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# VALUES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Bill Johnston



# Preface

English language teaching (ELT) is not merely a matter of training students in a particular set of skills. Rather, the occupation of ELT is profoundly imbued with values, and these values furthermore are complex and riven with dilemmas and conflict. This book offers an extended analysis of the values underlying our work in ELT. I believe many teachers will find that what I have to say resonates with their own experiences and their own views; I hope this is so, and I do not believe that what I write here is “new” in the sense that no one has thought it before. However, from my knowledge of the literature of ELT it seems that these matters are rarely if ever raised in print in the professional dialogue of our field, and they are certainly not given the sustained attention they deserve.

In a way, the book falls under the category of philosophy of education. However, this is not the dry, abstract philosophy with which the word is often associated. The philosophical analysis in this book is built around real-life dilemmas faced by language teachers in a variety of settings. My aim is to produce what might be called a practical philosophy of language teaching, in which abstract conceptualizations not only relate to, but actually arise from, real situations.

This book is written above all for English language teachers. Although I hope that what I have to say will influence researchers, administrators, policymakers, and especially teacher educators, my primary audience are those who actually teach English as a second or foreign language. I hope this book will appeal to thinking teachers who are continually striving to understand their own classrooms. However, I do not offer neat, ready-made solutions to language teaching problems. My work is in the spirit of what Edge (2001b) wrote in the context of action research: “The thinking teacher is no longer perceived as someone who applies theories, but as someone who theorizes practice” (p. 6). The perspective on ELT that I set out in this book is intended not as a theory to be applied but as a framework to help teachers theorize their own work.

In an effort to address as wide a spectrum of teachers as possible in the field, I use the term English language teaching, or ELT, in this book. There are by now dozens of acronyms in the field (ESL, EFL, ENL, ESOL, EAL, TEFL, etc.), and ELT is intended to subsume all of these, in particular the frequently made distinction between English as a second language (ESL) - the teaching of English in settings where English alone is the dominant language- and English as a foreign language (EFL) - the teaching of English in countries where other languages are dominant. ELT also includes those considerable swathes of the world (like India and Pakistan) in which the ESL-EFL distinction is problematic. What I have to say should be interesting and relevant to teachers of English in all kinds of contexts.

I have deliberately used the feminine pronouns she and her to refer to teachers, because most of the teachers I know are women. I'm sure my male readers will not mind substituting he and him where appropriate - or, better still, considering themselves included in the category of her, just as women have had to do with male pronouns for many centuries now.

A crucial issue in language teaching and in teacher development is that of voice. Both as a researcher and as a teacher educator, my primary interest is in language teachers. At the same time, I want to talk to teachers and with them, not for them - I don't want to usurp their voice. For that reason, wherever possible I have used the actual words of teachers in describing the various moral dilemmas that arise in their work. I have tried to include the voices of teachers from different countries and working in different contexts, to make the point that the moral dynamics I discuss are in some form or another common to all ELT situations. All the situations and stories found in this book are real; I have not made up any examples to prove a point. Where examples are taken from published - that is, public - work, I use the authors' names. Where they are from private sources - student journals, e-mails, or conversations - I have used pseudonyms. In some cases I have altered certain details of stories to protect the confidentiality of those concerned.

The assumption underlying what I write is that all aspects of language teaching are imbued with values and moral meaning. In this book, however, I concentrate on exploring the moral significance of certain specific aspects of language teaching, chapter by chapter.

In chapter 1 I set out the basic claim that I substantiate throughout the book: that ELT is a value-laden occupation; that the values underlying it are complex, conflicting, and rooted in the details of context; and that it is important to bring to consciousness the moral dimensions of English teaching. I also set out basic definitions and understandings of terms such as values and morality, and I describe the philosophical underpinnings of my work, especially the writings of Nel Noddings (1984). I end by surveying existing research on the moral dimensions of teaching in general education and by suggesting that in some ways ELT is comparable but that in others it has its own peculiar moral landscape that must be explored and understood on its own terms.

In chapter 2 I examine the moral dimensions of ELT classroom interaction. This includes things that teachers and students say and do, the ways in which they interact, and the materials they use. I begin by taking a detailed look at the moral meanings encoded in examples of classroom discourse, focusing on four aspects: rules and regulations, curricular substructure, expressive morality, and voice. I then look at three aspects of the ELT curriculum that are charged with values: values in the textbook, moral choices that have to be made in pronunciation teaching, and the clash of values that underlies the process-product debate in the teaching of writing. Last, I analyze an important yet often overlooked moral dynamic: the clash between the teacher's role as individual and teacher and her position as *de facto* representative of the institution in and for which she teaches.

In chapter 3 I explore a matter close to my heart: the moral side of the politics of language teaching. In this chapter I focus in particular on critical pedagogy, on the moral meanings it encodes, and the dilemmas of values to which it gives rise. After first providing evidence to support the claim that all teaching is political, I briefly outline the tenets of critical pedagogy. I analyze the moral aspects of an example of critical pedagogy in action in an ESL setting, and then I consider the moral underpinnings of the question of whether critical pedagogy can be enacted in EFL contexts. After presenting a short critique of critical pedagogy from the standpoint of values, I analyze the central moral dilemma that dwells in the political dimension of ELT: the clash between the good inherent in the act of teaching someone another language and our participation through this teaching in global processes of cultural, linguistic, and economic imperialism.

Chapter 4 is devoted to an in-depth analysis of the moral significance of one aspect of teachers' work: that of testing and assessment. I begin by considering the value-laden nature of evaluation. I then look at the moral dimensions of widely accepted forms of student evaluation practiced in ELT programs. I move on to consider the issues of values raised by standardized tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the moral dilemmas that inhere in alternative forms of assessment. I end by posing the question of whether morally justifiable forms of evaluation are possible.

In chapter 5 I consider three facets of teacher identity which are particularly tightly bound up with values and moral judgment. The first of these is the teacher-student relation: specifically, the ways in which the personal lives of students impinge willy-nilly on our professional relations with them, and also the tension between authority and solidarity in relations with students. Second, I look at professionalism and the clashes of values that arise from teachers' attempts to assume an identity as a professional. Last, I consider the place of religious beliefs in language teaching, both from the point of view of the teacher's own religious values and what these mean for her actions, and from the perspective of different and clashing religious views held by students.

Chapter 6 concerns the moral dimension of language teacher development. In this chapter I begin by arguing that teacher development itself represents and embodies a particular set of values. Next, I consider the values implicit in the practice of teacher research - that is, investigations of teaching initiated and led by teachers themselves - and I take a close look at two examples of teacher research that focus on moral meanings in the classroom. I then reflect on the role of values in teacher career development, in particular the clashes of values that accompany important career decisions. Next I discuss the moral dimensions of the marginality experienced by many in ELT and the need for advocacy for teachers. I close by considering some of the consequences of my perspective on language teaching for the practice of teacher education.

The final chapter, 7, constitutes a taking stock in which I reflect on the significance of the analysis presented in this book for the practice of language teaching. In particular, I revisit and summarize the principal moral dilemmas of the field that I have identified throughout the book; consider the foundational values underlying our decision making in situations of moral dilemmas; and revisit the teacher-student relation, the core of the moral life of the ELT classroom.

Many people have helped in the writing of this book. First and foremost I want to thank Julian Edge, whose own moral courage has been an inspiration to me for many years now, and whose friendship is one of the most treasured things I have been given in my years in the field. His belief in this project and his close reading of drafts of the manuscript were invaluable.

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— Bill Johnston

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**THANK YOU FOR READING!**

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