Notes on Anthony Burgess and Language Teaching

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Notes on Anthony Burgess and Language Teaching

PALMER, Hugh

Anthony Burgess had many careers. A novelist, teacher, librettist, and composer, he was also an accomplished linguist who invented languages for his novel “A Clockwork Orange” and for the movie “Quest for Fire”. He wrote two books on linguistics, both of which emphasized the role of phonology in understanding and appreciating language. His interest in teaching and furthering knowledge of language is an aspect of his career which has been somewhat overlooked. This article will present a brief overview of Burgess's writing and speaking on linguistics, and will attempt to identify some of his most characteristic ideas on the teaching of languages, making reference to his fiction, non-fiction, autobiography and interviews.

“A Clockwork Orange” (1962) is written in a slang dialect of Burgess’s invention, with vocabulary largely borrowed from Russian. In a 1971 interview Burgess stated that his teaching experiences influenced his decision to take the risk of writing a novel in an invented language: “I’ve taught languages in the past, and I know one way of doing it is to frighten the reader at first with a spate of new words, but then gradually to break it down and introduce other new words...” (Ingersoll, p 7) In his autobiography Burgess describes the book as “an exercise in linguistic programming”, in which the reader learns a new vocabulary by encountering new words within a context which gradually clarifies their meaning: “...as the book itself was about brainwashing, it was appropriate that the text itself would be a brainwashing device. The reader would be brainwashed into learning minimal Russian... I would resist to the limit any publishers demand that a glossary be provided. A glossary would disrupt the program.” (Burgess 1990 p 38)

To a much lesser extent there are “programs” of this type working to teach minimal Malay in “The Malay Trilogy” (1956-1959), Russian in “Honey for the Bears” (1962) and Cockney dialect in “The Doctor is Sick” (1960). All these novels present dialog containing a high proportion of non-English or non-standard English words without explicit clarification. In “The Doctor is Sick”, Burgess’s main character Edwin Spindrift gives a short but comprehensive lecture on Cockney dialect to an audience of illegal drinking club habitués, in a scene which works both as comedy and as a preparation for the challenging, phonetically rendered Cockney

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which appears later in the book. Burgess, like his character Spindrift, was fascinated by slang, devoting a whole chapter of “A Mouthful of Air” (1992) to this topic. The cockney conversations in “The Doctor is Sick” are rendered with an exact phonological transcription that creates a series of momentary stumbling blocks for the reader, as for example when a character says “free mance” to mean “three months” (ibid p 97). This can be seen as part of Burgess’s “brainwashing”, in that the reader may be forced to stop and consider obscure expressions which are gradually clarified by context. Burgess may have seen novels as entertainments within which the writer could introduce serious themes- could educate by stealth, as it were- without the reader being aware of being educated.

Burgess very frequently depicted teachers in class in these early novels, most often teaching on subjects he would later write about in his non-fiction. Between 1956 and 1961, five out of six published Burgess novels have a teacher as the main character: the three novels of “The Malay Trilogy”, “The Doctor is Sick”, and “The Worm and the Ring”. All five novels are partly autobiographical, but the character of Spindrift, with his obsession with phonology, semantics, and compulsion to lecture on linguistics, may be the closest Burgess came to satirizing his own pedagogic obsessions.

Before becoming a full-time writer, Burgess taught for eighteen years, first in the army as an instructor, then after the war in grammar schools and colleges until in 1959 he collapsed in the classroom while teaching in Brunei. Diagnosed with inoperable brain cancer, he began writing full-time, but even as he produced new novels at a breakneck pace, writing four novels in 1960 alone, Burgess still found time to write books which explicitly tried to teach about language. The first was “Language made Plain” (1964), a book on linguistics which he later greatly expanded for one of his last books, “A Mouthful of Air” (1992).

The title of “A Mouthful of Air” (hereafter referred to as AMOA) is a reference to the primacy of sound in language. Seven chapters-close to a third of the book- are concerned with phonetics or phonology. Burgess asserts that when learning a foreign language “a knowledge of writing will matter hardly at all.” (AMOA, p 161) He returns to this theme often, and recommends that students learn the International Phonetic Alphabet, while accepting that his is a minority view: “I plead for the introduction of some kind of phonetic study into the English curriculum at all levels...The reader may shudder in advance, but we have to do something about the accurate visualization of speech...” (ibid p11) He was highly critical of the way foreign languages were taught in Britain, and one of his main criticisms was the lack of attention given to second language pronunciation: “Our teaching of foreign pronunciation is farcical... the tyranny of the printed or written word prevails. We forget that language is primarily sounds,
and that sounds existed long before visual signs were invented.” (ibid, p 26)

Both in this book and in the two-part autobiography “Little Wilson and Big God” (1987) (hereafter referred to as LW) and “You’ve had your Time” (1990) (hereafter referred to as YHYT) Burgess writes about his work in Malaya in the 1950’s, when he taught Chaucer to his ESL students in the original Medieval English version. The official curriculum required him to use a translation because educational authorities thought the original would be too difficult for ESL students. However the original version was, by his own account, well-received, largely for phonetic reasons: “Medieval English seemed to them closer to Malay, at least in pronunciation, than the braying, diphthongal instrument of colonial oppression.” (LW, p 392); “(the students) got to the heart of English through its medieval form, when the phonemes were close to their own.” (YHYT, p 362)

Burgess placed great importance on learning pieces of great literature, specifically poetry rather than prose: “the more poems one can learn by heart the better...verse is for learning by heart, and that is what a literary education should mostly consist of.” (ibid, p 97) This was not only for first language students of literature; he also argued that this would foster in second language learners an aesthetic awareness of the qualities of the target language, because poetry is untranslatable in the sense that its special qualities can only be accessed via the original. Characteristically he stressed the importance of pronunciation to learning a second language: “nothing is more important than to acquire a set of foreign phonemes that shall be acceptable to your hosts.” (AMOA, p 161)

He argues that students should be encouraged to read slightly beyond their level: “The big thing is to get them to want to read...reading makes them want to write...reading a book that is officially beyond their powers is in itself an act.” (Ingersoll, p 41) He seems here to be expressing something close to Stephen Krashen’s “input hypothesis”, which proposes that learners progress in their knowledge of the language when they comprehend language input that is slightly more advanced than their current level. He was challenged on this point by an interviewer who asked “How can a book teach someone to talk or write?” His response was partly that: “Reading is only a type of phatic communication....you learn how to write from seeing things written down. You learn how to imitate them...(books)” (ibid p 40). This view seems consistent with Krashen’s idea that “Input is the primary causative variable in second language acquisition.” (Krashen, p 32)

Burgess added several chapters when revising and expanding “Language Made Plain” to write “A Mouthful of Air”. One of the additions is a chapter on linguistics theory in which he accepts the basic soundness of Chomsky’s concept of a basic structural unity for all languages, (AMOA, p 44) with
reservations: “Some of us are not too happy with the assumptions about the “well formed sentence” that have come in with Chomsky.” (ibid p 49) To illustrate this, Burgess cites the examples of Chinese and Malay. In his view, in both of these languages vocabulary plays a more important role than rules of syntax. He sees problems here for Chomskian ideas about universal grammar, and questions what he sees as Chomsky’s assumption that knowledge of grammatical construction constitutes the true mastery of a language. (ibid p 61)

Burgess’s ideas on foreign language learning might appear old-fashioned in the sense that he emphasizes the role of memorization of great works of literature. However, he was intolerant of traditional teaching methods he thought ineffective, was critical of what he saw as an over-emphasis on testing in public schools, (ibid p 41) and lamented what he called the “long tradition of amateurishly incompetent language teaching in (British) schools.” (AMOA p 25) Burgess considered American ESL teaching methods to be superior to British, (LW p 404) but his son Andrea’s experience as a young schoolboy in New York made him also critical of American elementary education. He was unhappy with the graded readers the six-year old was made to read, their limited vocabulary and lack of stimulating content, as he told an American interviewer: “I couldn’t have learned anything from these graded readers they give Andrea...: there is something antihumanistic about education levels, your grading system, your controlled vocabulary...” (Ingersoll p 25) He found the American education system “dishonest”, because in his view it promoted conformism rather than rugged individuality. “(America) doesn’t want the free, individualistic person it pretends to value...its system of education is mechanized...” (ibid p 24)

A recurring Burgess theme is the rejection of a rigid separation between the teaching of English as a first language and the teaching of other languages. His belief in the benefit of a general course that would include instruction on all languages is one of the themes of “A Mouthful of Air”: “This book is trying to hint at the possibility of extending the curricular spot traditionally devoted to...English, into something vaguely termed language.” (AMOA p159) Burgess argues that an understanding of how other languages work enhances ones understanding of ones own language: “We cannot hope to appreciate what our native language is doing unless we understand what language in general is trying to do.” (ibid p 399)

Conversely, when teaching English as a foreign language, it can be appropriate to include some material which would normally be in a first language literary course, even if it is slightly beyond the level of the student.

Burgess would also refer in interviews to his preference for a holistic, cross-disciplinary approach, which he first experienced as a high school pupil at Xaverian College in Manchester. He remembered his teachers taking a free-ranging, digressive and sometimes eccentric approach to the
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curriculum (Ingersoll, p 36), which by his account influenced his approach as a Grammar School teacher: “I’ve had mad teachers all my life. I’m a mad teacher myself. I used to teach my students a little Chinese. This was totally heretical. I also taught them a little about Arabic writing...The most successful ventures I’ve ever had in teaching have usually come from total lack of preparation.” (ibid p 38)

Evidence that Burgess was something of a “mad teacher” long after his full-time teaching career ended is not hard to find in the autobiography, in which the narrative is often suspended for several paragraphs, in some cases for several pages, to digress or expand on a topic in an explicitly pedagogic style. The longer digressions are often on the subject of language teaching. To give a very few examples from the dozens available, there are detailed suggestions on teaching dyslexics reading and writing (LW p 273), tonalism and its importance when teaching Chinese ESL students (ibid p 405), and suggestions on how to teach question tags (ibid p 406). Just as frequent are digressions about language learning. He describes in some detail the significance of double consonants in Roman dialect (YHYT p 242), and mutations in Malay verbs (a lesson reinforced a page later by the use of the Malay verb “menangis” within the narrative without clarification). (LW p 395)

There are also long digressions on literature, most frequently and at greatest length on Burgess’s hero James Joyce, as well as extended discussions on music theory, the possibilities of the musicalization of prose and the use of musical forms in the novel. It is an approach to writing which echoes the cross-disciplinary approach of Burgess’s Xavieran teachers:

“(One teacher) had this wonderful holistic approach, which is what the eccentric teacher can give. He didn’t give a damn about the narrow boundaries of the subject....I’ve learned more from the eccentric teacher, the teacher who gives a fascinating divagation, breaking away from the subject totally ....The kind of teacher who is madly interested in things-who is prepared to break off ....and launch into a tremendous enthusiasm that is quite irrelevant does more than the average teacher to open children’s eyes to the diversity of life.” (Ingersoll, p 36-37)

Burgess taught himself many languages including French, Italian, Malay, Russian, Chinese and Japanese. The autobiography contains several references to the unwillingness of his colonial expatriate teaching colleagues in Malaysia and Brunei to learn the languages of the countries they were working in. The English headmaster of his college in Malaya repeatedly failed to pass his Standard Two Malay, while Burgess passed his Standard Three “with ease” (Biswell p 177) and continued to study until he could debate in Malay. Far from being admired, this “was regarded as a kind of affront” by his fellow colonial functionaries. The insular attitude of the expatriate teachers dictated that “one should do very badly on ones Malay
examinations.” (ibid p 170) His colleagues, he felt, “did not take language learning seriously enough.” (LW p 383) His description of expatriate teachers’ reluctance to learn the local language will be familiar perhaps, to expatriate teachers of English in Japan.

In the autobiography Burgess remembers early classes that were painful experiences, starting with his first teaching job in the army. Ordered to teach map-reading, German and other subjects he barely knew, he struggled to keep the attention of unruly soldiers. The description in the autobiography of being howled down by soldiers in Gibraltar includes suggestions on how to get a disruptive audience’s attention: “The thing to do was grab some (soldier) arbitrarily from the front row and talk to him with whispering earnestness, thus inducing the listening silence of the curious.” When these methods failed however, the hard-drinking Burgess accepted the situation by telling his students “you don’t need me, you need a drink”, and conducting an extra-curricular discussion in a pub. (LW p 307) This and other incidents led to difficulties with his superiors - a recurring theme in Burgess’s teaching career- but despite these frustrations, by his account students came to request his lectures in preference to those of higher-ranked staff. (ibid p 327) Burgess’s love of “digressive” education and dislike of segmented approaches to curricula also caused friction with his superiors in Malaya and Brunei, as did arguments about accommodation, pay, and seniority. (AMOA p 10) His teaching career in Brunei ended with his collapse in 1959 and the diagnosis of a cerebral tumor. Burgess may have fictionalized some details of this “death sentence”, but whatever happened it seems clear that his teaching career was in crisis at this point, effectively ended by a combination of health, temperamental, and personal issues that could not have been resolved. His career as an educator was not quite over, however. After establishing himself as a writer Burgess continued to accept short-term teaching posts and in 1970 was invited to teach at City College in New York. The open-access policy adopted by the school meant that he had to teach students who often had no previous qualifications and who were less motivated and well-behaved than his Malayan and Bruneian students had been. “Catch-22” author Joseph Heller was also teaching at City College that year, and having problems with his unruly students. So was Burgess, as Heller describes:

“They were capable of being very rude.....they’d walk out in the middle of his class, or call him names, or talk back to him constantly...They made fun of his British accent, the way he walked, his enthusiasm for literature... I admired the way Burgess could take even the most hostile of these students seriously. He knew and remembered their names. He gave serious thought to even their most absurd statements. He wanted to...figure out where he might find a hook to reach them and bring about a positive change. I admired that, but I didn’t like it.” (Biswell p 349-350)
Heller himself avoided contact with his students outside of lectures, and his final comment above suggests that for him there was something equivocal and demeaning about a successful writer of serious fiction being this conscientious and patient a teacher. In any event, Burgess's pride in his teaching ability and almost obsessive interest in pedagogy seems unusual if not unique among major writers, not to mention scholars, who value publications and research as a surer path to advancement than in-class skills. To give one example of the impact Burgess could have on classes, on a single day at Chapel Hill University in 1969 he was asked to teach consecutively five different classes on subjects ranging from Chaucer to James Joyce, and gave a typically virtuoso performance: "After five hours of uninterrupted brilliance, without a hesitation or false note to mar the performance, no professor or student dared or desired to say a word...Whenever he lectured in a classroom, this was in fact often the case." (Biswell p 340) Not all colleagues appreciated Burgess's improvisational lecturing skills however: Burgess Biographer Andrew Biswell notes that "Some of the senior professors had their doubts about Burgess and his crowd-pleasing monologues" (ibid p 340) and Burgess would say in a 1981 BBC interview: "I am aware of the disdain on the part of the genuine scholars (in the USA)...I use conjecture and imagination more than a scholar should... I am not a scholar." Despite these reservations Burgess seriously considered accepting a professorship at Columbia University which was offered to him in 1972. He described this as “a tempting offer that still haunts me” (YHYT p 288) However, he preferred the freedom of being a freelance writer and occasionally teaching when he felt like it. His pedagogic instinct distinguishes him from other contemporary teacher-novelists like Nabokov and Kingsley Amis, who never returned to teaching once their writing careers were established. Burgess was motivated to teach and write about language and literature long after achieving success as a novelist and screenwriter, and he continued to pursue pedagogy through writing on linguistics and literature until the end of his life.

Burgess's interests are probably too eclectic - from philology and phonetics to ESL and comparative literature - to be discussed in terms of any particular academic group or language theory, although his ideas on the teaching of literature have some similarities with those of the “New Criticism” group which was associated with TS Eliot and which was most influential during the period Burgess was an undergraduate at Manchester University. A theme he returns to often is the importance of a knowledge of phonetics and how sounds are produced in speech. There has been relatively little interest in this among teachers of English either as a first or second language, with a perceived lack of student interest being a common objection. For researchers, phonetics tends to be seen as peripheral aspect of linguistics, possibly because it is
perceived as not lending itself to any coherent theory. Burgess’s interest in ESL also marginalizes him, as this has not been a fashionable field within academia.

Perhaps the most significant theme in Burgess’s writing on languages and education is the belief that a standard education should require more diverse and demanding elements than are found in many standard curricula, for example, teaching English students to write their names in Arabic and Chinese, or having fourteen-year old grammar school students write interior monologs in the style of James Joyce, and free verse in the style of T.S. Eliot, as he did at Bamber Grammar School in the 1950’s. (Ingersoll p 39) “The important subjects, one finds, are not included in the curriculum. The areas where customs meet, where languages meet, these are not taught in segmented education.” (ibid p 38)

This is a view of education which would appear to have limited influence among public education policy makers and professionals, to say the least. In the last decade however, evidence has emerged to support the view that the benefits of greater teacher independence within a loosely-defined curriculum might gain wider acceptance in the future. In Finland, unusually among western countries, teachers are given a great deal of autonomy within a relatively decentralized education system, while students take only one mandatory standardized test at the age of sixteen. (Antikainen and Lukkainen p 2) Since 2000, Finland has consistently scored at or near the top of the OECD’s PISA assessment, higher than countries with more centralized, evaluation-driven education programs, including countries with similar demographics such as Norway.

What relevance can Burgess’s ideas have to teachers working within contemporary data-centric, test-driven public education programs? Burgess is perhaps so singular a figure that it is difficult to apply his ideas in a systematic way to illustrate a useful model for education specialists. His extreme erudition and virtuosity of in-class improvisation makes him problematic as a model for other teachers, because what applies to the exceptional teacher may not apply to the average teacher, and in any case exceptional classroom skills do not necessarily lead to influence within the educational establishment, or even with other teachers: “A teacher can be thought outstanding...without being thought to have made a single contribution to knowledge of teaching in general.” (Lortie p 241)

What may be most useful for educationalists to consider is Burgess’s commitment to a holistic, free-ranging, cross-disciplinary approach to language and literature in which the teacher can decide methods and choose materials as he or she sees fit. It seems clear that Burgess believed giving sufficiently talented teachers the flexibility to teach a loosely-defined curriculum would often serve students better than a specialized, centralized approach. The recent successes of Finnish students in international tests compared to
students in other western countries where the curriculum is more evaluation-driven and centralized, suggest that quantifiable evidence for the benefits of giving teachers more freedom to define priorities may finally be available to us, and that Burgess’s holistic approach to languages and education may yet find more recognition and influence in the countries in which he taught than it did during his long life as a teacher.

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