L2 Journal, Volume 6 (2014), pp. 3-8 http://repositories.cdlib.org/uccllt/l2/vol6/iss1/art1/

The Perilous Legitimacy of the Foreign-born Spanish Instructor in the U.S.

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Most Spanish departments would state, with varying language and emphasis, that their academic goals are to help students develop language proficiency and an understanding of the cultural values of the Spanish-speaking world. Beyond teaching basic language skills, a Spanish instructor may be expected to teach a wide range of language, culture, and literature courses. It follows that one can reasonably draw legitimacy from the degrees—earned from American universities— that attest to the expertise in the subject matter and the ability to impart an all-encompassing foundation of knowledge consistent with the goals of language and in particular Spanish departments.

As a foreign-born native speaker of the language I teach, I also draw legitimacy from the very experience that informs my linguistic and cultural identity, i.e. having been raised and educated in a Spanish-Speaking country. I, then, bring to a language department a certain authenticity that might not be as central if I were to teach literary and cultural studies, as I have, in a Spanish-Speaking country where everybody shares the same cultural referents and, thereby, only academic legitimacy is important. Thus, as a foreign-born native language instructor in the United States where, more often that not, I teach a tripartite blend of language, culture, and literature, I seem to enjoy a dual legitimacy that provides great significance to my teaching experience and career.

Nonetheless, what situations, if any, could jeopardize this legitimacy partly based on claims of authenticity? In order to answer these questions, it might be instructive to go back to departmental goals. My particular department clearly states that aside from emphasizing the students' development of language skills, it also underscores "the study of cultural values pertaining to the community of speakers of the target languages offered and their history, literature, art, politics, economics and other fields which are also essential to the understanding of these communities" (Department of Languages and Applied Linguistics, 2012). The department goes on to claim that it too emphasizes the development of other fundamental skills in the academic learning process "such as analytical, synthetic and critical thinking skills" (Department of Languages and Applied Linguistics, 2012). Since I have always pondered the question of what is the place of broad principles of humanistic inquiry, critical thinking, and academic freedom in language teaching, the department's statement seems to justify and corroborate that there is indeed a legitimate place for these principles in language teaching. Upholding and implementing these values of academic life, however, can be quite challenging, primarily when delving into the study and subtleties of cultural values, history, and politics.

Discussing Latin American politics, especially U.S.-Latin American relations in Spanish language classes, is an excellent case in point. In some ways, the outcome of such discussions is defined by the approach to U.S.-Latin American relations in language textbooks. In general, Spanish textbooks published by American publishing companies present cultural aspects that highlight the uniqueness of each Latin American country and the shared cultural legacies of the region. The latter trend confirms, as the authors of a textbook put it, "the intrinsic role that culture plays in foreign language development and the need for students to develop a critical understanding of the cultures of Spanish-Speaking countries" (De la Fuente, Martín, & Sans, 2012, p. xvi). Concurring with this premise, publishers increasingly develop more content-based and culturally-oriented textbooks. In the process of learning a language, as we know, students will be confronted not only with linguistic challenges but also with cultural differences that may force them to look critically at their own culture.

When it comes to a serious analysis of U.S.-Latin American relations, however, it is fair to say—after years of experience teaching Spanish and having used many different textbooks— that there is a predominant tendency to avoid a straightforward discussion of the issue. It is difficult to blame the authors of these textbooks for taking that approach even though at different stages of my teaching career I have been disappointed by this choice when I thought that elaboration or expansion was needed or justified. In addition, over the years, both as a student of languages and Spanish instructor, I have also learned that students taking Spanish courses, or any other language course, have understandable expectations to be introduced to language and culture in a politically or an ideologically neutral form. This desire for neutrality might derive from a genuine interest in a given culture, which does not contemplate or anticipate areas of contention. Authorial and editorial choices seem to reflect such expectations.

Yet, some textbooks cannot completely avoid touching on highly sensitive issues when emphasis on a given topic warrants it. Chapters and topics that center on political systems—specifically dictatorial regimes— and the ideological landscape that has polarized Latin American nations in recent decades are prime instances. Common themes are the Cuban Revolution, the Central American civil wars of the 1970s and the 1980s, and, most notably, the overthrow of the Chilean socialist president Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973. Even in these cases, textbooks have a tendency to shy away from conducting any meaningful analysis of the background and legacy of dictatorial regimes, opting for more sanitized presentations that elude or circumvent the most controversial or sensitive issue for American students to grapple with: U.S. historical involvement and interference in Latin America.

Instances of this approach can be found in beginning or intermediate textbooks. Consider an intermediate textbook entitled *Imagina* (Blanco & Tocaimaza-Hatch, 2011), which includes a chapter entitled "El valor de las ideas" 'The Value of Ideas' (p. 195-231). This chapter reviews the use of the subjunctive in adverbial clauses, the past subjunctive, comparatives, and superlatives. It also provides input related to beliefs and ideologies and introduces students to Chile. In a section called "Cultura" 'Culture', there is an introductory reading called "Chile: dictadura y democracia" 'Chile: Dictatorship and Democracy' (p. 225). Students can read this rather advanced reading without much difficulty. It discusses the overthrow of the socialist president Salvador Allende by a military coup led by Augusto Pinochet on September 11, 1973. Further, the reading presents the military coup as a blow to the longest democratic tradition in Latin America. It also discusses the ensuing repression of all political opposition, violations of human rights, torture, disappearances, illegal detentions, and the neo-liberal economic policies adopted by the Pinochet regime. Finally, there is a brief reference to the role of the Central Intelligence Agency (euphemistically referred as "los servicios secretos estadounidenses" 'the American secret services') in aiding the opposition to create obstacles to destabilize the Chilean economy in the period leading to the coup.

A subsequent section of the chapter presents a highly suggestive and insightful poem about the power of conviction and resistance by Cuban poet and dissident Armando Valladares. Considered a political prisoner, Valladares spent 22 years in a Cuban jail from 1960 to 1982 (Blanco & Tocaimaza-Hatch, 2011, p. 227-230). Both readings are intended as a balanced introduction to the Latin American political sphere and violations of human rights by both left and right wing governments. Nevertheless, in addition to language activities (vocabulary and comprehension questions), follow-up discussion activities on the Allende piece only offer a brief analysis of abuse of power and violations of human rights.

A second example is found in a first year Spanish textbook entitled *Gente*, which implements a task-based approach (De la Fuente et al., 2012). In Chapter Ten, the preterit tense is introduced for the first time (p. 164-181). Students are also introduced to "Chile." The chapter begins by presenting some historical events in the present tense. These historical facts include the election of Salvador Allende and the overthrow of his presidency by general Augusto Pinochet. This political event is later reiterated in an activity that describes four different decades, each including further historical events narrated in the preterit. Students have to match each decade with the corresponding information. Interestingly, information about the military coup appears right after the following sentence: "Richard Nixon dimite después del escándalo de Watergate" 'Richard Nixon steps down after the Watergate scandal' (p. 166). A subtle suggestion is probably there to make the link, but the authors leave it up to the instructor to make it or to the students to ask about the possible connection.

Finally, the main task of this chapter is to write a biography of a prominent Chilean using the preterit. Students have two options. Salvador Allende is one. He is introduced as "El primer presidente socialista de Chile" 'The first socialist president of Chile' (De la Fuente et al., 2012, p. 172). In fact, it adds, Allende "fue el primer marxista elegido presidente por voto popular en la historia del mundo occidental" 'was the first Marxist to be elected president by popular vote in the history of the Western World' (p. 172). Based on what students already know about Allende, they have to find other facts about his life randomly mixed with the biographical information of another prominent Chilean, Policarpo Toro, who is option two. In one box including information about Policarpo Toro and Allende, the following statement appears: "En 1972, asistió a la Asamblea de las Naciones Unidas, donde denunció la agresión internacional hacia su país. Al final de su discurso, la Asamblea lo ovacionó de pie durante varios minutos" 'In 1972, he attended the United Nations assembly in which he denounced the international aggression on his administration. At the end of his speech, he received a standing ovation for a few minutes' (p. 173). But the international aggressor is never revealed. In sum, no mention is made of U.S. complicity in ousting Allende.

When confronted with suggestive or tangential analysis of dictatorial regimes and their connection to U.S. political and economic presence in the region, I always find myself in an unwanted pedagogical conundrum. On the one hand, my principled approach to the study of cultural values—in line with the avowed mission of my department and the very experience that informs my cultural identity—guide my unwavering commitment to conduct a critical analysis of the wider political and economic implications of interference and institutional repression. The latter brings to the fore a certain predisposition to tackle political issues openly and forthrightly, which highlights the problematics of authenticity, especially when presenting Latin American perspectives and thereby challenging American versions of history and world affairs.

Altogether, it entails elaboration, mainly in situations where it is difficult to separate any discussion of oppression and violations of human rights from the U.S.-backed military regimes that committed such atrocities. Further expansion requires pointing to a trove of scholarly literature that has studied and documented how and why the United States favored repressive right-wing dictatorships over progressive democracies in the context of the cold war. Accordingly, expansion also necessitates drawing attention to the role of the CIA in overthrowing Latin American governments as in the notorious case of Salvador Allende in Chile.[1] In sum, expansion and in-depth discussion aim at producing a critical understanding of the political and economic history of Spanish-Speaking countries, namely Chile.

On the other hand, I fear that this type of expansion may provoke unreceptive reactions and negatively influence students' perception of my intention in doing so. While elaboration has often lead in my classes to varying outcomes that range from highly productive discussions and analysis of Latin American political views, governance, ideologies, grievances, and geo-political alignments, it has also prompted skeptical and even hostile reactions towards sources on the part of some students. Skepticism, when expressed with well-founded arguments and evidence, is, of course, encouraged. But hostile reactions to direct or marginal reference to U.S. foreign policy and its historical interference in Latin America can trigger tension in the classroom, which is difficult to mitigate.

More concerning is the fact that such reactions tend to strain the teacher-student relationship. A damaged relationship can be manifested in so many ways. I once experienced outright hostility during classroom interactions after having used related texts and visual materials to expand on the Chilean military coup and subsequently became the target of an explicit attack and insult in course evaluations. The latter outcome caused some apprehension, and, more importantly, it made me conscious of the professional vulnerability of my position as a foreign-born native language instructor pursuing deeper insight into Latin American culture and politics. I have, therefore, become aware of the fact that my legitimacy may be jeopardized whenever I conduct any expansion on highly sensitive issues, which may rub the wrong way the American sensibilities of some students.

My experience highlights a flagrant truth about the limits that foreign-born native language instructors may encounter when we take it upon ourselves to conduct an analytical and critical approach to the study of the most important political and cultural questions of modern Latin America. However, since experience dictates or redefines the course of action, it is worth asking: Should Spanish instructors avoid discussing sensitive issues involving U.S.-Latin American relations so that the instructor's legitimacy is not compromised? If we conclude that we should, further questions ensue: How do we avoid discussing sensitive issues and yet have students exercise "analytic, synthetic and critical thinking skills"? What is politically expedient? What thinking skills should be eschewed and when? In response to these questions, since 2012, I have gradually developed a working framework. This framework takes into account two principles: language proficiency and student academic maturity.

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[1] See Kornbluh, "Chile and the United States: Declassified Documents Relating to the Military Coup, September 11, 1973" for analysis of declassified documents related to Chile. See Kornbluh's (2005) and Mackin (2008) for insightful analyses of the military coup. See Wilson (2007) for a detailed account of CIA's capabilities, covert action, paramilitary operations, and espionage/counterespionage operations.

Based on language proficiency, I put into practice the following set of guidelines. I do not expand on U.S.-Latin American relations in Beginning or Intermediate levels of Spanish even when textbooks may present a topic that invites the discussion. I consider expanding in advanced levels if a given topic warrants it. I definitely expand in courses beyond advanced levels in accordance with relevant thematic analysis. Why? By the third year of Spanish, students have developed their language proficiency enough to be able to delve into multifaceted topics. Therefore, I use related materials (texts, films, documentaries, music, art, news, etc.) that address the issue with enough complexity and nuance and implement classroom activities that invite formal analysis, discussion, debate, oral argumentation, and the use of evidence to advance critical positions. The purpose is to adopt a more detached approach through the use of original texts and cultural products in tandem with broader principles of humanistic inquiry to expose students to different values and ideas while enhancing intellectual discussions and critical analysis.

My second principle—academic maturity— is based on the following assumption. If language proficiency is advanced, it is more likely that students are in their second or third year of college. Therefore, critical thinking skills have been developed in other areas of academic life. It is not unreasonable to expect that students will use these transferable skills when discussing original Spanish texts or other cultural products.[2] With this assumption in mind, I do not intend to underestimate the intellectual maturity of first-year college students, but rather implement safeguards to minimize negative or hostile reactions, as explained above, when discussing U.S.-Latin American relations at an early stage in language learning. Avoiding or delaying any discussion of the issue in question has certainly had deleterious effects on implementing "analytic, synthetic and critical thinking skills" at all levels of language development. While the decision to operate in this fashion can be viewed as a purely practical one that defers discussing sensitive issues until the right level and the right time, it is so far the best workable solution to a pedagogical conundrum without totally diminishing the significance of political developments so essential to the understanding of the community of speakers of the target language and culture.

To conclude, it appears to be paradoxical that a foreign-born native speaker language instructor cannot always address the very cultural values and perspectives that his qualifications and cultural background confer him to teach. Recognizing a professional vulnerability present in this position, I think that it is still important to generate a framework, any framework, that could make discussing U.S.-Latin American relations possible between foreign-born native speaker instructors and students rather than giving up in order to avoid offending anyone, fearing being perceived as anti-American and compromising legitimacy. U.S. historical involvement and interference to secure economic and geo-political hegemony in Latin America is not an abstraction. It has had serious social, political, and economic consequences. Thus, if we believe it is important that our students be linguistically- and critically-prepared to engage with the world around them and gain the multiple perspectives that the study of languages and cultures promises, then, following my framework, there should be a place for this type of analysis and discussion in language teaching.

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[2] In the absence of or lack of readiness to use critical thinking skills, carefully designed task-based activities that involve formal analysis, discussion, debate, oral argumentation can still yield some degree of productive outcome.

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