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Literaturas poscoloniales en lengua inglesa

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African Literatures and European Languages – A Debate

La actividad titulada “African Literatures and European Languages – A Debate” está diseñada para estudiantes de la asignatura *Literaturas poscoloniales en lengua inglesa* dentro del Grado en Estudios Ingleses. Su finalidad es que los alumnos reflexionen sobre un debate fundamental en los estudios poscoloniales: el uso de las lenguas europeas frente a las lenguas indígenas en las literaturas africanas. Para ello, se trabajará a partir de dos textos esenciales: el de Ngugi wa Thiong’o, que defiende la centralidad de las lenguas africanas como vehículo literario y cultural, y el de Chinua Achebe, que justifica el empleo de lenguas coloniales, como el inglés, por razones prácticas y de comunicación. Extractos de ambos textos se adjuntan con la actividad.

La dinámica consiste en dividir a la clase en dos grupos: uno defenderá los argumentos de Thiong’o y el otro, los de Achebe. Cada grupo deberá preparar de tres a cinco argumentos sólidos apoyados en ejemplos concretos extraídos de los documentos, anticipar las posibles objeciones del grupo contrario y formular respuestas. Durante el debate, ambos equipos expondrán y discutirán sus posturas de forma razonada y respetuosa, con el objetivo de persuadir mediante la solidez de sus ideas y el uso adecuado de la evidencia textual. Finalmente, se realizará una puesta en común en la que los estudiantes reflexionarán de manera crítica sobre las intervenciones, evaluando el peso del contexto histórico, cultural y político en la definición de las literaturas africanas y considerando la posible coexistencia entre lenguas africanas y lenguas europeas en la producción literaria.

A continuación se muestran las instrucciones en inglés para usar en clase, junto con los materiales necesarios para realizar la actividad.

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Activity: African Literatures and European Languages – A Debate

Objective:

To explore the ongoing debate over the use of European languages in African literature, understanding contrasting perspectives and practicing evidence-based argumentation.

Instructions:

1. Preparation:

- Read **Document A** (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The Language of African Literature*) and **Document B** (Chinua Achebe, *The African Writer and the English Language*) which are attached below.
- Take notes on key arguments, examples, and evidence presented in each text. Focus on points related to language, culture, identity, and the effects of colonialism.

2. Group Division:

- The class will be split into **two groups**:
 - **Group 1:** Support Ngugi wa Thiong'o's position that African writers should prioritize indigenous languages over European ones.
 - **Group 2:** Support Chinua Achebe's position that using European languages can be a practical and legitimate choice for African writers.

3. Debate Preparation:

- Within your group, identify **3–5 strong arguments** from your assigned text.
- Find **specific evidence and examples** from the documents to support each argument.
- Anticipate counterarguments from the opposing group and prepare responses.

4. Conducting the Debate:

- Each group will take turns presenting their arguments and responding to the other side.
- Aim to **persuade the audience** using evidence from the texts, logical reasoning, and clear presentation.
- Listen carefully to the opposing group and engage respectfully.

5. Debrief:

- After the debate, reflect on the arguments presented.
- Consider questions like: How do historical and political contexts shape views on language? Can European languages and African languages coexist in literature?

Document A: Excerpts from Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature" (1986)

"In 1962 I was invited to that historic meeting of African writers at Makerere University College, Kampala, Uganda... The title, "A Conference of African Writers of English Expression", automatically excluded those who wrote in African languages,... The discussions on the novel, the short story, poetry, and drama were based on extracts from works in English and hence they excluded the main body of work in Swahili, Zulu, Yoruba, Arabic, Amharic and other African languages. Yet, despite this exclusion of writers and literature in African languages, no sooner were the introductory preliminaries over than this Conference of "African Writers of English Expression sat down to the first item on the agenda: 'What is African Literature? (...)

English, like French and Portuguese, was assumed to be the natural language of literary and even political mediation between African people in the same nation and between nations in Africa and other continents. In some instances these European languages were seen having a capacity to unite African peoples mains divisive tendencies inherent in the multiplicity of African languages within the same geographical state (...)

How did we, as African writers, come to be so feeble towards the claims of our languages on us and so aggressive in our claims on other languages, particularly the languages of our colonisation? (...) In my view language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation (...)

I was born into a large peasant family father, four wives and about twenty eight children. I also belonged, as we all did in those days, to a wider extended family and to the community as a whole. We spoke Kikuyu as we worked in the fields. We spoke Gikuyu in and outside the home. I can vividly recall those evenings of story-telling around the fireside. It was mostly the grown-ups telling the children but everybody was interested and involved (...)

And then I went to school, a colonial school, and this harmony was broken. The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture. I first went to Kamaandura, missionary run, and then to another called Maangu run by nationalists groups around the Gikuyu Independent and Karinga Schools Association. Our language of education was still Gikuyu. The very first time I was ever given an ovation for my writing was over a composition in Gikuyu. So for my first four years there was still harmony between the language of my formal education and that of the Limuru peasant community.

It was after the declaration of a state of emergency over Kenya in 1952 that all the schools run by patriotic nationalists were taken over by the colonial regime and were placed under District Education Boards chaired by Englishmen. English became the language of my formal education. In Kenya, English became more than a language: it was the language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference.

Thus one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment - three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks - or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY....

The attitude to English was the exact opposite: any achievement in spoken or written English was highly awarded: prizes, prestige, applause; the ticket to higher realms, English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences, and all the other branches of learning."

Document B: Excerpts from Chinua Achebe. "The African Writer and the English Language" (1964)

"In June 1962, there was a writers' gathering at Makerere, impressively styled: "A Conference of African Writers of English Expression." Despite this sonorous and rather solemn title, it turned out to be a very lively affair and a very exciting and useful experience for many of us. But there was something which we tried to do and failed—that was to define "African literature" satisfactorily.

Was it literature produced in Africa or about Africa? Could African literature be on any subject, or must it have an African theme? Should it embrace the whole continent or south of the Sahara, or just black Africa? And then the question of language. Should it be in indigenous African languages or should it include Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, Afrikaans, and so on? (...)

I have indicated somewhat offhandedly that the national literature of Nigeria and of many other countries of Africa is, or will be, written in English. This may sound like a controversial statement, but it isn't. All I have done has been to look at the reality of present-day Africa. This "reality" may change as a result of deliberate, e.g., political, action. If it does, an entirely new situation will arise, and there will be plenty of time to examine it. At present it may be more profitable to look at the scene as it is.

What are the factors which have conspired to place English in the position of national language in many parts of Africa? Quite simply the reason is that these nations were created in the first place by the intervention of the British, which, I hasten to add, is not saying that the peoples comprising these nations were invented by the British.

The country which we know as Nigeria today began not so very long ago as the arbitrary creation of the British. It is true, as William Fagg says in his excellent new book, *Nigerian Images*, that this arbitrary action has proved as lucky in terms of African art history as any enterprise of the fortunate Princess of Serendip. And I believe that in political and economic terms too this arbitrary creation called Nigeria holds out great prospects. Yet the fact remains that Nigeria was created by the British—for their own ends. Let us give the devil his due: colonialism in Africa disrupted many things, but it did create big political units where there were small, scattered ones before. Nigeria had hundreds of autonomous communities ranging in size from the vast Fulani Empire founded by Usman dan Fodio in the north to tiny village entities in the east. Today it is one country.

Of course there are areas of Africa where colonialism divided up a single ethnic group among two or even three powers. But on the whole it did bring together many peoples that had hitherto gone their several ways. And it gave them a language with which to talk to one another. If it failed to give them a song, it at least gave them a tongue, for sighing. There are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language of the erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication. Therefore those African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart alecks with an eye on the main chance—outside their own countries. They are by-products of the same process that made the new nation-states of Africa."