

Journeys to and from curriculum English – and dust and heat along the way

Robin Richardson, Insted consultancy, London (www.insted.co.uk)

A lecture apropos the National Literary Strategy

Language, literacy and the human soul

The principal character in J.M.Coetze's novel *Disgrace* is a lecturer in English at Cape Technical University, South Africa. Or rather, he was. He is still a lecturer at the Technical University, but recently the university has changed the name and content of the subject he is employed to teach. He is now responsible for two courses, respectively entitled *Communications 101: Communication Skills* and *Communications 201: Advanced Communication Skills*. Although he devotes hours of every working day to preparing and teaching these two courses he is not at all happy, says Coetze, with the statement about language that introduces them in the university handbook. 'Human society,' it says, 'has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other.' Coetze comments:

His own opinion, which he does not air, is that the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul.

We may give him two cheers. One, for his opposition of the mechanistic, reductionist, technocratic understandings of language and literacy that are being imposed upon him and for his embracing instead of what he calls the human soul. Philip Pullman, for one, would agree:

It's when we do this foolish, time-consuming, romantic, quixotic, childlike thing called play that we are most practical, most useful, and most firmly grounded in reality, because the world itself is the most unlikely of places, and it works in the oddest of ways, and we won't make any sense of it by doing what everybody else has done before us. It's when we fool about with the stuff the world is made of that we make the most valuable discoveries, we create the most lasting beauty, we discover the most profound truths. The youngest children can do it, and the greatest artists, the greatest scientists do it all the time. Everything else is proofreading.

Pullman says also, incidentally, that all too many commentators on education believe that a mechanistic approach to language and literacy will lead to children and young people being 'politer and more patriotic and less likely to become pregnant'.

A second reason for cheering Coetze's character is his stoicism – his unflinching recognition of 'the overlarge and rather empty human soul'. Loneliness and emptiness are more real than, or anyway as real as, the communication of thoughts, feelings and intentions. But solitude is not the whole story, and that is why we can give no more than two cheers. He does not air his opinion, does not enter the public sphere to urge his point of view. We cannot praise him fully. For we cannot, as Milton so famously said, 'praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.'

With those words ringing and singing in our ears, we turn to the dust and heat of the routes that run to and from curriculum language. The lecture has three parts: mapping the terrain; the dust and heat of identities; the dust and heat of race and racisms.

Mapping the terrain

'I am the chair of governors,' writes someone in an internet discussion forum, 'at a school that has many bilingual pupils. We shall shortly be advertising and interviewing for an EAL co-ordinator, funded by the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant.' He or she continues:

Our big concern is that the writing skills of our bilingual pupils do not match their oral skills. In everyday conversation they are articulate, fluent, forthcoming, every bit as confident and competent as native speakers. But when they put pen to paper they are stilted and hesitant and they make various errors of grammar and syntax. At the interviews we shall ask all applicants to give their views on this issue. Can you suggest what we should be looking for – and listening for – when they reply?

Replies included the following:

Systematically teach key words in each subject. Kids love learning special words. Key words can be stuck up in classrooms and around the school and there can be short definitions and kids can be required to use the words, both in conversation (eg inside structured problem-solving and discussion activities) and in writing.

Collaborative drafting and composing. Do you know Wikipedia on the internet? It's absolutely fabulous as a model – thousands of people all over the world working together, correcting each other's draft definitions and descriptions of major concepts. There's a model here for what we should often be doing in schools. Btw, Wikipedia is available in lots of world languages, not just English.

You need to appoint someone who knows about graphic organisers and key visuals, etc, and how to design and use them in each separate curriculum area.

EAL isn't just about EAL. You need someone who understands race, racisms, Islamophobia, ethnocentrism, etc, as well, and identity issues too, particularly the concept of multiple identities.

Ask the candidates if they're familiar with the work of Jim Cummins stretching back over the last 30 years or so. If they're not, they're probably not suitable for the post you are seeking to fill.

In the early 1990s the Home Office adopted an extremely mechanistic view of EAL, based on the notion that pupils progress through various stages. It requested all LEAs to state how they were going to assess and define pupils' competence at each stage. A satirical response from one quarter included the following statement:

Stage One of second language development will be deemed to have occurred when pupils can understand their class teacher. Stage Two will be deemed to have occurred when pupils can understand their headteacher. With regard to Stage Three of second language development, we have decided to abolish it.

The emphasis here on mere comprehension by authority figures was a comment on the mechanistic, simplistic and apolitical view of language implicit in official discourse. The reference to abolishing so-called stage three was a comment on the fact that most people in education simply did not know how to embark on the route to curriculum language. The few who did know, having read their Cummins, had little or no power and influence. The ignorance of those with power was compounded by the indifference bred by the fact that the Home

Office was basically making no financial resources available for the development of curriculum English.

Over the last ten years the situation has been slowly improving. Seven points are worth emphasising:

1. 'Stage three' is not primarily to do with writing as distinct from speaking but to do with academic language (more accurately, 'curriculum language') as distinct from everyday language. Some of the principal differences between the two types of language are tabulated in Handout 1. (See end of text.)
2. Pupils need to be able to speak academic language before they can write it. Handout 2 (see end of text) is based on Cummins' famous chart and illustrates the argument that the route to curriculum language goes *via*, so to speak, reflective discussion and collaborative group work.
3. The teaching of English as an additional language is an academic specialism, not something anyone can do with a minimum of common sense. Amongst other things, the specialism involves being able to design and supervise collaborative group work such that learners do not merely remain within their cognitive and linguistic comfort zones.
4. Mainstream teachers need training in how to tap into the academic knowledge, and its practical implementation, of specialist EAL teachers.
5. There is substantial theoretical and practical knowledge in the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) field. All too often, EAL teachers have looked down their noses at TEFL teachers. But there is great expertise there, and a wealth of effective and imaginative ideas about what to do in practice.
6. Good EAL practice is valuable for all pupils, not for bilingual pupils only. An analogy can be drawn from the disability field. Buildings provide ramps for the minority of the population who are wheel-chair users. But ramps are extremely useful for a wide range of other people as well – parents and grandparents with infants in buggies, for example, and anyone with a heavy suitcase on wheels. In an analogous way, EAL theory and practice provide access to academic language for a wide range of pupils, not just those for whom they were developed.
7. EAL is not just about EAL. Handouts 1 and 2 stress that the route to curriculum English must engage with concepts of identity. To this topic we now turn.

The dust and heat of identity

Addressing Edgar, living in a cave like a wild beast, King Lear in Shakespeare's play exclaims: 'Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art.' In context, the words are a moving statement about shared humanity beneath surface differences of clothing, rank and status. Lear's famous words are misleading, however, if they are taken to mean that human beings ever exist outside cultural and social locations, and therefore outside situations and relationships of unequal power, and outside historical circumstances. No one is totally unaccommodated – or, for that, matter, unaccommodating. On the contrary, everyone is embedded in a cultural tradition and in a period of history, and in a system of unequal power relations. 'The only humanity we have in common,' Archbishop Rowan Williams has observed, 'is bound up in difference.'

No one, though, is just one thing. This is vividly recalled by the young woman in Ken Loach's recent film *Ae Fond Kiss*. 'I am a Glaswegian Pakistani teenage woman of Muslim descent,' she says, 'who supports Glasgow Rangers in a Catholic school ... I'm a mixture and I'm proud of it.' She speaks for everyone – everyone is a mixture. Everyone belongs in more than one place and therefore on occasion has divided loyalties.

Wrestling not nestling

The Russian dolls image of identity – one component neatly inside another – is vivid and helpful. But the various components of our identities, each formed by belonging to a particular community, do not always live in sweet harmony with each other. They not only nestle companionably but also, sometimes, wrestle, and bid to tear us apart. Often we have to choose, according to context and circumstance. Sometimes, though, our task is to refuse to choose, however painful that may be. Helping young people to refuse to choose – more accurately, to manage conflicts and tensions within themselves – is an essential task for teachers.

Just as each individual is a mixture and continually evolving so is each group, community, culture, society or civilisation. No culture, no community, is just one thing. 'East' and 'West', or 'Islam' and 'West', are no more than metaphors and dangerous ones at that. So are the terms 'majority' and 'minority'. All communities are changing and all are complex, with internal diversity and disagreements. Neither 'minority' communities nor 'majority' communities are static. They change in response to their own internal dynamics and also as a result of the interactions and overlaps which they have with each other.

Virtually all pupils currently in British schools will spend the rest of their lives in Britain. It is important therefore that they should feel that they belong here and that Britain belongs to them. In this sense Britishness should be an important part, though not the only part, of their identity. All need to be comfortable with terms such as Black British, British Muslim and English British and with the fact that there are, and always have been, many different ways of being British, and that Britishness is continually evolving.

A Home Office consultation exercise on citizenship in 2004 asked three key questions which, amongst other things, set a professional agenda for everyone involved in citizenship education:

- What can we do to make sure that everyone is able to feel proud to be British and feel they belong to this country?
- How can we make sure that people who may not have been born here or whose families have come to live in Britain from other countries don't feel that they have to change their traditions to feel that they belong to Britain?
- How can we help people, especially young people, feel that they have a part to play in the future of this country?

In the answers we give to these questions we have to assert, amongst other things, that comparing and contrasting different ways of doing things, and different ways of seeing, viewing and interpreting, is a fundamental human activity. It's important to help pupils see diversity and difference as interesting and exciting, and indeed as necessary and invaluable, rather than as merely confusing and depressing. To shrink from multiculturalism – in both its senses: as (a) fact and as (b) aspiration – is to shrink from being human. In both intention and effect it is 'to praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat'.

The dust and heat of race and racisms

A current academic debate is about whether 'Islamophobia' or 'anti-Muslim racism' is the more appropriate term to refer to the hostilities in our society which target – amongst others but in particular – a high proportion of children and young people learning English as an additional language. One objection to the latter term is that Muslims are not a race. But what is racism? A relevant explanation was given in the *Daily Telegraph* recently by the paper's sports editor.

He was writing about racist chanting at a football match in Spain a day or two earlier; the chanting had taken the form of making noises imagined to be the grunts of monkeys. 'Monkey chanting,' explained the *Telegraph* journalist, 'attacks the victim's very identity. It attempts to relegate a man to the animal kingdom. It sets out to reclassify him as less than human.' It is perhaps worrying that *Telegraph* readers in 2004 need to have this spelled out. Nevertheless the journalist put the point well. What he did not mention, however, was that the following passage appeared in his sister paper, the *Sunday Telegraph*, earlier this year:

All Muslims, like all dogs, share certain characteristics. A dog is not the same animal as a cat just because both species are comprised of different breeds. An extreme Christian believes that the Garden of Eden really existed; an extreme Muslim flies planes into buildings -- there's a big difference.

That is not a quotation from a letter from Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells, though one suspects the latter gentleman or lady would have agreed with it. No, it is a quotation from an article commissioned by the editor of the paper. It illustrates starkly the fact that crude racist language is sometimes used against Muslims, and that such crudeness is to be found in polite society as readily as amongst BNP thugs on the streets. That said, the term 'Islamophobia', as distinct from 'anti-Muslim racism', has become customary and cannot now be altered.

It is arguably more accurate to speak of 'Islamophobias' than of a single phenomenon, for anti-Muslim hostility takes different forms in different places and at different times. The current forms are exacerbated by the following factors, amongst others:

- ❑ neo-conservative discourse, particularly in the United States, since the collapse of the Soviet Union
- ❑ dislocations caused by globalisation and the consequent search for scapegoats
- ❑ prejudices against people seeking asylum, also known as 'xeno-racism'
- ❑ prevailing agnosticism and secularism, and fear of religion, in much of modern and post-modern society.

A crucial point raised by consideration of Islamophobia is that modern societies need rules, procedures and processes for dealing with difference and disagreement, specifically differences between self and other, PLU (people like us) and PLT (people like them). In its report published in 1997, the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia grappled with such problems of debate, dialogue and disagreement. When and how is it legitimate for non-Muslims to disagree with Muslims? How can you tell the difference between legitimate disagreement on the one hand and phobic dread and hatred on the other? The commission suggested, in answer to such questions, that an essential distinction needs to be made between what it called closed views of Islam on the one hand and open views on the other. 'Phobic' hostility towards Islam is the recurring characteristic of closed views.

The distinction between open and closed minds corresponds to the distinction which a Muslim anthropologist draws between inclusivism and exclusivism. In the first instance he is referring to two different ways in which Muslims themselves understand and practise their religion, and relate to others. But his distinctions also apply to 'the West'. He writes:

Exclusivists create boundaries and believe in hierarchies; inclusivists are those who are prepared to accommodate, to interact with others, and even listen to them and be influenced by them. Inclusivists are those who believe that human civilisation is essentially one, however much we are separated by religion, culture or language.

...I believe the real battle in the 21st century will be between the

inclusivists and the exclusivists.

These admittedly abstract distinctions between closed and open minds, and between exclusive and inclusive, are of fundamental importance in every consideration and discussion of human rights culture. They apply to differences and disagreements between all kinds of self and other, not to differences between Muslims and non-Muslims only. They are fundamental in the design and supervision of collaborative group work in school classrooms, and in any and every code of practice flowing from refusals to praise fugitive and cloistered virtues.

Concluding notes

The last word goes to Philip Pullman, and to some children and young people. 'It's when we fool about with the stuff the world is made of that we make the most valuable discoveries,' says Pullman. 'We create the most lasting beauty, we discover the most profound truths. The youngest children can do it, and the greatest artists, the greatest scientists do it all the time.' He quotes the national curriculum, for example that at Key Stage 2 children 'should be taught word classes and the grammatical functions of words, including nouns, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, articles, as well as the grammar of complex sentences, including clauses, phrases and connectives ...' He comments: 'Think of the age of those children, he says, and weep ... True education flowers at the point when delight falls in love with responsibility.'

For centuries, Robben Island near Cape Town was a place for the rejected – people living with leprosy, murderers, rapists, trouble-makers. From the 1960s onwards, infamously it housed political prisoners where the regime year after year was even more brutal than that of Guantanamo Bay. But the prisoners transformed it, against all the odds, into a place of learning and into a crucible for the new South Africa. Nowadays it is a world heritage site, where the work of transforming negatives into positives, the work of repairing and healing and transforming space, goes on. Recently some young people on an educational course there made poems created from notes taken at group discussions. Quotations from the poems included

Freedom is... those broken chains of apartheid... being able to think free without being threatened ... coming to a better understanding of yourself and your country... to carry with is the memory ... to be who you are... to accept and acknowledge other people's rights, moves and speech ... to do what is good to me and to the nation... to speak with one voice in many languages ... to live now in the present with the wonder and openness of a child.

True education flowers at the point when delight falls in love with responsibility.

Background and references

Philip Pullman, Common sense has much to learn from moonshine, *The Guardian*, 22 January 2005

The request for EAL advice and the replies are fictitious in the form presented here. They derive from training materials compiled by the Insted consultancy.

Paul Hayward, Black players were being stripped of their humanity, *Daily Telegraph*, 19 November 2004

Will Cummins, Muslims are a threat to our way of life, *Sunday Telegraph*, 25 July 2004

There is full discussion of open and closed views of Islam in *Islamophobia: issues, challenges and action*, Trentham Books 2004. The full report can be read at www.insted.co.uk/islam.html
Akbar Ahmed, *Islam under Siege: living dangerously in a post-honor world*, Polity Press 2003, pp 18-19

Voices of Young People on Robben Island, Robben Island Museum, June 2002.

Everyday Language and Curriculum Language

Success in the education system depends on being proficient in what may be called 'curriculum English', as distinct from 'ordinary' or 'everyday' English, with each curriculum subject having its own distinctive language. This tabulation summarises the principal differences.

Types of difference	EVERYDAY LANGUAGE	CURRICULUM LANGUAGE
Mode	Mainly spoken	Mainly written
Reason for using language	To maintain or develop a relationship with a friend or peer	To demonstrate knowledge to a teacher or examiner
<i>Relationships with others</i>	Very or extremely important	Little or no importance
<i>Sense of personal identity and family background</i>	Very or extremely important	Little or no importance
<i>Feelings – pleasure, annoyance, anxiety, etc</i>	Expression of feelings is very common	Expression of personal feelings is not encouraged and is rare
<i>Subject-matter</i>	Immediate and personal interest	Seldom of immediate interest
<i>Location of subject-matter</i>	Often can be seen as the talk takes place	Seldom can be seen as the writing takes place
<i>Whether about shared experience</i>	Often about an experience that the speaker and listener share	Seldom about an experience that the writer and reader share
<i>Possibility and speed of feedback</i>	Immediate feedback is available on how well one is communicating	In the case of written language, feedback is not immediate, and may take hours, days or weeks
<i>Non-verbal signs – facial expression, posture, gesture</i>	Extremely and unavoidably important	Of no importance
<i>Jokes</i>	Frequent	Rare
<i>Relationship to thinking</i>	Often one 'thinks aloud' – i.e. discovers one's thoughts in the actual process of talking	One thinks first, then uses language to express thought
<i>Lexical items</i>	Mostly of one or two syllables, derived from Germanic or Anglo-Saxon sources	Many of two or three syllables, derived from Greek, Latin or French sources
<i>Pronouns</i>	Clear from the immediate situation what they refer to	Clarity depends on knowing grammatical rules
<i>Technical terms</i>	Seldom used	Must be used
<i>Register of language</i>	Frequent use of slang and colloquialisms	Formal language essential
<i>Statements</i>	Frequently short phrases	Must be complete sentences
<i>Grammar</i>	Standard English not important and sometimes frowned on	Standard English essential

Source: adapted from *Enriching Literacy* by Brent Language Service, Trentham Books 1998

Four Types of Language

A separate paper for today's conference recalls differences between everyday English and curriculum English. Another crucial difference is to do with **cognitive challenge** – i.e. between easy problems and difficult ones. Everyday language can be about difficult problems and curriculum language can be about elementary ones.

If one bears in mind both sets of distinctions, it can be said that there are four main types of language use. They are referred to in the tabulation below as Types 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Register of English	Low level of cognitive challenge	High level of cognitive challenge
Curriculum language	<p>Type 2</p> <p>Examples include giving rote-learned answers to questions, copying from books or the board, doing various sentence-completion exercises.</p>	<p>Type 4</p> <p>Examples include writing answers in SATs and GCSE exams, and all or most written work in direct preparation for such tests and exams.</p>
<i>Everyday language</i>	<p>Type 1</p> <p>Examples include text messages and postcards, and 'passing the time of day' – chat about last night's TV, pop stars, sport, gossip.</p>	<p>Type 3</p> <p>Examples include talk within structured discussion exercises requiring genuine communication, and notes arising from such exercises.</p>

The tabulation provides a way of picturing the idea of '**routes to curriculum English**'.

Traditionally, the way to get learners from Type 1 language to Type 4 language has been to take them *via*, so to speak, Type 2 language – the route has been 1,2, 4. This has worked well for some learners, and continues to work well. It's often an appropriate route.

But for some learners, or even all learners in some of the subjects they study, the route needs to be 1,3, 4 – they need to engage in structured oral discussion with each other in pairs or small groups. For them, discussion is not a distraction from real work, or an optional extra, but essential.

The tabulation is taken from *Enriching Literacy*, Brent Language Service 1998, and is based on the writings of James Cummins.