

The schizophrenic teacher¹

Péter Medgyes

Non-native teachers of English invariably feel unsafe about using the language they have to teach. To offset this sense of inherent uncertainty, they seek refuge in adopting either a deeply pessimistic or an aggressive attitude to ELT.

The pessimistic type of teacher is more common, and the author points out that such teachers are obsessed with grammar, while taking little heed of pronunciation and lexis, and almost none of linguistic appropriateness.

Instead of insisting on mistaken beliefs, the author argues, non-native speaking teachers should openly acknowledge that they are students of English no less than the students they are teaching. With their conscience soothed, they will now be able to take a more confident stance in the classroom.

If it had not been for a humiliating experience to which I was recently subjected, my topic would have been 'Prejudices in English language teaching'. In the (Hungarian) National English Contest for Secondary School Students there was a test of 100 items, which I did myself. In my estimate I scored 98 points. 'Not too bad,' I thought with some pride. Then I offered the test for corroboration to a friend of mine—a native-speaker of English—who found an additional seven mistakes in my work, leaving my fondly cherished self-confidence shattered. Never would I have imagined, for instance, that the question 'Where are those five pounds I lent you?' is wrong, and so is 'Come on, I'll pay you a drink', while such sentences as 'Can I buy you lunch?' or 'When will it suit you for us to call?' are correct. I had to admit again, as so many times before, that, after learning English for thirty-odd years, I am still unable to do a relatively easy test on a par with an Englishman. Hundreds of colleagues complain of similar traumas day in, day out.

The symptoms

Most non-native speaking teachers of English have split personalities. We find it a hopelessly perplexing task to teach this language which, like any other foreign language, is full of mystery to the non-native speaker. Sooner or later every one of us regrets having chosen this career. Four or five hours a day we have to face our students, attempting to teach something we ourselves invariably have a shaky knowledge of. We endeavour to provide them with a model to imitate, as well as a live linguistic monitor who is able to correct their production should the need arise. By being both teachers and learners of the same subject, we are necessarily driven into a constant state of schizophrenia. In some ways we resemble Dr B. in Stefan Zweig's *Die Schachnovelle*, who, in the horrifying months of solitary confinement, begins to play chess against himself and eventually goes mad.

In our fight against a nervous breakdown, the options are few. One option is that of total resignation. I vividly remember a teachers' conference, where at the end of his talk the lecturer—a native-speaker of

English—asked for comments. The awkward silence was broken at last by an elderly colleague, modestly proposing that non-native speakers had better not contaminate air still resonant with the voice of a real native speaker. She seemed to entertain the belief that a non-native speaker of English can have no pertinent ideas in the presence of native speakers.

The other option is a more arrogant way of coping with the problem. Once a teacher came to me complaining about the countless misprints in a new coursebook. The one she picked out as the most blatant was the word *worry* marked with the phonetic symbol /ʌ/ instead of /ɔ/, which she had surmised was the correct symbol. When I politely replied that the symbol /ʌ/ was preferable, she shrugged me off, saying that there was not much difference between the two phonemes and she could not care less anyway. In other words, she was trying to restrict the language to those rules which she had once learnt or mislearnt. Like the proverbial fisherman who said that 'What my net can't catch isn't fish', my colleague complacently claimed that whatever was beyond her knowledge did not exist.

For my purposes the self-effacing, apathetic type of teacher is less interesting and undoubtedly less common. This second kind of schizophrenia, which manifests itself in aggressiveness, is very often based on mistaken beliefs and prejudices about how language works. These false assumptions will in turn precipitate as errors, which operate alike on all three levels of linguistic adequacy: phonological, structural, and semantic.

*Attitudes to grammar,
pronunciation, and
vocabulary*

Aggressive teachers tend to be *grammar-centred*, claiming that knowing a language equals knowing its grammar. Clearly, grammatical mistakes are the least frequent source of error among Hungarian teachers of English. After all, any standard structure can be checked in a good pedagogic grammar. Even if we omit, say, the *-s* ending in the third person singular of the present simple, we are likely to correct ourselves out loud or make a mental note of it. This mistake is not a breach of the code, as Corder argues,² since we are all well aware of the rule that should have been applied. Such mistakes, therefore, could equally well be called *lapses* to distinguish them from *errors*.

A non-native speaking teacher's performance, however, abounds in errors as well. There are certain rules that he or she wrongly uses and others that he or she is completely ignorant of. Misuses are more difficult to account for, as they are based either on imaginary rules or on rules that have long since lost the force they once had. My main objection to aggressive teachers is not that they have information gaps and misconceptions—every non-native speaker necessarily has these—but rather that they force them on their students with far more vehemence than even a valid rule would deserve, while turning a deaf ear to all the contradictory evidence. Grammar, the only area which they feel more or less sure of, is clung to tooth and nail in spite of the fact that the wrong intonation alters the meaning of an utterance far more radically than faulty structure normally does.

At the same time, the teachers to whom I have attached the label 'aggressive' are strikingly indifferent to matters of pronunciation and lexis. With regard to pronunciation, they will often reject the use of resources such as the tape recorder or the radio, lest their deficiencies in understanding spoken English be revealed. They also fear that once their students have access to English spoken by native-speakers, they will no longer appreciate their teachers' strongly accented variant.

The teaching of lexis offers an even bleaker picture. Whereas grammar is fairly well covered in grammar books, the vocabulary of English, or of any other language for that matter, defies systematization. Dictionaries, of course, are of immense value, but none has as yet been able to lay down rules to adhere to. There is no way for the non-native speaker to ascertain whether, say, the adjective-noun compound he is about to use, or his student has used, is correct or not. Even the most copious dictionaries inevitably supply only positive examples, without advising us what is to be avoided. In semantics, the native-speaker's 'Sprachgefühl' can be the only beacon for orientation. Consequently the aggressive teacher plays safe: he (or she) floods his students with lexical paradigms, very often patently old-fashioned or rare, while prohibiting the use of colloquial or, God forbid, slangy vocabulary.

Appropriateness and cultural context

An utterance, however, should not only correspond to phonological, grammatical, and semantic rules; that is to say, it should be not only acceptable and superficially well-formed: it should also be appropriate. For example, the statement *I'm listen* is unacceptable as it is grammatically incorrect, whereas *I'm listening* is perfectly acceptable as well as appropriate, provided the question to which this is an answer is *What are you doing?* But if the preceding question is *Why aren't you listening?*, the answer *I'm listening* is inappropriate, albeit acceptable. The appropriate answer to this is *But I AM listening*, with a marked stress on the operator *am*. An identification of error, therefore, necessarily involves interpretation in the context. Any utterance must relate to its linguistic environment or, as Pit Corder says,² must assume 'textual appropriateness'.

In grammar-focused teaching, where the basic unit of communication has traditionally been the sentence, discourse and dialogue have hardly ever been given their due. The issue of stylistic appropriateness has been treated to an even lesser extent. It goes without saying that the unintentional use of an American phrase in an otherwise purely British context would affect the dialectal homogeneity of the text. If you say *I wish you a merry Christmas and a happy new year* in passing, you make an *error of medium*, that is to say, you mistake writing for speaking, since in speech the phrase *I wish you* is obviously superfluous.³ In addition, the choice of language should match the social rules and status of the participants in any given interaction. Thus we would never expect a pupil to greet his teacher with a cheerful 'Hi, Jack! How come you're here?' Should he do so, it would show he has forgotten about the social role he is allotted in any teacher-pupil relation.

Unfortunately the problems do not end here. It is a well-known fact that different cultures structure the world differently, and that these divergences are necessarily reflected in their linguistic systems. There are certain phenomena that exist in one culture but are missing in another. For instance, in the English educational system places of higher education called *polytechnics* are fairly common, for which the Hungarian word *főiskola* or any other alternative would be definitely misleading. Conversely, the Hungarian *szakközépiskola* or *technikum* has no counterpart in the English educational system, and in turn in the English language. Still, such conspicuous gaps are far less embarrassing than are cases of what I would call *cultural overlap*, when the two cultures put similar segments of the world into somewhat different categories. An example of this could be the practically non-existent English equivalent for the Hungarian *testvér*

(*sibling?*). Thus if we wish to ask *Hány testvéred van?* in English, we must say *How many brothers and sisters have you got?* This is called *referential appropriateness*, reference being that relation which holds between linguistic forms and objects or events in the outside world. Learning a foreign language is emphatically more than acquiring a new set of names for the same phenomena. It involves learning to see the world as the speakers of that language habitually see it, as well as learning their culture or, if you like, their whole 'Weltbild'.

To illustrate the point I have in mind, let us drop in on an imaginary English class somewhere in Hungary. As the teacher enters, the class stands up and the person on duty blurts out: 'Class, stand still! I report to you, sir, that this is the fifty-ninth lesson, the class consists of thirty-five pupils, one pupil is absent: Gábor Somogyi. It is raining this morning.' The teacher replies: 'Thank you, Susan. Clean the board and fetch some more chalk. Sit down, children.' I don't think this scene requires a 'deep structure analysis' to point out its underlying discrepancies. The main trouble is that English is used in a situation which is blatantly un-English. Yes, but how could it be otherwise? In England (or the USA, for that matter) school children normally do not stand up, much less stand still, when the teacher enters, so Hungarian children should not do this either, one could argue. Similarly there should be no reporting and most of all there should not be that ridiculous comment on the weather. But even with these un-English moments wiped out, there would be lots of others still remaining. The teacher is not to address his class as 'children', just as he is not to be addressed by them as 'sir'; he ought to avoid using the imperative when he gives instructions, substituting for it structures such as 'Could you . . . ?' or 'Let's . . .', etc. However, the trouble is that, as I have suggested, the culture and the language it reflects are inseparable, the former determining the behaviour of the latter. If the culture changes, so will the language. But does this rule apply the other way round? Will the culture change along with the language? The answer is a definite 'no'. However eager the teacher might be, he (or she) is in no position to alter the major cultural features. For example, he can't avoid regularly filling in the ubiquitous class register or assessing performance with grades ranging from one to five, or rearranging the desks in a way characteristic of a more informally furnished English classroom, etc.

The treatment

What all this boils down to is that it would be an absurd idea to try to bring about a characteristically English environment in another country. With this possibility ruled out, cases of linguistic inappropriateness will inevitably be rife. By the same token, no non-native speaking teacher of English will ever be able to stamp out his or her own errors of appropriateness, which are primarily due to non-linguistic barriers.

To my mind it is here that the key argument against the schizophrenia of non-native speaking teachers lies. Both the apathetic and the aggressive types suffer from a harrowing sense of guilt for something they are not to be blamed for; both have been chasing something they do not have the slightest chance of catching, that is, a native-like command of English. Instead of indulging in wishful thinking, they ought to take it for granted that they are irrevocably non-native speakers and view this as matter-of-factly as possible. This they should make clear to their students from the very outset. They should admit that both teachers and students are, in fact, *learners of English*, the teacher, of course, being a more advanced learner

than the student. As such he is entitled to teach, especially on the grounds that as a qualified foreign language teacher he should be well-versed in the techniques of imparting his knowledge.

Strangely enough, there is a time when to be a non-native speaking teacher of English is of great advantage: through his own experience as a persistent learner of English on the one hand, and through the experience gained over the years as a foreign language teacher on the other, he should know best where the two cultures and, consequently, the two languages converge and diverge. More than any native speaker, he is aware of the difficulties his students are likely to encounter and the possible errors they are likely to make. Therefore, he has easier access to the measures and techniques which may facilitate the students' learning.

Only by viewing things from such a standpoint can the non-native teacher's shattered self-confidence ever be restored. He should be fully aware that a native command of English is out of the question; for him ever to have recourse to all the nuances of referential, stylistic, and textual appropriateness is nothing but delusion. His speech is often long-winded as the right phrase will continually elude him, thereby forcing him into hazy and lengthy definitions. In addition, he will invariably avoid the use of phrases about which he is not entirely sure, thus assuming a flat and in-expressive style, particularly when it comes to free oral communication.

However deplorable his predicament is, he should never despair. Fortunately native speakers usually adopt a fairly tolerant attitude to errors made by foreigners. I could not agree more with Corder when he writes:

We do not expect or require of foreigners that they should be able to select the stylistically appropriate language with the same skill and control that the native speaker does. Indeed, it is often part of their role as 'foreigner' that they should not. We can even go further. The native speaker finds it *inappropriate* in certain situations for a foreigner to use the same style of language as he would do himself. We can take as an example those features which we call 'slang'. It is not only that the appropriate use of 'slang' requires great familiarity with, and sensitivity to, the social life of a people, unlikely to be acquired by a foreigner, but also that the use of *any* slang features by a foreigner is inappropriate. A foreigner can only use slang appropriately when he is no longer regarded as a foreigner. (1972 : 281)

The cure Having regained a kind of mental and spiritual poise, the non-native teacher's schizophrenia will heal by itself. He will no longer suffer from unjustified apathy, and there will be no need for him to escape into aggressiveness. He will now know which objectives are within reach and which are beyond him. And with his spirit freed he will be able to enhance his knowledge of English to lengths that he would never have dreamt of in those schizophrenic fits of the past. □ *Received May 1982*

Notes

- 1 This paper is based on a lecture delivered by the author at the Conference in English Studies held in Debrecen, Hungary, 25–27 January 1982.
- 2 S. Pit Corder: *Introducing Applied Linguistics* (Penguin 1973).
- 3 Helen Thomas: 'Did I say something wrong?'. *Tanulmányok az anglisztika tárgyköréből* I. Debrecen 1981, p.179.

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