

## **Introducing Global Issues in A Language Classroom: Knowing Other Cultures by Analysing Multimodal Texts from NGOs**

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### **Abstract:**

*This article shows the importance of teaching with texts from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in which women from other cultures are represented in order to bring global issues in a language classroom and to deepen in the visual representation of women from other cultures so that students develop their gender perspective. Our main objectives with the research presented in this paper are to introduce students to visual grammar and to work with texts that allow students at tertiary level develop critical thinking and respect for cultural diversity, which will contribute to the introduction of global issues into the classroom. Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) model of visual grammar was introduced in an English language course at University level so that students could read and analyse multimodal texts. Having done this, students were asked to analyse the texts in groups in order to observe the importance of visuals in the construction of meaning and the way in which the women represented appeared portrayed. The analysis using visual grammar shows that the texts under analysis portray a positive image of African women, which breaks the traditional stereotypes of these women being weak, dependent and marginalised. In addition, this research will show that teaching global issues using multimodal texts from the NGO Intermón Oxfam will help students understand how the discourse used by NGOs creates meaning through different visual and linguistic choices.*

**Keywords:** *Multimodal texts, visual grammar, gender, global issues, teaching-learning process*

## **1. Introduction**

Globalization involves that information can easily go from one corner to the planet to the other and that people have more opportunities to know what happens in the world without making a big effort. Consequently, globalization must be present at the University classrooms of the XXI century and bringing global issues into the classroom is one way of doing so. In this sense, bringing global issues such as poverty, racism, homophobia, sexism, among others into the classroom gives students the opportunity of thinking about social topics and being aware of how they affect human beings in different parts of the world (Martínez Lirola, 2013). This is essential in order to make students be active and global citizens; this involves that they are aware of the social problems of the world and of the differences between different cultures. Consequently, they can be committed in different ways to make their own contribution to create a better world, following Barahona, Gratacós & Quintana (2013, p. 14):

“The perspective of a global citizenship raises a development of an integral human being, characterized, above all, for his/her critical ability to reveal the truth and recognize the difference between what 'is' and what 'should be'. Consequently, he/she recognizes that what 'should be' must be created from two perspectives: first, from a participative dialogue in which nobody imposes his/her vision on others; and second, from a historical-political consciousness involved in building a more fair, free and caring society that benefits mainly the excluded majorities in each context and the global environment. That is the meaning of social transformation”<sup>1</sup>.

The said topics can be introduced in oral presentations, in debates or in the texts that students have to analyse and write. Since the research presented in this paper took place in a language classroom (see section 3), we introduced them mainly through the analysis of multimodal texts (i.e., texts that combine more than one way of communication, for example written and visual) because there is no doubt that our society is multimodal.

Living in a multicultural society implies challenges for people since society needs to consider the necessities of each group and adapt the laws and social system (Laurenzo Copello and Durán Muñoz, 2014; Moyano, 2013). Consequently, we propose introducing cultural diversity in the classroom through the analysis of texts that represent minorities, other cultures, etc. In this way students are given the

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<sup>1</sup> Original quotation: “[L]a perspectiva de una ciudadanía global plantea un desarrollo centrado en el ser humano integral, caracterizado, por encima de todas las cosas, por su capacidad crítica para desvelar la realidad y reconocer la diferencia entre lo que ‘es’ y lo que ‘debería ser’. Consecuentemente, reconoce que ese ‘debería ser’ se ha de construir desde una doble perspectiva: primero, desde un diálogo participativo en el que nadie imponga su visión sobre las otras personas; y, segundo, desde una consciencia histórico-política de implicarse en la construcción de una sociedad más justa, más libre y más solidaria, que beneficie sobre todo a las mayorías excluidas en cada contexto y en el entorno global. Ese es el sentido de la transformación social” (Barahona, Gratacós & Quintana, 2013, p. 14).

opportunity of working with others who are different from them through real texts. Using texts in teaching practices implies using discourse and establish a connection between language and context (van Leeuwen, 2008), following Woods (2007: x):

“Discourse is, at the very least, language plus context- by which I mean the context that we bring with us when we use language; the context that includes our experience, assumptions and expectations; the context we change (and which is itself changed) in our relationships with others, as we both construct and negotiate our way through the social practices of the world we live in.”

The analysis of multimodal texts helps understand the relationship between discourse and society and the way in which the said texts interact with people on a daily basis. These texts are useful to be present in university classrooms because the classroom must be a space to be aware of the way society works (Hidalgo & Murillo, 2016; Martínez Lirola, 2017).

Language is a social practice and our focus is to explore the role of discourse in the structure of social relations and how language can be used to reproduce and maintain power and inequality between some social groups and others (Fitzgerald and Young, 2006; Johnstone, 2002). In this sense, we intend to explore up to what extent language reproduces and maintains unequal social relations among different social groups, for example between African women and the main group. Consequently, choosing texts from the NGO Oxfam Intermón in which African women are represented and analysing them paying attention to the principles of visual grammar introduced in the classroom (see section 4) is a practical example of introducing discourse into the classroom because discourse analysis pays attention to language in use. Following Johnstone (2002, p. 9) the analysis done in the classroom offers the possibility of observing:

“How discourse is shaped by its context, and how discourse shapes its context: - Discourse is shaped by the world, and discourse shapes the world. - Discourse is shaped by language, and discourse shapes language. - Discourse is shaped by participants, and discourse shapes participants. - Discourse is shaped by prior discourse, and discourse shapes the possibilities for future discourse - Discourse is shaped by its medium, and discourse shapes the possibilities of its medium - Discourse is shaped by purpose, and discourse shapes possible purposes”.

Language and society are interrelated, i.e., the discourse used by different members of society or by different institutions is a form of social practice because people do things through discourse since every time we speak or write we have a function, a purpose we want to accomplish. Moreover, it is also through discourse that we communicate our identity and our social reality, as Richardson (2007, p. 10) states:

“Language use exists in a kind of dialogue with society: language is produced by society and (through the effect of language use on people) it goes on to help recreate it. Language first represents social realities and

second contributes to the production and reproduction of social reality or social life. This ‘social-ness’ of language is revealed in a number of ways: for example, the way in which people speak to each other is in part a product of social context”.

The ideas presented in the previous paragraphs suggest that current teaching should focus not only on the use of printed texts to read or write. Today’s society, the changes proposed by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) demand new forms of “literacy”, i.e., students need to be trained to use technology in the classroom on a daily basis so that they can see a clear connection between new forms of communication and real life (Lemke, 2012; Levine and Scollon, 2004; Tan, Marissa & O’Halloran, 2012). In this way, learning takes place in an interactive way and students can see that what they learn has a practical application, that contents are connected with the requests of the labour market. Consequently, the learning process is understood as a dynamic process in which students share the protagonism with the teacher. The use of active pedagogies and ITCs facilitates the learning process and make students active and motivated to learn since they see themselves as active and protagonists of the teaching-learning process from the beginning to the end.

There are traditional teaching tools that remain in this new context in which new forms of communication are rapidly changing, but new times require changes in University education so that the learning opportunities offered by new technologies are incorporated into the teaching-learning process. In this way, what happens at University classrooms will be connected with real life and learning in formal contexts will have an active application to the changes and demands of the XXI century society, following O’Keeffe, McCarthy & Carter (2007, p. 26):

“Thus, when they (students) are presented with corpus examples, learners encounter real language as it is actually used, and in this sense it is ‘authentic’. [...] Furthermore, one can argue that authentic texts are embedded in particular cultures and may be thus culturally opaque to those outside that (usually western) culture, and that it may, as a result, be next to impossible for learners to ‘authenticate’ such texts for themselves on this basis”.

The fact that present societies are multimodal contributes to students’ development of multiple ‘*literacies*’ (Martín Nieto, 2009; Moya Guijarro & Pinar Sanz, 2008). In this article we argue for a social and cultural approach to literacy. In this sense, university classrooms as a reflection of life, of common knowledge and of multimodal discursive practices that are part of our daily life. For this reason, we have chosen multimodal texts for our teaching practices and this article pays attention to the classroom as a multimodal space.

In addition, in this article we are interested in the interplay between teaching English, which is considered a global language, and introducing global issues in the language classroom as a way of promoting critical thinking and giving students the opportunity of contrasting their social reality with the ones presented in the texts

used to explore global issues. These also determine the vocabulary and semantic fields students learn in the foreign language, which is another way of learning about the global issues selected (gender, specifically the image of African women in the case of this article). In this way, our proposal highlights the importance of a social consciousness to the curriculum as a key step for students to become active citizens. Consequently, introducing global issues in the classroom contributes to the development of a global citizenship (Boni & Calabuig, 2017), following (Reardon, 2001, p. 56): “With the rise of global civil society (Declaration and Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy, UNESCO, 1995), the concept of global citizenship became a practical political reality”.

The article is organised in the following sections: after this introduction, section 2 concentrates on the importance of introducing multimodality in the classroom. The main objectives, context and methodology of this research appear in section 3. Section 4 offers the analysis of some texts that contribute to introducing global issues in the classroom. Finally, the article ends with some results and conclusions.

## **2. Theoretical Background: Introducing Multimodality in the Language Classroom**

Working with texts with images implies paying attention to multimodal communication in the classroom. In this sense we agree with Machin (2007, p. x) in that what is special about the multimodal approach to communication is “the idea that all modes need to be considered with the same kind of detail, as semiotic systems in themselves, whose potential choices, patterns and grammar can be described and documented”. In this sense, we are interested in images’ social meaning and in the competences students can develop with them by analysing images as part of the visual/multimodal culture that predominates in our society.

Multimodality has been developed in the last decades thanks to the work of Kress (2010), Kress & van Leeuwen (2001, 2006), O’Halloran (2004), O’Halloran, Tan, Smith & Podlasov (2011) and Royce (2007), among others. Its development has contributed to understand how different modes of communication (language, photographs, sound, gestures, etc.) create meanings. Multimodality starts from the position that all modes, like speech and writing, consist of sets of semiotic resources, i.e., the different resources people can use to represent reality (Jewitt, 2009; Kress, 2010), as Baldry and Thibault (2006, p. 21) put it: “[...] multimodality refers to the diverse ways in which a number of distinct semiotic resource systems are both codeployed and co-contextualised in the making of a text-specific meaning”.

Working with multimodal texts, i.e., those that use more than one mode of communication allows bringing into the classroom a sense of immediacy since the use of visuals facilitate that students are able to understand the social situation of human beings who live in countries in the South and whose reality is quite different to the one they live on a daily basis. This is one way of introducing critical discourse analysis in the classroom, following Hasan Khan and Ghazali (2011, p. 164):

“One of the key aspects of CDA is that it is more about what happens in a society rather than what should or could have happened. It is not aimed at analysing an ideal speech situation. Therefore researchers of CDA usually collect their data from the real world, the everyday world, in which people interact in real situations as opposed to fictional situations”.

The study of multimodal texts with social content (women issues, immigration, ecology, social justice, etc.) offers the possibility of understanding the relationships between discourse and society. In this way, multimodal texts are part of everyday social practices because they are present in the interaction between human beings and between human beings with texts. Therefore, they are also present in university classrooms since they also offer the opportunity of being aware of the organization of society up to a certain extent, as Fernández Martínez (2011, p. ix) makes clear: “The classroom offers tangible ways of interpreting contemporary culture; it is an excellent forum for teaching discourse analysis and for making students aware that there is a complex world there to be analysed”. In this sense, the classrooms reflect what happens in life and multimodal teaching emphasizes this and contributes to students’ development of multiliteracies.

Working with multimodal texts on texts on global issues help students understand how the world works and what is hidden behind the messages that we receive on a daily basis, following Rose (2012, p. 10): “There are different ways of seeing the world, and the critical task is to differentiate between the social effects of those different visions. All these arguments make clear the necessity of understanding what social relations produce, and are reproduced by, what forms of visuality [...]”.

### **3. Objectives, Context and Methodology**

The selection of multimodal texts with social meaning comes motivated by our intention not only to introduce cultural aspects into the classroom but also with the purpose of helping students develop their critical thinking on global issues that include the situation of women in different parts of the world. Therefore, our main objectives with the research presented in this paper are to introduce students to visual grammar and to work with texts that allow students at tertiary level develop critical thinking and respect for cultural diversity, which will contribute to the introduction of global issues into the classroom.

The majority of the students that did the practice designed to accomplish the already mentioned objectives were 20 years old. They were registered in the core subject English Language V in the third year of the degree in English Studies at the University of Alicante (Spain). The subject is designed to help students develop the five skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing and interaction) at level C1. During the academic year 2017-2018 there were 95 students registered in the subject (78 were female and 17 were male).

The global issue selected to be introduced in a language classroom was gender. Different multimodal texts with the representation of women from other cultures were used to put into practice the principles of visual grammar (Kress & van



Leeuwen, 2006) explained in the classroom. The teacher distributed some texts from the NGO Intermón Oxfam (see section 4) so that the students could start analysing them following the framework proposed and to see the topic of the reality of women in African countries as a global issue.

Due to the limitations of this paper, section 4 offers a detailed analysis of 2 of the different texts that were analyzed in the subject English Language V. This practice combines the development of oral and written skills because students had to discuss in their groups the analysis and the representation of the women under analysis. Once this was done, they had to write their ideas in coherent and cohesive paragraphs as the ones that appear in sections 4.1 and 4.2 of this paper.

#### **4. Text Analysis: Introducing Global Issues into the Classroom**

In general, the global issues that appear in the magazine published by Intermón Oxfam every month are connected with poverty, women, empowerment and human rights. The texts published by NGOs such as Intermón Oxfam are used as a source of knowledge for the media. Consequently, they are considered important in the construction and creation of an image of the reality of countries in the South in general or the reality of the women who live and work there in particular.

These texts help students develop their critical thinking and broaden their understanding of global issues and the social reality of human beings whose culture is different from the one of students. The multimodal texts under analysis are also important for the development of social competences and to introduce education for development and peace in a University language classroom.

Once the main principles of visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) were explained in the classroom, students were divided in groups of 6 people and were given a photocopy of the texts that follow (see section 4.1 and 4.2). The analysis presented in these sub-sections is a summary of the main aspects students were able to analysis in these texts. As we will see, students pay attention to the main aspects connected with information value, salience and framing and they interpret these aspects by connecting them with the social reality represented in the texts and the one in which the texts are read.

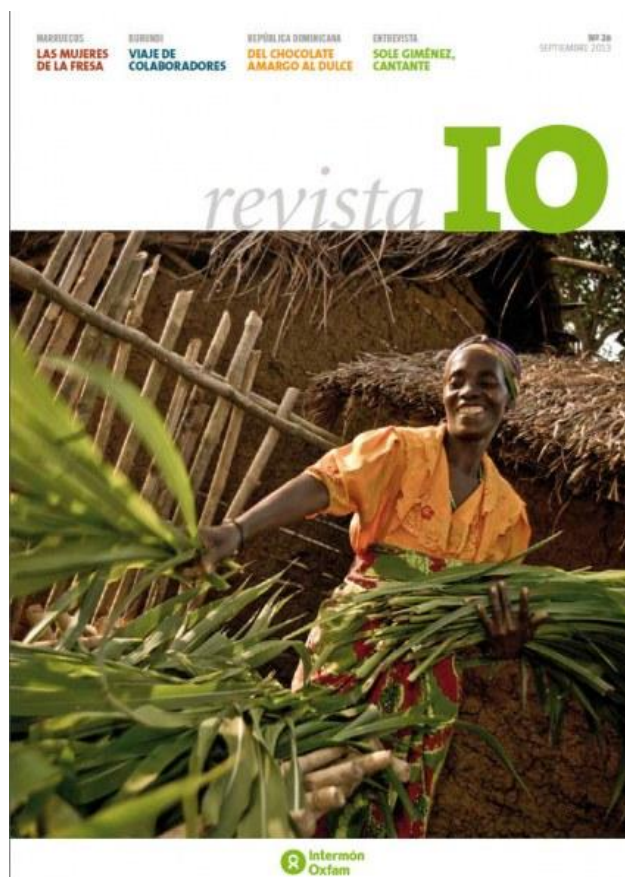
##### **4.1 Analysis of Multimodal text 1**

Immaculée Nizigama, beneficiary of a food security program in Burundi Oxfam, she feeds her three goats with grass. © Pablo Tosco / IO. Journal No. 28 (September 2013).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The original text is the following: Texto multimodal 1: Immaculée Nizigama, beneficiaria del programa de seguridad alimentaria de Intermón Oxfam<sup>2</sup> en Burundi, alimenta con hierba a sus tres cabras. © Pablo Tosco / IO. Revista nº28 (septiembre, 2013).

Oxfam covers usually follow the same structure that is constantly repeated. Thus, at the top, usually appears a set of small holders of different colors that highlight the topics that are going to speak about in that issue of the magazine. At the top they also show the data concerning the issue of its periodicity and the corresponding date. Then we can see the name of the publication, "IO Journal", highlighted and, below it, the picture takes up most of the cover. Ultimately, we can see the logo of the NGO located in the center of the bottom part. The most prominent elements are undoubtedly the photograph and the IO acronym, highlighted in green, the color used by this NGO in its logo (therefore it allows an immediate identification between NGOs



and the publication) and written larger than the other letters on the cover. Thus, the look ranges from the acronym "IO" and the photograph.

After reading the caption accompanying the image that is in the page following the cover, we consider that the headline that relates to this is "Burundi. Travel collaborators ". In this regard, it is interesting to note that the headline refers to people in the North who have been visiting Oxfam projects in Burundi and consequently also to their beneficiaries, for example, the protagonist of the image. In this sense the realities of the South and the North are connected with the headline and the image.

For this study, we will focus mainly on the image because of being the most prominent element of the cover and, therefore, it captures the attention of the reading public. Thus, we can see that the information value of the photograph (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) is distributed from left to right and from top to bottom. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the information known to the reader is located on the left of the image while the unknown information appears on the right. Thus, on the left of this picture, in the foreground, there are a number of plants that the woman located in the right part of the image (i.e., the new information) is moving. Consequently, we believe that, this image considers known information that Oxfam works with agricultural development projects, which have women as their



protagonists sometimes. The fact of placing the protagonist of the picture on the left is used, therefore, to give greater prominence and to make known the face of one of the beneficiaries of the NGO projects.

In addition, we can consider that the figure of the woman with her arms and holding plants forms a triangle which is located in a somewhat oblique image making the composition more dynamic. In this sense, the apex of the triangle is formed by the face of the woman, a fact that also serves to give her a greater role. Moreover, the woman's arm and the fence construction that appears in the picture are two vectors that also point to the top of the figure of the woman. Thus, we can divide the image plane between an upper and a lower. Thus, the top of the image, the part considered "ideal", shows the face of the smiling woman. She smiles because, as it can be seen in the bottom image, the "real" part, she can feed her livestock and therefore their survival is assured.

Moreover, the plants that she holds are located in the foreground at the bottom of the image, which produces an almost tactile sensation in the readers: it seems that the plants that the protagonist of the image is holding can be touched, a fact that still emphasizes more the real nuance that the information located at the bottom of the images already has. In this sense, the real part is opposed to an emotional part (reflected in the smile of the woman) that appears at the top of the image.

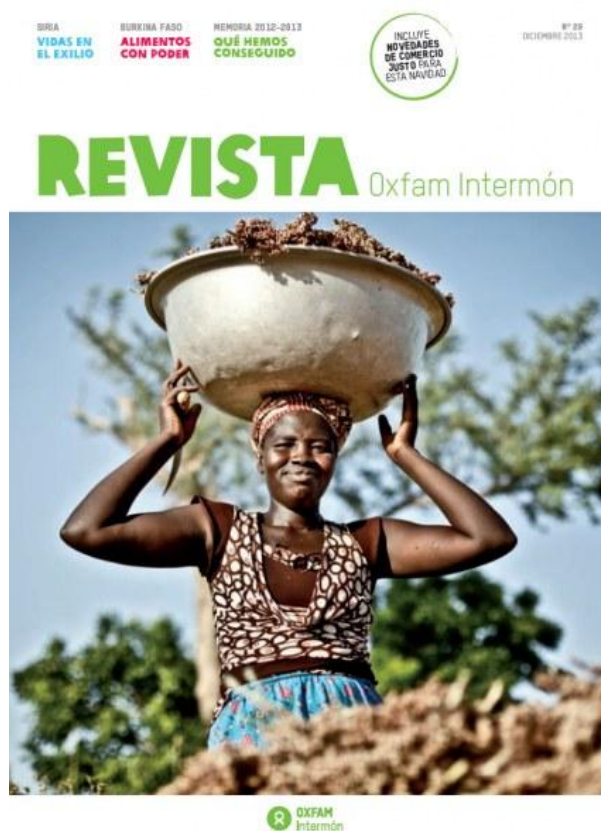
In this case, we find that the woman does not look at the camera and, consequently, social interaction is not established with the reader. However, the woman is dressed in bright colours, she smiles and shows an active role. The ability of action that the protagonist of the visual shows is emphasized by the fact that the image has a great dynamism and it has been captured in a time when the woman was working, so that some of the plants that she holds are blurred as a consequence of this movement. Similarly, the image has been captured in a somewhat oblique way, which shows some instability. It is also necessary to mention that the woman has been captured in a medium shot, a fact that creates a certain social distance with the readers. However, the image has been captured in a horizontal plane, so that there is a sense of equality.

#### **4.2 Analysis of multimodal text 2**

Mamouna Ouedraogo, beneficiary of the activities of money in exchange for work that Oxfam Intermón implemented in the area of Fanka in Burkina Faso. © Pablo Tosco / Oxfam Intermón. Journal No. 28 (December, 2013).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The original text is the following: Texto multimodal 2: Mamouna Ouedraogo, beneficiaria de las actividades de dinero a cambio de trabajo que Oxfam Intermón implementó en la zona de Fanka, en Burkina Faso. © Pablo Tosco / Oxfam Intermón. Revista n°28 (diciembre, 2013).



In this case, we may observe a change in the structure of the composition of the cover with respect to multimodal text previously analyzed. Thus, in this case, the acronym "IO" is replaced by the new name of the NGO, "Oxfam Intermón" and the highlighted word, in this case, is "magazine". The logo that we find at the end of the cover is also replaced by the new logo of the organization.

However, the most striking element is again the image. Thus, it is again a woman alone who is the main protagonist of the visual. In this case, when we analyze the information value (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), we find that it is distributed from the center to the margins. Thus, the woman has been captured in a medium shot clearly

showing her torso and face. She also has raised arms carrying a basket of agricultural products. Thus, the woman's body is the base of the triangle, her arms are the lateral parts of it and the drum she carries becomes the vertex of the geometric figure. Thus, her face is set in a prominent place of composition, occupying the center of the image and it also falls within the triangle. The margins of this composition are not clearly visible because they have been stumped. The only thing that can be observed is that the woman is located in a rural environment.

After reading the caption that is on the page following the cover, if you look at the ones located in the top of the page, we believe that the one that is more related is the one that reads: "Burkina Faso. Foods with power". Indeed, the image shows a strong and empowered woman that produces the nutrients she needs to ensure her survival. In this sense, the characterization of the protagonist of the image shows us precisely that power: she looks directly at the camera and she smiles. In addition, it seems that she is walking and moving precisely towards the reader. The plane that has been captured is horizontal, so that it is established a relationship of equality with the readers. As in the previous case, the woman has been portrayed individually, which shows that Intermón Oxfam relocates female faces to its development projects.

## 5. Discussion

The two texts presented in section 4 have been chosen because they are representative of the main aspects that were analyzed in the subject: these texts were connected with the reality of women in African countries but instead of offering a

negative view of their reality, they offer positive aspects, which contrasts with the traditional representation of African women as being poor, dependent and normally represented as the most vulnerable human beings in most societies.

Students need to be critical when analysing texts with social content as the ones presented in the previous section so that they are aware of some unfair social situations and they can be emphatic and develop attitudes of commitment and solidarity (Brooks & Hebert, 2006), in this sense, following Rose (2012, p. 16-17) our teaching practices would be an example of a critical approach to visual culture if we make students take images seriously, think about the social conditions and effects of visual objects and consider seriously their own way of looking at images.

The fact that students deepened in the reality of women from other cultures with texts published by the NGO Intermón Oxfam is an example of how to introduce global issues in the language classroom and contributes to students' development of their social competences and to the development of critical thinking because they were asked to give their opinion not only about the representation of African women in the texts under analysis but also about the general representation of these women in the media. In addition, these texts are very effective in to contribute to teaching cultural aspects, socio-cultural differences and consequently, to deal with global issues in a language classroom.

In addition, analysing texts on global issues critically contributes to the development of anthropological ways of looking at images (López García, 2005; Ortiz García, Sánchez Carretero & Cea Gutierrez, 2005). Choosing texts with social content to work on reading and writing in an advanced language classroom offers the possibility of working on the pedagogical value of photographs since they can be used to create an emotional impact in the students who work with them.

## **6. Conclusions**

Choosing authentic texts produced by NGOs as the ones presented in this article offers students the possibility of working with real language and real texts so that they can observe social and cultural aspects through text analysis based on global issues and be able to interpret contemporary culture. Consequently, analysing texts on global issues allows being aware of the main social changes that are taking place in the world; they can also contribute to prevent social problems such as gender violence by making students aware of the characteristics and consequences a problem such as the said one has.

Using authentic texts for teaching at University level is very important for the process of helping students to establish a connection between texts and the contexts in which texts are produced and consumed. The fact that the texts under analysis do not reproduce the traditional stereotypes of African women being dependent, poor and vulnerable contributes not only to breaking stereotypes but also to explore other cultures, such as that of Burundi (text 1) and Burkina Faso (text 2) and learn cultural aspects about the reality of women in the said countries. In this sense, the practice presented in this paper intends to be a contribution to the discourse of development

and to highlighting the importance of using global issues at tertiary level in order to help students be active citizens and critical thinkers.

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