

Essay 3

Moving beyond the nuts and bolts – integration and critical thinking in English A: Language and Literature

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Teaching English A: Language and Literature can be initially overwhelming. There is a huge amount of information in the course study guide to comprehend. Other documents inform course construction too, and it is important to adhere to prescriptions and proscriptions while constructing a course that, simultaneously, adheres to a range of rules and engages students. With the incipency of a revised curriculum for first teaching in August 2019, teachers have been given greater autonomy, although there are still many directives and procedures that must be followed. Greater agency for teachers to plan interesting courses for their students is undoubtedly a good thing, but it requires careful planning based on principles of backward design. There are many elements that go into course design. This essay deals with two of the most important aspects of course design: integration and critical thinking. The course involves the study of language and literature. These cannot be studied independently and, if they could, it would make little sense to do so. Thus a good course of study will integrate the study of language and literature, and doing so provide opportunities to promote critical thinking, where critical thinking is central to the IB's mission statement and learner profile.

In the following essay, an experienced IB English teacher discusses both course integration and the promotion of critical thinking. These are not entirely separate entities. The essay is at one level philosophical, reflecting the teacher's intellectual engagement in teaching the course and a desire to promote critical thinking. At another level, the essay bridges the educational ambition to stimulate critical thinking with a pragmatic concern to integrate the language with the literature parts of the course. The essay is certainly not intended as a recipe; what teachers do will be informed by opportunities and constraints informed, in turn, by their particular circumstances. The essay does establish links between pedagogy, course design and classroom activities. It is, however, a personal reflection. It is hoped that it provides impetus and encouragement to teachers to think about these things in relation to their own teaching practice.

Imagine the first day of a new term in school. The first lessons. New students, returning students, anticipation, excitement. Students are eager to make good first impressions on their peers and on their teachers. Teachers, in turn, are eager to make good first impressions on their students. These first lessons with a new teacher can signal many things to students. They can suggest, for example, that the teacher is engaging, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and organised. Early lessons also reveal to students the extent to which a teacher is caring and interested in them, something that can be suggested in something as apparently banal as learning a student's name.

Of course there is nothing prosaic in putting a name to a face. The opposite is true. It matters a lot. Good teachers recognise the importance of those things that go frequently unremarked. Good teachers also understand – in large part because we are products of our culture – that there is much we tend to take for granted and to assume without further question. Good teachers have the awareness and presence of mind to identify the extraordinary in the everyday, and to refract this for their students so that they too can glimpse that which is beyond their own ethnocentric baseline. It is, in a manner of speaking, the role of the teacher to make the familiar strange and, by corollary, to make the strange familiar. While students can do this too – and frequently do – the teacher must, as a matter of praxis, provoke the already fossilised preconceptions of their young students.

Teachers who are able to make quotidian life seem unusual or exotic are the teachers who are likely to promote critical thinking in their students. It is not enough, and actually a little absurd, for teachers to say to their students 'think harder' or 'think differently'. In practice, this gives students nothing to work with. To think critically, and to think with empathy, students need to be asked to view the world from the perspective of those who are not like them and, in equal measure, they need to be given the opportunity to confront their own homeblindness. Good teachers know this. While this is the case, such teachers also recognise that prompting students to contemplate other lives requires sensitivity. Classroom activities that manufacture multiple perspectives such as role-play and debate often promote critical thinking and international mindedness while creating a secure environment in which competing ideas may be profitably exchanged. Promoting pluralistic discourse, it is important to stress, is not tantamount to postmodern anarchy – a position I do not subscribe to. While our world is populated by any number of dogmatic demagogues, it is ironic that dogmatism and intolerance are in part fuelled by relativism in which anything goes and nothing needs to be justified. This is dangerous. Good teachers consistently ask their students to provide justification for their views. They ask: why do you think that? How do you

know? Can you provide evidence? Is it possible to claim otherwise? This is what good teachers of English language and literature do. It should be evident that this is not, nor should it be, the privileged domain of the TOK teacher. Teaching, clearly, is not like Twitter, a 280-character exchange of punch and counterpunch. Where students make assertions, they should be asked to account for these, but with sensitivity so that they feel challenged, not diminished.

It may be argued that the promotion of diverse perspectives is too utopian. Some would go further and suggest the impossibility of the task. That is, even good teachers are unlikely to challenge the authority of the theocratic state if this is likely to cost them their job. This is the *realpolitik* of international education, and it is difficult or impossible to challenge. Nevertheless, the promotion of critical thinking should remain a *de jure* and vital ambition to the extent that it is possible, and I struggle to imagine that it is entirely impossible in the vast majority of societies where IB schools are to be found.

Good teachers know that, often, the best place to begin a lesson is with the lived experience of students. What do students already believe, and what do they know? What motivates these beliefs and understandings? This initial ‘humanising’ approach puts the student(s) at the centre of the learning experience, provides security and engages learners affectively. Establishing emotive engagement, the good teacher recognises, is crucial. However, although it is no bad thing, students are, at this point, only articulating why they think what they think. It is important to move away from that which is, in the language of many students, ‘relatable’. Challenging preconceptions, approached with sensitivity, destabilises ethnocentrism. To reiterate, the good teacher will challenge students with caution and tact. Nevertheless, if students are not shifted from a position of culturally derived quasi-certainty to one of possible doubt, then critical thinking cannot in any meaningful sense be said to follow. Of course, some balance is necessary. If dogmatism is often undesirable, then so too is the epistemological Wild West in which nothing needs to be reasoned and argued validation is to be avoided.

If, as I argue, critical thinking can be activated through a sensitively managed destabilisation of a student’s understandings and assumptions, how could this work in practice in the specific context of an English language and literature classroom?

Well, let’s return to the beginning of a new academic term and the issue of learning the names of new students. When teachers ask students – and this is the case for people in general – what their name is, they

tend to reply unequivocally. They tend to say something like ‘Alice’ (if that is their name). It is quite improbable that this same student would respond ‘Alice. But, my dad calls me “my Angel”. My sister calls me “Freckles”. You can see why. My good friends call me “Brains”. I’m good in school. And I’m not telling you what my boyfriend calls me.’ While it is implausible that anyone would respond in this way, this simply reflects culturally specific communicative competence. A multifaceted response is not wrong; it is simply unusual.

I like to pick up on this social practice of naming during my second day of the Language and Literature course. I begin by asking students to remind me of their names. If, like me, you are no longer in your youth, such reminders are certainly beneficial. Beyond this practical benefit, my next move is to challenge students to reconsider the nature of their response. Why have they offered me only one name when they have several? What does the self-appellation – that is, the ‘choice’ to determine their own name – reveal about the nature of power in classroom communication and the role of social context in deciding how to respond? Here, such questions upset the experience of normal everyday life, highlight the situational dependency of discourse and suggest that language has a constitutive role in how relationships of power are established and challenged. Moving beyond what is, for most of my students, their immediate experience, I present students with the case study of a young Singaporean woman who self-identifies with 21 different names, depending on what language she is using, and the relative age, ethnicity, social context and relationship to her interlocutor. In this, students are drawn to the idea that societies, cultures and their concomitant languages are qualitatively different, each with their own inner logic. Cultural relativism, understood in this way, is not a lodestar for living, but is instead a methodology for understanding the lives of others. It is in this sense that the central tenet of the IB’s mission statement – other people, with their differences, may also be right – makes sense.

I’m not finished with my discussion of critical thinking, but let me now build the discussion towards integration of language *and* literature. It is important to be aware that the classroom discussion I have just described has centred on ‘everyday talk’. That, it can be reasonably argued, is a ‘language’ part of the course, and has been part of a wider endeavour to ‘make the familiar strange’. In the same first week of teaching, I like to introduce a text – the course, after all, is all about texts! In part, I aim to elevate the understanding of what, typically, IB students know about the mechanisms of language. In a way, this suggests to students that ‘we are doing something harder than before – this is different’. Often, I will bring a newspaper story to class. Initially, students tend to regard newspaper stories as apparently

‘objective’. This is wrong – such texts are called stories for a reason – and the role of newspapers in constructing and maintaining ideologies and discourses of power needs explicating, in large part through developing students’ skills in language analysis. This, again, is about challenging routine assumptions students may hold. Ideology can be said to work through language in many ways. Drawing on the work of critical discourse analysis, the use (and absence) of naming is one significant mechanism for the expression of ideology, and often, if not always, this ideology involves a form of binary ‘othering’, dichotomising those who are like us from those who are unlike us. The strategy is a mainstay of racist and sexist discourse, and finds its linguistic expression in the pre- and post-modification of noun phrases as denotation slips apparently seamlessly into connotation. In addition, the inclusion of privileged accessed voices, expressed through direct quotation, that endorse one view to the exclusion of others, and the absence or silencing of alternative, critical perspectives is a further strategy for the expression of bias and ideology in news stories that are, if nothing else, not objective. Knowing this and understanding how language works requires explicit teaching. This, then, is what I do. Notice two things:

- a** The focus, moving on from a discussion of student’s own names, remains on naming. The idea of language and power is continued.
- b** There is an endeavour to promote critical thinking, moving outside the student’s immediate experience to the wider world. In the case of absent voices, for example, it is seldom obvious to students that ideology in a text can be identified in that which is not present in a text. Knowing this requires a form of lateral thinking.

Thus far, in the sequence of teaching I have described, students have considered the significance of their own names, and have then moved to a consideration of naming and the linguistic construction of ideology in a newspaper story. However, what, in part, is crucial to me as a teacher is that my students should recognise that they are involved in the study of language *and* literature. Since the course, apparently, has two parts, it seems reasonable to challenge the separation because to do so, again, confronts the otherwise obvious conclusion that there is some kind of inherent difference. One might ask, for example, what is the difference between, say, the prose of a novel and the language of a newspaper story? Does the thing we call literature have essential qualities that separate it from other text types? If yes, what is this essence?

Now, probably in the second week of our course, I want to introduce a literary extract, and I want the focus to remain on naming. Doing this creates, obviously, an immediate link between the daily lives of students, media texts and literature. Virtually anything could work, but I have found that there is an

extract from Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel, *Robinson Crusoe* in which Crusoe gives Friday his name and then describes him as one might describe a horse. Crusoe's first-person narration, in my experience, shocks the contemporary teenage reader as remarkable in its manifest racism. This is surely no bad thing. Students quickly identify the 18th-century context of production, and then just as quickly explain away the racism as a relic of the past. That is, students may think, in the same way that we no longer believe that evil spirits exist in Brussels sprouts, so we no longer discuss ethnicity in such a blatantly racist fashion. However, good teachers know that many or most of their young charges are 'guilty' of presentism. Put otherwise, and possibly controversially, IB students of language and literature have been socialised, most often without their knowing, into accepting unquestioningly the myth of the Enlightenment; that is, the idea that things, on the whole, just get better and better. However, a moment of reflection quickly reveals that this may not be the case. Learning this may disappoint young minds, but they cannot really think critically if their assumptions go unchallenged.

Where have we come? One may say not far. We have only reached the second week of the course. However, in the general model I have described, the main objectives in teaching have been to create cohesion between apparently disparate parts of the course and to promote critical thinking, beginning with and exploiting the affective engagement of students. Along the way, hopefully, students have learnt something about the way in which language and literature works. Of course what has been described is not 'the way'. It is, rather, the way that I have historically introduced my own course, and it has been my intention to maintain these foci over the weeks and months that follow. It can be challenging to design a language and literature course for students that is faithful to the parameters set out in IB documentation. Equally, it is not always easy to teach in a way that, one way or another, realises the grander ambitions of what constitutes an IB education. There is, however, some good news: subject reports for English A: Language and Literature highlight time and again that critical thinking is a prerequisite for real examination success. In other words, critical thinking is both an instrumental imperative for doing well in examinations, and an imperative – I am with Socrates on this – for leading a good life.