

USING ASIAN HISTORY, CULTURE AND LITERATURE IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO NEW ASIAN IMMIGRANTS

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This paper is a reply to an article by Wang Yong-zhang that appeared in the first issue of *Many Voices*. Wang Yong-xiang is from the English Department, Zhangjiakou Teachers College, Hebei Province, Peoples Republic of China. He spent 1990 in New Zealand as a participant in the AFS Adult Educators' Programme.

As sociolinguistic research grows, so the argument for including material from the learners culture becomes more compelling. As Mahoney argues:

Based on recent research into the interactional nature of reading and the importance of operationalized real world schemas to the comprehension of text, it can be strongly argued that using Asian-English literature with Asian students of English makes sound pedagogical sense. (Mahoney, 1991 : 87)

These Asian-English literatures come from within a culture, they are not imposed from outside. They bring with them the cultures and value systems of the learner, thus enabling the learner to work from the known, and acquire the new language by processing existing knowledge. How much simpler and more meaningful this must be than labouring through passages set in the English country side or King Arthur's court in Camelot. There is also the enrichment to the rest of the class of valuing the history of various groups.

HISTORY

In using Chinese history with groups of Chinese learners, there are many thousands of years to draw on, up until the end of the Imperial Dynastic system in 1911. (Post 1911 history, however, needs to be tempered by political considerations; that is, are the learners from the Peoples Republic, Hong Kong, or Taiwan?). One example from Chinese history that will be well known by most Chinese learners, (but much to our shame, by few Westerners), is the Taiping Movement, or Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace, which ran from 1853 to 1864, was a quasi-Christian Rebellion and claimed over 20 million lives. This was by far the largest Civil War in the history of mankind (Fairbanks 1986).

Irrespective of the national origin of our Asian learners, there are thousands of years of recorded history to draw upon, the history of the Khmer, Vietnam, Japan, Siam, Burma, Laos, Indonesia, to name a few.

CULTURE

Many Pākehā often think of our long tradition based upon British history and culture. After all, the British and other European powers colonised and 'civilized' much of the known world. If we but look at these people that were 'civilized', without the aid of our cultural imperialism, we will see civilisations well-established before the explorers ever left European shores. Take, for example, the Shinto Empire

of Japan, the Buddhist nation-state of Siam and the Confucian Empires of China and Vietnam, most of which existed a thousand years before Christ was born.

Asian concepts of family, education, cuisine and leisure are all rich sources of classroom activity. When there is a mixed nationality class, there is the opportunity for the learners to enrich each other as well as the teacher. When school results are published at the end of the school year, what are the percentage of students of ethnic Asian origin who top the marks? A cursory study of Chinese and Vietnamese culture will show that under the Imperial Confucian system, that operated in both countries until this century, the only way for anyone in society to progress was to pass a long series of examinations in the Confucian Classics. Passing these examinations could take twenty to thirty years but this was the only way that a family member could progress to the Centry Class and, thus, become part of the ruling bureaucracy. Perhaps, just perhaps, this is part of the reason we see so many Asian names in examination results in the newspapers in January each year.

LITERATURE

In this area, there are two primary sources of works to consider. Firstly, there are the classic Asian writings translated into English. Some of the more popular and widely known are the Chinese classics such as *The Journey West*, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, *The Water Margin* and *The Three Kingdoms*.

The second source of materials comes from an ever increasing body of works which is termed Asian-English Literature. These are works written in English, by Asian authors, whose primary language is not English. When Asian students read Asian-English, they are able to engage in a dialogue with their own culture. The issues raised in this literature are often real and living issues for the reader. With this literature, students are more able to acquire the English language from the reality of their own cultural norms and life experience without the extra burden of assimilating a variety of complicated Anglo-Saxon cultural values. Certainly, the culture and values of the new society need to be addressed but we should let the learner acquire the new language through the existing culture and literature first. In using literature, we are not just engaging in a linguistic exercise, rather;

if there is a distinct corpus of texts which can be called 'literature', it would appear that the corpus will have to be defined at least partly in socio-cultural rather than in linguistic terms. (Carter, 1987: 108)

Consider the following extract from "*Monsoon Country*", by Pira Sudham, a Thai-English author who was nominated for the Nobel Literature Prize:

"The train was loaded not only with human beings but also with bundles of possessions, implements of various types, and bags of fruit and foodstuffs. How fascinating it was to feel the speed, to see the landscape, to watch the vendors at various stations selling iced-coffee, bananas, boiled eggs, peanuts and fried rice. Beyond the mountains, the monsoon season had already come. The landscape here was a flat, alluvial plain; the language was foreign. At the stations on this side of the hills, the food hawkers called out in the language of another country." (Sudham, 1988: 51)

Surely, the setting, cultural reference and attitude of this text would be much more accessible for the Thai student than some extract set in the public schools of Britain, or the inner-city chaos of New York. Clearly then, there exists a wide body of works available, both Asian literature in translation and Asian-English Literature which could be drawn on in the language learning classroom. They are works that need to be used, that need to be made available to teacher and learner, that need to be made familiar. In the words of Krachu:

One might then say that such texts, produce a cultural identity, and the learners see a non-native language as part of the culture with which they identify. The English language thus acquires both formal and functional realism. (Krachu, 1987: 141)

EITHER/OR

It is not suggested in this paper that traditional British-American-Australasian literature be excluded from the classroom, but rather it be allowed to co-exist with Asian-English Literature, culture and history. It follows that teachers of ESL/EFL be exposed to courses in Asian literature, culture and history, which already exist in the Universities. Once teachers have been introduced to this wide and important body of works and knowledge, there exists the possibility that it may in time be introduced into the mainstream classrooms. Although many teachers have their roots in Anglo-Saxon Celtic history, and our morality is based upon the Judeo-Christian ethic, there must surely be a greater realisation of our geo-political location, and an idea of our future, more and more closely linked with the rapidly developing nation states of the Asian continent.

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