

Values in English Language Teaching

Shavkatjonova Maftuna Furkatovna

Teacher of Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages

Abstract: Teaching English (ELT) is not just a matter of teaching students a certain set of skills. On the contrary, the ELT profession is deeply embedded in values, and these values are also complex and have dilemmas and contradictions. This article offers an expanded analysis of the underlying values of our work on ELT. I believe that many teachers will resonate with what I say with their own experiences and perspectives; I hope so, and I don't believe what I'm writing here is "new," meaning no one thought of it before. However, according to my knowledge of ELT literature, these issues are rarely raised in professional communication in our field and are not given due attention.

Keywords: English, teaching methods, values, history.

Introduction

Some years ago my friend Peter was teaching English to a senior class of Palestinian and Jordanian students in a college of education in Jordan. One of his students was uncooperative and unfriendly; despite both encouragement and warnings, he did little work and made hardly any progress. When the end of the year came, and following a dismal performance on the final examination, Peter did not hesitate to give this student a failing grade. After Peter had completed his grading, he met with the head of his department to go over the grades assigned. When the case of the weak student came up, there was a long silence. The head of department eventually said something like, "Well, if that's the grade you've assigned...." There was another silence. Peter asked what he meant. The head of department explained, all the while asserting his respect for Peter's decision, that a failing grade would mean that this student, a Palestinian from the occupied West Bank who had been away from his family for 4 years, would now have to return to Israel and would not be allowed to leave the country again. His chances for employment would be severely affected. "However, this is your decision," said the head of department. Peter resolutely refused to change the grade, saying, rightly, that the student did not deserve a higher grade. A series of long, uncomfortable silences ensued. At no point did the head of department threaten or challenge Peter. In the end, however, Peter changed his mind and gave the student a passing grade.

This story is an example of the centrality of values in second language teaching. I believe that every teacher will recognize in this story the elements of situations they themselves have experienced. In a literal sense, many of us have found ourselves giving a student a grade different from that which the student deserved. More generally, I believe that every one of us has experienced situations in which the values that we hold turn out to be in conflict. (Incidentally, though I have changed Peter's name, this story, and every other example given in this book, is taken from real life. I have not made up any examples for the purpose of illustrating a point—rather, I have taken the stories themselves as starting points.)

In this particular story, it seems to me that two of Peter's most profoundly held beliefs are in conflict. On the one hand, he holds a professional belief (which I think many teachers will recognize and share) that it is right and good to give students a score or grade that accurately

represents their level of achievement, and that it is morally wrong to give a student a grade (whether higher or lower) that he or she does not deserve. But another value that Peter holds dear (and which I would also want to claim for my own) is that, whether as a teacher or as a person, it is good to help others in whatever way one can, and it is bad to create problems for someone or cross his or her plans when one is in a position to be of assistance. In the story about the Palestinian student, these two values are in conflict; whatever the solution, Peter's values will be denied in some way. In addition, of course, this rendering of the issue is grossly oversimplistic. In reality, Peter found himself dealing with a vast array of factors, including the personality of the student in question, his relations with his director, his relations with his other students, and the entire complexity of the social and political context.¹

For me, stories such as this one go to the very heart of the work of teaching. I am fascinated by this kind of story, and I have found that other teachers too find them compelling; they somehow capture a deeply meaningful aspect of what we do. Yet although many, many teachers I have spoken to remember incidents like this with extraordinary clarity and regard them as crucial in their own professional development, such stories, and the conflicts of values they raise, are never mentioned in books on language teaching methodology—for example, the kinds of books one reads and studies in methods courses during teacher education programs. These books show us good ways to encourage fluency in our students, teach us useful techniques for reading activities or how to use video, and help us think about motivating our learners, but they never address the kinds of tough decision that Peter faced.

Part of the reason for this is that it is very hard to write or speak about such situations. They are highly complex and fraught with ambiguities; furthermore, unlike certain aspects of language pedagogy, it is impossible to produce generalized solutions—each individual situation has to be understood in its own terms. Moreover, in most situations of this kind the application of logic or of “scientific” knowledge is of limited use. To put it plainly, no amount of empirical research will ever answer the question of what Peter should have done. The solution has to be an individual one, dependent on this particular teacher in this particular context, and it rests ultimately not on logic or propositional knowledge but on *belief*: the teacher's belief that he is doing the right thing.

¹This reading of the situation, of course, is my own. This fact was brought home to me when I showed Peter a draft of this chapter. While acknowledging that I was entitled to my own interpretation, Peter stated clearly that “I don't recognize the second value that you name as one that was on my mind in that situation.” He went on to say that reading my account of his dilemma led him to reflect further on the incident and that his own view of it now is as follows:

I was unsure of my right to insist on the primacy of a principle that I had been brought up to believe in, in the face of a moral, social, and political context that was too big and unfamiliar for me to claim knowledge of. I felt inadequate to insist on doing what I thought to be right in the context of what I did not know. If I were to be accused of bottling it, ducking the virtuous act for the popular one, I could not credibly defend myself. From that perspective, I used my ignorance to excuse myself doing an easy wrong. I certainly cannot claim to have served the Palestinian cause by facilitating the qualification of a morose, antisocial and, as far as I could tell, unintelligent youth as a language teacher. The kinder light on the situation is that I paused long enough to entertain the doubt that the cultural and educational certainties of a 21-year-old Brit might not encompass the basis for all actions across the world and, having paused, the doubt won the day.

I cite Peter's reflections at such length both because they are intrinsically of great value and because they remind me of how hard it can be to speak for others accurately and fairly.

I believe that this kind of story is in fact central to language teaching and to the lives of teachers. Important as teaching methods are, teaching is not ultimately just about methods or the efficient psycholinguistic learning of the language by students. Rather, as Peter's story suggests, it is about our relation with our students as people, with the way we treat them. I have been a teacher myself for twenty years now; the more I teach, and the more I work with teachers and talk with them, the more firmly I have come to the conviction that what we do in classrooms (and outside of them) is fundamentally rooted in the values we hold and in the relation we have with our students.

In this book, then, I aim to explore this dimension of language teaching, which is central to our work but has gone largely ignored until now. I look at the ways in which values, and clashes of values, inhere in everything we do as teachers. I try to provide a language with which to talk about these values and these clashes. And I will encourage you, the reader, to become aware of the values implicit in your own work and to examine these values critically in light of your teaching situation.

The topics I raise in this book are very difficult and very personal; they are likely, as the phrase has it, to push some buttons. I make no apology for this, because I believe that, although these are difficult and controversial issues, they are also essential for a full understanding of our work as language teachers. I believe that a significant part of professional growth comes from the courage to tackle difficult topics, for these are of-ten also the topics that are most important to us. This book is my attempt to sustain such an engagement and to share it with fellow professionals.

At the same time, I acknowledge that my own take on these matters—for example, on situations such as Peter's dilemma, or the many other stories I tell in this book—is highly personal. I want to state clearly that I do not have an agenda in terms of specific values; I do not write from a particular religious or ethical standpoint. I simply believe that these matters are worth talking about. My agenda, then, is to open up aspects of our work to discussion that I believe have been ignored until now in the professional discourse of ELT. In this book I suggest many aspects of language teaching that I believe you ought to think *about*, but I will not tell you *what* to think about them. In doing so I also wish to try to reclaim the use of the term *moral* by those of us who think in moral terms yet do not necessarily align ourselves with particular religious or political factions. My goal is to reveal the value-laden nature of our work in the language classroom and to provide tools for analyzing that work. It is my firm belief that each individual teacher must face her own moral dilemmas in her own way. By the same token, I am not recommending or arguing for any particular teaching methodology but for a way of *seeing* the classroom. Whether change follows as a result of this different way of seeing is a matter for the individual teacher to know.

To state my basic case very briefly, language teaching, like all other teaching, is fundamentally moral, that is, value laden, in at least three crucial ways. First, teaching is rooted in relation, above all the relation between teacher and student; and relation, in turn—the nature of our interactions with our fellow humans—is essentially moral in character. This was seen clearly in Peter's dilemma. Second, all teaching aims to change people; any attempt to change another person has to be done with the assumption, usually implicit, that the change will be for the better.² Matters of what is good and bad, better or worse, are moral matters. Third, although “science” in the form of research in various disciplines (second language acquisition, education, sociology, etc.) can give us some pointers, in the overwhelming majority of cases it cannot tell us exactly how to run our class. Thus, the decisions we make as teachers—what homework to assign, how to grade student writing, what to do about the disruptive student in the back row—ultimately also have to be based on moral rather than objective or scientific principles: That is, they have to be based on what we believe is right and good—for each student, for the whole class, and sometimes for ourselves. I elaborate on each of these arguments in the course of the book; each, I believe, applies to teaching in general. In

addition, as I explain later, language teaching in particular has its own characteristic moral issues with which to deal.

The Nature of Morality in Teaching

Before I go on, I should clarify what I mean by *morality*. This is a notoriously difficult and dangerous term, all the more so because it is used so widely, and, as with any term or concept, once academics get their hands on it the picture becomes even murkier.

In this book I shall follow my earlier work on morality in teaching (e.g., Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002). I use *morality* to refer to that (whether more or less coherent) set of a person's beliefs which are evaluative in nature, that is, which concern matters of what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. I further take morality to be both individual and social. It is individual in that all moral beliefs are mediated through particular people—there is no “morality” without it being instantiated by individuals. It is social in two important senses. First, strong social forces operate on individual moralities, in the form of religious, political, and other beliefs that are shared to a greater or lesser extent by groups of people and encoded in various forms—for example, in religious texts. Second, although the moral values that a person holds may in some abstract sense be independent of those around her, in practice our morality becomes interesting only when our values are played out in social settings—when our inner beliefs are converted into actions that affect others.

Rather than worrying about the extent to which morality is individual or social—that is, seeing this as an either-or choice—I suggest that in fact morality exists precisely in the interplay between the personal and the social.

In this respect, my vision of morality is reminiscent of recent accounts of culture (e.g., Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Strauss & Quinn 1997) in which culture, traditionally an impersonal thing outside the individual, is instead seen as both a cognitive and a social force. Strauss and Quinn (1997), for example, argued that cultural meanings cannot be explained “unless we see them as created and maintained in the interaction between the extrapersonal and intrapersonal realms” (p. 8); they wrote further that although “the dynamics of these realms are different,” the boundary between them is ²This is an educational application of Aristotle's claim, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that “every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good” (Aristotle, 1926, p. 1).

very much “permeable” (p. 8). My view of morality offers a parallel with Strauss and Quinn's vision of cultural meanings: I see morality as neither a purely individual nor a purely social phenomenon but as existing at the meeting point between the individual and the social, of cognition and community. Furthermore, also like culture, it is not a fixed set of values but, while it may have certain relatively firmly anchored points, to a significant extent it is negotiated both within the individual and between individuals. This was clearly the case in Peter's dilemma: His decision was a moral one, but it emerged from the interplay between the beliefs and values that he brought to the situation and a highly complex set of factors arising from the social and political environment in which he found himself.

This brings me to another characteristic of morality as I conceive it in this book. Although certain beliefs may be absolute, I see most moral issues (dilemmas, conflicts, problems) as being fundamentally dependent on context; that is, because morality exists at the intersection between inner beliefs and social situations, the nature of those situations is of crucial importance. I follow Nel Noddings (1984) in believing that morality is deeply colored by “the uniqueness of human encounters” (p. 5). In this book, the discussion of moral values centers around real-life situations from the work of language teachers. I believe strongly that morality cannot in any interesting or

meaningful sense be reduced to unconditional rules of the type “always do *X*” or “one should never do *X* to *Y*.”

Let me give an example of the way in which moral judgments are fundamentally affected by context. A few years ago, a Korean woman whom I will call Hae-young took my methods class. Hae-young chose to write her final paper on whole-language instruction. Though I take a process-writing approach with assignments such as this one, Hae-young was very late in giving me even the first draft; it was almost the end of the semester. The paper she gave me was perhaps two thirds taken word for word from the sources she had used, often without acknowledgment. In other words, it seemed to be a clear case of plagiarism. I had encountered a similarly egregious case a couple of years before, in which a Japanese student had copied long passages from a textbook. I was angry with that student and, generally speaking, I have little sympathy for those guilty of plagiarism. But I somehow felt that Hae-young’s case was different. I called her to my office and explained the problem with her paper. Hae-young seemed genuinely surprised by what I had to say; though I cannot prove it, I was convinced that her bewilderment was real. She truly did not understand the American requirement that the language of a paper be her own, especially since she was largely just reporting on the research and opinions of others. She had time to go through one round of revisions before the end of the semester. The new version of the paper was still 50% acknowledged or unacknowledged quotations.

At this point, the deadline for final drafts was well passed, yet something led me to continue working with Hae-young. We met again, went through more revisions, then again, and then again. In all, Hae-young went through five or six versions of her paper, as our work together extended way beyond the end of the class; both of us seemed determined to get it right. In the end, Hae-young finally produced a paper that was, in my estimation, her work rather than a patchwork of the work of others; both of us breathed a sigh of relief.

The reason I tell this story now is to show what I mean by the contextually dependent nature of moral decision making in teaching. If I had acted according to the university regulations—which from a moral standpoint represent a way of treating all students equally—or if I had followed the ethical guidelines relating to plagiarism, I would not have given Hae-young an extra chance. I did what I did because from all that I could see, Hae-young’s failure to write in the required manner was due not to laziness or a desire to deceive but to a genuine ignorance of U.S. academic expectations. (Pennycook [1996] has laid these issues out very clearly in an article published since the incident with Hae-young took place.) I made a moral decision to give her some leeway because I saw it as an educational opportunity, a chance for her to learn those expectations. For me, the educational value of leading Hae-young to this understanding outweighed the value of fairness in dealing with all students equally. In doing what I did, I had to accept that Hae-young could develop only from where she was and that to help her I had to practice what Noddings (1984) called motivational displacement: the ability “to see the other’s reality as a possibility for my own” (p. 14). In this, I had to accept that the problem could not be fixed by merely rewriting but had to be reached organically by Hae-young herself—a process that took us far beyond the limits of the 15 weeks that the academy had laid out for learning to occur. I believe my decision was the right one; but it could be made only by taking into account all that I knew of Hae-young as a person and the nature of our educational relation in the class concerned, that is, the “uniqueness of human encounters.” No abstract principle—for example, about how to handle plagiarism—could have led me to do what I did.

To return to the discussion about the nature of morality in teaching, the story of Hae-young brings me to a point I have already mentioned and that I think is illustrated in this story: In the decision-making processes of teaching, somewhere along the road rationality ceases to operate effectively.

While many attempts at a rational morality have been made by philosophers (e.g., Gert, 1988, 1998), decisions and actions are motivated ultimately not by reason alone but also by beliefs held by individuals that cannot be based in or justified by reason alone. I call these kinds of belief *faith*, because they are based on a kind of trust we have in our own instincts, often bolstered by our personal experiences but rarely in the certainty that, for example, scientific knowledge can bring.

For instance, in my own teaching I am rather lax about deadlines: I rarely if ever penalize students for handing in written work late, so long as they let me know that they have to do so. I am not aware of any research literature that suggests that my practice (or the opposite, i.e., being strict about deadlines) has any influence one way or the other on students' learning. I do what I do because, for a variety of reasons, I *believe* it is the right thing to do. I believe that students' time and nervous energy are best spent producing a good paper rather than worrying about a usually artificial deadline, and I do not see my role as preparing teachers for expectations beyond the university (where deadlines are in many cases also routinely missed), but rather follow Dewey in seeing what we do in our own educational setting as being of value in itself and not merely a preparation for something else. However, I have no absolute authority to which I can turn to prove that the way I believe in is in fact the right and good way to deal with students. It may be that I am doing them a disservice by not being stricter. In fact, I think that it is impossible ever to know objectively whether I am right. I only have my own faith that I am doing the right thing.

This is the kind of educational belief I am talking about. In fact, much of what I (and, I think, others too) do as a teacher is grounded in certain beliefs that cannot be reached by reason. In this lie both the importance and the danger of acknowledging the centrality of morality in teaching: We recognize that our deepest and best instincts as teachers arise from belief or faith rather than from pure logic, yet by the same token we are deprived of the best tool we have for evaluating those instincts. This is a fundamental dilemma that informs all debate on morality in social settings such as teaching.

Furthermore, as my colleague Cary Buzzelli and I have pointed out (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002), in educational contexts (as in others) morality has two other characteristics. First, it is highly complex: Even if we assumed that the morality of a particular individual is a reasonably straightforward thing (which it most certainly is not), in any given classroom the teacher is dealing not just with her own moral values but those of 20 or 30 other individuals, who are often themselves in the midst of moral growth and moral confusion. Second, in the overwhelming majority of cases it is run through with ambiguity. Teaching as an occupation involves constant rapid decision making. Many, if not most, of those decisions are moral in nature (e.g., the decision made by Peter, and the decisions I made with regard to Hae-young). However, these decisions are rarely if ever clear-cut; we rarely if ever have sufficient information to be completely sure of our decision, for the simple reason that no amount of information is ever enough. Indeed, in most morally ambiguous situations more information often clouds the issue even further. The simple decision of which students to devote one's special attention to is a moral decision, but it is also a moral dilemma. Spending time with a student is in most cases a good thing, yet to spend time with one student is not to spend it with others, and since the teacher's time, energy, and resources are always limited, the decision of which students need more attention is a moral one of determining whose need is the greatest and even how need is to be determined.

In this book, then, I interpret *morality* as the interplay between our personal, inner beliefs about what is right and wrong and good and bad (beliefs that are often, but not always, influenced by sociocultural values) and the social situations in which those beliefs play out. That is, morality is both individual (cognitive) and cultural (social) in nature. Furthermore, morality is deeply affected by context and at all times is both complex and ambiguous.

Ethics, Values, and Ideology

If *morality* is a difficult term, then *values* is even more problematic. One leading moral philosopher wrote bluntly: “I find it difficult to find a philosophical use for the noun ‘value’ that is not more clearly served by the words ‘good,’ ‘bad,’ ‘harm’ and ‘benefit’ and related terms like ‘better’ and ‘worse’” (Gert, 1998, p. 94). Gert (1998) went on to acknowledge that the word is widely used but claimed that he does not understand these uses. However, as a nonphilosopher I am less confused by everyday uses of the term, or by its use, for example, in Julian Edge’s (1996a) article entitled “Cross-Cultural Paradoxes in a Profession of Values,” to which I refer more than once in this book. However, I believe that what Edge (1996a) referred to is the same thing that I call the *morality of teaching*; and, more generally speaking, I take the term *values* to refer to beliefs about what is right and good—the same meaning I have assigned to *morality*. This is close to the kinds of definitions used in research on values in education (Stephenson, Ling, Burman, & Cooper, 1998): for example, that values are “those beliefs held by individuals to which they attach special priority or worth, and by which they tend to order their lives” (Hill, 1991, cited in Ling & Stephenson, 1998, p. 3). Thus, in this book I use *morality* and *values* interchangeably, using the latter not just for stylistic variety but also to make connections with work such as Edge’s and research in general education.

I also wish to clarify one distinction: that between morality and ethics. For philosophers, these two terms are generally interchangeable; *morality* is the subject of the branch of philosophy known as *ethics*. However, in professions such as teaching and research, the term *ethics* has taken on a more specific meaning: It refers to codified standards and rules governing professional practice. In this understanding, the difference between morality and ethics is that

References

1. Allwright, D., & Lenzuen, R. (1997). Exploratory practice: Work at the Cultura Inglesa, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *Language Teaching Research*, 1, 73–79.
2. Amirault, C. (1995). The good teacher, the good student: Identifications of a student teacher. In J. Gallop (Ed.), *Pedagogy: The question of impersonation* (pp. 64–78). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
3. Argyris, C., & Schön, D.A. (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
4. Aristotle (1926). *The Nicomachean ethics* (H. Rackham, trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
5. Auerbach, E.R., & Paxton, D. (1997). “It’s not the English thing”: Bringing reading research into the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 237–261.
6. Ayers, W. (1993). *To teach: The journey of a teacher*. New York: Teachers College Press.
7. Bailey, K.M., & Nunan, D. (Eds.). (1996). *Voices from the language classroom*.
8. Bakhtin, M.M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination* (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, trans.).
9. Ball, S.J. (Ed.). (1990). *Foucault and education: Disciplines and knowledge*. London: Routledge.
10. Boshell, M. (in press). What I learned from giving quiet children space. In K.E. Johnson & P.R. Golombek (Eds.), *Teachers’ ways of knowing: Narrative inquiry as professional development*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press,
11. Branscombe, N.A., Goswami, D., & Schwartz, J. (1992). *Students teaching, teachers learning*.

ISSN 2792-1883 (online), Published in Vol: 2 No: 6 for the month of Jun-2022

Copyright (c) 2022 Author (s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann.

12. Brown, H.D. (1994). *Teaching by principles. An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
13. Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*.
14. Buzzelli, C.A., & Johnston, B. (2002). *The moral dimensions of teaching: Language, power, and culture in classroom interaction*. New York: Routledge Falmer.
15. Cole, D.J., Ryan, C.W., & Kick, F. (1995). *Portfolios across the curriculum and beyond*.
16. Coleman, H. (Ed.). (1996), *Society and the language classroom*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
17. Crookes, G., & Lehner, A. (1998). Aspects of process in an ESL critical pedagogy teacher education course. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32, 319–328.