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# Foreign Language Teaching and the Politics of Culture in a Tour Guiding Curriculum

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Language teaching courses for prospective tour guides often focus exclusively on the linguistic medium of communication, coupled with a basic awareness of history and geography. This paper argues that language courses in tourism institutes should not separate the teaching of a language from wider political and cultural spheres. Similarly, during their daily encounters with visitors, tour guides should not present an unrealistic, idyllic image of a particular place, avoiding questions of a more political or socio-cultural nature. Taking French language teaching at the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS), Malta, as a practical example, this paper studies how the teaching and learning of the French language can become more critically aware of the politics of culture. How can a language curriculum in a tourism institute remain loyal to its dominant role of imparting different language skills to students and simultaneously avoid a false distinction between the linguistic medium and its cultural or political environment? Using Freirean critical pedagogy and Pennycook's politicisation of language as theoretical frames of reference and action research to outline a 'problem' in foreign language education, this research proposes ways of coming to terms with this issue. Making use of a number of interviews with Maltese tour guides and tour guiding students, the study evaluates perspectives, issues and solutions and proposes curricular developments that can transform the teaching of foreign languages in tourism institutes like ITS. By proposing more creative tours that consider a broader range of disciplines and firmer emphasis on a visitors' needs analysis, this research presents a more holistic tour guiding experience that engages with the realities of various communities, cultural scenarios and other social groupings and challenges.

**Key Words:** tour guiding, foreign language teaching and learning, French language.

## Main Text

As a teacher of French in a vocational institute of higher education (the Institute of Tourism Studies or ITS, Malta), my role is generally perceived as being restricted to the transmission of linguistic skills to students with rather specific requirements, such as using the language in settings associated with food and beverage services, hospitality and tourism management or tour guiding. This definition of a language teacher's role focuses on procedural forms of knowledge that can help students to solve problems of a practical and especially linguistic nature. It also correlates with

the generally accepted idea that foreign language teaching is an apolitical discipline (Starkey, 1999).

In this paper I will be discussing the challenge of contextualising language within wider cultural and political spheres that characterise its use in everyday life. This challenge formed the basis of action research that I conducted some time ago, during which I studied how the teaching of the French language to tour guiding students at ITS can be informed by the politics of culture. My central research question was: How can a French language curriculum for tour guiding students remain loyal to its dominant role of imparting

different language skills to students and simultaneously avoid a false distinction between language and culture? Implicitly, I was also asking how a transformed curriculum within an institute of tourism studies could possibly lead to a transformation of the tour guide's job.

### Literature

In an early analysis of the roles of the guide, Cohen (1985) referred to this occupation as a socially mediating job, linking the tourists under the guide's responsibility to the local population. This implies that the guide can use his or her position to influence tourists' attitudes towards the visited country and its people in explicit or subtle ways. As guides construct representations of places in visitors' minds, they simultaneously reveal that their own role has political implications. Naturally, this does not mean that tourists' ideas about a place are controlled entirely by guides; tourism policies, brochures and even 'daydreaming and fantasy', as Urry (2002:3) writes in his classic study of the tourist gaze, can also influence perceptions. Nevertheless, once tourists arrive at their destination, tour guides can play a considerable role in the projection of a specific image about a country, city or people, and this could lead us to ask, as Lingle Pond did in her study of the dynamics of the professional tour guide: 'If guides are ambassadors, who do they represent?' (Lingle Pond, 1993:81)

What is being suggested here is twofold: Neither tour guiding nor the study of languages for tour guiding purposes can be performed in a geographical or cultural vacuum. As Pennycook has stated, 'What we do with language in a particular place is a result of our interpretation of that place' (Pennycook, 2010:2). In other words, there can be no value-neutral cultural competence in the foreign language classroom. This accent on the politics of language emerges from a philosophy of education that maintains that the starting point of all learning is the individual's daily, concrete existential situation. This philosophy, articulated in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993), holds that individuals should reflect critically about the world they live in and try to change it. Freire talks about the importance

of dialogue in educational settings; for him, dialogue is the key to authentic classroom learning and replaces more traditional teaching methods, which treat students as recipients ready to be filled with knowledge (what Freire calls 'banking education').

### Methodology

The qualitative methods that were used to research the cultural and political connotations of foreign language teaching involved interviewing both tour guiding French language students and professional tour guides who graduated in the past from ITS. These meetings with professional tour guides permitted me to enter the field very directly and contextualise the literature in order to reflect about local issues that are more specific to the Maltese islands.

Qualitative methods of research were used in order to

- a) make maximum use of the natural setting in which students at ITS experience their training as prospective tour guides;
- b) focus as much as possible on the educational processes involved rather than solely on the outcomes;
- c) understand more deeply the meanings that students and tour guides give to their encounters with foreign, French-speaking tourists.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with guides and students of tour guiding using a set list of questions. The interviews with professional tour guides were carried out before the commencement of the academic year at ITS. At the start of the academic year, another set of interviews was carried out with a new cohort of ITS tour guiding students (three male, three female) in order to become more familiar with their aims and expectations. Towards the end of the academic year, the students were interviewed again in order to understand whether the transformed course programme had been up to their expectations and to discuss possible ways of improving it further.

Action research was also adopted as a second method during this study in order to include the students as active participants in the generation of data, which were collected as students learned and debated issues in class. During the period of action research, a new curriculum was developed that included various political issues that were relevant at the time, for example, the rise of illegal immigration in the Mediterranean, low wages (in comparison with other European countries like France), and the drop in tourist expenditure in Malta. Action research transformed the curriculum into a living process that was fluid enough to be amended on the basis of students' suggestions and ideas.

### Findings

The first interview with the prospective tour guides revealed a rather traditional understanding of their future roles as workers in the tourism industry. In fact, an interest in history seemed to be the main impetus for choosing the tour guiding course. On the other hand, the second set of interviews that followed the action research showed that their views on the guide's job changed considerably by the end of the year. It is clear that the renovated, more critical programme that was introduced permitted them to make a deeper assessment of their relationship with their future clients and to approach the industry of tourism more holistically.

One of the most evident transformations in their attitudes was related to their understanding of the requisites of a tour guide's training programme in an institution such as ITS. At the beginning of the year, they had stated that linguistic skills and a thorough knowledge of history were the most important characteristics of a good tour guide. By the end of the year, they still felt that a good grasp of the French language and knowledge of history are very relevant to a guide's work; however, they no longer understood these skills and knowledge of facts as a detached body of academic data but as a contextualised knowledge base that only becomes relevant when it is applied to their daily work with tourists. In short, they understood that a guide's training is insufficient if it is not combined

with direct experience, in the same way as tourists' prior readings about a place they intend to visit are a poor substitute for the realities they come across during their trip.

The trainee tour guides' ideas about their work with tourists changed not only as a result of being exposed to the new French programme at ITS but also because they had applied these methods with actual visiting French students from Arles and Angoulême. Meeting and working with French people helped them to resolve technical linguistic issues, interpret places and question preconceived ideas about their clients, and also distinguish between different groups of French tourists instead of seeing them all as a single, uniform group. They appreciated the importance of listening to tourists to understand their individual interests and needs, rather than present a programmed schedule of visits that rely on politically correct narratives. Guiding French tourists around Maltese towns helped the trainee tour guides to reflect critically about their relationship with tourists and also made them aware of the practical significance of some of the debates we had during the classroom sessions. Socio-cultural discussions that might have seemed unconnected to the requirements of a language class at the time now started to acquire a definite educational significance.

By the end of the academic year, it became so evident to us all that genuine meaning-making could only occur in the real-life experience of connecting with others that I decided to organise an educational trip to a partner tour guiding institution in Nîmes in France for our students and myself. I felt that such a trip would benefit ITS students in at least three ways:

- a) Visiting a French institution that also trained tour guides would show the Maltese trainee guides how guiding is practised in France, which is the main country of origin of Francophone tourists in Malta. This would expose our students to specific expectations vis-a-vis the tourist-guide relationship in France.

- b) The Maltese students would reinforce their experiences of guiding, but from the other side – that of being a tourist guided by a French trainee guide. By experiencing tourism from the perspective of the tourist within a structured visit to a tour guiding establishment in France, Maltese trainee tour guides would reflect critically about their own interpretations of places, histories and people.
- c) The Maltese students would strengthen their grasp of the French language by having to use it on a daily basis. This experience would expose them to real-life situations related to shopping for food, transport, museums and the school environment. Moreover, they would use the language within the context of a French, cultural environment, and this would reinforce the general aim of the new French programme at ITS, i.e. to connect the use of a foreign language with its wider, socio-cultural and political environment.

During the trip, our students participated in an educational programme organised by our French hosts which included visits to Marseille, Arles and Avignon. They also made presentations about Malta as a tourist destination, Maltese culinary specialities and a handful of local socio-cultural and political issues. Amongst the latter subjects, the Maltese students spoke about bird-hunting, the divorce campaign, and racism in Malta. The French students participated in these discussions and helped to compare some of the issues with similar topics in Nîmes or France, confirming the significance of such debates in tourism colleges. There was a week of bull-fighting in Nîmes during the period when we were there, and despite the presence of animal activists in France, the events still took place. The French students felt that this practice should not be stopped because it is an old tradition there and also because they feel that it is good for tourism, but ironically they were shocked to hear that some people hunt birds in Malta.

Apart from becoming aware of the relevance and topicality of certain issues like racism in France, the Maltese students' contact with their hosts helped them to develop new attitudes towards

French people in general. For instance, their preconceived idea about French 'snobbery' disappeared very quickly in Nîmes. Prior to their visit, the Maltese students also had no idea just how varied the food is in the regions of Languedoc-Roussillon and Provence. Again, they had preconceived ideas about French food: some of them thought the French mainly eat frogs' legs and snails. Several Maltese students were also surprised to find nuns working in the Lycée Saint Vincent de Paul (which is a church institution) because they thought that the French were largely secular or atheist.

The students' international experience in Nîmes permits us to confirm one of the central claims that the action research was based on: i.e. that a foreign language curriculum that rigorously attends to socio-cultural, environmental and political issues and brings students into a direct and active experience of other cultures will improve the students' ability to understand other societies, respect their diversity and make important comparisons between different cultures. Such visits and exchange programmes with French-speaking schools offer Maltese students opportunities to broaden their horizons and improve their language skills. For several students, such visits are their first personal experiences with a different culture and may have an important impact on their attitudes towards the target culture. One of the most evident recommendations that can be made on the basis of the research conducted at ITS is to integrate international experiences more firmly in the foreign language curriculum, not only by providing opportunities for students to visit foreign countries (or French students to visit Malta and ITS) but to structure such exchanges in a way that allows lecturers to build on their positive educational benefits. A more intercultural approach to foreign language learning would need to make the exchanges and work experiences of students more central to the curriculum as a whole. A simpler way of creating contacts with native speakers is to organise regular meetings with French expats in Malta as well as outings to institutions like the *Alliance Française* (I often take students with me to activities organised by

the *Alliance Française* in Floriana). Such experiences also boost students' confidence in spoken French and pronunciation and thus enhance their practical guiding skills.

The use of discussions and debate as pedagogical tools throughout the action research and the visit conducted at the Lycée Saint Vincent de Paul motivated the students and gave them opportunities for communicating ideas and opinions. These frequent discussions also presented the students with a more open-ended understanding of the role of interpretation in a tour guide's daily work. When the tour guiding trainees started to understand their own role and that of the tourist in more sociological terms, they also learned that both tourist and guide need to question their own assumptions and interpretations, making use of what Reisinger and Steiner have described as an

*approach that aims less for definitive and acceptable interpretation and more for mind-opening insights and questions that encourage tourists to find their own significance in what they experience* (2006: 494).

The action research also showed us that interpretations and interests vary depending on a variety of factors, for instance, the age of the group of tourists being shown around Malta. This confirmed the importance of engaging in a more differentiated form of tour guiding, one that takes these different interests and requirements into consideration. A tour guiding curriculum needs to develop clear strategies for dealing with such a differentiated group of visitors: guiding strategies that are flexible and adapted according to the preferences of specific groups of tourists and different linguistic and cultural backgrounds encountered by the guide. This also means that Maltese guides need to involve themselves in ongoing assessments of the profiles of groups they guide around Malta and Gozo and develop ways of stimulating different kinds of visitors. Such strategies can involve the inclusion of different kinds of sites for different age-groups in tour schedules as well as different modes of presentation.

## Conclusion

How can these strategies and attitudes be instilled in our future tour guides? It is clear that tour guiding students need to question, plan, synthesise and evaluate the various topics they discuss in class as well as their future clients. In order to do this, the approach to learning how to guide tourists needs to place a greater emphasis on developing a more dynamic, critical and flexible attitude toward guiding and tourism. One of the key factors in developing this attitude is the place of creativity in foreign language teaching as well as guiding itself. The new teaching activities developed during the period of action research, for instance, underlined the value of creative walking tours that produced new narratives revolving around places, heritage and communities and linkages between Maltese and Francophone cultural traits.

In order to develop creative tours for their clients, tour guides also need to have a wider appreciation of a variety of disciplines that could contribute to more effective and holistic tour guiding. Tour guides' readings and interpretations need to be open to change; only by transforming their own attitudes towards tourists and meaning-making can future tour guides provide themselves and their clients with a platform for reconstructing the human relationships and memories that tourism generates.

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