Terry Lamb *

Reconceptualising Intercultural Education: A Model from Language Education

"'Utopian realism'...is the characteristic outlook of a critical theory without guarantees. 'Realism' because such a critical theory, such a radical politics, has to grasp actual social processes to suggest ideas and strategies which have some purchase; 'utopianism' because in a social universe more and more pervaded by social reflexivity, in which possible futures are constantly not just balanced against the present but actively help constitute it, models of what could be the case can directly affect what becomes the case."[1]

1 Introduction

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return to terror, for the realisation of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name[2].

Today, education is set in a rapidly changing context. There is much talk of the demand for a numerate and literate citizenship and an increased awareness of the issues of equity and inclusion. Moreover schooling and educational research are being held to be more accountable for their effects. Much educational research has moved to appeal to notions of the 'social' and the 'cultural' to address increasingly visible problems in teaching and learning and to account for the failure of education to produce these numerate and literate citizens. However, I am concerned that the complexity of working with the terms 'social' and 'cultural' is not always acknowledged. As we move into the realm of the social we must be aware that we encounter society as organised, ordered communities and must work with sociology and cultural

* Senior Lecturer in Education, Director of Learning and Teaching, Director, MA in Applied Professional Studies in Education, University of Sheffield, President, FIPLV (Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes), Chief Editor, *International Journal of Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching,* e-mail: T.Lamb@sheffield.ac.uk

[1] Giddens, A. 1994, *Beyond Left and Right - The Future of Radical Politics*, (Cambridge: Polity Press), p. 250.

[2] Lyotard, J. 1984, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

studies as ways of theorising the structure and functioning of human society together with its texts and artefacts.

We should remember that a vision of this broader role for education includes the preparation of students to "restructure the social systems in order to remove the barriers that women, minorities and others experience in their jobs and in the social institutions with which they interact"[3]. This offers a focus for educators interested in equity, equity here "construed as a check on whether or not the actions taken in teaching (...) students and the social arrangements resulting from these actions are just"[4].

A move in this direction will clearly challenge the social and cultural context within our classrooms. Indeed, with a pedagogical stance based on choice, collaboration and contextualised learning we begin to move towards the culture creating classroom suggested by Bruner[5]:

> It is not just that the child must make his knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture. It is this that leads me to emphasise not only discovery and invention but the importance of negotiating and sharing – in a word, of joint culture creating as an object of schooling and as an appropriate step en route to becoming a member of the adult society in which one lives out one's life.

Surely this is a step along the road to fighting the cultural selection which operates within many of our classrooms. Indeed, this cultural selection and a perceived cultural imperialism within our education systems have led many communities to challenge the education on offer within our schools. In the United Kingdom Saturday schools, complementary or supplementary schools, and community education schemes have been widespread in the Black and Asian communities in Britain as a means of combating inequalities within the state system. These alternatives can be seen as an example of the commitment by many communities to a socially just education for their children.

So the challenge for educators interested in redefining the experience of learning as an emancipatory experience and a way of empowering individuals to confront injustice is to locate the ways in which the curriculum and its assessment, pedagogy and social and cultural environment can be reconstructed.

My view of empowerment here is best described by Rappaport[6], who suggests that

> Empowerment needs to be based on divergent reasoning that encourages diversity through support of many different local groups rather than the large centralised social agencies and institutions which control resources, use convergent reasoning, and attempt to standardise the way people live their lives.

Educators interested in empowerment should perhaps avoid seeing themselves as experts who can 'solve' the problems of those with whom they work. An empowerment focus involves exploring ways in which we as educators disempower those who do not readily fit the models we devise. We can then work with those disempowered by education in collaboration, using the resources at our disposal to support and critique the needs of our communities, as defined within those communities.

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[3] *Ibidem.*

[4] *Ibidem.*

[5] Bruner, J. 1986, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, (London: Harvard University Press), p. 127.

[6] Rappaport, J. 1981, In Praise of Paradox: a Social Policy of Empowerment over Prevention, (In *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 9), p. 19.

1.1 Defining Culture

Culture is an extremely difficult term to pin down. It is particularly difficult as learners in our schools are at a point of cultural transition, and in many ways operate at the intersection of several cultures, or indeed move between cultures depending on the context in which they find themselves. Learners in multi-ethnic schools illustrate this cultural transition with great clarity.

The work of the Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies is possibly the most important work in the study of culture to emerge in the UK. Rather than work with a single idea of culture, they preferred to discuss sub-cultures, although their accounts of the origins of youth culture remained in a framework which had been expressed some years earlier:

> The 'culture' of a group or a class is the peculiar and distinctive 'way of life' which realises or objectifies group-life in meaningful shape and form... The 'culture' of a group or class, the meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in 'mores' and customs in the uses of objects and material life. Culture is the distinctive shapes in which this material and social organisation of life expresses itself... Culture is the way the social relations of a group are structured and shaped: but it is also the way those shapes are experienced, understood and interpreted[7].

Such a definition could also be taken as adequate for a term such as ideology. Ideology is occasionally linked to common-sense views of the world, the underlying values through which we come to interpret our worlds. However there is a subtle difference. Eagleton[8] suggests that it consists of "the ideas and beliefs, which help legitimate the interests of a ruling group or class specifically by distortion and dissimulation". We can work with a separation of culture and ideology into culture being what learners bring with them to the classroom, values and ideas which are embedded in their individual life histories and which shape their often unconscious interpretation of this business of schooling. Ideology can be seen as the way in which institutions through their political interest distort and mould the cultures in order to reinforce and reinvent a conservative status quo, whilst appearing to behave in a common-sense way.

Ideology operates to make day-to-day processes appear natural, the only sensible or practical way to work[9]. These processes and structures are apparently not affected by teacher choices but somehow within the fabric of the school. Ideology can often be exposed when this common sense view of the world is challenged – occasionally by a view from outside the dominant culture. We use the word culture deliberately. For example, a teacher from Portugal once said that they could not operate a system where pupils were 'set' by 'ability' in Portugal. 'You forget', he said, 'we have had a revolution'. The people would not stand for a system which told them that some pupils were not capable of succeeding.

The following metaphors outline a developing view of identity and culture. Both of these terms must be seen as continually shifting and changing. Pupils in schools, as well as their teachers, are

[7] Sparks, C. 1996, Stuart Hall, Cultural Studies and Marxism. In Morley, D., & Kuan-Sing, C. 1996, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, (London: Routledge Press), pp. 84-85.

[8] Eagleton, T. 1991, *Ideology*, (London: Verso Press), p. 30.

[9] Ernest, P. 1991, *The Philosophy of Mathematics Education*. London : Falmer Press.

engaged in culture creation and through this process identity creation.

- **Cultural Dominance**

The first view of the way in which the culture of the classroom or sub-cultures within classrooms can be viewed is that of a major planet with orbiting moons. The main planet (dominant culture) controls the journeys and development of the orbiting moons (sub-cultures outside the dominant culture). Neither the dominant culture nor the sub-cultures are required to change during the journey. However, the only way to gain access to the dominant culture is by a complete shift from the sub-culture to take on all the values of the dominant culture – a one-way journey from the moons to the planets. This model is one of exclusivity, dominance and disconnectedness.

- **Cultural Osmosis**

This model can be seen as a large oil bubble with smaller different oil bubbles circulating. Occasionally these bubbles come into contact for a moment. During this moment there may be mixing of a small amount of oil but the bubbles soon separate to continue in their own journeys. Here the dominant culture 'notices' difference and on occasions when contact between the dominant culture and a sub-culture is forced there may be minor shifts in the way the dominant culture operates. However, this shift also becomes the means by which the sub-culture is rejected as a whole. This model is one of selective integration whilst allowing the dominant culture to remain a controlling force. It is a model of weak connections.

- **The Cultural Web**

The last model is that of a spider's web. In this model no one part of the web can be seen as dominant. Depending on the part of the web we view we see a different construction of culture and a different centre of identity on which to concentrate. Thus, depending on the context in which we work, the 'culture' or the 'identity' on which we draw will be dominated by a range of influences with often diverse centres of influence. This model offers strength through diversity and is a model which offers communication, flexibility, connectedness and strength.

2 Reconceptualising Intercultural Education: A Model From Languages Education

The relationships between identity, culture and language are powerful ones indeed. Language has been described as a 'marker of identity'[10] and as a 'core value'[11], an integral part of identity and culture. Consequently, the languages curriculum is intimately connected to the concept of intercultural education as described above. Indeed, the presence of an increasing range of languages in the classroom is one of the most obvious manifestations of change and diversity.

[10] Grant, N. 1997, Some Problems of Identity and Education: a Comparative Examination of Multicultural Education, *Comparative Education*, 33:1, pp. 9-28.

[11] Smolicz, J. 1979, *Culture and Education in a Plural Society*. Canberra: Curriculum Development Centre, University of Adelaide; & Smolicz, J.1983, Multiculturalism and an Overarching Framework of Values: Educational Responses to Assimilation, Interaction and Separatism in Ethnically Plural Societies. Discussion paper delivered at the *Eleventh Conference of the Comparative Education Society of Europe*, Würzburg, Germany, 3-8 July 1983.

The UK, for example, is typical of many parts of Europe in its multilingualism. In London, for example, over 300 languages are in use by school-age children[12]. Furthermore, despite the belief of many that use of minority languages would disappear as the various communities became more 'integrated' into British society and as immigration slowed down, the number of languages spoken has continued to increase in recent decades. In 1989, for example, there were speakers of 184 different languages in London's schools.

So might a languages curriculum respond to such change[13]. Parallels can be drawn with the metaphors described above. In the first metaphor (cultural dominance), the major planet is the English language, orbited by other languages. The only way to gain access to this dominant force is by learning English and leaving behind the first language. In the curriculum this leads to a focus on teaching English as a second language, with no place for the other languages of the classroom.

The cultural osmosis metaphor can be understood as tolerance for other languages, but primarily outside the mainstream curriculum. Other languages of the community are confined to voluntary supplementary schools run in the evenings or on Saturday mornings. Occasionally they may be offered in the mainstream school, but only as an activity – curricular or extra-curricular – for speakers of these languages. The largest oil bubble – the English language as spoken by the monolingual majority – comes into occasional contact with other languages in the community, but remains unaffected by them.

The metaphor of the cultural web can be understood as a linguistically diverse society in which bi- or plurilingualism is perceived as a strength; here, languages other than the majority language are not just tolerated, but enjoyed. The beneficial aspects of bilingualism for the individual have been recognised by linguists for some time. As a meeting of UNESCO experts stated in 1980:

> …learning of a second language affects perceptual strategies and cognitive capacities of an individual in a positive way. Bilingualism is a psychological and individual phenomenon as well and in its functional dimension it is conducive to greater cognitive flexibility and linguistic sensitivity. It brings to an individual deeper social consciousness, greater cultural enrichment and better international understanding.[14]

For society as a whole, strength can also be seen in diversity and greater flexibility and adaptability. Clearly this will be reflected in the languages curriculum, indeed in the education system as a whole, with speakers of all languages being prepared for life in a range of linguistic settings both at home and abroad[15].

2.1 Languages and the Cultural Web

My work as a Head of Languages Faculty in a multilingual school for pupils aged 11 to 18 in London in the 1980s can be viewed as a response to the needs of the cultural web. Far removed from the traditional work undertaken within modern

[12] Baker, P., & Eversley, J. 2000, *Multilingual Capital*. London: Battlebridge.

[13] See Lamb, T. 2001, (Language Policy in Multilingual UK. In *Language Learning Journal*, 23, Summer, pp. 4-12), for a discussion of local language provision.

[14] UNESCO. 1980, *Meeting of Experts on Language Teaching in a Bi- or Plurilingual and Multicultural Environment, 19-23 December 1977: Academic Report,* (Paris: UNESCO), p. 6.

[15] Lamb, T. 1999, Responding to Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in the Primary School. In Bertaux, P., Garcier, F. & Kerviel, C. (eds.) 1999, *La Dimension Européenne dans l'enseignement: Enjeux, Réalités et Perspectives*, (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy), pp. 25-36.

language departments in UK schools, in which languages offered are usually restricted to French with possibly German or Spanish, curriculum planning was informed by the following principles[16]:

- The development of all children's linguistic potential is an issue for the school. The school should therefore as far as possible reflect the linguistic makeup of the school community, which means that languages taught (and used as a medium of communication) should not be restricted to the usual European languages but should include the languages of that community. As the Bullock Report[17] stated, "no child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he crosses the school threshold"[18];
- As everyone is part of a multilingual society, positive attitudes towards other languages should be fostered amongst monolingual teachers and pupils. No-one should be made to feel uncomfortable about using their own language;
- All pupils should be able to sample a range of languages and then choose whichever they feel to be most appropriate for their own needs. These languages should include languages of the community;
- Bi- and plurilingual pupils have expert knowledge and can thus easily be placed in the position of the teacher on occasions through the use of collaborative learning techniques;
- Bi- and plurilingual pupils need access to the whole curriculum rather than being withdrawn from certain subjects. However, this means that support with the development of English to speakers of other languages should be integrated into all subjects, and that all teachers should be trained in their role as teachers of English;
- Information about and experience of other languages should be supplemented by a more critical language awareness which explores the benefits of bi- and plurilingualism as well as the development of multilingual communities;
- New teaching and learning modes need to be explored in order to facilitate the learning of a wider range of languages and cater for individual and community needs. Self-access learning, distance learning, and flexible learning all represent a paradigm shift in pedagogy, and all require the development of learner autonomy, to enable learners to take control of their own learning[19];
- Activities should also encourage the development of autonomy in order to encourage learners to be "authors of their own worlds"[20], through transformation of rather than withdrawal from situations which potentially disenfranchise them[21].

[16] Lamb, T. 1992, The Promotion of Language Awareness across the Curriculum. *Language Awareness Newsletter*, 2:2 (Derby: National Consortium of Centres for Language Awareness), pp. 13-15.

[17] Committee of Inquiry into Reading and the Use of English. 1975, *A Language for Life, Report of the Committee of Inquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science under the Chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock*. London: HMSO.

[18] *op. cit.*, paragraph 20.5

[19] Lamb, T. 2007, Backward Planning for Lifelong Language Learning, *Lenguas en Aprendizaje Autodirigido* (Electronic journal of the Mediateca del CELE – UNAM (Mexico City); Lamb, T., & Reinders, H. 2005, Learner Independence in Language Teaching: A Concept of Change. In Cunningham, D., & Hatoss, A. (eds.) 2005, *An International Perspective on Language Policies, Practices and Proficiencies*. (Belgrave, Australia: FIPLV), pp. 225-239.

[20] Pennycook, A. 1997, Cultural Alternatives and Autonomy. In Benson, P., & Voller, P. (eds) *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning,* (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman), p. 35.

[21] Lamb, T. 2000, Finding a Voice – Learner Autonomy and Teacher Education in an Urban Context. In Sinclair, B., McGrath, I., & Lamb, T. (eds), *Learner Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy: Future*

The modern languages curriculum was therefore redesigned to introduce learners to a range of languages. All pupils began at the age of 11 with taster courses in four languages: French, German, Turkish and Greek; Turkish and Greek were the main community languages in the school, though altogether 40 languages were represented. After these tasters, which, because of restrictions brought about by the newly introduced National Curriculum, could only take place over a three-month period, pupils were able to choose which language they would continue with for the next five years. Although most children still chose French or German – mainly as a result of parental pressure due to perceptions of the vocational relevance of these two languages – some children did choose Turkish or Greek, and some of these children were from monolingual English-speaking backgrounds. For these children, learning a language which they could use on a daily basis appeared to make better sense than learning French or German, and the consequent perception of the value of language learning often led them to learning a second foreign language later in the school.

Since some of the above principles were whole-school issues affecting the whole curriculum and not just that of the Modern Languages Faculty, it was decided that a major aspect of the languages curriculum should be delivered as part of the Personal and Social Education (PSE) program. This part of the program, delivered by teachers from a range of different subject areas to all pupils in their first term in secondary school, was seen as an introduction to social justice issues to be followed up across the curriculum throughout their time in the school. At its heart lay the following aims:

- **To reveal to pupils the richness of linguistic variety** represented in the class, school and local area (i.e. London) by speakers of different mother tongues, and to develop an enjoyment of that variety without arousing feelings of antagonism or inferiority;
- **To foster better relations between all ethnic and linguistic groups** by raising pupils' (and teachers') awareness of the origins and characteristics of various languages and their place in the wider map of languages used in the world;
- **To challenge racism via direct experience of the languages of different cultures,** and of the cultural associations of words;
- **To give pupils the opportunity to empathise with people who are in the early stages of learning a language**.

Drawing on ideas prevalent in language awareness at that time[22], topics explored in these lessons included:

- **Languages of London:** Pupils were invited to share their own knowledge of different languages in order to raise awareness of the number of languages spoken in the school community. Students filled in language questionnaires and also took part in an activity in which they matched some of the languages of London with the name of the language in the original script. The original scripts were provided by pupils from the school.

Directions, (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman). pp. 118-127; Lamb, T. 2000a, Reconceptualising Disaffection – Issues of Power, Voice and Learner Autonomy. In Walraven, G., Parsons, C., Van Veen, D., & Day, C. (eds) *Combating Social Exclusion through Education*, (Louvain, Belgium & Apeldoorn, Netherlands: Garant), pp. 99-115.

[22] Hawkins, E. 1987, *Awareness of Language: An Introduction* (revised edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- **Greetings:** In this activity, pupils listened to a tape onto which had been recorded native speakers saying "Hello! My name is X and I am speaking Y". They had to guess which language it was and then select the correct written greeting from a series of cards. Bilingual pupils were invited to contribute further examples and to teach the greetings to the other pupils. The activity was followed up with further work on greetings, including gestures (shaking hands, kissing, bowing, touching the forehead, etc). The activity was intended to validate the pupils' linguistic expertise as well as to help pupils to empathise with people in the early stages of learning a language.
- **Languages of the World:** Pupils were invited to put a list of the twelve most widely spoken languages into order, according to numbers of native speakers in the world. They then plotted these onto maps of the world. This helped to dispel certain myths, for example, that English has the largest number of native speakers and that there is a language called 'Indian'.
- **Language Families:** This introduced the idea that there are families of languages. Working with the numbers one to ten in nine languages, pupils studied the similarities and differences between Indo-European and other language families, as well as the ways in which they have evolved over the centuries. In this way, pupils became aware that there are relationships between different languages.
- **Borrowed Words:** Pupils learned that languages are constantly influenced by one another by working out the origins of a range of words. This encouraged further curiosity about languages and acknowledged contributions made by different linguistic groups to scientific and cultural development.
- **Scripts:** A range of different alphabets and scripts was examined, with pupils decoding and copying examples. As with previous activities, pupils were encouraged to find further examples in their local area.

3 Conclusion

The intention here is not to offer a series of lesson plans. Rather, the hope is that I have offered a flavour of how the ideas of intercultural education we are working with transfer into classrooms. The modern languages curriculum – renamed *languages* curriculum in order to break down barriers between different categories of languages – was considered by the teachers involved in teaching the course as a resounding success. In particular, the language awareness element, taught by a range of teachers from a variety of subject backgrounds, offered an opportunity to provide education for multilingual settings not only to pupils but also to teachers. The fact that the pupils were used as a resource and that active learning methods were very carefully devised to be 'teacher-proof' – given that most of the teachers were not language specialists – meant that teachers could relax and enjoy themselves as they felt their own knowledge and awareness expanding. They also observed significant changes amongst the pupils. Monolingual English speakers found themselves with a linguistic deficit compared with the bilingual pupils, and consequently sought to find family connections with speakers of other languages – for example, "My uncle has a girlfriend who speaks Greek" – in order to be able to 'compete'. When offered the chance to choose their National Curriculum language on the basis of a series of (French, German, Greek, Turkish, and Urdu) lan-

guage tasters, a significant number chose the language of their friends, since it connected more closely with their own lives than the usual European languages. Bi- and plurilingual pupils moved from a position of denial with regards to their bi- or plurilingualism, to one in which they were ready to support their fellow pupils' learning of these languages. Their cries of "that's *my* language" contrasted remarkably with previous experiences in which they had not raised their hands to say that they were bilingual in response to teachers' questions.

Fired by their experiences, the teachers were keen to continue to meet as a group exploring ways in which the pupils' linguistic diversity could be incorporated into their own curricular areas. Moreover, the fact that, in the course of the language awareness module, languages had been discussed on an informal basis in the staffroom, meant that a larger group of teachers were interested enough to attend the initial voluntary meeting of the continuation working group – despite their usual objections to the large number of imposed meetings. As a result, the work was written into the Institutional Development Plan of the school, demonstrating the commitment of the senior staff to the work. The school thus developed a whole-school language policy, which addressed the issues of bilingualism, dialect, school ethos and the very important role of *all* teachers in language development. The hegemony of English as the sole vehicle for the development of literacy was challenged as the school recognised the existence of different *literacies*.

One of the major challenges of postmodern society is to allow for and encourage diversity – "otherness" – whilst acknowledging the desire for "communal identifications" in order to reduce the experience of "alienation"[23]. The ideas offered in this chapter see diversity within the classroom as a vital component of education. Diversity offers us all new ways of viewing the world and new ways of living in our worlds. Our own identities both as learners and as teachers are acknowledged in their complexity, and this complexity allows us to finally make sense of that common phrase 'achieving our potential'. There is immense potential in all of our schools. Through the ideas in this paper, it is hoped that teachers across subject disciplines can find ways of working together to fulfil this potential.

[23] See Wheeler, W. 1994, Nostalgia isn't Nasty: The Postmodernising of Parliamentary Democracy. In M. Perriman (ed.), *Altered States: Postmodernism, Politics, Culture*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.