Reading skills and terrorism

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Some thoughts on teaching students to challenge and learn

A seriously tongue-in-cheek essay on helping learners learn through doubting and challenging, and not through swallowing whole what they are told in the classroom or a book.

YOU MAY already have assumed that I chose that gimmicky title merely to catch your attention, and that there is of course no connection between reading skills and terrorist activities. I assure you that I am not joking, being whimsical or playing with words, but let us at least begin in light-hearted mood with a short, easy test.

1. The Sun circles the Earth every
   (a) month
   (b) year
   (c) 12 hours
   (d) 24 hours
2. Which of the following statements is correct?
   (a) The spider is useful insect
   (b) Spiders are useful insects
   (c) A spider is useful insect
   (d) The spiders are useful insect
3. God created whales and living creatures on the
   (a) second day
   (b) third day
   (c) fourth day
   (d) fifth day

That's enough. Now let's compare our answers to these three test items. My own view is that not one of the choices given is a correct answer. This is because, according to my own system of beliefs, the Sun doesn't circle the Earth, spiders aren't insects and no creatures were made in one day. Today's scientists would no doubt support me in each of these beliefs but they would also say that a fact is simply a statement of what we assume to be true until it is proved false. In other words, any text purporting to express the truth must be regarded as challengeable. In the interests of good science, then, I would expect teachers not only to enable learners to understand a written text but also to encourage them to ask themselves, "Is this true?" "Do I believe this?" "Do I disagree with this?" and so on. As we have just seen, even questions need to be questioned.

Challenging the English teaching 'expert'

However, challenging an authority is not always and everywhere an acceptable form of behaviour. As a young English teacher in Thailand forty-odd years ago, I tried several times to teach my students to contradict me. Having drawn a white ball and a bird on the blackboard, I would announce "That isn't a bird" and

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get them to chorus, "Yes it is!" and I'd say, "That's a black ball" and get them to say, "No it isn't. It's white." This was just listen-and-repeat stuff, but when I tried to get real contradictions out of the class, they were struck dumb. Until now, they had been obeying the foreign 'expert' in an artificial exercise; their culture forbade them to challenge in real life any teacher (the Thai word comes from 'guru'), let alone a foreign visiting expert.

Westerners should not regard that failure to challenge as merely an illustration of a quaint eastern culture in action, as my second example shows. When I was teaching the comparatives, several of my Thai students started producing written sentences such as **John's running faster than Tom's* and **He's older than I'm*. The best advice I could think of at the time was to give my students a hasty rule of thumb: "After THAN, there are no contractions." More than a decade later, I read a very influential paper (Selinker, 1972) that appeared in the *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, in which the author made the following claim about the learner's 'interlanguage' (IL) – the set of stages through which a language learner passes on the way to becoming fluent:

> Most learners of English quickly learn the English rule of contraction which forms things like the *concert's* from the *concert is*, but then these learners may overgeneralise this rule to produce sentences like
>
> (3) Max is happier than Sam's these days
>
> in their English IL. Though this sentence is hypothetical, it illustrates an earlier point. The learner of English who produces contractions correctly in all environments must have learned the following constraint without 'explanation or instruction', since this constraint was discovered only recently …

When I came to this point, I thought I must have misread something, although I had paid particular attention because of my teaching experience in Bangkok. So I read the passage again, realised it was nonsense and mentally sat back to see what the international response would be. After all, Selinker was saying that

(a) the applied linguist had only just discovered this rule; so
(b) no teacher could have discovered it; but
(c) the learner could have done so.

Yet there was no outcry – even, I must add, from me. Were my international colleagues so respectful of a paper published in an international journal that they believed that nonsense? Or were they perhaps, like me, a bit too lazy to object?

Challenging the political text

In political matters, treating a text with too much respect or being too lazy to object can lead to dangerous situations. Moving back to the nineteenth century and away from ELT contexts, we find two learned but little-known figures, Gobineau and Chamberlain. Count Gobineau, a French diplomat, wrote the massive *Essai sur l'Inégalité des Races Humaines* (Paris, 1853–55) in which he stated that of the three main races (white, yellow and black) the white was superior – especially the Aryans, of whom the Teutons were the purest and best. Gobineau societies promptly sprang up all over Germany, so popular was this analysis. An enthusiastic member of one of these societies was Houston Stewart Chamberlain, an Englishman who had become a German citizen. Chamberlain wrote a huge and influential work in his adopted language. Published in 1899, *Grundlage des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Foundations of the Nineteenth Century) further argued that the Teuton was the only hope for the world, and that the importance of a nation was directly proportional to the amount of genuinely Teutonic blood in its population. Recognising the importance of the Christian heritage, however, Chamberlain concluded that Jesus could not have been a Jew but was probably an Aryan. Was all this nonsense laughed out of court? No. By the outbreak of World War II it was in its twenty-fourth edition and had sold more than a quarter of a million copies. In fact, in *Mein Kampf* Hitler expressed his regret that Chamberlain's observations had not been heeded during the Second Reich.

Shirer (1959:103) considers Gobineau and Chamberlain important 'for their effect on the German mind, which they helped to direct toward the coming of the Third Reich' and consequently the terrorism of the Holocaust. One can understand how fear led to the massive sales of *Mein Kampf* – as Shirer puts it, 'few family households felt secure without a copy on the table' (p.81). But how was it that the views of these two well-educated men, writing for a literate public much earlier, were left unchallenged? Was it fear of a different kind that was involved here? Fear of appearing to lack solidarity and patriotism, perhaps? Timidity in the

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face of a perceived authority? If so, can we say that fear or timidity may impair one's reading comprehension?

Challenging the religious text

In George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, a character called Sportin' Life sings about certain stories in the Bible, such as the one about Jonah:

> He made his home in
> That fish's abdomen,
> Yeah, Jonah he lived in a whale.

Well, just as a spider isn't an insect, a whale isn't a fish, but the irreverent point that Sportin' Life is making comes in the chorus:

> The things that you're li'ble
> To read in your Bible
> They ain't necessarily so.

Texts of a religious nature have often been assumed to be perfectly true and consequently left unquestioned – or at least, relied upon unthinkingly. This applies to Islam as well as to various branches of Christianity and Judaism. The word *Islam* means something like 'the peace that comes from submission to God in all things'. The Arabic text revealed to the prophet Mohammed by the angel Jibra'el, being of divine origin, has for at least a millennium been regarded by Moslems as unchallengeable. To surrender to God entails surrendering oneself to the text of the Qur'an. It is learnt by heart and generally regarded as literally true; and often these two features transfer into the reading of other important texts, such as those used in education. While any attempt to change or challenge the text of the Qur'an may be seen in some quarters as punishable by death (as Salman Rushdie will confirm), such a punishment may be seen elsewhere as an act of terrorism.

Turning to sixteenth-century Christianity, we find William Tyndale toiling at translating the Holy Bible into English. His aim was simply to make the scriptures comprehensible to all without the need for intermediary interpretation, but here too the text was regarded as inviolable. In 1536 he was strangled and burned at the stake as a heretic – a tragic act of terrorism if ever there was one. Only three years later it was possible to print the 'Great Bible' legally in English.

The challenges made to religion by scientific advances are well known. In Europe the Polish astronomer Kopernik concluded that Aristotle was wrong, in that the earth moved round the sun and not vice versa. Following him a century or so later Galileo Galilei came to the same conclusion in his *Dialogues on the Two Chief Systems or the World* (1632). But this work was banned by the Catholic Church authorities because it ran counter to the texts used in the universities that they administered. These authorities would nowadays be called 'fundamentalist': they already knew the facts, so anyone contradicting them must be wrong and therefore actually or potentially evil. The Church did not execute Galileo. Instead, the terrorist Inquisition forced him to lie to the world by making a public recantation.

In 1925, the year in which the first volume of *Mein Kampf* appeared, a teacher called John Scopes was tried in Dayton, Tennessee, and found guilty. In the United States, especially in the south, it was a time of resurgent Christian fundamentalism, and Scopes was guilty of teaching the evolutionary theory put forward by Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. The fundamentalist view was that the Holy Bible was accurate: the world was created in six days by God, probably in 4004 BC. Rocks known to be millions of years old were adduced in evidence, but to no avail. Scopes was guilty of questioning the Bible and sowing sinful thoughts in the minds of his students. The verdict was later reversed, but only on a technicality. This fundamentalist conviction, that the account of the Creation in the Book of Genesis is *literally* true, persists in parts of the USA and probably elsewhere to this day.

It is a belief in the literal truth of later biblical texts that has led to, or at the very least exacerbated, the current terrorism in the Middle East. In the Torah (the first five books of the Christian Bible) it is written that God promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that their offspring would possess the land of Canaan (Joshua, Chapter 1). By no means all Jews, whether Israeli or not, would subscribe to a literal interpretation of that text; but it is in the Zionist pursuit of 'the promised land' that Palestine is slowly being ethnically cleansed. The terrorism began long ago in the 1940s when Palestine was under British mandate. I am old enough to remember newsreel and newspaper accounts of the Irgun Gang's killing of 91 people in the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946 and the Deir Yassin massacre of 1948, in which they wiped out a

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village of 254 Palestinians. The gang was led by Menachem Begin, who became Prime Minister of Israel in 1977. In 1983 he handed the premiership to Yitzhak Shamir, who had led the Stem Gang in such terrorist acts as the assassination of the UN mediator, Count Bernadotte. You will notice that I have used the old British names: in Hebrew the groups are not known as 'gangs', and the participants would be called 'freedom fighters' rather than 'terrorists'.

Currently the Prime Minister is Ariel Sharon, who planned the 1982 invasion of Lebanon and was responsible for the massacres in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. He is fond of calling Palestinians 'terrorists'; they regard themselves as 'freedom fighters'. In present-day America there is even a Protestant evangelical movement which allies itself to those Jewish groups that are intent on establishing a Greater Israel – an act which would entail the forceful expulsion of Palestinians, whether Christian or Moslem. In justification, these evangelists also point to *Joshua*, Chapter 1.

If at this point you are experiencing a twinge of uneasiness, you are not alone. I am wondering if I shall be reviled as antisemitic, and my unease is probably similar to the phenomenon responsible for the popularity of the Gobineau Societies and the works of Chamberlain: a reluctance to be seen as socially unacceptable. So I shall leave that topic and tell you about a large advertisement that appeared in *The Guardian*, London some days ago. It was headed *The Last Piece of the Jigsaw?* and, being interested in puzzles, I read through its many column inches of small print. Among this verbiage I focused upon two major points. The first was a detailed political prediction concerning the USA, the UK and the UN, based on a reading of three verses in the Holy Bible. The prediction was explained as follows.

> Here are the 3 verses of Revelation which have given us all of this information:
>
> **11.** And the beast that was but is not, it is also an 8th King but springs from the 7 and it goes off into destruction.
> **12.** And the 10 horns that you saw are 10 kings, who have not yet received a kingdom. But they do receive authority as kings one hour with the beast.
> **13.** These have one thought, and so they give their power and authority to the beast. (Revelation 17)
>
> We believe that these 3 verses of Revelation contain the whole rise to power of the UN when the correct symbolism is employed. We understand this symbolism to be as follows:
>
> The Beast is the UN, the 8th King of the world. The 7 previous kings over God's people are in order, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Medo Persians, the Greeks, the Romans and the Anglo Americans.

And so on – there was a great deal more, but none of it meant anything to me. The second point I focused on was:

> The fall of the Twin Towers themselves is prophesied in Isaiah Chapter 30 we believe …

I took out my old Bible and read that chapter but, finding no mention of two towers, I stopped reading. (If you think your reading comprehension might be better than mine you can, according to the advertisement, write to The Lord's Witnesses, PO Box 1AL, London W1 1AL for some further information.) I decided that The Lord's Witnesses, confident that Revelation must contain *literal* truth in some form or other, had identified coded messages that did not exist. It was not enough that the Old Testament's messages had been translated from Hebrew into Latin and then English; for these fundamentalists, they had to be in code as well.

Conclusion

What I have been stressing in the above accounts is the acute danger of literalism in the process of reading, whether of sacred or secular texts. In my own culture, intelligent reading necessarily involves the decoding of signs and the extraction of meanings, but it does not stop there. The meanings then have to be considered and judged and then accepted, rejected or 'put on hold'. Umberto Eco (1983) puts it succinctly: his sleuthing monk tells a young apprentice, "A book is not made to be believed. It is made to be questioned."

To regard any text as unchallengeable is incompatible with modern scientific thinking. To regard a religious text as infallible is in my view an act of fundamentalism; and fundamentalists tend to further their cause by means other than scientific debate or friendly persuasion. My own view of good teaching is that it is a subversive activity, in that it actually fosters the questioning and challenging of authority. But this is an attitude that some other cultures discourage. When I encourage students from

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those cultures to disbelieve a story told as true or to challenge an author's argument, do they transfer these reading skills to political and religious texts within their own cultures? If they do, have I been guilty of cultural imperialism? Of subversion, even? And if they don't, what prevents them? Could it be fear? ■

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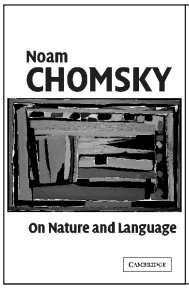
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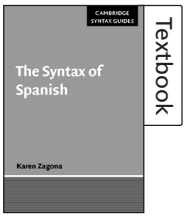
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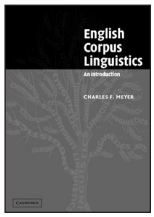
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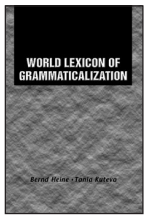
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