

The role of the cultural dimension in the teaching of English in Chile. An interview with Dr. Leopoldo Wigdorsky.

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Introduction

If we take a quick look at the history of foreign language teaching, we realize that one of the main tensions has been with respect to whether grammar should be taught implicitly or explicitly and between those advocating for a purely linguistic instruction and those that believe that language learning involves learning about the target language culture as well. With the recent changes in the status of English as an international language (Pennycook, 1994; MacKay, 2003) the place of the cultural dimension has gained momentum as the question is now, what culture should be taught?

The following interview, which was carried out in 2003, right before Dr. Wigdorsky passed away, was part of the research conducted by Luis Alvarez for his undergraduate thesis on the culture dimension in the teaching of English in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's in Chile.

Dr. Wigdorsky was a well known applied linguist who trained and inspired generations of language teachers and one of the few Chilean authors of textbooks for the teaching of English as a foreign language. By presenting here this interview we are offering a tribute to his work in Chilean applied linguistics.

The purpose of the interview was to know, from the textbook author himself, his opinion about the contribution of the culture dimension to the learning of a foreign language.

To contextualize the problem under discussion, we first provide a brief overview of the main approaches to the

connection between language learning and culture.

Language and culture

Although it would take another full paper or more to deal with the complex problem of the connections between these two concepts, all we can do here is to refer to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as one of the most influential models in contemporary linguistics that advocates for the position that thought depends on language. This hypothesis combines two principles: linguistic determinism, i.e., that language determines how we think, and linguistic relativity, i.e., distinctions encoded in one language are not found in other languages (as referenced in Crystal, 1999).

As we can observe, and ratified by Kramsch (1989: 11), "*the difficulty in dealing with this topic lies in its unavoidable subjectivity and relativity*". Despite major claims for globalization, these days we know that different countries have different political cultures, intellectual styles, social fears, hopes, prides (as the ones that are probably going to be displayed in 2010 for the Chilean Bicentennial), and different meanings and values attached to language and culture.

In a broad sense, according to Jenks (1995), culture can be divided into two major components. One is anthropological or sociological culture: the attitudes, customs, and daily activities of people, their ways of thinking, their values, and their frames of reference. Since language is a direct manifestation of

this phase of culture, a society cannot be totally understood or appreciated without knowledge of its language. The other component of culture is the history of civilization. Traditionally, representing the 'culture' element in foreign language teaching includes geography, history, and achievements in the sciences, the social sciences, and the arts; in brief it represents the heritage of a people so it must be appreciated by the students who wish to understand the new target culture. When dealing with the teaching of language and culture, Byram (1991) supports the idea that the use of the learners' mother language for comparing their own and foreign cultural meanings can be combined with the teaching of the foreign language both as subject and medium of foreign cultural phenomena.

The interview

LA (Luis Alvarez): How many years have you been teaching English?

LW (Leopoldo Wigdorsky): I've been teaching English for 56 years.

LA: Where did you complete your studies to become a teacher of English?

LW: I got my teaching title, as you say in Chile, from Universidad de Chile. Then, I got my M.A. in Linguistics from the University of Michigan, and a Teaching Certificate of English as a Foreign Language at the same university. Some years later, I got my diploma in Applied Linguistics which is equivalent to a Master of Science from the University of Edinburgh, in England. Years later I got my Ph.D.

LA: Mr. Wigdorsky, my intention for my thesis is to know about how the cultural notion, the cultural dimension, has been introduced in your own experience as a text producer, and also as a student, in the teaching of a foreign language.

LW: When I was a student at high school, we used a book by Raúl Ramírez. They were culture-oriented books. They

all gave us instances of life in Britain and the States; that was the idea. With an overview of literature which was much criticized at the time, but very interesting. Then, when I started teaching I went along the same lines. But we felt at the same time that teaching, for example, the History of English Literature is not the same as teaching English. They are different things.

LA: How important do you believe the cultural dimension is in the teaching of English as a foreign language?

LW: It is very important. I don't think you can teach a foreign language without taking into account the cultural aspects. Teaching only grammatical structures and pronunciation is awkward. When I say culture, I don't mean just literature. People tend to equate literature with culture. By culture, I mean, everything used by the mind of the English speaker. That includes philosophy, technology, science, cinema; it includes many things. If you take a look at the British and American civilizations, you will have an idea of that, what we mean by civilization.

LA: In your experience, what is understood by culture applied to language teaching?

LW: Indeed, what is understood by culture? It hasn't been defined by anyone yet. But my definition might not be the best. I don't agree with it completely but it is every intellectual, I mean, production of the people. That is culture. So that folklore, for example, is culture. In our case, Chile for example, "cacharritos de greda", are part of our culture, right? And sure enough, Neruda or people from the 18th century, Letelier, Amunátegui, all that is part of our culture. It is everything that our development covers.

LA: Do you think the cultural component in the teaching of a foreign language should be introduced implicitly or explicitly, i.e., treated independently from linguistic contents?

LW: No. They should be mixed. One of the ways to make the teaching of a foreign language attractive is by presenting the culture of the people who speak that language. Introducing a language formally, by grammar and rules or phonological features alone is a very boring stuff for most people. Not for you perhaps, but for most people at schools or adults.

You can take advantage of the production, the cultural production, so as to present, let us say, the rules of pronunciation. Talking about that, they should be presented together. That is what makes difficult to make a good textbook. Linguistics contents should be mixed with the cultural contents.

LA: Did you include any cultural contents in your book? Which ones? What criteria did you apply to select them? Were they central or accessory to your book? Were they realistic and representative of the target culture? Was the view of the target culture descriptive or critical?

LW: In the first books 'I speak English' which is book 1, 2 and 3 for 1ero, 2do, 3ero Humanidades, I mean, 7mo, 8vo, 1ero medio, you won't find much cultural contents for two reasons. To begin with, you have to present the minimum language. At the same time, when you teach the child how to address the teacher to call him 'mister' or to call her 'miss', you gradually introduce the cultural content.

The other series, which is 'British and American Civilization' which is two books, I think the title is clear. That is mostly cultural, because by that time, the students master, let us say, the structural contents.

The criteria were very subjective. At the time we wrote the books, I was working at the American Embassy. So I could get a lot of information; pictures and graphic material. I had also material from Scotland as I had been recently there for a scholarship. So, I really incorporated in

the book what I could find which was quite a lot; this is a fat book.

In the case of the first 3 books, culture was accessory. The first 3 books are structurally based, but with a lot of cultural contents.

'British and American Civilization' is culturally based. They were long successful.

I don't think the cultural contents are critical. I don't think they criticize. If I were to choose, I would choose descriptive, just describing things.

LA: Do you think the cultural view introduced in your book provides the learner with a broader understanding of the foreign language?

LW: Yes. Because I was always careful to give this in small amounts, not in huge amounts, for example, speaking in terms of a reading selection. The reading selection is always short, maximum 2 pages. Perhaps 3, usually 1 page. The idea was that the lesson had to be covered in one session or two sessions put together. So the students have the sensation that they had finished and learned something in that period.

LA: Did you ever consider including features of the local culture in your book?

LW: There are some inclusions. Not much. There is a unit called 'British and American Contribution to Chilean Development' or something like that. There, we speak about, for example, when the English brought the Railroad to England. The point was that the English and the American had been important in the development of Chilean thought.

I don't think you should teach the local culture through English.

LA: At the time of producing your book, was there any official position, i.e., syllabi or the like, regarding the cultural

dimension in the teaching of foreign languages?

LW: The books were made in accordance with the official programmes, in 1963. The official programmes did contemplate that you have to teach something about culture. But, of course, it is the textbook writer who has to interpret the programme, anyway. Eventually, the only real programme that you use is the textbook. Because the textbook writer interprets the programme, so that is what you teach eventually.

The notion in the programme was quite wide. It was a very short book, no more than 10 pages for the six years of Humanidades. Culture was especially understood as literature.

LA: In your opinion, has the treatment of the cultural dimension in English language teaching in Chile undergone any changes in the last four decades? Which ones?

LW: Of course, for the worse. In general the teaching of English has gone to the worse. We teach less language, less culture and students know less and less.

The Ministry of Education has said something about it. I think they are mistaken, but it is a great step forward. They have this problem in mind. Because for many decades foreign languages had been left completely out of the focus. Nobody cared much about foreign languages in schools.

When you study History, it is not for the purpose of studying history, but to develop your personality. And the same thing is for the study of a language; studying English or French is to enlarge your personality. To have a broader view of the world. This is true for all of the subjects, they are all formative, and none of them should be vocational with the possible exception of Spanish, in our case, because we all know Spanish.

Final remarks

As the teaching of English faces another century and as English is rapidly changing from being predominantly associated to the UK and the US to being a means of international communications, a global language, it is important to have in mind the issues discussed in this interview. A further problem that was not dealt with in this interview with Dr. Wigdorsky is the new possibilities to be exposed to the cultural dimension that are provided by Internet. If the traditional concept of Centered (Kachru, 1992) native speaker gives way to an international standard user of the English language, then the notions of authenticity and appropriateness that were attached to native speakers need to be modified to that of a diversity of authenticities and appropriation. For Kramsch (1998), appropriation means that "the learners make a foreign language and culture their own by adopting it and adapting it to their own needs and interest" (p.81).

What is clear is that language should be understood as a totality and that teaching a language is not primarily an instrumental activity but it comprises the values, beliefs and cultural understandings of its speakers.

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