

More than 'mere' language teachers?*

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Language is a complex entity. Learning our mother tongue at a basic level of competence takes about five years. Achieving a level of language sophistication good enough to function in modern society takes much longer and requires schooling. Given the multifaceted nature of language use, it is no wonder that learning a foreign language is usually neither fast nor easy.

It follows then that undertaking to teach others to use a new language is a formidable task. Not only do language teachers need to know about language and methodology, but they also need to have an array of essential personal qualities, such as patience, open-mindedness and communication skills. As if the job was not demanding enough already, language teachers often have to operate in less than ideal conditions.

In the light of this, an outside observer would expect language teachers to be more than content, if not proud, to provide such a demanding and useful service. I know I am. In fact, I thought that this was an unexceptional view. But perhaps I was mistaken.

It seems that for a number of colleagues the task of language teaching is not elevated enough. Not content with 'merely' teaching language, they have assigned themselves the lofty mission of shaping learners' personalities, of making them 'better persons'. On the surface, this seems to be a commendable attitude, which is made all the more appealing when presented as an aspect of humanistic education. A closer examination of its premises and implications, though, provides serious grounds for scepticism.

The notion that any single individual or group possesses the correct answer to the question of what a 'better person' is can only lead to totalitarianism, not humanism. The distinction between *shaping* and *brainwashing* is simply arbitrary. Come to think of it, the mythical Procrustes was engaged in 'shaping', too. What if the teacher's view of a 'better person' happens to conflict with those of the learners, their parents or their culture? I wonder how

those colleagues who believe in 'shaping' would react if a teacher tried to shape *their* children according to beliefs and attitudes they themselves would reject.

I can only assume that those who see it as their prerogative to mould learners have worked with children and young teenagers, or in other contexts that give them power over learners, presumably in quantities tempting enough to abuse. Experience in teaching professionals, particularly ones of a higher status and income, would provide the proponents of the 'shaping' attitude with an illuminating second opinion.

One argument put forward in defence of the 'shaping' attitude is that we cannot avoid influencing our learners' thinking and behaviour, and that we would be wise to be aware of this. It goes without saying that we need to be aware of our power over learners so that we can control ourselves, but this is a far cry from including 'shaping learners' in the job description.

Having said that, I would like to clarify that I do think that language teaching is more than teaching language. It is also about autonomy and critical thinking. It is about teaching learners how to collect, combine and analyse information in order to draw informed conclusions. As I have argued before, language teaching has two ultimate goals. One is to help learners be themselves in the new language. The other is to enable learners to keep on learning without the help of a teacher. And *this* is what humanistic education is all about.

Language teaching is, or should be, a fulfilling and worthwhile occupation. There is no need to try to make it more so by adding irrelevant and dubious goals. Perhaps I am misguided, but I would think that the moment our learners show ability to communicate and support their views using the foreign language, whether to agree or disagree with us or the popular dogmas of the day, we should pat ourselves on the back for a job well done.

* This article was prompted by a panel discussion with the plenary speakers at TESOL Greece Convention, 15-16 March 2003 (<http://www.tesolgreece.com/convention2003.html>).