Social Responsibility in the Language Class. Some Thoughts on Paulo Freire, and Bruno Bettelheim's 'The New Illiteracy'.

By Gerald Mosback

There is a problem peculiar to third world language teachers, especially in the universities, which other subject teachers do not face. It is that language, particularly at the intermediate and advanced levels has to be about something. Physics, Mechanics, Geography, even Psychology to a great extent are concerned with the investigation of phenomena which vary little from society to society.

History, Economics and Political Science do, of course, vary in content according to the envirnoment, but then one *expects* these subjects to be controversial by their very nature. Also, they can be controlled in a fairly consistent manner by selecting an underlying philosophy at the outset — the Marxist view of History, say, or the Keynesian school of Economics.

The English Language teacher in this context is continually involved in the search for suitable reading materials to form the basis for comprehension, discussion and vocabulary work in class. No single published course is ever entirely suitable for his particular circumstance and country. Even one produced within the country will usually require supplementing or substitution as passages lose topicality. It takes at the very least from three to five years to get a new textbook from the planning stage into the classroom, and things move fast in the developing world these days. This year's burning problem may have given way to quite other concerns in a year or two as old difficulties are surmounted and new ones come to the fore.

Even at the primary level, the question of content cannot be avoided. In a recent article on primary readers (November, 1974) Dr. Bruno Bettelheim, professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Chicago, makes some interesting comparisons between primary school readers in various countries. In some western primers, he observes, not only school, but the whole business of living seems to be depicted as a series of tedious and senseless activities. From the American Initial Training Alphabet series he quotes,

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> In the morning you get up. You get dressed. You get breakfast. Even if you get wet you go to school on time. Then you get out of school and you go home again. After a day of getting up and getting dressed and getting breakfast and getting to school, and getting out of school and getting home and getting dinner, you get very tired and get into bed, so that you can get up the next morning and start all over again.

Again from the ITA series,

> Bill lives in this house. Today is Monday. It is a hot, sunny day. (I suppose the day is hot and sunny to make going to school seem even less attractive, B.B.) Bill goes to school. Bill rides to school on the bus. What can Bill do after school? After school Bill can fish. . . . . Al goes to school. Al rides a bike to school. What can Al do after school? After school Al can run and play. . . . What can Pat and Liz do after school? After school Pat and Liz can play house.

This extract is from a section called *School Days*, but the content makes a mockery of the title since the whole emphasis is on the exciting things the children can do *outside* school. In the *Janet and Mark* series, a widely used primer in the west, Bettelheim points out that most of the appeals to the child's interest are of a locomotoric nature — physical play activities outside school. "It is difficult for a first grader to sit still and pay attention — and much more so for those whose social background is culturally deprived. But it becomes an insult to his feelings if he is asked to sit still when he is at the same time required to think only of romping and running and jumping and all other varieties of active play." The first pre-primer of the Harper and Row basic reading programme begins,

> Janet and Mark . . . Come and jump, jump, jump. Here I come, Janet. Here I come. I can ride my bike, I can, I can. I can ride, ride, ride. . .

While the ITA series contains passages such as the following,

> If a boy likes to jump, he jumps over and into and on. He jumps over a fence and into a puddle into bed and into trouble. He jumps into a pool, over some rocks, *out of school* (!), into a box. . . (my italics).

Not only is the child asked to think about jumping, but even specifically jumping out of school.

Reading books in other countries on the other hand tend to emphasize the importance (and enjoyment) of learning activities. A Polish primer starts with a series of 5 pictures showing children discovering books with

obvious pleasure, their different homes and backgrounds, and their friendly walk to school. A sixth picture shows them happily entering the school yard. In the seventh, a friendly teacher helps them off with their coats and in the next picture, the children are in their chairs, books open, showing interested attention as the teacher starts a reading class.

A Soviet primer has the children heading for school on the first day of class, with flowers in their hands to celebrate the big event.

As Bettelheim points out, though, primers in the U.S. were not always devoid of instructive content, though the famous *New England Primer* of 1727 which he quotes must have been quite hard going for very young children. Its opening words were, "In Adam's Fall We sinned All. Thy Life to mend — this Book attend!" The Oxford English Dictionary quotes an even more daunting example from T. Lyre's *New Spelling Book* of 1677, "Z, z, zee, Z-eal, thou shalt be my charret, whilst I ride, Elijah-like, with Word and Spirit my guide."

These were early attempts to use the content of the language lesson to instil a sense of purpose and acceptable social mores, and by some means or other, the content of language instruction today must be geared, like every other resource, to the vital and immediate problems of development — especially at the tertiary level of education where at all costs the potential danger of elitism and the detachment of an 'educated' minority from the needs of the mass of the people must be avoided.

In a recent work on education for development, Paulo Freire, the great Brazilian educationalist, outlined his philosophy of one kind of language teaching situation — the literacy project. He made many interesting innovations as co-ordinator of the Adult Education project for the Movement of Popular Culture in Recife. Instead of a rigid academic syllabus, which Freire found 'alienating' for the students, he organised what he called 'culture circles' instead of formal classes. In these culture circles, the participants sought education through group debate under a co-ordinator rather than an authoritarian teacher. The topics for the debates were offered by the participants themselves and included, "Nationalism, profit remittances abroad (by foreign firms), the political evolution of Brazil, development, illiteracy and the vote for illiterates" (1974, pp. 41 - 42).

Shortly afterwards, Freire was called on to apply his methods to language training in a mass literacy project.

> From the beginning we rejected the hypothesis of a purely mechanistic literacy program and considered the problem of teaching adults how to read in relation to the awakening of their consciousness. . . . We wanted a literacy program which would be an introduction to the democratization of culture, a program with men as its Subject rather than as patient recipients (1973, p. 43).

He noted that,

> In most reading programs, the student must endure an abysm between their own experience and the contents offered for them to learn. It requires patience indeed, after the hardships of a day's work (or of a day without work), to tolerate lessons dealing with 'wing'. 'Johnny saw the wing'. 'The wing is on the bird'. Lessons talking of Graces and grapes to men who never knew a Grace and never ate a grape. 'Grace saw the grape'.

Freire's answer to the content problem was to allow the group discussion to formulate around a series of 'situations', represented initially by pictures. A farm worker standing by a well in a field has a book in one hand and a hoe in the other. The group consider the interrelation of Nature and culture. How had man shaped and controlled his environment. What is the relationship in this process between books and tools and the making of wells. What is the place of language and literacy in Man's adjustment to his environment. In other pictures, a cat hunting mice is compared with a man hunting game for food, both with simple equipment (a bow and arrow) and a modern rifle. "The debate on these situations produced a wealth of observation about men and animals, about creative power, freedom, intelligence, instinct, education and training" (1974, p. 71). Other pictures show the extension of Man's inventiveness from objects of practical use to decorative and imaginative activities (such as we more normally think of under the term 'culture'). In this case from jugs and pots to a decorative earthenware vase. In this way the worker from the countryside learns to realize for himself that 'culture' and 'education' are not closed mysteries, studied only by an elite in classrooms and universities, but they are processes that he himself is daily engaged in and contributes to.

Another simple device of Freire's in the culture groups, was the selection of what he calls 'generative words' (pp. 82-84). These topics and the way he treated them have much in common with the interrelated topic treatment advocated in the 1972 *Education Sector Review* for Ethiopia.

Rain
Aspects for discussion: The influence of environment on human life. The climatic factor in subsistence economy. Regional climatic imbalances in Brazil.

Food
Aspects for discussion: Malnutrition. Hunger (from the local to the national sphere). Infant mortality and related diseases.

Wealth
Aspects for discussion: Brazil and the universal dimension. The confrontation between wealth and poverty. Rich man vs. poor man. Rich nations vs. poor nations.

In Freire's view, "Literacy makes sense only... as the consequence of men's beginning to reflect about their own capacity for reflection, about the world, about the position in the world, about their work, about their power to transform the world..."

There are lessons from Freire and Bettelheim in the work of the foreign language teacher in the National University, both on the question of content and approach. In the past, it has always been the practice of the English teachers, for example, to get together as a teaching group to try to decide what materials would be interesting for the students. The teachers would then make up a package of materials which they would be responsible for getting the students to understand.

Many of the materials thus produced have found the students hostile, a few have been found to generate considerable interest, but it is not surprising that on the whole the attitude has been one of acquiescent indifference. There are so many pages to be read, so many words to be looked up in order to pass the examination at the end of the course. This attitude is hardly surprising since there has never been any attempt to systematically ascertain the students' views on the materials provided, let alone elicit their views on what would be interesting and useful to them in the first place.

In a sense, of course, this has been the result of the previous view of education as an elitist, academically compartmented exercise. The students were, in Freire's words, the "patient recipients" of what their authoritarian teachers thought was good for them.

Within these parameters, it is hardly surprising that even the most well-meaning attempts to provide 'relevant' materials have met largely with failure. Two notable examples in the freshman English programme have been a section on over-population and birth-control, and another, now abandoned, on the miraculous transition of Japan from an underdeveloped country to a major economic world power. Both these topics were felt to be interesting in the third world context, but because of the teacher's position as authoritative 'educator' at the front of the class, both topics aroused great resentment and hostility. The Japan topic, it was hoped would provide an interesting example for Ethiopia — instead it was seen as a calculated piece of opinionated moralising on Ethiopia's comparative *lack* of progress. The population and birth-control question might have been an interesting one if thrown up as a result of group discussion on, say Food, Health, or National Resources as Freire-type 'generative' words, but as 'explained' by a controling 'teacher' especially a foreign teacher, and from the west at that, it must have seemed one more manifestation of Euro-American propaganda.

When more or less relevant topics prove difficult, it is not to be wondered at that more arcane materials in recent and current courses leave students not so much 'patient recipients' and dazed onlookers. Recent passages have included one on Florence Nightingale and the intransigence of British military commanders in the Crimean war, the emigration to Australia of Yorkshire mill girls after the 1914-18 war, a 'humourous' piece on the names of villages and towns around the English city of Liverpool, reflections by Dr. Samuel Johnson on the plight of the soldiery in the Falkland Islands campaign of the mid-eighteenth century, and many other quite isolated and totally irrelevant snippets which teachers thought, entirely without consultation, 'might interest' the students — or at least be 'good' for them. All the above examples are *currently* being 'taught' in the evening Extension department of the National University.

However, to make use of even the most suitable topic cores (there must *be* topics, since as we have said, language must be about something), some serious rethinking of the student-teacher relationship must be carried out.

In another essay, *Extension or Communication* (1974, p. 84), Freire advocates a new terminology for this relationship in order to indicate more desirable attitudes on both sides. He suggestes groups do not consist of 'educators' (teachers) and 'educatees' (students), but of educator-educatee and educatee-educator. Everyone both learns *and* teaches in the learning situation. There is certainly no guarantee that the present day 'teacher', merely because he is older and has a degree, is necessarily more intelligent and perceptive than every single one of his students. These are innate qualities whose measure may not appreciably increase with years. The truly receptive 'teacher' is just as much in a position to learn from the varied insights and reflections of 'his' groups as they are to take what they require from his experience and academic training.

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