2 Between Recognition and Redistribution – The Political Economy of Taboos in Foreign Language Education

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Abstract

This chapter considers taboos in foreign language education under the heading of political economy, namely the ways in which social institutions, their activities and capitalism influence each other. It takes the view that taboos are a form of politically, ideologically and commercially motived erasure. Two glaring erasures are addressed – that of working class and that of non-normative gender and sexual identities in English language teaching (ELT) materials produced in the UK for global consumption. Drawing on Judith Irvine and Susan Gal's work on ideology and Nancy Fraser's theorisation of the distinction between the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution, the chapter explores why the ELT industry turns a blind eye to these identities. It argues that these erasures are both discriminatory and anti-educational and urgently in need of redress.

Introduction

As the Introduction to this volume points out, taboos have a long, complicated and evolving cultural history. In the modern world, they continue to exist for a complex variety of reasons and can take very different forms in which linguistic prohibitions and the power to limit what can be encoded in language are often central. This is particularly true of foreign language teaching.

Perhaps one of the most deep-seated prohibitions teachers of my generation (trained in the communicative approach in the 1980s) were exposed to was the taboo against the use of the mother tongue or the home language(s) in the classroom. As novice teachers, we were expected to teach English through English and our students were expected to learn it with no (or minimal) recourse to their existing linguistic repertoires. Use of a language other than English on the part of a teacher was taken as evidence of deficient pedagogical skill, or an indication of a student's wilful attachment to what was ultimately seen as a source of interference. This taboo had clear educational consequences in terms of classroom practice, but it also had economic consequences for the Anglophone English language teaching (ELT) Edu-business promoting it – monolingual textbooks for global consumption were cheaper to produce than country-specific bilingual materials, monolingual learner dictionaries were marketed as state-of-the-art learning resources by leading ELT publishers and of course (frequently monolingual) Anglophone English language teachers trained in monolingual methodology became key promotional features of the burgeoning global commercial sector from the last quarter of the 20th century onwards. Increasingly, however, under the aegis of the "multilingual turn" (Cenoz & Gorter, 2015) and calls to decolonise the curriculum (Macedo, 2019), this insistence on monolingualism is understood as being politically, ethically, educationally and cognitively questionable. Commenting on this linguistic taboo, Alistair Pennycook (2019, p. 175) argues that "one of the great crimes of the global hegemony of communicative language teaching" is the way in which it served to "promote a monolingual, native-speaker norm-based, and educationally shallow version of English". While this may be a little harsh on communicative language teaching (CLT) as originally conceived, it is undeniable that CLT quickly became associated with a rigid monolingualism and narrow view of language using. Grammar translation, contrastive analysis and literature were edged out of many teaching

settings, particularly in the powerful commercial sector, where an instrumental, skill-based view of language came to predominate. This impacted hugely on the production of materials, many of which originated in the commercial sector before eventually finding their way into schools and universities. My point, in raising this at the outset of this chapter, is that taboos exist for a reason and that, in exploring them, it behoves us to consider their underpinnings from a political economy perspective.

This chapter argues that many of the taboos found in the foreign language classroom can be considered as forms of erasure and raise issues related to social justice which are in need of redress. The chapter focuses on two salient taboos in ELT materials, namely those which avoid referring to the working class and those which proscribe mention of LGBTQ+ identities, as well as any treatment of issues related to them. The following section outlines the theoretical perspective adopted in this chapter in greater detail, before moving on to a consideration of the pedagogical implications of these erasures and the case for their removal.

Theoretical Background

As stated, key to my understanding of taboos in foreign language education is the concept of erasure, by which I mean the systematic editing out of the curriculum of certain categories of person, identities, events, injustices and histories for ideological, cultural or commercial reasons. As Judith Irvine and Susan Gal point out, specifically with regard to language:

> Erasure is the process in which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible. Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away. So, for example, a social group or a language may be imagined as homogenous, its internal variation disregarded.

(2000, p. 38)

This is particularly noticeable in the way in which language is represented for teaching purposes in pedagogical materials. The fact that students, if they go on to use the language they are learning beyond the classroom, will encounter a range of accents and grammars is not taken into consideration. But erasure is not simply a matter of ignoring certain accents (both L1 and L2) or linguistic variation, although they are important, it is also in many cases a matter of withholding lexis so as to make certain topics literally unspeakable, a point I will return to below. From this perspective, erasure is fundamentally a matter of injustice, and for those teachers who take the view that a commitment to education is perforce a commitment to social justice, this raises a number of issues. It is here that the work of Nancy Fraser (1995) is particularly useful (see also Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Fraser argues that social justice in the world today requires redress on two fronts. On the one hand, there is the *socioeconomic injustice* exacerbated by neoliberalism (discussed below) dating from the late 1970s. This has seen the extraordinary growth of material inequality across much of the world, the immiseration of those working in the gig economy and on zero-hour contracts, the proliferation of food banks in the rich countries of the Global North, as well as the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on poorly paid key workers. Collectively these injustices may be said to require a politics of redistribution which would entail a political-economic restructuring of the economy.

At the same time, there is the *cultural injustice* suffered by minority groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, religious minorities and sexual and gender minorities whose marginalisation also calls out for a politics of recognition. With regard to the latter group, although there has been a great deal of legislation granting rights to LGBTQ+ people in many countries around the world in recent years, recognition remains noticeably absent from pedagogical materials. Socioeconomic

injustice raises the issue of social class and redistribution, while cultural injustice raises issues of identity and recognition. Of course, there is overlap between these and as Fraser points out, "this distinction between economic injustice and cultural injustice is analytical. In practice the two are intertwined" (Fraser, 1995, p. 72). At the same time, it is important to clarify that the economically disadvantaged do not seek recognition *as disadvantaged* but rather the removal of their disadvantage – while LGBTQ+ people seek recognition as socially legitimate and equal members of society. From this perspective, a cultural politics of difference (including a critical foreign language pedagogy) that does not include an intersectional awareness of the role of class will not succeed in alerting students to the ways in which issues of recognition articulate with those of redistribution. With this in mind, I will argue that representation, by which I mean the semiotic processes whereby meanings are made and received, is important with regard to *both* types of injustice, particularly when it comes to education. In the following section, I consider research on the relevance of these issues for classroom practice, specifically with regard to the representation of the working class and that of LGBTQ+ identities and related issues.

Relevance for the Classroom

A number of recent studies show that language teaching materials for several decades have been characterised in many settings by an unproblematised and celebratory take on neoliberalism (Bori, 2018; Copley, 2018; Gray & Block, 2014). By neoliberalism, I refer to the forms of market fundamentalism which have characterised the current phase of capitalism since the late 1970s. These studies show language teaching materials are key sites for situating language learners not only as would-be users of the languages being taught but also as particular kinds of people who embody the resilience, entrepreneurialism and individualism so characteristic of the ideal

neoliberal citizen. In this way, the dominant ideology of contemporary global capitalism is repeatedly reproduced in the second language classroom. One good example of this is the way in which mobility (whether for work or leisure) is dealt with in textbooks. Willingness to relocate geographically for work is a key neoliberal value, and textbooks repeatedly associate English with unproblematic work-related migration. In *Navigate* (Roberts et al., 2015), a unit on ambitions focuses entirely on work. In one listening exercise, three typical textbook characters describe their positive experiences of relocation. Maria, an unemployed Greek architect from Athens, describes her experience as follows:

> I'd been unemployed for over a year when I decided to try Australia. I still haven't been able to find work as an architect in Melbourne, but I have been able to retrain as a landscape designer, designing gardens instead of houses. It's great being outside so much, because the weather's nearly always good. I also have a lot of job satisfaction now.

(Roberts et al., 2015, p. 167)

When asked by the interviewer if she plans to stay, Maria answers in the affirmative. In this extract, the unemployed speaker is shown to agentively decide to relocate as a consequence of redundancy. There is no mention of the difficulties this may have entailed, the financial implications or any of the other problems less fortunate migrants face – such as exploitation, physical danger and racism. Even when she is unable to obtain work as an architect in Australia, Maria unproblematically describes her self-reinvention as a landscape designer and finds that it offers her job satisfaction and the chance to work outdoors. Resilient, individualistic and unquestioning with regard to the structural forces underpinning such migration, Maria is in every way an ideal neoliberal citizen. That she speaks English need not even be mentioned – it is part of what makes her such an ideal.

Although neoliberalism is far from being a seamless phenomenon globally and has evolved over time, integral to its rhetoric is a repudiation of the concept of social class and the primacy of the individual. While the financial crisis of 2007–2008 and its aftermath saw a tentative return to the concept of class in the British media and political discourse, most politicians on the right avoid the term completely and those on the centre left still prefer to talk of hard-working or working families for fear of being seen to subscribe to a view of society deemed outdated. That said, many scholars still consider the concept of class to be important, and its attempted erasure from public discourse as part of an ideological denial of class as a social fact and an attack on organised labour and human collectives more generally.

In our study of the representation of the working class and the treatment of class in general, David Block and I carried out an analysis of a set of six best-selling ELT textbooks published between 1970 and 2010 (Gray & Block, 2014). In setting about categorising representations of the working class, we drew on a classical Marxist definition:

> Classes are large groups of people which differ from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labour and, consequently, by the dimensions and method of acquiring the share of the social wealth of which they dispose. Classes are groups of people one of which can appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definitive system of social economy.

(Lenin, 1982, p. 57)

This was complemented by a Bourdieusian perspective in which property ownership, disposable income, occupation, place of residence, education, social networking, consumption patterns and

types of symbolic behaviour such as the way one speaks, the clothes one wears and leisure activities are added to the mix. Our point of entry was employment as this was often clear (although on its own not a sufficient determiner of class location) and then we looked at other dimensions to make our decision as to whether or not the representation could first be included in our analysis.

The analysis revealed a progressive decline in the representation of working-class characters, mentions of working-class employment and themes relating to working-class experience over the four decades covered by our sample – a period which is coterminous with the entrenchment of neoliberal government (regardless of party) in the UK, and elsewhere in the world. The study also showed that where limited representation of working-class characters did occur (in textbooks from the 1970s), students were not invited to identify with them and there was generally no serious engagement with issues relating to working conditions, union activity and disputes – although these were mentioned in passing. In subsequent textbooks, however, working-class characters are shown to have been erased and replaced by a collection of property-owing, professionally successful, globe-trotting characters with whom students *are* repeatedly invited to identify.

Such erasure is not only a refusal to recognise the existence of the working class by focusing only on middle-class representations, nor is it simply a denial of the existence of working-class students who may be learning English; it is also an active withholding of lexis related to working-class life and struggles. This serves to make certain topics literally unspeakable in the classroom. Without the language to discuss their lives and their perspectives on the world, working-class students are being asked to learn a foreign language in which the content they engage with erases them and their concerns.

When it comes to LGBTQ+ language learners the situation is similar – although there are important differences. Here again, studies show that erasure is pervasive (Gray, 2013; Thornbury, 1999), but

unlike decreasing working-class representation, there was never a time when LGBTQ+ had featured. A major global report carried out by UNESCO (2016) concluded that, despite legislation recognising and protecting sexual and gender minorities across much of the world from the late 20th century onwards, the education sector as a whole appeared to be reluctant to accord recognition to LGBTQ+ students. The report pointed out that materials remained firmly heteronormative in character, stereotypical in terms of gender roles and blind to varieties of gender and sexual diversity. The report, which focused on violence against LGBTQ+ students in educational settings, argued that pedagogical materials needed to reflect the changing legal panorama if actual social change was to occur and the lives and educational opportunities of LGBTQ+ students were to be improved. Physical violence aside, there is increasing evidence to suggest that being erased from the curriculum is experienced as a form of symbolic violence by LGBTQ+ students. As the young, queer Black novelist Paul Mendez explained, reflecting on his own experience of schooling:

> One of the reasons it took me so long to write [my first novel] is that there were so few Black male (and queer Black male) names on my shelves to give me confidence and permission. My secondary-level English literature curriculum was centred entirely around canonical, dead white men, and I wonder what might have been different for me had I been introduced to James Baldwin and Caryl Phillips – let alone Toni Morrison and Buchi Emecheta – at that age.

(2020, n.p.)

Here, we see the coming together of the erasures' sexual orientation and race in ways which Mendez suggests delayed his potential to flourish as a writer. Specific erasure related to gender and sexual orientation in ELT can be traced to the political economy of the British publishing industry. British materials are sold globally in counties which have legalised same-sex marriage

but also in countries whose governments are hostile to sexual and gender diversity in which state-sponsored homophobia may be actively promoted. The lucrative sales of ELT materials produced by leading publishers are used to subsidise their more prestigious academic lists. Given the political and economic risks posed by LGBTQ+ recognition, and the profit-reducing consequences of producing country-specific materials, this particular taboo is unlikely to be removed any time soon. What then, it might be asked, are teachers concerned with such erasure to do? In the following section, I suggest one possible way forward.

Practical Examples

Despite decades of critique, demands that ELT textbooks address these erasures have fallen largely on deaf ears. For that reason, it falls to educators themselves to attempt to fill the gap, and it is here that literature and other forms of so-called authentic materials can be of use (see Eisenmann & Ludwig, 2018; Gray, 2021). Well-chosen literary texts provide an opportunity to address a cultural politics of difference while also providing an intersectional awareness of the role of class. A good example is found in the collection *Everything I have is Blue: Short Fiction by Working Class Men about More-or-less Gay Life* edited by Wendell Ricketts (2005). Also, useful and easily exploitable short engaging texts can be found online in sites such as Gay Flash Fiction (https://gayflashfiction.com/). As several of the contributions to the theoretically informed and eminently practical *Queer Beats* (Eisenman & Ludwig, 2018) volume show, literary texts can also be used alongside other types of material such as films, blogposts and journalism. Films such as *Pride* (Warchus, 2014) and *Beautiful Thing* (Macdonald, 1996) address different aspects of queer working-class life. In the case of the former, there is the true story of the involvement of a group of lesbian and gay activists in the British miners' strike of 1984–1985, and in the case of the latter,

the story of an emerging love affair between two teenagers who live on a housing estate in south London. Such films are important not only for providing an alternative to a sanitised version of middle-class gay life found in much of the media but also for another reason – namely, the inclusion of regional accents which are often (but not necessarily) markers of working-class speech and which learners of English are often deprived of exposure to in mainstream materials.

Conclusion

In this short chapter, I have argued that two very different erasures characterise UK-produced materials and that this is linked to the political economy of ELT publishing. Following Fraser, I have taken the view that while the politics of redistribution and recognition are different, they are not unrelated. As educators, we are necessarily constrained by what we can achieve in terms of social transformation. We can, however, seek to recognise our students in all their difference, and that may make a modest, but not insignificant impact on them. In concluding with the suggestion that the use of literary (and other kinds of so-called authentic) texts can be of use, it seems appropriate to finish with a quotation from a lesbian feminist poet who had much to say about education. Adrienne Rich writes

> When those who have power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you […] when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing.

(1987)

In the case of the textbooks I have described, it is not just those who are LGBTQ+ and those who are working class who see nothing – those who are neither LGBTQ+ nor working class are also denied access to a fuller picture. The consequences for both are different though. In the case of the former, there is the denial of recognition and the attendant psychic disequilibrium, while in the case of the latter, there is the denial of the opportunity to see the world in its more of its human complexity. For all students though regardless of class, sexual orientation and gender identification, the potential for the development of critical consciousness is seriously curtailed.

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