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10-21-2006

# Teaching Language as a Political Act

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This is a Plenary Speech given at the 2006 Conference on Modern Cross-Cultural Research. National Sun Yat-sen University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan.

# 當代跨文化 2006

## 國際研討會 論文集

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Teaching Language as a Political Act

# Teaching Language as a Political Act

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MCR 2006 CONFERENCE TAIWAN
NATIONAL SUN□YATSEN UNIVERSITY 10/21/06

Each time I have had the opportunity to speak on Taiwan, I have used the occasion to provoke teachers to think about the incredible responsibility it is to teach and how, too often what we are asked to do in our classrooms is a distraction away from this responsibility (Bahruth 2000, 2006). The purpose of professional gatherings is for us to renew ourselves, to commune with colleagues, to hear what is new from scholars in the field, and to contemplate ways in which our students and our society can benefit from what we have experienced. I hope to offer here a full range of emotions: to say things to make you laugh and cry, to instigate anger, a deeper sense of purpose, and a disequilibrium that will cause all to be uncomfortable with schooling practices that do more harm than good to children, ourselves and society. Part of my responsibility is also to provide pedagogical alternatives to go beyond the limitations of teaching, learning, literacy and language as defined by people who have no theoretical basis for invading and defining our work solely because of a commercial interest in education.

Let us begin with teaching; what it is and what it is not. Good teaching is anchored in art and science, both disciplines that require arduous investment over long periods of time where creative thinking is essential, as well as skills such as analysis, synthesis, and application. To teach well involves the production of knowledge so we are constantly improving as we mature and gain insights that have new implications for our classrooms. Most radical of all, teaching cannot be separated from our own learning and that of our students. Since we, and our students are individuals, all classrooms and the materials used in them should not look identical.

If you can accept these notions then teaching is not duckling stuffing (Lea 2003), and the materials used to teach must include what Maria Montessori referred to as "flexibility of thought." Without this, no art would be original (thereby no longer being art) and no science would produce solutions to complex problems. This has been expressed by the popular notion of "thinking outside the box," but it is difficult to do if we are unaware of the box itself. Much of what passes for teaching is really a trapping of students in the box without their, or our critical awareness. After all, we have also had this done to us through the dominant paradigm of duckling stuffing or what Paulo Freire (1970) referred to as "banking," where the same coin is deposited in everyone's head at the same time.

What about learning? Children learn a tremendous amount of language and concepts from birth to age five when they begin to go to school. This process occurs without a pre-defined curriculum, without publishing company materials, without lesson plans, without tests. The child interacts with people and the world naturally, organically, generatively. Humans, before school, are not required to cram for an artificial, outside agenda that is superimposed upon us. The whole notion of "cram schools" represents a response to the

failure to learn by doing more intensively what did not work in the first place. Can we say we are teaching when no learning occurs? We must climb out of the box that asserts that passing a poorly informed and constructed test is evidence of learning or good teaching.

Let us look at language. As native speakers of our mother tongues we have knowledge that we are unaware of until we approach human communication scientifically. In the everyday experiences of native speakers "fleeting moments" of conversation (Goffman, 1976) occur that display our knowledge without our awareness of what we know. When a non-native speaker speaks to us in our mother tongue with less than native proficiency we become aware of what we know through their display of what they do not know. Tests trivialize language, learning, literacy, and teaching so devastatingly that very little of the native speaker abilities we have are measured. This is why so many people can pass the test, yet are still incapable of communicating with native speakers. In the United States, ninety-five percent of those who study through a traditional foreign language method retreat from the effort as self-diagnosed poor language learners. They are thereby condemned to a lifetime of monolingualism. I often hear comments about people having the "knack" for learning languages. If some people did not have the knack, they would not have learned their mother tongue! The problem is not with our human capacity to learn languages, but with the artificial misrepresentations of languages in traditional foreign language classrooms. Students may even get A's on all of their grammar tests, yet walk away defeated. Ironically, this is one industry in the United States that always gets funded, despite obvious failure. One might speculate that the failure may be interpreted as success since it discourages people from learning a new language and thereby expanding their worldview.

Now let's look at literacy, perhaps the most sophisticated and useful human tool yet invented. The way literacy is presented in schools is enough to discourage people from ever wanting to read or write. Literacy is a tool for thinking and for clarifying our thoughts. It must be represented as such from the initial stages of instruction. Literacy is a way to explore, negotiate and eventually record our thoughts, first for ourselves and then for others. We can go back to what we, or others have written across time and space. It allows us to become time travelers to anywhere. We must shed our domesticated and trivialized notions of literacy if we wish to ever discover the joy and utility it clearly provides to the few humans who have broken away from their earlier boxed up and boxed in experiences during their school years. One of the most damaging effects of literal approaches to reading and writing is a *paralysis before metaphor*. Many are unable to see the deeper and multiple interpretations left to us by artists through their works. Contemplation of a work of art has the power to transform our lives when we take up the invitation of the artist to do so. When schooling deskills us through misrepresentations of language, literacy, learning and teaching we are unable to make much use of works produced by creative minds living beyond the box.

Another horrifying effect of lessons that deform is a dependence upon others to tell us what we should think about important human issues. Since the word has always been divorced from the world in school, we are unable to make the necessary connections or to see the contradictions in order to make up our own minds. Confused people are easily influenced by propagandists with agendas of deception and exploitation. Artists and scientists are often outspoken representatives of avant-garde ideas (over 1,500 scientists have signed a letter of protest about global warming), but if people do not read, or visit museums, or pay attention to declarations of leading intellectuals (Albert Einstein wrote a

cautionary letter to President Roosevelt stating that if he had known that his theories would be used to create weapons of mass destruction, he would rather have been a shoemaker); if they watch Hollywood movies designed to provoke thought, but are only entertained without getting the deeper message intended, then the metaphor is lost on an audience that cannot see beyond the box. In a recent interview about the Star Wars films, George Lucas (2005:6) made the following comment:

> RS: Vader is largely machine. Is that a reflection of Anakin having lost his humanity?
>
> Lucas: It's a metaphor: As your humanness is cut away, you become more like a programmed droid.

Federal mandates in the United States, driven by high-stakes testing, have increasingly reduced teaching and learning to droid-like behavior. Scripted lessons, "teaching" to the test, and other repressive measures have reduced teaching to schooling and learning to memorization (Bahruth & Lea, 2006).

A few embarrassing questions will serve to illustrate how few of us have escaped the damage caused by misrepresentations of teaching, learning, literacy and language in schools. How often do you read books and how many per year? When was the last time you wrote a poem? A short story? A novel? A reflection on your personal or professional life? When was the last time you hand wrote a letter (not an email) to someone you loved? Who can say they do all of the above on a regular basis?

Teaching and learning, language, and literacy are creative, organic, generative phenomena that must represent sophistication and their essence at all times. If our misconceptions about teaching and learning, literacy and language are so prevalent, it should come as no surprise that assessment instruments and practices are also erroneous, and may well be the reason why we accept being in the box and putting others into one as well.

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As educators, what are we to do? First, we need to reflect upon the insanity and immorality of what we are doing to our students and to ourselves. Andre Gide once stated, "If a million people are wrong, they are still wrong even though they are a million people." We saw this during World War Two, but the trend runs throughout history. I am not convinced by a person who professes to be a spiritual or religious person, especially if that person is greedy, dishonest, violent and disrespectful to fellow human beings. When a person speaks of values similar to one's own, one should not equate one's own genuine belief with the words of the person, but with his or her actions in contrast to one's own actions. Our literacy should enable us to see the hypocrisy of those who say one thing and do the opposite.

We have no right to call a Spanish class as such, if the students are unable to communicate in Spanish when the course is over, despite passing all the grammar tests. Cram schools are about making money, and not about teaching English. In the United States, signs outside schools declare, "DRUG-FREE SCHOOL ZONE," yet children are given drugs inside to make them sit still for the duckling stuffing their natural intelligence

resists. There is a direct relationship between school shootings in the United States and these same pacifying drugs, yet most educators are totally unaware of this fact. Ironically, these same educators and their students become the targets of the victims of drug abuse of the worst kind: officially approved and promoted drug distribution. The solution is not to blame the victim and then drug the child into conformity. We must question the insanity of this approach to disruptive student behavior and recognize the real cause, which is schooling that goes against the nature of human learning, as it misrepresents literacy and language.

Furthermore, I refuse to accept the arguments about literacy, language, learning, and teaching from people who have not demonstrated deep understandings and lifelong scholarship in these areas. A person who cannot produce effective language learning and literacy as demonstrated by affirmative answers to the questions I posed above, holds no authority. An instructor in a language class whose students can only pass a grammar test with no actual communicative competence in the language has nothing to offer from inside the box of traditional duckling stuffing. Show me the results. Show me students who enjoy reading and writing, who are constantly seeking to learn more, not because of the threat of a test, but because the intrinsic value of learning has been discovered.

How are we to reclaim our lives and our classrooms? I feel we need to become scholars of pedagogy in the most critical sense. Only a scholar can produce scholars. In Farsi there is a saying, "A wolf does not give birth to a lamb." The human intellect is our birthright and no one should be allowed to take it away. If this has happened, then we need to recognize this and take it back. Reclaiming as a process is sloppy and a lot of work, but it is worth the effort. We cannot ask our students to do so if we are not willing. The process is also dialectical in that we must rediscover and redefine the world in which we live together through critical examinations of history, politics, economics, and ecology across societies and cultures. We know the names of great thinkers, but do we understand what they thought and said and committed to print because it was so vital?

An important dimension of critical pedagogy includes the questioning of traditional terminology used to explain reality. In the process of schooling, people often learn language that supports the thinking of the dominant paradigm. Many become fluent in the language of impossibility as they are schooled. In response to this, I always try to keep in mind two central points as I teach languages: One is to undo the damage of schooling by helping my students to acquire a language of possibility. Second, I try to expose the ideological influences in language and to offer my students a language of criticity where they become fluent in reading the world critically for themselves to get beyond the propaganda of an antihumane paradigm. For instance, we cannot wage war for peace. This is Orwellian double speak. It is a way of using language to control the way people see the world, or in many cases to prevent them from seeing the world clearly at all.

Paulo Freire (1970) emphasized the importance of reading the harmony or the dissonance between the word and the world, or to say it another way, between what we say and what we do. Language acquisition and learning in general, take place through a dialectical process across a variety of world views as learners construct meaning. It does not happen through a duckling stuffing process where official bodies of knowledge are force fed to passive students. The former is pedagogical and humanizing, while the latter

is antipedagogical and antihumane. I call the difference between the two education and schooling, respectively.

Lessons structured along the lines of critical pedagogy have students engaged in using language and literacy to explore vital issues of humanity while experiencing the pedagogy actively. A series of activities can be introduced to demonstrate a critical pedagogical approach to language teaching where the target language is used as a tool for thinking and negotiating for meaning rather than as a subject to be studied in the abstract. Students become more confident and competent in English through a dialectical process that is interesting, engaging, thought provoking and life changing. Through the process of sharing different worldviews all come away with a richer sense of language, literacy, and learning as well as a deeper understanding of the human condition.

*The last thing a fish would discover is the water in which it swims...*

When we learn our mother tongue, we simultaneously discover the world each language names. Differences in languages create different ways of seeing and differing worldviews. This is why translation is the highest expression of bilingualism and should not be a method for beginners. Speaking only one language results in a limited worldview. Learning a second language becomes an opportunity to consider other worlds. Bilingualism provides a fundamental web of dialectal relationships and juxtapositions of language and culture that enrich our learning and lead to deeper understandings of our humanity and the humanity of others. Through considerations of the way the world is named by others, we come to appreciate the power of language to influence our ways of seeing and understanding. For example, in English we have the word "pet" for animals that are raised as companions to people. In Spanish, two words are required to express the concept (animal doméstico) because it had been a foreign concept to their culture. With the advent of globalization in Latin America, the idea of owning pets has become incorporated into the middle and upper classes. Poor people in Latin America still only have animals that fulfill some pragmatic purpose: a watchdog, cats for catching mice, guinea pigs -- a common pet in the United States -- are a delicacy food in Bolivia, Ecuador and Perú. And delicious, I might add.

Another example might be kwai and comkwai in Chinese, where the concept has been imported into English. We use the word chopsticks, but since there is no one word in English to specify spoons, forks or knives to be used in common, comkwai is neither imported nor represented linguistically or culturally. One could dispute these examples, but the point is there are millions of examples of subtle linguistic differences across cultures that influence our perceptions and what we fail to perceive, many times in our own language, until we encounter a second language and its cultures.

The important point here is that learning a second language provides a potential source for escaping our ethnocentrism. If the subtleties of language and culture are not discussed in their dialectical relationships with other codes, this opportunity is often lost. The result is similar to remaining monolingual: we continue to believe that our way is the only way or perhaps the best way, and every different way is ignorant or inferior. Asians should stop using chopsticks because we use forks and they work better -- mainly because we can't use chopsticks as effectively as people who grew up with them. This is obviously wrong minded and unacceptable, yet this kind of thinking is prevalent in the United States where most native English speakers do not speak a second language.

It would be impossible to cover all of the juxtapositions present in bilingualism, but we should strive to sensitize our students to these opportunities and promote dispositions of openness to other ways of viewing the world as we come to appreciate the ways in which our first language influences us in otherwise invisible ways. This is an essential dimension of what I mean by "learning how to speak human" (Bahruth, 2003).

Another dimension of speaking human is to notice how many ways all languages express our commonality as human beings. For example, in every language in the world we say things such as "Every now and then, I like to go here and there." This represents an egocentric worldview common to all humans regardless of language or culture. We put now and here first since this is our location as speaker. Then and there are locations away from, and in relation to, our egocentric positions. This is a cultural example of the universal grammar that Chomsky has promoted for so long. There exist examples at all levels of language. In phonology, all languages have vowels and consonants. A vowel must be present to have a syllable, etc. All languages have ways of communicating time and person.

All of the preceding examples and arguments lead me to a central point about bilingualism and the politics of language in the context I know best, the United States. For years we have been debating the issue of English as the official language of America. Language issues disguise racist issues, and those of class and gender as well; in other words, issues of power and powerlessness. Powerful people make laws. The US senate is often referred to as the most expensive and exclusive club in the world. It takes millions of dollars and lots of connections to get elected to the senate. Most of those who get elected are monolingual and/or ideologically invested in the power structure of patriarchy and Eurocentrism. The former have not experienced the blessings of bilingualism and the liberating possibilities to escape from the box of ethnocentrism. The latter have had to give up their native identities in order to fit in to the dominant culture as their only ticket to social mobility. Both limiting experiences produce a mindset that argues for an official language as the code of power, and identifies speakers of any other code as inferior until they can speak English. Even then, if English is spoken with an accent, the person enjoys less than full citizenship.

Gramsci long ago stated (translated 1971), "[E]ach time that in one way or another, the question of language comes to the fore, that signifies that a series of other problems is about to emerge: the formation of an enlarging of the ruling class, the necessity to establish more 'intimate' and sure relations between the ruling groups and the popular masses, that is, the reorganization of cultural hegemony."

The English Only Movement in the United States is just as much about the discouragement of learning other languages as it is about the learning of English as the official code. It is a way of maintaining fervent nationalism among all native English speakers across all economic groups making for "sure relations between the ruling groups and the popular masses." The threat of bilingualism is a threat to power and hegemony as we know it. Language becomes a tool of domination, and power is expressed through the ability to make one code official and all others unacceptable and stigmatized. I am in favor of learning English; it is my mother tongue. The Faustian Pact is, if you want access to equal rights and power, there is only one acceptable code. My argument is that bilingualism is a pathway to humanization. Accepting the pact has only led to

dehumanization of the other and the powerful becoming less and less humane in the process.

Two solutions exist for a future where humans will survive in a better and safer world: Time and pedagogy. Time has already demonstrated that America and the world are becoming more and more the "global village" McLuhan (1962) spoke of so many years ago. Time and space shrink as the internet, communication and transportation speed up. This has both positive and negative implications. On one hand, neoliberalism is spreading an economized worldview of consumerism, however, more and more people are refusing the Faustian Pact of the English cooperate worldview and globalization. Some resist peacefully as they retreat into age-old traditions, while others rebel violently as witnessed on September 11, 2001, and more recently in Baghdad and Afghanistan. The rebellion is not just against the United States; Russia has its problems too. Also note how Mainland China is embracing globalization and consider the implications for humanity and the environment.

As Yeats (1920) predicted, "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold," but perhaps, working together, the answer need not be anarchy and destruction as he forewarned. This is the purpose underlying critical pedagogy. Teachers can remain domesticated, distracted, and ignorant of the vital issues threatening humanity today. In so doing they will produce the next generation of students perhaps able to pass the TESOL test, but ill equipped and equally unaware of the crises humankind has created for itself. As such, they will be unable to address the critical issues threatening the survival of humanity and all other life forms.

We need to teach according to the higher, rather than the baser expressions of our humanity. Values of respect, dignity, consideration and honesty have been lost through a bankrupt curriculum filled with disconnected and trivial skills. We can teach the difference between a problem and an inconvenience to give clarity and perspective to the next generation. Many serious ecological problems can be solved if we are willing to accept personal inconveniences, such as using our cars less, walking more, taking shorter showers, recycling useful materials, creating compost heaps in our gardens, picking weeds rather than spraying poisons, buying less and saving more, not having the sheets in our hotels changed more often then we do at home. This all begins through education for awareness rather than schooling as a distraction. We can only make our students aware of those things we have come to understand and value. Are we paying attention?

Critical pedagogy centers itself on human issues of vital importance often ignored in the subject-verb agreement trivialization of traditional language classrooms. Language is not a object of analysis alone, but is also a tool for exploring the dialectical relationships of the human condition across cultures, races, social classes and gender, as well as across time in historical contexts. It is about economies, ecology, and our place in the ontological scheme of being more fully human and humane. How much more of our humanity are we willing to give up or have stripped away by skill, drill, and kill approaches to schooling? It is time for teachers to rediscover the vocation of teaching, the noblest and most important profession in the history of humanity; the mother of all other professions. Teaching is a calling of hope and love.

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主辦單位：國立中山大學文學院

時　　間：95年10月21日 (六)

地　　點：國立中山大學文學院706國際會議廳

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