

## Narratives of a professional sojourner: mediating between languages and cultures

By NBPG

- ❖ Hello everyone, through this power point presentation I aim to share with you a little bit about my own experience as a professional sojourner. In the same way, I would like to tell you how I have come to learn how to mediate situations where I meet up or work with people whose linguistic and cultural background is different from my own.
- ❖ My name is Nahielly Palacios and I am originally from Mexico. As you can see, I have a lot of hobbies. I like painting, hiking, dancing, reading and travelling. Back in Mexico I am a teacher, I teach English as a foreign language. I am currently doing a Phd at the University of Manchester. I have been living in England now for about a year and a half. This is my third sojourn in England. The first one was in 2011 when I went to work as a FLA of Spanish for about 8 -9 months and the second sojourn was in 2013 when I went to study a Master degree in TESOL (intercultural education) I lasted about 11 months. Now I am back again doing my postgraduate research and this third sojourn has been the longest one so far.

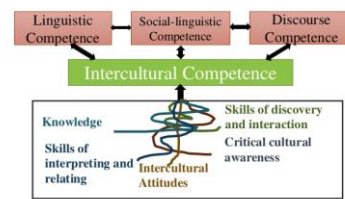
For visual support please see slides on the power point presentation.

- ❖ [We live in an *interconnected world*]. We are experiencing an increasingly complex interconnectedness both globally and locally (O'Nelli, 2013, p.387). People from different parts of the globe and diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are increasingly coming into contact with one another. There are different ways and purposes by which people come into contact. For instance, as the picture on the slide (n.4) illustrates some people may travel temporarily to another place for leisure purposes. Some other people may migrate to a different place for work or studies. Their stay may be temporal or permanent. Also, there are people who migrate because they face certain political issues or because they are fleeing war.
- ❖ As I mentioned at the beginning I will share with you my experience of a professional sojourner, which is a term I use to refer to a specific group of people with whom I

position myself in this moment of my life. I use the term professional sojourners to refer to the people who migrate temporarily to another place (e.g. inside or outside their own country) for professional purposes. People who travel because of work or academic studies fit within this conceptualisation, as I consider that their motives of migration are related to the development of their professional life or career. I am an international student and at the same time a teacher assistant at the UoM, thus, I consider myself a professional sojourner.

❖ “The dramatic increase of this social interconnectedness has pushed the 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education toward greater international development” (Altbach and Knight, 2007: 290). Therefore, there is an increased investment in knowledge industries to meet the demand for highly educated individuals who can interrelate effectively with people from different cultures and succeed in this globalised world (Jackson, 2015; Dolby, 2007).

3. Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 1997, p.73)



❖ [My own personal experience]. As a post graduate researcher and TA (teacher assistant) at the University of Manchester, I interact with different people who like me have a different socio-linguistic and cultural background. I am always experiencing a wide range of intercultural encounters inside and outside the University.

❖ I have realised that I am constantly operationalising my intercultural communicative competence. I understood the need to better understand the experience of moving between languages and cultures. I realised that ‘stepping back and reflecting on situations I have experienced helps’. To give you some examples of how I have come to learn to mediate between languages and cultures, I will tell you more about my academic experiences, teacher assistant experience, supervisory team experience and Research project experience.

❖ As I mentioned my first experience as an international student was in 2013 when I started my MA studies. That was the first time I encountered a multilingual and

multicultural class. Within the first weeks I noticed that even though we all communicated in English, we communicated in different ways, our body language was different, the words we used were different, our behaviours were different. But it was after getting to know my classmates and teachers and that I took some time off to analyse these differences that I realised that our own way of communication reflected our own culture and linguistic background. From this lived experience, I learned among other things to be sensitive to ways of communicating, to acknowledge the identities of others and to be aware of my assumptions stereotypes and prejudices [interpreting and relating, respecting otherness, being critical etc]. Using these skills helped me to get involved more and more with people.

- ❖ Academic changes: There were also academic differences. Classes were conducted in a way that I was not used to, there were a lot of debates and presentations. We were expected to participate and to critically engage in discussions not only in an oral way but also in a written way. I must say that I was not used to this type of academic practice. There was a day that I thought I had to erase everything I knew about how to write academically or behave in class and start zero learning the academic way of the university in order to fit and succeed at Uni. But I was wrong, I realised that my own academic background was good and solid enough to develop and enhance the academic skills I was expected to reflect not only in class but in a written. Acknowledging this helped me to mediate this situation. Knowing that I was not starting from zero but from a solid educational background which would be the base to build up this academic experience. Moving between my previous and current academic experiences has helped me to develop my own voice and authorship.
- ❖ Teacher assistant experience: My experience as an International student has contributed a lot to my experience as a TA. Last year, I worked as a tutor of the course unit study skills. Acknowledging that students' have their own academic experience [e.g. way of studying, behaving in class, etc] helped me as a tutor to understand their different ways of acting and behaving in class. It also allowed us as a group, to build up our own classroom culture [read slide]. Sharing my own academic experiences with students and giving students space to share their own experiences helped us to compare the new

with the familiar and develop new academic experiences. Allowing time to get to know each other, to interact in class, to talk about ourselves and our countries, talk about our academic struggles etc. helped us to relate to one another.

- ❖ Supervisory experience: Calling my supervisors by their name instead of Dr. Z or Mr. Y, helped me to modify the paradigm I had of power-relationships: e.g. Teachers telling you what to do, and how to do because they are the authority. It helped me to see them as critical friends. Starting our sessions in a pleasant environment: catching up with each other, sharing some stories about our lives back at home, or our experiences travelling, greeting each other in our own language, are things that help to build up our relationship, to relate to one another. Sharing my ongoing research ideas, listening to their views allows me to be able to explore other peoples' perspectives, to distance myself from my own ideas and to develop understandings of different points of view.
- ❖ Finally, I would like to emphasise that making sense of the meetings in my own language helps me to understand what I am doing and why I am doing it. Navigating my research ideas in English and Spanish. Talking about my project with my friends, family and colleagues back in Mexico. These examples are the different situations that have made me realise that I am constantly mediating between languages and cultures. I think that reflecting in the way we operationalise our ICC in intercultural encounters and becoming aware and reflective of situations will help us to become better mediators between languages and cultures.

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