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***The other voice: the non-native speaker telling about his/her  
experience of the other culture***

What we are talking here today is about introducing a new voice into classroom reading material: the voice of the non-native speaker talking about his/her experience of the other culture. This is a voice hardly ever encountered in the classroom. We tend to choose documents written by native speakers to talk about their culture. We tend to think that the native knows better, that his/her voice is more authentic.

Our argument for introducing this new voice is that reality should be looked at from as many different perspectives as possible in order to be more fully and fairly represented. Physical objects around us are not flat, they have volume. To get the whole picture, so to speak, of this table, I should move around and look at it from every side. This object is not the same when looked at from different perspectives, and the more perspectives taken into consideration, the more accountable the images of the objects we form in our mind become. What happens when we move from physical objects to cultural realities? What happens is that, given the fact that cultural realities are far more complex, different perspectives are much more essential for our never ending task of understanding.

I would like to support this point by re-telling you a beautiful story written by Jorge Luis Borges. The title is «La casa de Asterión» (Asterión's house).

Who is Asterión? Most of us know who he is, but do not know about his name. I am sure you will find out by the end of the story.

The story starts with Asterion's voice talking about his house. He explains that his house is unique. First of all, it has no furniture. Second, it has fourteen, which means infinite, doors, that are always open. All the parts of the house are repeated fourteen, infinite, times. People believe, Asterion says, that he is a prisoner because he never gets out. But he repeats that the doors to his house are open and he says that he does not get out of the house because he is not interested in what is outside: pale and flat faces, people running scared or gathering stones when they recognize him.

So he stays at home and tries to entertain himself: he runs through the stone galleries until he becomes dizzy and faints; he plays hide-and-seek; he lets himself fall from the roofs until he gets bloody; he pretends to be asleep with his eyes closed and breathing deeply. But his favorite game is the one about the other Asterion. He pretends that the other Asterion comes to visit him and he shows him the house.

And then, every nine years, nine men enter the house so that, Asterion says, he can liberate them from all evil. He runs joyfully to find them and the whole thing lasts just a few minutes: they fall one after another without Asterion having to bloody his hands.

«I don't know —Asterion says—who they are, but I know that one of them prophesied, at the moment of his death, that some day my redeemer would come. Since then my loneliness

does not hurt me, because I know my redeemer lives... I hope he will take me to a place with fewer galleries and fewer doors...»

After a long monologue, two new characters are introduced by a narrator: Theseus and Ariadne. Theseus is cleaning his sword and talking to Ariadne: Can you believe it? —he tells her — The Minotaur barely defended himself. And that is the end of the story.

Theseus, Ariadne, are characters we know from Greek mythology. Theseus was the one who killed the Minotaur and Ariadne helped him with a thread to find his way out of the labyrinth. So Asterión is the Minotaur. We already knew about this story: half man, half bull, this creature was locked up in the labyrinth, and every nine years, nine young men were sacrificed to it. This is the version of the Greek mythology. What Borges has done here is to tell the story from the other side. He started by learning the name of that creature and then let him do the talking. We ended up with a quite different story. Theseus, who obviously has not read Asterion's version, does not understand what happened. Only the reader knows. Theseus, however will remain forever in his unresolved perplexity.

Going back to our topic:

Different perspectives, different voices help us to understand reality in its complexity. Among the different voices that contribute to our understanding, the voice of the non-native speaker talking about his experience of the other culture should be recognized as a crucial contribution. «Stories teachers tell.» The non-native teachers of the foreign language are probably the most devoted to the understanding of the «other» and to making the best of their experience abroad. «Making the best» means, among other things, to be able to cope and to be a part of it. But this is not an easy task. For this to happen we need to make room within ourselves to accommodate the «other».

The voice of the non-native speaker is a voice in between two different worlds in an attempt to bridge the gap, and make possible inter-cultural communication. We believe that this voice may make the students feel more comfortable when dealing with their own perceptions, fears and expectations about the other culture.

When I was invited by my colleague Hildegard Morales to participate in this presentation, she asked me to think — if I were to teach English in Spain — about a personal experience, a story that happened to me, that I could tell to my students and that would help to present some aspects of American culture in a positive light and contribute to doing away with stereotypes.

I thought about it for a while and, to my amazement and her disappointment, all I could come out with were unfortunate experiences. I was amazed because, when I compare myself to others, I see myself as a positive person. But there I was, unable to tell a positive story.

I realized then that quite often, when talking with another non-native of this culture, we end up talking about what is different, what is shocking for us, what we absolutely cannot and do not want to cope with. I guess to share some frustrations is somehow comforting. However, the problem of dwelling upon that kind of topic is that we are building a barricade around us. Barricades are great for protection during wartime, but out of war during our daily interchanges barricades are not useful, they are rather a hindrance...

So here I am, sometimes very critical, and with very little understanding of the other and I come to class with my Spanish, my literature, and my culture, and I expect my students to

have an open mind to incorporate all of what I bring to class. I want them not to be prejudiced, I want them to be understanding. I'll go even further: I want them to love what I am offering them.

I guess I want them to be better than me. I heard once that that is exactly what a good teacher is about. I felt a great sense of relief.

The fact is that what we are asking our students to do, what we ask ourselves to do when dealing with another culture, is not an easy thing to do. There is what I call the «invisible wall» against which non-natives bump sooner or later in their attempt to meet the other. Have you experienced it? Do those bumps hurt? Mine have been almost fatal. Now get ready for a wordy sentence. The prefix «non» in the word non-native is quite expressive of the confrontational and competitive character of our linguistic and cultural exchanges. When I talk about myself as a native of Spanish I am totally in control. When I talk or they talk about me as a non-native of English I have totally lost it. My strength is at the same time my weakness. Of course, it is only when you are a non-native that you crash against the wall. It can be a bloody mess. If you are a native you just sit, relax and wait until someone cleans the mess on the other side of the wall. Ugh! this metaphor is becoming ugly. Let's get out of it.

There are two kind of obstacles when attempting to enter the other side: one is the resistance of the other culture to take someone in from outside; the other is the resistance of the newcomer to leave behind the mind set with which he operates in his own culture and which does not work in the new culture. Obviously we cannot do much about the first one; the second, however, is all up to us.

Living in between two cultures and having the opportunity in this country of meeting a good number of people from different cultures has made me re-think the concept of «normality». I have realized that what I consider «normal», therefore, «good» is simply what fits my way of thinking, my set of values. This means that there is nothing objective about my definition of normality, or into my definition of goodness. And, in any case, as Cayetano Veloso sings, «visto de cerca nadie es normal», «when you look at people up close, no one is normal». «It's different», we often say when we want to express subtly/softly/politely that we do not like something. The use of this word for this purpose tells a lot about our prejudices towards the difference.

We are familiar with the concept of being fluent in another language. What about being fluent in another culture? The same with bilingualism: why not speak also about biculturalism? The bilingual individual is one who expresses him/herself with equal comfort in both languages. We know how rare it is to find a truly bilingual and how difficult it is to get there. I personally would need more than one lifetime to reach that point, if ever. What about the bicultural individual? He/she is also rare, but there are some of them around. The bicultural individual, who is not necessarily bilingual, is the one that moves comfortably between cultures; he/she is the one who can walk smoothly through the invisible wall. What does it take to do so? I think there are two crucial features in this individual : he/she is able to see what is good in the other, and he/she is able to accept the other with his/her flaws. But I would like to leave this question open for you to find more answers by reflecting on your own successes or failures when dealing with another culture.

I would like to conclude with a real, and positive story about my experience in the United States. (Addressing to Hildegard) Hildegard, I finally could find one. (Back to the audience)

This story has to do with an immigration officer at JFK airport. I know there are horror stories on the subject of immigration controls, but mine this time is on the happy side. I do not know what your experience is with the immigration officers at Madrid airport, in Spain, but it will probably not be too different from my own, if not worse. At the Madrid airport, every time I go back home, I join the line with the other Spanish or European Community citizens and when I reach the officer, I say hi and present my passport. The officer does not say anything, he barely looks at my face to check whether the picture in the passport is me. And with an expression that seems to say «just please get out of my sight», he concedes, «Go ahead». That's all, no welcoming smile, nothing. The first time I came back to the United States as a permanent resident I joined the line for United States citizens. When I came up to the immigration officer I handed to him my Spanish passport and my green card, and with my distinct foreign accent I said «Hi, how are you?» Do you know what he answered to me? «Hi, welcome home.»

Thank you.