

Reflection

by Laurie Kovacovic

“Head and shoulders knees and toes, knees and toes, knees and toes. . .” Many language teachers can relate to the sounds of a class of spirited 7 to 10 year olds gleefully pointing out their body parts and singing out the corresponding vocabulary with the pride of mastering a new language. Their enthusiasm to learn can hardly be contained once they are allowed to voice what it is they want to learn about: their history, region, community, families – nothing short of their universes. Harnessing this enthusiasm to explore their own places in the world is essential to teaching a non-native language in manner which is of relevance to the students.

As teachers in SELT, our roles were very similar to that of tour guides, a profession which many of the students were eager to pursue. We might introduce a topic of vocabulary, and if it was of interest to the students, we would stay there for a while examining and exploring and becoming much more familiar with that area. From there, the next site of investigation would become clear and we would continue on our journey through words. Just as tourists become antsy and begin to wander when their interest and attention fades, students also make it clear whether or not the subject matter is appealing.

Belonging to a group of anthropologists, the students were well aware of our interest in Maya culture. From day one, we asked the children to be our teachers, our guides, to Yucatec Maya. We asked them to make Maya flags, and present the stories behind their flags to the community. This was a stop on the tour they definitely relished, but with mixed emotions. They were eager to talk about the site of Chichén, the heavily inscripted meanings behind all the buildings and glyphs, the tourists that come to visit, the English they already knew from living in a tourist Mecca. But their eagerness faded to apprehension when we asked them for Maya words. This hesitation stemmed from the view that Maya is not spoken by the middle class, the social group of most of the students. As one student bluntly stated “Why would you want to learn Maya, only drunks speak Maya.” On one hand the students were very proud of their Maya identity, but on the other hand, it was something that had not been actively explored. This is when the tables turned and the classroom and the teachers became the tourists and the students became the guides.

Several of the students, encouraged by our interest in what they presented to us as Maya, engaged their families and came back to class with lists of vocabulary, explanations of the significance of certain holidays, ceremonies, etc. This created a classroom where we were no longer dealing with two languages, but now three: English, Maya, and Spanish. It also created a classroom where once well defined roles of

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teacher and students blurred as we jointly attempted to acquire a new language, and jointly participated in all the activities. New value was given to speaking Maya, not just by the teachers interest in the language, but by the students interest in recovering their language to teach it to us.

And why pursue so many different things in such a time restricted course (four short hours a week for one short month)? Because the urge to learn English was already proven by the mere attendance of the students. Because teaching English was only one goal of SELT. As an experiment in ethnographic research, it was also designed to realize the views of the students, to indulge them in their own curiosities, to let them take the reigns and conduct the research, to let them be the “anthropologists” and use that as the fuel for teaching English and Maya.

By the end of SELT, we were no longer singing in one dimension, one language. Just as our range of experiences had gone beyond the classroom and into the intersection of our lives with our students lives, the intersection on tourists and guides, so did our music as we practically shouted out the last verse to the community, “¡Pol, kelemba, yok in pach, yok in pach . . .!”