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 EFL 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) lurid 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 anymore’ (p. 288), it is probably true to say that its central denominator 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, 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 is an end in itself, with exams that only measure the students’ possible competence in very different cultural milieux), the latter does attempt to find a compromise rather than the former.

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Martin Layton, Editor, IATEFL Voices

Feature articles

In this way, their real ability can be enhanced. Sometimes I 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 real-comprehension questions.

In the light of the latter interviews, the following section reports the factors of teaching affected by washback.

Discussion

The teaching section of the EFL exam at Bangkok high school tests the students’ writing ability, and the students were not aware that their writing ability was assessed as a single sentence derived from the reading text of the textbook. The fact that the exam at Bangkok high school tests the students’ speaking and the teacher also gives practice to the students on their spelling could be linked with the exam washback on their teaching. The students’ writing could be attributed to the exam washback on the students’ spelling and the teacher also gives practice to the students on their spelling because the language becomes an object of study, and the study of language is an end in itself, with exams that only measure the students’ possible competence in very different cultural milieux, which Harmer does not believe ‘is a describable phenomenon anymore’ (p. 288), it is probably true to say that its central denominator 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, 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 is an end in itself, with exams that only measure the students’ possible competence in very different cultural milieux), the latter does attempt to find a compromise rather than the former.

It could be argued that washback influences the instruction method so well that the teachers assert their teaching (i.e. ‘what’ he teaches) influences the instruction method. The interview data seem to suggest that there is washback both on the teaching method and the ‘content’ language. It could be observed rather than changed (Harmer 2003). I will stay very currently on my present structured class observations to bring about triangulation between what the teachers asserted and what I observed in the classroom.

In some of the classes I observed, teaching spelling and practicing dictation were done through reading out loud to the students single words and unlinked sentences rather than coherent chunks of language. This way of teaching resembles the method of teaching spelling in high school ELI 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 understanding the question would be argued that washback influences the instruction method as well. In conclusion, the fact that the teachers assert there is washback on both the method and content, and the fact that my class observations triangulate this assertion, seem to suggest that we need to rethink the attention that washback affects only the teaching content and not the teaching method. We have already seen how complex and language teaching content appear to vary so that they cause washback to differ from context to context in the first 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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of these language schools survive is that students obviously 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 it is in the UK, nor VarPatten (2002) in the US. Second, when it comes to adapting or adapting alternative, pedagogical options, is it teachers or students who are generally more relevant? 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?

References
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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 not afraid, shy of, or unfamiliar with the media world. It seems rather to be an integral component of their everyday life, and its contents are regulated by many as being influential in the social structures of their families, school and community. Media, including all computer activity as well as Internet access, is a shared activity by children and young people who do not only have a medium for communication and information, games, and support for friends, such as email and chat groups. This is not surprising since approximately 2.2 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 born in Switzerland do read in hard copy print form, from Monday to Friday, is a shortened version of the daily newspaper. A little over twenty minutes to read incidentally, the name of the daily in 20 Minutes, the average time it takes in the morning for a local train, bus or tram ride to school. Although a reasonably good read for following the main news stories, their penchant for brief news items indicates a shorter attention span (cent for entertainment features) is in contrast to the same soul who can spend hours enthralled by the tape of a good piece of literature.

As a language teacher I fear for those who grow up not knowing how to read books (or- off-line). Not because they will lose the historical, sentimental sense and skill of reading literature and library or community and social centres of interaction with other. Rather reading has been shown to increase the mental ability to learn. I am not only talking about language. Gisele Krisher’s books and numerous articles citing the advantages of a good reading program and a well equipped library, for example, Krisher 2004.

Reading has been found to also help poor those considered mismatched, and even beyond. Take, for example, the experience of Brenda is 10. A bright, dyslexic child, she had to learn to read on her own, and later developed a reading method specifically for height, dyslexic children. Colleagues at a state mental hospital where she was chief of psychological services asked her one day, through. In reference teaching beginning reading methods in a few selected patients - she asked again, but found this result astounding. Those with a lower IQ level than 30 learned to not only read with comprehension, but to tell stories and eventually to create their own stories. Needless to say their lives were transformed - others came for them moved differently, and they began taking

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brought some of themselves, had a different IQ in their teens, and not being able intelligently. These more selected individuals even taught themselves how to read! Pickerson (2000) reported on fuller’s written words:

When you think about the many centuries in the history of the world has relied on story to teach its history, morals, and life skills. The great religions all have relied on stories from the pulp, in images and sculpture, in drama, and in literature. Story keep us together as a species. Powerful ways of learning-powerful ways of helping the mind to make meaningful, intelligent connections. They also make us feel safe.

From my perspective, I do not think online texts, and short daily newsbytes are bad, per se, but they are not representative of the faces of life, and people rarely make 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. Typing away 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.

References
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