters, reflecting on the characters’ decisions and considering if they themselves would act similarly or differently if they were in the characters’ position. Numerous students affirmed that the books contributed to their knowledge of Latino culture because they were able to enter the story worlds of the books and experience life vicariously through the eyes of the characters and putting themselves in “another person’s shoes”.

Students frequently mentioned that the children’s novels pushed them to go beyond learning about Latino culture to actually experiencing Latino culture. This experiencing of Latino culture was accomplished in several ways. While reading *Me llamo María Isabel*, a number of students appreciated María Isabel’ efforts to maintain her Puerto Rican identity in the face of mainstream culture which attempted to force her to renounce her Puerto Rican heritage in favor of a new identity. These students observed that, rather than taking the extreme positions of either maintaining her Puerto Rican heritage or losing it in favor of a new bicultural identity, María Isabel chose an intermediate position, one which would allow her to negotiate her own identity by fusing her Puerto Rican heritage with her mainstream identity. Numerous students appreciated María Isabel’s perseverance in negotiating her cultural identity, particularly considering the fact that she was a nine-year-old girl.

The children’s novels also promoted students’ intercultural growth by promoting their awareness of other cultural perspectives through the recognition of similarities and differences between mainstream American culture and Latino culture. Texts which focus only on the common characteristics between cultures mask the inherent complexities of these cultures. Conversely, books which focus only on the differences between cultures reinforce stereotypes and obscure common values intrinsic to all cultures. The children’s novels chosen for this study attempted to promote a balance between analyzing the unity and diversity of both mainstream American and Latino cultures. Students’ comments suggest that the books did indeed support this balanced view of both cultures.

Although students’ comments suggest that they did become aware of important facets of Latino culture by comparing and contrasting various facets of Latino culture with their own culture(s), it is important to note several concerns. Firstly, many comments were relatively superficial in nature, suggesting that students neither examined Latino culture from a more profound perspective nor deeply explored their own cultural identities. This phenomenon seems to substantiate Fennes and Hapgood’s (1997) iceberg model of culture in that students still seemed to view Latino culture from a largely stereotypical view by only focusing on observable facets of the culture, or the “tip” of the iceberg. One example of this situation is that a number of students did not use María Isabel’s full name in their comments, often referring to her as “María”. It is interesting to note that although these students are adamantly against the teacher’s efforts to change María Isabel’s name to Mary, they in fact do





the same in their own statements. Thus, future studies should be designed to explore ways in which literary texts can challenge students' preconceptions about other cultures and help them understand similarities and differences between other cultures and their own in more substantial and profound ways. Secondly, data for the study were obtained almost exclusively from students' perceptions of their own gains in cross-cultural understanding. While students' observations do provide some insights into their thinking about the contributions of the children's novels to their intercultural understanding, their interpretations were not verified by the researcher, and no quantitative data were collected during the study to validate students' perceptions. It is recommended that future studies employ a mixed-methods design in which both quantitative and qualitative data are collected to be able to determine the veracity of students' reflections. It is also recommended that researchers include assessment tools to measure the level of students' intercultural competence before and after implementation of specific pedagogical interventions. Thirdly, since all participants in the study read the same children's novels and participated in the same course activities, no experimental or control groups were created, which did not allow for comparisons with other groups who either did not read the children's novels or who could have participated in similar activities such reading non-fictional texts in Spanish or watching comparable movies in Spanish. Accordingly, researchers might consider including experimental and control groups in their studies to measure and determine the effects of particular instructional interventions.

In conclusion, Zapata (2005, p. 262) states that "it remains to be seen how feasible intercultural understanding is in the context of American higher education L2 classes", particularly with respect to students who have not previously studied abroad. Results from this study suggest that developing language students' intercultural competence is indeed feasible and that children's and adolescent literature can play a significant role in accomplishing this goal.

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