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## Perspectives on Global Citizenship Education of Mexican University English Language Teachers

### Abstract

Global citizenship education is an attempt to introduce into formal and non-formal education programs issues of global concern and elements of an emerging global civic culture. It aims at creating more fair, peaceful, tolerant and inclusive societies. The broad nature of global citizenship education has led to a range of interpretations and approaches in a continuum that goes from a conservative perspective that contributes to the reproduction of the existing social order, to more critical approaches that intend to transform the existing social dynamics. In the field of English language education, global citizenship has a natural place. Globally, intercultural citizenship and critical citizenship approaches have been predominant. In Mexico, however, global citizenship is not a common element of English language education. This study examined the views of ten Mexican university English language teachers about global citizenship education. Specifically, the study analyzed the participants' notion of global citizen and their perception of the viability of global citizenship education in their institutional settings. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire and a responsive interview, which was analyzed with the use of the constant comparative method. Three notions of global citizen emerged from the data: informed traveler, adaptable individual, and critical thinker. None of the participants considered global citizenship education as viable in their programs and universities. The paper explores the implications of the results for teacher training efforts.

Keywords: English language teaching, intercultural citizenship education, critical citizenship education, higher education, teacher training, Mexico

### Introduction

In 2013, UNESCO published a framework to promote the discussion about education for global citizenship (Tawil, 2013). The document indicates that the processes associated to globalization require a change in the traditional notion of citizenship, and that students of all kinds should be encouraged to cooperate in the solution of global problems. Global citizenship education is an attempt to introduce, into formal and non-formal education programs, issues of global concern and elements of an emerging global civic culture. The aim is to contribute to the creation of more fair, peaceful, tolerant and inclusive societies. The broad nature of global citizen education can, arguably, lead to a range of teaching approaches in a continuum that goes from the soft, minimalistic and conservative perspective that reproduces the existing social order, to more critical approaches directed to transform the existing social dynamics. In English language teaching (ELT), examples of the soft and the critical perspectives are the intercultural citizenship education (Byram, 2008), and critical citizenship education approaches (Andreotti, 2010).

The intercultural citizenship education model is based on the idea that students should be prepared to discuss common problems with citizens of other countries around the world (Alred et al., 2006; Byram, 2008). This model emphasizes the notion of criticality as the capacity to analyze and formulate reasoned arguments (Porto & Byram, 2015). To put this model into practice, teachers require training that helps them increase their own cultural awareness and intercultural competence; promote intercultural abilities of students; and change their professional identity from language teachers to intercultural communication teachers (Paricio, 2004). The intercultural model has been questioned because although it focuses on developing interpersonal attitudes and individual dispositions of students, it ignores social inequalities and power imbalances (Osler, 2015). This is thought to mask or deny the problems of injustice and discrimination that cause global problems. Without acknowledging these phenomena, it is argued, it is difficult to enable dialogue over difference.

Advocates of a critical citizenship education from a decolonial perspective (Andreotti, 2010; 2014; 2015) on the other hand, argue that global citizenship education should be discussed from different epistemologies to help students go to the roots of the problems that affect the world. To cope with the complexities, uncertainties, diversities and inequalities of globalization, teachers need other knowledges and other ways of knowing, being and relating. Educational practice must have a high level of commitment with decolonial epistemologies and social movements. It must, therefore, make evident: (1) the geopolitics of the production of knowledge, so that students “see” the knowledge of social groups that has been made invisible by dominant knowledge; (2) the development of hyper-auto-reflexivity, to avoid anchorage to “universal truths”; and (3) a pedagogical emphasis in dissent, so that students develop their capacities to understand paradoxes and tolerate complexity, ambiguity, conflict, uncertainty and difference.

The decolonial perspective on global citizenship education suggests the adoption of a critical literacy teaching approach. Critical literacy has been defined as learning to read and write in the process of becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations (Luke, 2014). Teaching critical literacy focuses on guiding students to interpret discourse in different environmental and cultural contexts. Students are encouraged to reflect on how they got to think, be, feel and act the way they do; and the implications, in local and global terms, of their beliefs about social and power relations.

Andreotti (2010, p. 13) claims that if the theme of globalization and world crisis is to be approached seriously, the levels of intellectual commitment and autonomy of the profession must be raised: “we need more lenses available to make better-informed choices of what to do in the complex and diverse settings in which we work”. Romero Reyes (2013) indicates that incorporating global citizenship education into English language teaching in universities requires that teachers abandon a technical approach and go beyond teaching grammar, phonetics and vocabulary. She maintains that teachers should develop in students a critical spirit and comprehension of cultural differences to promote understanding among all human beings.

Despite the diversity of theoretical developments, in Mexico very few efforts have been made to incorporate global citizenship contents into English language

education and no information is available about the reasons for this apparent lack of interest. This study examined the perceptions of a convenience sample of English language teachers about global citizenship education. The purpose was to collect information that served in the design of a teacher training strategy on global citizenship education. The research questions were: What is the English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' notion of a global citizen? How viable do EFL teachers believe global citizenship education is in their teaching situation? The following section will describe the methodology used to obtain the teachers' insights.

## **Methodology**

This cross-sectional, exploratory, qualitative study was conducted to examine the views of English language teachers on global citizenship education. A non-probabilistic, intentional sample consisting of ten higher education English language teachers working for two public institutions participated voluntarily in the inquiry. Four were men and six were women. They all had more than 15 years of EFL teaching experience in higher education. Four of them had also been teacher coordinators. They all held postgraduate degrees in Education, Applied Linguistics or Social Sciences.

Data for the study were collected in two stages. In the first stage, the participants responded to a 19-item questionnaire they received by electronic mail. The items were formulated according to the criteria contained in the Education for Global Citizenship Framework for Discussion (UNESCO, 2013), and the Principles of Education for Intercultural Citizenship (Byram, 1988; 1997; 2009). The questionnaire had the purpose of situating the topic among the participants as well as collecting background information and opinions about global citizenship education.

In the second stage of the study, the teachers participated in a responsive interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). A responsive interview is a conversational partnership between researcher and participant which allows the researcher understand experiences of the participant by following up, deeply and extensively, on the interviewee's comments. The interviews deepened on the notions of global citizen and global citizenship education. The interviews lasted an average of 43 minutes. They were transcribed and analyzed through the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Pseudonyms were used to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

This small-scale study focused on exploring the opinions of teachers about global citizenship education, although they did not have any learning or teaching experience in the topic. They were potential participants of a world citizenship workshop. Results are meaningful only in relation to the teachers involved and are not intended to be generalized to other teachers or educational contexts.

## **Results**

Information from the questionnaires indicated that the age of the participants ranged between 36 and 60 years. Six of them had MA studies and four had completed a PhD program. Seven of the ten informants reported that they had never heard about global citizenship education before. In relation to their notions of global

citizen, responses were categorized as: (1) an informed traveler; (2) an adaptable individual; or (3) a critical thinker. The following sections analyze these notions.

### *Global citizen as an informed traveler*

One of the participants that more clearly expressed the notion of a global citizen as an informed traveler was Mónica. She had a PhD in International Education and was responsible of the English as a Foreign Language Department in a public polytechnic university.

*A global citizen can function in any part of the world. And to be global, a person needs to speak English. A global citizen can travel to different countries without a problem, comfortably... I think a critical global citizen is the kind of person that does not conform, that changes what is wrong... The new generations should have the abilities to live in a peaceful world, and to collaborate for mutual benefit. However, at this point there are other problems in this country that deserve immediate attention, such as inequality and insecurity.*

During the interview, the participant gave her views on she thought was necessary if a global citizenship education component were incorporated to her university. Her comments focused on three elements: (1) the implementation strategy; (2) the training of teachers; and (3) the teaching materials. With reference to the strategy, she stated:

*We would need to teach it across the curriculum. Students take many courses, some of them lend themselves to that kind of content, emotional development and human development, for example. In those courses, students could be taught about other countries. Many are not good at geography!*

In another part of the interview the participant referred to the lack of appropriate teaching materials for Global citizenship education:

*We would need to have teaching materials such as videos, for example... Textbooks include global topics but not topics of strong impact, wars, nuclear problems. Serious issues never appear in textbooks. They must keep English language beautiful, I guess [smiles]. We would need more up-to-date materials.*

As to the viability of offering Global citizenship education in her university, the participant was skeptical. She talked about the knowledge base and disposition of teachers. The following were her comments:

*If teachers had the proper knowledge base and believed that their students should become global citizens, they would do it, but I don't think it is the case. If they were qualified, they could produce materials and discuss world topics with their students. The majority has never traveled to other countries. You feel a citizen of the world when you have traveled.*

### *Global citizen as an adaptable individual*

The participant that most clearly represented the notion of global citizen as an adaptable person was Fiona, who had a PhD in Modern Languages and experience coordinating a language teacher education program. The following were her comments:

*I believe a global citizen is someone tolerant to different situations, someone who is willing to learn about those situations and to adapt to them.*

Fiona considered that a critical global citizen is:

*... someone capable of responding to the question: What can we do to improve tolerance and to adapt ourselves to the present-day world?*

During the interview, Fiona said she considered that Global citizenship education is compatible with English as a foreign language education:

*I consider that it could be a component of any language course. As a component, it could motivate students to develop a sense of common well-being, mutual tolerance and respect... Learning a language is the easiest way to teach a student to be a global citizen because learning a language is learning a different culture. If a student is competent in two languages, it means that he or she understands two cultures, and this facilitates the process of becoming a global citizen.*

The participant estimated that two things were necessary to put critical global citizenship education into practice: time and teachers.

*This kind of project requires the investment of a lot of time. I believe that for people to become critical global citizens, they need to be observant and reflective. Many need a lot of time to acquire reflective skills. It is not impossible to teach students to become global citizens, but it requires a lot of work and most teachers would not be willing to invest their time in it. They do not want to leave their comfort zone. The other aspect is that teachers would need to consider themselves as global citizens. They would need to be open-minded and flexible. Not all of them have critical abilities. It means saying the truth; saying what is right and what is wrong; and putting forward ideas and plans. Not all teachers are able or willing to do that. Most of them complain and complain, but they never offer suggestions or solutions to community problems.*

### *Global citizen as a critical thinker*

The critical thinker is conscious of the connection between local and global problems. This was the notion of James, a participant with a Doctorate in Social Sciences. The following comments illustrate his views on global citizenship:

*A global citizen is aware of the different views about the world and is respectful of them. She is guided by inclusive principles, has a sense of justice, peace and common well-being. She is conscious of the causes of world problems.*

During the interview the teacher elaborated on his point:

*Global citizens know that local issues affect global issues and vice-versa. Issues such as global warming and social inequalities are strongly connected at the local and the global level. Students should be able to understand those connections and discuss possible solutions to the problems... Critical global citizens are aware that there are no universal truths, but perspectives on topics or issues. Perspectives are related to the historical and social conditions of the human beings that adopt them.*

James considered that to put Global citizen education into practice, three things are needed: administrative support, teacher development, and planning. He explained his views in the following terms:

*I think that it would not work as a course. It would need to be provided to students across the curriculum. When aspects such as ethical behavior and values are given as courses, for example, neither school administrators nor students take them seriously... Teachers should have deep knowledge of the contents to be taught and the strategies to teach them, and this implies professionalization. Most university teachers are not prepared to deal with global issues in class... Global citizenship education is a utopia. In times of labor uncertainty, extreme poverty, social violence,*

*both teachers and students are in the need of this kind of education, but paradoxically, most teachers will not have the intention to learn how to incorporate this into their classes.*

The words expressed by James seem to indicate that understanding world problems and having a position on those problems is important, but not enough to educate global citizens. Truly, in addition to being well-informed citizens themselves, to develop students' knowledge, skills and values that help them engage with the world, teachers of all disciplines need to strengthen a diversity of abilities. Examples of those abilities are: creating classroom climates that are conducive to respectful dialogue; conducting discussions about controversial topics and listening non-judgmentally. Training teachers to become world citizenship educators in the context in which this study was made would need to start by understanding the reluctance of and inspiring English language teachers.

## Conclusion

The notions of global citizen as informed traveler and adaptable individual seem to correspond, in some points, with the citizen fostered by the intercultural citizenship model. These notions, highly promoted by EFL textbooks, give more importance to individual attitudes and dispositions. They never refer to the social determinants of citizenship. The notion of global citizen as critical thinker concurs with some of the ideas that underpin the decolonial perspective to global citizenship. Advocates of this approach argue that teachers need other knowledges and other ways of knowing, being and relating, to cope with the complexities and uncertainties of globalization.

Results of this study show that global citizenship education was not considered workable in the universities in which the participants were teaching. The main reason given was the lack of teacher preparation. This suggests that, instead of providing given or "static" knowledge, teacher training efforts should be directed to provide spaces for teachers to engage in dialogue and focus on interrogating, interpreting and transforming their teaching conditions and circumstances, in connection to what teachers world-wide are experiencing at this point in time.

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