Heat and Dust Along the Way
— routes to curriculum English

Language, literacy and the human soul

The principal character in J.M.Coetze's novel *Disgrace* is a lecturer in English at Cape Technical University, South Africa. Or rather, he was. He is still a lecturer at the Technical University, but recently the university has changed the name and content of the subject he is employed to teach. He is now responsible for two courses, respectively entitled *Communications 101: Communication Skills* and *Communications 201: Advanced Communication Skills*. Although he devotes hours of every working day to preparing and teaching these two courses he is not at all happy, says Coetze, with the statement about language that introduces them in the university handbook. 'Human society,' says the handbook, 'has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other.' Coetze comments:

> His own opinion, which he does not air, is that the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul.

We may give him two cheers. One, for his opposition to the mechanistic, reductionist, technocratic understandings of language and literacy that are being imposed upon him, and one for his embracing instead of what he calls the human soul. Philip Pullman, for one, would agree:

> It's when we do this foolish, time-consuming, romantic, quixotic, childlike thing called play that we are most practical, most useful, and most firmly grounded in reality, because the world itself is the most unlikely of places, and it works in the oddest of ways, and we won't make any sense of it by doing what everybody else has done before us. It's when we fool about with the stuff the world is made of that we make the most valuable discoveries, we create the most lasting beauty, we discover the most profound truths. The youngest children can do it, and the greatest artists, the greatest scientists do it all the time. Everything else is proofreading.[1]

Pullman says also, incidentally, that all too many commentators on education believe that a mechanistic approach to language and literacy will lead to children and young people being 'politer and more patriotic and less likely to become pregnant'.

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[1] Common sense has much to learn from moonshine, The Guardian, 22 January 2005

A second reason for cheering Coetze's character is his stoicism – his unflinching recognition of 'the overlarge and rather empty human soul'. Loneliness and emptiness are more real than, or anyway as real as, the communication of thoughts, feelings and intentions. But that is not the whole story, and that is why we can give no more than two cheers. He does not air his opinion, does not enter the public sphere to urge his point of view. We cannot praise him fully. For we cannot, as Milton so famously said, 'praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.'

With those words ringing and singing in our ears, we turn to the dust and heat of the routes that run to and from curriculum language. The lecture has three parts:

1. Mapping the terrain
2. The dust and heat of identities
3. The dust and heat of race and racisms

Mapping the terrain

'I am the chair of governors,' writes someone in an internet discussion forum, 'at a school that has many bilingual pupils. We shall shortly be advertising and interviewing for an EAL co-ordinator, funded by the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant.'[2] They continue:

> Our big concern is that the writing skills of our bilingual pupils do not match their oral skills. In everyday conversation they are articulate, fluent, forthcoming, every bit as confident and competent as native speakers. But when they put pen to paper they are stilted and hesitant and they make various errors of grammar and syntax. At the interviews we shall ask all applicants to give their views on this issue. Can you suggest what we should be looking for – and listening for – when they reply?

Replies included the following:

- Systematically teach key words in each subject. Kids love learning special words. Key words can be stuck up in classrooms and around the school and there can be short definitions and kids can be required to use the words, both in conversation (eg inside structured problem-solving and discussion activities) and in writing.

- Collaborative drafting and composing. Do you know

[2] The request and the replies are fictitious in the form presented here..

Wikipedia on the internet? It's absolutely fabulous as a model – thousands of people all over the world working together, correcting each other's draft definitions and descriptions of major concepts. There's a model here for what we should often be doing in schools. Btw, Wikipedia is available in lots of world languages, not just English.

- You need to appoint someone who knows about graphic organisers and key visuals, etc and etc, and how to design and use them in each separate curriculum area.

- EAL isn't just about EAL. You need someone who understands race, racisms, Islamophobia, ethnocentrism, bias, etc, as well, and identity issues too, particularly the concept of multiple identities.

- Ask the candidates if they're familiar with the work of Jim Cummins stretching back over the last 30 years or so. If they're not, they're probably not suitable for the post you are seeking to fill.

In the early 1990s the Home Office adopted an extremely mechanistic view of EAL, based on the notion that pupils progress through various stages. It requested all LEAs to state how they were going to assess and define pupils' competence at each stage. A satirical response from one quarter included the following statement:

> Stage One of second language development will be deemed to have occurred when pupils can understand their class teacher. Stage Two will be deemed to have occurred when pupils can understand their headteacher. With regard to Stage Three of second language development, we have decided to abolish it.

The emphasis here on mere comprehension was a comment on the mechanistic, simplistic and apolitical view of language implicit in official discourse. The reference to abolishing so-called stage three was a comment on the fact that most people in education simply did not know how to embark on the route to curriculum language. The few who did know, having read their Cummins, had little or no power and influence. The ignorance of those with power was compounded by the indifference bred by the fact that the Home Office was basically making no financial resources available for the development of curriculum English.

Over the last ten years the situation has been slowly improving. Seven points are worth emphasising:

1. 'Stage three' is not primarily to do with writing as distinct from speaking but to do with academic language (more accurately, 'curriculum language') as distinct

from everyday language. Some of the principal differences between the two types of language are tabulated in Handout 1.

2. Pupils need to be able to speak academic language before they can write it. Handout 2 is based on Cummins' famous chart and illustrates the argument that the route to curriculum language goes via, so to speak, reflective discussion and collaborative group work.

3. The teaching of English as an additional language is an academic specialism, not something anyone can do with a minimum of common sense. Amongst other things, the specialism involves being able to design and supervise collaborative group work such that learners do not merely remain within their linguistic comfort zones.

4. Mainstream teachers need training in how to tap into the academic knowledge, and its practical implementation, of specialist EAL teachers.

5. There is substantial theoretical and practical knowledge in the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) field. All too often, EAL teachers have looked down their noses at TEFL teachers. But there is great expertise there, and a wealth of effective and imaginative ideas about what to do in practice.[3]

6. Good EAL practice is valuable for all pupils, not for bilingual pupils only. An analogy can be drawn from the disability field. Buildings provide ramps for the minority of the population who are wheel-chair users. But ramps are extremely useful for a wide range of other people as well – parents and grandparents with infants in buggies, for example, and anyone with a heavy suitcase on wheels. In an analogous way, EAL theory and practice provide access to academic language for a wide range of pupils, not just those for whom they were developed.

7. EAL is not just about EAL. Handouts 1 and 2 stress that the route to curriculum English must engage with concepts of identity. To this topic we now turn.

The dust and heat of identity

Addressing Edgar, living in a cave like a wild beast, King Lear in Shakespeare's play exclaims: 'Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art.' In context, the words are a moving statement about shared humanity beneath surface differences of clothing, rank and status. Lear's famous words are misleading, however, if they are taken to mean that human beings ever exist outside cultural and social locations, and therefore outside situations and relationships of unequal power, and outside historical circumstances. No one is totally unaccommodated – or, for that, matter, unaccommodating. On the contrary, everyone is embedded in a cultural tradition and in a period of history, and in a system of unequal power relations.

[3] See, for example, the wealth of practical ideas at www.onestopenglish.com/tefl_skills/writing.htm

The notion of a pure human essence shared by everyone is certainly appealing, and is the basis for ethical conduct and for anti-discrimination legislation. The composer Nitin Sawhney describes himself thus:

> I believe in Hindu philosophy
> I am not religious
> I am a pacifist
> I am a British Asian
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> My identity and my history
> are defined only by myself — beyond
> politics, beyond nationality,
> beyond religion and beyond skin.[4]

But let us heed also Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury. He has pointed out that the claim all human are 'the same under the skin' (or in Sawney's fine phrase, 'beyond skin') is a dangerous over-simplification, for 'the only humanity we have is one that is bound up in difference'.

That is the first point about identity. We are all human, yes, but also we are all accommodated, all embedded in time and space and therefore in culture: the only humanity we have in common is bound up in 'difference'. There are four further key points.

First, no one is just one thing. This is vividly expressed by the young woman in Ken Loach's recent film Ae Fond Kiss. 'I am a Glaswegian Pakistani teenage woman of Muslim descent,' she says, 'who supports Glasgow Rangers in a Catholic school, cause I'm a mixture and I'm proud of it'. It is equally vivid in these two self descriptions:

> I am a Muslim, a British citizen, of Pakistani origins, a man, a writer, a critic, a broadcaster, an information scientist, a historian of science, a university professor, a scholar of Islam, a rationalist, a sceptic, a traditionalist, and a partial vegetarian. All of these identities belong to me, and each one is important in a particular context.[5]

> I could view myself as a member of the following communities, depending on the context and in no particular order: Black, Asian, Azad Kashmiri, Mirpuri, Jat, Marilail, Kungriwalay, Pakistani, English, British, Yorkshireman, Bradfordian, from Bradford Moor … I could use the term 'community' in any of these contexts and it would have meaning. Any attempt to define me only as one of these would be meaningless.[6]

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[4] From the sleeve of Sawhney's *Beyond Skin*, 1999.
[5] Ziauddin Sardar, in Rosemary Bechler, ed, *What is British?*, British Council, 2004
[6] From a statement to the Bradford Commission, 1996, quoted in *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (see note 5)

Mixed identities are present in language itself. 'Around me,' writes Meera Syal:

> I hear teenagers mixing cockney glottals with black patois and Punjabi slang. It's a new language with a unique beat and it drums through all our work, the new Londoners. Innit?'[7]

A second point may be summarised with the phrase 'not nestling but wrestling'. In a novel by Jackie Kay published a few years ago one of the characters recalls an episode in her childhood in which she met someone called Mrs Moody:

> The thing she was fussy about was all her ornaments. Ornaments from all around the world in that house. Huge Russian dolls, those ones that hide inside each other. Mrs Moody showed her one one day. It took up ten minutes to get to the baby hiding in there. The smaller they got the less detail on their faces. Mrs Moody said to her, 'We're all like that, aren't we? We've all got lots of little people inside us.'[8]

The Russian dolls image of identity – 'we've all got lots of little people inside us' – is vivid and helpful. But it is misleading in so far as it implies that the various components of our identities, each formed by belonging to a particular community, live in sweet harmony with each other. The components not only nestle companionably but also, sometimes, wrestle, and bid to tear each other apart. Often we have to choose, according to context and circumstance – we are different people in different situations and seasons. Sometimes, though, our task is to refuse to choose, however painful that may be:

> … Was it that her heart, roped by two different loves, was being pulled both East and West, whinnying and rearing, like those movie horses being yanked this way by Clark Gable and that way by Montgomery Clift … I too have ropes around my neck, I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose. I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassoes, lariats, I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose.[9]

Helping young people to refuse to choose – or, rather, to manage conflicts and tensions within themselves –is an essential task for teachers. The issues are beautifully expressed in a short poem by John Agard – the notion of a difference-free world, both inside us and outside us, is appealing but a fantasy:

> When I ask Daddy
> Daddy says ask Mummy

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[7] Meera Syal, Voluntary Service Overseas, 2003
[8] Jackie Kay, *Trumpet*, 1998
[9] Salman Rushdie, *East, West* 1994

When I ask Mummy
Mummy says ask Daddy.
I don't know where to go.

Better ask my teddy
He never says no.

Third, just as each individual is a mixture and continually evolving so is each group, community, culture, society or civilisation. No culture, no community, is just one thing. 'East' and 'West', or 'Islam' and 'West', are no more than metaphors and dangerous ones at that. So are the terms 'majority' and 'minority'. All communities are changing and all are complex, with internal diversity and disagreements. Neither 'minority' communities nor 'majority' communities are static. They change in response to their own internal dynamics and also as a result of the interactions and overlaps which they have with each other.

Fourth, comparing and contrasting different ways of doing things, and different ways of seeing, viewing and interpreting, is a fundamental human activity. It's important to help pupils see diversity and difference as interesting and exciting, and indeed as necessary and invaluable, rather than as merely confusing and depressing. And to live with diversity within themselves as well as outside. And in their own immediate household as well as the wider world. To shrink from multiculturalism is to embrace, to quote famous words of John Milton, 'a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.' (*Areopagitica*, published 23 November 1644),

Part three: the dust and heat of disagreement and dialogue

In its report published in 1997, the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia grappled with problems of debate, dialogue and disagreement. When and how is it legitimate for non-Muslims to disagree with Muslims? How can you tell the difference between legitimate disagreement on the one hand and phobic dread and hatred on the other? The commission suggested, in answer to such questions, that an essential distinction needs to be made between what it called closed views of Islam on the one hand and open views on the other. 'Phobic' hostility towards Islam is the recurring characteristic of closed views.

The distinction between open and closed minds corresponds to the distinction which a Muslim anthropologist draws between inclusivism and exclusivism. In the first instance he is referring to two different ways in which Muslims themselves understand and practise their religion, and relate to others. But his distinctions also apply to 'the West'. He writes:

> Exclusivists create boundaries and believe in hierarchies; inclusivists are those who are prepared to accommodate, to interact with others, and even listen to them and be

> influenced by them. Inclusivists are those who believe that human civilisation is essentially one, however much we are separated by religion, culture or language.
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> ...I believe the real battle in the 21st century will be between the inclusivists and the exclusivists.[10]

These admittedly abstract distinctions between closed and open minds, and between exclusive and inclusive, are of fundamental importance in every consideration and discussion of human rights culture. They apply to differences and disagreements between all kinds of self and other, not to differences between Muslims and non-Muslims only. They are fundamental in the design and supervision of collaborative group work in school classrooms, and in any and every code of practice flowing from refusals to praise fugitive and cloistered virtues.

Concluding note

The last word goes to Philip Pullman, and to some children and young people. ' It's when we fool about with the stuff the world is made of that we make the most valuable discoveries,' says Pullman. 'We create the most lasting beauty, we discover the most profound truths. The youngest children can do it, and the greatest artists, the greatest scientists do it all the time.' He quotes the national curriculum, for example that at key stage 2 children 'should be taught word classes and the grammatical functions of words, including nouns, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, articles", as well as "the grammar of complex sentences, including clauses, phrases and connectives ...' Think of the age of those children, he says, and weep … True education flowers at the point when delight falls in love with responsibility. '

For centuries, Robben Island near Cape Town was a place for the rejected people living with leprosy, murderers, rapists, trouble-makers. From the 1060s onwards, infamously it housed political prisoners where the regime year after year was even more brutal than that of Guantanamo Bay. But the prisoners transformed it, against all the odds, into a place of learning and into a crucible for the new South Africa. Nowadays it is a world heritage site, where the work of transforming negatives into positives, the work of repairing and healing and transforming space, goes on. Recently some young people on an educational course there made poems created from notes taken at group discussions. Quotations from the poems included:

> Freedom is… those broken chains of apartheid… being able to think free without being threatened … coming to a better understanding of yourself and your country… to carry with is the memory … to be who you are… to accept and acknowledge other people's rights, moves and speech … to do what is good to me and to the nation… to speak with

[10] Akbar Ahmed, *Islam under Siege: living dangerously in a post-honor world*, Polity Press 2003, pp 18-19

> one voice in many languages … to live now in the present with the wonder and openness of a child.[11]

Flowers, Delight, Love, Responsibility

'True education,' said Pullman, 'flowers at the point when delight falls in love with responsibility.'

[11] Voices of Young People on Robben Island, Robben Island Museum, June 2002.