

THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH IN BRAZIL

Nina Wallerstein

My starting point for this panel presentation (as with my lecture tomorrow) is that all education is situated in a social, historical and cultural context and either implicitly or explicitly adopts a political stance. Theorists such as Paulo Freire, Henri Giroux, Jack London, or Apple argue that education does not exist in isolation. The curriculum which carries out educational goals and objectives is political; it either reinforces people to accept their roles in society or to challenge those roles that keep them passive.

Today I'm going to look at some curriculum choices for teaching ESL, not particular books as much as choices in approach. My central question is one that is often shared by other educators: how accurately does the curriculum reflect students' reality and shape their reality outside of class. I then have a series of questions that are less frequently addressed: what are the underlying assumptions for this choice, what function does the curriculum serve in society, who benefits from this curriculum and how do they benefit. These questions are especially critical now for Brazil during this period of crisis and change.

After critically examining some existing curriculum approaches, I'm going to briefly review the problem-posing community literacy and ESL approach I will discuss in depth in my lecture. I propose that curriculum development is a dynamic and interactional process that must be developed in conjunction with student needs, feelings, and conflictual issues in society. With this view, I cannot espouse a text that can be easily transplanted from one classroom to another in America or from American society to Brazil. I do hope to leave you with a philosophy and methodology and with tools for teaching others (University students or teachers in training) to develop this kind of curriculum or for writing your own.

Let's start by looking at current language teaching approaches. Audiolingual methods are based on prepackaged drills, repetition and memorization. What's the effect of these methods on the learner? It says the learner is passive and doesn't have life experience or ideas to bring to the classroom.

In the last decade, there has been a surge of survival, functional, or competency-based texts. This shift from audio-lingual or grammar-based curricula has been in response to a number of educational trends in adult learning and in second language acquisition. From adult learning theory comes the knowledge that adults come to classroom settings with life histories, needs, goals and responsibilities. They want educational experiences that provide immediate practical help in dealing with life demands.

In 1977, the notion of competencies was advanced with the Texas Adult Performance Level Study which identified 65 competencies or criteria of what constitutes successful functioning in society. Twenty-three million adults were identified as functionally illiterate with another 40 million minimally competent. Out of this study grew the competency-based adult education and ESL models, which divide learning into manageable chunks taught in specific skills and measured in pre and post tests. Competency learning has been reinforced by the recent National Literacy Initiative which began in 1983. Business, military, and educational leaders are worried about the decline in literacy in America in terms of economic needs; to maintain parity with other Western industrial nations, business leaders are adopting an educational role to upgrade literacy, English, and computational skills of their employees. The recent surge of ESL and workplace texts reflects this demand.

Another major trend has been the theoretical advances in language acquisition, that students require real communicative contexts for learning. Notional-functional syllabi arise from this development. A parallel growth in interest in humanistic education stresses curriculum that relies on affective involvement, use of life experiences, and counselling approaches.

While on the surface these developments show promise in meeting literacy and ESL student needs, some of the assumptions underlying competency curricula are inappropriate. Let's look at the word functioning. What does functioning really mean? Some of the competencies include writing a check, reading a bus schedule, buying stamps, reading written directions at work? These may be valid criteria for determining ability to read and write, but they do not recognize that the majority of our students (ESL or native language literacy) function quite well enough to survive; in fact, they may have much to teach us about survival. They have learned to rely on and to use family and friends to interpret. Their problems differ from ours: many students do not have the economic means to open a bank account.

The functional definition of literacy also fails to take into account how students view themselves, their low self-esteem in class acquired from years of living under adverse social conditions, or conversely, their pride in skills they have outside of school.

Functional competency learning assumes literacy is an individual skill acquired through step-by-step sequences or chunks. Yet, other theories I mentioned contradict this notion. Learning involves active thinking and trying out problem-solving skills. Teaching critical thinking is not an individual process, but a group

interactional dynamic that involves the learner's personal and social context.

Finally, what is presented as real situations in much of audiolingual or competency curricula may not be realistic in the content or the communicative expression. Current curricula often deserve criticism for not accurately portraying students' economic or cultural realities, nor the complex feelings they have in potentially difficult situations. Other materials though attempting to be culturally appropriate result in implicit patronizing messages. In communication expectations, often materials expect parroting or single yes/ no answers rather than discussion to promote critical thinking in students' lives. Let's look at a few examples of current texts. These are from a presentation by my co-author in a new book on Problem-Posing at Work, Elsa Auerbach.

Look at the first excerpt, excerpt A. As you read it, what underlying messages are portrayed to students? First of all, the passage assumes that jobs are readily available, though real unemployment figures in the U.S. present a different reality. Secondly, it suggests that job seeking, job interviewing, and acquiring a job is an easy process; no anxieties, difficulties, or concerns are even made apparent. We know from ourselves, who represent a more privileged middle class, that job interviews can always generate anxiety and fears. Students who may have fears in entering gateway situations, such as job interviews, may think they are crazy or alone or just not competent enough in English to make it in America. By obscuring conflicts, the curriculum may be doing more damage than good; students' low self-image is reinforced and no specific skills are taught to offset learning experience.

Another example of a decontextualized and mechanistic view of life experience on the job is presented in excerpt B. This passage presents work rules and duties in order to be liked by your boss so that you can progress up the job ladder. This passage is also unrealistic in understanding the reality of job promotions and the reality of job interactions between supervisor and employee, or native English speaker and immigrant. Instead of promoting discussion about real interactions, the reading admonishes a student to be a good and not a bad worker. The student becomes a child being threatened instead of an adult trying to understand the complexities of work situations and his or her role in maintaining a good work record. Other job texts teach students to respond to the imperative, but not to reproduce it.

In my experience consulting in a Philippines refugee camp, I found competency-based materials with similar patronizing messages. In one class, teachers were explaining the U.S. welfare system and the steps to rise above welfare. Their assumption was that people had to accept whatever low-level job was offered, so that eventually through job promotions they could make enough money to live independently or even reclaim the status they had in their own country. Refugees were taught to just accept a job as a dishwasher, rather than question the role they play in society by filling menial jobs. This is not to say that students should not accept these jobs; what I'm implying is that the curriculum should challenge people to think about their lives so that they can make changes.

In summary, the underlying assumptions of all these materials are that students should submit to the situations they find and not become critical thinkers about their lives. By using curriculum that claims neutrality, I contend that students may end up with lower self-esteem if they have no safe outlet for discussing their fears and conflicts.

Texts and curricula can adopt three different stances: the stance as demonstrated above that teaches students to fit into their prescribed role in society. In workplace ESL, this means understanding job instructions, asking for clarification, or for permission to take a break. A second stance is often equated with liberating education. Students are given information and skills to discuss choices in order to get a promotion, or seek a better job. This approach is a humanistic and individually beneficial approach and often meets many of students' needs. Materials will include competencies that go beyond acceptance of the status quo: how to ask for raises or even how to lodge a complaint. Yet, as we've seen, this approach may offer false promises and in fact worsen self-concepts because students expect to succeed without difficulty. Another problem with this approach is that individual improvements on the job may create difficulties in interpersonal relations on the job. A person who works harder or seems to do extra favors for the boss may be resented by fellow employees.

The third stance (and the one that I propose) embraces the philosophy of Paulo Freire and other educators: that education should challenge people to see themselves in a community and with capabilities of acting for personal and social transformation. This approach starts with the idea that students have a right to understand their society: what are the forces at work that keep people from getting equal shares; what blocks health and safety improvements; where can they find the most strength to demand changes. With this approach, competencies include presenting disagreements or refusals in an appropriate manner, suggesting alternatives, and identifying environmental barriers to be overcome or actions with other employees to create a safer atmosphere for changes. Let me just show you one example of a lesson from my new book that values students' knowledge and rights (excerpt C).

Community problem-posing offers a methodology for teachers to promote the third Freirian perspective. We, as teachers and teacher trainers, also choose our roles. Do we want to promote acceptance and low self-images on the part of our students or do we want to help them develop critical faculties, self-confidence, and mutual responsibility so they can make changes in their lives? I propose curriculum that starts from problematic reality of students' lives, and through dialogue encourages critical thinking and actions. The teachers' role becomes one of engaging students in analyzing their own experiences, and in rethinking their reality in order to generate alternatives.

My book, Language and Culture in Conflict: Problem-Posing in the ESL Classroom, and my new co-authored book, ESL For Action: Problem-Posing at Work, both demonstrate how to apply problem-posing in U.S. classrooms and in other nations where

immigrants face complex interactions in a different culture. I propose this approach also has applicability in Brazil where people are examining new roles and coming to grips with fast changes in recent history. In a time of crisis, the opportunity is there to challenge assumptions and adopt new approaches. Problem-posing which I'll discuss in my lecture offers one such new approach.

A.

Miss Nakamura is looking for a job. In her country she was a waitress. Every day she looked in the newspaper. Last week she went to an employment service and they helped her. They sent her for an interview. First, she called the personnel department and made an appointment. She also sent in an application. She looked very nice on the day of the interview. She wanted to make a good impression. The interviewer asked her many questions. He asked if Miss Nakamura wanted to work full-time or part-time. She said she would like to work full-time. Now she has a job. She makes \$3.50 an hour plus tips. She works from 4 P.M. to 12 midnight. She is very happy.

-competency-based ESL text (1981)

B.

If you're a good worker, your employer will like you. You can get a raise or you can move up to a higher position, and you can get a good reference for your next job.

To be a good worker, you should:

1. Go to work on time. Don't be late. Don't be absent a lot. If you are going to be late, or if you can't go to work, call in to the office.
2. Work hard. Don't be lazy.
3. Work carefully. Always do your best.
4. Ask questions if you don't understand or if you're not sure.
5. Learn everything you can. Ask questions. Watch other people work.
6. Be friendly. Get along with everybody. Be nice to the other workers. Say hello to them. Talk to them. Smile at them. Be clean and neat.

If you have a problem, or if you're not happy about something at work, tell your boss. Maybe he can do something about it.

If you don't like your job, or if you don't move up, or if the pay is too low, or if you get laid off, you can quit (leave) and find another job. You should tell your employer two weeks before you want to leave. It's good to have experience in many jobs, but don't leave jobs too quickly. Other employers might not want to hire you if they think you will leave soon.

If you're a bad worker, the company can fire you. Then it might be hard for you to get another job, because you will have a bad reference.

-competency-based ESL text (1984)

C.

The women all in the United States less than four years, work at New England Shrimp Co. In Malden. Since August they and many other workers have been trying to form a union at the company, where nearly 70 percent of the 200 employees are Southeast Asian Immigrants. Their efforts so far have been stymied at every turn and, through an interpreter whose English is imperfect, the women say their belief in America as the land of choice is fading.

"We like America, but not our jobs." says one of the Cambodians, who like the others fears company retribution and so asks not to be identified. "If union not win, we look for new jobs. We not want to work here."

Union organizing is tough under the best of circumstances. But when the company is willing to spend money to fight the organizing effort and the employees speak little or no English, it becomes almost impossible. Local 592 of the United Food & Commercial Workers union has been trying to organize New England Shrimp workers since August. Now, some workers are as angry at the union as they are at the company.

What spurred the workers to want a union seems to have less to do with paychecks than with intangibles. The workers equate a union with having a voice on the plant floor and in the upstairs offices, where computer terminals hum. A union, they say, would mean better hours, better benefits and better treatment.

New England Shrimp's Commercial street plant is clean and streamlined, but the workers say supervisors yell at them constantly to move faster and work harder. It is not uncommon to work 60 hours a week and while the three women workers say they enjoy earning time-and-a-half after 40 hours, they say they feel pressured to work more. Their breaks are 15 minutes in the morning and half an hour for lunch. Vacation time is minimal: paid sick days are nonexistent.

Boston Globe, 1985

HAZARDS IN THE WORKPLACE

CODE

Robert: The report from the health and safety inspector is in.

Mary: What does it say?

George: It says there's no problem. The chemicals in new paint finish are safe.

John: But we know there's a problem! We all have skin rashes on our hands!

George: The report says there's nothing wrong.

MARY: Well, we should know. We work here.

Problem-posing questions

1. What do you see? What happened?
2. What's the problem?
3. How does this apply to your situation?
- Has this happened to you?
4. What are the causes of the problem?
5. What can be done? What can you do?

Form: ESL For Action: Problem-Posing at Work, by Auerbach and Wallerstein, Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1987.