

‘Orwellian’ discourse in ELT: a threat to professional diversity.

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Abstract

The diversity of opinion about pedagogy within ELT makes it essential that its professional discourse is sufficiently inclusive. However, this often fails to occur because professional discussion is frequently too ‘Orwellian’ in nature, i.e., behaves in a manner resembling the political structures in the novel ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’. For example, a form of professional ‘newspeak’ often exists, whereby meanings of words are aligned with ‘approved’ ways of thinking, such as in the use of the term ‘authentic’. A second frequent occurrence is ‘thoughtcrime’ (views contrary to those of the ‘ruling party’ being regarded as unacceptable). The over-promotion of task-based learning can be seen as often taking such a form. Thirdly, ‘doublethink’ (simultaneously believing in two contradictory ideas) is all too common, as in the advocacy of professional inclusivity, on the one hand, and the rejection of ‘English as a Native Language’ as a pedagogical model on the other. As a result of such forms of ‘thought control’, a number of valid professional pedagogical perspectives are denigrated. The paper concludes by discussing how a less Orwellian and more representative form of professional discourse might be created. [186]

Keywords

Pedagogy, inclusivity, professional discourse, ‘Orwellian’, newspeak, thoughtcrime, doublethink

Introduction

It is increasingly recognised as important for professional discussion in ELT to properly reflect the true diversity of opinion about pedagogy that exists within the field (see, e.g., Holliday 2005). However, it is contended in what follows that some forms of current professional debate fail to properly acknowledge the value of a number of widespread and well-motivated ELT pedagogical practices. As a result, professional discussion is often insufficiently inclusive.

To support this argument, I will analyse the workings of relevant parts of the ELT professional discourse by using several concepts from the novel ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ (Orwell 1949). I have chosen this theoretical framework because the political processes underlying the forms of professional debate in question seem to me to operate in a manner similar to the kind of political discourse described in the novel, i.e., to also be concerned with attempting to achieve forms of ‘thought control’.

Briefly, the main features of ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ of importance here are as follows. Written in 1948, its setting is an imagined London in the year 1984. England at this time is ruled by a dictator known as ‘Big Brother’, whose regime is enforced by ‘The Party’. The official political ideology is known as ‘Ingsoc’ (i.e., ‘English socialism’), and conformity to it is strictly monitored by the ‘Thought Police’.

Three of the main means of enforcing the Ingsoc ideology are i) ‘newspeak’, ii) ‘thoughtcrime’ and iii) ‘doublethink’. It is these concepts which will be used in the analysis that follows. Each of them will first of all be briefly explained, and then representative examples given of their operation within parts of the present-day professional discourse, showing, in particular, how they inhibit the expression of a truly inclusive range of views about ELT pedagogy.

1. Newspeak

In ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’, ‘Newspeak’ is a method of exerting political control through the use of terminology aligned with ways of thinking approved of by Ingsoc. As the novel explains (Orwell 1949):

The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible (312-313).

For example, in Newspeak the term ‘goodthink’ meant a point of view in keeping with the ideology of the Party, rather than a well-formed argument (Orwell, 1949: 220).

Within ELT, a clear example of the use of ‘newspeak’ occurs in the terminology that is habitually used to talk about kinds of language teaching ‘texts’ (reading and/or listening ‘passages’). Such texts can be thought of as consisting of two main types, viz: ‘naturally-occurring’ and ‘specially-written’.¹ The former comprises newspaper or magazine articles, letters, television or radio broadcasts, web-pages and so on,

¹ In reality, of course, several sub-types of texts can also be distinguished, but the picture has been deliberately simplified here in the interests of clarifying the main focus.

which, though originally devised for other purposes, are now being used for language teaching. The latter, on the other hand, consists of texts which have been constructed solely for language teaching use.

Both types of text are of potential pedagogical value, of course (Hutchinson & Waters 1987: 158-160). For example, if the teacher's aim is to boost learners' confidence by showing them how much they can understand of 'real-life' language, despite knowing the meaning of only some of it, then a 'naturally-occurring' text will be the obvious choice. However, if the aim is to provide learners with plentiful examples of the use of a particular language structure, it is likely that a 'specially-written' text will be more appropriate. In other words, both kinds of texts have their place in pedagogy, with neither kind being inherently superior to the other, i.e., they are in a *complementary* relationship.

However, within much of the ELT professional discourse, the overall 'message' is that the emphasis in pedagogy should be on the naturally-occurring rather than the specially-written type of text (see, e.g., Simpson 2009), i.e., a *replacement* strategy. This view is strongly reinforced by the frequent use, in a newspeak-like manner, of the term 'authentic' to stand for 'naturally-occurring'. Such usage carries with it positive overtones of 'genuine', 'real', 'natural', and so on. On the other hand, the other main kind of text, instead of being referred to as 'specially-written', tends to be described in the same discourse in more negative terms, such as 'artificial', 'contrived', 'unnatural' (see, e.g., Tomlinson 2010).

Furthermore, contrary to such perspectives, it can be argued that, in truth, it is the so-called 'authentic' text which is actually 'artificial'. This is the case because such a text, once used for language teaching, cannot be regarded as truly 'authentic' any longer, since both its purpose and context of use are no longer the same as they were originally. At the same time, the other, 'specially-written' type of text can be regarded as potentially more truly 'authentic', in the sense that its context of use and its function are consistent with its original (pedagogic) purpose of construction (cf. Seedhouse 1996).

However, the forms of 'newspeak' used in this connection in much of the professional discourse has the effect of reversing such a perspective, resulting in a lop-sided view, one in which an implicit preference is expressed for 'naturally-occurring' over 'specially-written' texts, despite the benefits inherent in *both* kinds. As a result, the value for pedagogy of the specially-written text tends to be downplayed, and an unrepresentative kind of professional discussion is created.

2. Thoughtcrime

In 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', 'thoughtcrime' is the harbouring of views seen as contrary to those of the official political ideology ('Ingsoc'). Instances of 'thoughtcrime' are detected and punished by the 'Thought Police', a form of repression summed up in the well-known slogan 'Big Brother is watching you'. As a consequence, a frequent habit of thought of the ordinary citizen in the novel is what is known in newspeak as 'crimestop', a form of 'protective stupidity' (Orwell, 1949: 220), i.e., not thinking unorthodox thoughts for fear of the consequences, a matter which will be returned to later.

The operation of similar tendencies in the ELT professional discourse can be seen in some of the discussion surrounding ‘task-based learning’ (TBL). It is nowadays generally accepted that, when teaching new language knowledge, in addition to pedagogical elements such as ‘learning about’ and learning how to’, it is important for there also to be a ‘learning by doing’, or, in other words, a ‘task-based’ component as well (Lightbown & Spada 2006: 179-180). From this perspective, and in a manner parallel to what has just been said about types of ELT texts, TBL can be seen as in a potentially helpful, *complementary* role with respect to other, equally important pedagogic elements.

Unfortunately, however, this is not the way the matter tends to be viewed in a good deal of present-day ELT professional debate, in which a much more one-sided stance is taken, whereby TBL is seen as a *replacement* for other forms of pedagogy (once again, like the situation described in the previous section,). For example, in his detailed review of recent research and theorising concerning TBL - or ‘task-based instruction’ (TBI), as he refers to it - Swan (2005) concludes as follows:

The claim that TBI is a superior teaching approach, solidly based on the findings of current theory and research, cannot be sustained... The claim that ‘traditional’ approaches have failed is not well founded, and frequently involves misrepresentation of the approaches in question. The naturalistic communication-driven pedagogy characteristic of TBI has serious limitations, especially as regards the systematic teaching of new linguistic material. Its exclusive use is particularly unsuitable for exposure-poor contexts where time is limited—that is to say, for most of the world’s language learners. No reports of successful long-term classroom implementation are available (396-7).

In other words, Swan’s analysis shows that there is no compelling evidence to support the claims often made for the superiority of TBI/TBL with respect to the teaching of new language knowledge in particular, especially in contexts involving the majority of ELT learners, nor for the concomitant criticisms so often made of more ‘traditional’ approaches in this respect. The operation of the professional discourse in making such claims and criticisms, as the title of Swan’s paper indicates, therefore amounts to ‘Legislation by Hypothesis’.

Nevertheless, because of the ‘over-selling’ of the benefits of TBL in this manner, practitioners are under increasing pressure to align their thinking accordingly. As Littlewood (2004) puts it:

The task-based approach has achieved something of the status of a new orthodoxy: teachers in a wide range of settings are being told by curriculum leaders that this how they should teach, and publishers almost everywhere are describing their new textbooks as task-based. Clearly, whatever a task-based approach means, it is a ‘good thing’ (319).

Prodromou and Mishan (2008) also argue in a similar vein, as follows:

There are forces in the native-speaker centre which would like to see the Task Based Learning (TBL) focus applied more generally as a ‘good thing’, if not a best method ... Indeed, in some local areas, the new methodological trends are accepted and adopted as ‘correct’, given the authority of native-speakers and academics based in prestigious Anglo-American – and, indeed, Australian universities (sic). ELT

practitioners are often swept along by the latest trends, reluctant to criticize the fruits of academic research, even if that research is partial and still ongoing (194).

By analogy with ‘political correctness’, they go on to refer to this trend as a form of ‘methodological correctness’, which they define as:

‘a set of beliefs derived from prestigious but incomplete academic research in the Anglo-phone centre that influences the decisions one makes regarding materials and methods in the classroom, even if those decisions are inconsistent with the local context and particular needs and wants of the students one is teaching’ (194).

In other words, the ELT professional discourse can be so overweening in its promotion of TBL that practitioners feel compelled to seek conformity with its ideas, even when this involves flying in the face of pedagogic realities, rather than risk committing ‘thoughtcrime’ – it is ‘safer’ to employ ‘goodthink’ and/or ‘crimestop’ modes of thought instead. As a result of such forms of ‘thought control’, methods like TBL are promoted as pedagogical panaceas, and other, equally or more valuable pedagogical practices are denigrated, leading ultimately, once again, to an unrepresentative form of professional debate.

3. Doublethink

The third and last of the concepts from ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ that I wish to discuss is ‘doublethink’. In the novel, ‘doublethink’ is defined as ‘the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them’ (Orwell 1949: 219). Well-known examples of doublethink in ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ are the ruling party’s main slogans, such as ‘Freedom is Slavery’, ‘War is Peace’, and so on (Orwell 1949: 6). By the use of this form of conceptualisation, apparent conflict between ideas disappears, and ‘reality control’ is achieved.

A representative example of how ‘doublethink’ manifests itself in ELT occurs in connection with a principle that has become increasingly prominent in the professional discourse in recent years – the view that ELT pedagogy, rather than being based solely on an English as a native language (ENL) model, should instead also give equal or greater weight to ‘non-metropolitan’ varieties of English (Matsuda 2006). As with the cases discussed in the previous two sections, there have been some potentially beneficial effects of this line of thinking, such as increased awareness of the importance, in an ‘English as Lingua Franca’ world, of exposing learners to alternative forms of English and teaching related intercultural awareness and communication strategies (Baker 2012), so that they may be sensitised to and helped to cope with present-day international forms and uses of English. However, and once again in parallel with the two earlier cases, there have also been calls in certain parts of the ELT professional discourse for ENL as a pedagogical model to be replaced altogether, and for one or other localised variety to be used instead (see, e.g., Kirkpatrick 2007: Ch. 13).

Research into learners’ views on the matter nevertheless shows a consistent preference for the continued use of an ENL model (see, e.g., Taylor 2006; Sung 2012). Other studies have shown similar attitudes on behalf of teachers (Kuo 2006; Jenkins 2007). In an attempt to resolve this conundrum, Jenkins (2007 : Ch. 2) argues that learners and such teachers are ‘victims’ of ‘standard language ideology’, i.e., only

have a preference for an ENL model because they have been ‘brainwashed’ into such thinking. However, data in Sung (2012: Chs. 5 & 6), in particular, demonstrate that learners are capable of holding very insightful and well-articulated views about their overall preference for an ENL pedagogic model, ones that show a clearly-expressed pragmatic orientation, rather than the hallmarks of ideological oppression. A similar picture emerges from Jenkins’ data with respect to teachers’ views, her critique of them notwithstanding.

This situation therefore presents a contradiction in terms for professional discussion in ELT, since it is logically impossible to simultaneously advocate a language model which it is clear learners and many teachers do not prefer, and at the same time to uphold the principle of maximising professional inclusivity, a matter which, as pointed out at the outset of this paper, is seen within the same discourse as also of great importance. As a consequence of ‘doublethink’ of this kind, the potential advantages of ENL as a pedagogical model are not given their rightful place in professional discussion, resulting (once again) in an unbalanced and insufficiently diverse form of ELT discourse.

Conclusion

It should be noted that none of the arguments presented so far is intended in any way to advocate returning to a pre-communicative ‘Dark Ages’, i.e., a blanket rejection of newer teaching ideas in favour of older ones. Indeed, it needs to be clearly acknowledged that the operation of much of the ELT professional discourse is, of course, by no means always as negative in its effects as the aspects of it that have just been focused on. In particular, as has been pointed out throughout, its teaching ideas can be seen as frequently having an important role to play as a *complement to* prevailing pedagogical practices. Unfortunately, however, as has also been shown, its contributions are not always presented in this way: rather, they can often be promoted instead as *replacements* for well-grounded existing approaches. As a result, a lop-sided and unrepresentative form of professional discourse too frequently predominates, whereby, as in the case of the examples discussed earlier, ‘pedagogic’ texts are devalued, ‘traditional’ approaches to teaching new language knowledge are denigrated, and ENL as a pedagogic model dismissed out of hand.

Greater care therefore needs to be taken in professional debate to more directly acknowledge and reflect the full range of perceptions about pedagogy that exist within ELT as a whole. Part of ensuring this occurs would be for the main focus of a good deal more professional discussion to be squarely based on what research of the kind described in the previous section shows to be the actual views of learners and teachers about pedagogy, and for these to be given due acknowledgement and weight, rather than rationalised away. Another strategy would be to centre discussion much more frequently on empirical evidence about the kind of pedagogy which appears to work best in practice. In this respect, the summary in Lightbown & Spada (2006) referred to earlier, concerning the overall findings of a large range of classroom-based research studies, would make a useful starting point. Thirdly, those in ‘gatekeeping’ roles with respect to the ELT professional discourse, such as academics and teacher trainers, might do more to critically question hegemonic viewpoints about ‘common-sense’ ELT pedagogical practices, and to foster research which looks at ELT from a much more truly ‘bottom-up’ perspective (cf. McDonough 2002; Batstone 2012). In

such ways, in other words, a less ‘Orwellian’ and more genuinely diverse and inclusive ELT professional discourse might be created.

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