In this way, their oral ability can be enhanced. Sometimes I also ask them to *write the answers* on the board as well because, as you know, our final exams don't test the reading comprehension of the students through 'oral' comprehension questions.

In the light of the latter interviews, the following section discusses the facets of teaching affected by washback.

Discussion

The spelling section of the EFL exams at Iranian high schools tests the spelling ability of the pupils through single sentences which are unrelated to one another. Teacher 1 has stated that the way he attempts to improve his students' spelling is through single words excerpted from the new words of the textbook as well as single sentences derived from the reading texts of the textbook. The fact that the exam at Iranian high schools tests the students' spelling and the teacher also gives practice to the students on their spelling could be linked with the exam washback on the 'content' of the teacher's teaching (i.e. 'what' he teaches is spelling). However, the fact that both the exam and the teacher deal with spelling through incoherent sentences could be attributed to the exam washback on the 'method' of the teacher's teaching (i.e. 'how' he teaches spelling). Likewise, the fact that both the exam and Teacher 2 attend to the reading comprehension of the pupils could be ascribed to the exam washback on the content of the teacher's instruction, whereas the fact that the teacher also asks the pupils to write the answers to the reading

it could be argued that washback influences the instruction method as well

comprehension questions rather than produce them orally could be linked with the way (i.e. the method) the exam tests the students' reading comprehension. Thus, the interview data seem to suggest that there is washback both on the teaching 'method' and 'content'. However, since washback is to be observed rather than claimed (Watanabe 2004), I will draw very succinctly on my twenty semi-structured class observations to bring about triangulation between what the teachers asserted and what I observed in the classrooms.

In some of the classes I observed, teaching spelling and practising dictation were done through reading out loud to the students single words and unrelated sentences rather than coherent chunks of language. This way of teaching resembles the method of testing spelling in high school EFL exams. Similarly, the way reading comprehension questions were answered in the classes conformed to the requirements of the EFL exam (i.e. writing the answers rather than verbalising them). Hence, it could be argued that washback influences the instruction method as well.

In conclusion, the fact that the teachers assert there is washback on both their teaching content and method, and the fact that my class observations triangulate this assertion, seem to suggest that we need to rethink the assertion that washback affects only the teaching content and not the teaching method. In fact, washback seems so complex and language teaching contexts appear so various that they cause washback to differ from context to context in terms of test effects on the content and method of instruction. As a consequence, it could also be argued that if EFL teachers wish to avoid negative effects of the tests on their teaching, they should watch out for the impact of the tests on both teaching 'method' and 'content'.

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Have you thought of writing for *Voices*?

Have you thought about writing something for *Voices*? Is there something you feel strongly about? Something you would like to say or share?

Everyone who has ever had an article published in our Newsletter started out by submitting an article for the first time and *Voices* is particularly interested in receiving material from people who are relatively new to the profession.

Perhaps you have an idea but it's not enough for an article? Well, brief can be just as good and often better. We are especially interested in items as short as 400–800 words – quite long enough in many cases to make a pithy point – and shorter articles will give more people a chance to be heard, regardless of who, where or how well 'qualified' they are.

Martin Eayrs, Editor, *IATEFL Voices*

Power to the people?

Anthony Bruton looks at commonalities and diversities of culture and language teaching, and wonders just who is empowering whom.

In a recent *ELT Journal* article, Bax (2003) heralds the end of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and argues for a 'context approach to language teaching'—note, not contextual, and obviously not contextualised—which is actually nothing new. (See Prabhu (1990), for example, for a discussion.) The basic argument is that local context should be the initial point of reference rather than method, especially CLT, thus protecting local practitioners from imported impositions. I must admit that Harmer's (2003) lucid rebuttal of Bax's (2003) proposal is much more coherent than the original author's defence, though the latter does attempt to find a compromise in his own reply to Harmer. Presumably, most teachers and authorities of whatever kind must consider the viable options available, both in terms of beneficial goals and effective procedures, before attending to the particular contexts they confront. This is logical since diversity and difference are potentially infinite, while commonalities are not. In a rather more flippant vein, one might argue that Bax would also recommend a context approach to maths or history.

With respect to the communicative approach, not CLT note, which Harmer does not believe 'is a describable phenomenon any more' (p. 288), it is probably true to say its central denominating factor is that some form of communication is the goal of the formal learning undertaken. And in most state systems, foreign languages (FLs) are ultimately on the secondary school curriculum for two typical reasons: one, so that students can learn to communicate in the language, and two, so that students become aware of other cultures. If neither of these goals are achieved (in the first case, very often for example, because the language becomes an object of study, and the study of language an end in itself, with exams that only reflect the system of the language, with the major motivator being grades), the authorities presumably have to decide whether the whole enterprise is worthwhile at all, or whether some change should be attempted—where the authorities look for alternatives, and how and whether change is achieved is another matter.

But having said that, let us try another tack. Take natural first language learning, which admittedly is another ball game, but nonetheless not irrelevant. All children learn very different languages to a level of native-speaker competence in very different cultural milieus. So here we have diversity of language and diversity of culture, but similarities in relative levels of communicative proficiency across the board. However, when it comes to 'language learning cultures' presumably there must be some very significant commonalities that produce the same high level of outcome. Moreover, there must be some significant commonalities in the capacities of the children who learn the diverse languages they are exposed to—the Universal Grammar argument. As we know, it does not matter which languages children are exposed to initially; what matters is the internal capacity and the learning environment. Now, which are more instructive in theory, the commonalities or the diversities? I would argue the former rather than the latter. Of course, when it comes to more mature students and other languages, many variables change, including eventual learning outcomes, but the point remains the same.

And if we return to FL learning, especially when it is English, there is a further issue I would like to raise. It refers to a point made by Gupta (2004), about the driving force of relevance in pedagogical contexts being the change in the use of English in India at large. My personal feeling is that the point of reference for using FLs should be the students themselves. If communication is to occur, it should emerge from the immediate communication between and about the students themselves, and the teacher (!), however rudimentary it may be, and not in terms of potential target contexts and potential roles. This would apply to English, or any other less 'globally-used' language, which would not have the external impetus mentioned by Gupta. Such an option is all the more pertinent when it comes to younger

children learn very different languages to a level of native-speaker competence in very different cultural milieus

learners, who may not be projecting their aspirations that far ahead. It may require suspending disbelief, which will depend very much on the teachers' capacity to transmit convictions, but will probably produce more constructive outcomes than the alternatives.

To make the point, take Seville in southern Spain, where I live and teach. Most of the students in local schools do not come into contact directly with speakers of English, whether native or otherwise. Some of them do, however, come into contact with English through songs or the Internet, but English is for the most part not an immediate necessity. Yet many students whose parents can afford it go to local language schools to learn English, in addition to, or in spite of, their English classes in school, where very often they receive an abundance of grammar and complete numerous written exercises/ exams with grades. The reason why some

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of these language schools survive is that students obviously receive something they do not get in school, namely some form of communicative language instruction, which is essentially motivating.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this. First, there are not necessarily cultural reasons for students not wanting to learn the FLs in particular ways, but rather other factors. Secondly, many state school students are underprivileged because they may not be receiving the instruction they perhaps deserve, or achieving the goals they might achieve. One conclusion that is *not* to be drawn from this is that the success of foreign language schools is due to the teachers

> One conclusion that is not to be drawn from this is that the success of foreign language schools is due to the teachers being native speakers of English

being native speakers of English. When I taught at the SBCI in Sao Paulo, Brazil, one of the biggest non-state language teaching organisations in the world, most of the teachers were Brazilian native speakers of Portuguese, which did not deter the public, maybe even the contrary, for the simple reason they received instruction that was professional, relevant and motivating. Of course, in the case of some state teachers, they may need (to be encouraged) to convince themselves that they do not need to be perfect oral communicators in the FL, nor that the FL classroom need become a communicative free-for-all, but that they too might benefit from communicating with their students, and in the target language.

Two final questions: first, is a strong form of CLT, of the type that is apparently being 'exported' to other cultures around the world, that widespread in both US and UK state secondary schools? Neither Klapper (2003) suggests that it is in the UK, nor VanPatten (2002) in the US. Secondly, when it comes to adopting or adapting alternative pedagogical options, is it teachers or students who are generally more reluctant? From the evidence gleaned from numerous studies on attitudes to the communicative approach, cited in a talk I gave at the IATEFL conference this year, the majority verdict seems to suggest that, if anything, it tends to be the former. Which prompts a third, parting, question. When authors, such as Bax, talk about empowerment, who exactly is empowering whom, ... and with what power? Administrators, academics, teachers or even students?

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Cardiff feedback form winner

Thanks to all of you who filled out feedback forms at the Cardiff Conference. We have drawn from these the winner of the free conference registration (for the 40th IATEFL International Conference in Harrogate, in 2006). We are pleased to announce that the winner is Mrs Justine Rutledge of Wicken, UK.

Justine, a new member of IATEFL, having joined only this year, commented 'Great! Thanks a lot. Maybe I can now persuade the college to pay for my accommodation instead ... I was afraid I wouldn't be able to come to Harrogate and I really enjoyed Cardiff, my first IATEFL conference'.

Patterns of literacy

JoAnn Salvisberg examines the effect of modern life on reading habits and acquisition.

Young people in Switzerland these days spend fewer hours reading books than they do text messaging their friends. Furthermore, they spend much more time watching films, and surfing the Internet than visiting their local library. This is based not only on my own observations, but on discussions with students in some of my classes who are primary and secondary school teachers.

Young people are neither afraid, shy of, nor unfamiliar with the media world. It seems rather to be an integral component of their everyday life, and its contents are regarded by many as being as influential as the social structures of their families, school and/or occupation. Media, including all computer activity as well as Internet access, is viewed by children and young people alike as not only a medium for communication and information, but games, and support (for example, using email and chat rooms). This is not surprising since approximately 3.2 million Swiss households (i.e. 94 per cent of Swiss TV households) have cable service. Furthermore, Swiss households spend more money on telecommunications than any EU country, the USA or Japan.

What young people here in Switzerland do read in hard-copy print form, from Monday to Friday, is a shortened version of the daily newspaper on their way to school. It takes about twenty minutes to read (incidentally the name of this daily is: *20 Minutes*!), the average time it takes in the morning for a local train, bus or tram ride to school. Although I do give them credit for following the main news stories, their penchant for brief news items indicates a shorter attention span (and craving for entertainment bites!) in contrast to the rare soul who can spend hours enthralled by the tale of a good piece of literature.

As a language teacher, I fear for those who grow up not knowing how to read books (on- or off-line). Not because they will lose the historical, sentimental sense and skill of reading literature and libraries as communities and social centres of interaction with others. Rather, reading has been shown to increase the mind's ability to learn. I am not only talking about languages. (See Krashen's books and numerous articles citing the advantages of a good reading program and a well-equipped libraries, for example, Krashen 2004.)

Reading has been found to also help even those considered unintelligent and even beyond help. Take, for example, the experience of Renée Fuller. As a bright, dyslexic child she had to learn to read on her own, and later developed a reading method specifically for bright, dyslexic children. Colleagues at a state mental hospital where she was chief of psychological services asked her one day, though, to consider teaching her reading methods to a few retarded patients. She reluctantly agreed, but found the results astounding. Those with a lower IQ level than 30 learned to not only read with comprehension, but to re-tell stories and eventually to create their own stories. Needless to say their lives were transformed as others (caring for them) viewed them differently, and they began taking

> I fear for those who grow up not knowing how to read books (on- or off-line)

better care of themselves, had a different look in their eyes, and to behave more intelligently. These once retarded individuals even taught themselves how to write! Dickinson (2002), reporting on Fuller's work writes:

When you think about it, every culture in the history of the world has relied on story to teach its history, mores, and life skills. The great religions all have relied on stories from the pulpit, in images and sculpture, in drama, and in literature. Stories bind us together as a species. Powerful ways of learning—powerful ways of helping the mind to make meaningful, intelligent connections. They also guide our lives.

From my perspective, I do not think online texts, and short daily newsbytes are bad, *per se*, but they are not representative of the fabric of life, and people rarely write similar stories relating personal experiences they have lived through to carry on the tradition. This is where, I believe, the sense of online community comes in. Requiring more than the response to questions, but a search for more personal, meaningful details to relate in a complex piece of writing. This can only come, in my opinion, through guided training and keeping students motivated by offering challenging yet useful tasks whether they are in the real or virtual classroom.

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