
Language-Teaching as a Form of Witchcraft¹

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IN THESE DAYS of pupil-oriented teaching it may sound unfashionable to concentrate on the teacher. However, he still plays a part, some part at least, in the teaching-learning process, whether educationists like it or not. So much so that we may ask ourselves the question: how far does *his* attitude to the teaching problem, more specifically the language-teaching problem, affect his students' motivation?

Modern methods are all based on so-called scientific assumptions. Even if we do not go into trivial details, we find that what is required from the language-teacher today is not only a substantial grasp of deep-structure analysis and a sound command of surface structures, but also an ability to make good use of predigested material, whether audio-visual or not. In short, textbook authors as well as theoreticians, to say nothing of inspectors, seem to take it for granted that it is enough to reach the students' minds along rational lines. Because one cannot teach how to feel, we have come to believe that feelings are not to be taken into account in language-learning. There used to be a time when we more or less unconsciously tried to make up for this loss by turning from the teaching of language to the teaching of literature. We tried to avoid teaching English by teaching Shakespeare instead. It seems that we are now using a different dodge. Instead of teaching English, we have come to teach algebra via technology. Some people have their doubts about such a complete reversal. If science is not enough, then psychology is the answer. Hence the emphasis laid on motivation. But as we all know, psychology does not yet seem well enough equipped to help us much. Even if the language-teacher knew more than he does about his students' motivation, we may wonder whether he himself is particularly well-fitted to deal with psychological problems, if only because he has his own problems to sort out and solve before those of his students.

The language-teacher suffers from all the ills and weaknesses, to say the least, which have become the plague of the teaching profession in the last decade or so. Like his colleagues, he realises or is made to realise that in a changing society he is required to uphold and transmit values that the world at large apparently disregards. He is a living example of mutual understanding and toleration in a world whose

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rulers base their policies on selfishness and greed. In a world where the urge for making money and the desire for power are only less strong than the sex-drive, he teaches self-respect and self-denial.

It is not surprising that so little is known about the teacher's own motivation when he chooses his career, even if we remember that the relevant factors may vary greatly from country to country. But what we know for certain is that most of the time he spends his life away from the rat-race, or at least from its main currents, that he spends the greater part of his existence with children and adolescents, that he is a vehicle of culture but neither its maker nor its discoverer.

As his students' cultural environment becomes daily larger and larger, he appears to them as only *one* source of information among others, far less impressive than the media he is all but hopelessly competing against. The teacher is fortunately not alone in his plight. The priest in a godless country, the officer in a would-be non-violent society, do not fare any better than he. They are all marked down as misfits, if not as downright losers.

More specifically, the language-teacher constantly fights against a peculiarly irritating form of criticism. If there is one area of knowledge in which everybody is competent it is language-teaching, at least in my country. Engineers, biologists, lawyers are safe: no layman ever dares to interfere with them. But everybody, however ignorant, can check the results of foreign-language teaching against everyday reality. If our Johnny cannot make head or tail of the jabberings of that French hotel-manager in Toulouse, why on earth did he have to take five years of French at school, with language labs and everything? Needless to say, our critics cannot speak a word of French themselves, but that is neither here nor there. As everyone knows, language-learning in schools is a waste of time and money!

The teacher of English is, indeed rightly, supposed to have a sound command of the language. Although he is daily submitted to the ordeal of hearing the language butchered by his students, everybody expects his own performance to remain unchanged, in other words faultless, whatever the circumstances, throughout his career. This, incidentally, is a privilege which he shares with the art master and the gym master alone.

One aspect of the changes undergone in recent years by the teaching-learning process is that the English teacher's performance is frequently assessed, not only by inspectors in their official capacity, but also by the students themselves. Some of them, at least, have been to England once, if not more often, in the course of their studies, others to the United States, and have returned with an expertise which they rate far above his own.

Then he not only labours under the same handicaps as his colleagues, but in addition suffers from what almost amounts to a case of split personality. Take our French teacher of English, for instance, arriving

at his school in the morning and shaking hands with everybody from the headmaster to the concierge, even with some of his students as well. How typically French! But how un-English too! The moment he sets foot in his classroom he is supposed to offer his students the right model of English, i.e. the right type of behaviour. We all know that speaking English does not merely imply producing the right sounds at the right moment. Speech is behaviour. In his intonation, his countenance, his gestures (or absence of gestures), the teacher of English almost literally sheds his French personality during the four or five hours a day he is called upon to perform in front of his audience. It is not immaterial to remark at this point that in its everyday sense the word 'performance' is no less important to us than in its Chomskyan one.

If things were as bad as they look, we should not be surprised to hear of an abnormal proportion of nervous breakdowns among teachers of English and other languages. The reason why we do not is to be found elsewhere. Every human being has his or her own psychological problems, and perhaps our motives for becoming teachers of English might be worth looking into. As far as I know, no psychologist, no educationist seems to have done much research in this field, so we can only rely on the data of common experience. I would say very briefly and tentatively that the language teacher must in the first place have felt an urge to imitate, to act, finally to identify, unless of course English is his native language or the language of one of his parents. But the huge majority of language-teachers have learnt English at school in the country of their birth, and one of the reasons why they chose to teach English rather than maths or history is that they enjoyed speaking English and did it rather well. In my opinion this also means that they enjoyed the very childish game of dressing up. Here of course psychologists might have a lot to tell us. But this is the second paradox of the language-teacher's position. We saw that as a teacher he finds it hard to reconcile the values he is supposed to believe in with the values really worshipped by his contemporaries. We have now found that, year in year out, he spends most of his professional life divesting himself of his own personality in order to play a part, the same part, with only minor changes in the script.

The third paradox is that if he is to succeed as a teacher he must convince his students that they must imitate in him what after all is a mere disguise. What matters in the long run is not his theoretical knowledge of his subject, nor even his skill as a performer, but his ability to stand aside for his students to imitate him, i.e. to perform in the highly unnatural context of the classroom. Ultimately the language-teacher's motto is 'The less said the better'. It is his students' performance that counts, not his. We all look forward to the rare moments when we can—so to speak—sit on the fence, watching our

students' brave efforts to sustain their part in conversation or a dramatic dialogue or a debate.

Let it be enough to say, for the time being, that this third paradox is no less frustrating than the other two. If the language-teacher has managed to overcome his early psychological problems, all the same he still has to rely upon his ability to mimic, although probably no one ever taught him the essentials of the art. But he can only judge of the success of his effort if and when he ceases to perform and becomes a critic. How does he do it? This certainly is a question that we would all like to be able to answer.

We now come to the crucial problem in a language-teacher's career, which is: how to sustain this performance unflinchingly for thirty or forty years running. Like everybody else, the language-teacher, in addition to the paradoxes we have pointed out, has to submit to the burden of age and change. Changing students, changing theories, changing environment, he can cope with these if he really is the dedicated person we assumed he was from the start. But his subject-matter changes, as well as his own attitude to it. The English taught today is certainly different from the English taught thirty years ago. For instance, we cannot afford to ignore the American dialect and its influence on English as spoken in Britain. I realise this will sound like blasphemy to some people, but we may wonder whether we should continue to teach the English spoken in the south of England by ex-public school boys and nothing else.

But this after all is not yet the worst point. We are asked to perform as smoothly, as dexterously, as accurately after thirty years as we did when we were just out of university. One might object that the same is required of doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc. But the difference is that the human beings who are the raw material of our industry are free agents, free to accept or refuse the treatment that we are trying to impose upon them. To be completely honest we must admit, in addition, that our performance may sometimes fall short of perfection. We set ourselves to imitate an English-speaking person and we try to keep up this pretence for years. Now even the English girl who married a Frenchman twenty years ago, who stayed in France and now teaches her native tongue, cannot be said to speak exactly the language her mother taught her. There are slight alterations in the sounds and the vocabulary she uses. Anybody will notice this phenomenon who listens to recordings made in France by English speakers after years of exposure to the foreign language.

How infinitely more awkward then is the position of a Frenchman teaching English in his own country! Of course he goes to England once in a while, he tunes in to the BBC in the morning, he sees English and American films, he meets English friends. But 'Time's winged chariot (is) hurrying near', and sometimes when he listens to a recording of his own voice he begins to have doubts. No wonder this

is a subject of real anxiety to many language-teachers, however unwilling they are to admit it.

So it appears that even if psychologists have little to tell us about the language-teacher's own motivations for learning and teaching a second or a third language, it is easy to see that he is caught in a net of contradictions that do not make it especially easy for him to understand his students' problems. Still, the funny thing is that there are thousands of young people who manage to learn English at school all over the world. Is it pure witchcraft then on the successful teacher's part, or is there more to it than mere sleight-of-hand and conjuring tricks?

We shall now try to answer this question. In the first place we are to bear in mind that method is not the be-all and end-all of success, that the teacher's way of overcoming his own problems, in other words his personality and psychological balance, have a lot to do with the success or failure of his students. But we have just outlined some of the reasons why the best student does not always make the best teacher, essentially because he fails to meet needs which he has never even learnt to recognise in himself. How then is he going to keep up his students' interest in the foreign language, or rather to create it when it does not exist, and then stimulate it against so many odds?

If we return to our starting-point, we will remember that the teacher of English is first and foremost a teacher; he is part of a system and his *awareness of his students' attitude* to this system may well be the first key to his success or failure. We have watched considerable changes in this respect since 1968. We have gone all the way from the recklessness of the late sixties to the frustration and boredom of the seventies. True, there are still some vociferous minorities left, but they seem to be growing smaller and smaller. What we are up against is not so much open hostility as studied indifference. It is all very well to say that the teacher who cannot conquer boredom in his students had better look for another job. But after so many ups and downs, so much righteous help proffered from above and so little understanding shown from below, he is not without justification in his diffidence, soul-searching, even self-pity. So we have only this to tell him (to tell ourselves, that is), that focusing the students' attention, enriching their memory, and enlarging their judgment is the whole point of teaching.

Their first need, more than ever, perhaps, is to feel secure. If they are to believe what we say, we must enjoy their full trust and confidence and actions speak louder than words with them. If we are to gain and, more difficult still, to keep this confidence, we ought to meet them on their own ground, which means speaking their language, listening to their music, seeing their films, reading their books.

Even if the language-teacher does not have to face the same problems as the teacher of history or literature, his business is not as harmless

as it looks. He may think that, in the beginners' stage, he need not bother about the social or political implications of language teaching. But this can never be taken for granted. It is now over fifteen years since Robert Lado showed the close connection between language learning and culture. Then, as soon as our students begin to read and understand today's English, we cannot very well limit them to a diet of Sherlock Holmes or Winnie-the-Pooh. They will ask for more than this. Rather sooner than later they will demand what have come to be the staple items in their elders' diet, namely, newspaper articles, contemporary plays and stories, debates about topics of current interest such as non-violence, contraception, abortion, and so on. Even the most cautious teacher cannot rely for ever on the comparative safety of old textbooks. Who can imagine that bowdlerised versions can long stand the test of our young people's curiosity, if not hunger?

The teacher's responsibility here is considerable. Who is he to decide what his students may or may not read? It would be idle to assert that the problem does not exist. Selection of material is one of our basic tasks and this implies reference to standards at least of linguistic acceptability. This again is not enough, since this formula obviously refers to social if not moral standards. The choices made by the teacher will inevitably reflect his own social and moral conditioning: as long as the students shared his cultural background this did not create any serious problem, but with the development of mass education this has changed. Is it not then the teacher's duty to see to it that his students should be as well equipped as possible to understand the ways of the world as it is today?

There is no doubt that the English language is an indispensable means to this end. The language-teacher's responsibility here is perhaps more serious than that of his colleagues. He cannot very long take refuge under cover of phonological, lexical, and syntactic technicalities. He does not merely teach isolated noises and gestures, but meaningful words and sentences. These words and sentences do not arrange themselves naturally into sets and patterns; every utterance implies the channelling of meaning into fixed structures, but a certain amount of free choice as well. So that when the student uses the 'wrong' word, it belongs to the teacher to set him right or, to be more precise, to invite him to comply with a different set of social rules. But the student's viewpoints may be just as valid as the teacher's, and they deserve consideration, however clumsily expressed.

Nobody can dodge this obstacle and nobody knows any safe way of overcoming it. Every teacher takes his own stand on social, moral, and political problems and so do his students, most of all perhaps those who claim to ignore them. A facile answer would be to resort to the old-fashioned academic refusal to take sides. May I say that, especially in the light of the experience of the last few years, I am

not prepared to accept this without discussion. It seems to me more honest (and it pays better from the viewpoint of educational and even linguistic results) for the teacher not to conceal his own standards, to stand his ground when confronted by opposed views, to let the debates among his students be as fierce as possible, blows excluded of course as well as personal remarks. The language-learning business, far from suffering as a result of a heated atmosphere, will thrive on it. Students will be made to realise that English is not merely a matter for drilling and tape-listening, but is above all a way of expressing one's longings, one's imaginings, one's feelings.

Another handicap of the language-teacher is that his subject-matter is also his main pedagogical tool, namely the foreign language itself, with all its vagaries and inconsistencies. Here again the main point is to take one's students into one's confidence. They should be told as early as possible that the teacher is not omniscient, that there are more varieties or dialects of English than any single man can hope to master in his whole life, that one dictionary includes some 450,000 words which all belong to the English language. It is quite clear that the teacher can only speak one (or possibly two) of these dialects and understand and use only a comparatively small percentage of this huge lexicon.

Regarding the prejudices and preconceived ideas so many parents and administrators entertain about language-teaching, it is a wise policy for us to set the record straight as soon and as often as possible, in order to dispel certain common errors which can be highly detrimental to the student's progress. It is not unusual, for instance, for French parents to refuse to send their children anywhere north of London. The reason for this may be to save fares, but in fact they are afraid that their offspring might catch the 'wrong' accent. Oxford, however, remains a notable exception, since this is the place where they are bound to acquire that famous Oxford accent, which, according to *France-Soir* and Pierre Daninos, is the only right way to speak English. It might be a good idea for teachers to take the opportunity of a parent-teacher association meeting in order to get rid of such old-fashioned nonsense.

Here of course the teacher's task begins with his students. A short linguistic introduction should be enough to convince them that he can only teach them what he knows, that if he cannot teach how to speak American English, at least he can teach them how to understand it. There are also many specialised jargons that *he* does not normally use but which *they* can understand as well as he does by skilful use of a dictionary.

In addition, the older his students the more he can *learn* from them. There are not only technical areas which are beyond the average teacher's grasp but also specific sub-cultures with which young people are more familiar than some of us. Pop-music and modern slang are

obvious examples. It is of course easy for the teacher to demonstrate the transient value of slang but it would completely spoil his relationship with his students to dismiss it as linguistically irrelevant. It is of great educational importance to use slang and other jargons, if only to demonstrate the differences between registers.

In this field, as in others, honesty is the best policy. It is the teacher's duty to keep an open mind about the foreign language, i.e. to watch its development carefully but without undue caution. His students will be all the more eager to learn as he points out to them aspects of the language he is discovering with them. Once he has succeeded in focusing their attention on matters of genuine linguistic interest, the difficulty is not to disappoint them. Let them make their own discoveries and their own 'errors'. Language is so inextricably linked with social behaviour that it is only too easy for the teacher to foster a sort of guilt-complex in the beginner, who is making fumbling attempts to express himself. It can be a painful experience for a fourteen-year-old to be made the laughing-stock of his mates even for a few minutes because he got mixed up with English vowel-sounds. If the teacher sounds ironical, everything is lost. If he sounds patronising about a young fellow's inappropriate use of an idiom, he is not likely to hear this student's voice again for a long time. The fifteen-year-old is like a recently emancipated citizen of an ex-colony. He is touchy to the extreme. He may sound naïve or overbearing to you, but there is nothing he will resent more fiercely than being made the object of a biting remark.

The language-teacher has another means, perhaps more effective than any other, of retaining his student's confidence. Language, as opposed to other subjects, does not easily yield to the process of being sliced up into neat, well-packaged lumps of knowledge. The unfortunate consequence is that after two or three years, some students, when they pass on from one teacher to another, complain of always being asked the same questions about the same grammatical problems. For this reason it is essential to assess their knowledge at the beginning of the school year by means of various tests, and then, but only then, to set them the main linguistic targets to be reached in the course of the nine or ten following months. It will certainly help to make this proposed syllabus the subject of a debate with the students themselves, for them to know in advance what they can hope to learn in a given period of time. *It will immensely increase their motivation to realise that the task of learning a foreign language is not without end.* The easiest way to do it is probably to set them the same test at the end of the school year as the one they took at the beginning. Everyone will then know where he stands.

We now come to our third point: methods. Even if the teacher is a native speaker of English and therefore not in danger from some of the pitfalls which beset his foreign-born colleagues, he has to

put his method or methods to the test of experience. Otherwise a teacher is prone to the sad sin of self-complacency, which is particularly damaging to his students. A teacher cannot trust himself too much or too long. He should not trust theoreticians either, however well-meaning. He should trust his students. There is no need for him to disclose to them all his tricks, of course, but there must be something in his attitude, a measure of warmth perhaps, which is bound to elicit a response from them. Even if it is impossible to analyse this notion very closely, we might do well to remember it.

One way might be for the teacher in training, or possibly later in his career, to take a course in acting. In fact, whatever the technical aids at his disposal, it is the teacher himself, sooner or later, who is compelled to deliver the goods. My advice to him then would be: play the game; be straight! It is true that you have to pretend; you cannot possibly be a football fan today, a poet tomorrow, and next week an expert on ecology or drug-addiction. But there is nothing wrong with role-playing. When my class (of twenty-year-old students) held a debate on conscientious objection, I had at one point to give up my role as chairman because feelings were running fairly high and somebody had to play the scapegoat and express unpopular opinions. With the teacher thus flying to the rescue of the minority (even though his personal feelings might be different), it was possible to reduce the free-for-all to a more respectable level. So it is not unusual for the teacher to have to speak with his tongue in his cheek; but he should do so purposefully, helping the silent ones to conquer their shyness and trying to curb their more vociferous opponents. Finally, of course, he should resume his role, so as to point out the linguistic niceties which the debate has brought to light. Thus the teacher commits himself without getting involved. Because the classroom is a stage, not to be confused with life. Neither is pedagogy to be mistaken for moral or political preaching.

This role-playing is one of the possibilities open to the language-teacher of remaining 'alive' until the end of his career. It is the future he has to remain aware of, not the past. His main chance then lies in his versatility. If he insists on always teaching students of the same age-group, always according to the same methods, using the same material, he is in great danger of losing touch, of forgetting his students for his subject or for his own promotion. It is of course true that for a variety of reasons many teachers will stay in the same school for years. But there are also more openings for us than formerly: one can teach adults, for instance, or move from a conventional secondary school to a technical one, or vice versa. One can teach beginners of various ages, which is a very stimulating experience . . . The worst teacher is the one who knows all the answers, the one with no sense of humour, and this is particularly damning in a teacher of English. The best teacher is the one who is reborn out of his own

ashes every September, a feat which indeed requires a measure of witchcraft!

But this result will not be achieved by means of science and technique alone. The language-teacher can only hope to foster an interest in the foreign language among his students if he himself remains alive to their needs. If he looks forward to meeting them, they will look forward to meeting him. He must create and sustain some sort of rapport with them, so that they will trust him even if their standards and values are different from his. He who cannot learn cannot teach. He will accept that he learns from them almost as much as they learn from him. Thus he will conquer his own obsolescence.

You remember what Caliban, that stereotype of today's students, replied to the magician his master:

'You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse.'

It is true indeed that as language-teachers we try to change our students' behaviour, to alter their personalities. In this sense also it is a kind of magic which we practise and we had better handle it with care. Otherwise (and with all due respect to the Bard) the only way open to us might be to 'break our staff' and to 'drown our books'.

TV Comedy and the Teaching of English

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A MAJOR problem in producing materials for the teaching of English as a foreign language is the choice of language to be used. No matter what syllabus you are working with, the language of your texts must reflect it; that is, it must be selected and controlled as the syllabus requires. This is true whether the syllabus is graded grammatically, situationally, or notionally. On the other hand, to be meaningful, the language of your texts must be realistic, must get as close as possible to what people actually say. The need then is for a language that is both natural *and* controlled: if too natural, the hesitations, repetitions, and false starts common to colloquial speech will make it difficult to understand; if too controlled, it will be untypical of ordinary native speech and thus irrelevant to the learner's communicative needs.