



Lessons in Circumlocution

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If you look up the word “circumlocution” in the dictionary, you’ll see the irony: there are many synonyms for it. These are circumlocuted ways of saying “circumlocution.” Writers have addressed this topic. Jorge Luis Borges wrote dizzying stories about the precise nature of meaning, or perhaps, the meaningless nature of precision. (Just exactly WHAT am I trying to say here?) Dickens describes the “Circumlocution Offices” in the London of “Little Dorrit.” The endless, round-and-round red tape of the British government is magnificently exposed. Dickens’ description of bureaucratic circumlocution is (again, ironically) spot-on.

As language teachers, we encourage circumlocution. We tell students things like, “If you don’t know the word for ‘apple,’ describe it!” What we receive is a deliciously-mangled sentence with poor attempts at other vocabulary words like “round,” “food,” and “bite.” Somehow, in Spanish anyway, everyone gets the “rojo” part of it. The positive outcome of our demand for circumlocution is that we’ve encouraged speech and instead of saying just one word, the student ends up using several. Circumlocution

is both vital and necessary as we move toward proficiency in a second language.

Some may argue that the skill of circumlocution does not apply to their field. I boldly call these people “wrong,” with no beating around the bush. All kidding aside, I believe that circumlocution is an essential skill for reaching proficiency in any skill or field of study. I look to my own experience with math as an example. I remember a high school teacher who tried to teach me a certain formula which would lead me to correct solutions. I struggled with this approach. I could never remember the formula and it seemed confusing to me. It wasn’t until I slightly modified it in a way that made more sense to me that I was then able to reach the correct answers from a different angle. It worked and although I circumlocuted the original formula, my approach worked for me every time.

Circumlocution means flexibility. As instructors, we should question the rigidity of our methodologies, and always commend the circumlocuted approach to the learning outcomes that we have set up for our courses. Clearly, we must be careful. Reading the book jacket is not an appropriate circumlocuted approach to the assignment of reading the book itself (again, a high school reference).

What if we pull back from our busy lives as teachers and try to view the trajectory that our careers have taken? We may notice times of wild circumlocution from our original expectations that came with our advanced degrees. The Ph.D. may indeed stand for “Pretty Hard to Deviate” because we felt certain of our abilities and locked into a career path based on our level of expertise in that area. BYU-Idaho has a healthy tradition of asking us to “Rethink education” and perhaps go around the easy, smooth career path that we all anticipated. Teach until July? OK. Teach a foundations course on Pakistan? Sure. Develop an online course? Why not? Just as language learners learn how to successfully circumlocute with the language to move toward proficiency, for teachers at BYU-Idaho, the full and proficient use of our talents may indeed require us to skirt the obvious career path and approach our work from a different angle. ❁

Just a few comments by the Spanish Professor who served his mission in Argentina, studied at Vanderbilt University, and has taught at BYU-Idaho for 11 years.