
TEACHING TEXT AND CONTEXT THROUGH MULTIMEDIA¹

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ABSTRACT

The use of multimedia technology to teach language in its authentic cultural context represents a double challenge for language learners and teachers. On the one hand, the computer gives learners access to authentic video footage and other cultural materials that can help them get a sense of the sociocultural context in which the language is used. On the other hand, CD-ROM multimedia textualizes this context in ways that need to be "read" and interpreted. Learners are thus faced with the double task of (a) observing and choosing culturally relevant features of the context and (b) putting linguistic features in relation to other features to arrive at some understanding of language in use. This paper analyzes the interaction of text and context in a multimedia Quechua language program, and makes suggestions for teaching foreign languages through multimedia technology.

INTRODUCTION

Today's teachers are frequently urged to make use of computer technology to teach foreign languages. In its recent Standards for Foreign Language Learning (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1996), for example, ACTFL suggests:

Access to a variety of technologies ranging from computer-assisted instruction to interactive video, CD-ROM, the Internet, electronic mail, and the World Wide Web, will help students strengthen their linguistic skills. . . and learn about contemporary culture and everyday life in the target country. (p. 31)

Teachers are particularly encouraged to use multimedia materials based on original videos filmed in culturally authentic contexts (e.g., for French, see Furstenberg, in press, and Noblitt, 1995a, 1997; for Spanish, see Noblitt, Rosser, & Martinez-Lage, 1997; for German, see Crocker & Fendt, in press; for Quechua, see Andersen & Daza, 1994; for Russian, see Paperno & Tsimberov, 1997). In general, the computer seems to offer immediate access to the way native speakers use their language in real everyday situations. As many researchers have shown (e.g., Crook, 1996; Herring, 1996; Kenning & Kenning, 1990; Murray, 1995; Noblitt, 1995b; Warschauer & Kern, in press), it offers the possibility of developing the sociocultural competence of language learners more readily than the pages of a textbook or the four walls of a classroom. In effect, computers seem to realize the dream of every language teacher--to bring the language and culture as close and as authentically as possible to students in the classroom.

But what do we mean by this "language and culture" in digital form? Through multimedia in particular, language is no longer just a list of grammatical paradigms or lexical items. Rather, it is intimately associated with all kinds of verbal and paraverbal behaviors, an acoustic and visual context that is indissociable from the larger societal context in which the words are uttered. Language, in a sense, has become culture. Similarly, culture is no longer just the factual pieces of information that textbooks present in the form of culture capsules on foreign mores, but is produced and reproduced under our very eyes, on the screen, through what people say and how they say it. In multimedia, culture is inscribed in language use. How can we teach this combination of language-in-culture and culture-in-language?

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Most producers of video-based multimedia materials view language as textbook writers do, that is, from a formal linguistic perspective. Language is presented as a set of linguistic structures (vocabulary, grammatical forms, or discourse gambits), selected, to be sure, from within the flow of authentic speech seen and heard on the television screen, but now accessible at the click of a mouse in framed windows with their synonyms or English equivalents, and offered to the students to learn and reproduce in active language use. Language is taught as words and sentences, not as discourse and interaction in context (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Kramersch, 1981, 1993; Schiffrin, 1994). On the other hand, culture is presented by multimedia through attractive links to visuals, film segments, and other documents that also appear in windows, whose relevance to other windows has been pre-determined by the computer programmer. Language in these windows serves to explain culture. It is seen as a transparent conduit for the transmission of cultural information. Again, language is presented here as an unproblematic culture-free conduit (Reddy, 1979); it is not seen as being itself the carrier of values, beliefs, and various worldviews (Kramersch, 1998).

From a discourse or anthropological perspective, linguistic structures, as they are used in communicative situations, are embedded in the whole social and historical context of culture (e.g., see Gumperz, 1982; Malinowski, 1923; Sapir, 1949); they are but one system of signs among many that people use to give meaning to their environment. Other signs include not only gestures, facial expressions, body movements, verbal and non-verbal sounds, and proxemics, but also cultural artifacts such as traffic noise and folk music, pictures and billboards, and landscapes and city maps. Linguistic signs acquire their meaning because they point to other signs in the environment. When learners go abroad and interact with the members of the host culture, all these signs are there, live, to be recognized and decoded (Hanks, 1996). In a video or multimedia program, however, they are inevitably filtered through the film-maker, the camera, and its lens, in other words, through the semiotic system of the video itself. Interpreting that semiotic system means understanding as much as possible why certain events might have been selected, others ignored, why certain people were focussed on, others left in the background, and so forth. What students need to understand, then, when learning the linguistic system through "authentic" video, is the way language interacts with other sign systems, including those of the medium that represents them (Kress & van Leuwwen, 1996).

Using multimedia transforms our task from teaching language as a formal system to teaching language as what Hanks (1996) calls "communicative practice," that is, a social activity that reflects and reproduces a speech community's stock of values and beliefs. However, language teachers are used to teaching the linguistic system the way linguists have described it (i.e., independently of its communicative practice). Their formal grammars talk about verbs, nouns, adjectives, and prepositions. They do not talk about the language as cultural semiotic. By contrast, work done in anthropological linguistics (Duranti, 1997; Foley, 1997), discourse analysis (Brown & Yule, 1983; Cook, 1989; Coulthard, 1977; Kramersch, 1998; Stubbs, 1983; van Dijk, 1985), pragmatics (Levinson, 1983; Mey, 1993), and the ethnography of communication (Goffman, 1959; Hymes, 1972) can help teach the forms of language together with the meanings attached to it by speakers and listeners in social settings (for foreign language study, see Kramersch, 1993).

COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICE AS CONTEXT

In *Language and Communicative Practices* (1996), William Hanks shows us what this might mean in his brilliant analysis of a short exchange that took place one evening in a Maya household in Oxkutzcab, Yucatan, where Hanks was conducting anthropological fieldwork. A young man named Yuum had come to visit the senior man of the household, Don Chabo. Standing outside the house, Yuum asked through the open window:

Yuum: kul á?an wá dón chàabo?
Is Don Chabo seated?

Margot, the wife of Don Chabo's eldest son and thus the senior resident woman in the household, answered:

Margot: ushén tol o?, taán uy uk' ul. sheén to ich nah o?
Go over there. He's drinking. Go over there inside. (Hanks, 1996, p. 157)

Hanks was puzzled by this exchange. Why did Yuum ask if Don Chabo was seated? Why did it matter? Why did Margot answer that he was drinking when in fact he was "gazing off into space with a roll in his hand" (p. 157)? Why did she choose the adverb *tol o?*, which means "over there" (outside the space that includes me), rather than *way e?*, which means "here" (the space that includes me now), since Don Chabo was having dinner with her at that very moment, thus occupying the same space as she? Understanding these few lines of dialogue, Hanks argues, means accessing the "cultural horizon" against which this exchange took place. This horizon has elements of past verbal interactions, shared knowledge of domestic architecture, the overall organization of the household, and a commensurate knowledge of the Maya language. "Context," writes Hanks, "may be organized out of the vivid present of utterances, but it is equally preformed by histories and social facts that linger in the blank spots and silences of speech" (p. 166).

If, according to the ACTFL Standards, "the key to successful communication is knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom" in real-life situations (1996, p. 12), then students, like Hanks the anthropologist, have to first observe and understand how communication occurs among native speakers against these speakers' cultural horizons.

FROM CONTEXT TO TEXT

It is one thing to experience the Maya language in its living context, as Hanks did, but it is quite another to describe it to fellow anthropologists or to teach it to students in academic settings. Hanks himself transformed his lived experience into readable text (e.g., the book *Language and Communicative Practices*), so that we could benefit from the insights he gained through his textual scientific study of oral situated language use.

The problem with learning a language from live context is that context itself cannot be learned, it can only be experienced, or apprenticed in. Therefore in order for context to be made learnable, especially in an academic setting, it has to be transformed into analyzable text. As an educational tool, multimedia technology opens up immense possibilities of contextualization by textualizing knowledge through its representational capabilities, that is, its endless reproducibility (see Benjamin, 1968). What the printing press did to the evanescent spoken word, multimedia technology does to words and images:

- Digitalization insures against the aging and decay of the presented event.
- Random access breaks the linearly experienced flow of time. It can rearrange the order of events, fast forward, or fast rewind them; it can juxtapose/superimpose gestures, words, and actions that were experienced separately.
- Digital technology can slow down or speed up the spoken word without altering pitch and tone.
- Multimedia can select events perceived to be similar or analogous, draw them out of their original texts, and reconfigure them within a different frame. It can repeat a segment of speech or a gesture over and over again up to absurdity; it can isolate fragments of speech or behavior to a level of presentation that was certainly not perceived that way by those who lived the experience.

This unlimited mechanical reproduction of live data contrives to transform lived context into analyzable text. Anthropologist James Clifford sees this process as indispensable for both interpreting lived experience and for learning from it. He writes:

Textualization is understood as a prerequisite to interpretation It is the process through which unwritten behavior, speech, beliefs, oral tradition, and ritual come to be marked as a corpus, a potentially meaningful ensemble separated out from an immediate discursive or performative situation. In the moment of textualization this meaningful corpus assumes a more or less stable relation to a context; and we are familiar with the end result of this process in much of what counts as ethnographic thick description. . . . A world cannot be apprehended directly; it is always inferred on the basis of its parts, and the parts must be conceptually and perceptually cut out of the flux of experience. (Clifford, 1988, p. 38)

Applied linguist Richard Kern expresses the same sentiment when he writes: "Audiotape and videotape recorders have made it possible for speech and events to be 'objectified' and 'textualized' just as much as paper texts" (Kern, in press). Kern provides as an example the video footage of Rodney King being beaten by Los Angeles policemen in 1991. It is through repeated viewings of this tape during the Rodney King trial that the event became a "text" viewed by millions of people throughout the world. This ostensibly "objective" videotext could then be interpreted and reinterpreted by the defense and prosecuting attorneys as evidence of either the innocence or guilt of the policemen involved in the incident.

In the case of educational multimedia, the acquisition of textual literacy includes both verbal and visual literacies. To fully appreciate this process, we must first understand what textualization consists of.

TEXTUALIZATION: THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING

Textualization in multimedia language software is nicely characterized by Ucuchi: Quechua Live and in Color! (Andersen, 1987, 1996; Andersen & Daza, 1994), a CD-ROM produced by Roger Andersen and Jaime Daza for the teaching of Quechua in the United States. It is based on a two-hour ethnographic film, taped in Bolivia in 1989 and digitized by Roger Andersen and Jaime Daza. We focus on Scene 4 because it nicely illustrates the challenge we are discussing here. This eight-minute scene presents an authentic hearing that took place in September 1989 in the village of Ucuchi, Bolivia. A woman from the village, a money lender named Doña Petra, is charged by the village magistrates with not paying her quota of village dues. She defends herself vehemently, claims her innocence and, in turn, accuses the magistrates of corruption. Highly disliked by the villagers, however, she eventually loses the case and is forced to pay and go to jail.

In this scene, the technology gives us the possibility, through the computer's unlimited database, to access a host of original sources beside the video itself: spoken and written glosses and commentaries, transcriptions, translations, written ethnographies, and official documents, including interviews with the participants after the fact, not to mention the filmmaker, expert anthropologists and ethnographers--all part of an immediately accessible relational database that both presents and represents Bolivian Andean culture. All of these sources must be brought to bear on that sunny Sunday afternoon in Ucuchi if we want to understand what occurs there.

Textualization is characterized by five fundamental features, which we can readily observe in Scene 4 of the Quechua tape:

- 1) Textualization realigns reality along other arbitrary axes of space and time. Indeed, the full Ucuchi video juxtaposes for sequential viewing scenes that were shot at different times and in different places, thus recreating an Andean reality that is different from the day-to-day reality lived by the protagonists in the film.
- 2) Textualization makes an event or propositional content identifiable as "the same" at every reading or replay. This content has been carved out of the flow of time through arbitrarily selected

boundaries (e.g., beginning and end, arrival of defendant and government official, and departure for the prison in Scene 4).

- 3) Textualization dissociates the meaning of an event not only from the mental intentions of its participants, but also from the intention of the text's or film's author (in this case the filmmaker and computer programmer). The meaning of the event is now associated with those who have the technological know-how, and the societally sanctioned expertise to "read" and interpret the text as text: anthropologists, linguists, language teachers, and language learners.
- 4) Textualization extends the importance of the event beyond its relevance to its initial situation. The text is held together internally by its own expository or narrative logic. Scene 4, for example, begins with the ostentatious arrival of the defendant and the city official and ends with the official leading the defendant into prison. This is a staged representation of an authentic event, emplotted along a familiar narrative pattern of problem-complication-evaluation-resolution that evokes other legal proceedings of a quite different cultural value.
- 5) Textualization makes the meaning of the event accessible to multiple, unpredictable, and changing audiences. The reenactment of this filmed, narrativized, version of the event acquires at each replay additional layers of meaning for each viewer.

These five traits taken together constitute the "objectivity" of the text. Text replaces lived experience by the textualized experience of "reading" and interpreting.

The technology that enables experience to be presented over and over again develops a problematic of its own which is not merely an extension of the speaking/hearing situation constitutive of the original dialogue. To understand a text is not to rejoin the intentionalities, attitudes, and beliefs of the author or actors involved. Rather, it is an argumentative process that enables viewers to grasp the world opened up by the actions as they are *represented* in visual/electronic form. To quote philosopher Paul Ricoeur:

Understanding has nothing to do with an *immediate* grasping of a foreign psychic life or with an *emotional* identification with a mental intention. Understanding is entirely mediated by the whole of explanatory procedures which precede it and accompany it. (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 220)

This argumentative process can be achieved through multimedia by bringing context and text in constant interaction with one another.

THE DIALECTIC OF CONTEXT AND TEXT IN UCUCHI: QUECHUA LIVE AND IN COLOR!

In order to understand Scene 4 as an instance of both spoken Quechua and lived Andean culture, let us consider several related texts: (a) the filmed eight-minute scene, (b) interviews with a native consultant who is also an anthropologist, and (c) a written ethnography by Billie Jean Isbell.

Each of these texts represents (i.e., "stands for") a larger world opened up by the text. The eight minutes of videotape entitled "Scene 4" stands for the entire hearing that lasted two hours. The hearing in turn stands for the justice system in the village of Ucuchi, Bolivia. Ucuchi itself stands for, or is a synecdoche of, Bolivian Andean culture. The whole video clip stands in miniature for the culture of these Quechua speakers. A challenge for us viewers is, of course, the meaning of the drama represented here in micro fashion. That meaning is both in the words uttered and in the non-verbal context. It is crystallized in a fleeting moment where at the onset of the proceedings, the union leader, Pibe, motions Doña Petra to come forward and face the court. (View a high quality video of this scene in [QuickTime](#) format [5.2 Mb] or a significantly lower quality video in [RealPlayer](#) format [110 Kb].)



- Pibe (union leader): Mama Petra, jamuy a
Mama Petra, please come here
- Doña Petra: (does not move and looks away)
- Rosalio (secretary): Kay laduman pasamuy mama Petra.
Come this way mama Petra.

Doña Petra emphatically refuses, preferring to remain standing behind them on the side. By repeating Rosalio's utterance (kay laduman) but fitting it to her desires, she defiantly challenges the court right from the start.



- Doña Petra: Ay! kay laduman parlamusqayki. Urmaymanpis, imanaymanpis.
Ah! on this side I will talk to you. I may fall down, I might do something.
- Rosalio: K'askamuy, solamente nanaykupaj intyendenaykipaj, mana intyendenaykipaj, i?
Come near, just so we uh, um so you can understand, like that you can't understand, eh?

Lived Quechua, as language learners would experience it if they went to Ucuchi, has its own logic of action. Had a foreign student of Quechua been there, he or she would have probably been led to interpret this dialogue based on any one of the participants' or spectators' interpretations, for instance, by Jaime

Daza, an anthropologist and friend of one of the magistrates. Here are portions of conversations between Roger Andersen (RA), Claire Kramsch (CK), and Jaime Daza (JD), also a native consultant and co-author of the multimedia program:

First Conversation:

- RA: At the beginning, Pibe sort of puts his back to her and says "come over here," and then Rosario says "come this way." She decides to stand back there. What's the significance of him turning his back to her and saying "come here"?
- JD: Well, he's showing contempt for her because she's a feisty woman, a disagreeable person.
[. . .]

Second Conversation:

- CK: Doesn't she realize she depends on the community?
- JD: Probably, but then she lives by herself. Probably she feels somewhat isolated by the people, so she doesn't feel like she should=
- CK: = Is she isolated by the people?
- JD: I think she's kind of a loner. . .yeah, because she's so contentious. . .her demeanor. . .you see they were so nice to her and say "would you please come in front and face the authorities," and she said, "No, no, I'm not deaf. I can hear you from where I am." And she had her own way. They didn't force her. They could. She was supposed to face her accusers....
- CK: Doesn't Doña Petra contribute to the life of the community?
- JD: No, she is like a leech. You know, she's sucking the life-blood of the community. She's not a likeable lady at all, no no no....

Jaime Daza's judgment on Doña Petra seems to echo that of Crispin, the mayor of the village, during the trial

- Crispin: Q'ala umayta nanachiwarqayku. Kay Doña Petraqa ajna usurerapuni kasqa. Tukuy nerquanku ripuy.
She gave us the biggest headache. This Doña Petra is said to be always that sort of usurer. Everybody told her, "Go away."

and of Leonardo, the corregidor, or village magistrate, whom Doña Petra accused of having pocketed the money that she gave him for the church

- Tata Leonardo: Ya, ya, kay millay, mala y kay runa.
Yeah, yeah, this bad filthy person.

However, the explanatory pattern that ultimately emerges from this interview is different from the American pattern of non-compliance to societal rules, greed, or even lack of private philanthropy.

- JD: Everybody's paying, we all agree to pay, like for example they have to fix the church, the church is made of adobe, and with the rain all this, you know, so they have to keep it up. So she is supposed to give a quota to keep, for the upkeep of the church. She never did that. She was supposed to contribute money for the electricity, to bring the electricity, the lines of the cables and all this. She never did that. She did not put out the money either, because she says that she's poor, that she doesn't have a husband, that she lives by herself [and that she doesn't need electricity]....

Daza's discourse clearly pits the we and the they of the community against the she of the unattached or "unaffiliated" defendant; he positions himself alternately as the voice of the community ("we") and as the voice of the ethnographic outsider ("they").

JD: She was saying that she wasn't getting any benefits from being a member of the community. . . She may not be part of it, I mean, she's kind of a loner type of lady, and that's because she's not well-liked by the community.

In other words, says Daza, Doña Petra is a loner because she is not well-liked, and she is not well-liked because she is a loner. Doña Petra, of course, gives her own reasons for this: the corruption of the village magistrates:

Mama Petra: Chaypi, nata Alcaidetawan Alcaidewan, Corregidorwan oqoykunku.
There, uh, um, the Mayor, the Mayor and the Corregidor swallowed up the money.

This is echoed by Daza's acknowledgment of the inefficiency of the city's officials and the impotence of the central government in La Paz. In our interview with him, Daza remarked:

JD: If you wait for the government [to do things], in Latin America, it will never happen. We'll wait until we die, you know. It's not like in the United States, where your taxes are at work, you know?

All these are reasons that incriminate the justice system itself and, by the same token, the very magistrates who are passing judgment on Doña Petra. At this point, it is appropriate to bring in other perspectives, such as that of anthropologist Billie Jean Isbell:

[In Andean culture], membership in the many communities demands active participation in the civil-religious hierarchy, whereby a member expends wealth and achieves status through service to the community. . . . Exchange and reciprocity are common, and the accumulation of wealth is not tolerated. Wealth is expended in civil and religious displays of generosity. (Isbell, 1978, pp. 31-32)

If indeed Andean culture has an ambivalent attitude toward money and if wealth in this community is tolerated only if associated with displays of generosity, then we have a much more complex picture than would appear initially. As Pierre Bourdieu would say: "Reality is relational" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 203). To have a generous gift, you need a society where generosity is rewarded and not taken advantage of, such as through the corruption of elected officials. In the end, Jaime Daza gives a much more differentiated view of Doña Petra than the one he gave at the beginning, as can be seen in the following extract:

CK: Where did she start having money to lend?
JD: Probably she is very wise with her money, she saves, probably her needs are not as great as other families, where they have children. She's all by herself. She can grow her own food, sell whatever she produces, save that money, invest that money in dollars....

What this last extract suggests is that what is being put on trial here is not the simple offence of not paying your dues. What is at stake is the very survival of a cultural tradition of reciprocity that keeps the community alive.

We can now return to our initial dialogue and understand better what is going on. Teaching students of Quechua to "read" multimedia entails linking the words heard to the events seen on the screen and to the background knowledge provided by the various links in the program. In light of what we have learned

from the interviews with Jaime Daza and from anthropological accounts of Andean culture, we can start piecing together the following interpretation of the scene.

The spatial confrontation of Rosalio's position expressed by his words *kay laduman* (on this side) and Doña Petra's position expressed by her echoing Rosalio's words *kay laduman* (on this side), but giving them a different meaning, is emblematic of the ideological confrontation of the two protagonists in this village hearing, where each tries to anchor the debate deictically within his and her own legitimate perspective. Doña Petra, the village usurer, keeps to herself both in the way she leads her life and symbolically now as she insists on standing "on the side." The linguistic features of the dialogue match her position in space on the screen. Both are a metonymy for the insider/outsider's place she occupies in the Ucuchi community. Doña Petra's "crime" appears to consist not in having disobeyed the law (which she claims is abused by corrupt administrators like Rosalio), but in not honoring the very foundation of this community's culture, namely private and public exchange and reciprocity, owing and being owed to, or in anthropological terms, playing the game of "prestation" (dues) and "counterprestation" (dues in return). The act of not paying one's dues takes on in this context a much weightier cultural value than just doing "what is legally expected or morally right." It is a sign of distrust and lack of solidarity toward the community.

The interpretation we have suggested here brings together the text and context of this scene. Each additional text changes the general configuration of the context. For example, another conversation with Jaime Daza would have informed us that he had been for one year a guest in the Camacho family, in which two of the magistrates at the trial, Crispin the Mayor and Leonardo the Corregidor, are father and son. We would have then perhaps understood that Doña Petra's behavior not only went against the unspoken rules of solidarity in this village, but was also perceived as a personal affront to the Camacho family's authority in the village. But that interpretation itself is only one piece of a complex puzzle that has to be deciphered in the posture, words, tone, attitudes, and silences of the participants in this scene.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

In trying to understand the lived context of culture presented by multimedia, the analysis we have just offered has attempted to interpret the textual representation of that context on the screen. Following current communicative methodologies that put the emphasis on authenticity of language use and the need to understand native speakers in their cultural context (e.g., Kramersch, 1993), teachers might want to use authentic video as an extremely rich semiotic "text" to be deciphered and interpreted with all the critical resources of discourse analysis and cultural ethnography. Teaching the language is not only teaching what people say and how they say it correctly and appropriately, but why people say this rather than that to whom, and for which purpose, and how they express irony, anger, or scorn (e.g., see Doña Petra's *Urmaymanpis* [I may fall down] which may express all three feelings).

Of course, developing the students' sociocultural competence in that manner requires that the teacher know something about the culture of the community and about Andean culture in general. If we want students to understand the text, they must have a sense of the context. For example, learners may notice that Doña Petra is the only woman at this hearing--all the magistrates are men. Are gender roles being enacted at this court hearing as well? Is it unusual for a woman to be a money-lender in Andean culture? What is the role of women in this community? To understand this particular hearing, learners of Quechua would have to know something about the penal system in Bolivia, the tradition of town meetings and the organization of local, regional, and central governments. Each of these aspects of Bolivian culture can be assigned for research in the library; the students can report on them in class as a culture component of the course. They can do this in English at the beginning and intermediate levels, in Quechua at the more advanced levels. Teachers themselves can use any source of ethnographic information at their disposal (e.g., from interviews with native informants, conversations with friends and acquaintances, books and articles) to shed light on the larger context of the interactions going on in this film.

The teacher might also wish to make the students notice the participants' skills in managing the conversation (e.g., Doña Petra's attempts at interruption, or Crispin's use of strategies of indirectness when indicting the defendant), and the students can identify the linguistic ways in which these acts are accomplished. Ultimately the meaning of these strategies will go beyond the here-and-now of the interaction and reflect the broader attitudes, values, and beliefs of an Andean community and culture.

CONCLUSION

What multimedia thrusts upon us as never before is the necessity to keep text and context in constant tension with one another. The computer with its unlimited capacity, rather than challenging our analytic and interpretive responsibilities, seduces us into believing that the truth is just around the corner of the next "text" that will fill the ultimate gap in our understanding. But this universe of spoken, visual, written, and printed texts is not self-explanatory. As a medium, it can only substitute itself for the living context and foster the illusion that con-text is nothing but an assembly of texts that get illuminated in unmediated fashion by juxtaposing them with other texts. Contrary to folk wisdom, understanding has not been made more immediate through the advent of multimedia technology. Rather, it has become more mediated than ever, with a mediation that ever more diffuses and conceals its authority.

The role of education, and foreign language education in particular, is precisely to make this mediation process visible. The way to make sense of the unique textual and contextual environment offered by multimedia is to be aware of the gap between context and text, that is, between the material base of lived Quechua and the textual base of represented Quechua, between the meanings attributed to the scene by the participants and the meaning pieced together by the analyst/teacher/learner. Learning and understanding take place precisely in that gap and in the tension between the two. Basil Bernstein, the British sociologist of education, describes this space as follows:

If meanings are consumed by the context and wholly embedded in the context, there is no space. But if these meanings have an indirect relation to a specific material base, because they are indirect, there must be a gap. Intrinsic to these meanings is the potential of a gap, (a space) which I will term a potential discursive gap. It is not a dislocation of meaning, it is a gap. (Bernstein, 1996, p. 44)

In multimedia this discursive gap is created by the powerful way the computer has of both imitating and representing life. Multimedia both reenacts the original, lived context in which language was used and transforms it into readable "discourse" or text. It is the gap between these two processes that constitutes the pedagogic challenge par excellence.

All language teachers know that teaching the language entails also knowing something about the culture. But the power and the complexity of multimedia technology increases the need to contextualize the texts and textualize the contexts presented on the screen. Language teachers are not expected to be anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists, and historians. But inasmuch as the language they teach conveys meanings that are unique to a given social and cultural community, it is part of their profession to deepen their understanding of the relationship between text and context when teaching language as communicative practice, and to develop what Charles Goodwin calls a "professional vision" (Goodwin, 1994).

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NOTE

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