English Language Teachers on the Discursive Faultlines

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Identities, Ideologies and Pedagogies

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1 English Language Teachers in Sociohistorical Context[1]

English language teaching (ELT) worldwide is increasingly seen as a 'vector' (Markee, 2000) for a suite of cultural practices, ideologies and commodities ranging from free-market capitalism and neoliberal democracy to fast food and rap videos. The consequences of ELT's proliferation have been long debated (Block & Cameron, 2002; Pennycook, 2010; Phillipson, 1992). Almost absent from these debates, strangely, have been the voices of teachers, those directly responsible for mediating the cultural messages of English in specific classroom contexts (but see Phan, 2008). Moreover, few studies compare the tensions around English instruction in international contexts with the similar linguistic and cultural tensions that surface in educational programs serving immigrants in English-dominant countries (Auerbach, 1992; Duff, 2002).

What is a discursive faultline (Kramsch, 1993; Katz, 1999)? On 13 June 2005, the edge of the Nazca plate slid under the South American plate, triggering an earthquake that killed 11 people in the Andes of northern Chile. A day later, and about 10,000 kilometers northwest, off the coast of California, the Gorda plate skidded along the Juan de Fuca plate, triggering tsunami warnings. Although I was in California, packing to leave for Chile, I heard nothing about the Chilean earthquake and little about potential tsunamis, because the news was dominated by the acquittal of pop singer Michael Jackson on child molestation charges. Two weeks later, I was observing an English class at the University of Las Peñas[2] (ULP) in the north of Chile, where a struggling older student gave a brief oral presentation on the Michael Jackson case. His professor, Paloma,[3] responded, 'This was quite the news the day of the earthquake! I think a lot has been said about this. Was it really a fair trial? And you start getting into "was it money?" etc.'

Thus, there are literal faultlines in Chile and California where tectonic plates slide along the Pacific Rim – and other metaphoric faultlines, where

tensions, stresses and collisions occur between discourses, which can be defined as competing ways of referring to and evaluating particular topics, such as sexuality, celebrity and the legal system – or ELT, the topic of this book. Almost always these are realized through language, for example, through the use of typical vocabulary, but they often involve visual imagery as well, especially in the news media. Discourses easily cross language boundaries (Risager, 2007) – but also get associated with particular languages, so that language acquisition generally involves the simultaneous encounter with unfamiliar or unsettling discourses, which may be appropriated or resisted.

Theorizing connections between language and power, the great post-structuralist Foucault famously stated, 'Discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized' (Foucault, 1984: 110). However, in examining encounters between actual speakers in particular historical contexts, it often turns out that discourse(s) are hard to seize, or at least hard to hold onto. They tend to be slippery, constantly in motion and subject to the vagaries of human agency. For this reason, I find the theoretical perspectives of Russian linguistic philosopher and literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin more useful than French post-structuralism for analyzing language(s) and discourse(s) in my context of research, as I shall explain in Chapter 2. Here I should also mention that along with 'language(s)' and 'discourse(s)', I will often have occasion to use the term 'ideolog(ies)' (as does Bakhtin). Influenced by van Dijk (1998), Fairclough (1992) and contemporary linguistic anthropology as well as Bakhtin, I use *ideology* to refer to beliefs and perceptions linked to power relations between social groups – which may or may not be expressed explicitly as discourses, but often become apparent in taken-for-granted practices (I discuss this in most depth in Chapter 3).

This book is based on interviews with English language teachers and observations of some of their classrooms at a small university in northern Chile and at several community colleges and adult schools in northern California, primarily in 2005 and 2006 (more on this later in the chapter). A central premise of my research is that every instance of language use, and thus language teaching, is 'intrinsically historical' (Blommaert, 2005: 18), and thus must be seen in a historical context (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984, 1986b). In this chapter, I contextualize the place of ELT in Chile and California by discussing the recent histories of both contexts, with special reference to 'discursive faultlines': Chile's transitions between dictatorship and democracy, and California's politics of immigration and ethnicity.

In order to connect history to teacher identity development, I illustrate recent Chilean and Californian history through life history narratives of

one Chilean and one Californian English teacher, Diego and Veronica, respectively. I begin the book with the stories of these two teachers, Diego and Veronica, because their life history narratives intersect most explicitly with the historical currents that shaped the identities of all the teachers in this study. Rather than trying to cover each teacher's entire life history, I focus on narratives that illustrate how the sociohistorical contexts of Chile and California in recent decades have influenced the linguistic and cultural identities of English teachers. Having thus situated my research in its sociohistorical context, I will explain how I came to conduct this study, detail its aims and focus and give an overview of the contents of each chapter.

My analysis of the narratives in this chapter is primarily thematic rather than discursive (Riessman, 2008). Nevertheless, while looking more at content than linguistic resources, I try to never lose sight of the fact that 'stories (are) co-constructed. . .discursive constructions that are situated in a specific place in history' (Vitanova, 2010: 31, citing Pavlenko). Specifically, I examine teacher identity construction in the narratives, defining identity as a negotiation over time between the social positions that individuals claim for themselves and those they are assigned by their interlocutors (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001). Seeing identity as *negotiated* entails the recognition that language teacher identities develop in connection with the social contexts where they have learned, used and taught languages (Varghese *et al.*, 2005).

In sharing Diego's narratives of Chile and Veronica's of California, I leave out most back-channeling, false starts and repetitions (this is my practice throughout the book). I use pseudonyms to talk about the regions of Chile and California where I conducted my study: Las Peñas for the city and university where I have worked in northern Chile, and Farmington for the urban–suburban–rural region of northern California where I live and teach, and which contains several cities and numerous educational institutions.

Chilean History: Diego

Diego was born in 1959 in northern Chile; when I interviewed him on 13 July 2006, he had lived in that region all his life. His parents were from northern Chile, but both his grandfathers were *guasos* (cowboys) from southern Chile, while one grandmother came from an indigenous community in Bolivia. At that time, he had three positions teaching English in the city of Las Peñas, at a private high school, a public adult school and as a university adjunct. He was also working on his Masters in English Teaching

at the ULP. In 2005, he had been my student in an intensive Masters class on Second Language Acquisition, and at the time of the interview, he was about to become my student again, in a class entitled Language and Cultural Identity.

When I first got to know Diego in 2005, he told me he had traveled to Russia as a child, and also gone on a teacher exchange to Iowa in 2004. He had spoken at length about the Iowa trip, and now a year later, I wanted him to articulate its influence on his English teacher identity:

> **Julia**: Umm, any other kinds of experiences you've had, with English, or with other cultures… uhh, you went to Iowa, right?
> **Diego**: Oh yes, yes.
> **Julia** ((overlapping)): Could you tell me about that experience?
> **Diego**: When I was 13 years old? In July, August, I don't remember, I was chosen as the best student in my primary school. And I receive a grant from…you know at that time? The president was Salvador Allende?
> **Julia**: Yeah.
> **Diego**: Mmhmm ((pause)). So my school received a grant from Russia. A trip. To visit Russia. So I travelled. I travelled to Russia. At that time I was there for 30 days. Visiting several communities in Russia.

Before he could describe his trip to Iowa as a middle-aged schoolteacher, Diego needed to tell me about his first experience with 'English or with other cultures'. He had already mentioned that he was born in 1959, so when he said he was 13 and the month was July or August, he was perhaps expecting me to do the math like a Chilean, to realize that he was talking about 1973, in the last month or two before the military coup in September. To make sure I was following him, he mentioned the name of the president at that time, Salvador Allende, the socialist who was democratically elected in 1970 and then overthrown by his own military, under General Augusto Pinochet. Diego did not know, and was too polite to ask, where I stood on the question of Allende, or even how much I knew about Chilean history. My presence in Chile was partly funded by the US government via the Fulbright Commission; I was in Chile on a US passport, and thus as an 'American'[4]; the US government under Richard Nixon had been complicit in the coup that put Pinochet in power for the next 17 years (Loveman, 2001; Qureshi, 2009). Diego was clarifying why he went to Russia: Chile had briefly been part of the socialist world. It went unstated that his government and mine had been temporarily on opposite sides of the Cold War.

Having introduced this story, Diego went on to recount memories of Soviet Communism:

Diego: And I remember I visited the Red Square? Plaza Roja? That's nice in English, Red Square?
Julia: Yeah. Red Square, uh huh.
Diego: And I didn't know what was going on there. And then we stood in line? And there was a building, mausoleum I think, and we toured, we make a tour around, and there was the body, the corpse?
Julia: Yeah, the body, yeah, yeah.
Diego: The body of Lenin there. Frozen ((laughs)). Wow! ((laughing)) Like that ((gestures)). He was with his left hand. . .
Julia: Ah, in a fist.
Diego: In a fist.
Julia: Uh huh ((laughing)).
Diego: Very interesting. Something's going on here, something's going to happen here. Well, that was the experience when I was a kid.

In telling me this story, Diego is not confident of the English words for certain things: Red Square, the body of Lenin, Lenin's fist, so I co-construct this narrative with him, during which he embodies the frozen corpse of Lenin by clenching his own fist. We both laugh. His evaluation is briefly serious, 'very interesting. . .something's going to happen here', but he dismisses this reaction as a child's view. Then I had another question:

Julia: How did you communicate with people?
Diego: English.
Julia: English? So you took what little bit of English you knew then...
Diego: Yes, I...we had time for about three months to prepare in English, I was in primary school. I had a teacher, a teacher of English, I didn't learn a lot with the teacher, but I learnt a lot when I was there...
Julia ((overlapping)): Because you had to use it...
Diego ((overlapping)): When I was...I had to. Communicate things.
Julia: Yeah.
Diego: So 'how do you say that, how do I say that? OK.' So I started, you know, it was communicative.
Julia: Oh, yeah!
Diego: Really communicative. So I think those influenced, when I was in...when I arrived in university.

This is where Diego's trip to Soviet Russia in 1973 connects to his identity as an English teacher. Even at the height of Soviet power, in the heart of the Soviet empire, English was the lingua franca in which socialist children from around the world were expected to communicate. As contemporary language teachers, Diego and I share our evaluation of the importance of communication for language acquisition: 'it was communicative.' 'oh yeah!' 'really communicative' (Savignon, 1983). Then he remembered the museums:

Diego: Lots of museums, because I…we went to a museum of astronomy. It was the first time, it was in 1973, and we were in the museum, we got together in groups of ten and they say, 'OK, this ten, go inside this room.' Completely dark. And then the lights turned on, it was like uhh, you are in space.
Julia: Yeah. Like a planetarium.
Diego: It was a planetarium. And I didn't know that. Beautiful. Amazing. Very nice. Good technology. At that time, 1973, we didn't have that kind of technology in Chile. […] So, many, many things that I never imagined I could, you know, experience.
Julia: Yeah. Do you think that inspired you to keep learning more about languages and experiencing other cultures?
Diego ((overlapping)): Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. I was very lucky ((laughs)).

Chileans often draw discursive connections between English and advanced technologies, so this incited my question on whether the planetarium had led him to language learning. He told me about traveling home via Cuba, and then he began to talk about Iowa:

Diego: Well, then I took the chance when I was forty three years old. Yeah, I was very old when I took the chance to go to the United States.
Julia: So between the time you went on this trip to the Soviet Union and Cuba…you were in Chile straight through till you were 43 pretty much…
Diego: ((overlapping, laughing)) I couldn't…because when I travelled to Russia, we arrived here in August ((pause)). And in September we had the…political trauma.

I simply wished to clarify whether Diego had other foreign travel experiences, but my comment triggered the memory of the coup, 'in September we had the …political trauma'. Although the dictatorship did not prohibit

foreign travel, nevertheless, Diego subjectively experienced this as a time of closed borders, an era when Chile was separated from the world. To answer my question, he recounts the erasure of his nascent global citizenship:

Diego: So all the stuff that I brought from Russia, lots of books…They disappeared.
Julia: Your parents had to get rid of them, or?
Diego: ((overlapping)) It was very dangerous!
Julia: Yeah.
Diego: Very dangerous. One of my teachers, the art teacher, Valenzuela, I remember his surname, he said, 'Diego…' I was in eighth grade. He said, 'Diego, I want to talk to you. It's urgent ((pause)). So you can go to my house?' And when I was there he say, 'Diego? Everything that you brought from Russia? Burn it. Don't even hide it. Burn it.'
Julia: Wow.
Diego: And I did.

Similarly, Diego told me that the school principal made all the records disappear. His parents were anxious, but never actually found themselves in political trouble. There was a local conspiracy of silence and forgetting, which protected Diego's family from problems with the military. As Gómez-Barris writes, 'historical processes of memory making and forgetting…are often symbolic strategies that assist in the process of smoothing over painful memories on the path toward national unity' (Gómez-Barris, 2009: 4–5; cf Moulián, 1997); Diego's story perhaps shows how these processes start as pragmatic strategies for survival under oppression. In Diego's case, the operation of the national process of forgetting was what allowed him to take on the identity of an English teacher for the Chilean military years later:

Diego: Well my mom was absolutely very worried about what was happening with us because she, 'You travelled to ( ) Russia.' Fortunately, it was nice. Well, I have nothing against the military people. Because I never had problems. When I finished my studies in the university, I started working for the military people.
Julia: Ahh. Teaching English?
Diego: Teaching English. Uh huh. I still do [at the adult school].

When we finally started talking about Diego's Iowa trip, he explained it as a project in the *Diplomado* (diploma) *de Emprendimiento* in the university. I asked what Emprendimiento meant, and he replied, 'To be a businessman, you know, to have business, to be alert about how you can get more, how