



Language and Culture: How do Uruguayan teachers of English connect to the English speaking world?¹

Claudia Brovetto & Gabriela Kaplan²

claudia.brovetto@gmail.com; kaplan@netgate.com.uy

1. Introduction

The purpose of this text is to present the preliminary results of a study done among Uruguayan EFL teachers, in which the way they relate to the English language outside the classroom has been investigated. The scope of the investigation is to know in order to better understand, teachers' personal, cultural, and emotional connections to the English speaking world; with the intention to analyse the manner in which teachers build their bilingual cultural identity, and their sense of belonging to a bilingual speech community (Risager 2005; Sercu 2005).

The researchers' first motivation stemmed from a shared concern with a sense of stagnation in the field of English teaching in Uruguay, a sense that despite the amount of hours devoted to English teaching at the public system, students still have not acquired as much learning as expected. Our intuition seemed to direct us to a perception of a forceful tension alive within the teachers' world, so strong that we deemed it a paradox, thus an anomalous juxtaposition of incongruous ideas and contradictory statements. These include on the one hand, a most valuable sense of the English language associated with social prestige, founded on the expectation of better chances of employment and education for those Uruguayans who master the foreign language. Together with this thought of value, the rejection of the English speaking world as a whole, on the bases of ideological postulates related to the economical domination and imperialist role of English speaking countries, which are presumably perceived as threatening to identity building for Uruguayans; and eventually held responsible for lack of future employment opportunities for the students.

¹ Trabajo presentado en el 3er. Foro de Lenguas de ANEP, 8 – 10 de octubre 2010, Montevideo.

² Claudia Brovetto y Gabriela Kaplan son miembros del Programa de Políticas Lingüísticas de ANEP – CODICEN

2. Language and Culture

The challenge for the teacher of English thus goes far beyond the realm of the classroom. Her profession implies her bringing into the world of her students a novel cosmogony, a new and different vision of the world, which may at times clash against her own and her students' native vision of it. At some point before appearing before her classroom the teacher needs to have negotiated within her intimate self her own identity as bilingual and bicultural person and as a messenger of a different culture.

Every single learner – whether in the shape of students or teachers – comes with brains, souls and hearts, with illusions, desires, fears, loyalties and allegiances to certain cultural values. Thus, teachers of English in Uruguay become the vehicle, the arbiters between the culture of their first language (Culture 1 or C1) and the culture of the foreign language (Culture 2 or C2), and how these will become mentally represented through the linguistic forms discussed in the classroom. A second/foreign language teacher therefore, does not just transmit useful information in the shape of verbs, adverbs and nouns, but she negotiates and judges symbolic power, the power to interpret signs and connect them to an infinity of other signs, albeit through verbs and particles, through adverbs and adjectives, but these extending ad infinitum to form webs of meaning with symbolic power. Although formed by items of vocabulary and communication strategies, symbolic forms are the universe of conscious and unconscious myths and stories, experienced or imagined concepts of history, science, religion and spirituality, words and silences, in William Blake's words, our own personal "mind-forged manacles", but also the place where to find our own keys to liberate ourselves from those same manacles.

For the researcher the task is not simple, the field of investigation is immersed within teachers' identity and hence belongs to the intimate more than to the public sphere. Nevertheless, there is an open door, and this is where our steps have been directed, to teachers' cultural competence.

Following Kramsch (2003), Saville-Troike (2003), Brody (2003), with an analytical purpose in mind, the field of culture may be divided within three dimensions of cultural competence: **Sociolinguistic ability** (verbal and non-verbal behaviour patterns grounded in interaction); **Knowledge of the culture**

area (explicit knowledge of the English speaking world) and **Attitudes** (tolerance to other cultures, strategies to dealing with differences). The three dimensions of culture and their connection to bicultural identity are explained in more detail below.

a. Sociolinguistic ability

In order to understand teachers' sociolinguistic ability, concentration needs to be sought in language as social practice, since "culture is reflected in the way we use language in social contexts", just as "culture is an interpersonal process of meaning construction" (Kramsch 2003, p.21).

b. Knowledge of the culture

This dimension refers to the explicit referential knowledge of facts, events, arts, and products associated to the foreign language speaking communities. These include the more 'crude facts' such as knowing that London is the capital of England and that the Battle of Hastings occurred in 1066; the products of each civilization such as Locke's "Two Treatises on Government" or Benjamin Franklin's invention of bifocal glasses; but most importantly every one of these cultural items needs to be seen as a possibility of symbolic construction, the product of self and other perceptions (Kramsch, 2005). Hence, even the most 'crude facts' can be perceived as culturally complex: London is the capital of England as the consequence of it being the seat of royalty and the centre of business in detriment of other towns – where other centers of power lived –, or the Battle of Hastings as the triumph of the Norman-French and the submission of the Anglo-Saxons.

c. Cultural attitudes

Cultural attitudes, like all other attitudes, are highly difficult to measure in quantity but they can potentially impregnate the whole process of learning L2 – C2. The first element to be taken into account is the way in which Uruguayan culture – C1 – imagines and conceptualizes C2. The extent of this element may be perceived by the fact that even without attending any one lesson of German, Uruguayan culture informs its inhabitants of the way in which German people

are, an identity of which the very Germans are completely unaware since they have not been encultured in Uruguay, but in Germany.

Other aspects related to attitudes such as the teachers' capacity to relativize her own self, to qualify her own cultural certainties and value others, her disposition, whether and to what extent positive towards learning intercultural competence; and most importantly her general disposition usually characterized by a critical engagement with the foreign culture (Sercu, 2005), simply due to the fact that it is foreign, and hence we are always readier to be critical of that which is not naturally ours, all have been taken into account for the purpose of this survey.

3. The study

This section reports the results of a survey done among Uruguayan teachers of English to explore their forms of cultural participation in the English speaking world and their bilingual / bicultural identity. A survey containing 10 questions was prepared and administered via on line to a group of teachers of English working at the public system. Teachers were invited to complete the survey voluntarily and anonymously.

a. The survey

Participants were asked to answer 10 questions divided into two groups. After a first question about personal information, the first set of questions relates to the connections to the English speaking culture. The second set is a self-assessment test through which participants were asked to evaluate their proficiency in the English language. The questionnaire was done using the Survey Monkey program and questions were answered entirely on line. In this paper we report the results of the first part of the questionnaire (connections with the English speaking culture)³. The questions are listed below:

1. Personal information (Gender, Age, Years of English teaching, Teaching degree).
2. How often do you hold a face to face conversation in English, or use email or chat in English with a native speaker? (Every day, Once a week, Once a month, Rarely, Never)

³ The second set of questions will be analyzed in a future study.

3. What artistic or cultural expressions do you enjoy in English? (Music, Movies, TV series, Literature, None).
4. Which do you think is the main purpose for teaching English in Uruguay? (To travel, To learn a different culture, To find better job opportunities, To continue studying, To read manuals, Other)
5. In your belief, English transmits: A sense of development and modernity in education, A sense of cultural domination, None of the above, Other).
6. Have you ever been to an English speaking country? (No, Yes once, Yes more than once).

Questions 2 and 6 refer to the sociolinguistic dimension of culture; question 3 to the cultural knowledge dimension. Finally, questions 4 and 5 aim at gaining information about the cultural attitudes of Uruguayan teachers of English.

b. Participants. Eighty five teachers participated in the study: 76 (89%) women, and 9 (11%) men. Most teachers were between 20 and 40 years old (68%), the rest were more than 40. The information about their background education and teaching experience appears in Table 1 below:

Teaching degree	I have an English teaching degree	I have a Primary School teaching degree	I have another teaching degree	I do not have a teaching degree	Total
	43.5% (37)	15.3% (13)	18.8% (16)	22.4% (19)	100% (85)
Years of English teaching	Less than 2 years	Between 2 and 5 years	Between 6 and 10 years	More than 10	Total
	9.4% (8)	18.8% (16)	18.8% (16)	52.9% (45)	100% (85)

Table 1. Participants background education and years of English teaching.

c. Results. The analysis of the answers to the survey is presented in the tables that follow. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the answers to questions 2 and 6 respectively, concerning the sociolinguistic dimension of culture. Table 4 shows the results of question 3, related to the knowledge of the culture. Finally, tables 5 and 6 present the answers referred to cultural attitudes (questions 4 and 5 of the survey).

Question: How often do you hold a face to face conversation in English, or use email or chat in English with a native speaker?

	Every day	Once a week	Once a month	Rarely	Never	Total
Face to face conversation	3.5% (3)	9.4% (8)	9.4% (8)	60.0% (51)	17.6% (15)	100% (85)
Email or chat	5.9% (5)	16.5% (14)	17.6% (15)	36.5% (31)	23.5% (20)	100% (85)

Table 2. Sociolinguistic Dimension of Culture: personal contact with English native speakers.

As shown in the table above, a large majority of Uruguayan teachers speak face to face with English native speakers only rarely (60%, 51 teachers). If we consider together the people who answered “Rarely” or “Never”, we can see that almost 78% belong to this group. Only 13% of the teachers (11) hold face to face conversations with native speakers frequently, every day or on a weekly basis, and 9% (8 teachers) do it once a month. Regarding communication with native English speakers through technology (email or chat), the results are slightly different but follow the same tendency. The analysis shows again that the most frequent answer to this question is “Rarely”. A large majority of teachers rarely or never email or chat with native speakers (60%, 51 teachers), and 22% (19 teachers) do it every day or once a week.

Question: Have you ever been to an English speaking country?

Visit to an English speaking country	No	Yes, once	Yes, more than once	Total
	69.4% (59)	15.3% (13)	15.3% (13)	100% (85)

Table 3. Sociolinguistic Dimension of Culture: visit to an English speaking country.

Table 3 above shows that most Uruguayan teachers of English have never visited an English speaking country (69%, 59 teachers), whereas 31% (26 teachers) visited an English speaking country once or more than once.

Question: What artistic or cultural expressions do you enjoy in English?

Artistic or cultural expressions	Music	Movies	Television series	Literature	None
	92.9% (79)	80.0% (68)	65.9% (56)	55.3% (47)	0.0% (0)

Table 4. Knowledge of the Culture: connection with English language cultural products.

Table 4 above shows the preferences of Uruguayan teachers of English with respect to different cultural manifestations. In this question, participants were able to mark more than one option. The analysis of the answers shows that music and movies are the most popular cultural expressions enjoyed by Uruguayan teachers, followed by TV series and literature.

Question: Which do you think is the main purpose for teaching English in Uruguay?

Purpose of teaching English in Uruguay	To find better job opportunities	To learn a different culture	To continue studying	To read manuals	To travel	Other	Total
	61.2% (52)	24.7% (21)	5.9% (5)	1.2% (1)	0.0% (0)	7.1% (6)	100% (85)

Table 5. Cultural Attitudes: purpose of teaching English in Uruguay.

Question: In your belief, English transmits:

English transmits	A sense of development and modernity in education	A sense of cultural domination	None of the above	Total
	74.1% (63)	22.4% (19)	10.6% (9)	100% (85)

Table 6. Cultural Attitudes: personal beliefs about the English language.

Tables 5 and 6 above show the answers to the questions related to the cultural attitudes of Uruguayan teachers of English towards the English language. As can be seen in Table 5, most teachers (61%, 52 teachers) associate English teaching with the possibility of students finding better job opportunities, thus, with what can be considered an instrumental goal. The cultural aspect of language teaching, the option that indicates an awareness of the symbolic dimension of language, was far less preferred as answer, but it was still present in 25% of the teachers (21), who made the choice “to learn a different culture”. The possible academic goal (“to continue study”) was only marginal.

4. Conclusions

This paper reports a preliminary study on the ways Uruguayan teachers of English connect to the English speaking culture. The analysis of the answers shows that most English teachers in Uruguay have little or no participation in English speaking culture in the sociolinguistic/interaction dimension.

With respect to cultural expressions, the most popular expression among English teachers is music. Finally, in terms of attitudes, English is associated to positive values (“modernity and development”). However, English seems to be perceived mostly as instrumental (“to find better job opportunities”), and not necessarily as a way to gain symbolic competence.

In order to further explore these cultural attitudes, after all an intimate area for any person, a qualitative study seems to be necessary.

5. References

- Brody, J. (2003) A linguistic anthropological perspective on language and culture in the second language curriculum. In D. E. Lange & R. M. Page (Ed.) *Culture as the Core. Perspectives in Second Language Learning*. IAP, Greenwich, p. 37-51.
- Clark, J.L.D (1981) Language. In T.S. Barrows (Ed.) A survey of global understanding: final report. Change Magazine Press, New Rochelle, p. 87-100.
- Damen, L. (2003) Closing the language and culture gap: an intercultural – communication perspective. In D. E. Lange & R. M. Page (Ed.) *Culture as the Core. Perspectives in Second Language Learning*. IAP, p. 71-88.

- Kramersch, C. (2003) Teaching language along the cultural *faultline*. In D. E. Lange & R. M. Page (Ed.), p. 19-35.
- Kramersch, C. (2006) From communicative competence to symbolic competence. *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 90, No. 2, p. 249-252.
- MacIntyre, P.; K. Noels & R. Clément (1997) Biases in self-ratings of second language proficiency: the role of language anxiety. *Language Learning* 47:2, p. 265-287.
- Risager, K. (2005) Forward to L. Sercu et al. Foreign language teachers and intercultural competence. An international investigation. *Multilingual Matters*, Clevedon.
- Saville-Troike, M. (2003) Extending “Communicative” concepts in the second language curriculum. A Sociolinguistic Perspective. In D. E. Lange & R. M. Page (Ed.), p. 3-18.
- Sercu, L. (2005) Teaching foreign languages in an intercultural world. In L. Sercu et al. Foreign language teachers and intercultural competence. An international investigation. *Multilingual Matters*, Clevedon, p. 1-18.