

### 3D IN HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: LEARNING A L2 THROUGH HISTORY, CONTEXT AND CROSS-CULTURAL EXPERIENCES<sup>1</sup>

ANA SÁEZ-HIDALGO  
LAURA FILARDO-LLAMAS  
*University of Valladolid*

**ABSTRACT.** *Given the four elements involved in having a communicative competence, it could be argued that learning a L2 does not only involve overcoming linguistic differences, but also cultural ones. Following a double conceptualization of “culture”, we will show our experience as teachers of History of the English Language (HEL), and the potential usefulness of the diachronic axis in developing the critical intercultural awareness needed to master a foreign language. This wider cultural approach results in a more accurate linguistic intuition in the L2, which is a consequence of the critical intercultural spirit developed by the students.*

*Keywords:* Intercultural education, History of the English Language, L2 teaching, synchrony, diachrony, cross-cultural dimension.

---

<sup>1</sup> This research is to be framed within the Teaching Innovation Project entitled “En busca de los Fundamentos de Lengua Inglesa” (2014-2015), funded by the University of Valladolid.

### 3D EN LA HISTORIA DE LA LENGUA INGLESA: EL APRENDIZAJE DE UNA L2 A TRAVÉS DE LA HISTORIA, EL CONTEXTO Y LAS EXPERIENCIAS INTER-CULTURALES

**RESUMEN.** *Partiendo de los cuatro elementos necesarios para conseguir una competencia comunicativa, se podría decir que aprender una L2 no solo supone superar las diferencias lingüísticas, sino también las culturales. Tomando como punto de partida una doble conceptualización de “cultura”, pretendemos mostrar nuestra experiencia como docentes de historia de la Lengua Inglesa, y la utilidad del eje diacrónico para desarrollar la conciencia crítica intercultural que requiere el conocimiento de una lengua extranjera. Este enfoque cultural tiene como consecuencia una intuición lingüística más certera en la L2”, que resulta del espíritu intercultural crítico adquirido por los estudiantes.*

*Palabras clave:* Educación intercultural, Historia de la Lengua inglesa, enseñanza de L2, sincronía, diacronía, dimensión intercultural.

*Received 17 July 2014*

*Revised version accepted 14 January 2015*

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

According to William Littlewood (1981), having a communicative competence in the L2 should involve the development of linguistic, communicative, contextual, and socio-cultural competences. Thus, learning a L2 does not only involve overcoming a linguistic difference, but also a cultural one. Even if it is a truism that culture is an essential component in L2 teaching, this has mostly been considered from synchronic perspectives which emphasise the differences and similarities between the cultural elements of the L1 and L2. However, language is not only synchronic, but it also has a diachronic dimension which, together with the different socio-political and cultural contexts it is grounded on, is often forgotten.

As we will see below, in this paper we advocate for a bi-dimensional notion of culture, within which not only the idea of a shared (cultural) knowledge between communication participants but also the accretion of diverse layers of socio-political and linguistic knowledge throughout time are included. In accordance, we argue that historical linguistic awareness is an important help in acquiring English as a L2. In this paper, we intend to show our experience as teachers of History of the English Language (HEL), and the potential usefulness of the diachronic axis in developing the critical intercultural awareness needed to master a foreign language.

We hypothesise that both synchronic and diachronic understandings of culture play a significant role in acquiring a L2, and we will use in-class examples and

students' feedback to show how the wider cultural approach proposed here results in a more accurate linguistic intuition in the L2. By following the postulates of Byram's intercultural approach to L2 teaching, and combining it to a double understanding of culture –applied within the specific circumstances of a Spanish university– we will prove that not only general knowledge about the specific (historical) context of the English language, but also a wider linguistic intuition and a stronger critical intercultural spirit are developed.

Given that one of the main aims of higher education is developing a critical spirit (Saramago 2010), we propose here to help students learn a L2 by relying on the critical capacities acquired by introducing them to a historical perspective of culture. With this, not only their knowledge of English as a L2 will be improved, but also their cultural competence as specified in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), and their critical awareness about the intrinsic connections that can be established between historical linguistics and knowledge of linguistic forms in English.

## 2. LEARNING A L2 AND THE INTERCULTURAL SPEAKER

Learning a L2 involves both overcoming a linguistic and a cultural difference, as both language and society shape the way any language is created. It could be argued that when both differences are overcome, communicative competence in the L2 is achieved. The notion of “communicative competence” stems from recent approaches to learning a L2, which are dominated by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) understandings. These focus on the importance of learning how to communicate authentically and meaningfully in another language. Communication involves the integration of many language skills (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 172), which according to William Littlewood (1981: 6) should be related to at least four elements: attaining a high degree of linguistic competence; distinguishing between those forms mastered and the communicative function they perform; developing skills for communicating effectively in different types of situations; and becoming aware of the social meaning of language forms.

The importance of mastering different skills when acquiring a language has been also acknowledged when devising the CEFR, which favours an intercultural approach whose central objective is “to promote the favourable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture”. Even if this definition of intercultural approach does not explicitly advocate in favour of learning a L2 by relying on its cultural components, the cross-cultural experience implied by the “enriching experience of otherness” stresses the importance that cultural elements

have in learning and mastering a L2. Language and culture cannot be separated, as both of them help in building the students' communicative competence. According to this, the final objective of L2 learning should not be to become a L2 quasi-native speaker, but an "intercultural speaker" (Byram 1997: 31-34) who shall be able to:

- mediate. i.e. s/he must help to establish co-operations and the basis for mutual understanding between groups that differ culturally (as well as ethnically and socially). [...]
- learn. Via communication with native speakers and interaction with the unfamiliar cultural context, the intercultural speaker constantly strives to increase his or her knowledge and understanding. This learning takes place
- at all levels, i.e. for pupils, teachers and researchers alike [...].
- be (self-)reflecting. The intercultural speaker regularly attempts to create cohesion, i.e. understanding in relation to made observations and gathered data. [...] The reflection and possible revisions also include the perception of
- the self and the view of one's own cultural stance. (Jaeger 2001: 53-54).

Following Byram's (1997) notion of intercultural competence, certain accounts of CLT have identified five competences, or *savoirs*, which are to be developed in order to become an intercultural speaker:

- Knowledge (*savoir*) involves knowledge of the world, socio-cultural knowledge, and intercultural awareness (CEFR 2001: 102-104), and it can be defined as the factual knowledge about the country (or countries) where a language is spoken. This emphasizes the relationship between a language and the context where it is produced.
- Ability to learn (*savoir apprendre*) refers to the ability to acquire new knowledge about a given culture, and to incorporate this into existing knowledge. By mastering this ability, a learner can deal with new learning challenges in a more effective and independent way. It includes several components, in particular language and communication awareness, general phonetic skills; study skills; and heuristic skills (CEFR 2001: 107-108).
- Critical awareness (*savoir s'engager*) is the ability to evaluate critically the practices, perspectives and customs which are typical of one's own and other's culture (Byram 2008: 162). This implies that judgments, and their culturally-determined nature, are made explicit in such a way that learners are encouraged to reflect on how others might consider their socio-cultural position.
- "Existential" competence (*savoir être*) implies reflecting on the fact that communication is not only affected by knowledge, but also by factors related to the self. Amongst them, attitudes, motivations, values, beliefs, cognitive styles and personality factors can be highlighted (CEFR 2001: 105).

- Skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) refer to the ability for interpreting a document or event in another culture, and explaining and relating it to another document or event in one's own culture (Byram *et al.* 2002: 13).

Taking into account Byram's intercultural approach to language learning, and the observation of certain teaching practices which are still focused on the sole acquisition of grammatical and purely linguistic elements, it is our purpose in this paper to emphasise, and reflect, about the role of culture in overcoming those linguistic differences that can be identified between a L1 and a L2, and how can historical linguistics can help in doing so.

### 3. NOTION OF CULTURE

Before looking at the usefulness of the intercultural approach and its applicability for diachronic studies of English, it is necessary to define what we understand by the word "culture", as this is, according to Raymond Williams, one of the three English words which is most difficult to define (1983, quoted in Storey 2006).

Many different explanations of "culture" can be found, but in this paper we will mainly focus on sociological approaches to the study of this phenomenon. Since there have been some attempts to explain L2 acquisition by relying on them – overlaps and similarities can be found between those sociological accounts and certain prominent trends in the study of linguistics, including ethnolinguistics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis. In particular, we will focus on Giddens' notion of structuration and Bourdieu's practice theory, as within both theories we can find a connection between the role of culture and the study of language.

Following Giddens' notion of structuration, culture is understood in a double way, as it could either be a structure or a lifeworld. Within the overarching lifeworld conception, culture "comprises the everyday, mutual knowledge and consciousness of social groups and their more systematic 'intellectual' formations and cultural products", whereas when it is understood as a structure, culture consists of "the underlying rules employed in social interactions and through which social systems are reproduced" (Giddens 1986, quoted in Scott 2007: 83). This second notion of culture resembles Saussure's and structuralist's perception about a language's structure, which is defined as "a social product of our language faculty" and "the body of necessary conventions adopted by society to enable members of society to use their language faculty" (Saussure 1983: 9-10).

In Giddens' view, when culture is conceived as a structure, the latter is divided in three components: structural principles, structures, and structural properties. Structural principles are those which help in the organization of societal totalities,

structures refer to those rule-resource sets which are involved in the institutional articulation of social systems, and structural properties are the institutionalized features of social systems which stretch across time and space (Mayes 2003: 25). A close connection can be therefore established between understandings of culture and language as a structure. It can be argued that language and discourse are one of the main ways of articulating a social system because they are structures which are socially-determined, i.e. they reflect the organization of a particular society. At the same time, both language and discourse are related to structural properties, and can be considered elements which have changed across time. Thus, as we will show below, how a language is shaped is the consequence of a double influence coming from the synchronic elements of society and its diachronic evolution.

The idea that a language is influenced by the context where it is spoken also permeates Bourdieu's practice theory, according to which the context –or field– of a social group and the cognitive and motivating structures that form part of it give rise to (social) practices which help to reproduce that social context and its subjective understanding – or habitus. It can be argued that the production and reproduction of culture can be done through language. Thus, competence in a language is to be understood as relational, because it depends on the linguistic dispositions of an individual (or linguistic habitus) and the social and linguistic settings (fields) where they function (Hardy 2011: 171).

Taking into account these two sociological accounts, our understanding of culture is based on a combination of them. Hence, when trying to incorporate cultural elements in the classroom, we consider the existence of two main components – which are, in turn, parallel to the two axes described by Saussure for the study of linguistics.

- The identification of a “synchronic dimension of culture” can be connected to Bourdieu's notion of field –or sociolinguistic context– and Giddens' description of structural principles. According to both views, culture can be understood as the beliefs and ideas that permeate the particular context where a language is produced. Similar ideas can be found in certain linguistics trends, which stresses the notion that communication is successful whenever language is encoded and decoded on the basis of a given common ground which is shared by speakers (Gavins 2007). Different elements form part of this shared knowledge of the world. Amongst others, certain aspects can be highlighted, including personal knowledge –or “autobiographical knowledge about personal experiences” (Van Dijk 2005: 77-78)–, interpersonal knowledge –or that which stems from a previous communication experience between two or more individuals–, group knowledge or that which is related to socially shared experiences–, and cultural

knowledge –or the “the general knowledge shared by the members of the same ‘culture’” (77-78).

- Following Giddens’ notion of culture as structural properties which stretch across time in a particular space, we could also talk about a “diachronic dimension of culture”. This is the consequence of the accretion of different layers of socio-political and linguistic elements throughout time, and its influence on how a language is currently spoken cannot be neglected (Schmitt and Marsden 2006).

Culture shall, in our view, be understood as a combination of synchronic and diachronic elements, both of which shape and have shaped a particular language. Thus, both elements shall be taken into account when implementing the intercultural approach to English language proposed here. As a consequence a re-definition of the above-mentioned *savoirs* (Byram 1997) shall be made so that not only synchronic aspects but also diachronic ones are considered, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The diachronic dimension in the intercultural approach.

SAVOIR	SYNCHRONIC ELEMENT	DIACHRONIC ELEMENT
Knowledge ( <i>savoir</i> )	Factual knowledge about the country (or countries) where a language is spoken.	Factual knowledge about the <b>history</b> of the country (or countries) where a language is spoken.
Ability to learn ( <i>savoir apprendre</i> )	Acquire new knowledge about a given culture, and incorporate this into existing knowledge. Compare this new knowledge about the L2 culture with the one about the L1.	Acquire new knowledge about elements of a <b>historical period</b> of the given culture (including language awareness). Compare this historical knowledge with knowledge about present-day culture. Establish analogies and differences (with present-day L2 and L1).
Critical awareness ( <i>savoir s’engager</i> )	Evaluate critically the practices, perspectives and customs which are typical of one’s own and other’s culture.	Evaluate critically the practices, perspectives and customs which are typical of different <b>historical periods</b> in the L2 culture.
“Existential” competence ( <i>savoir être</i> )	Relate self-factors to the L2, including elements such as attitudes, motivations, values, beliefs, cognitive styles and personality factors.	Relate self-factors to the <b>history of the L2</b> , including elements such as attitudes, motivations, values, beliefs, cognitive styles, and personality factors.
Skills of interpreting and relating ( <i>savoir comprendre</i> )	Ability for interpreting a document or event in another culture, and explaining and relating it to another document or event in one’s own culture.	Ability for interpreting a document or event in another <b>historical period</b> , and explaining and relating it to another current document or event.

#### 4. PAST AND PRESENT IN LANGUAGES

If there is a human capacity that is inherently connected with culture, it is language – or rather, languages–; each of the diverse languages spoken throughout the world. As ethnolinguists, cultural linguists, discourse analysts, and sociolinguists have proved, languages are intrinsically related to the societies and cultures in which they are used and developed (Hymes 1964). But, what is meant by the verb “develop”? It has already been pointed out that culture is, in our view, the result of historical accretion. Languages –being both cultural and human outcomes– cannot be but the result of how they have evolved throughout the centuries. In fact, languages are constantly changing; as Humboldt (1999: 25-64) pointed out, they are not *ergon* [product], but *energeia* [process].

It was, as is well known, Saussure, who defined the two axes of diachrony and synchrony in linguistics (1983: part I, ch. 3). And by doing so, he established the two basic approaches to the study of languages for the rest of the twentieth century; two approaches that are still functional in our days, despite the debate and constant revision of the two notions (Hale 2007). However, both synchronic and diachronic studies already existed before Saussure. Historical linguistics, in particular, had started by the beginning of the nineteenth century. From its early years, the discipline did not only focus on the development of languages, but rather, combined the two axes to different degrees depending on the outlook:

- The study and description of a language in a specific period in the past, either by giving a complete picture of all the aspects of the language in general or by focusing in some particular element of it. Thus, researchers travel in time (diachronically) in order to give us a picture of how people talked in that moment (synchrony): that is the case of handbooks of, say, Old English or Early Modern English. In a way, this type of description had started centuries before: for instance, in medieval grammars of Latin and Greek.
- The comparative method analyses the similarities among a diversity of languages (synchronic) by searching how they are related in families and how they diversified through the centuries (diachronic). This was initially done with a biological understanding of languages, which aimed at organizing them in families, thanks to the systematic diachronic comparison carried out by scholars like the Grimm and the Schlegel brothers. The result is well known: language families that can be traced back to ur-languages like Indo-European (Seuren 2004: 79ff). Although this method has several limitations (Harrison 2003: 213), it continues to be considered the main manner of diving into the past of languages and studying both their genetic



relatedness and their diversification and changes (Rankin 2003:185). Thus, a third dimension is added to the synchronic and diachronic axes, the cross-linguistic.

- What we shall call the “resultative approach”, that is, the study and systematization of how certain elements of a language in a specific stage (synchronic) have come to be or developed into a later form and usage (diachronic). This originated in the neogrammarians’ scientific view of change and their drafting of laws that systematized the passage of time in sound shifts, morphology, syntax, lexicon, etc. This is still one of the main trends of historical linguistics, though it has evolved as a result of the several questionings of its mechanistic approaches. Obviously, scholars have called attention to the social and cultural dimensions of languages, therefore broadening the scope of linguistic change, without losing sight of its evolutionary process (Cable 2008). It is this view that we find in the majority of the handbooks studying the history of a specific language, that is, they show how that language has changed from its earliest form to the present.

This “resultative approach”, combined with the study of cultural and sociological aspects, has proved expedient to understand the particularities of some languages in the present. English is no doubt a good example of it. It is a language that has developed through a particularly complex combination of cultural and linguistic circumstances throughout history, the result being a large number of peculiar usages and forms which are difficult to grasp and acquire and which can only be explained from a diachronic perspective. That is the case of spelling: why is “h-” sometimes pronounced and sometimes it is not? Is there a way of predicting how to pronounce “ou” or “ow” in words we have never learnt or used?

History of the English Language (HEL) handbooks have made an explicit attempt to render this “resultative approach” useful for the understanding of these peculiarities in the English language nowadays. They normally do so by emphasizing the notions of change and development in their description of the progress from the Old English period, to Middle, Early Modern and Present-day English – it is noticeable that the friendlier the approach, the more explicit the connection with our days, as can be seen in the series “The History of English in Ten Minutes” by the Open University. Barbara Strang, in her *History of English* (1970), puts further emphasis on the result by arranging the stages of English history backwards chronologically: she starts with the main characteristics of Present-day English usage and moves gradually to the past, explaining how historical and sociological changes have led to this stage. Although this specific

pattern of exposing the history of English has not been very successful among scholars, most of them contemplate in one way or another the idea of helping speakers of English to become aware of how the language has come to be what it is nowadays.

This was no doubt one of the purposes of the exhibition *Evolving English: One Language, Many Voices*, featured by the British Library between November 2010 and April 2011: “This is a unique opportunity to see and hear its evolution from a language spoken on a small island to a global language spoken by 1.8 billion people.” And this was carried out both by means of a chronological account of the English language, and based on a notion of linguistic diversity, not only in recent times but also throughout its history, as David Crystal remarks in the book accompanying the exhibition (2010). The success of this exhibition shows how the diachronic perspective on the language keeps on attracting people’s interest, particularly when it involves understanding our linguistic usages nowadays.

##### 5. MOVING INTO A THIRD DIMENSION: THE VALUE OF HEL IN THE CROSS-LINGUISTIC/CROSS-CULTURAL AXIS

Although there is no question about the relevance of a scholarly knowledge of the history of languages, synchronic linguists contend that native speakers of a language do not need to know the history of that language in order to achieve competence in it (Hale 2007: 3). Obvious as this may seem, this argument is however debatable. As debatable as saying that native speakers do not need any knowledge of grammar for effective communication. Strictly speaking, they do not need either of them. But both of them are intrinsic to their speech. If we focus on the diachronic axis, it has already been stated that a synchronic layer of a language is the result of its historical –and cultural– development; therefore, although a native speaker does not need to be aware of the historical accretion this language has gone through, such a speaker’s discourse and utterances are necessarily bound to the cultural history behind it.

The success of the British Library exhibition, or the large number of people who have watched the Open University History of English videos show that native speakers have curiosity to learn more about the history of their language and may find it useful for their own practice. This is no doubt what has moved Norbert Schmitt and Richard Marsden to write *Why is English like That?* (2006). In this book, they take a step further in combining the diachronic and the synchronic axes: their purpose is to help teachers of English by giving them explanations which may help their “students to a more informed understanding of the English

system and may actually facilitate their learning” (2006: v). Examples of this include references to the historical origin of the oddities of English spelling, grammar (including verb-subject inversions) and vocabulary (such as the doublets pig/pork or fantasy/fancy).

Even if they seem to believe that some basic knowledge of HEL can be valuable from a pedagogic perspective, they mainly find that what the diachronic perspective does is “alleviate [students’] frustration with some of the seemingly unreasonable aspects of the language and, as a result, maintain their motivation and interest” (2006:v). However, our experience as teachers of HEL shows us that the degree of success of the method depends both on the level of the ESL students and on how they intend to use the English language.

A few years ago, Michael R. Dressman (2007) published some reflections on how teaching HEL for university students from a variety of academic fields can be considered a way of catalyzing diverse subjects into what can be considered an all-encompassing knowledge. This experience is interesting because it was carried out among higher-education students with a certain professional profile involved. The positive response of his students has to do with what HEL can teach them at their cognitive level of intellectual maturity. What his article demonstrates is that what they learnt goes beyond the linguistic aspects of the historical development of English and helped them to have a deeper understanding of cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural knowledge. In a way, we find that our experience teaching HEL has certain aspects in common with Dressman’s reflections, although the fact that the teaching we carry out happens in a context of non-native speakers of English has an added value for L2 acquisition at this particular level of language learning.

Before proceeding to explain how university students can benefit from knowledge of HEL when learning English, it should be made clear that the proposal we are putting forward is the result of our experience as teachers of HEL primarily. This course<sup>1</sup>, which we have been teaching for several years at the University of Valladolid, has allowed us to train our students so that not only would their knowledge of the English language be enhanced from a historical and cultural perspective, but it would also have an impact in their linguistic

---

<sup>1</sup> This includes two different courses: “Historia de la Lengua Inglesa,” which was a compulsory full-year course of the now-extinct Degree in English Studies, and “Fundamentos de la Historia de la Lengua inglesa,” which is a semester-long optional course offered in the Current Degree in English Studies.

proficiency, which is greatly enhanced. This is no doubt the result of a combination of factors:

- the teaching method
- the combination of three axes: diachronic, synchronic and cross-linguistic
- the level of intellectual maturity and professional perspective of the learners

A detailed account of our teaching method for this course can be read elsewhere (Sáez-Hidalgo and Filardo-Llamas 2012)<sup>2</sup>. For the purpose of the present paper, we would like to recall two aspects which are particularly relevant to our discussion. The first one is our understanding of academic teaching, which, we believe,

has to aim at helping our students to develop critical attitudes as they acquire knowledge. In our view, the university is not only the place where contents are acquired, but also a place where critical thinking is developed, either by means of applied practices or debates about society (252).

This view –highly influenced by Saramago’s notion of the university– necessarily fosters two facets that David Little (1991) had claimed in order to achieve learner autonomy: learner involvement, and learner reflection. The second aspect of our method that we would like to describe here follows the first one: we have structured the teaching process with this double objective in mind, so that it is not merely information that is provided to the students, but they are incited to develop their critical attitudes. This is carried out in a tripartite process: lectures –aimed at the transmission of theoretical contents and a dialogue with students–, guided practice –where the previously-acquired knowledge is activated and reaffirmed through analytical tools–, and free practice –students are properly trained to carry out a variety of exercises with a greater critical capacity.

It is in this third stage when the combination of the three axes renders the learning of HEL particularly useful for non-native speakers of English, who need to supplement historical and cultural background knowledge. HEL can help in this as it would contribute to an understanding of the language based on reasoning rather than on rote learning, which brings us back to Byram’s *savoirs*.

---

<sup>2</sup> Even if that essay accounts for the method followed when we taught a full-year compulsory course, it is still applicable to the one-semester-long optional course we are teaching at the moment. The methodology followed is similar in both cases, although the new course has been adapted to make historical changes even more related to Present-day English usages.

Table 2. The intercultural approach applied to HEL teaching.

SAVOIR	EXAMPLES
Knowledge ( <i>savoir</i> )	<p>Knowledge about <b>historical events</b> with a significant influence on the development of the language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Norman Conquest</li> <li>• Printing Press</li> <li>• Religious Reformation</li> <li>• Colonization of the East and West Indies</li> </ul> <p>This results in awareness about the influence of the external history on the internal aspects of a language.</p>
Ability to learn ( <i>savoir apprendre</i> )	<p>Acquire new knowledge about elements of a <b>historical period</b> of the given culture (including language awareness) and compare them to present-day culture:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spelling as a consequence of material and cultural circumstances such as the manuscript context, or the advent of professional approaches to the study of language in the spelling reform.</li> <li>• Contemporary normalization of spelling and the influence of ICTs.</li> </ul> <p>This results in reflections about spelling as a culturally-bound element throughout time.</p>
Critical awareness ( <i>savoir s'engager</i> )	<p>Critical evaluation of the practices, perspectives and customs which are typical of different <b>historical periods</b> in the L2 culture:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evolution of the different types of lexical word-formation from the OE period (German-style) to PDE (mixture of influences)</li> </ul> <p>This results in ability to evaluate the forms and meanings of words.</p>
“Existential” competence ( <i>savoir être</i> )	<p>Relation of values and beliefs to the <b>history of the L2</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparison of the influence of religious beliefs on the lexical and stylistic choices made by authors belonging to the same historical period (The Bible in EModE).</li> </ul> <p>This results in a greater attention being paid to the importance of ideological factors.</p>
Skills of interpreting and relating ( <i>savoir comprendre</i> )	<p>Ability for interpreting a document or event in another <b>historical period</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the re-interpretation and re-creation of clichéd metaphors, for instance in Shakespeare's sonnets.</li> </ul> <p>This results in a capacity to contextualize linguistic choices and rely on that to decode them.</p>

The examples presented in Table 2 above show how by working with specific features of the History of English, certain intellectual capacities can be developed by the students. This helps both in knowing how the English language has evolved and in acquiring an in-depth knowledge of it. Thus, students do not only understand the logic underlying the English language but also master a wider variety of utterances that go beyond the use of mechanically-learned expressions.

## 6. RESULTS

The results of our methodological proposal are to be found mainly in our day-to-day experience teaching History of the English Language. The students engage in the course and in what it offers to them for improving their expertise in English. And it is doubtlessly their interest and curiosity to know more about it that contributes to their success in the course. Apart from our own observation in class, we have considered necessary to find an objective way of measuring the benefits of applying this methodology. Therefore, in order to test our hypothesis, we have carried out a survey among our students so that we could know the impact that taking a course on the History of the English language has on their learning of English. The design of the survey was based on two main aspects. On the one hand, we wanted it to include two types of questions: yes/no questions which could help us test students' views on our hypotheses, and open questions where students could explain and give examples of the benefits (if any) of taking this course. On the other hand, we wanted the survey to reflect the views of history and culture that have been explained above. Thus, we divided it in five sections, following Byram's division of the *savoirs* that shall be mastered when learning a language (see the appendix below).

Once the survey had been designed, an electronic version of it was created with Google Forms. This helped us reach students that were not only taking the course at the moment, but also students who had previously studied this subject either in its current form as an optional course in the degree, or in its previous shape as a compulsory (and full-year) subject. Current students could access the questionnaire through a link on the University virtual campus, whereas former students were sent the link by e-mail. All of them answered the questions anonymously. This decision was taken to give them the freedom to answer in the way that they found most appropriate, regardless of whether they viewed the course in a positive or negative way.

Taking the questionnaire was never presented as compulsory, and eventually a total of 26 students voluntarily took part in this research. Eight of them had taken the longer, compulsory course whereas eighteen had taken the new, revised and shorter version. The age of participating students ranges between 20 and 45. Since students have taken the course between 2004 and 2014, that 10-year period can

easily help us see how the course has evolved as some differences –particularly when identifying the benefits of the course– can be seen in their answers.

The results of the survey show that an overwhelming majority of students who have taken this course have acquired the *savoirs* we have been trying to implement: they recognize not only that it is a useful knowledge, but also that it contributes to a better and more effective acquisition of the English language and to develop their critical capacities by giving them tools to understand how the language has been shaped through history. A hundred percent of the interviewees believe that taking a course on the History of English can help understand better Present-day English (Question 1) and have developed a complete awareness of the influence of the external history –e.g. socio-political events– on the shape of the language in our days (Q3). Even aspects of language usage, like lexical choices in terms of etymology (English *vs.* Latin or French terms), are understood by most students. Similar results are obtained for the rest of the *savoirs*: students have learned the historical factors behind the peculiarities of English spelling (Q7-Q9: 98% positive), and have developed their linguistic critical awareness to the point of interpreting newly created vocabulary (more than 80% for Q14). Likewise, in the case of the last two *savoirs*, the “existential” competence (*savoir être*) and the skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), there is no question that our students are aware of the importance of ideological factors in the language (80% for Q15), and even can find new instances of this in our days, like racism, xenophobia and political correctness, in a perfect example of the newly acquired ability to evaluate critically the practices in their own culture (Byram 2008: 162). Finally, it is highly relevant that our students’ answers reflect the process of implementation of the method here described, as is shown by the answer to Q16 on ideological and religious reasons for the lexical debate in the early modern translations of the Bible (Protestant *vs.* Catholic): almost a 70% of the students recognize these factors; all of them have taken the course in the last three years. Similarly, an important progress in the learning results can be observed in the last years, particularly with the new course – more focused on the development of the *savoirs* and the skills to use them. The degree of success has increased from a 66% (2007-2012) to almost a 79% (2013-2014).

Given that the questionnaire was devised in such a way that it would allow (former) students to provide us with their own opinion, an analysis of the answers obtained can give us feedback on the benefits of taking this course and its help in mastering English as a L2. Examples can be seen in quotes like the following:

“I think the History of the English Language is fundamental for the understanding and production of English so I consider it should receive the appropriate relevance in the syllabus” (I12).<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> The quotes have not been edited so as to maintain students’ originality.

“Only by understanding how a language works and how it shaped itself through the years can we achieve a full mastery of the said language” (I6).

Not only has our original hypothesis been tested. As we can see in the summary presented in Table 3, students also agree in that each of the *savoirs* required to master a L2 are improved by taking a course on History of the English language.

Table 3. Students’ reflections on the benefits of taking a course on HEL.

SAVOIR	SELECTED ANSWERS
Knowledge ( <i>savoir</i> ) (Q1 – Q7)	<p>“Of course, if England had not suffered the Norman conquest in 1066, we will be speaking a very different English nowadays; an English which, in my humble opinion would have been much more interesting and authentic.” (I10)</p> <p>“As we have seen in the taken course, socio-political events have an important role on the use of English language, i.e. the Norman Conquest hugely influenced the English then spoken and so, the English spoken after it.” (I19)</p>
Ability to learn ( <i>savoir apprendre</i> ) (Q8 – Q10)	<p>“The phonetic evolution of lexical words has helped me understand the morphological and lexical creation of present-day English words.” (I11)</p> <p>“I have learned about the development of some grammatical structures, for example, the use of the subjunctive in English. For example the reason why we can say something like: ‘If I were rich’ and ‘If I was rich’.” (I2)</p> <p>“Learning the etymology of the words helped me to understand better the meaning of unknown words” (I21)</p> <p>“It has helped me understanding current pronunciation in a better way and also how foreign words have been adopted into English.” (I24)</p> <p>“As a matter of fact, I think a course on the History of English is particularly useful to understand the peculiarities of its spelling and pronunciation.” (I7)</p>
Critical awareness ( <i>savoir s’engager</i> ) (Q11 - Q14)	<p>“By understanding the processes a language has undergone you might get some clues about some of the irregularities nowadays.” (I2)</p> <p>“Perhaps knowing when and with which sense a word was borrowed can help with false friends. I’m only guessing, though.” (I6)</p> <p>“Thanks to this course if there is a word that you are not completely sure what it means you can deduce its meaning by doing a kind of etymological analysis.” (I14)</p>



SAVOIR	SELECTED ANSWERS
“Existential” competence ( <i>savoir être</i> ) (Q15 - Q18)	“It can help the students to be critical, showing them how words and the way we express ourselves are the greatest ideological sign.”(I24) “Well, it may be a very simple example, but the choice between the words “Muslim” and “Arab”, when they work as synonyms, conveys ideological connotations that should be taken into account.” (I17) “The only thing I can think of is the choice of name for regions that have a strong independent feeling, as Cymru for Wales (different word) or the change of spelling for Cataluña in Spanish were now even in the newspapers you find Catalunya” (I21)
Skills of interpreting and relating ( <i>savoir            comprendre</i> ) (Q19 - Q20)	“It is essential to have some basis of English language history to be able to read early English literature. Otherwise, there would be many words and expressions we would not understand.” (I24) “When I was in the first year of the degree I had to read “Beowulf” and it was such a crazy thing, nowadays and after studying this subject to read it is easier.” (I14) “A course on the History of the English Language is absolutely essential for those who want to master the English language and to read medieval or Early Modern English texts. It should be a compulsory course in the degree in English Studies.” (I7) “It’s great when studying literature; it really helps understand not only the texts, but the background behind those texts. I wish it could be studied at the same time as we deal with the literary periods and the historical events.” (I6)

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

Teaching ESL by combining this double understanding of culture and applying it to the specific circumstances of students in Spain helps us devise exercises aimed at developing a critical intercultural spirit. Education is no doubt intended for developing that critical spirit (Saramago 2010), which in this case is acquired by introducing students to a historical perspective of culture and language.

We could say that one thing is learning a language for sheer communication purposes and studying it as part of the professional training. In general L2 learners, in the same way as L1 speakers, may enjoy knowing details like the fact that etymologically “frail” and “fragile” come from the same word, and the difference lies on when they were loaned. However, this does not necessarily make their English any

better. On the other hand, as the survey has demonstrated, those who have gone through a program that develops their critical capacities and gives them tools to understand how the language has worked historically can know that that is not the case for “ail” and “agile”. What is remarkable about this is that the former do not really need to be able to deny such a false connection, while the latter do. The latter, those who are being educated to become teachers of English, translators, or have to use English as a second language at a high level, need to have a fluency and proficiency in the acquired language that requires a capacity of intuition in their utterances.

#### REFERENCES

- British Library. “Exhibition. Evolving English: One Language, Many Voices”. <<http://www.bl.uk/evolvingenglish>>. (Accessed 10 September 2013)
- Byram, M. 1997. *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M. 2008. *From Foreign Language Education to Education for Intercultural Citizenship*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M., Gribkova, B. and H. Starkey, eds. 2002. *Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching. A Practical Introduction for Teachers*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. <[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/guide\\_dimintercult\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/guide_dimintercult_en.pdf)>. (Accessed 10 September 2013)
- Cable, T. 2008. “History of the History of the English Language: How Has the Subject Been Studied?” *A Companion to the History of the English Language*. Eds. H. Momma and M. Matto. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. 11-17.
- CEFR. 2001. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press/Council of Europe.
- Crystal, D. 2010. *Evolving English: One Language, Many Voices*. London: British Library.
- Michael R. D. 2007. “The History of the English Language Course. A cross-disciplinary approach to the Humanities”. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education February*, 6 (1): 107-113.
- Hale, M. 2007. *Historical Linguistics: Theory and Method*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Hardy, C. 2011. “Language and Education”. *Bourdieu, Language and Linguistics*. Ed. M. Grenfell. London: Continuum. 170-194.
- Harrison, S. P. 2003. “On the Limits of the Comparative Method”. *The Handbook of Historical Linguistics*. Eds. B. D. Joseph and R. D. Janda. Malden: Blackwell. 213-243.

- Humboldt, Wilhelm von. 1999 (1836). *On Language, On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*. Ed. Michael Losonsky. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hymes, D. H., ed. 1964. *Language in Culture and Society: A Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology*. New York, London: Harper and Row.
- Jaeger, K. 2001. "The Intercultural Speaker and present-day requirements regarding linguistic and cultural competence". *Sprogforum* 19: 52-56.
- Littlewood, W. 1981. *Communicative Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mayes, P. 2003. *Language, Social Structure and Culture*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Open University. "The History of English in Ten Minutes". <<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLA03075BAD88B909E>>. (Accessed 10 September 2013)
- Rankin, R. L. 2003. "The Comparative Method". *The Handbook of Historical Linguistics*. Eds. B. D. Joseph and R. D. Janda. Malden: Blackwell. 183-212.
- Richards, J. C. and T. S. Rodgers. 2001. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sáez Hidalgo, A. and L. Filardo-Llamas. 2012. "Reflections on e-learning in the new frame of European Higher Education and its consequences for the design of a History of the English Language course". *Convergent Approaches to Medieval English Language and Literature*. Eds. J. Martin Arista, R. Torre Alonso, A. Canga Alonso and I. Medina Barco. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 241-272.
- Saramago, J. 2010. *Democracia y universidad*. Madrid: Editorial Complutense.
- Saussure, F. 1983 (1915). *Course in General Linguistics*. Peru, Illinois: Open Court. Ed. Albert Reidlinger.
- Schmitt, N. and R. Marsden. 2006. *Why is English like That: Historical Answers to Hard ELT Questions*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Scott, J. 2007. "Giddens and Cultural Analysis: Absent Word and Central Concept". *Cultural Theory. Classical and Contemporary Position*. Ed. T. Edwards. London: Sage. 83-106.
- Seuren, P. A. M. 2004. *Western Linguistics: An Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Storey, J. 2006. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. Harlow: Pearson.
- Strang, B. M. H. 1970. *A History of English*. London: Methuen.
- Tucker, K. H. Jr. 1998. *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory*. London: Sage.

## APPENDIX: SURVEY

SAVOIR	QUESTIONS
Knowledge ( <i>savoir</i> )	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Do you think that taking a course on the History of English can help you understand how the English language is shaped today?</li> <li>2. Give an example or instance of something you've learned with this course that has helped you with Present-Day English</li> <li>3. Do you think that socio-political events have an influence on how we use the English language?</li> <li>4. Do you think that the use of borrowings in contemporary English is a consequence of socio-political events?</li> <li>5. Can you explain why people think that you are snobbish or too formal when you use too many words of French or Latin origin when you speak English?</li> <li>6. Do you think that this is related to past historical events?</li> <li>7. Which historical events do you think have had a greater influence in shaping contemporary English?</li> </ol>
Ability to learn ( <i>savoir apprendre</i> )	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Do you think that taking a course on the History of English can help you understand better the difference that there is in contemporary English between spelling and pronunciation? And the peculiarities of English spelling?</li> <li>9. Do you think that taking a course on the History of English can help you understand some differences in pronunciation between British and American English?</li> <li>10. Do you think that knowing about strategies such as the use of final -e, or the difference in spelling between -ea/-oa or -ee/-oo can help you understand better how to pronounce contemporary English?</li> </ol>
Critical awareness ( <i>savoir s'engager</i> )	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. Do you think that taking a course on the History of the English language can help you master your knowledge of the English language?</li> <li>12. Give an instance or example of how taking a course on the History of the English language can help you master your knowledge of the English language.</li> <li>13. Do you think that taking a course on the History of the English language can help you master your translation competence?</li> <li>14. Do you think that having some knowledge about the origin and the evolution of the English language can help you infer the meaning of words such as "fortnight", "motel", "foreign" or "glocal"?</li> </ol>

SAVOIR	QUESTIONS
“Existential” competence ( <i>savoir être</i> )	15. Do you think that taking a course on the History of the English language can help you understand the role of ideological beliefs in making linguistic choices? 16. Do you think that the debate over vocabulary in Early Modern Biblical translations could be an example of these ideological factors? 17. Can you think of any similar instance in more recent history when people discuss a word choice? 18. Do you think that the words /syntactical patterns we use may be influenced by what we believe in?
Skills of interpreting and relating ( <i>savoir            comprendre</i> )	19. Do you think that taking the course on the History of the English language has helped you understand earlier texts, like Shakespeare, for instance? 20. When you read a metaphor or a literary figure in an older text, do you find yourself more ready to figure out its meaning? 21. Add any information which you think we should have about the advantages or disadvantages of taking a course on the History of the English Language.