

Ideology for Second Language Teachers

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Abstract

This paper criticizes the lack of clarity in second language teacher education, and in the literature on second language teaching more generally, about the relationship between language and ideology. The paper proposes that there should be a reference point for second language teacher-learners which would allow them to position themselves and others. Thompson (1990) provides such a reference point in the form of a framework that can be used to analyse the extent to which the language in texts supports the power of social elites. The paper draws on some examples of orientalist discourse in order to discuss how second language teacher-learners can come to understand the process of the production and reproduction of ideas. The advantage of Thompson's framework is its clear presentation of five ways in which ideology operates and the fact that if second language teacher-learners decide to disagree with him, their own use of the term ideology will be based on principled argument. Such an outcome will be preferable to the current situation in which this valuable concept is rarely dealt with explicitly, and across the literature appears in contradictory ways, leaving second language teacher-learners struggling to identify some coherence around the term.

Keywords: culture, ideology, orientalism, second language teacher education

Introduction

In this paper, I argue that second language teacher education (SLTE) should include, as part of the second language teacher's knowledge base, an understanding of ideology. In the face of a range of meanings encountered in the literature, some more explicit than others, teacher-learners would benefit from having ideology discussed within a clear framework allowing them to place an author's use of the term and relate it to their own understanding. Thompson (1990) proposes a framework within which language found in text is related to discourses and the power of elites in society. I argue that this framework could be used in SLTE courses by adding the relationship between ideology and language to other levels of language analysis (e.g. morphological, semantic, discourse). Such language awareness is the essence of the content that underpins our professional knowledge. Graves (2009) provides a clear summary of thinking about this knowledge base. Her review of two influential proposals gives us six types of teacher knowledge: 1. target language knowledge (including proficiency); 2. general pedagogic skills; 3. pedagogical content knowledge (knowing how to teach language); 4. contextual knowledge (awareness of the personal, institutional and wider social contexts of the learners); 5. pedagogical reasoning skills (ability to create learning opportunities as lessons unfold); and 6. communication skills (Richards, 1998; Roberts, 1998, as cited in Graves, 2009, p. 119). To these, Graves mentions that Velez-Rendon (2002) would add intercultural competence, although this could be included within contextual knowledge and communication skills. By seeing ideology as part of language knowledge, a link would be made to contextual knowledge, inasmuch as this deals with the societies within which texts are produced and read (for the sake of simplicity I refer only to written language). Explicit teaching about ideology as conceptualized by Thompson would also help to establish a *critical* frame for second language teacher education, still not widespread, at least for English teachers (Hawkins and Norton, 2009) despite years of being discussed. It would, moreover, add some substance to a focus on the "historical, and socio-political contexts" referred to in Hatton and Smith's (1995) discussion of "critical reflection" (p. 9). Finally, an understanding of ideology would enable teacher-learners to appreciate better the different contributions to the debate over how to teach cultural and/or intercultural awareness (Kramsch, 2011; Byram, 1997; Baker, 2012) with its emphasis on revealing how language and culture are intertwined.

Multiple meanings of ideology

Even if they think it is important, it is clear that second language teacher educators do not share an understanding of what ideology means. The Cambridge Guide to Second Language Education, for example, (Burns and Richards, 2009) has 13 instances of *ideology* being used. Writers with a critical perspective (e.g. Hawkins and Norton, 2009) are concerned to see how language and power are related, but there is no definition of the term. Meanwhile, other contributors to the volume seem to use it to mean either political viewpoint or beliefs about teaching and learning. The concept of ideology is undeniably complex, perhaps especially so (Wodak, 2007: 1), and the lack of consistency in contributions may be the reason that the term is not included in the index.

Elsewhere in the literature, the second language teacher-learner will encounter a lack of clarity. For example, Waters (2009) argues that current trends in English language teaching (ELT), including demands for authentic language in class, are rooted in a critical perspective which has attained "ideological status" (p. 141). His argument is that there are ideas about ELT which have become common sense despite being, in his opinion, pedagogically unsound. Waters uses

ideology in a way that separates it from the power of social elites and he attempts to undermine the critical theorists by claiming that their position is as ideological as those they attack. At the same time, he imbues the term with a pejorative connotation similar to “dogmatic”.

Meaning in the service of power

In order to work with the concept of ideology, a useful distinction can be made between ideology as “A system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy” (“Ideology”, n.d.) and ideology as “meaning in the service of power” (Thomson, 1990, p. 23). The latter has the advantage of making the link between language (as well as other symbolic forms) and power explicit. Ideology for Thomson is the complex of ideas that presents the status quo of privileged positions for powerful elites as normal. The fact that ideas are naturalised in this way makes them resistant to questioning and this makes it easier for elites to govern. Thompson thus makes the claim that, “to study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning serves to establish and sustain relations of domination” (p. 56). Language is key here, as it is the norms of a particular discourse that make this happen. The discourse which forms the way we talk about a particular topic can be said to be more or less ideological to the extent that it encourages thinking about the topic in ways that do not challenge the privileged perspective of the elite. This definition also allows for the possibility that discourse can be “ideological and nonideological” (Noth, 2004: 14), so that text might manifest a political discourse but not be ideological in that it does not benefit the ruling elite.

Thompson (1990) identifies 5 typical modes of operation of ideology. These are legitimation; dissimulation; unification; fragmentation; and reification and can be summarised as follows:

- Legitimation refers to a process whereby social relations are justified or rationalized;
- Dissimulation refers to a process whereby descriptive language is manipulated to show a positive evaluation of social relations;
- Unification refers to a process whereby the language used to refer to individuals and groups is standardized and works to create the impression of unity between them;
- Fragmentation refers to a process whereby differences are emphasized between the reader and another group and, at the same time, this becomes a common enemy in opposition to the reader;
- Reification refers to a process whereby situations and the people involved are presented as naturally occurring things, independent of context.

Together they serve the purpose of presenting the ideas of the ruling elite as natural, normal and neutral. To the extent that the mass of the population, and in particular the working classes, internalize these ideas, it is easier for the elite to govern as they see fit. When the hold of ideology weakens, elites may turn to violence to maintain their position. Without the clarity that Thomson provides, the use of the term ideology becomes confused. For example, Root (2012), in an interesting piece on perceptions of English in South Korea, begins with a definition of ideology as a set of specific ideas but runs into difficulties when trying to deal with some ideas being dominant. She ends up dividing ideologies into those with power and those without. This is unnecessarily complex. Ferguson et al (2009), on the other hand, investigated the ideological discourse in textbooks used on accounting courses and are enthusiastic about the practicality of Thomson’s approach and the clarity it provides. Second language teacher-learners could also find it beneficial for analyzing teaching materials and its use would make it easier for them to evaluate a claim that this or that practice is ideological.

The power of language

I have already commented on the fact that there is notable variation in the way the term ideology is used in the literature that might be read by second language teacher-learners and educators. One reason, described at length by Thompson (1990), is the way influential thinkers have given the term negative and neutral meanings over the decades. Another reason is the disagreement over the extent to which language determines how we think. This has long been debated and, no doubt, will continue to be so. To quote just two examples from the last forty years, Halliday (1978) argues that, “The speaker can see through and around the settings of his semantic system” (as cited in Addison, 2011, p. 58), while, Mills (2004: 67) suggests the opposite, writing that, “there is no intrinsic order to the world itself other than the ordering which we impose on it through our linguistic description of it.”

There is general agreement, however, that the influence of language (determining or otherwise) works through the establishing of discourses that privilege certain ideas over others, as well as the voices of their proponents. What is privileged is the choice of content and the manner in which it is presented. The elite have power over the mainstream media and centres of education and this power means that what gets said, how it is said and by whom is influenced by the world view of the elite. It is not necessary to have a conspiracy theory to argue, as Marx (1974) did, that,

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it (p. 65).

Whatever one’s opinion of Karl Marx or the use that has been made of his method of analysis, many of us would recognize the usefulness of this idea for understanding certain aspects of culture, both contemporary and historical. Holborrow (2007), for example, provides examples of how neoliberalism now appears as the common sense approach to running the economy. Similarly, Wrigley and Smyth (2013) detail the way a neoliberal focus on economic competitiveness is apparent in state education in England where “a wider human formation associated with humanities and creative arts” is abandoned for many working class pupils (p. 4). In an earlier, but not unrelated example, Bisseret (1979) looks at the ideologically loaded discourse that presents success or failure at school as largely a matter of inherited intelligence. She sets out the historical context we need in order to understand the role of ideology,

Confronted with the tangible inequalities it had maintained after taking political power and strengthening its hold on economic power, the bourgeoisie was to develop an ideology by which it could justify these disparities and silence an opposition which threatened its newly acquired privileges (pp. 11-12).

Looking further back into history, Marshall (1993), describes a similar process, this time to show how the transatlantic slave trade, which provided the labour power needed to shift the developing capitalist economy into a much higher gear, was justified by scientific racism. Marshall points out the irony of the slave owning bourgeoisie overthrowing feudalism and calling for liberty, fraternity and equality. The discourse of scientific racism presented the argument that the slaves were not of the same race and thus provided the ideological force to fend off criticism.

Learning about ideology in SLTE

Second language teacher-learners engaged in some kind of professional development can expect to encounter the term ideology if they are interested in critical discourse analysis (CDA). However, a review of some examples suggests that here too, there is a lack of clarity about the term. For example, Cots (2006) mentions ideology in a piece about using CDA as an additional approach to working with a coursebook text but he does not define it. This opens him up to severe criticism from O'Dwyer (2007) who questions the apparent assumption that all discourse is ideological and asks for a better reason to have his students, "hunt after ideologies in their reading activities." (p. 373). More recently, Sewell (2013) criticizes Cogo (2012) for the incoherence of mixing a post-modern understanding of language with a Marxist view of ideology. The former, crudely speaking, sees language itself as constitutive of social reality (Mills, 2004) while the Marxist view identifies a relationship between the material power of a social elite and language use in society. The latter view, moreover, sees opportunities for people to challenge the dominant discourse as they respond to the contradiction between material reality as they experience it and the way they see it represented.

Teacher-learners reading about cultural awareness (CA) will also encounter occasional references to ideology (for example, Holliday, 2012). Perhaps more likely, is to find a critical perspective from which asymmetries of power are discussed more or less explicitly. Baker (2012) writes about an approach to intercultural awareness suitable for the modern context in which English is a lingua franca. He comments favourably on the development of critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997), which involves analysis of one's own culture and how other cultures are positioned relative to it. In his call for a "non-essentialist and dynamic approach" (p. 64) to understanding culture in today's world, Baker emphasizes "skills and the ability to view cultures as dynamic, diverse, and emergent" while also acknowledging that classroom teaching will have to include knowledge of specific cultures in order to develop a "deep understanding of culture per se" (p. 67). What is missing here is a discussion of where ideas originate and how they come to be part of the shared patterns of thought and behavior that underpin culture. Holliday (2012), on the other hand, argues that,

the success of intercultural communication will not be modelled around awareness of and sensitivity to the essentially different behaviours and values of 'the other culture', but around the employment of the ability to read culture which derives from underlying universal cultural processes (p. 2).

The relation between ideology, elite power and language is, arguably, the most important of those cultural processes.

Weninger and Kiss (2013), also writing on CA, make this connection as they look at how meaning is made in context and understand ideology "not only as structures of political domination but also as cultural beliefs that are manifest in cultural practices and materials" (p. 711). A few years earlier, Taki (2008) had argued quite specifically for an approach to cultural content in textbooks that focuses on where ideas come from and the process of how meaning is made. Teacher-learners with a framework such as Thompson's (1990) would be able to evaluate for themselves Taki's conclusion that,

What ELT teachers can do with the present ELT texts available on the market is to create critical language awareness in their learners. Teachers should make their learners

cognizant of the fact that language is not simply grammar, but that it is also a system of communication for sharing ideas *and* a way of controlling people and influencing what they think or do (p.140).

Coming to terms with ideology

When Waters (2007a) and Holliday (2007) crossed swords over ideology in ELT, it appeared to be more about the usefulness of Holliday's evidence for claims he makes about methodology, but Waters (2007b) is clearly put out by the suggestion of complicity in reproducing oppressive practice. In my experience, even before discussion can begin on the what and how of ideology, it is necessary to overcome resistance to the idea that teachers may be so involved, either in their pedagogy or their use of texts as learning materials. One way to do this is to distance the discussion from those present and look to the past before confronting the present. Thus, Gray (2010) uses the archive at Warwick University as a resource to research the developing discourse of work in ELT course books and how this now serves to naturalise the idea of job insecurity. In discourse developed since the 1980s, the precarious employment situation is presented as an opportunity for the creative individual to realize their dreams. This "spinning" (Berlin, 2011: 169) of a stressful and undesirable situation serves to legitimize the neoliberal project of ruling elites.

Ideology and orientalism

Second language teacher-learners studying ideology could use Thompson (1990) to consider one of the most overtly political examples of ideological discourse: the way the Muslim world is presented, and in particular the oil producing societies of the Middle East. Sheehi (2011) calls this Islamophobia, although some may prefer Said's (2003) concept of orientalism to discuss this discourse and whether or not it serves to justify western invasion and occupation. There may be flaws in Said's arguments but the concept of orientalism has had a major impact on how we think about the ideological role of discourses about Arabs and Muslims (Achcar, 2013). In ELT, this has been of sufficient concern for a major publisher to produce a volume entitled "Re-locating TESOL in the age of empire" (Edge, 2006). Three years earlier, the editor (Edge, 2003), writing on the eve of the UK/US led invasion of Iraq, had asked if the USA, was moving from a republican age to an imperial age as it bombed its way to regime change in Baghdad. Edge's particular concern was with the morality of English teachers who might possibly don flak jackets and move in behind the troops to establish the new order in the language of the conqueror, all the while assuming that teaching English is a neutral occupation. As mentioned before, the sense that something is natural, normal and neutral has significant ideological power. And in fact, Pathak (2011) describes just what Edge suspected would happen. His account of teaching the new Iraqi army may also be seen to provide some support for Phillipson's (2011) claims about a continuing linguistic imperialism aimed at increasing profits for national and multinational businesses based in the west by extending their reach into new territory, physical and social. Phillipson's concern is largely with the consequences for other languages as ELT is promoted across the world and with the fact that the promoters are the same governments that so enthusiastically argued for the forcible dismantling of the Iraqi regime. The consequences for the people who live in the Middle East are well known. The consequences for local languages include the perception that Arabic is a language of the past. English is seen as the language of the modern world (the same is true to a lesser extent for French), not just for trade but also for studying science and technology (Bentahila, 1983; Al Jarf, 2008). Warschauer (2003) provides the very practical example of

decreasing literacy in Arabic in rural Egypt as school time is reallocated to the teaching of English for computer skills.

Following Gray (2010), we might look to the past to gain some perspective from which to consider how the aforementioned islamophobic/orientalist discourse serves elite interests. For example, writing in the then ELT journal, Setian (1972) presented some contrastive analysis of Arabic and English and in the following discussion she claimed that Arabic speakers did not value time in the same way as Americans. The evidence was the impossibility of distinguishing in Arabic between being *in time* and *on time*. This is actually incorrect but the analysis and, more importantly, the interpretation went unchallenged apart from a letter from an Iraqi teacher (Al Mashta, 1973). Setian provides the following conclusion to her article,

In teaching English to Arabic-speaking students, particularly when the teacher is working *in* the country of the learners, it is strongly advisable to always bear in mind these very basic cultural differences in attitudes toward time, not only in order to ensure teaching with proper comprehension, but also in order to avoid misunderstandings and possible personal friction between students and teacher over punctuality, attendance, and the completion of assignments! (p. 294).

It might seem that such a patronizing attitude is from another time (this might explain why the editors let the article through), but the same way of thinking is evident today. For example, Baker (2012) worries about the fact that CA “is still rooted in a national conception of culture and language” (p.62) that essentialises culture and sees people in terms of them and us. Setian’s depiction of Egyptians in particular, and Arabs in general, comes from that same way of looking at other people. *Other* is used here in the sense discussed by Said (2003),

the development and maintenance of every culture requires the existence of another different and competing alter ego. The construction of identity... whether Orient or Occident, France or Britain... involves establishing opposites and “others” whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from “us” (p. 332).

In SLTE today, the term “othering” (e.g Holliday, 2012: 69) would be used to describe Setian’s representation of her students. Teacher-learners would benefit from asking how Setian’s interpretation was reached. While the workings of ideology are indeed complex, Thomson’s (1990) approach points us in the direction of the ruling elite’s control of ideas production through its domination of the educational system and its ownership and control of the mainstream media. For example, in a book produced for use in British schools, Pocock (1953) describes the lives of famous historical figures. The collection is made up of texts which are brief but written in such a way as to, “stress the point that one wants to bring home” (p. v). The book includes a chapter on Mohammed, the prophet of Islam. After describing the success of Islam, Pocock asks, “why did this tremendous force all die down?” and answers the question by saying that Muslims believe that, “whatever happens has all been arranged beforehand – so why try to do anything about it?” (p. 28-9). Pocock finishes the chapter with a story which is worth quoting in full.

I was once being driven in a Turkish car in Asia Minor when suddenly there was a bang and a tyre split. The two drivers – there are always two, so as to get two tips –

didn't attempt to do anything about it. And there were no tools. They just said: 'Inch' Allah' – 'God wills it' – sat at the side of the road and smoked. Two or three hours later an American came along in a car, and he and I changed the wheel. Do you see what I mean?" (p. 29).

This metaphor of the supine orient, incapable of helping itself and thus in need of western intervention, is present in many depictions today. What is good for the western elite is presented as what is good for the peoples of the Middle East.

Ironically, Pocock's text was published two years after the Iranian government nationalized the Anglo-Iranian oil company yet this effort to do something about a perceived injustice does not seem to have influenced Pocock in his depiction of Muslims. What he had to say about the UK/USA orchestrated coup against the democratically elected government of Iran in 1953 is not known. The point is not to see conspiracy in every text, although there clearly was a conspiracy to replace the government of Iran with another (Daneshavar, 1996), but rather to see how the ideas of the ruling elite are dominant, reproduced in everyday discourse and perceived as natural, normal and neutral.

Conclusion

If we adopt Thomson's (1990) framework of language and ideology, there is still plenty of room for debate, not least because he allows that gender, race and nationality based oppressions may be independent of social class, a point on which Marxists would probably disagree. On the other hand, his framework provides us with a useful approach for considering the progression from Pocock's (1953) lazy driver to Setian's (1972) absent minded students to Pathak's (2011) language teacher as aid worker. To this we might add Setian's (n.d) eventual destination as president of a company providing language and logistics support to the USA army in post-Saddam Iraq.

As has been shown, the term ideology tends to be used by ELT writers in a confusing manner. However, a definition which sees ideology as meaning in the service of power, supported by discourses constraining the way we think about certain aspects of society, does offer us a clear point of reference and the possibility of placing our arguments within Thomson's (1990) approach, or of differentiating them on the basis of a specific disagreement. The term ideology appears in a variety of contexts of interest to second language teachers. We can all benefit from making it clear how we understand the relationship between the language in texts, discourse, and the power of elites.

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