

# TEACHING THROUGH THE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE APPROACH: THE CASE OF CEBUANO

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This paper is a response to calls for the promotion of indigenous culture through language, such as those by the groups called DILA (Defenders of Indigenous Languages of the Archipelago) and SOLFED (Save Our Languages through Federalism) as well as by various writers' groups. It will situate the efforts of the groups above within the field of identity politics as well as the field of cognitive anthropology which seeks to find the rules and order in culture from underlying mental processes. The paper, however, is not a presentation in teaching methodology.

Focusing on the Cebuano language, the paper will propose the use of the "language and culture approach" first reported by Gary B. Palmer (1988) in connection with the Coeur d'Alene Language Preservation Project. This approach refers to the systematic presentation of vocabulary from cultural topics or domains of meaning, such as proper names and geography, as opposed to the presentation of language primarily through phonetic exercises, syntactic paradigms or phrase grammars. Since vocabulary is the starting point for lesson development, lexical analysis provides the framework for the presentation. In this approach, cultural domains are lexical domains. Earlier attempts using similar approaches will be cited, such as those used in psychology by Virgilio Enriquez, in philosophy by Fr. Leonardo Mercado, and in general culture itself by Mimi Trosdal.

This paper begins with a rationale and background of the proposal to teach language in order to teach culture, then describes earlier attempts to use language as a key to understanding local culture, and closes with a recent survey on Cebuano vocabulary. The paper, however, is not a demonstration in teaching methodology as much as an exploration into what it is in culture that we want to teach and why.

First, this paper is a response to several calls for the promotion of indigenous culture through language intervention, calls such as those of the groups called DILA and SOLFED as well as those of the local writers' groups.

At the national level, the National Commission for Culture and the Arts or NCCA, through its several committees, has been active in funding projects

to preserve both tangible and intangible heritage. And since 1994, the CHED has required the study of the regional literatures of the Philippines. This requirement has ushered the publication of hitherto unknown works in the different regional languages both in the original and in translation. Then there are the newly created heritage councils at the city, municipal and provincial levels, which have initiated projects in cultural mapping, restoration of buildings and creation of museums. There is also a mushrooming of regional centers generally based in academe for research in local culture, like the Kapampangan, Bicol, and Pangasinan Studies Centers in addition to the older ones of Cordillera in Baguio and Western Visayas at UP-Iloilo, and the Cebuano Studies Center in Cebu. The latest such center is in Cebu, the Central Visayas Studies Center of the UP, which is trying to develop a program in response to President Nemenzo's challenge "to promote, dignify and intellectualize the Cebuano language, and revive our cultural heritage" (Nemenzo, 2004).

Outside the Philippines are similar efforts at preserving intangible cultural heritage. Several conferences sponsored by UNESCO in different regions of the world culminated in a final international conference in 2001. Native Hawaiians, aboriginal Australians, the Pacific peoples, Eastern Europeans and Africans shared insights and activities toward protecting their languages. For example, the Pacific peoples report activities in revitalizing language usage, compiling dictionaries, and teaching language at all levels in schools (Seitel, 2001, p. 222). Delegates to that conference invoked their linguistic rights, which has been expressed in a statement of Bro. Gonzales that one can really be a full person only if one "can identify oneself by one's native language and can express one's innermost thoughts and sentiments and feelings as well as insights in one's native language which constitutes part of one's personality and psychological physiognomy" (Gonzales, 1996, p. 57). Among the conclusions arrived at that conference are that the strengthening of local cultures is essential to the perpetuation of a worldwide cultural diversity, and that this diversity in turn is based upon peaceful cohabitation of different ethnic groups.

Two groups called SOLFED (Save our Languages through Federalism) and DILA (Defenders of the Indigenous Languages of the Archipelago) have urged on its members the need to teach the native languages to our youth. We can situate their efforts within the discourse of identity politics that is much talked about today. Identity politics is defined as "the tendency for groups of people – who may or may not be associated with a specific space – to involve themselves in a struggle to establish a distinctive identity for themselves that is usually in opposition to some dominant identity" (Norton, 2000, pp. 278). DILA has many members abroad, in the United States and Europe, an

imagined community bonded in cyberspace that is vocal against the imposition of Tagalog as the national language, which they see as slowly suffocating the other native languages. There is something to be learned here about the psychology of Filipinos abroad who want to compensate for their absence by nostalgically harping on the need to keep intact the traditions and values that they themselves grew up with.

Indeed, there is such a need to review our ideas and consequent behavior regarding the native languages. I certainly feel with them that we should do something about the continuing hybridization of our native languages. Now, instead of mastering two languages, our children will become half-breeds. Intervention for the preservation and promotion of language may be through legislation, as in the bilingual policy, and through media blitz, as in the proportionate assignment of time and space given to local and foreign programs on TV, radio and in cinema. This paper, however, focuses on the teaching of language as a form of intervention.

Identity politics may be seen as a trend that reflects globalization in general and, more specifically, of a weakening of the more established bases of identity such as kinship or religion. Thus, emergent alternative cultures have been identified in the context of ethnicity, environmental concern, and gender and sexuality. Three forms and origins of identity construction have been suggested (Norton, 2000, p. 278): first, legitimizing identity, which is introduced by the dominant institutions in society and used to rationalize their domination of others; second, resistance identity, introduced by those who are in some way excluded and/or disadvantaged; and third, project identity, introduced by a group as a new identity that serves to redefine their position in the larger society with the goal of transforming that society. It is the second type, or resistance identity, that both SOLFED and DILA are concerned with. My proposal, however, falls under the third, project identity. "Project" has a more positive action-orientation ring to it than the word resistance. It is project identity, too, that is being constructed by Cebuano writers, who are at the frontiers of language use by exploring ways of expressing contemporary concerns.

I should mention that a survey in 2000 by Gloria Fuentes of University of St. La Salle in Bacolod (Fuentes, 2000) revealed a failure in the implementation of the Bilingual Education Policy among Cebuano and Hiligaynon tertiary institutions. While the study shows that Filipino is now acceptable as a language of unity and a symbol of national identity even among Cebuanos, the results also say that a majority believed that being an appropriate national language did not make it an appropriate language of instruction in science and math. Filipino is seen to have more of a symbolic than functional purpose in the lives of Filipinos, and English is still viewed

as the language of success. Another finding is that the majority believed they were nationalistic despite their lack of competence in the national language. Fuentes' study concludes that in a multilingual society like the Philippines, the people's sense of nationalism is strongly attached to their mother tongue, thus their feeling that lack of competence in the national language does not make them less nationalistic.

There have been earlier attempts at using language study or linguistics as key to the understanding of the Filipino psychology, philosophy and culture. The best known is the *Pantayong Pananaw* or PP as practiced by Zeus Salazar and his colleagues at the UP. A recent critique by Ramon Guillermo (2003) cites one usage of PP as a discourse reactive to Western perspectives in colonial history, and the use of Filipino as a central issue. This critique is shared by Brother Andrew Gonzales, who problematizes the indigenization of the social sciences, as exemplified in the works of Enriquez, Fr. Leonardo Mercado, Jose de Mesa and Remigio Agpalo, calling the project as a "red herring," or distracting from the main issue because their attempts consist mainly in "giving Philippine names to realities learned in a Western tongue." (Gonzales, 1990, pp.112-114), or in Guillermo's review, "writing in Filipino but thinking in foreign categories" (Guillermo, 2003). I have a feeling, though, that these remarks are addressed less directly to Salazar than to his followers, some of whom are perceived to be nativistic and essentialist. In their essays, both Gonzales and Guillermo give credit to PP but recommend a broadening of epistemological and methodological compass.

The semantic explorations of these social scientists, however, are precisely what appeals to a language teacher like me. The several concepts prefixed by "pakiki-" (e.g., pakikiramay, pakikibaka, pakikiramdam, pakikiusap) are fascinating to someone who has taken everyday interactions for granted. Enriquez's statement that "the Filipino should marshal his knowledge as a culture bearer and as speaker of the language to heighten his awareness of Philippine social reality" is an inspiring statement (Enriquez, 1977, p. 1).

So, looking for a way to heighten that awareness of social reality, I came across a study using an approach that I thought was worth exploring. This paper proposes, then, the teaching of culture using "the language and culture approach" that was first reported, as far as I know, by Gary Palmer in connection with the Coeur d'Alene Language Preservation Project. Coeur d'Alene is an American Indian language with few remaining native speakers and its status is not to be compared with Cebuano, which has perhaps more than 20 million native speakers. I thought such an approach would do as well for the few million Cebuano youths who have to look up a dictionary to understand a short story written in their own language, or ask an older person

to explain what he means by a certain term, or who cannot count from number 20 up in Cebuano.

The rationale for the approach is not merely language fluency, since language study conveys benefits beyond language fluency. Such benefits of language study are: to get a feeling for the language of the group's ancestry; to gain a sense of participating in the temporal, spatial, or material culture in which one may have an interest; and to gain insight into a philosophical and moral culture (Palmer, 1988, p.:308). Such gains are applicable not only to an outsider learning the language, but also and especially to someone like the typical Cebuano who has grown up in a bilingual or trilingual setting. He may need to know more about his local history and ancestry to feel a deeper sense of belonging to his community.

The approach itself, a.k.a. the semantic approach, as described by Palmer (1988) was developed essentially as an application of cognitive anthropology, and refers to the systematic presentation of vocabulary from cultural topics or domains of meaning, such as proper names and geography, as opposed to the presentation of language primarily through phonetic exercises, syntactic paradigms, diagrams or trees. Anyway, for Cebuanos there may be no need for a grammatical review. Since vocabulary is the starting point for lesson development, lexical analysis provides the framework for the presentation. Systematic presentation of vocabulary is according to schemes which reveal underlying semantic relations, and focusing upon organized knowledge:

Along with the purely linguistic analysis and definition by denotation, the semantic approach also introduces history, mythology, techniques and values which adhere to terms by association – the connotational aspect of meaning in a very broad sense (Palmer, 1988, p. 309).

This does not necessarily mean using Cebuano as medium of instruction but, in much the same way that both Enriquez and Mercado present their studies in English, it means reintroducing Cebuano as a culture into the school curriculum and taught within a curriculum in the dominant language. Students are taught:

the history and culture of their area using the vocabulary and categories by which the concepts are traditionally conveyed. . . . and the language resurrected consists mainly of what may be referred to as culture-loaded vocabulary. . . . Such a vocabulary consists of items pertaining to what is "special" in the community, i.e., to the "culture-

specific” rather than to “culture-free.” A culture language, so conceived, . . . consists of a stock of vocabulary reflecting . . . cultural concepts (e.g., unique cosmology, counting systems, mythology, fishing and hunting techniques, oral tradition) (Eastman, 1981, p. 302)

The linguistic anthropologist working in such a program would attempt to identify semantically rich domains, topics in which a relatively small number of features of meaning govern the construction or use of many terms. As in previous works cited, abstract concepts like loob, gahum or sakop may be at the core around which related words are generated. But even concrete body parts have to be learned, if one wants to experience his body as a Cebuano body. Also, as proper names and geography are essential features of ethnic identity, they should be prioritized.

Names and maps, for example, can direct our attention to things that we might not have seen before; names and maps provide an indication of the circumstances of the various groups occupying a landscape. Both are cases of cultural writing in the world and such writing can be read as a text (Norton, 2000, p. 292). In Cebu City, for example, places are given three types of names: possessives, descriptives and commemoratives. “Kan-irag” is a possessive, indicating the area as once owned by an ancestor named Irag; “Kalubihan” is a descriptive, hinting at the original character of a place that used to be full of coconut trees; and “B. Rodriguez” is a commemorative, in honor of an esteemed statesman and writer.

With the basic strategies of the approach in mind, I thought of designing teaching modules for introduction in various departments in my school, including history, psychology, sociology, political science, language and literature and the arts. But that design is still in the air, something to be done in collaboration with the respective departments. This plan has something of the subversive in it, for there is no separate course for the teaching of the native culture or the native language, to be integrated into the curriculum. So I felt I had to conduct a survey first of what the academic community thought and felt about the teaching of Cebuano vocabulary.

Now, to the preliminary survey. Respondents to the survey were 82 in all, distributed as follows: 51 students, 23 faculty and 8 staff. Variables of age, sex, civil status and migration were considered, but responses did not show considerable differences. This is how they rated their knowledge of Cebuano: 39 good, 20 very good, 17 fair, 3 poor and 3 excellent. Such self-estimation was corroborated by a multiple-choice vocabulary test included in the questionnaire. To find out how much of their knowledge may be due to exposure to media, we asked if they regularly read Cebuano periodicals and

listened to radio programs in Cebuano. 60 out of 82 or 73% did not read Cebuano materials while 49 or 60% did not listen to Cebuano radio programs regularly. Listening to radio then is slightly more a source for learning Cebuano than is reading. (Perhaps we should have a Cebuano language course on the air?) This suggests that the respondents get their knowledge of the language from the community at large, including at home. A slight number, only 3 out of 82, read library books in Cebuano probably as part of their assignment in Philippine Literatures.

When asked whether they believed that a vocabulary retraining program in indigenous Cebuano is important, 66 or 81% believed it is important, 11 or 13% said no, and a few abstained. Of those who agreed on the importance of such a program, they gave the following reasons: 83% for the first reason, namely, "to promote appreciation of the language," followed by "to preserve the language and its cultural value," then "to promote confidence in one's Cebuano identity," also "to increase competence in the use of the language," and "to learn about the history of the language itself." One last reason, given by 45% of the respondents, is "to gain insight into the Cebuano psychology." What about those who negated the importance of a retraining in Cebuano vocabulary? Only half of those who answered "no" bothered to specify why, either that the bilingual policy is enough (4 responses), or that Cebuano is a provincial language (2 responses, given by teachers of English).

I was curious to find out which vocabulary areas were considered priority areas, so we asked the respondents to rank twelve domains, which I have arranged after computation of the first three ranks with descending weight per rank: 1) cultural heritage (music, literature, games, etc.); 2) food; 3) psychology (emotions, behavior, etc.); 4) history (names and events); 5) crafts; 6) folklore; 7) philosophical concepts; 8) flora and fauna; 9) politics; 10) idiomatic expressions; 11) business and marketing; and 12) health.

The two last ranked are business and marketing, and health. This tells us there is little need perceived to learn native terminology because the current practices in these areas are from the West, and are much discussed or read about in mass media. But I failed to distinguish between traditional medicine and urban health care, and it's probably the latter that was in the mind of the respondents, who are conversant in the vocabulary of hospitals, diseases and vitamins.

The highest number of respondents (41) ranked as no. 1 the area of cultural heritage. The next highest (though with only 6) is food. I would have wanted to see a higher ranking for idiomatic expressions since many such expressions are culture-specific, as in the expression *karaan pa ni Mampor* (more ancient than the Capt. Joaquin Monfort, commander of the Spanish forces during the revolution), or the figures of comparison "as \_\_\_\_\_ as",

e.g., *itom pang Lugdoy* (blacker then the local ogre Lugdoy). But I guess the students are comfortable with their own brand of idiom or slang.

Another domain that I expected to rank high was flora and fauna, but it was only 8<sup>th</sup>, perhaps because they don't see much need for distinguishing species, except when buying fish. It's a pity because our poetry and fiction in Cebuano is full of local color.

**Table 1: Ranking of vocabulary domains**

Ranking of vocabulary domains	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total
Cultural heritage	41	11	4	2	2	4	3	1	1	0	2	0	71
History	6	17	11	5	2	4	3	2	3	3	4	2	62
Food	6	4	4	8	8	3	3	1	5	2	6	5	55
Folklore	5	13	12	8	5	2	2	3	2	3	3	2	60
Psychology	5	3	2	5	4	3	8	6	5	3	3	5	52
Philosophy	4	2	6	2	6	3	6	4	4	3	7	2	49
Business and marketing	3	1	0	7	3	3	3	8	4	7	4	5	48
Idiomatic expression	2	11	12	4	3	9	1	4	3	2	1	3	55
Flora and fauna	2	4	4	5	5	4	4	5	4	7	1	8	53
Crafts	2	2	2	4	10	5	5	2	5	4	4	4	49
Health	1	4	5	6	6	7	4	4	4	5	6	1	53
Politics	1	1	2	8	1	4	8	8	5	6	3	5	52

Planning and implementation of the project of teaching vocabulary in various domains would take time. But it's a start. A more comprehensive survey should help narrow down these domains. But I think this recent survey reinforces what the linguistic anthropologists behind the approach have said about culture-specific vocabulary as boosting identity and morale.

Let me close with a poem submitted to a writers' workshop in Cebu held 15-17 October (2004). Written in Cebuano, entitled "Pikoy ni Lola Mameng," it is about a parrot named Winok that's imprisoned for a while inside a jar, accompanied by a radio that would air soap operas and play Max Surban's songs. The parrot's owner, Lola Mameng, is a Surban fan. It's a humorous poem, but its closing line hints at the allegory of the native who is forced to master a language to the point that he cannot find his own voice.



**Pikoy ni Lola Mameng**  
ni Jennibeth Loro

Kung mao may pasulti-on  
Mokutib lang ang baba  
Sa mga kanta ni Max Surban  
Hangtud sa pamalikas  
Sa usa ka kontrabida

Kay niadtong  
Kuyabog pa si Winok  
Kini gisulod ni Lola Mameng  
Sa tadyao ug gidulgan  
Ug radio

Sa ilawm sa tadyao  
Si Carmela nagpabiling maanyag  
Ang Christmas tree wala gyud nabali  
Ug si lolo ug lola nagpadayon  
Ug kara-kara niadtong disco-ral

Sakto gyud  
Paggawas ni Winok  
Nakalimot na siya  
Sa iyang tingog.

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