

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Literature through live online ICT interaction

The Spanish Civil war through Spanish eyes

by Maria Lamberto Calvo
King's College, Auckland, New Zealand

One of the aims of all language teachers is to try to make students understand that what they are learning is real. Living in New Zealand, away from any other Spanish speaking countries, means that it is quite tricky sometimes.

This year I am teaching A2 Level Cambridge, in this course we have to read 3 works of literature in Spanish. One of the books offered was "Las bicicletas son para el verano" by Fernando Fernán Gómez. The book is about the Spanish Civil War and how the "average" Spanish family survived during that time. How their lives changed, the philosophy of the republican and fascist sides, their dreams, their lives, their stories. This is a topic in which I have a special interest. I am Spanish and as such you would think that I would know what happened during those years, but in reality the war was something that was never talked about. All children of my era knew that "war" was a word not to be uttered and this was never challenged. Talking to my parents, my Dad was not even sure which side his father fought on; it is only now that the stories are coming out. It is not hard to see that Spain is a country, which is still getting to grips with how the war changed it as a Nation. The Spanish Civil War finished 69 years ago, therefore, there are a considerable number of Spanish people who were in the war and are still alive today.

While I was reading the play at home I was wondering how I could make my students understand that this is not just a book, but also an account of what actually happened. New Zealand, is a very peaceful country, students see war as something distant, which doesn't really affect them directly. There has not been a civil war in New Zealand and their only understanding is through movies. War is something that happens in Iraq, something that happens in the local Village Sky Cinema... and in books, something surreal. This was not what I wanted my students to get out of reading "Las bicicletas son para el verano". I wanted them to understand that the war had changed the identity of my country; the personality of the country is what it is, because of the war. Language is always an expression of the society who uses it and the Civil War had an impact on the language. I needed to make the book real to the students.

We read the play and tried to "act" it as well as we could in class, we talked through the topics, we wrote about

it, we saw the movie, we saw supporting movies like "Land and Freedom" and when I thought that they had a medium level of understanding of the Spanish War, I told them they would have to write an interview for a Spanish War veteran and his wife (Dario Calvo-Altuzarra y María Gómez-Ayabarrena). The only information that I gave them was the names, ages and the place where the war survivors were born. By arranging an interview with a Spanish war veteran and his wife I wanted them to see through their eyes, the reality of the war and the consequences to the lives of those that suffered because of it. This would give them a real insight, an empathy of understanding.

I have to admit that it was not too hard for me to find all of the ingredients necessary for an interview of this type. I did not know anyone in New Zealand who had been in the Spanish Civil War but the wonder of technology was the answer to my problem. The main thing was finding a couple that had gone through it all and I am lucky enough to have my grandparents alive and they were willing to share their experiences. Initially, I thought there could be a problem because, as I mentioned before, war was not something my grandfather or anyone for that matter, wanted to talk about. However, at his tender age of 92, he is now keen to tell the story of his life and make people understand how disastrous a war can be. As for my grandmother... she is always happy to have a chat.

The next thing I needed was an Internet connection that would allow a real life interview. That was even easier than what I thought, Skype was the perfect software medium. My computer had a web camera (thank goodness for Mac computers) so that made it even easier. I had only to go to Skype.com and download the programme. My grandparents in Spain did the same on their computer (with a great deal of help from my mother).

The next problem to deal with was... what would happen if my students didn't understand a lot of what they heard? what if they got lost in the middle of the conversation? The whole experience would not be as rewarding as it could be. I needed to be able to record the teleconference so that we could revisit it and get the most out of it. This was achieved with a programme called "IShowU", which again you can probably get from your school IT department. With this programme you

can record any communication occurring on your computer for an unlimited time. With all these “problems” sorted, I then shifted my attention to my students.

The fact that they had to think about and discuss what they were going to ask, helped me to see their level of understanding of what they considered to be important, this was a real challenge for them. They had to think about relevant questions that followed a logical progression. The idea being that the questions had to be from a personal perspective, not data based, they were meant to give students a deeper understanding of war from another person’s perspective. It took the students about 4 days to complete the interview questions and be ready for the real thing. We started by brainstorming about what was to be asked, what they thought was relevant and what questions they personally wanted answered. Once we had the questions and the order in which they were going to be delivered for both Señor Dario and Señora María, we worked on the vocabulary we thought my grandparents may use in their answers, so we could be ready to understand as much as possible and also, to ensure that we could ask further questions if needed.

Finally the day arrived, everything was organized for the interview. Students were dressed in their Number One Formal Uniform. Dario Calvo and María Gómez were waiting in Spain; you could feel the excitement in the air from both sides of the world. The students were practicing their delivery and debating which questions were going to be asked by whom. Finally the dialing sound interrupted the conversation and the ringing sound took over the room. 5 seconds later, my

grandparents were on screen, with their big smiles asking how everyone was. After the formalities of presentations and greetings the interview started. It surprised me that the whole interview took 24 minutes. It finished with my grandparents asking, “How did we do?” I thought it was very touching how they saw the experience as a “test” for them too. My answer, of course, was “You guys were great”.

After the interview my students were excited and keen on revisiting the interview and listening to the conversation we had recorded. We ended up working on a transcript of the whole 24 minutes and analyzing not only the language used by my grandparents but also what the War meant to them. We related it back to the book and saw the similarities between the book and real war life. The net outcome was a case of ‘mission accomplished.’ They really understood

(I believe) that war affected people for life and is something that, even at 92 and 89, you can’t forget. Even now, after 4 months, both my grandparents and my students talk about the experience and about each other. I know my pupils will not remember most of my classes, 10 years down the track, but I am certain they will remember the interview and conversation they had with Señor Dario and Señora María.

Recommendations: A book I would strongly recommend (other than “Las bicicletas son para el verano”) that will help you walk through post war scenes at the end of the twentieth century is “El hijo del acordeonista” by Bernardo Atxaga.



King’s College students face the camera while speaking to those who had lived through the Spanish Civil War.

[Click here for next article](#)