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Culture and the Language Classroom

Edited by: Brian Harrison

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Preface

Brian Harrison

Culture, both in itself and as it impinges on the language classroom, is seen in the following pages as many-faceted. Thus we are concerned not only with the views and achievements of peoples, Anglo-Saxon or not, but also with how these views and achievements are transmitted. We do not neglect either the effects of transmission, both on the societies from whom, through their language, 'culture' flows, and on the societies who receive it, and who, probably, modify it in the receipt. We are concerned with the procedural culture of the classroom itself, and how that culture mirrors, or struggles against, wider societal views of what learning is and what education is. We are concerned with the effect of political decisions on the content of language teaching programmes. We are obviously concerned with language teaching materials, and how adequately they reflect, or how they distort, the culture they purport to represent. We are concerned with overt censorship via ideology and self-censorship through omission, unconscious or deliberate.

We would assert that, historically, language teachers have been more concerned with techniques than content and in this they do not resemble, let us say, teachers of literature or sociology. Language teaching is, in a sense, a subject in search of subject matter; that subject matter could, or should be, culture, not merely the 'high' culture of literature, but, as expressed above, the views of a people, its variety and its essence.

If there is one proposition on which all the contributors to this book agree, it is that teaching a language is not a value-free, or transparent, activity. What we do in the language classroom is affected by who we are, the views we hold, and the societies we are part of. This will be so however askance, as individuals, we may look at dominant views in these same societies.

Thus Robin Barrow, in the first paper in the book, argues that we do indeed present values and beliefs when we teach English, and the values and beliefs enshrined in English may be different from those enshrined in other languages. He questions, however, the claim sometimes made that this process must necessarily be pernicious or imperialistic. Doug Holly would assent to the first of these propositions but would regard

as merely Platonic an argument which neglects power relationships within societies, and what English is used for. Joyce Valdes, in a survey of materials and practices mainly in the United States, assents to the indivisibility of culture and language.

Jane and Michael Clarke in their article on the important question of stereotyping, consider the extent to which representations of society in language textbooks are partial, how that partiality arises and what might be its effects. In my own paper on the teaching of literature I raise two questions: to what extent are literary texts penetrable to readers from a different culture and how might one approach and select literary texts for the foreign language classroom. Martin Cortazzi discusses cross-cultural behaviour in the classroom and how previous learning experiences can influence views on what is being taught and on the teacher's role; the article questions what one might describe as naive transferability, the assumption, perhaps prevalent amongst syllabus designers, that what works well in one society will work well in another.

We then have case studies from different societies. Euan Reid looks at ESL teaching in Britain, and the links between the kind of teaching that has gone on in the last few decades and British views about the culture of minority communities. Michael Byram looks at the effects of language programmes on pupils' views of foreign societies; Roy Dunning considers teaching and learning styles and the effects, via educational politics, of decisions about what counts as knowledge. Pamela Fearey and Olga Lalor write about textbooks and materials selection in the Soviet Union. Mildred Thiyaga Rajah in an article on TESOL in Malaysia looks at the effect of the wider social and political milieu on what is taught, how it is received and how English is used. She also argues that, at least in Malaysia, English is seen instrumentally rather than as a vehicle for an alien culture. Marion Myhill looks at teaching materials designed for New Australians and the oldest Australians of all, the Aboriginal population.

In the last paper Arvind Bhatt writes a personal account of processes, deculturation and acculturation, bilingualism where first one and then another language is dominant, which most of the other contributors have only had to consider intellectually.

Finally, by way of a public health warning, if language teaching is not value-free then neither are these essays about language teaching. Some might be construed as conservative, or supporting the status quo, others are certainly of the Left. (It is not part of the editorial function to state which is which; readers can interpret the texts for themselves.) Authors, however, are responsible for their own views. Considering the volume as a whole, it is neither accidental nor tokenistic that contributors come from various racial backgrounds and both genders. Virtues embodied, then, are pluralism, a belief in rationality, constructive scepticism and absence of dogma.

Culture, Values and the Language Classroom

Robin Barrow

On the face of it, teaching English, whether to ethnic minorities in English-speaking countries or to members of non-English speaking countries, stands in little need of justification. The ability to speak the language of the country in which one lives has obvious value; but English is also useful for those whose mother tongue it is not, given that it is the second most widely used language in the world. It has an unsurpassed richness in terms of vocabulary, and hence in its scope for giving precise and detailed understanding of the world. However, it seems that we sometimes get cold feet in this enterprise and worry about our right to proceed, largely out of fear of what may be termed 'cultural imperialism'. Are we not guilty, the suggestion goes, of imposing the values and beliefs of the English-speaking western world on individuals and countries whose traditions are quite different? In this paper I shall argue that we do indeed transmit particular values and beliefs by teaching English as a Second Language, but that to some extent this is inevitable, that in respect of some values and beliefs it is desirable, and that therefore it is not something about which we should feel guilty.

Any programme of teaching involves behaving in ways that may shape values and beliefs. At the very least, teachers provide exemplars of particular attitudes, assumptions and values. Such exemplars may, of course, make little impact or even prove counter-productive; but, by and large, the historical record would seem to suggest that they are quite influential. Some teachers, such as missionaries, have quite deliberately sought to instill particular beliefs and values. But even those who do not are bound to represent certain values, even if they are only procedural values such as a belief in rationality or impartiality, by the mere fact of teaching what they teach in the way in which they teach it. When it comes to teaching a language, ultimately one teaches the distinctions that are recognised by and are important to those who normally speak the language, one teaches types and ways of reasoning, and one almost certainly, more indirectly but more

specifically, promotes particular substantive values through the material one uses.

Whether or to what extent and in what ways language and thought are logically inseparable is perhaps open to debate. But it seems clear that as a matter of contingent fact people's ability to think and the quality of their thinking is co-extensive with their command of a language, provided we accept the obvious qualification that command of language is not necessarily to be identified with the capacity to articulate it publicly. In other words, while one of course recognises that some people who cannot express themselves well publicly, perhaps because they are shy, or mute or suffer some speech defect, can nonetheless think clearly, the argument would be that, insofar as they think, they will be doing so by means of or through the medium of some language. What they are capable of thinking will therefore be delimited by their grasp of the language in question. To think intelligently about existentialism, physics, or stamp-collecting involves grasping the concepts central to these areas and appreciating their logic. To grasp the concepts requires labelling them. At any rate, I find the idea of somebody having a concept of, say, love, without any word, sign or symbol for demarcating it unintelligible. To understand the existentialist concepts of bad faith and *angst* requires knowing what these words mean in the existentialist tradition. I may add that for the purposes of this argument, if anyone doubts this thesis, a weaker one will suffice: one obvious way, and the only way that we have any control over, to develop a conceptual grasp of the world is to provide understanding of the language that encapsulates our understanding to date. In short, and by way of example, if we wish to enable people to understand laws of science or principles of aesthetics or religious faith, the obvious way forward would seem to be to give them understanding of the language of these subjects. Conversely, while I do not claim and do not in fact believe it to be the case, that an individual is logically incapable of discovering and appreciating the laws of science in a culture that has no developed scientific discourse, it would seem highly unlikely in fact that many, if any, would do so. For such an individual would have to generate for himself all that is now enshrined in the scientific discourse that has been developed over centuries by numberless individuals, each building on the work of predecessors. (Barrow, 1982)

If we concede that in practice the manner and extent of people's thinking is governed by the limits of their language, it follows that different languages may make a material difference to the nature of thought in different communities. Particular communities may vary in what they think worth reasoning about and, as a consequence, fail to develop a language for reasoning about certain things. This, in turn, will inhibit and restrict the chances of developed or refined thought about those things. For example, classical Greek indicates a concern with, and allows for sophisticated reasoning about, individual freedom, which the contemporaneous language of the Persians does not. Similarly, the various languages associated with Islamic culture reflect this association,

inasmuch as they are dominated by certain words and concepts rather than others. The Latin word 'gravitas' may be roughly translated as 'gravity' or 'dignity', but to be Roman or to learn the Latin language involves arriving at a different and far more subtle, rich and distinctive concept of 'gravitas' than could ever by conveyed by and amongst English speakers using the word 'gravity'. To learn Latin is, therefore, amongst other things, to come to conceive of and see value in 'gravitas', which is an experience that is not necessarily vouchsafed by learning English. Some cultures incline more or less to what we would term religious explanation at the expense of scientific explanation. Some cultures incline to particular ideological explanations of psychology or sociology and hence do not develop these disciplines in the same way as other cultures. Consequently I concede that in teaching English to those for whom it is a second language we may be promoting different ways of thinking and different values from those with which they are familiar.

Now what is wrong with this? Why should it be pejoratively termed a form of imperialism? In the first place, having conceded the point in principle, I may be forgiven for raising the question of how real a problem it is in practice. Are we really to believe that Saudi Arabians or French Canadians are so different from us that our language alone will completely re-orientate the view of life they have gained through acquisition of their native language? Since this is a contingent question that would require detailed empirical study of various particular languages, I will not pursue it here. I merely re-iterate that while there may be some cultures whose language is so different from ours that in teaching them English we literally shatter their world view, and while it is conceded that the structure of, say, Greek, reveals different beliefs and values as compared with, say, Latin, by and large English would seem merely to lead to different emphases, priorities and capacities when contrasted with the sort of first languages that we usually encounter. The Inuit, we are constantly reminded, have several different words for 'snow' and lack a vocabulary of literary criticism. But in learning English the Inuit are not culturally demolished: they can still make the fine distinctions between types of snow that is useful to their way of life, and they add the capacity to make fine distinctions in respect of literature.

A related point worth raising here is that some of the claims made about different ways of thinking appear to confuse what cultures are interested in doing and what they are capable of doing. For instance, it has been said more than once that some cultures do not have the concept of contradiction. But in any suggested instances, it invariably transpires that what is actually being claimed is that a particular culture does not approve of contradiction in social intercourse. This is something quite different from not having the concept of contradiction, which would imply that if members of the culture were to be involved in argument, they would be unperturbed by reasoning of the form: "x is the case and −x is the case". I do not believe there has ever been any such culture, and

if there were (though this is a point to be developed below) I should unhesitatingly suggest that something be done about it. What does of course happen is that cultures vary in their ability to recognise, or in their assessment of, particular contradictions. But here (and again this will be developed below) one should surely be concerned to consider whether particular cultures are *correct* in failing to see a contradiction where others see one, rather than to glibly assume that whether one recognises a contradiction or not is a mere matter of cultural preference.

A similar example is provided by those who argue that the West African Kpelle tribe do not accept the basic laws of syllogistic reasoning. Apparently, if one says to a member of this tribe "All Kpelle men are farmers. Mr Smith is not a rice farmer. Is he a Kpelle man?" one will meet the response "As to that I can't say. I have not met Mr Smith". Well, as to that I say: this at best shows that the Kpelle are not inclined to reason syllogistically or that they do not appreciate its force, rather than that they cannot or that the logic of valid syllogistic reasoning somehow doesn't apply in West Africa. Would a Kpelle man, for instance, assume that his newborn child might be able to lift tables, prior to observing him? Or would he assume that his child would not be able to on the grounds that no child can lift tables? And if the Kpelle really believe that the syllogism in question is invalid they are mistaken. (The truth, I hazard, is that they don't like to reason syllogistically about Mr Smith because they appreciate (correctly) that the premiss may be false.) (Anderson, 1984)

At this point, then, I want to accept the view that different languages do enshrine different values, different beliefs and different ways of thinking; but I also suggest that the differences may be exaggerated, and that some beliefs or values may be inadmissible. The last point leads into what is surely the most interesting aspect of the argument surrounding teaching English as a Second Language: the idea that we ought not to impose on or influence people's ways of thinking.

Prima facie, this is a most peculiar objection to encounter in an educational context. For if education is not about developing people's ways of thinking, it is hard to see what it is about or why we do the various things that we do do. The tighter the connection made between language and thought, the more evident it becomes that all education, and not just second language teaching, necessarily involves presenting particular beliefs and values. So on what grounds might one oppose such practice? The key lines of argument seem to be that it is indoctrination; that it offends against individual rights; and that it ignores the fact of cultural relativism.

(1) Whether the practice amounts to indoctrination, and whether that matters, depends on what we mean by indoctrination. It would not be appropriate here to launch into an analysis of that concept. But it will be sufficient to point out that if one takes a view such as that the favouring of particular beliefs and values is in itself

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indoctrination, then indoctrination is unavoidable and, if for no other reason, it cannot be presumed to be immoral. It does not make sense to presume that one is committed to a belief or value that one never acts upon or refers to. Consequently, nobody can altogether avoid modelling and admitting their commitment to the values and beliefs that they do hold. And, as the old adage has it, "ought implies can". It is for such reasons that those who wish to retain the pejorative implications of the term 'indoctrination' have had to accept some such definition of the term as "the deliberate inculcation of unquestioning commitment to certain (usually 'contentious' or 'unprovable' or 'doctrinal') beliefs". In that sense the teaching of English, whether as a first or second language, clearly need not be indoctrinatory. (Snook, 1972)

(2) The argument in respect of rights has to be mentioned, because we are currently going through a phase of re-introducing the language of rights in all sorts of contexts (e.g. the rights of non-smokers, the rights of mothers). This is arguably unfortunate, since philosophers, without necessarily endorsing Jeremy Bentham's view that talk of rights is "nonsense walking on stilts", have nonetheless traditionally seen enormous difficulty in this manner of talking. The problem is not that we do not wish to accord people various rights, but that the claim that someone has one doesn't in itself advance an argument. The suggestion that women have a right to an abortion does not add anything to the claim that in the speaker's opinion they ought to be allowed to have one. To substantiate the claim in either form requires lengthy, difficult (and in this case we may say undetermined) argument in the realm of moral philosophy. Furthermore, attempts to specify rights for particular groups, such as non-smokers, have nothing in common with traditional arguments for rights which are concerned with the idea of natural or universal rights — rights, that is to say, that persons have *qua* being persons. We may and do give legal rights to particular groups of people on moral grounds, but the idea of having a natural right to something *qua* being a non-smoker or an Inuit or an Irishman scarcely makes sense. (Wringe, 1981)

Certainly any attempt to argue that teaching which interferes with or modifies the individual's cultural inheritance offends against that person's rights (or the rights of his parents) would need a lot more work than has so far been done. Why should an Asian living in Leicester be presumed to have the right to remain utterly untouched by the ways and demands of that society? Why should an Indonesian or an Englishman be presumed to have the right to refuse to be subject to the influence of other cultural ideas?

There is a tendency for some to attempt to deal with such questions by an appeal to what is natural. An Indonesian is naturally of a certain sort; an Englishman is naturally of another sort. But if there is one concept even more fraught with confusion than that of rights, it is the concept of nature. If one took the argument seriously one would

have to conclude that by rights no society should evolve at all; for, at any given point in history, what is natural to a culture would be fixed in terms of the then current aspects of the society in question — any development, change or modification would, by definition, be unnatural. But surely more serious is the objection that the fact that something *is* the case (and is therefore in one sense natural) is in itself insufficient to permit the conclusion that it *ought* to be the case. (Barrow, 1978)

(3) All such arguments lead inexorably to the argument that revolves around the issue of cultural relativism. It is feared that steps taken to modify or alter the cultural perspective of an individual or a group unwarrantably imply the superiority of the imposing culture. People do not generally object to imposing beliefs and values accepted as uncontentious within our society on our children, but they sometimes worry about imposing disputed values and object to the idea of imposing our ideas on the children of other cultures which do not share them. And they object, very often, because they subscribe to the view that while cultures may be different, they cannot be distinguished in terms of varying quality or worth. I want to conclude by making various comments on this kind of view.

First, to re-iterate a point made above, we surely exaggerate the shift in world view that our humble efforts may achieve. Learning English does not necessarily destroy the Inuit's, the Indonesian's, or the Asian's commitment to beliefs and values that they otherwise acquire. Rather, we may add something to their inheritance, as familiarity with other languages might add something to ours.

Cultures are undeniably different in some respects. But the fact of difference, the fact of existence, is simply not germane to the question of worth or value. In other words, if there is a case for asserting the equal worth of all cultures, it certainly does not lie in the mere fact of their existence.

Some cultures are superior to others, at least in certain specific respects. Here we come to the nub of the argument. I am inclined to the view that at least in principle some cultures can be said to be superior to others *in general* or *on balance*. (The point of the qualification 'in principle' is that there is a separate question as to whether particular cultures are indeed superior to certain others. Whereas most people would agree that the Third Reich was culturally inferior to many other cultures, one doubts whether it would be easy to get agreement on the superiority of, say, Canadian culture to American culture. Such difficulties in establishing particular judgements should not be confused with the question of the logical possibility of making any such judgement.) But of more immediate practical significance is the point that evaluative comparisons can certainly be made in respect of specific criteria. That is to say, it would be an instance of relativism gone mad, if one were to pretend that some cultures are not superior to others in respect of their literature, their

morality, their industrial capacity, their agricultural efficiency, their scientific understanding and so forth.

I am not suggesting that teachers of English as a Second Language should see themselves as missionaries for the cultural heritage that is enshrined in the English language or that they should disparage the cultural backgrounds of their students. But I am suggesting that they should have no qualms about the fact that they are directly introducing certain patterns of thought and values to students, and, indirectly, introducing various other beliefs, values and ways of thinking. It is true that at a sophisticated level of language use students will encounter much that is foreign to their thinking, but we can reasonably argue that much of what they are introduced to is desirable, in some instances we may even say superior to alternatives. Besides which, provided we avoid indoctrination, we are not forcing anybody to accept anything: we are merely presenting them with the possibility of thinking in certain ways.

In conclusion, I suggest that self-doubt and fears of cultural imperialism amongst teachers of English as a Second Language are misplaced. English does indeed enshrine a variety of ways of thinking, values and assumptions that may be absent from, or at variance with, the presuppositions of other languages, just as it may fail to recognise certain ways of viewing the world that are implicit in other languages. But, while it is conceded that therefore to teach English may involve changing the way in which people think,

(i) it does not necessarily do so. Provided that we avoid indoctrination, we are merely providing the opportunity for people to see things in new ways.
(ii) in the context of teaching English to those who have become citizens of English speaking communities, it would seem entirely reasonable to take active steps to initiate people into the common understandings that the language enshrines.
(iii) in some particular cases what is implicit in the English language may represent a better or truer way of understanding the world than is represented in certain other languages.
(iv) the reverse may of course also be true, but there are grounds for associating the richness and diversity of a language with superiority in terms of providing a true perspective, on the principle that the ability to make fine discriminations is part and parcel of subtle and realistic thinking and understanding. English, on these terms, is a relatively powerful language.

If these points are well taken, the teaching of English as a Second Language may properly be regarded as a service and a potential advantage to non-English speakers, rather than as a further exercise in cultural domination.

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The Unspoken Curriculum — or how language teaching carries cultural and ideological messages

Doug Holly

By now Ivan Illich's aphorism 'the hidden curriculum' has become a commonplace in the English-speaking world. Like all such expressions it perhaps conceals more than it reveals. In general terms, I think Illich himself meant to convey that the *overt* curriculum of schools and other establishments where formal education takes place is much less important, in the long run, than the *covert* process of subtle — and sometimes not-so-subtle — repression which is, according to him, their real 'curriculum'.

Whatever one might feel about the intrinsic nature of schools, Illich's phrase contains an important insight: namely, that in the process of attempting to educate, educators may well be in the business also, and quite unintentionally, or alienating, or confusing issues, of conveying repressive, authoritarian/elitist messages. This is a matter which, surely, must fascinate linguists in particular; and in the course of this essay I will be paying special attention to the unintended 'messages' which might well accompany a foreign language, particularly when that language is English, the social vehicle, *par excellence*, of imperialism — old-style *and* new-style. First, however, I want to try and elaborate on the general idea involved, irrespective of the particular content of the teaching/learning encounter.

We should attend first, I think, to the matter of social relations and, in particular, *power* relations. By this I do not have in mind the unequal power implicit in any teacher-taught encounter. For teachers of languages, be they 'natural' or technical, this form of inequality is, certainly at the outset, inevitable. The teacher is in possession of knowledge which the learner lacks and that knowledge — or, at least, the possession of it by the one and not the other participant in the learning encounter — necessarily defines the social relation between them. This truism has, in fact, tended to colour the whole popular perception of

education so that even governments see it as *the* defining characteristic of teaching/learning. It is probably this, more than any Illichian repressive intent, which has made 'schooling' the sadly alienating experience it remains for many. But such a tendency to characterise *all* learning by reference to one rather special kind is itself problematic. Why do people necessarily identify learning in terms of an 'unknown language' passed on from the knowing to the ignorant? Why has this become, so to speak, the defining metaphor in the popular perception of education? And why do governments, in particular, tend to cleave so determinedly to this popular perception — insisting on it against all professional objection on the part of educational theory? The problematic embodied in these questions is the one that I want to make central in what follows. The connection with the specific interests of language teaching is, we see, actually a vital one. I will explore, in due course, the particularity of that connection for *English* teaching as a natural consequence of the argument.

To address the problem directly: what is the force of the knowledgeability/ignorance metaphor and whence does it derive its widespread currency? The force of the metaphor is in its legitimating function and this function follows from its derivation. For the currency of the 'knowledge/ignorance' duality reflects the reality of social life, outside their most immediate circles, for a majority of humanity. The reality of current social orders is of a wide disparity in knowledge and power as between more or less restricted elites and more or less broad masses of people. This holds good whether the dominant political-economic aspiration is socialist or capitalist and whatever the position on some scale of economic 'development' — with the exception, perhaps, of the least developed groups of isolated hunter-gatherers now threatened with imminent extinction. An important fact of life for most people is a perceived or actual inferiority to 'Them'. Whatever national constitutions may assert, the classless society is nowhere in sight. On the contrary, those governments and leading groups formally dedicated to such a society seem, in practice, to be abandoning the idea. Everywhere, entrepreneurial self-sufficiency rather than equity is now the implied goal of such elites. It goes without saying that, for the mass of people in Africa, Asia and South America, the daily reality is one of vast inequality. For such people — and they are a majority of the world's population — inequality seems ordained by the gods. And, as Paulo Freire, an expert in 'Third World' fatalism has pointed out (1985) — it is an attitude shared by the less privileged even in the 'advanced' countries.

As it is today, so it has been throughout recorded history: inequality of knowledge and power is experienced as a fact of existence on a par with mortality and the rotation of the seasons. Small wonder then, that the most widely-held notion of learning sees it as a handing-down of knowledge, an encounter between the inevitably powerful and the inevitably powerless. In this context the 'secret language' metaphor seems to make sense.

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