ELT and the Risk of Political Brainwashing: A Novel Approach to Deconstructing Politically-Constructed Identities

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Abstract

Much headway recently has been made in terms of devising pedagogical tactics to lay bare the 'powerful unsaids 'of the 'topdog', preserve the learner's Arab identity and meet the dangerous effects of a foreign culture. Among the strategies of resistance most frequently employed by Arab intellectuals, scholars and educationists, we find the censorial approach. The belief behind this is that any exposure of Arab students to western culture and values is likely to lead them to culture-shock, to political brainwashing, and even to a rejection of their own culture and identity. My belief, however, is that the real solution to cultural brainwashing and the Arab identity crisis is not censorship of cultural texts. A more fruitful defence against cultural indoctrination would be to draw Arab students' attention to how language works through unstated assumptions and to sensitize them to the working of ideology. This paper advances the claim that, because students are in any case in contact with western values, and not necessarily through textbooks, Arab scholars should help students develop a sense of "healthy criticism" and equip them with a "critical language awareness" and effective discourse patterns. For the implementation of this strategy, linguistic tools from the "Prague school of Linguistics" are considered, mainly 'Theme, 'Rheme', and 'Foregrounding'. Illustrative passages from President Dwight Eisenhower's "The Chance for Peace Speech" will be scrutinized.

Key Words: EFL learners, cultural brainwashing, thematic approach, censorial approach, healthy criticism

1. Introduction

The paper seeks to be a starting point for rethinking prevalent strategies and approaches to preserving the learner's Arab identity and enable him/her to avoid political brainwashing and cultural indoctrination. The main argument is to find an approach which serves best the learners' needs, helps them deconstruct ideology, analyse cultural texts independently, and consolidate their linguistic ability.

The paper first explores the thematic approach to culture and asks if it reduces cultural brainwashing. It next examines the censorial approach which suggests meeting cultural brainwashing by rejecting all contact with western values. The paper then argues in favour of a learner - centered strategy, which attempts to sensitize learners to the working of cultural brainwashing and shows them how linguistic / discoursal tools such as Foregrounding, "Given" (Theme) and "New" (Rheme) equip them to meet the dangerous effects of a foreign culture. Finally, and in terms of methodology, excerpts from the US president Eisenhower's "The Chance for Peace" speech (1956) are given to demonstrate how learners cannot only resist cultural brainwashing but also gradually lose the habit of relying on their teacher for the analysis of cultural texts.

2. Language and Ideology: How Language Works Through Tacit Assumptions

However, the paper proposes, first, to examine the relationship between language and ideology. According to linguists, language is not an innocent tool at the service of knowledge (Phillipson, 1992). It is laden with ideological issues and presupposed theories. It paves the way for a writer to infiltrate his ideas through tacit and unstated assumptions. One specialist who draws our attention to the implicit meaning of words, to the ideological and "the powerful unsaid" of language, is Volosinov. He maintains that "the divorce of language from its ideological implication is one of abstract objectivism's most serious errors" (1973, p. 48). Similarly, Michel Pêcheux (1982, p. 111) argues that "the meaning of a word, expression, proposition, etc., does not exist in itself... but is determined by the ideological positions brought into play in the socio-historical process in which words, expressions, and propositions are introduced" (p. 101). In this respect, Whorf believes that language shapes a person's ideas. He assumes that the linguistic system "is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but is itself the shaper of ideas" (1958, p. 209).

Fowler is also a linguist who springs to mind when we deal with language and ideology. In his view, it is erroneous to assume that language is innocent or that "the world has a natural structure from which language draws its meanings passively" (1986, p. 24). He claims that the structural form of any text "constitutes a representation of a world, characterized by activities and states and values". In other words, whether the text is a novel, poem, or cultural text, in Fowler's view it is "a communicative interaction between its producer and its consumers" (1986, p. 84).

3. Approaches to Cultural Pedagogy

3.a. The Thematic Approach

In a thematic analysis of Eisenhower's "The Chance for Peace" speech, most learners are likely to focus on the speech's key content and strive to understand topic sentences. Unaware of language intricacies, EFL students will probably interpret the writer's assumptions as common sense or given issues. My contention is that learners are likely to see President Eisenhower, in this text, only as a defender of peace and freedom around the world. They may at face value interpret his speech as a neutral comment on the value of peace and the folly of war. The president's speech seems to create a powerful impression of US flexibility and conciliation. It also seems to show the Eisenhower's desire not only to save peace but also to build his reputation as a champion of peace, a keen advocate of freedom and a "soldier" for global harmony and democracy. Such an approach, however, pays scant attention to covert linguistic devices or to implicit and unstated ideas. Therefore, by relying on it, EFL learners will ignore the importance of discoursal tools such as 'Theme' and 'Rheme', and the speech's foregrounded parallel structures.

The negative side of this method is that it encourages learners to act as passive receptors of information and prevents them from seeing through the text or deconstructing its ideology. There is, then, a risk of cultural indoctrination and brainwashing if students' understanding of cultural texts is based only on a thematic approach. To sensitize learners to the subtle workings of ideology, the paper suggests alternative approaches.

3.b. The Censorial Approach

Among the methods the Arab world most frequently employs to draw a learner's attention to the interconnectedness of culture and ideology is the 'censorial' approach. The rationale here is that it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to benefit from the fruits of western culture without importing some shortcomings. Learners exposed to western culture, it is claimed, become discontented, reject their own culture, change their habits, their way of thinking and even perhaps their religious faith. Advocates of this approach, like Galtung (1980), assert that exposing learners to a foreign culture involves in some respects the acquisition of a second identity. Some educationists hold that learning about a foreign culture may lead to psychological crisis and feelings of frustration and loneliness. From an African perspective, moreover, Ngugi's theory supports Galtung's view that learning about a foreign culture represents a threat to learner stability rather than an enriching asset. Ngugi maintains (1985) that "political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control its tools of self-definition in relationship to others" (p. 289).

Defenders of the censorial approach make even further claims. Muslim scholars, for example, argue that the assumptions of western civilization are the antithesis of Islamic principles. The western model of moral permissiveness and the degradation of its secular thought, they see, represent a direct threat to the basic beliefs of a Muslim society.

Interpreting culture from this viewpoint tends to reduce learners to passive receptors and culture studies to an occasion for imperialist enemies to shape mental structures and inflict their ideologies via the power of language. In my view, it would be imprudent to turn a blind eye to

the close relationship between culture and ideology. However, the real challenge in revealing this link is not censorship. This authoritarian view of culture fails to show how learners can equip themselves with tools to deconstruct ideology, protect their identity and resist political and cultural brainwashing. More important, rejecting the idea of exposing learners to western culture or controlling and censoring its content will in no way sensitize students to the workings of ideology in cultural texts. This is because learners in any case are in contact with western values, not mainly through university textbooks but through the cinema, music, magazines and the Internet.

    3.c. *Towards Sensitizing Students to the Working of Ideology and Encouraging " Healthy Criticism"*

    The real issue, as the paper attempts to show, is not to avoid exposure to a foreign culture but to face it and provide EFL learners with appropriate linguistic tools. Once equipped with effective discourse patterns and "critical language awareness" (Fairclough, 1992), they can decode the "powerful unsaids" of language (Volosinov, 1973) and deconstruct ideology.

    It seems obvious from this statement that knowledge of foreign language intricacies, together with language awareness, can play a key role in helping learners to decode ideological messages concealed in a text. This implies that, without understanding language as discourse, learners "cannot understand the systematic ways in which the western developed countries have been able to manage and control, and in many ways, even create the third world politically, economically, sociologically and culturally" (Escobar, 1985, p. 384). For his part, Fairclough (1992) stresses the importance of a learner's critical reading and language awareness in uncovering the ideological messages of the "topdog" or writer. He also points out that "ideologies are embedded in features of discourse which are taken for granted as matters of common sense" (p. 66).

    It is my view, therefore, that any text analysis or teaching about cultural issues should be learner-centered. Instructors should play the role of monitor to guide learners and help them to decode the writer's hidden messages. Hence, the best road to a learner awareness of the relationship between culture and ideology is not by having texts censored or being spoon-fed. A more suitable strategy would be to avoid accumulating information as "superior knowledge", as Scholes puts it (1985, P. 16), maintaining that the role of a learner is to challenge any propositional knowledge and to resist the writer's ideological assumptions. He states:

    "In an age of manipulation when our students are in dire need of critical strength to resist the continuing assaults of all the media, the worst thing we can do is to foster in them an attitude of reverence before texts".

    The central point of interest so far has been that a certain dimension of language awareness is essential for EFL learners to see how ideologies are permeated through language. Theoretical knowledge about language, however, is not sufficient and cannot enable a learner to meet brainwashing and decode the implicit messages in cultural texts.

    Even when learners may be aware of the danger and pressures of language, they remain powerless and they lack the practical skill to dismantle political discourse. Therefore, while recognizing that language awareness as advocated by Norman Fairclough is helpful in some

respect to learners, the present paper claims that there are more discoursal tools that could lend themselves to a more appropriate manner to our corpus.

Since language awareness is theoretical, discourse analysis seems to be a more efficient and practical way of challenging language practices. To sensitize EFL learners to the workings of ideology and help them question "taken for granted" assumptions, their theoretical understanding of language should be supplemented with a practical analysis of the language strategies. In other words, access to linguistic tools will empower the learner to examine the "textness"/"texture" of texts and to look at obvious and "given" assumptions in a critical way. This implies that a learner, equipped with more effective discoursal tools, will no longer play the role of an "undergog" or a model reader. Henceforward, a learner will be able to challenge the ideological content of cultural texts and unravel cultural brainwashing.

In the above theoretical part, the paper attempted to look at cultural texts as ways of permeating ideology and changing opinions of the addressee or reader. The paper also attempted to describe in general terms how linguistic tools can help students unravel some of the strands of discourse and decode the ideological assumptions of the writer.

Now, the paper will apply this theory to excerpts from a speech by the US president Dwight D. Eisenhower entitled "The Chance for Peace". The terminology adopted here has been suggested by the *Prague School of Linguistics*. The discoursal tools that the paper applies to the present corpus are: 'Theme', 'Rheme' and 'Foregrounding' in order to show how they are used in political language as a means of persuasion and permeating ideology. Throughout an examination of particular situations where ideology is crucial, the paper will underscore the role of a learner to read between the lines and uncover the hidden or implicit message of the writer.

Study - Case **:** Excerpts from Dwight D. Eisenhower's speech :

"**The Chance for Peace**":

Excerpt one:

The world knows that an era ended with the death of Joseph Stalin. The extraordinary 30-year span of his rule saw the Soviet Empire expand to reach from the Baltic Sea to the Sea of Japan, finally to dominate 800 million souls. *This free world knows*, out of the bitter wisdom of experience, that vigilance and sacrifice are the price of liberty. *It knows* that the defense of Western Europe imperatively demands the unity of purpose and action made possible by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, embracing a European Defense community. *It knows* that Western Germany deserves to be a free and equal partner in this community and that this, for Germany, is the only safe way to full, final unity. *It knows* that aggression in Korea and in southeast Asia are threats to the whole free community to be met by united action. (*My italics*)

Excerpt Two:

I know of nothing I can add to make plainer the sincere purpose of the United States. *I know of no course*, other than that marked by these and similar actions,that can be called the highway of peace. *I know of only* one question upon which progress waits. It is this: *What is the Soviet Union ready to do? (My italics)*

Excerpt Three:

In the light of these principles the citizens of the United States defined the way they proposed to follow, through the aftermath of war, toward true peace. *This way* was faithful to the spirit that inspired the United Nations: To prohibit strife, to relieve tensions, to banish fears. *This way* was to control and to reduce armaments. *This way* was to allow all nations to devote their energies and resources to the great and good tasks of healing the war's wounds, of clothing and feeding and housing the needy, of perfecting a just political life, of enjoying the fruits of their own free toil. *The Soviet government held a vastly different vision of the future*. (*My italics*)

Comment:

President Eisenhower's political language in this speech is not just a discourse of objective or innocent description but one of persuasion, brainwashing and action. The ideology here is founded on a certain belief about what is inevitable, namely Peace through cold war."

Throughout the speech, the president's discourse is built on the reader's presupposed acceptance of the "given" or "taken for granted" information. The given elements ('The world knows', 'It knows') in the first excerpt assumes the prior consent of the reader and suggests that the information it communicates is already taken for granted and not conveyed as fresh ideas. Repetition of the same structure suggests that president Eisenhower is including the addressee as someone who will react as if the president's statements embody taken for granted assumptions. It is worth noting, too, that Eisenhower is not speaking only of and for himself but also on behalf of American citizens nationwide as if they accept that they have a common interest to defend, namely true peace. In other words, Eisenhower is making an implicit authority claim to articulate on people's behalf his personal perception of peace.

Close discourse analysis of the speech also shows that there are many foregrounded groupings of lexical items resulting from deviance from the normal language code. The most obvious method of foregrounding here is parallelism, where some structural features are held constant while other lexical items are varied. In excerpt two, the structure and some words are repeated creating a parallel structure which is a repetition of ' I know of '. In this example the parallel meaning, promoted by the parallel structure, is obvious because of the similarity in meaning of the two words involved.

A more restricted method of foregrounding in the speech is repetition. In excerpt three, for example, there is repetition of the paradigm ' this way ' in three successive lines which makes the contextual meaning stand out. By inference, the learner is indeed intended to conclude that, in opposition to the Soviet Union, the United States is striving to move the world toward true peace and freedom. It should be obvious, from such foregrounded features, that Eisenhower's discourse constitutes a powerful and sobering comment. But it would be wrong for the learner to assume that the speech is a call for freedom, universal peace and disarmament. The real goal, in my view, is the achievement of power superiority at all costs over the Soviet government, which, it is said, holds a vastly different vision of the future. Eisenhower's speech, in fact, consolidates not the discourse of peace but rather the rhetoric of war, victory, security and superiority. The meaning of peace has been distorted and used to justify all sorts of violence and belligerence. Hence, Eisenhower's words are uniquely nuanced and aimed at cultural indoctrination and political brainwashing, since he is striving to persuade Americans nationwide to see no contradiction between pursuing peace and waging war.

In other words, the definite article in Eisenhower's "The Chance for Peace" makes it obvious that he has violated the meaning of 'peace' and has cunningly used the word as a weapon of cold war. Thus he has entwined the rhetoric of peace and the rhetoric of cold war, doubtless to legitimize the use of nuclear weapons, persuade Americans that war is a way of achieving perpetual peace, and crucially accuse Russia of being fully responsible for condemning the world to a life of perpetual fear and tension.

Conclusion

This paper is based on technical terms and linguistic tools suggested by *The Prague School of Linguistics*. , It is worth noting, however, that terms such as *Given* and *New* have been developed by Halliday and Matthiessen in *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (2004). But, because the scope of the paper does not allow for a broader coverage, the main intention was to start and stimulate discussion about the importance and usefulness, for the learner, of linguistic or discoursal tools in the analysis of cultural texts and deconstructing politically-constructed identities.

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