CREATING CITIZENS: CONTEXTS AND STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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In this paper I wish to discuss some implications for language teaching of transnationalism, globalisation, and new technologies. We need to carefully reconsider both the aims and methods of language teaching in light of these phenomena.

In my discussion I will draw on examples of teaching practice from my experiences as a language teacher and a teacher educator. I will discuss teaching approaches I used to teach English as a foreign language in French primary and secondary schools. I will also discuss approaches I have used in teaching French as a foreign language in Australia. Finally, I will present an extended example of a secondary school ESL lesson I have taught in Australia.

My goal in presenting these examples is to illuminate ways of approaching the problem of recontextualisation in foreign language teaching. Teachers face a constant challenge in making curriculum relevant and meaningful in a given local context while at the same time empowering students with academic knowledge. This problem is particularly acute for foreign language teachers whose students have little contact with the target language community. In this situation, knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar has little meaning for students unless teachers can find a way of connecting students to the target language community and recreating some aspects of that community in class-room communication. This work is what I am calling here recontextualisation.

I wish to begin by outlining very broadly some of the purposes of foreign language learning before attempting to show how different approaches to recontextualisation can be used.

David Labarée distinguishes three purposes of schooling generally:

1. Democratic equality, to create citizens as a public good
2. Social efficiency, to create efficient workers for the economy, as a public good to put at the service of private interests

3. Social mobility, to create personal advantage relative to others

In relation to the teaching of English, it is perhaps the second purpose – social efficiency - which predominates. English is the language of global capitalism, and as such is a vital economic resource. In this perspective, English teaching should focus on the communicative competence needed for business interactions.

However, English is also a vehicle for personal social mobility, and success in English examinations can help to distinguish individuals from their peers. The immediate motivation for many secondary students is indeed doing well in examinations. In this perspective, English teaching needs to focus on those skills needed to excel in scholastic examinations.

It is the first purpose – democratic equality – which is most neglected in the teaching of English in the school systems with which I am most familiar. The traditional humanist vision of culture as personal enlightenment sits within this purpose. This purpose is also where critical literacy sits. In this perspective, the teaching of English should give students an insight into the workings of their own society, as well the English-speaking societies they are studying. Whereas a minimum of knowledge of social customs, norms and rules is necessary for communicative competence, and therefore necessary for both the social efficiency and social mobility purposes, this knowledge is central to the purpose of democratic equality.

These three purposes of schooling invoke a number of contexts to which a student can be connected through the task of learning English via the work of their teacher.

1. The context of formal examinations
2. The context of English speaking communities
3. The context of the student's own community
4. The context of globalisation and transnational relations of power

Each context requires the teaching of different kinds of linguistic knowledge for it to provide the basis for learning English. Typically teachers rely on the English presented in a textbook, consisting of formal structures and an 'ideal' model of English

communication. Such textbooks offer guidance about distinctions between formal and informal usage, but are restricted in their usefulness. Many do not provide guidance on the subtle forms of discourse required for the context of formal examinations. They typically provide a narrow insight into the contexts of English speaking communities, defined as face-to-face social networks. They offer little to guide students in a reading of their own community. Finally, they do not offer an means of understanding connections between contexts and wider relations of power within the context of globalisation. Yet this is, I argue, extremely valuable knowledge.

Let me turn now to some teaching strategies which relate to the four contexts I have outlined above:

1. Cramming for examinations. This is familiar to most of you. It requires the rote learning of vocabulary and grammar, as well as appreciation of formal academic language.

2. Simulation of the target language community. This typically involves role playing and is the main-stay of communicative language teaching (CLT). The role-plays students prepare and present usually involve them playing young people interacting with each other, family members, or in daily commercial transactions.

3. Direct engagement with the target language community

4. Home-context embedded learning (community communicative purposes are represented in the language taught to students).

5. Relativising: drawing attention to connections, flows, differences. This requires a language of comparison

The first of these strategies does not require much elaboration. It involves explicit teaching of the language forms and functions which characterise academic texts, along with the metacognative skills which allow students to comprehend and produce such texts. However, the principle of explicit instruction of linguistic form and metacognitive skills should also be part of the remaining four strategies. A number of other principles should inform all language teaching strategies. Lessons should build on and take into account students' background knowledge; input in English from the

teacher should be challenging to students but still comprehensible; and students should have opportunities to practice their English.

SIMULATION OF THE TARGET LANGUAGE COMMUNITY

Let met provide an example of the second strategy – simulation of the target language community.

I was asked to teach a group of advanced students of English in France how to present opinions and structure arguments. The students in the class had very good written English, but were weak in their spoken English, as well as being timid. Knowledge of argumentative language was necessary to students for the context of formal examination. I wished to extend students' learning to the contexts of English speaking communities, globalisation and transnational relations of power. To this end, I decided to organise classes around a court case underway in Australia. A case for government compensation was brought by Aboriginal people who had been removed by the government from their parents when they were children. This group is known as the 'stolen generation'. I introduced the topic through newspaper articles describing the case brought against the government in the Federal court. I asked students to take on the roles of individuals involved in the case. Each student was either a lawyer for one of the parties, or a witness. Students then had to identify arguments for and against granting compensation. After some time in preparation, the lawyers presented arguments and examined the various witnesses, who gave evidence. I played the judge, and we went through the proceedings in a simple way without regard for legal terminology or fidelity to legal processes in Australia. At the end of our simulated court proceedings, students discussed their own perspectives on where responsibility lay, which they ultimately drafted in written form. Over the same period, the Federal court in Australia ruled against the members of the stolen generation seeking compensation.

The unit of work was extremely successful in motivating students to participate enthusiastically in oral discussions on complex issues. It was also successful as an exercise in critical pedagogy, drawing students' attentions to histories of colonialism, dispossession, and state power. This resulted in a strong level of personal investment.

There was a palpable sense of disappointment and incomprehension when the class learned that the court had ruled against the stolen generation.

The unit did not, however, provide a direct engagement with the target community in the form of communication with members of that community. It did not translate into action. Further, it did not provide for reflection on the students' own social context.

Direct engagement with the target language community & reflection on 'home' community

Let me provide an example which achieved these two outcomes of direct engagement with the target community and reflection on students' home community. The topic for my advanced students was youth employment conditions.

I taught this topic on youth employment conditions at a time when it connected particularly strongly with political struggles in both Australia and France, in March and April 2006. New laws were passed in Australia stripping young workers of many rights, while at the same time similar laws were introduced in France. In both countries there were important protest movements against the changes. The French laws were known as the CPE.

With this topic I was able to draw on students' personal, experiences. I was also able to use online resources to directly connect students with French counterparts. The benefit of using online resources for this project is the prevalence of current material published by individuals or groups coming from outside of the traditional media sphere, and of forums which allow greater scope for interaction, feedback and self-publishing. In this instance this included forums and blogs established by individuals, unions and community associations. This means that students do not have to rely solely on the interpretation offered by text-books and commercial media outlets, and dissenting voices can become audible.

From using online resources students can grasp how opinions are formed and political organisation developed and managed through online communication between politically active young people. This is made possible because of the dialogical form of

online media and its use not only for the presentation of polished texts, but for organisational purposes.

In online debates on forums, the evolution of perspectives is visible to students from the written traces left of dialogue with other people contributing to the forum. By reading a range of accounts, often counterposed in the same space, students can identify the dissonances between government policies, official declarations and media reporting on the one hand, and the experiences of those involved in the protest movement on the other.   These texts are also rich in persuasive devices, expressions for agreement and disagreement, and expressions of concession and rejection.

I first gave students an article in English on the planned changes in France and reactions to them. After a first reading and some discussion, I asked students to conduct further research online. Students were given a list of website addresses and asked to (a) record three headlines in English and three in French together with translations (b) make a list of French key-words they could use for an online search on the topic based on the original article (c) answer in French some simple questions about the form of the laws and protests. Students read through two or three articles, began recording a vocabulary list.

Here follows an example of student work:

1. Search terms: CPE(new youth labour law) France, The C.P.E riots in France, demonstrators, demonstrations, strikes
2. Verb tenses: past tense, imperfect.
3. Headlines: 'General outcry after schools ordered to reopen on Thursday', 'Anti-CPE font fixes a date for action', 'Violence enters the protests'.
4. Demonstrators: Students, workers who will be affected by the CPE.
5. Numbers: Three million across France
6. Reasons for protesting: Because the CPE will affect students and they want their voices to be heard.
7. Those affected: Students, workers.
8. Locations of demonstrations: Primarily in Paris.
9. Comparison with Australia: The differences are that the new laws in Australia will not only affect young people, they will affect all workers. The similarity is that the laws will affect many people.

From this introductory activity, as a class we produced a list of key vocabulary. This task involved comparing and contrasting the situation in Australia to that of France, and re-evaluating the universality of the Australian experience of labour relations. Some of this comparison was also along historical lines, with students also discussing the tactics of earlier social movements (such as anti-war campaigns) in Australia and elsewhere.

In a second foray into internet sources, which aimed to address questions students had developed through the preceding discussion, high school student association websites were used. As a whole class we started by spending time on the forum page of the Democratic and Independent High-School Federation) (http://forum.fidl.org/), where French high-school students were posting reports and commentary on local anti-CPE activism. This was done initially using a single laptop and data projector. Because this material is produced by and aimed at target-language peers, it is of particular interest to students and provides perspectives that are of particular relevance to them. After a familiarisation session in which we also posted some questions on the FDIL forum as a class, students looked through the forum posts independently when we had access to a computer lab. Initially, students formulated questions and dictated them to me so that I could enter them onto the forum using the laptop projected to the whole class.

One such discussion thread we looked at together examined appropriate means of protest:

> On several threads of the forum it is written that certain people are not in favour of protests during class time, so I asked myself whether you would be in favour of protests on Wednesdays or Saturday afternoon…It would demonstrate well that we are motivated and not just doing it to wag class.

In reading through the responses to this together, I drew students' attention to aspects of language which they then used to construct their own response. These included cohesive devices: "I am opposed for a certain number of reasons…firstly… then…. finally…therefore…thus" and hortorary statements: "We must make priorities!". I also revised 'if clauses' followed by the conditional as the grammatical focus of this exercise as many responses speculated on what *would* happen *if* particular courses of action were undertaken. In students' own discussions, this grammatical

structure was also used for consideration of what *would* happen *if* elements of the French situation were transposed to Australia, and vice versa.

This work exposed considerable difficulties in using 'raw' texts found online. Internet texts appear in a wider range of genres than traditional media, with the formal register of news articles and editorials sitting alongside persuasive texts in the casual register of spoken vernacular of another place. Slang and keyboard abbreviations are distinctive to online communication and text-messaging, and as a cultural practice which crosses linguistic boundaries, this also provided a point of connection between my students and French young people. If the teacher draws attention to differences in register and how to recognise these, this can equip students with valuable metacognitive skills for their own manipulation of language.

The richness of online media presents a second challenge in new vocabulary. Much of this vocabulary is associated with concepts or institutions which are new to students, and is quite distinctive to the language community in question. Online material takes much of this contextual knowledge for granted, and hence is inconsiderate of readers coming from outside of both the social environment and language community.

In order to overcome some of the constraints presented by online texts which were often long, complex and context specific, I adopted a number of strategies which were quite time consuming. The first consisted of shortening and simplifying the language of some preselected. A second strategy was to provide students in advance with background briefings and vocabulary lists relating to a particular event or theme (such as the occupation of a school by its students), which often introduced them to concepts they were unaware of in English.

Once students gained an initial understanding of the issue and I had introduced new language items needed for this next task, I asked them to formulate a personal impression of the events in France, which they returned to at the end of the unit as part of the reflection process. I asked students to contribute in French to a forum on Moodle which I initiated with a number of questions and sentence starters. Here follows a translation of my initial post and an example of two student contributions.

Hello all. Please tell me your impressions of the events in France. Use the expressions:

I think that ….
In my opinion…
It seems to me that ….
If I were in their situation, I + conditional
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Hello Mr. W
I think that the laws are unfair and that the young people have the right to protest, but in my opinion they need to speak with the government and not be aggressive.
If I were in their situation I would be furious too but I would not protest because I think that does nothing.
Bye (name).
****
Hello everyone and Mr. W,
Like everyone, I think that this law is not fair. But I don't agree with (name) because I think that the protests do a lot. It is clear now because the law will probably not get passed.
Yes, they need to be reasonable and not too aggressive, but for the government to realise that there is a problem and that young people are not happy, they need to fight.
Regards (name)

Through consideration of the conditions of production and reception of texts, students identified ways in which the voices expressed in the texts were part of networks of interests and institutional structures positioned in a conflictual relationship. By comparing oppositional and official texts, students were able to identify how authors relied on distinctive rhetorics of rights, responsibilities, necessities and common sense.

Students quickly began independently making connections between the French and Australian movements, and brought in press articles on developments in Australia on the workplace reforms, which they also described in French for a French audience. In the specific context of language teaching, the use of internet sources reflecting different viewpoints in debates also offers opportunities for developing in students a greater sensitivity to rhetoric and the linguistic forms used in the construction of argument. At this point, many students considered that writing to politicians was a useful step, and composed letters to the French president.

TEACHING ABOUT JOURNALISTIC LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE NEWSPAPERS

The final example I wish to present is from a class for intermediate ESL learners in an Australian secondary school. I will very quickly go through a lesson which took an hour and a half to deliver. I wish to draw your attention to the combination of linguistic goals, and recontextualisation in this lesson. The lesson engages students with the plight of refugees in Australia. It provides them with access to journalistic texts by familiarising them with common conventions and giving them skills for decoding different kinds of journalistic content. Finally, it engages students with their immediate context of the school through a task they are asked to complete at the end of the lesson. Ultimately, students lobbied the minister responsible for refugees as part of the work they produced in this series of lessons.

CONCLUSION

In this presentation I have provided some examples of teaching strategies which involve teachers in the work of recontextualisation. Through the lessons presented, I attempted to connect students to a range of contexts, and to draw links between contexts. I have emphasised transformative goals through units of work that connect local and global concerns (through community involvement, engagement with global events, and establishment of connections with distant communities). I wish to end with some suggestions from the work of Fein which can be used as the basis for selecting topics and activities. He suggests designing lessons to give students an understanding of the following:

- interdependence and links between countries
- questions of power and the fairness of international relationships
- human rights
- environmental degradation
- economic, social and political justice across different societies

These are ambitious goals, and my own experience has taught me that they are difficult to meet in practice. I have identified a number of strategies which can be used to meet them, focusing on advanced learners. In pursuing wider goals goals, difficult as this work is, we equip students not just as competent speakers of English or successful workers, but as citizens of the world. Thank-you for your attention.