

THE WHOLE PROCESS APPROACH - LANGUAGE
TEACHING AND RESPONSIBILITY

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In this short article I would like to examine the implications of a view of language teaching which sees teaching and learning as something more than the mastery of technical skills. This view is perhaps best expressed by Brumfit in the following passage:

"I believe that language teaching is unavoidably bound up with the whole process of education" *

and later,

"...teaching is a species of friendship at the same time as it is an applied science" (1980: ix) *

If language teaching and learning is then something more than the teaching of language - and I believe that it is - what responsibilities does this place on the teacher and the learner? Is communication an abstract process, or is it - surely a saner view - the process of exchanging ideas and beliefs?

Language teachers and language learners form a world-wide body of human beings in a way that few other disciplines can emulate. Both the learner and the teacher are in the business of acquiring or guiding an extra means of relating to and with the rest of humanity. The acquisition of another language allows us far greater possibilities

* Brumfit C.J. (1980) Problems and Principles in English Teaching. Pergamon.

of ideational interchange and imposes upon us responsibilities of cultural understanding that competence in our mother tongue alone tends to restrict.

Textbook writers have long recognised this position to greater and lesser degrees and have often tried to include in a language course information about the culture of a target-language community. The mere inclusion of material designed to foster appropriacy, for example, imposes a cultural stereotype even at the simplistic level of whether or not you add a 'please' to the order you give to the waiter in a restaurant (not all language communities do). Even a weak version of the Whorfian hypothesis would recognise this, and yet writers go a lot further. We include texts about the amount of money paid to pop stars or pilots, the dangers of pollution, or the problems of one-parent families. In all these cases we are, to some extent, making political statements: the purpose of this article is to examine just how far we should go along this road.

As the historian has to adapt facts to his world-view of history and the literature teacher has to see a common striving in patterns of literary effort, so the language teacher has to fashion his teaching to a world-view of communication. This is what I understand by 'the whole process of education'. And what is this world-view if not the responsibility to share international concerns and tackle the overriding concerns of humanity? Language teachers are in an exceptional position; the members of our profession come from all countries and share widely differing ideologies. Yet they share knowledge and expertise through journals and conferences. Where they teach multi-national groups they are in immediate contact with vast areas of the world they would not otherwise encounter. Language teachers are members, then, of a vast international community and if they can not, from this position of strength, help to promote a feeling of responsibility among themselves and their students for the future of the human race then one might question the value of the type of communication they are teaching.

I would like to examine three areas which rarely form part of the subject matter of EFL curricula and discuss the

implications for language teaching that they raise.

1 The Nuclear Future

We live in an age of pre-emptive anti-nuclear strikes and rapid proliferation of a technology which will give governments of many different countries the knowledge and materials to manufacture weapons of awesome destructive capability. Ominous signs suggest that the old power of the nuclear bomb - its deterrent value - is fading as new technology finds ways to deliver multiple warheads with pin-point accuracy. The nuclear nightmare is moving rapidly into the realms of the possible, and the unthinkable is frequently discussed in war games and scenarios. Coupled with this, defense spending - to defend who and from what? - is rising dramatically all over the world, despite the fact that the human race already has the means to dispose of itself finally and forever many times over.

Of course none of this is new, yet somehow we have allowed the situation to arise. However political the issue of nuclear power is, it transcends the preoccupations of individual governments and differing ideologies. It matters not one jot in a nuclear war who casts the first stone for we are all losers; a limited nuclear war is, after all, a contradiction because nuclear weapons are not limited in the swathe of destruction that they reap.

Nuclear war, then, must be an issue in a 'whole process' approach and any pretensions to be involved in bi-cultural communication almost necessarily would have to be backed up by a concern with the subject. Nuclear war does not threaten individual governments or political systems, it promises to obliterate the entire international community of which language teachers and students are members.

Is it possible, then, that a communicative and educational approach to language teaching can avoid this topic or restrain itself from didactic materials aimed at persuading us all to act in the face of this threat? People created the situation and people can un-create it. A body of language teachers and students committed to do just that would be a powerful force to contend with.

2 Discrimination and Repression

We live in an age - no different perhaps from those that went before it, but on a much grander scale - where discrimination and repression are commonplace and are perpetrated hugely by governments all over the world of entirely opposing and different political persuasions. What it boils down to is that great numbers of human beings are disadvantaged and even badly treated simply as a result of their colour or their nationality. To make matters worse, governments regularly use imprisonment, ghastly torture and summary execution (a polite term for murder) as a way of silencing and frightening people who don't agree with their ideas or attempt to redress the balance that discrimination and oppression so unfairly create.

Once again we are faced with an issue that confronts not just one country or system, but the whole human race. Repression and discrimination are systematic and widespread, and they demean us all.

A truly educational approach to language teaching would have to confront these issues for they threaten the very process of education itself. Repression takes place when communication between human beings breaks down. It is surely the job of a language educator to make sure that this does not happen.

3 Poverty and Hunger

In all countries of the world there exist the twin evils of poverty and hunger. Sometimes in populous and so-called 'under developed' countries the scale of the problem is so massive as to completely beggar description. Publicity has recently been given, for example, to the plight of the refugees in the Ogaden, but the number of children and adults who will die, this year, of starvation runs literally into the millions. And this does not include those who live in appalling poverty with little or no possibility of improving their lot.

Relief organisations and Western charities do their best to alleviate this situation by asking for financial support. Clearly,

though, charity can not (and should not) be the answer. It is unthinkable that people can be allowed to die because they do not have anything at all to eat, and once again we are faced with a problem not for any individual country, but for humanity. New international initiatives will be necessary to combat this situation and language teachers and students are in a unique position to create them now and in the future.

A consideration of the above three issues may seem to fall outside the content of an EFL or FL syllabus, and materials have rarely, to the best of my knowledge, dealt with them. There is also a strong feeling, perhaps rightly, that politics should not form part of syllabus content especially where topics are particularly sensitive and are likely to cause conflict. This may be because much language teaching takes place within the framework of specific political systems with clearly defined ideologies, and in EFL because the private sector encourages a tentative approach to such issues in the face of the sensibilities of fee-paying students. To justify such a position it would be argued that language learning is concerned with acquiring new channels of communication with other peoples and that it is up to the student to decide what topics would form the basis for such communication. These arguments may, however, be seen rather as conveniently abdicating responsibility for the predicaments of twentieth-century humankind.

The three issues raised in this paper are crucial to the survival and decency of the human race and yet they are conveniently forgotten. A whole-process approach, however, in which, essentially, human beings are learning how to better communicate with each other, could surely deal with them. International communication is about learning how to communicate with each other to the benefit of all, and I can see no good reason why language teaching and learning should not shoulder this responsibility by facing squarely the kind of issues I have raised here. After all, someone has to do it, soon.