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Nicaragua's Grand Canal: A Case Study in Political and Economic Culture

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Cover Page Footnote

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INTRODUCTION: A MULTIFACETED PEDAGOGICAL CASE STUDY

The proposed Nicaraguan Grand Canal mega-project—whether promised land or pipe dream—serves as the basis for the following short case study in political and economic culture, with interested regional and global stakeholders. It can be useful for multiple fields such as business, policy, foreign affairs, public relations, logistics, tourism, intercultural communication studies, business communications, and the emerging field of language for specific purposes (LSP). Regarding the latter, it can be applied via translation as a language and culture learning tool for pedagogical objectives such as business Spanish or business Chinese. This short case study is neither a research nor a theoretical contribution per se, rather it is intended to serve as a theory-based pedagogical piece for developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and presentational skills, illustrative of the didactic genre, in a way that is applicable to multiple fields. Following the short case study and its pedagogical prompts, concluding observations will refocus briefly on case studies such as this as an effective pedagogical methodology in the expanding field of LSP studies that is seldom given due consideration.

CASE STUDY: THE NICARAGUAN GRAND CANAL

The June 13, 2013 Sandinista government's ratification of Nicaragua's 173-mile mega-project designs for an interoceanic Grand Canal, to stretch from Punta Gorda on the Caribbean coast to Brito on the Pacific, by way of Lake Cocibolca (an indigenous name meaning "sweet" [freshwater] sea), has been painted as both promised land and pipe dream (Agurcia Rivas, Alaniz E., Alaniz L., Anderson, Cardenal, Duarte Pérez, et al.). Canal construction rights have been granted to HKND Group (the Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development Investment Company), backed by the mysterious Chinese billionaire Wang Jing, dubbed "el loco del Canal" [the Crazy Man of the Canal] (Villa), reminiscent of the great skepticism once faced by Ferdinand de Lesseps when the iconic French engineer, builder of the Suez Canal, undertook the construction of the Panama Canal in 1880. In the Panama Canal project, the U.S. and France were the competing geopolitical stakeholders. Now, in Nicaragua, it is primarily the geo-strategic interests of the U.S. and China. Supporters of the Nicaraguan Grand Canal, largely the Sandinista government and its staunch supporters, troll the lure of benefits such as the construction of two modern seaports and the income-generating transit of gigantic Post-Panamax ships between them, an international airport, a free trade zone, new cement and steel factories, resort development for upscale tourism, and the creation of some 58,000 jobs by 2030 (Enríquez, Kraul). Opponents from many quarters have protested the lack of transparency in the proceedings, the absence of compelling feasibility studies and cost-benefit

analyses, the ecological risks to the largest freshwater lake in Central America (and to its fisheries, flora and fauna—Kraul reports that “scientists and conservationists are warning that the project is an environmental disaster in the making”), the expropriation of some 7,000 farms, and the forced relocation of many ancestral residents, the prospect of which has led to violent demonstrations in several affected communities (Enríquez, Shaer).

The Nicaraguan Ley del Canal Interoceánico (Interoceanic Canal Law) has authorized HKND to appropriate whatever land it may deem necessary for purposes of the project. Poet, former Minister of Culture (1979-1987), and Catholic priest Ernesto Cardenal, an iconic leader of the Sandinista Revolution, has come out forcefully against the Sandinista government’s backing and blessings for the Canal, predicting that it will go down as one of the greatest boondoggles in the country’s history (Cardenal). Opinions regarding the possibility of the Canal often vary within the same family: hard skepticism, with a prediction by one executive-level brother that the odds of ever building the canal are at most 10%, while another executive-level brother leans on the hope that it could have “una repercusión positiva” [a positive repercussion] if given the chance: “no podemos oponernos a, o atacar, un proyecto solo porque no nos guste la ley” [we can’t oppose or attack a project just because we don’t like the law].¹ Enrique Alaniz Castillo, Director of Research at FIDEG, the Nicaraguan NGO Fundación Internacional para el Desafío Económico Global, considers that the success, and perhaps *even* the mere proposal, of a project such as the Grand Canal works toward a positive rebranding of Nicaragua, which the world too often continues to typecast in terms of the civil war and violence of the 1970s and 1980s.

Shrouded in “secretismo” [secrecy] and “permisología” [“permitology,” the “art” of securing official permits], the Canal Law covers Wang Jing and HKND with a stipulation of total confidentiality regarding construction matters. There is no clear view to process or accountability. Rural protesters, one of whom declared ominously—when considered in the context of the need for positive rebranding referenced by E. Alaniz—that “estamos en guerra [we are at war]” against the Canal and the government that supports it,² have gone so far as to label president Daniel Ortega as a “vendepatria,” a traitor and sellout of the homeland:

¹ Author interviews on Nicaragua’s current economic conditions, concerns, and opportunities with Enrique Alaniz Castillo of FIDEG (<http://www.fideg.org/quienes-somos>), on March 5, 2015, and with his brother Luis Alberto Alaniz Castillo, Main Economist on Economic Issues, at FUNIDES, the Fundación Nicaragüense para el Desarrollo Económico y Social, “an independent think tank specializing in research and analysis of policies in the areas of socioeconomic development and institutional reform,” on March 6, 2015 (<http://funides.com/quienes-somos/?lang=en> and <http://funides.com/nuestro-equipo/?lang=en>).

² Author interview with a long-term Nicaraguan resident of Ometepe Island who was wary and wanted to remain anonymous.

“¡Ortega vendepatria, le vendiste nuestras propiedades a los chinos!” [Ortega, you traitor, you sold our lands to the Chinese], and “¡Fuera, Ortega! ¡Fuera vendepatria!” [Out with Ortega, out with the traitor!].³ This notion of a presidential sellout plays also on linguistic and cultural fears that have been widely reported, such as: “Under the banners ‘Our land is not for sale!’ and ‘Chinaman, go home!’ Nicaraguan farmers and cowboys vowed to defend their properties from government expropriation and Chinese encroachment” (Rogers and Miranda 1), also documented by Enríquez under the popular slogan of “¿Qué quieren los campesinos? ¡Que se vayan los chinos!” [What do the farmers want? For the Chinese to go away!]. Even farmers who are members of the Frente Sandinista political party have felt betrayed by president Ortega: “Nos traicionó. Tracionó nuestro voto. Vendió las tierras y nos vendió a nosotros como a unos animales. No tenemos para dónde ir. Nos está vendiendo como esclavos” [He betrayed us. He betrayed our vote (for him). He sold our lands and sold us like we were animals. We have nowhere to go. He is selling us like slaves.] (Enríquez 43).

Language itself plays a role in stoking resentment and resistance against the Canal, as “Chinese surveyors, with the muscle of heavily armed Nicaraguan soldiers and police, have been fussing about the countryside taking unwelcomed measurements of people’s properties and homes, then chattering amongst themselves in a foreign tongue” (Rogers and Miranda 3). A complaint has been that “the nosy foreigners don’t speak Spanish and don’t explain themselves” (Rogers and Miranda 4).⁴ Not being able to understand the language of those who are busily laying the groundwork for their planned relocation compounds for many Nicaraguans the apprehensions brought on already by the lack of transparency in the governmental proceedings. A lack of interlingual understanding is heaped upon a lack of political and economic clarity. The official spokesperson for the Nicaragua Grand Canal project, Telémaco Talavera, has countered that “in principle the Canal belongs to Nicaragua, not to the Chinese, in spite of the fact that it is being built by foreign investment, the Canal will be safeguarded by the Police and the Army because it belongs to the Nicaraguans” (Duarte Pérez).⁵ However, the police and the army are in an odd position of being enforcers for Chinese interests that many Nicaraguans perceive as not being in

³ Flyers seen and photographed by author posted on telephone poles in neighborhoods and roadways in and around Managua. See also Enríquez, pp. 7, 38 and 43, e.g.: “en la manifestaciones populares contra HKND ahora enarbolan pancartas en las que llaman ‘vendepatria’ a Ortega” [in popular protests against HKND banners are waved calling Ortega a traitor and sellout of the homeland].

⁴ One can assume similar language barriers and resentment toward the French and English languages when France and the United States were busy building the Panama Canal.

⁵ Author translation of “en principio el Canal es de Nicaragua, no es de los chinos, pese a que se está haciendo con una inversión extranjera, el Canal estará resguardado por la Policía y por el Ejército porque es de los nicaragüenses.”

their own best interest, while simultaneously defending Nicaraguan sovereignty even as they move in to relocate many ancestral residents against their will. Equally odd is the prospect of having a Chinese-funded and Chinese-built canal defended by the Nicaraguan police and army in a country notorious for expropriation.

The possibility of a lucrative transoceanic canal through Nicaragua has a very long history: “The place most nineteenth-century North Americans expected to see the canal built, including the President [Grant] was Nicaragua (...) through Lake Nicaragua” (McCullough 28). Long before the French and Americans chose the current Panama Canal site, Nicaragua and the San Juan River ranked at or near the top of five possible locations for a trans-isthmus project: one across southern Mexico, one across Nicaragua, and three across what is today Panama, which had not yet become an independent nation from Gran Colombia (McCullough, 28 and 131). Dating as far back as 1529, Pedrarias (Pedro Arias de Ávila, governor of Castilla del Oro, the name of the Central American Isthmus at the time) and the engineer Juan Bautista Antonelli were responding to orders from Charles V and then Philip II of Spain to plan a canal through Nicaragua that would link the Atlantic Ocean with the South Sea (the Pacific Ocean).⁶ Indeed, Eric Farnsworth, current vice president at the Americas Society and Council of the Americas, has reminded us recently that “There have been over 70 attempts to build a canal in Nicaragua, but it hasn't happened” (Ordóñez 2/15/15).

If constructed, the Nicaragua Grand Canal, which broke ground on December 22, 2015 with “the start of an access road to let through heavy equipment” (Ordóñez), and which is scheduled for a completion within an astounding five-year time frame, will become a game-changer in terms of the

⁶ Author’s visit to the Plaza de Francia in Panama City, Panama, “dedicated to the French effort to build the Panama Canal and the thousands of people from around the world who died during the process” (<http://cascoviejo.com/plaza-francia/>). The “dozen marble plaques provide [chiseled in print] details of the labor of construction the Canal,” the first of which memorializes the earliest involvement by Spain transcribed by author):

La idea de encontrar o de crear artificialmente una vía que, abriendo por su centro el continente Americano, acortase el paso a las Indias Orientales, surgió desde el descubrimiento del Nuevo Mundo por Colón.

Ya en 1529 Álvaro de Saavedra, cumpliendo órdenes concretas de Carlos V, levantaba los primeros planos de un canal por Panamá, mientras Pedraria y Antonelli hacían lo propio para otro por Nicaragua.

[Author translation: The idea of finding or artificially creating a path that, by cutting across the middle of the American continent, would shorten the passage to the East Indies, first appeared with the discovery of the New World by Columbus. Already in 1529 Álvaro de Saavedra, under specific orders from Charles V, was drawing up the first plans for a Canal through Panama, while Pedraria y Antonelli were doing the same through Nicaragua.]

greater volume and lower cost of goods being shipped from East Asia to importers and markets in the United States (Ordóñez, see CNBC video). The Nicaragua project will be “three times as long and almost twice as deep as its rival in Panama” (Watts). Talavera has predicted a demand for the largest possible maritime vessels, giant container ships that even the recently expanded Panama Canal, which on June 26, 2016 opened its new locks to massive neo-Panamax vessel commercial transit, will be unequipped to handle: “There will be a need for world shippers to reduce time, costs and pollution, and that will be an opportunity for Nicaragua and the rest of the region” (Ordóñez). On the other hand, Jean-Paul Rodrigue, a transportation expert at Hofstra University, expresses his reservation that “[M]ost ports in the United States won't be able to accommodate the larger ships [dubbed “floating behemoths” by Serrano] that the Nicaragua canal is hoping to target (...) it would require a hugely expensive investment for U.S. ports to gear up for those types of ships” (Ordóñez). Yet, in response to the 2016 expansion of the Panama Canal, American ports such as Charleston, SC and Savannah, GA had already been engaged in deepening their waters in order to accommodate Super Post-Panamax Megaships, which are “up to 235 feet longer and 54 feet wider than the current Panamax class” (AIT), so it stands to reason that similar capacity enhancement would accompany the construction of the Nicaraguan Grand Canal.

President Daniel Ortega, his staunch Sandinista government, and supporters of the Grand Canal market it domestically as a promised land for economic prosperity which not only “would give the Nicaraguan people some measure of subsistence and development”⁷ but more optimistically “revolutionize Nicaragua and convert the country into the third-fastest growing economy in the world over the next five years” (from 2014-2018). Indeed, government projections have boasted that the Canal “will lift precisely 403,583 Nicaraguans out of poverty by 2018, and an additional 353,935 people will be pulled from the grasps of extreme poverty” (Rogers and Miranda). Francisco López, vice chancellor at the Universidad Central de Nicaragua, echoes this great hope that the Grand Canal “will be a development process that will help us get rid of our main enemy—poverty” (Ordóñez). On the other hand, Ernesto Cardenal has challenged such optimism with his ominous statement that “The Nicaraguan State will not receive a single centavo in taxes for any of the projects” and that with its construction, “Lake Nicaragua, which for us is a blessing from God, will become a curse” (Cardenal). Intertwined tightly around such competing rhetoric are the wary political adversaries, the Sandinista government of Daniel Ortega and its opposition, who push for and against a Grand Canal in Nicaragua.

⁷ Authors translation of “que le daría al pueblo nicaragüense un mínimo de subsistencia y desarrollo.”

COMPREHENSION, CRITICAL-THINKING, AND PROBLEM-SOLVING PROMPTS

1. Why is Nicaragua's Grand Canal presented as either a promised land or a pipedream?
2. Is the proposed Grand Canal the first time Nicaragua has been considered for such a transoceanic site? Explain briefly.
3. Why is the Nicaragua Grand Canal referred to as a mega-project?
 - How does it compare to the scope of the Panama Canal with which it would compete?
4. Where does the financial backing for the proposed Nicaragua Grand Canal come from?
 - What is the HKND Group?
 - Who *is* Wang Jing?
5. What geopolitical interests are involved in the Nicaragua Grand Canal project?
6. How does Nicaragua's political structure facilitate the financing and possible construction of the Grand Canal?
 - Does the secrecy surrounding the Grand Canal help or hurt national/international relations? How so?
7. What major benefits do the supporters of building the Grand Canal trumpet?
8. What are five major objections of opponents to the Grand Canal?
9. Who is Ernesto Cardenal and what does he think about the Grand Canal project?
 - Why should what he thinks matter?
10. When exactly did the Sandinista Revolution occur? What were its causes and outcomes?
 - What are some key elements that would go into a country's rebranding efforts after a long and bloody civil war?
11. What has the president of Nicaragua been labeled as by some opponents, and why?
12. What role has language played in the Nicaragua Grand Canal controversy?
 - Might it have played a similar role in the building of the Panama Canal, where French and then English rubbed up against the Spanish spoken in Panama? Explain.
13. What odd position do the Nicaraguan police and army find themselves in regarding many ancestral residents?
14. What kind of game-changer does the Grand Canal have the possibility of becoming?
 - What kind of ships would it accommodate? What are some advantages and disadvantages of these ships?

15. Do *you* think Nicaragua's Grand Canal is a promised land or a pipedream? Explain.

ROLE-PLAY, PRESENTATIONAL, AND CRITICAL-THINKING SCENARIOS

1. *In pairs or small groups*: As policy makers in the Nicaraguan government, devise a strategy campaign to persuade the citizens of Nicaragua that the Grand Canal will be beneficial for the nation. (Consider reasons such as its potential to reduce or eliminate poverty in the nation, the jobs it could bring to Nicaraguans, the infrastructure and tourism development that it could spur, etc.)
2. *In pairs or small groups*: As Nicaraguan opponents of the Grand Canal, explain your opposition and persuade others to join you. (Consider reasons such as the loss of ancestral lands that have belonged to families for generations; the fear of ecological disasters that the Canal could cause in terms of drinkable water, fisheries, flora, fauna, etc.)
3. *In small or large groups*: Enact #1 and #2 above, the two sides arguing their points of view in a public forum.
4. *In pairs or small groups*: You are possible investors (from Nicaragua or from abroad, the U.S., China, elsewhere) in the Nicaragua Grand Canal, and you are discussing the risks and benefits of investing.
5. *In pairs or small groups*: You are policy makers in the United States and are apprehensive about China's construction and possible control over the proposed Nicaragua Grand Canal, so near to the United States, which could have serious geopolitical ramifications in the region (e.g., the passage of Chinese warships?) and beyond. Others disagree with your concerns.
6. *In pairs or small groups*: You are policy makers in China and would like to see China increase its brand and impact in the region via the Nicaragua Grand Canal. Others disagree because they think it could lead to political and economic problems with the U.S.
7. *In pairs or small groups*: You are policy makers in Nicaragua who want the nation to assume a more important leadership role in Central America and in regional, hemispheric, and global trade. Discuss how the Nicaragua Grand Canal will accomplish this.
 - As part of your discussion, include general rebranding efforts for Nicaragua.
8. *In pairs or small groups*: You and fellow Nicaraguans discuss possible employment opportunities related to the construction, operation, and maintenance of the Grand Canal, as well as other job opportunities that you think will come (e.g., at the international airport, the new free trade zone, new cement and steel factories, resorts for upscale tourism, etc.).

ADDITIONAL CRITICAL-THINKING, PROBLEM-SOLVING, AND PRESENTATIONAL ACTIVITIES (INDIVIDUAL, PAIRED, OR IN SMALL GROUPS)

- Prepare and present an executive summary of the pros and cons of the Nicaragua Grand Canal
- Prepare and present a policy paper on the Grand Canal
- Write a research paper on an aspect of the proposed Grand Canal
- Prepare and present a cost-benefit analysis and feasibility study for the proposed Grand Canal
- Prepare and present a short video either for or against the Grand Canal
- Design and present competing Web pages for and against the Grand Canal
- Conduct an interview with Nicaraguans regarding the proposed Grand Canal
- Translate the case study into Spanish, Chinese, and perhaps other languages, since it represents an international issue
 - Work with a translation team, which will need a project manager, to produce this document
- Provide song lyrics in Spanish in favor of the Grand Canal, and substitute them for the lyrics against it in “Nicaragua no quiero el canal” [see Works Cited]
 - Translate into English or Chinese, etc., the song lyrics of “Nicaragua no quiero el canal.”

CONCLUSION: LSP THEORETICAL BASIS FOR THIS SHORT CASE STUDY

The story of the proposed Nicaragua Grand Canal sets up the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and presentational skills that characterize the case study as a didactic genre. When considered as an LSP business language learning tool, or when considered as issuing from LSP theory, this short case study belongs to both the provisional or partial category of intrinsic theory of Business Language Studies (BLS) and to the extrinsic or applied theory area. Following Doyle’s modeling for Business Language Studies theory (2012a, 2012b, 2013), within the provisional or partial domain subset for intrinsic or pure theory, this case study is *medium-restricted* in that the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and presentational skills is achieved by humans (author and students) using technology, both in conjunction. It is *area-restricted* in that it is delimited by the language[s] and culture[s] involved, primarily but not limited to the Spanish dialects and cultures of Nicaragua, the setting of the case study that continues to unfold. It is variously *rank-restricted* in that the semiotic units of business language analysis and performance range from word, sentence, paragraph, text, image, logo (e.g., street banners protesting against the Canal), sound, company [micro, small, medium, large], industry, sector of the economy,

national economy, to regional and global economy. It is *discourse type-restricted* in that the main genres dealt with are the case study per se and related articles, reports, interviews, videos, songs, etc. It is *time-restricted* in terms of the modern languages used in 2014-2016 to refer to the proposed Nicaragua Grand Canal, particularly English, Spanish, and Chinese, but also dating as far back as the Spanish used during the time of Charles V and then Philip II of Spain. Furthermore, reporting on this story-in-progress can be found in many world languages. And it is *problem-restricted* in that the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills originates from and focuses on a consideration of Nicaragua's Grand Canal in terms of being a promised land or pipedream (or perhaps a mixed blessing) as presented in a pedagogical case study in political and economic culture.

As a language learning tool, this subgenre of the pedagogically motivated case study falls within the applied theory branch of BLS, and per se belongs not only to the methods and methodology concerns within pedagogy, but also to the areas of course and curriculum development (i.e., business language courses that incorporate some form of the case study genre), learner outcomes, and faculty training (directly or indirectly). Within the tripartite theoretical model for a business language (BL) course (Doyle 2012a, 2012b, 2013), a short case study may combine all of the areas—business content, regional/area studies (e.g., a region- or country-specific setting such as Nicaragua) or cultural context—or it may emphasize any one of these three fundamental features to varying degrees. This can be illustrated in an adaptation of the Variable Matrix for Tripartite Business Language Course Coverage (Doyle, 2012a, 113) to a short case study, as indicated in Table 1:

Table 1. Variable Matrix for Tripartite Business Language Case Study

COMPONENT	DEGREE (%) OF EMPHASIS IN A BL CASE STUDY										
	100	0	0	75	12.5	12.5	50	25	25	33	Other
Business Content	100	0	0	75	12.5	12.5	50	25	25	33	Other
Cultural Context	0	100	0	12.5	75	12.5	25	50	25	33	Other
Geographic Context (area or region)	0	0	100	12.5	12.5	75	25	25	50	33	Other

As indicated in Table 1, a case study such as the Nicaragua Grand Canal can easily be designed to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and presentational skills predominantly, or even exclusively, in terms of its:

1. business aspects: e.g., feasibility studies and cost-benefit analyses, investment, construction, logistics, public relations, marketing, administration,⁸ etc.
2. regional/area studies aspects: e.g., how the proposed Grand Canal relates exclusively to Nicaragua, or to Nicaragua and Central America, or to Nicaragua and Panama, where a recently expanded trans-isthmus canal already exists; or to Nicaragua, China, and the U.S., etc.
3. cultural aspects: e.g., the struggle internal to Nicaragua between supporters and opponents of the project, ancestral rights of land ownership versus governmental eminent domain, nationalistic push-back to what a great many Nicaraguans perceive as a foreign intrusion or even an invasion by China, etc.

From the theoretical perspective of a provisional definitional model—that a BL case study is a didactic subgenre adapted from the multifaceted business case study with methods and methodology that seek to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and presentational skills while simultaneously developing language and cultural proficiency—the Nicaragua Grand Canal example uses a variety of prompts and role-play scenarios in order to begin achieving the definitional outcomes. For the language proficiency aspect, one must imagine the case study in another language such as Spanish or Chinese.

Regardless of whether or not Nicaragua’s Grand Canal turns out to be a promised land or a pipedream, a blessing or a curse, the story that is unfolding provides rich material for an illustrative example of a short case study in political and economic culture. The example provided calls for an instructor to imagine and create additional content-question and role-play prompts, as well as employ other pedagogical methods, to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and presentational skills based on the Nicaragua Grand Canal, which could also include LSP as a learner outcome.

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⁸ It would be informative to study the administration of the successful Panama Canal.

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