Languages for Intercultural Communication and Education

Language in the Academy

Cultural Reflexivity and Intercultural Dynamics

Joan Turner

LANGUAGES FOR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION
Series Editor: Michael Byram, University of Durham, UK
and Alison Phipps, University of Glasgow, UK

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The overall aim of this series is to publish books which will ultimately inform learning and teaching, but whose primary focus is on the analysis of intercultural relationships, whether in textual form or in people's experience. There will also be books which deal directly with pedagogy, with the relationships between language learning and cultural learning, between processes inside the classroom and beyond. They will all have in common a concern with the relationship between language and culture, and the development of intercultural communicative competence.

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Chapter 1
General Overview

Introduction

This book foregrounds language as a central rather than a peripheral player in the work of higher education. The empirical reality of language, its materiality, its uses in academic performance, its importance in intercultural communication and the cultural values associated with it, and performance in it, all play an important role in contemporary higher education in the United Kingdom. As such institutions have become increasingly international in recent years, the experiential reality of intercultural communication has reached larger numbers of students and staff. This has not always, however, been accompanied by richer ways of interpreting what is actually going on in many of the varied kinds of intercultural encounters that occur. It is one of the aims of the book to illustrate some of that variation and make the interpretative possibilities more widely available. This includes analyses of intercultural encounters between tutors and students, of student perceptions of those encounters, as well as the cultural background values that have motivated the linguistic behaviour or subject positions of those involved, along with discussion of frequently foregrounded topics of intercultural concern such as silence, being critical, individualist opinion giving or speaking in relation to group orientation. The empirical reality of intercultural communication, given its increasing presence in contemporary higher education is also seen as an important driver of change, even if unplanned, in the pedagogic practices of higher education.

A further important aim of the book is to frame language in the contemporary academy as an object of cultural theory. This is to some extent a counterfoil to the perception of language as a superficial practical concern. While the relentlessly practical nature of language work is not denied, and indeed seen in need of more positive evaluation, the fact that its issues circulate predominantly within a deficit discourse is subjected to critique. Reasons for the ready availability of this discourse are sought in intellectual cultural history, in particular in relation to how attitudes to

knowledge developed through the scientific revolution and the European Enlightenment effectively made language invisible. This invisibilising process is theorised in Chapter 5 through what I have called 'occidentalist inscription'. The rhetorical values which have been formed in relation to this inscription, the rhetorical norms which have been set up, the evaluative metalanguage which corresponds to the rhetorical norms in the assessment of student writing and the rhetorical subject positions which academic writers are normatively obliged to take up are the focus of Chapters 5 and 6. The rhetorical norms are seen as part of wider cultural practices and the effects of social and political power, rather than as an independent codification of rules which must be adhered to.

Addressing the Institutional Interface between Language and Higher Education

From a pedagogical perspective, as those of us who work as language teachers of one sort or another in higher education will know, the empirical reality of language and intercultural communication lends a relentless practicality to the issues that need addressing. It is, however, also the case that such practical issues affecting pedagogy and curriculum in the different contexts of teaching and learning language or languages have already been prolifically identified and addressed in a wide range of publications, Byram (2004), Byram and Grundy (2003), Celce-Murcia (2001), Kramsch (1993), Nunan (1998) and Tudor (2001), to name but a few, as well as in journals too numerous to mention. While those practical and pedagogic issues of language, language teaching and learning have developed their own professional spaces, the institutional interface between language and higher education remains a neglected area. It is a major aim of this book then to address, and redress, this neglect.

Furthermore, while the ways students are expected to perform through language in higher education has been the focus of pedagogy and curriculum design in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), the cultural values inscribed in those expectations have themselves received little attention. For example, the question of why we evaluate academic writing in the way that we do is not often asked. The focus is rather on teaching its pedagogical genres and their rhetorical norms as if given. This is another unexplored topic, which the book takes on. It does this with historical reflexivity, locating specific sites in intellectual cultural history where conceptualisations of language were generated, which continue to hold sway, if only implicitly, in the institutional context of contemporary higher education. Furthermore, the preferred ways in which language is used in pedagogic

academic contexts are seen as linguistic and rhetorical inscriptions of cultural values that have gained power, at specific moments, or over the course of intellectual history.

In putting the interface between language and higher education in the frame for cultural-theoretical research, the book constitutes an intellectual effort to make the workings of western academic culture, as it relates to how language is used and evaluated in higher education pedagogy and assessment, available to critical reflection and transformation. This is in marked contrast to the prevailing institutional discourse, whereby discussion of language issues circulates in a deficit discourse, and language work is marginalised.

Re-configuring Marginalisation

The teaching of EAP, or academic writing/academic literacy, as well as that of modern foreign languages, is routinely sidelined in the institutional discourse of higher education. All such pedagogic practices, whilst they have their own strong professional backgrounds, are, in institutional terms, seen as less important 'services' rather than as being of substantive academic merit in their own right. To foreground them at all then becomes a matter of institutional politics. In a small way, it disrupts the language/content dichotomy that has grown up around language and languages. As has been shown in post-structuralist theorising, notably in Derridean deconstruction, dichotomies privilege one pole over the other (Culler, 1982; Derrida, 1974, 1978; Norris, 1982). In the case of the language/content dichotomy, it is invariably language that is less privileged. As Carter and Nash have put it in relation to courses in literature and media studies, they 'look *past* language' (Carter & Nash, 1990: 24) in order to focus on what is considered more 'important', namely ideas or content. This same privileging of literature over language, in relation to how its teaching is perceived, is also referred to by Kramsch, who states:

> Teaching language is consistently viewed as a less sophisticated, hence less difficult, task than teaching literature. (Kramsch, 1993: 7)

The position of language at the negative pole of the dichotomy with 'content' is manifested also in the relentlessly remedial representation of language issues in the institutional discourse of higher education, as discussed further in the following chapter. The book therefore aims to refigure this representation, to critique the widely circulating deficit discourse for language, along with the dominant representations and conceptualisations of language that have promoted it.

A major argument is that the role of language, and the concomitant performances of languaging, along with what I call the languaging pedagogies, are underestimated, undervalued and marginalised in the institutional discourse of higher education, and this marginalisation needs to be conceptually and discursively rewritten. It is my hope that this book will make a contribution to that rewriting.

In re-focusing the role of language in higher education as a central player, the book mirrors conceptually a major focus of post-colonial studies, that is, making what has been peripheral, central. It is therefore an important aim of the book to rewrite this ancillary position of language in relation to knowledge, to re-inscribe language into the complex process of knowledge production and reproduction, to recognise the constitutive nature of language, and to acknowledge the integral role of language in academic performance. Language plays a role in every discipline, not only in their textualisations but also in how they are taught and assessed. It is imbricated in epistemological shifts and theoretical frameworks. It plays a role as carrier of the past and mediator of future discourses.

Ultimately, not only language-related pedagogies but also the pedagogic practices of higher education itself, such as the seminar and the lecture, alongside assessment tasks such as the essay and other genres of academic writing are quintessentially language or languaging practices. They can all be seen through the lens of language.

The Conceptual Construction of Language in Western Intellectual Cultural History

In focusing on language in the academy, the book is informed by dual perspectives. One looks backwards, considering how we have got to where we are now, and the other looks at the transformative potential of the contemporary context, and assumes a forward-moving dynamic whose future is unpredictable. In the first case, it is seen as important not only to critique the marginalisation of language and the ubiquity of its association with remediation but also to explore why such marginalising discourses for the role of language are so readily available. The question is addressed to 'western' intellectual cultural history, the ground on which conceptualisations of language in the contemporary academy were grown, and where contemporary attitudes towards language, and representations of language issues were formed. It is also the ground on which the rhetorical roots of ways of using language in the academy, especially in an Anglophone, 'western', institutional context, were planted. Conceptualisations of language which have taken hold socially

and culturally, and therefore circulate widely, along with preferred ways of using language, which continue to be maintained are seen as the effects of culturally embedded power.

Chapters 5 and 6 look at how in relation to what might be encapsulated as the European Enlightenment project of the search for truth and knowledge, language became subsidiary, indeed one could say, subservient to knowledge. What was considered to be culturally important was, on the one hand, the scientific method(s) by which knowledge was to be determined, and on the other, the means whereby knowledge was communicated. The correct exercise of reason and the careful transmission of knowledge were the sociopolitical and intellectual–cultural watchwords of the scientists or natural philosophers who were vying with each other to find out how things worked or to come up with better means of doing so. A flavour of this scientific and social ethos in the 17th and early 18th centuries can be absorbed in the 17th century documentation of the transactions of the Royal Society (Sprat, 1958 [1667]) or in Jardine's more recent account of the times in *Ingenious Pursuits* (Jardine, 1999).

While the use of language was necessarily implicated in those scientific and knowledge-producing activities, it was focused on more as an obstacle that was to be overcome, or a medium that was to be moulded into a particular shape. What was primarily at stake was the communication of knowledge or the manifestation of correct reasoning. Locke's (1975 [1689]) conduit metaphor for language and Bishop Wilkins' 1668 (1968 [1668]) notion of a *Real Character and a Philosophical Language*, as well as the German philosopher Leibniz's vision of a *characteristica universalis* or universal character were conceived of as different ways of keeping the channels of communication clear. One meant fashioning language in a scientific manner without the distortions of how language was used in everyday interaction, and the other meant eschewing language altogether in favour of an artificial notation, based on mathematics.

Making Language Invisible in the Visibilising Economy of Rationality and Knowledge

What constituted knowledge had to be 'clear and distinct' to use a well-known Cartesian trope, although as with philosophical rationalism generally, it was in the mind's eye that analytical or conceptual categories, not to mention the steps of logical deduction were to be 'clear and distinct'. Empirical science, on the other hand, as promoted particularly in England at this period, through the auspices of the Royal Society, encouraged direct observation and experimentation that made processes

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