

Reconstruction of women's stories in the Spanish class

Cecilia Silva

Tohoku University

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The present article describes a classroom activity. Japanese university students of Spanish as a Foreign Language had to reconstruct a female representation from a film. The theoretical framework is Social Constructionism; the basic principle is that learners do not just acquire knowledge but they actively engage in the construction and reconstruction of knowledge based on their personal experiences. The article demonstrates how students produced a collaborative dialogue so as to reconstruct a topic taken from a film and supported their ideas. The activity contained the following steps: a) a writing activity based on a guide, and b) an oral activity. In relation to characters, students elaborated a semantic map, built simple sentences and used those sentences to produce a dialogue around the topic "female representation in film: a strong woman or a weak woman?" The conclusions refer to how beginners, by means of simple sentences, recreated a social structure, a family tradition and four female characters' relations and feelings.

本論の目的は、外国語としてスペイン語を専攻する大学生達が映画における女性のイメージを再構築し、教室での活動を記述することである。理論的な枠組は社会構成主義である。構成主義の基本的な原則は、学生達は単に知識を習得することのみならず、自分の経験を積極的に構築し、再構成することである。重要なのは、本論での記述及び映画からのトピックを学生達がいかに共同作業の中で確立したかということである。クラス活動のステップは次の通りである。48の質問に基づいて書く活動、それに追随会話の活動である。まず学生達は登場人物に関してのマッピングと文を作り、「この女性のイメージは強いのか弱いのか」というトピックについての会話を作る為の作業に取りかかった。その結果、簡単な文章で初心者 of 学生達でも社会構成や、その家に纏わる伝統及びの登場人物である女性達四人のそれぞれの関係と感情を容易に創造することができたのである。

The basic idea of the depicted classroom work is that learners do not just acquire knowledge but they actively engage in the construction and reconstruction of knowledge. Thirty-one Japanese university first year students of Spanish as a Foreign Language participated.

What is described in the present work is how students built the stories of the characters and reconstructed the topic "female image" from the film "Like water for chocolate" by means of a simple dialogue. The article contains the following points: 1. Classroom work (in class, students produced a semantic map, created

sentences, and built dialogues), 2. Women stories (dialogues about the female characters of the film watched in class), 3. Discussion (the classroom activity seen from the perspective of social constructionism), and 4. Conclusions referred to the students' ideas revealed by the dialogues.

Classroom work

Classroom work consisted of a chain of interlinked activities that included watching a video, writing, and speaking. First, due to the complexity of the theme students produced words, not sentences, related to the story, creating a conceptual map. The second step was to produce sentences so as to see the relationship between the words. Finally, the whole class engaged in a dialogue based on the mapping and the students' written reports. Further explanation follows:

Watching and writing activities

Students watched the film "Like water for chocolate": the story of Tita, whose mother forbids her to marry her true love Pedro because tradition expects the youngest daughter to care for her mother until her last breath. In the writing activity students followed a guide containing 48 questions (see Figure 1). Students watched the whole film (divided into four parts), replied to the questionnaire and, in class, I asked questions about a few points: story, characters, setting, time, traditional food, feelings, and atmosphere of the film. This article deals specifically with discussion of the female characters, a point students dealt with more deeply.

- COMO AGUA PARA CHOCOLATE 赤い薔薇ソースの伝説
- 1) ¿Qué pasa cuando picas cebolla?
玉ねぎを刻む時にどう感じますか
 - 2) ¿Dónde transcurre la película?
映画の場所はどこですか
 - 3) ¿Cómo se llaman los tres hijos de la Señora Helena?
横さん三人の名前は何ですか
 - 4) ¿Cómo son las tres hijas de la Señora Helena?
横さん三人はどうですか
 - 29) ¿Qué imagen de la mujer hay en la película?
映画では、女の人について、どんなイメージがありますが
- a) una mujer fuerte b) una mujer débil

Figure 1: Five of the forty eight student replies to the questionnaire. (Students received the questionnaire in Spanish and Japanese)

Oral activity

Before the oral activity in the class, students replied to a questionnaire (Figure 1) related to the film, so as to organize their ideas in relation to story, characters, topic, setting, and so on. In creating the semantic map for the four female characters, the teacher asked simple guiding questions ("What are the names of the characters?", "What are the characters like?", "Mention words related to the four female characters") and students replied with words that became components of a cognitive map that showed characteristics of characters, relationships among them and associations with other elements of the film.

1. As can be seen in Figure 2, students mentioned the names of the main four female characters in the film, and then words related to their characteristics. To avoid long explanations about what a cognitive map is, the teacher told students: "Let's play with words related to the characters" and wrote all the words students mentioned in answer to question 29 on the board.



Figure 2. Semantic mapping based on the topic "female image"

2. Figure 3 reveals how students made sentences using the words from the mapping and their reports.
3. Point 3 shows part of the dialogue students constructed in answer to the question “What kind of female image do you see? A strong woman? A weak woman? Students used their reports, the mapping and the previously created sentences to answer these questions.

For the construction of the semantic map in Figure 2 the teacher asked students to mention any word, phrase or expression related to the four female characters, in any order, and student answers were written on the board. Students mentioned words they had learned when replying to the questionnaire (Figure 1).

Gertrudis es Jefe. Tita aguanto horribles
 Mama luchó con los soldados. ~~las~~ cosas
 Tita aguanto la ira de su mamá. La madre está terrible. odio
 Cuando es triste, siempre es fuerte.

Figure 3. Some of the sentences produced by the students

After the mapping was completed, students made sentences using components of the mapping. Students wrote their sentences next to the answer to question 29. As Figure 3 shows, some of the sentences students wrote were: “Gertrudis is boss”, and “Tita tolerated terrible things”, “Tita

tolerated her mother’s anger”. Students had time to think and write sentences using words from the mapping.

The written sentences became components of a dialogue that exposed the personal stories of the four characters and situated those stories in a broader context. Students identified four voices in the film: the Mother, who does not allow herself tenderness and sticks to family traditions; Gertrudis, who strives hard until she can find an outlet for her rebel temper; Rosaura, who struggles to continue the family tradition, which disappears when she dies; and Tita, the youngest daughter, victim of family and social constraints, who paved the way towards freedom and love.

Women stories through collaborative dialogue

The dialogue developed in class may seem quite simple but the ideas behind the simple language were deep enough to situate the film in a broader contextual space.

What follows below is the transcription of part of the classroom discussion about “woman image” in the film “Like water for chocolate” and the interpretation under the light of language and gender construction, bearing in mind the basic idea that language is never neutral and utterances are never innocent. Jerome Bruner (1986, cited in Libidinsky 2001, p.113) stated that language always imposes a point of view, not just about the world to which it refers to but also as regards the use of the mind in relation to that world, the perspective from which things are considered and the attitude towards those things. In accordance with Bruner’s idea, this interpretation aims at showing that through simple language students expressed powerful ideas

because they managed to understand several basic family relationships.

I started the classroom discussion with the question “*What kind of female image do you see in the film, a strong woman or a weak woman?*” The question was not neutral, but served the purpose of language practice: students chose an opinion and had to support it. Students and the teacher agreed to the meaning of strong and weak: in Japanese, 強い (tsuyoi) is strong and 弱い (yowai) weak, frail or timid. Students were allowed some time to discuss in pairs before the whole class interaction. Student interaction was supported by their reports and the conceptual map. At the time the activity was performed (during the second semester) students could hold a simple conversation and exchange personal information. However, when referring to a complex topic out of the textbook, students were not independent of written material. What can be evidenced in the dialogue is that:

- Using simple language students could refer to a complex topic and communicate deep ideas (as interpretation of the dialogues shows).
- The teacher guided the dialogue and did not express any opinion. Ideally, the teacher would not have intervened, but it was necessary to ask students to support their answers (Why?), to give opinions if they remained silent (What do you think?), or to re-confirm (Everybody thinks ...?).

In the transcribed dialogue T stands for “Teacher” and S for “Student”. Each line was uttered by a different student. In the case of two answers uttered by the same student, it is indicated as Sx. The English transcription tries to be as

faithful as possible to the original dialogue in Spanish, which contained minor grammatical mistakes that did not affect communication. The first answer follows:

1.S: Mother is very strong.

2.T: Why?

Other students' answers:

3.S: Mother substitutes the father.

4.S: Mother, especially, is a strong woman.

5.T: Why?

6.S: Mother gets the power of the house

Students think that the father has control of the house; the mother can control the house only when he is absent. After the patriarchal structure breaks down with the father's death a strong independent mother emerges.

7.T: Kana, do you think Mother is strong?

8.S: Tita's mother is austere.

9.T: Kanako, what do you think?

10.S: Mother is strong because she is strict with her daughters.

This example illustrates that strength is related to the mother's lifestyle, which was hard: working and raising three daughters. Two students agreed the mother was forced by circumstances to be active and competent because if she were not the house and family would collapse.

11.T: A gentleman's opinion, please, what do you think, Chikara?

12.Sx: Mother is fearsome.

13.T: Why?

14.Sx: Mother has a gun.

15.T: Akane, your opinion?

16.S: Mother is strong because she fought against the soldiers.

17.S: Mother broke up the soldiers of the Mexican Revolution.

Gender studies suggest that guns can be considered an element of power and masculinity. Holding a gun is a sign of strength: as the Father, the natural holder of a gun, is dead, the Mother holds it and is empowered by the acquisition of the masculine elements guns represent, such as strength to fight (Wolmark, 1995, p.107-120).

18.T: Everybody thinks that Mother is strong?

19.S: Mother is strong.

20.T: Why?

21.S: She feels hatred.

22.T: Another opinion, Mayumi please.

23.S: Mother is weak. Hatred.

24.T: And how about Rosaura?

25.S: Rosaura is weak. She marries Pedro.

This part of the dialogue shows opposite opinions regarding the same feeling: hatred may indicate strength or weakness. Weakness also implies “betrayal of feelings”: Rosaura

marries Pedro even though she knows he loves her younger sister.

26.T: Only Mother is strong?

27.S: Gertrudis is strong. Gertrudis is “Boss”.

28.T: Gertrudis is strong?

29.S: Gertrudis is a general (of the revolutionary army).

30.S: Tita’s older sister is captain.

Gertrudis is considered strong by some female students because she became a leader of the Mexican Revolution, joining the revolutionary army, a role previously dominated by men (Wolmark, 1995).

31.T: Do you think Tita is strong or weak?

32.S: Tita is strong. She tolerated her mother’s bad treatment

33.S: Tita tolerated her mother’s anger.

The dominant discourse constitutes women as loving, dutiful (in relation to their parents), uncritical (in relation to children), and passive (Coates, 1998). Some students considered Tita strong because she could tolerate or endure the state of things imposed by her mother, even though it was a cruel situation.

34.T: Everybody thinks the same?

35.S: Tita is strong. Tita abandoned her mother and wanted to marry Pedro.

36.T: What do you think?

37.S: Tita is strong. Tita fights against her mother and Rosaura for Pedro’s love.

38.T: Everybody thinks that Tita is strong?

39.S: Tita is weak. According to the tradition, the youngest daughter cannot get married.

A woman can be weak within the context of family and social pressures. Gender studies reveal that social structure is based upon a dualism: oppressors (traditions, rules) and oppressed (female). The conflict arises when that social structure, in this particular case, the family structure, is endangered by one of the oppressed (Humm, 1997). A woman becomes strong when she is able to rebel, defend her rights and her feelings, and fight to destroy oppressive family and social exclusions. These students suggest “women are not passive in the face of the dominant ideology” (Coates, 1998, p.305) and can sometimes assert their right to say they cannot stand their mothers or current traditions.

40.T: Other opinions about the four women?

41.S: They are strong. Life conditions are bad but they manage to survive.

42.S: They are strong. They are independent.

43.S: Those women are strong. They struggle to love.

44.S: They are strong. In spite of hardships they manage to survive.

45.T: A gentleman's opinion? Kenichi, please.

46.S: Women are strong. When life is sad, a woman is always strong.

Once again, opinions are in favor of a woman who is able to defeat oppression, difficulties and sadness. Patriarchal

discourse tends “to see strength as incompatible with femininity and somehow bad, even dangerous”. However, students' answers contain a “sense of strength as good, as part of a different type of femininity, a femininity which is distinct from masculinity but not inferior to it” (Coates, 1998, p.297).

Discussion

Student discussion embodied a very valuable kind of reasoning: they took elements from a film and produced their own opinions.

Classroom activity

When a teacher presents students a cultural object and asks them to discuss a topic, the teacher is normally expecting a certain quantity and quality of interaction (Mercer, 2004). However, one frequent problem when confronting students with a foreign film, for example, is the culture gap: Japanese students have trouble relating to cultural objects from South America. Thus, it may be conjectured that there is no point in showing students cultural objects because they are difficult to manage. The key is to discover a particular interest the students have and devise a strategy to take advantage of this interest. In this case, the point of departure was students' interest in the film characters. First, due to the complexity of the theme students produced words, not sentences, related to the story, creating a conceptual map. The second step was to produce sentences so as to see the relationship between the words. Finally, the whole class engaged in a dialogue based on the mapping and the students' answers to the questionnaire.

Social constructionism

The Russian literary scholar Bakhtin (1981, cited in Mercer 2004, p.125) explained how we take the words we use from the mouths of other people. In the present work we consider how students took ideas from a film and used them together with their own ideas to build dialogues and recreate stories. In addition, social constructionism focuses on constructions of the subject and on meaning and is interested in discovering how individuals perceive and create reality (Gergen, Wortham, 2001), and takes construction out of the classroom (Shaw, 1996), which means students elaborate a connection between the classroom and the world. As this article revealed, students focused on dialogue and conjoint meaning creation.

Within the limits of this classroom work, activities gave primacy to meaning and communication over grammatical accuracy and students produced a cultural dialogue they could not have created individually. They also discussed a gender oriented topic linked to the classroom and the target language culture.

Conclusions

Male and female students expressed what a “strong woman” and a “weak woman” meant to them. Throughout collaborative work students offered emphatic commentaries about the four women. One interesting thing about the words, ideas, and sentences supplied by students is that they seem to relate strength with being able to defend one’s feelings, being resilient and tolerate hardships, becoming a revolutionary, holding a gun, and surviving without a man’s

help. On the opposite hand, a few students were in favor of a “weak image” of the characters, related to “feeling hatred” and “betrayal of feelings”. By means of simple sentences, students recreated the social structure, family tradition, and the four female characters’ relations and feelings.

Cecilia Silva is currently teaching Spanish at Tohoku University, Sendai. She is interested in media literacy, critical literacy, and cultural awareness in foreign language teaching and learning.

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