

Teaching Critical Thinking in Second Language Learning: an Intercultural Approach

Maria del Mar Calero Guerrero

Mahidol University International College, Thailand

0630

The Asian Conference on Education 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

It is commonly agreed that critical thinking is a significant concept to be promoted in our students at higher education level, particularly considering the time of turbulent changes that societies are immersed nowadays. In this study I have developed the idea of critical thinking taking Brookfield, Paul and Elder's conception and it has been applied to Second Language Learning, more specifically to learning Spanish as a L2. This study is based on critical thinking as a means of questioning your assumptions and reflecting about your own thinking process in order to improve it through different perspectives. The ultimate goal is to apply these strategies in making decisions in real life situations.

Teaching and learning a second language is a privileged ground to develop this kind of thinking because the students are facing a different culture, a new way of thinking and living. This factor can make them reassess their own way of thinking. As a result, they can discover some assumptions that they have taken for granted because they are part of their cultural background. This is especially relevant if we take into consideration the importance cultural shock. In this study I have interviewed people from Spain who live in Thailand and I have used their stories reporting a cultural shock experience. Afterwards I have used these stories in order to create activities based on real experience. The idea of reading these stories is to provoke the reflection in our students about their assumptions in relation to their own culture and to be more aware of their own cultural code of behavior and their own identity. Finally, this reflection will help them to be more intercultural competent citizens.

Introduction

21st centuries societies are increasingly shaped by a profound change in human communication means. Given the fact that we have access to an increasingly larger amount of information within our daily routine, the problem has been shifted from the amount of information that we receive to the quality of the material available. Furthermore, the vertiginous pace of changes has provoked a remarkable necessity of new strategies to approach this constantly evolving communication. Hence, a critical attitude towards that vertiginous flux of information has become undoubtedly essential at any level of the education system. Fomenting critical thinking can become a weapon against incoherent and fragmented knowledge as well as a shield against ideological, political and economic alienation.

Why did I relate critical thinking to the development of an intercultural competence? The globalized world comes into the picture at this point because it can be seen as a threat against cultural diversity. Learning a foreign language means facing a different perspective of the world, a different way of thinking and living that can make us question our own assumptions, inquiring ideas that we would not have posed otherwise. Therefore, learning a foreign language promotes the social dialogue among diverse cultural identities, fostering the reflection about our own identity as well. The awareness of our own cultural identity can benefit a holistic epistemological view of knowledge, values and social behavior as well as it can foster the respect towards diverse cultural communities.

The Context of the Study

The idea behind this article came into being because a remarkable necessity was observed in my students, a lack of curiosity and a certain indifference towards questioning themselves and others. The context of my research is fundamental in order to comprehend the relevance of promoting critical thought together with the promotion of an intercultural competence. I am a Full time Spanish Lecturer at Mahidol University International College (MUIC), in Bangkok, Thailand. We do not offer a Major degree in Spanish. 90 percent of students who learn Spanish take it just as part of their General Education requirements during 2 or 3 terms, depending on their major degree. However, there is a part of the students who take it as a Minor during 4 years if we count the Elementary levels. This information is crucial given the fact that these students, who decided to accomplish a Minor program in Spanish, are the focus of this research. The Spanish Minor provides the perfect opportunity to observe how the students develop academically, emotionally and personally in the course of three years. The class in which the research was carried out has been taking Spanish for 3 years already. 13 students conform to this group.

A distinctive feature of the MUIC curriculum is its strong focus on liberal arts and the promotion of a learning culture that prepares its students to meet the challenges of living and working in the 21st century. In its website, MUIC states that the college fosters analytic and critical thinking as well as creativity, problem-solving and research skills. It also emphasizes a well-rounded education, promoting life-long learning and social responsibilities, keeping in mind the complexities and demands of an ever-changing and inter-connected global community (MUIC, 2013). The international environment promoted in MUIC also aims to develop cross-cultural sensibilities in the students. Fulfilling critical thinking ability can be seen as a means to address the goal of a more holistic education. This article seeks to encourage that critical thinking can be fostered and should be promoted in foreign language classes.

Teaching and learning a foreign language at University level transcend the mere transfer of grammatical, lexical and phonetic knowledge. Professors at higher education are responsible of enabling well-rounded, reflective, autonomous and responsible citizens.

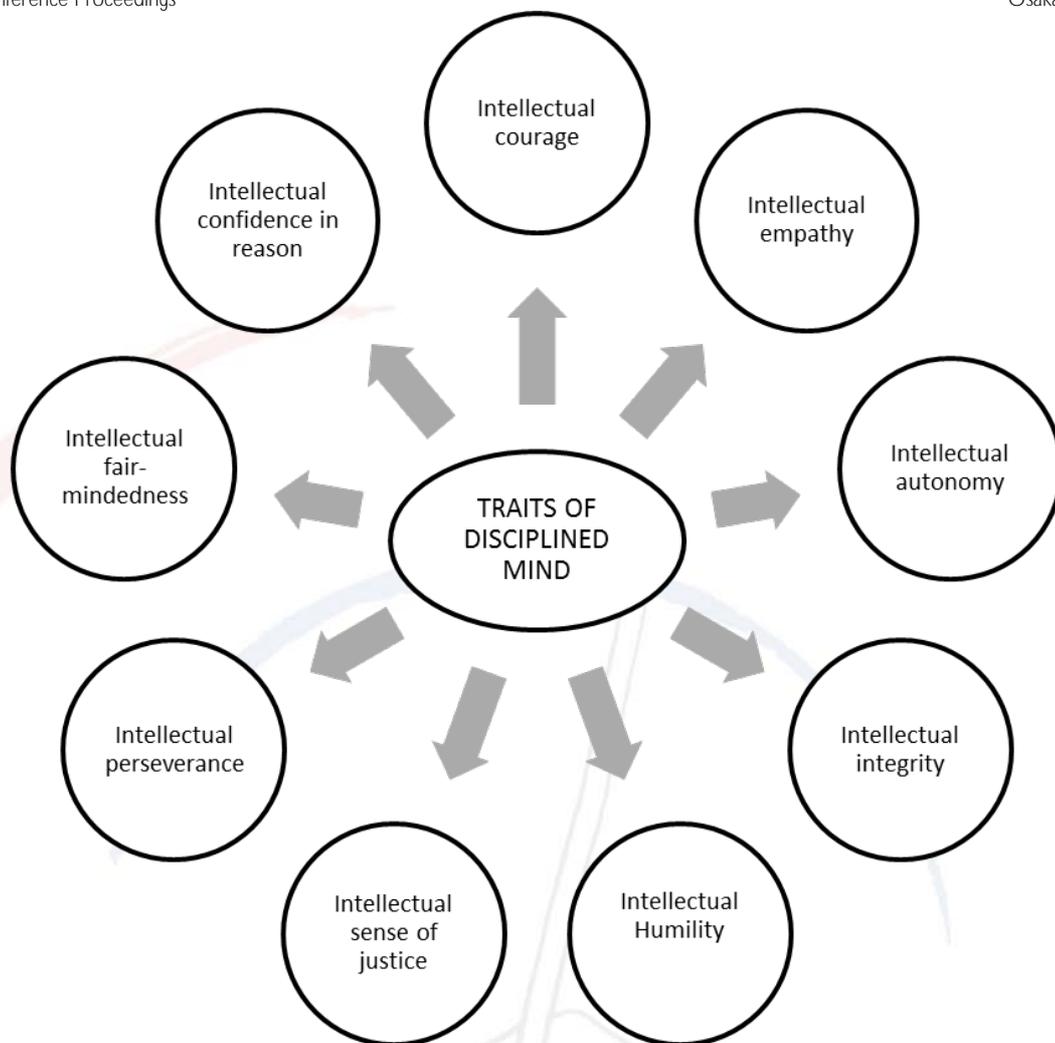
Theoretical Framework

There are different approaches that we can take into consideration when we start talking about critical thinking. The work of Stephen Brookfield (2012) sheds some light to discern this concept. This author states that the problem of teaching critical thought is the existence of a wide range of perspectives which lack coherence among them. He proposes five traditions that encompass the melting-pot of various views about this concept taking into account diverse disciplines: Logic, Natural Sciences, Pragmatism, Critical Theory and Psychoanalysis (Brookfield, 2012: 32-52)

Within the logical perspective, reading and writing are highlighted because we can practice the logic organization of the discourse by working with these two skills. Authors such as Paul and Elder (2002), Wittgenstein (2009), Searle (1995) and Ennis (1995) belong to this group according to Brookfield. Paul and Elder have been highly influential in the conception of critical thinking for the development of this article. On the other hand, pragmatism was also relevant in this conception of critical thinking because its advantage is the connection with personal, professional and intellectual development in students. (Brookfield, 2012: 39) In this sense it is important to create communities of learning and inquiry, where the students feel comfortable and develop their thinking abilities through dialogue, sharing of ideas, questioning themselves and each other. Lipman (2003), Brookfield (2012), Vygotsky (1978) are interested in this social dimension of learning. Eduard Lindemann (1961) and Paulo Freire (2005) belong to this pragmatic approach as well.

One aspect that appears in the five approaches proposed by Brookfield is the concept of opening. An intellectual opening is necessary in order to question our assumptions. These approaches deal with the importance of being open to question ourselves, check our assumptions and make informed and conscious decisions later. In order to achieve this goal, Paul and Elder talk about the features of a disciplined mind.

These authors highlight humility that is necessary in order to listen; courage to recognize that we can be mistaken; empathy to try to understand the points of view of other people; integrity to face points of view that can be opposed to ours. This disciplined mind also needs to be perseverant and believes that this effort makes sense because we trust our reason and the capacity of thinking for ourselves. The ultimate goal is to be autonomous, the owners of our lives, our judgments and our decisions. Critical thinkers do not passively accept the beliefs of others without questioning them. These features, that characterized a disciplined mind, are relevant when making



a distinction between a strong and a weak thinker and a strong fair-minded thinker. The difference is marked by the usage of thinking in a responsible and ethically responsible manner (Paul and Elder, 2002: 18)

According to Stephen Brookfield (2012), the process of developing critical thinking is structured in 4 steps. Firstly, we need to enquire our assumptions. Secondly, we should ensure that these assumptions are based on authentic and reliable evidences. Thirdly, we need to consider other points of view to check the validity of these assumptions, evaluating them from another perspective. Finally, taking into account the previous steps, we are better prepared to make informed decisions and well-founded judgments, understanding this as a way of behaving based on reflection, analysis and evidences. This is the conception of critical thinking that was taken into account for this study.

Why should we promote critical thinking in higher education? The new modernity demands new approaches for learning that make connections with real world challenges. This new learning requires dialogical, participatory and problem-solving methods. (GUNI, 2009: 12) Regarding the intercultural competence, Ruiz Roman (2003: 33) states that every individual is a permeable system in an open, dynamic and constant process of construction. This permeability is nowadays accentuated because of the populations growing mobility. Therefore, the frontiers have been blurred, the

world has become smaller and more cosmopolitan. This fact brings us an imperious necessity of fostering dialogue among cultures, even if they are apparently distant such as Thai and Spanish. Learning languages and comprehending a diverse range of cultural codes of behavior have been raised as unavoidable requirements in order to achieve certain professional level in an international environment. This is notoriously relevant when we are considering the city where my students live, Bangkok.

Byram (1995), when picturing the concept of intercultural competence, asserts that learning a foreign language implies facing a divergent interpretation of values, behaviors and cultural beliefs that we thought were universal; values and beliefs that we took for granted and assumed as dominant in our society can be relative when seen from a divergent prism in other societies. The intercultural competence is the ability of managing situations when individuals from different cultures are in contact, being aware of their contradictions and differences. Likewise, the 21st century citizen needs to be interculturally competent, meaning that he/she has to be shaped by a deep capacity of flexibility, observation, reflection, comprehension and adaptation. These skills will be strongly required in our students' personal and professional lives and they are particularly relevant when we talk about an International University context and teaching a third language.

Intercultural competence also includes the capacity of balancing our own identity in the cultural mediation process. (Meyer, 1991) A fundamental aspect of intercultural competence is the awareness of our own identity. The identity of a person is not simply a mosaic of different individual belongings. Instead, it is like a drawing made on our tense skin. As soon as you touch one of these belongings, the whole person trembles. (Maalouf, 2010) He defines the concept of belonging as the feeling of being part of a social group that can be connected to our country, religion, ethnic or language. According to this author we should not make anyone choose a specific sense of belonging because identity lies in the unique combination of belongings that defines each specific person.

At this point, we can face the most important question: How? How can we develop capacity for critical thinking in our students? How can we make them aware of their own identity? How can we make them discern their assumptions? In this article the answer is: cultural shock. Nevertheless, these skills can be cultivated through a wide array of means. I chose cultural shock because it implies different aspects involving critical thinking. It means facing a dilemma, confronting a conflict due to diverse cultural identities reflecting divergent cultural codes; it also fosters curiosity, giving perspectivism to our conception of the world.

Angels Oliveras (2000) and Pérez de Herrasti (2010) dealt with cultural shock stories related to teaching and learning Spanish as a second language. The former interviewed foreign people who lived in Spain and they reported their experiences regarding this topic. They explained whatever had surprised them when living in Spain. The latter is concerned with the cultural differences between Spain and Germany. If this happens when we consider close enough cultures such as European ones what can we find if we consider Spain and Thailand? I was curious about the upcoming results of these questions so I decided to interview Spanish people who lived in Thailand. They reported their experiences, what they had noticed being different from their native culture, what had surprised them. Afterwards, I used these stories with my students demanding them to reflect on why cultural shock was happening, what the differences were between the cultural codes and what we can learn from these anecdotes.

Objectives

The objectives of my research were the following: gathering information about cultural shock, showing the students an external perspective of their cultural code, promoting reflection and understanding Spanish way of thinking and behaving as well. Later they needed to transcend these specific anecdotes, attempting to glimpse the abstract code lying beyond these experiences: the cultural code that is shaping our identity, values, way of thinking in order to gain a more subtle awareness of our cultural and social self.

The idea behind this article is to gather personal and real experiences of Spanish people regarding a cultural shock experience and present them to the students. The objective of doing this is to visualize the cultural code behind these pieces of behavior. Analyzing notable examples of sentences can help us to visualize the grammar rules behind them. Likewise, reflecting and comprehending the cultural values discovered beyond the anecdotal stories can lead us to understand the subtle and abstract cultural code that lies beyond these stories, the grammar of the culture (Herrasti, 2010: 11).

The ultimate objective of this project is to increase the reflective capacity in our students, their adaptability, their curiosity, their capacity of developing a more profound contemplation and comprehension of human and social behavior as well as their awareness and critical ability. This study is grounded in authentic and personally valuable experiences. The observation of concrete anecdotes about cultural shocks can make them gain awareness of their own code, which is an abstract way of thinking. If the learning process is successful they will transfer this abstract knowledge to their daily life when interacting with people from other cultures. Moreover, they will also be more aware of the assumptions they make because of their culture. This awareness will address their critical thinking, because they will be able to make more informed decisions when interacting with people from other cultures.

Methodology

I developed a qualitative research based on personal interviews. I followed the following steps:

- 1) Theoretical framework. That it was explained at the beginning of this presentation. Authors such as Brookfield, Paul and Elder, Lipman, John Dewey have been vital in this stage.
- 2) Gathering of information. 19 Spaniards filled a questionnaire. 10 of them were interviewed personally.
- 3) After completing the didactic unit, my students answered a similar questionnaire about their experiences in Spain or in other foreign countries. Some of them have not had this experience, so they reported about their impressions on foreign people living in Bangkok.

Analysis and discussion

The impressions reported by the Spanish people (19 individuals) and my students (13 individuals) were compared to the concepts developed in Hofstede and Hofstede (2005). These authors compile data from employees of the company IBM from 74 countries and they classify this data into 4 dimensions. A fifth dimension was included later on. Nevertheless, the original 4 dimensions conceived by Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) will be used in this article in order to illustrate the impressions and cultural shock stories reported in the interviews with a theoretical framework.

	SPAIN		THAILAND	
	Puntuation	RANK	Puntuation	RANK
Power Distance index	57	45-46	64	34-36
Individualism index	51	30	20	56-61
Masculinity index	42	51-53	34	64
Uncertainty avoidance index	86	17-22	64	44

In this chart you can see the position of Spain and Thailand regarding these dimensions:

Power distance.

This dimension encompasses the relationship between bosses and employees, family members, teacher and students. It is concerned with the establishment of hierarchical relation within the society of a country or cultural community. Whereas the distance is lower, an interdependency between bosses and subordinates is noted. This can be applied to different fields such as the school, family and workplace. The position of Thailand (34-35) reflects a higher power distance which was pointed out by the Spanish people (45-46). 48 per cent of Spaniards highlighted the power distance established between parents and children, bosses and subordinates, older and younger siblings. For instance, one of them explained that his cultural shock was related to the protocol followed when interviewing a monk. This power distance is showed in the rules behind the *Thai wai*: the protocol when greeting depends on a hierarchical organization of the society while in Spain two kisses on the cheek is the normal way of greeting.

In Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) the distance established between Spain (position 45-46) and Thailand (34-35) is not significantly apart. However, during the interviews this factor was highlighted as a profound distinction between both cultures. This can

be explained by a generational aspect. People interviewed were around 30 years old and there is a remarkable generational gap in Spain regarding values. It would be interesting to research this aspect in further studies about Spanish cultural code.

Obedience was as well emphasized for both Spanish and my Thai students as a means of establishing a difference between both cultures. Two of my students, who were living in Spain for a month in order to take a summer course over there, told me that they were surprised when they saw how teenagers could answer back to their parents and disagree with them. They considered this behavior was disrespectful. Family is important for both cultural communities, Thai and Spanish, however the relationship among the members of this social group differs. This hierarchical relationship is also shown in the language when calling each other they use the word *pi* to refer to the older and *nong* to call the younger. They even use this with friends and it marks a difference between them. Respect was also a concept highlighted by the Spanish people, they felt that Thais showed more respect to elders than it is done in Spain.

How can we transfer this knowledge to the classroom? The fact that a power distance is established influences the dynamic in the classroom. The students can feel that questioning the teacher, asking questions and specially disagreeing with him is not permitted. Therefore, this has to be taken into account when working with critical thinking. The goal is to establish a community of learning where everyone has a role that it is interconnected with that of others. The teacher will lose her protagonist role in order to become an observer, a guide. The students will question each other and themselves and they will construct the knowledge working together.

Individualism versus collectivism.

The idea of creating a community of learning is connected to this dimension and to the information. This dimension is related to the feeling of integration within a given social group. More collectivist societies define their identity by the pronoun “We”, whereas more individualist societies based their identity in the idea of “I”. According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), most Western countries are situated in a more individualist zone. Regarding this dimension, Thailand is situated in a less individualistic zone (position 56-61) than Spain (position 30). The importance given to keeping harmony is connected to the relevance conceded to the social group. Two of the Spaniards said that they were shocked when Thai people smiled because they did not know the answer, when they felt uncomfortable, when they did not know what to do or say.

The meaning of a smile is different depending on the degree of individualism and collectivism of that culture. Two of the Spaniards noted that a smile in Thailand can mean that the person is uncomfortable, does not know the answer or does not know what to say. This is also noted by Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) and it can be a cause of cultural shock experiences. The idea behind this smile is to avoid conflicts. 30 per cent of the Spaniards highlighted the smile as a characteristic of Thai people, this country is well known as *The land of Smiles*. (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005: 34) Another aspect connected to the fact that Thailand is a collectivist society is the importance given to the image and the social opinion, 30 percent of the Spaniards noted the relevance of image within Thai society.

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) quote the study of Yoshy and Emiko Koshima regarding the usage of personal pronouns in different languages. These authors state that in languages where the first person of singular I is necessary the individualism is bigger than in cultures of countries where the language does not force the expression

of this pronoun such a Spanish, ex *Te quiero*. We can go a step further when talking about the culture in Thailand because the pronoun is not necessary either but they do not conjugate the verbs so sometimes the subject of the verb is ambiguous.

Masculinity versus femininity.

Masculinity is applied to societies where the roles of genders are clearly defined. Men are expected to be assertive, successful and women are modest and they are worried about quality of life. Feminin orientated societies show an undistinguished separation of roles, both men and women are supposed to be modest, etc. Both countries are considered feminine and Thailand is emphasized in Hofstede and Hofstede's work (2005) as the most feminine Asian country. Competition is also an outstanding aspect in societies marked shaped with a strong masculine orientation. 30 per cent of the Spaniards interviewed noted a lack of effort and competition within Thai society specially regarding the professional field. This fact can be translated to the classroom setting. In my teaching experience in Thailand I came to realize that competition does not work in the same way than in Spain. Students tend to avoid winning over other classmates and they do better when working together in groups. This lack of interest and competition is also noted in the Spanish classes (Srivoranart, 2011).

Uncertainty avoidance.

This dimension is concerned with the degree of the feeling of being threatened because of unknown situations in the future. This sensation is expressed by the level of stress. Countries where this feeling is lower tend to develop a negative disposition against the expression of feelings. Thailand is situated in the 44th position among 74 countries other countries. One of the cultural shocks' stories reported for one of the interviewed described a situation where two women overcome a Spaniard when waiting for a taxi. The Spanish person started talking to these people loudly telling them that this behavior was not right. He was surprised because his Thai friends did not support him at that time. One of these friends explained to him later on that one is not supposed to show emotions in public, especially when they are negative. There is a feeling called *krenyai* that it means you should not hurt other person's feelings. This was explained to me in class by the students when working with the story. This is also connected to the collectivist feature that characterizes Thai culture because harmony prevails over personal interests.

Finally, I would like to note some obstacles found when elaborating this research. The first one was that the questionnaire and the interviews were too open. This openness difficulted the process of drawing conclusions from the questionnaire because each person reflected about different topics. The second main problem was that in this questionnaire people were asked to judge if these impressions were positive or negative without reasoning why. Because of this some unfounded and not argued judgements were made which conflicted with the research's aims. This study does not look for stereotypes; contrarily, the objective is to make students aware of cultural differences in order to comprehend in a more profound and complex way the Spanish cultural code as well as their own.

Didactic proposal

A didactic proposal to work with assumptions was elaborated. Stories based on both Spanish and Thai culture were created taking into consideration the information gathered previously through the interviews. Later on the students needed to acknowledge their assumptions within their cultural code. This activity is based on Brookfield's Basic Protocols of Critical Thinking (2012, 77-103). For instance, one of

the stories proposed is about Thai university student whose name is Ploy who wants to live in Chile but her parents prefer that she goes to England because they think it is safer and more prestigious. She does not know what to do. Marta, a friend of her from Spain tells her she should do whatever she wants, she should follow her dreams. The students do not need to make a decision for Ploy but discover the assumptions that she, her family and Marta are having and how it reflects their culture. Finally, they can connect this to their personal life and talk about what they would do in this situation and why.

I would like to address different possibilities of developing this line of research:

- 1) Firstly, I think it would be interesting to extend this research to other countries, comparing other cultures. My idea is to create a closed questionnaire based on Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) and apply it to my research. After gathering this information, different activities can be elaborated in order to work with these aspects and to develop their cultural awareness.
- 2) Secondly, proposing a method of developing critical thinking applied to learning a Second Language will be interesting. I think reading and writing skills can be worked upon keeping in mind a critical thinking approach, specially related to the Logic and Analytic Philosophy.

Conclusion

The attitude of opening and questioning has to impregnate every piece of work concerning culture. This paper involves at least three cultures: Spanish, American and Thai. The concept of critical thinking is specially researched in the United States, which is placed in Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) as the most individualist country. Transferring a concept from an individualist culture and apply it in the education system of a much more collectivist society, such as Thailand, should not be made without some questioning. The concept itself of critical thinking has to be adapted to the new setting.

In conclusion, this study has been very enriching, rewarding because it sheds light over the concept of critical thinking in a Thai context when teaching and learning Spanish. Moreover, it establishes connections between cultures. This factor develops the students' intercultural competence and their critical thinking enhancing attitudes such as respect, curiosity, humility, perspectivism, questioning and courage. This research has also helped me personally to better understand Thai culture which I consider to be very important when teaching Thai students because I can improve my teaching practice.

References

- Brookfield, S. D. (2012) *Teaching for Critical Thinking. Tools and Techniques to help students question their assumptions*. San Francisco: San Francisco.
- Byram, M. (1995). 'Acquiring Intercultural Competence. A Review of Learning Theories'. In L.Sercu (ed.) *Intercultural Competence*. Vol. I, 53-70.
- Ennis, R.H. (1995) *Critical Thinking*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Freire, P. (2005) *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Continuum.
- GUNI (2009) *Higher Education at a Time of Transformation: New Dynamics for Social Responsibility*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hofstede, G. and Hofstede, G.J. (2005). *Cultures and Organizations. Software of the Mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Lipman, M. (2003). *Thinking in Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maalouf, A. (1999). *Identidades asesinas*. Madrid: Alianza editorial.
- Meyer, M. (1991). 'Developing Transcultural Competence: Casa Studies of Advanced Foreign Language Learners'. In D.Butjes and M.Byram (eds.) *Developing Languages and Cultures*.
- MUIC (2013). Mahidol University International College. Available at http://www.muic.mahidol.ac.th/eng/?page_id=1071/ (Accessed 29 November, 2013)
- Oliveras, A. (2000). *Hacia la competencia intercultural en el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera. Estudio del choque cultural y los malentendidos*. Barcelona: Editorial Edinumen.
- Paul, R.W and Elder, L. (2002). *Critical Thinking. Tools for Taking Charge of Your Professional and Personal Life*. New Jersey: FT Press.
- Perez de Herrasti, N. (2010). *Gramática de la cultura (I). Estilos de conversación. Teoría y práctica a través de los textos, imágenes y tareas*. Norderstedt: Herstellung und Verlag: Books on Demand GmbH.
- Ruiz Roman, C. (2003). *Educación intercultural. Una visión crítica de la cultura*. Barcelona: Ediciones Octaedro.
- Searle, J. (1995). *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Srivoranart, P. (2011). *El proceso de aprendizaje de ELE por parte de los alumnos tailandeses: Condicionantes lingüísticos y culturales*. Alcala de Henares: Universidad de Alcala de Henares (unpublished thesis)
- Wittgstein, L. (2009) *Philosophical Investigations*. Malden: MA. Blackwell-Wiley.

