

Teaching English with topics of the local culture

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Abstract

The lack of varied topics related to the local culture is a weakness of the books provided by the Chilean Ministry of Education for English teaching. This fact motivated a group of teachers and led to the publication of eight books for language teaching at various levels from 2010 to 2018 in northern Chile. They include stories of the local culture, interviews, short biographies, and selected texts of distinguished authors born and raised in Tarapacá. The complete process was developed by a team of professors from the English Teaching Program at Universidad Arturo Prat in Iquique, as a way to counterbalance a clear deficit regarding the limited number of topics about this matter in books being used in Chile to teach English. The theoretical foundation and methodological work (Díaz-Rico 2008; Kramsch 2014; Celce-Murcia 2014) with their local, intercultural components and an eclectic approach based on communicative instruction are also presented. Finally, it is explained how the books are distributed, used in schools and undergraduate level and the projection of this initiative.

Keywords innovation, culture, intercultural components, English teaching, teaching materials

1. Introduction

Life today is exponentially more complicated and complex than it was 50 or even 25 years ago. The digital age has revolutionized many of our institutions to include how we communicate, the way we interact with our surroundings, and how we access and retrieve information. In the 21st century, citizenship requires levels of information and technological literacy that go far beyond what was needed to navigate our world. We are now living in a global village with opportunities for instantaneous communication across the globe. Given our advances, unacceptable rates of illiteracy still exist in many nations. Those who are impoverished are often those who have inequitable learning

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experiences and/or opportunities. Limited speaking ability also impacts academic achievement and academic success. (CEPAL, 2020)

Social and equitable justice should no longer delineate our humanity based on markers of difference; but should call to the oneness of our condition -the ability to access equitable learning environments and to experience success without barriers to opportunity-. We realize that to improve our economic and social conditions, we must be vigilant in the pursuit and advancement of knowledge. We understand ethnicity, ideology, value, race, gender, and class politics as frameworks and constructs for defining our social culture because they interact with one another in shaping human behavior. We also know these identities are central to how we “see” ourselves and “view” the world.

This paper presents innovative practices and research that teachers and teacher educators are undertaking in northern Chile, led by a team at Universidad Arturo Prat (UNAP) in Iquique, to impact language acquisition, literacy, and intercultural awareness. Here we review eight books written around themes of regional culture. These books were published to be used in primary, secondary schools and undergraduate level. In addition, the paper explores the theoretical bases and the development of the teaching and learning process related to these goals.

1.1 Writing and publishing for Chilean students: An overview

In Chile, the Ministry of Education provides books to public schools, which contributes greatly to many families, especially those with low-income. The country is also highly centralized; thus, most decisions dealing with education are made in the capital, Santiago, located approximately one-third of the distance from the northern border to the southern tip of this 4270 km. “long” nation. Within this context, the textbooks for English teaching are initiated, written, and published in Santiago. (MINEDUC, *Textos Escolares Oficiales*, 2020) Their contents typically follow a global perspective with lessons about Great Britain or other English speaking nations. The focus may have a very limited number of pages about the 16 regions that constitute the country, including the populous capital, Región Metropolitana. Rarely do the lessons focus on topics that include the country’s diverse, rich cultural traditions and lifestyles. Furthermore, most of the very few Chilean-focused lessons are associated with touristic and historical sites for which Chile is well known in the world (Atacama Desert, Easter Island, Santiago, Valparaíso, Concepción, the Mapuches, Torres del Paine, Antarctica, etc.)

In addition, these textbooks typically never explore local or regional areas, traditions, cultures, nor do they focus on local issues. This problematic topic was much discussed in northern Chile, far from Santiago, and with a very different culture than the urban life of the capital. An attempt to solve this curriculum weakness has been to publish books for English teaching and learning that also focus on regional contents and context. A team of university professors and student assistants from Universidad Arturo Prat (UNAP) in Iquique has participated in these various book projects for which the aim is to balance the contents and the presentation of English, in other words, to teach English with a focus on regional topics to which the students could easily relate and to which they could apply what they learn.

Chile is a “long, skinny country,” and it is highly diverse with native people, early and recent immigrants from many countries and their home cultures, a wide variety of skills and work, and a rich and diverse Chilean culture that absorbs and changes but also maintains national traditions. The geology and geography of Chile is also extreme in the Andes, the Atacama Desert, and in Patagonia. Chile has one of the longest coastlines on earth, and the people and cultures adapted differently to the different regions. As a result of this variance, the task of providing materials with which the teachers and students identify, and to build lessons that are truly applicable, needs to be faced locally and regionally. The faculty and students at UNAP determined to write and publish regionally focused supplementary textbooks to be used alongside those provided by the Government.

The literature associated with language teaching, learning, and culture (Chastain 1978; Díaz-Rico 2008; Kramsch 2014; Celce-Murcia 2014) argues that when learning L2 we should learn and appreciate both the foreign and native culture for the benefit of students and in order to promote tolerance, acceptance, and understanding. Thus, for the past 11 years the UNAP publication team has studied, researched, and explored innovative teaching projects that came to include the publication of eight books for English teaching at elementary and secondary school levels, all with themes of the regional culture of northern Chile: *We are Here to Read with You* (2009); *Here and There, Young People in Chile and the USA* (2010); *Read and Rediscover Tarapacá* (2012); *So Far... So Close, Contemporary Writers of Tarapacá and Pennsylvania* (2014); *Let's Read a Story* (2014); *Our Land, Our Stories* (2015); *Voices for Global Communication* (2017); *Learning English with Selected Works of Oscar Hahn and Sergio González* (2018).

The teachers were able to obtain grants to pay for printing; so, these books, in printed and digital format, have been distributed without charge to public schools in the region of Tarapacá and are used as supplementary materials. The teaching team has also presented workshops to regional school teachers to help them develop effective ways to use the materials in their classrooms with their students (location, level, background, age, etc.). At the same time, the publishing project is used at the undergraduate level at Universidad Arturo Prat to help teacher trainees learn about materials and how to develop and use them in their teaching. Each book involves the participation of ten student assistants from the English Teacher Training Program who learn the various ways to think about, initiate, plan, and develop teaching materials with special focus on the “know how” for book publication.

1.2 Local Focus, Local Application, and Global Purpose

English is a foreign language in Chile and part of the national curriculum in which students are taught English throughout the 12 levels of primary and secondary education. According to the Chilean Ministry of Education (2019) “learning English is of paramount importance in the education of globalized citizens. English is the language of travels, tourism, commerce, diplomacy, science and academics, and our students need to command this language to be connected to the world” (p. 1). In addition to having these important goals for English teaching and learning, Chile has been part of the Organization for

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) since 2010. This is “an international organization that promotes policy coordination and economic freedom among developed nations” (p. 1). The OECD primarily aims to “improve the global economy and promote world trade. It provides an outlet for the governments of different countries to work together to find solutions to common problems” (p. 2). For Chile, being a member of the OECD has led to a national effort to develop and improve the nation in the coming years and meet the organization’s purpose, which is related to helping people of all ages develop the capacities to work productively with dignity in jobs of the future. English language teaching and learning are a major part of the context described above; however, Chile still has a long way to go as a country, one that has already made substantial effort to promote democracy, eliminate poverty, and invest in education. Recently in Chile, an intense debate followed the publication of the Education Quality Agency (2019) report that stated that English teaching in Chile has several weaknesses that need to be urgently strengthened with a cross disciplinary approach. The main conclusions indicated that 85% of students from high income families obtain better results (at the basic and intermediate level schools) than those who belong to low income families; these lower economic level students obtain only 9% of the achievement at the same levels. Although Chile is divided into 16 regions, the regions with best results and scores above the national level (at basic and intermediate levels) are the Metropolitana, Magallanes, and Tarapacá Regions (Iquique, where UNAP is located, belongs to the latter). According to the report, the key factors contributing to the achievement levels include the number of hours for classes, teacher training, use of English in class, teacher’s personal proficiency level in English, student’s exposure to English, and use of English outside class. From our perspective, such conclusions are not optimistic, but they offer areas with opportunities for improvement, which, in our case, means to review our teacher training processes and determine what can be done to overcome any negative aspects.

One of our decisions has included initiating the training of our English pedagogy students in materials: how to find excellent and useful books and other resources, how to develop classroom materials, and how to contribute to the wider frame for tools to teach English as a foreign language, including textbooks that are applicable to the students’ daily lives. Thus, the UNAP book publishing project includes books that are highly associated with local identity. This concept deals with the way people live their reality according to the culture and place where they live and work. According to Flores (2018), “This construction is normally permeated by the economic, educational, and social realities of the context in which people are immersed, and it helps them create a relationship characterized by a set of shared beliefs, traditions, and cultural practices” (p. 196). Further on, the same author states that “local identity is defined as the construct of behaviors, beliefs, and social thoughts that people identify with and which make them part of a community.” (p. 198)

Furthermore, it is important to recognize the cultural context as a rich source of content; materials should be developed to assist teachers and students in obtaining knowledge and insight about the customs, traditions, and lifestyle that are part of their lives, and that they may take for granted. About this

point, Nieto (2018) argues that “teaching and learning practices should aim at evolving from traditional concepts of literacy to include the community as a text that can be explored by teachers and students through pursuing personal and collaborative inquiries” (p. 264). Nieto also explains that future teachers should be social enquirers of local issues and that a social justice perspective can be very useful when addressing local values. Thus, teachers with these perspectives and materials to assist their teaching may provide an opportunity to participate in the transformations of their students’ social reality.

The eight texts published by the team of professors of the English Teaching Program at UNAP are about the concepts discussed previously (See Appendix for the books and links).

These books include stories of the local culture, contemporary and ancient, interviews, recipes, letters, short biographies, testimonies, and selected texts of distinguished authors born and raised in the region. (See Appendix to download and review the textbooks) After all, the Tarapacá Region in northern Chile is usually described as the driest place on Earth; however, rich multicultural topics define the cultural identity of this area in the Atacama Desert located at 1800 kilometers north of the country’s capital, Santiago. Historically, it has received people from neighboring and far away countries. This area in Chile was inhabited about 8000 years ago by people of the Chinchorro culture, which practiced the mummification process using sand, mud, and ashes. After several centuries of evolution (4th to 16th century AD), other nomadic groups settled the high plains that rise to about 12,000 feet above sea level on the western ridge of the Andes, an area now known as the Altiplano. Aymaras and Quechuas, as well as the Changos near the coast, established in small communities that traded through caravans that travelled long distances in the Atacama Desert and that are now still very much alive and well. Later, during the nitrate mining boom in the 19th century, great prosperity in the region attracted European migrants (English, Italians, Spanish, Croatians) along with people from other areas of Chile, Perú, and Bolivia, making the Tarapacá and Iquique area the richest in the world for several years. After the 1970’s a new wave of immigrants arrived, attracted by business opportunities and a copper mining boom. Most came from Asia, the Middle East, the United States, and other parts of South America and gradually acculturated into the local culture but have kept those parts of their traditional culture most dear to their first identity. They also brought their life style and languages, and have made a significant contribution to reshape the ethnic and multicultural identity of Tarapacá. After all, as Yule (2009) points out, “The particular language we learn through the process of cultural transmission provides us, at least initially, with a ready-made system of categorizing the world around us and our experience of it” (p. 216). Many of these immigrants keep and practice their native languages at home and in their private circles. Spanish is the language everyone uses to communicate in public, and English is taught in school, and is increasingly used in commerce, medicine, and international relations, all of which are important in the port city of Iquique.

Activities that appreciate such culture and local identity of a city, region, or country are difficult to find in the government-supplied English texts used in Chile. The size and diversity of the country seem to be the main obstacle. However, research evidence shows that when a foreign language is learned (Brown 2000; Ur 2012; Larsen-Freeman 2016), the native and the foreign cultures must both be taught in a balanced, motivating, and effective manner. Thus, to learn a new language implies the study and appreciation of its culture and, ideally, that process should also include activities that facilitate the appreciation of one's own in order to make that experience integrative and meaningful. And also consider the fact that English is now used as a tool for global communication, which means that students may exchange conversations with non-native English speakers. In the words of McKay (2004, p. 14) "the purpose of an international language is to describe one's own culture and concerns to others."

Therefore, awareness and appreciation of the native culture are relevant aspects to be considered when learning a new language; they facilitate understanding among people and develop flexible attitudes toward different realities and experiences (Gebhard 2000; Brown 2003; Snow, 2007; Díaz-Rico 2008).

Specific needs from local teachers in Iquique and the more rural areas of the region are important factors that were considered when shaping these projects for book publication. Such information was obtained through meetings, brainstorming, group conversation, focus group, among others. In seminars and workshops presented in the past years by UNAP faculty for school teachers, those teachers have noted that, when teaching a foreign language, they want their students to go beyond grammar and vocabulary and to be immersed in the local and regional culture, along with the new language being taught. They had the impression that sometimes an important amount of time is devoted to only teaching cultural aspects of the foreign language (English) and little to no attention was paid to topics from their own culture. The topics for supplementary material included in the eight books mentioned earlier had their origin in the conversations, formal requests, and focus group activities held with teachers of English from Tarapacá. As a result, The UNAP team aimed to provide an innovative solution to a problem: the lack of regional topics in the official textbooks provided by the Ministry of Education.

In addition to the previous aspects, many students who graduate from the English Teaching Program at UNAP stay in northern Chile and work in schools serving low socioeconomic areas, including the mountainous native people's villages. Their pupils have many basic needs, and learning a foreign language as well as appreciating the best of their cultural values is imperative. The UNAP graduates believe the value to be gained is worth their facing challenges. In order to provide assistance for teachers using the books, each contains a methodological guide with an eclectic approach based on Communicative Instruction that in turn is supported by Content-Based Instruction: "an approach to second language teaching in which teaching is organized around the content or subject matter that students will acquire such as history or social studies, rather than around a linguistic or other type of syllabus" (Richards and Rodgers 2014, p. 116), and Task-Based Language Teaching: "an approach to language education in which students are given functional

tasks that invite them to focus primarily on meaning exchange and to use language for real-world, non-linguistic purposes” (Van den Branden 2006 cited in Richards and Rodgers 2014, p. 174). These types of instruction share the essential characteristics of communicative instruction, which is used here as an umbrella term to refer to all those methods and techniques being used for language teaching aimed at communication (rather than simply following rules). The teaching and learning process is then focused on the student and aims at developing linguistic, communicative, and social competence. The foreign language is learned through real-life situations, and authentic material is used for written and oral comprehension. Communicative language teaching and learning aims to help learners acquire new knowledge and the new language. However, this type of instruction has less to do with the linguistic aspects of the language itself than with learning and communicating about learners’ topics of interest and other topics that will help them broaden their vision about themselves, the world, and how to function well in it.

Taking into account all the ideas previously mentioned, the intercultural approach for language teaching was also considered. It states that the good learner of a second or foreign language is not the one who wishes to simply imitate the native speaker of the language s/he is learning. This learner is also aware of her/his own culture and identity and is able to realize how other cultures and identities perceive her/his own. Additionally, this learner knows and acknowledges the culture and identity of the people with whom s/he interacts (Paricio 2004). This intercultural communicative approach is at the heart of every book published at UNAP, and the results of their use have proven not only to engage the learners but to help them gain a fuller understanding of their own culture as they learn English and about other English-speaking cultures of the world. The UNAP books truly integrate language learning with culture.

2. Methodology

The publication of the books mentioned in the previous sections stemmed from a conversation with Dr. Anne Bliss in 2008. She is a former Professor at the University of Colorado and Fulbright Fellow in Chile. In her view, most areas of the country, with their people and culture, are virtually absent in the English curriculum and it would be an opportunity of paramount importance to publish books to fill this gap and therefore, promote language teaching to help students and teachers learn a foreign language and also their own and the foreign culture. Thus, from 2009, a group of teachers at Universidad Arturo Prat, in Chile applied for and obtained innovation and research grants that have enabled the publication of eight books for language teaching that include contents related to the local culture of northern Chile. Each grant and project included the following stages:

- Application for innovation or research grant at UNAP every year. The budget is used to work with a professional designer and cover the printing press cost.

- Call and selection of 10 students from the program to participate as assistants. Oral interviews and grade average were considered to select 10 students in each project.
- Workshop: creation of texts, technical, aesthetic and linguistic aspects. Dr. Anne Bliss presented several workshops to teachers and students about vocabulary, syntax, and style for textbooks and how to choose and use lexicon and knowledge according to age and skill level. Specialists in local culture and history were also invited to meet and talk to the team that worked in each project.
- Reading process and selection of texts to be included in the books have been done in all projects. The student assistants and teachers of the English Teaching Program participated as a team.
- Translation of the selected texts when necessary. Student assistants under the guidance of language teachers of the Program translated several of the texts. Some books include topics of the local culture, history and literature that are accompanied by dialog originally in Spanish from interviews or writing of local people.
- Design of learning activities. Book design and layout have been done by the teachers in charge of each project alongside a professional designer. Photographs were contributed by Hernán Pereira, who is a highly respected local professional photographer in addition to teaching English.
- Validation of the teaching material through experts' judgement. The book drafts were sent to university professors in Chile with expertise in language teaching and material design. They provided feedback and useful observations to be included in the final version.
- Book launch and distribution to schools and libraries. The initiation of each book took place at Universidad Arturo Prat, and copies were sent to the university library for use in undergraduate programs. In addition, copies were sent to all schools in the Tarapacá Region.
- Workshop for teachers of English in schools of the Tarapacá region. When the local network of language teachers meet, the new books are presented, and demonstration on their effective use is shown.
- Writing and sending an article to an academic journal. The three articles Pereira and Ramos (2014), Pereira and Ramos (2016) and Rivera and Espinaza (2019) about the books were published:

3. Conclusions

The UNAP teaching and learning books published between 2009 and 2018 have the following educational value as reported by teachers and students. Based on their reports as well as the experiences of the publication team the following recommendations are presented:

- Facilitate the learning of a foreign language by learning about, understanding and valuing the Chilean culture through the study of English. Such books for Chile necessarily would be very diverse as the country regions include northern, central, and southern Chile with varied lifestyles and traditions. The geography as well as the people who first inhabited Chile (Aymara, Quechua, Chango, Atacameño, Kolla, Diaguita, Rapa Nui, Mapuche, Kawashkar, Selknam, Tehuelche, Yámana) have shaped the national character and cultural identity along with the Spanish ancestors that arrived in the 16th century. The UNAP books have explored the Tarapacá Region; more such books are needed in other regions of Chile.
- Develop integrated skills and cultural knowledge in teachers and students about Chile and English-speaking countries. A balanced approach toward the foreign and local cultures is recommended to enable teachers and students to appreciate both cultures in learning a foreign language.
- Provide a solution about the manifest weakness of some books for language teaching in Chile; these texts have little to no presence of the above discussed topics about the culture of each region. This situation has been almost impossible to solve for the Chilean Ministry of Education in the uniform books they give to schools for language teaching. One solution they have used is to include a few regions of Chile and the best known landmarks such as Torres del Paine, Chiloé, Santiago, Valparaíso, Easter Island and San Pedro de Atacama. However, these notations do not do justice to the rich cultures and lives of Chileans, nor to the varied geography and topography. (See <https://curriculumnacional.mineduc.cl/614/w3-propertyvalue-187786.html>)
- Help teachers and students develop attitudes of understanding, tolerance, and acceptance towards one's own and foreign cultures. Today there is more interdependence as the world is globalized. People also need to learn that the world is very diverse and the more we know how to interact with people who are different from us, the better in our studies, work and lives we can live and perform.
- Train university students in the design and creation of teaching material which includes printed texts and educational video. An additional element added through these projects is that UNAP undergraduates are able to create teaching material that includes their own culture when teaching English in schools. This should have a long term impact in many young boys and girls as well as the teachers in the region who have received the books, participated in workshops and used the eight textbooks published in the past 10 years. The UNAP program is unique in this materials development/publication training for English teachers in Chile, but we recommend that every English Pedagogy program in the country undertake such training.
- Create educational material that integrates theory, multimedia and multicultural issues for learning a foreign language. Chilean teacher training programs should not only develop this material but use it in training future teachers who will enhance English teaching and learning in Chile. The feedback and positive comments received from language teachers of the Tarapacá region about the eight books they were given, class applications, and students' motivation indicate that we are on the right track. ("The books have

been very useful, the teenagers in my class feel motivated.” Yarith Jorrat; “Thank you for sharing these materials; I’ll include some lessons this year.” Anabella Bravo; “It’s very important that our students may know and value young locals from Tarapacá with outstanding accomplishments.” Bryam Vergara.) The next step then will be to evaluate and analyze the impact the teaching material has had and what are the areas that have not been covered in order to include that in future projects. The participation of both UNAP teachers and students has enabled training over a decade of several groups of currently in service teachers who can replicate this innovative way of teaching a foreign language, on campus and in local schools.

The lack of materials about the regional culture in the books delivered by the Chilean Ministry of Education cannot be thoroughly solved through these projects. However, this project has demonstrated over time that it is possible to find a solution when the efforts of language teachers and undergraduate students are joined. After all, in various meetings held with teachers of Iquique, Alto Hospicio, Pica, Huara, Pozo Almonte, all cities in Tarapacá, teachers have thanked the team for their initiative and creativity, and they have provided ideas based on their own experiences and needs for future publications. For example, they offered topics of local cuisine and recipes, touristic landmarks, historical issues, petroglyphs and geoglyphs in Tarapacá, the saltpeter world then and now, among others.

The books and projects mentioned above, with their local, intercultural components and an eclectic approach based on communicative instruction, have come to introduce a significant challenge in our educational work as teacher trainers. We have developed the so called publication “know how” from 2010 until now. The next step should be to invite colleagues from other universities in Chile to collaborate in a network with similar projects and, therefore, help make other regions of the country and the rich lives and cultures of their people more visible when teaching and learning English.

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Appendix

Links to the books under focus:

We are here to Read with You. 2009. Hernán Pereira, Heriberto Watson, Lucía Ramos, Juan Chamorro. Iquique: Universidad Arturo Prat. Stories for young children about lifestyles, traditions and celebrations in northern Chile.

URL <http://bit.ly/readwithyou>

Here and there, Young People in Chile and the USA. 2010. Hernán Pereira, Lucía Ramos, Roger Gee. Iquique: Universidad Arturo Prat and Holy Family University. Video and textbook with stories of remarkable young Chilean and American people. (Artists, college students, a pilot, a skater, a goalkeeper, social project volunteers, a surfer.)

URL <http://bit.ly/herebook>

Read and Rediscover Tarapacá. Hernán Pereira, Lucía Ramos, Marcela Quintana. 2012. Iquique: Universidad Arturo Prat. Stories, testimonies, letters, recipes, interviews about the Tarapacá region in northern Chile.

URL <http://bit.ly/rediscoverTarapacá>

So Far... So Close, Contemporary Writers of Tarapacá and Pennsylvania. 2014. Hernán Pereira, Pamela Daza, Lucía Ramos, Karen Jogan. Iquique: Universidad Arturo Prat and Albright College. Video and textbook with interviews, excerpts and portraits of ten Chilean writers and ten American writers.

URL <http://bit.ly/sofarsoclose>

Let's Read a Story. 2014. Hernán Pereira, Lucía Ramos, María Isabel Trillo, Michelle Espinoza. Iquique: Universidad Arturo Prat. Stories for young children with color illustrations.

URL <http://bit.ly/letsreadastory>

Our Land, Our Stories. 2015. Hernán Pereira, Lucía Ramos, Marcela Quintana. Iquique: Universidad Arturo Prat. Stories from the Aymara culture that include their people, traditions, symbols and world vision.

URL <http://bit.ly/ourlandourstories>

Voices for Global Communication. 2017. Hernán Pereira, Carolina Astudillo, Karen Jogan, Roger Gee. Iquique: Universidad Arturo Prat, Holy Family University, Albright College. Video and textbook with interviews to ten American college students.

URL <http://bit.ly/voicesglobal>

Learning English with Selected Works of Oscar Hahn and Sergio González. 2018. Hernán Pereira, María Isabel Trillo, Juan Chamorro, Anne Bliss. Iquique: Universidad Arturo Prat. A textbook with selected works of two local scholars who received the Chilean National Award in Literature and History respectively.

URL <http://bit.ly/hahngonzalez>