
Dr. Brown provides a succinct and penetrating overview of a very real challenge that language teachers face in the classroom: dealing with potentially inflammatory subject matter. He introduces the topic with the polarized philosophies of authorities in pedagogy whose viewpoints range from cultivating learners that can critically challenge knowledge to warning of political agendas in teaching. He premises the rest of his article by asking if there can be a middle ground between these two viewpoints where teachers can educate students to be critical of moral and political issues and to do it without a “personal subversive agenda.”

Brown then establishes some of the framework behind the concept of teachers as agents of change. Citing the historical context of this idea, Brown asks readers if they think that present day educational systems are indeed agents of change and not merely the voices of bureaucracies preaching the status quo. Leaving this question open, Brown makes it clear that he feels language teaching is not neutral or that it has nothing to do with politics or power; indeed, he feels that it is the educators’ responsibility to provide multiple points of view even if they are considered socially, economically or politically taboo.

On the side of caution, Brown points out that this liberal stance on language education isn’t entirely benign. Not all cultures find these teaching methodologies to be as liberating as some have found them to be; some could even potentially find them to be oppressive and inhibit cognitive development. Also, with the spread of English throughout the world, it is only natural for certain regions which have a propensity towards acceptance to fully embrace English, whereas other regions may be slower to do this. This unequal distribution of English, Brown warns, could lead to an unequal distribution of power.

From a linguistic relativity perspective, Brown briefly describes some specifics of English grammar which could potentially bring moral and political issues into the minds of our students without our intentions. Pointing out gender loaded phrases such as “the nurse did her best” or political terms such as “collateral damage” and even count and non-count nouns such as oil and water which may subconsciously obscure the finite nature of these resources; that these
messages will inevitably be delivered through our teaching makes the issue of finding the aforementioned “middle ground” all the more pressing.

Next, Brown provides an outline of what this middle ground might look like through four principles. The principles are as follows: 1) Allow students to express themselves openly 2) Genuinely respect students’ points of view 3) Encourage both/many sides of an issue, and 4) Don’t force students to think just like you. Going forward with these principles in mind, Brown shows the reader some firsthand experiences from language teachers in the field who have used “subversive” activities in their classrooms. The stories, from a variety of cultural settings, exude the principles that Brown laid out but also touch on his cautionary references. Brown ultimately stresses a commitment to human rights in general, as a foundation to engage in “sensitive and sensible treatment of moral and political issues with our students.”

Brown ends with a powerful personal anecdote that portrays the collective sense of community and feelings of interdependence humans have on this planet. He calls for teachers to help their students become aware of their status as global citizens and to become partnered and involved as a community of planetary stewards.

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While reading Dr. Brown’s article I was reminded of a mentor teacher I worked closely with. As a student teacher and assistant in his ESL class I had many opportunities to observe his teaching style. At the time I would have described his treatment of the potentially inflammatory subjects that sometimes arose as humble, professional and extremely diplomatic. Now, through the lens of Brown’s article, I have a more educated understanding of exactly what my mentor teacher was doing. His class was an ESL class in San Francisco, so he dealt with students from a wide variety of backgrounds, which means the possibility of cross cultural conflict was even greater than for language teachers working in EFL situations where classes are more culturally homogenous. This means that he not only had to ensure that he was following Brown’s maxims of tolerance and understanding but that he had to work to instill these concepts in his students so as to promote the cooperation and community building that Brown advocates.

I was lucky to have had my mentor teacher as a model for finding the middle ground. I
am also grateful that Brown is so well connected and was able to provide so many wonderful examples of this critical pedagogy from throughout the world. It was inspiring to hear of teachers risking their jobs by finding ways to get their students to think critically about hot topics in societies that are very conservative and traditional. I was also touched by the difficulties that some teachers had talking about communism in post communist countries, or of teaching in and of itself, in countries that forbade it during recent dictatorships. These stories made it clear to me what Brown meant in his advocacy of critical pedagogy in language teaching and what it might take to implement it.

I think it can be easy to misinterpret the principles that Brown laid forth when he describes his middle ground. Growing up in California, I have been exposed to the political left and therefore am a bit liberal when it comes to things like change and reform. It is exactly these things, change and reform, that Brown’s critical pedagogy celebrates. However, in China where political issues are taken very seriously and “treatment [of them] must be covert”, change and reform are not as celebrated. One of Brown’s tenets and a basis for his middle ground framework is a teacher’s responsibility to encourage alternate points of view on a topic, to not deny access to any varying points of view and to not purposely change or repress subject matter pertinent to a students’ progress. To an American like myself this seems appropriate, but it is important to understand that not everyone thinks like an American and that teaching from this framework could be inflammatory itself.

Besides this, I feel that Brown does a good job phrasing his principles in neutral and diplomatic wording and expounding them with a resolve that is, if not a bit grandiose, at least plausible and respectable. I would recommend this article to any language teacher, especially one thinking of teaching in an EFL context.