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A model for describing, analysing and investigating cultural understanding in EFL reading settings

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This article describes a model used to explore cultural understanding in English as a foreign language reading in a developing country, namely Argentina. The model is designed to investigate, analyse and describe EFL readers' processes of cultural understanding in a specific context. Cultural understanding in reading is typically investigated using inappropriate theoretical rationales framed, for instance, within static and essentialist notions of culture and identity. The model used here rests on a notion of comprehension based on levels of understanding rather than on recall of textual content. It emphasises the centrality of cultural understanding as a fluid process in a continuum of cultural familiarity and unfamiliarity within a dynamic conception of culture. Instead of a free recall protocol, a reading response task and a visual representation task are the two key instruments which require readers to exploit a text in order to rewrite it from an alternative perspective. The investigation shows that during the reading process, participants moved back and forth among the six levels specified in the model, indicating that the process of cultural understanding is not composed of independent and discrete elements, processes or stages but is fluid and complex. Furthermore, the investigation reveals the presence of an affective dimension throughout the different levels. This needs further research which might be pursued with the help of the visual representation task. This tool is also appropriate for developing the imaginative and emotional dimension of cultural understanding through reading.

Investigating cultural understanding in a 'peripheral' country: Argentina

This aim of this research was to describe cultural understanding as it took place in an English as a foreign language (EFL) reading setting in Argentina. It is an exploratory interpretive study which responds to current calls from theorists such as Canagarajah (2002) regarding the importance of the individual and the local in classroom-based research that describes how literacy in English is lived in peripheral countries, such as Argentina.

Although Canagarajah and Said (2011) argue that terminology distinctions such as 'centre' and 'periphery' and 'inner and outer circles' (Kachru 1986) are reductive and no longer appropriate due to the effects of globalisation, no accepted alternative has been proposed. I adopt these terms in this article with the pertinent caveats. I also agree with Canagarajah (personal communication 2012), who says that, despite drawbacks, terms such as 'centre' and 'periphery', when used critically and contextually (i.e. 'peripheral' does not necessarily mean dependent and passive), succeed in highlighting unavoidable power

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inequality relationships that other distinctions deliberately intend to hide. In this study, the Argentinean setting is both local and peripheral, where peripheral acquires a particular significance because of the geographical location of the country in the world map. The project addresses the need to 'engage with the reality of language as experienced by users and learners' (Widdowson 2000: 23) within culturally-specific contexts and consequently has ecological validity (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007).

A review of the literature indicates that cultural understanding in reading is often investigated using inappropriate theoretical rationales framed within static and essentialist notions of culture and identity and within static notions of cultural schemata (Lipson 1983; Reynolds et al. 1982; Rice 1980; Steffensen, Joag-Dev and Anderson 1979). Furthermore, most of the empirical investigations on reading comprehension carried out by cognitive scientists in the 1970s and 1980s in the field of schema theory are laboratory-based experiments. Because this early work was undertaken in artificial intelligence (Schank and Abelson 1977), it fails to take the social and the cultural into account. This means that culture becomes a variable within mental representations and is reduced to just one aspect of an individual's identifications: race, ethnicity or nationality and occasionally religion (Lipson 1983; Reynolds et al. 1982; Rice 1980; Steffensen et al. 1979). This essentialist and static conception of culture and identity constitutes a serious weakness in the literature, as the theoretical rationales do not take account of the conceptions of culture which emerged from the fields of anthropology, cultural psychology and educational anthropology in the 1980s (McVee, Dunsmore and Gavelek 2005). These conceptions analysed the complex interplay of the multiple and varied aspects of one's individuality (Rosaldo 1993), or social identifications and groupings (Byram et al. 2009), rather than isolating aspects such as race, ethnicity, religion, etc.

The inadequacy of those theoretical rationales was accompanied by methodological limitations, such as relying exclusively on the immediate recall protocol as a research instrument (Lipson 1983; Reynolds et al. 1982; Rice 1980; Steffensen et al. 1979; and more recently Brantmeier 2003 and Sharifian, Rochecouste and Malcolm 2004). Participants are told to read a text and then recall it in writing as closely as possible. The text is first parsed into idea units, which are then identified and quantified in the recall protocols that participants produce. The more idea units present in a recall, the more a reader is said to have comprehended the text in question. However, the recall protocol is not an appropriate instrument for the investigation of comprehension because the focus is on the *amount* of understanding, i.e. how much has been remembered from a text. The required recall is *verbatim* or as close as possible to the original and comprehension is assumed to have occurred when a text is recalled as accurately as possible. This focus on recall requires attention to the memory factor but because 'comprehension does not necessarily equate with remembering' (Chang 2006: 522), the model used here rests on a notion of comprehension based on levels or degrees of understanding. The understanding of the cultural aspects of texts during EFL reading is not a matter of idea units present or absent in a recall, but a question of increasing levels of complexity and detail.

Several instruments were used in the research reported in this article but on this occasion, the focus is on a reading response task and a visual representation task which presuppose some textual intervention, an act of transformation and change that reveals a deeper understanding of a text (Pope 1995). Re-producing a text visually or in writing requires an alternative perspective that is complementary or supplementary but never identical to the original text (Anstley and Bull 2006). In other words, in both tasks readers produce a new text, *different* from the prompt text. Both research instruments thus differ significantly from the free recall protocol, where the exactitude and precision in the reproduction of the

original text is fundamental. This is mirrored in the data analysis using a model of cultural understanding which emphasises the *process* of understanding instead of the accuracy of recall.

Models of cultural understanding

Several models of cultural understanding exist in the literature, which have arisen from peculiar culture-specific conditions and are intended to cater for particular and local needs. Most focus on interaction and communication in naturalistic settings, whereas the model proposed here was developed for classroom settings. Like others, it rests on a view of culture as dynamic and heterogeneous and of language and culture as inseparable. Although it draws on useful elements from several of these existing models and is consistent with shared agreements in the literature regarding cultural understanding (Deardorff 2009), it is specific in focus and intended to capture cultural understanding in EFL reading in this particular Argentinean context.

Two models have been fundamental in its conceptualisation. One is Kramsch's (1993, 1998), defined as 'a four-step approach to cross-cultural understanding' (Kramsch 1993: 210). Central here is the conception of context 'as a social construct, the product of linguistic choices made by two or more individuals interacting through language' (Kramsch 1993: 46). Just as culture is viewed as dynamic and relational (involving an individual interacting with others), context is too (Kramsch 2003, 2007). A key role is consequently attributed to language: 'language expresses cultural reality … language embodies cultural reality … language symbolises cultural reality' (Kramsch 1998: 3). My model takes up this notion of culture and context and reflects the centrality of language since cultural understanding is investigated through reading. Kramsch also emphasises the role of perceptions in her model and argues that cultural understanding is a process centred not so much on the discovery of the factual and objective characteristics of another culture but rather on the exploration of how other cultures relate to one's own. Perceptions include those that individuals have of themselves, of their own cultures, of others and of others' cultures. Because of the difficulties of perceptions (for instance, perceptions may end up being caught in misperceptions), Kramsch (1993: 210) proposes the notion of a 'third perspective that would enable learners to take both an insider's and an outsider's view on C1 [one's own culture] and C2 [another culture]'. This focus on perceptions and the relational is present in my model in the shifts of perspective that each level captures and in the focus on one's own as well as other cultures. My characterisation of cultural understanding as fluid and procedural is consistent with the notion of a third perspective.

The second influence is the Model of Intercultural Competence (Byram 1997, 2009), conceived for foreign language education contexts. It consists of five *savoirs* or dimensions of knowledge, skills and attitudes: *savoir être* (e.g. attitudes of curiosity and inquisitiveness), *savoirs* (knowledge of different aspects of life in a certain society, such as work, education, traditions, etc.)*, savoir comprendre* (involving the skill of interpreting and relating those *savoirs*), *savoir apprendre/savoir faire* (involving the skills of discovery and interaction) and *savoir s'engager* (involving critical cultural awareness). Several of these aspects are also foregrounded in my model, namely the relational aspect and perspective-taking (Byram 2009), the emphasis on processes rather than facts (e.g. observing, describing, analysing, relating, interpreting), and a recognition of the importance of empathy, perspective-taking, adaptability, flexibility, sensitivity and criticality, among other characteristics of intercultural competence as stated in Byram (2012).

Table 1.   Model of cultural understanding during EFL reading.

Level 0	Erratic perception or omission of cultural aspects.
Level 1	Perception/identification of cultural differences. Access to levels 2, 3, 4 and 5.
Level 2	Identification of own values and ideas. Identification of the cultural assumptions behind one's own culture (insider perspective).
Level 3	Perception of culture C2 from one's own frame of reference (C1) (outsider perspective). Stereotyped views of culture C2.
Level 4	Perception of culture C2 from the frame of reference of members of culture C2 (insider perspective).
Level 5	Perception of culture C1 from the perspective of culture C2 (outsider perspective).

The model of cultural understanding proposed here

This is a six-stage model which describes the ways in which EFL learners in this Argentine context approached cultural issues during reading. It is a conceptual model which emphasises the centrality of cultural understanding as a fluid process in a continuum of cultural familiarity and unfamiliarity. It attempts to capture the double angle of vision (us–them) achieved through imagination, attributing importance to both aspects: the capacity of movement in and out of different perceptions and the significant role of imagination in cultural understanding. Following Kramsch (1993), this *double* vision needs to be stretched to reach *multiple* perspectives and in fact the model can be thought of as a vehicle for the creation of a third space in cultural understanding, a space that foregrounds the fluid, the relative and the unstable. Exploring *multiple* perspectives thus posits culture as 'negotiation' (Genetsch 2007: 26).

The model is represented schematically in Table 1, although the dynamic interaction and the interrelationship among all levels is an important factor that this chart fails to capture.

Level 0. Erratic perception or omission of cultural aspects

At this level, readers may fail to perceive cultural aspects, which leads to their omission; or they may perceive them erratically, either accepting or rejecting them. There is an underlying theoretical tension here between a notion of difference-blindness oriented toward universal values and the recognition and appreciation of difference in its own right (Genetsch 2007). The indeterminacy of meaning is fundamental here. Any interpretation is provisional because whoever interprets is prepared to know certain things and not others (Rosaldo 1993) and the notion that there exists a horizon beyond which something always remains incomprehensible, underlies this first level.

Secondly, the concept from cultural anthropology that each culture is so unique that it is virtually impossible to compare one to another in a truly deep way (Rosaldo 1993) is also relevant and it is argued that no culture is superior or inferior, richer or poorer, bigger or smaller than any other. However, since, theoretically, the investigation of cultural understanding *is* feasible despite limitations, the notion of cultural visibility (Rosaldo 1993) means that some aspects of another culture may become noticeable. In spite of the fact that all the ways of perceiving and organising reality are culture-specific, there are always visible and invisible elements in all cultures (Rosaldo 1993). In practical terms, this means that certain human phenomena may appear to be more susceptible to cultural analysis than others. From this perspective, this level in the model constitutes an attempt to capture the visible elements of a given culture. At the same time, the notion that there

is a horizon beyond which comprehension is not possible points to the inherent difficulty of this level in this model to capture the whole of any culture.

Level 1. Perception/identification of cultural differences

This level involves the perception of cultural differences, with the identification of the different, exciting, attractive, etc., elements of a given culture. The perception of cultural differences through comparison, confrontation and contrast works as a bridge for the other stages in the model (Levels 2, 3, 4 and 5). It is accessed through the identification of key vocabulary.

The connection between key vocabulary and culture is close (Byram 2011; Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994; Kramsch 2007; Wierzbicka 1992). The link constitutes one rationale for Levels 0–1 because 'some key words are particularly heavily connoted and reveal shared meanings of another society … The acquisition of these words and their connotations is not simply a cognitive process but one which can threaten the affective attachment to the world one knows' (Alred and Byram 2002: 342). In addition, the role of vocabulary in the perception, storing, recall and comprehension of information is crucial (Carmichael, Hogan, and Walter 1932).

Atkinson (1999: 641) highlights the 'basic human urge to categorise those in some ways different from oneself as radically, irreducibly other.' The focus on difference is useful at this level because it contributes to making cultures particularly visible to external observers. At the same time, it is problematic because such differences are not absolute but relative to the cultural practices of the observers themselves. The decision to regard someone as different is always 'a positioning or an interpretation' (Genetsch 2007: x). In other words, part of the difficulty in cultural understanding is that the Other can be 'represented in ways that could suggest difference as well as sameness, depending on who did the defining and for what purposes' (Genetsch 2007: 16). Ultimately, the perception or understanding of the Other is always problematic.

Level 2. Identification of own values and ideas. Identification of the cultural assumptions behind one's own culture (insider perspective)

Comprehending culture C1 from an insider perspective means analysing one's behaviours, values, ideas, etc. , in the light of one's cultural norms. Given its familiarity, observing one's cultural reality is not easy. The access to this level requires guidance (e.g. the teacher's) as in general, access is accompanied by ethnocentric positions and a lack of cultural sensibility.

The discovery of alternative perspectives in the interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena within one's cultural practices as well as disposition to question the values and assumptions within those practices is important (*savoir être* in Byram's model). Reflecting on one's culture reveals one's attitudes toward it. In this process, one distances oneself from the familiar, and this distance makes the familiar look different, strange, unfamiliar (*savoir comprendre* in Byram's model). In this process, the identification of the others' stereotypes about one's culture leads to awareness of oneself and one's cultural reality. This level is important because self-understanding appears to be inevitably linked to understanding otherness (Byram and Morgan 1994).

Level 3. Perception of culture C2 from one's own frame of reference (C1) (outsider perspective)

This level involves comprehending culture C2 from an outsider perspective and requires becoming aware of how the behaviours, values and ideas of others are

interpreted from the perspective of one's own cultural frame of reference (an observer perspective).

The notion of stereotype is relevant here because the ideological construction of otherness is produced when what is different (in racial, cultural, historical or other terms) is perceived as rigid, static, degenerate and inordinate (Bhabha 1994). Initially, the identification of stereotypes constitutes one way of classifying culture C2 in manageable categories (Allport 1954), is the first step toward the appreciation of the unknown and makes access to Levels 4 and 5 possible. However, the mere accumulation of stereotypes helps comprehend another culture only superficially and often prejudicially (Allport 1954).

Stereotyped visions are distinct from cultural understanding which depends on attitudes of curiosity, openness and willingness to suspend disbelief and value judgments with regard to other people's beliefs and behaviours (Byram 1997; Byram and Morgan 1994) (*savoir être* and *savoir comprendre* in Byram's model). There must also exist willingness to approach the unfamiliar, recognising the importance of understanding the manifestations of a different culture in the context in which they are framed, but at this level, the approach is stereotyped.

Level 4. Perception of culture C2 from the frame of reference of members of culture C2 (insider perspective)

This stage involves the comprehension of culture C2 from an insider perspective. How the members of another culture behave and what values they have is interpreted in the light of their own cultural norms. Awareness about how others behave according to their own cultural norms is partly gained through information about the private world of the Other (*savoirs* in Byram' model). The perceptions that the members of another culture have of themselves make the access to their cultural codes possible, even though they influence the selection of content and the perspective adopted by outsiders.

Level 5. Perception of culture C1 from the perspective of culture C2 (outsider perspective)

This means apprehending culture C1 from an outsider perspective. This level involves awareness of how one's own behaviour, values and ideas are seen through the eyes of the members of other cultures. The capacity to recognise and articulate the difficulties found in the process of perceiving a culture from inside (Level 4) is present here. There is also the capacity to accept that one's cultural perspectives and one's values and expectations influence one's visions. The decentralisation in relation to one's cultural norms promotes awareness about their cultural relativity. One is able to explore one's reactions to one's own behaviours as well as the behaviours of others. It is possible to place oneself in the shoes of the Other through imagination. This level matches Kramsch's 'third perspective' (Kramsch 1993: 210), which permits the adoption of insider, outsider and hybrid perspectives in the apprehension of C1 and C2. A critical and reflexive attitude is present (fundamental elements in Byram's *savoir s'engager*).

The model in empirical research: an illustration

The empirical project was carried out at the National University of La Plata in La Plata, Argentina, during 2009–2010. Participants were Argentine college students (nine female, one male), future teachers and translators of English; they were Caucasian, between 21–22 years of age, enrolled in the course 'English Language II.' They had CAE level at

this stage (Certificate in Advanced English, Cambridge; C1 in the *Common European Framework of Reference*). They participated on a voluntary basis, used pseudonyms, signed a consent form and were debriefed upon completion of the research.

The participants read three literary narrative texts on different occasions and carried out a number of tasks after reading each text. The texts were selections: from *Mi planta de naranja-lima* (Vasconcelos 1971: 39–43) with a Brazilian context, written in the native language, Spanish; from *Cat's Eye* (Atwood 1998: 137–140) with a Canadian-American context, written in the foreign language, English; and from *Desert Wife* (Faunce 1961: 173–181) with a Native American context, also in English. These selections have a common theme (Christmas celebrations), different perspectives (insider, outsider, hybrid) and different cultural loads (relatively culturally familiar, culturally distant and totally culturally remote). They are consistent with Sharifian et al.'s (2004) concept of a continuum in varying degrees of familiarity with cultural schemata.

The rationale for the use of unmodified literary narrative texts included 'the primary authenticity of literary texts and of the fact that more imaginative and representational uses of language could be embedded alongside more referentially utilitarian output' (Carter 2010: 116). This authenticity contributes to the high ecological validity of this project because 'narratives enable an investigation of contextualised language use' (Van Hell et al. 2003: 299). The advantages of literature for the development of an understanding of otherness (Bredella 2000; Matos 2005) are also emphasised. By contrast, the prompt materials used in the different studies on reading reviewed at the outset of this article are contrived, generally expository and extremely short. Allington and Swann (2009: 224) refer to these texts as 'bibliographically idiosyncratic texts (or 'textoids').'

Data were collected in the native language, Spanish, and come from tasks revealing prior knowledge, immediate reflection logs on the cultural aspects of the texts, reading responses to the texts, visual representations based on the texts, individual interviews, and post-reading written reflections, among other research instruments. More specifically, in the reading response task participants were told to put in writing their own personal reading of each text. A visual representation is a research instrument in the form of a visual representation of textual content. Participants were told to read each text and then portray it visually and in words using charts, tables, graphs, grids, mind maps, flowcharts, diagrams, or drawings. The prompt texts were available to the participants at all times (cf. the studies reviewed initially, where the prompt texts were withdrawn before requiring participants to produce the recall protocols, therefore emphasising recall and the memory factor rather than comprehension).

In order for students to produce a reading response and a visual representation, recalling and summarising, essential in the recall protocol, are not enough. My participants had to make sense of the cultural cues as well as the culturally situated information in the fragments, relate them to their own cultural parameters and in so doing they brought in their experiences, knowledge and background to their interpretations. As the instructions did not require them to recall every bit of the texts (cf. recall protocol), these participants were free to respond to particular aspects which called their attention. They were not committed to reflecting the views of the writer or the narrator in each text. In this sense, the reading response and the visual representation tasks are clearly distinct from the *verbatim* recall generally required in the recall protocol, where the exactitude and precision in the reproduction of the original text is fundamental.

Data were analysed using a taxonomy of cultural idea units corresponding to each text, a list of reader behaviours and the Model of Cultural Understanding itself. In this article I focus mainly upon the model, as I describe next.

Fluidity and complexity of cultural understanding: flexible trajectories along a continuum

My original plan was to consider each reading response and visual representation task with reference to at least two different levels from the model. First, the choice would be between Level 0 (i.e. erratic perception or omission of cultural aspects) and Level 1 (identification of cultural differences). These levels are critical because they involve the perception, or lack of perception, of cultural elements (cultural details, similarities, differences, always on the basis of the reader's own culture). I would then allocate responses to one of Levels 2, 3, 4, 5. However, in the actual process of data analysis, I discovered that the participants in fact slipped backwards and forwards along the continuum of levels, not only among the written tasks they produced, but also at different points within the same task. In other words, the model was successful in capturing the dynamic and procedural aspects of cultural understanding when conceived as a flexible trajectory among stages, as readers moved back and forth among levels during the reading process.

For illustration purposes, I take a visual representation by one of the participants, Scarlet Rose (pseudonym), based on the text from *Cat's Eye*. This text portrays a different cultural reality from the participants' with an insider perspective (i.e. with a narrator who participates in the celebration described and is a member of the culture the text represents). It describes the Christmas celebration of a Canadian family. Mr Banerji, a student from India, is a guest in the celebration, invited by the father, a professor of biology. The narrator is Elaine, the professor's daughter, who is a child. Readers notice tension since they perceive that the visitor feels awkward in a context where he does not understand the cultural meaning of the celebration and can only fully interact in conversation when he and his professor, the father of the family, use scientific language (Figure 1).

The first scene represents Level 1 in the model through the comparison and contrast between Elaine's and Banerji's cultures. Scarlet Rose identifies cultural differences explicitly, which are portrayed visually by the magnifying glass. She mentions some of Banerji's features which she perceives as exotic or attractive, and identification of the exotic, the attractive and the different is a characteristic of Level 1. The features are Banerji's brown skin (*marrón*), his long arms (*brazos largos*) and the fact that he does not celebrate Christmas (*ni siquiera sabe qué es la Navidad,* 'he doesn't even know what Christmas is').

At the same time, this first scene also represents Level 3 in the model, which involves the perception of another cultural reality different from one's own norms (i.e. Elaine's in this case), revealed linguistically by 'even' (*ni siquiera*), underlying the meaning: 'how can it be possible that Banerji doesn't celebrate Christmas?' This shows that the starting point of cultural understanding in this setting was what was familiar to the participants (Level 2), in this case that Christmas is a universal celebration. Scarlet Rose's use of 'even' (*ni siquiera*) is an evaluative comment which reflects her position as she presents her interpretation of the text through the visual representation. The position of external observer that characterises Level 3 in the model is revealed linguistically by *mírenlo* ('look at him') in the first scene and by the location of the characters at the dinner table in the second scene. The family and Banerji are physically distant, which may be seen as representing the confrontation 'we/he.'

The second scene also represents Level 1 in the model through the explicit identification of the cultural features that attracted Scarlet Rose's attention, such as the abundance of food and the central location of the turkey. There are several culturally appropriate details in the portrayal of the typical Christmas food and drink (for example, the enormous turkey, the glasses). In addition, the fact that Elaine's father is wearing glasses, a suit and a tie can

Figure 1.   Scarlet Rose's visual representation of *Cat's Eye*.

be seen as representing Level 3 in the model since there is an implied and stereotyped association between being a professor and this specific outfit (at least in Argentina). Here there is a switch toward Level 4 as Elaine positions herself on Banerji's side in an attempt to understand how he feels at that moment: 'he is afraid of us' (*nos tiene miedo*). Worth remarking is the importance of affect in cultural understanding during EFL reading: Banerji is '*afraid* of us' (nos tiene *miedo*).

Then the last scene has indications of Level 4 with traces of Level 5. Banerji perceives Elaine's culture (C1) from his own outsider perspective (C2). At the same time, the final question *¿cómo no les voy a tener miedo si yo puedo ocupar el lugar de ese pavo la próxima Navidad?* ('how am I not to be scared if I can take this turkey's place next Christmas?') reveals Scarlet Rose's abilities to de-centre, think critically and reflect which are characteristic of the highest levels of cultural understanding in this model (*savoir s'engager* in Byram's model). Simultaneously, this question again shows the importance of affect and emotions in cultural understanding through the reference to 'being scared' (*tener miedo*). Clearly the confrontation with the values and ideas present in the perspectives of others (members of other cultures such as Elaine and Banerji) in *Cat's Eye* favoured a process of decentring or critical distancing from Scarlet Rose's own perspectives (*savoir s'enga-ger*). Involved in this process is a recognition of the importance of empathy, perspective taking and adaptability, stressing not only the individual or personal dimension of cultural understanding but also the relational facet.

The example shows that Scarlet Rose, like the other participants, moved back and forth among levels in the model at various points during the reading process since she revealed

indicators of almost all levels in this task. In other words, the process of cultural understanding in this setting was integral, and cannot be said to be composed of independent and discrete elements, processes or stages. The process of data analysis, illustrated briefly here, also reveals that cultural understanding was consequently fluid and complex, because of this impossibility to use levels in isolation to describe cultural understanding.

Emotions, affect and imagination in cultural understanding through reading

The recognition of affect in cultural understanding is an important finding of this study, which traversed all data types, not only the visual representation illustrated above. For instance, in the interview, Scarlet Rose explains further what she meant by the question in her visual representation *¿cómo no les voy a tener miedo si yo puedo ocupar el lugar de ese pavo la próxima Navidad?* ('How am I not to be scared if I can take this turkey's place next Christmas?'). I highlight in bold key terms related to affect and provide an English translation, voluntarily produced by Scarlet Rose herself after the closure of data collection. The focus in this interview extract is on Barnerji:

> Y esto… no es que lo van a comer la próxima Navidad, es para… para hacer énfasis en esto de… de que **se siente excluido y miserable** y… que **no puede entender**… Bueno, lo del pavo que dijimos antes, bueno, un poco marcado en esto, y **el sentimiento de aislado**…
>
> And this… it isn't that they are going to eat him next Christmas; it's to place emphasis on the fact that **he feels excluded and miserable** and … that **he cannot understand** … Well, the turkey thing we mentioned before. Well, it's to point out this a little and **the feeling of isolation** …
> (Scarlet Rose, interview, *Cat's Eye*)

Slightly later on in the interview Scarlet Rose reveals once again her ability to de-centre and shuttle between different positions and perspectives, in this case by placing herself on Elaine's side in an attempt to understand how she might be feeling:

> Ella [Elaine] dice que **está igual de… de isolated que el indio**.
>
> She [Elaine] says she's **as isolated as the Indian boy**.
> (Scarlet Rose, interview, *Cat's Eye*)

In a part of her reading response task, Scarlet Rose makes a conscious and explicit effort to focus on how the characters might be feeling under the circumstances. This task is interesting because she intertwines the character's feelings as she perceived them (in bold and underlining), as well as her own position toward the celebration described (in italics):

> El texto refleja cómo una familia norteamericana celebra la Navidad *en una situación inusual, no tradicional*: invitando a un estudiante indio a la *típica gran* cena navideña. Este *no es un texto cualquiera* ya que *no describe simplemente cómo pasan la Navidad en los Estados Unidos*: el tema central es el contraste entre dos culturas muy diferentes (Oriente/Occidente).
>
> La cultura norteamericana refleja, en el texto, *el estereotipo de una blanca Navidad con abundante comida (¡y el clásico pavo!)*. **Desde el punto de vista <u>emocional</u>, se nota que a la familia norteamericana le <u>importa</u> pasar las fiestas <u>felices</u> ('… as long as they make people happy') y <u>se sienten incómodos</u> con los silencios producidos por el enfrentamiento de las culturas.** El contraste principal (que puede notarse mejor al final del fragmento) es el del

mundo capitalista (EEUU) y el mundo 'naturalista' (India), por llamarlo de algún modo. Mientras que al padre le **preocupan** más los gastos del experimento reciente hecho con un pavo, el estudiante indio se concentra en el hecho de que al hombre **no le importa** 'jugar con la naturaleza', que **no la respeta**. Como el narrador dice, el padre norteamericano **se preocupa por cuidarse a sí mismo**, no al medio ambiente ('Wild things (…) look out for themselves').

The text shows how an American family celebrates Christmas *in an unusual non-traditional situation*: by inviting an Indian student to *the typical big* Christmas dinner. *This text isn't like any other; it doesn't simply describe how Christmas is celebrated in the USA*: the central theme is the contrast between two very different cultures (Orient/Occident).

The American culture shows, in the text, *the stereotype of a white Christmas, with plenty of food (and the classic turkey!)*. **From the emotional point of view, one can see that they really care about celebrating the holidays happily ('… as long as they make people happy') and that they feel uncomfortable with the silence produced by the clash of cultures**. The main contrast (best seen at the end of the fragment) is that of the capitalistic (USA) and 'naturalistic' world (India), just to give it a name. While the father is **concerned about** the expenditures of the recent experiment done on a turkey, the Indian student focuses on the fact that the man **doesn't care about** 'playing with nature', that he doesn't respect it. As the narrator says, the American dad **worries about** taking care of himself, not about the environment ('Wild things (…) look out for themselves'). (Scarlet Rose, reading response, *Cat's Eye*)

These examples show that cultural understanding among this group of participants in this specific setting was linked as much to what the prompt texts had to offer, as to what these readers brought with them, regarding the Christmas schema in particular, but also regarding all the interconnections that this schema triggered in other dimensions, including the emotional and the affective. Cultural understanding was also linked to the re-visiting of textual content that the research instruments allowed for (in this case the visual representation, the reading response and the interview). This re-visiting took place through the skills of self-understanding, perspective-taking, empathy, de-centring, reflection and critical analysis (among others) that characterise cultural understanding.

Conclusion: theoretical and pedagogic implications

In this article, I have emphasised that the model of cultural understanding that I designed for this study can be used to investigate and analyse cultural understanding in foreign and second language education contexts within a fluid conception of culture. The study highlights the underlying centrality of cultural understanding as a *fluid and complex process* in a *continuum* of cultural familiarity and unfamiliarity. In this way, it departs from the static notion of available versus unavailable schemata upon which most previous studies on reading rest. By contrast, this study emphasises *processes* at two levels: theoretically, through the notion of culture embraced, and methodologically, through a research design conceived to embody this focus. Previous studies were flawed because they were framed within cultural understanding but investigated it using inappropriate rationales and methodologies. By contrast, this investigation is conceived with a theoretical rationale and a research design that allowed for depth, criticality and reflexivity in cultural understanding to emerge in the first place. The reading response and visual representation tasks allowed participants to turn into analysts, critics and writers themselves (Pope [1995]), something that other research instruments such as the recall protocol do not permit.

The study also reveals the centrality of criticality and reflexivity in cultural understanding. The participants' confrontation with the values and ideas present in the perspectives of others (members of other cultures) in the prompt texts favoured a process of decentring or critical distancing from their own perspective.

Finally, the study also foregrounds the importance of *image* and *emotion* schemata within the cultural dimension of reading, an area in which schema theory has problems (Sadoski, Paivio and Goetz 1991). It also highlights their difficulty and complexity and consequently the need for further research in these areas. Cultural understanding involves putting oneself in someone else's shoes and this requires imagination (Byram and Morgan 1994). The visual representation in particular offers a forum for its manifestation. Scarlet Rose's example shows the power and simplicity of visual imagery in capturing the cultural in reading. In this sense, this mode of response could become an appropriate tool for developing the imaginative and emotional dimension of cultural understanding through reading.

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