

Language and learners

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Writings on Life, Language and Learning, 1958-2008

Harold Rosen (edited and with an introduction by John Richmond)

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To begin on a personal note, I met Harold Rosen for the first time as one of a formidable trio of tutors, along with Jane Miller and Margaret Spencer, on my MA at the Institute of Education in 1984-5. I met him for the last time at a memorial meeting in 2005 for the Battle of Cable Street, a battle that he, as a 16 year old Jewish boy, had fought in. These two encounters encapsulate his political combativity and theoretical clarity. Rarely do the academic and the political activist cohabit, but in the classical Marxist tradition Rosen invariably brought educational theory to bear on the practice, particularly of English teaching, in an environment that was increasingly hostile to anything progressive. He was also renowned for his collaborative work with colleagues and in doing so he eschewed the egotistical elitism of ivory tower academics.

John Richmond, himself a teacher, researcher and writer of distinction, has done us and the study of educational theory and practice a great service by compiling this diverse collection of Rosen's writing. The wide range of the output is reflected in the structure of the book. Richmond has divided his volume into three parts: "The Politics of Language and English Teaching", "The Role of Language in Learning" and, finally, "Story". Each part is interspersed with "interludes" of Rosen's own personal and mainly autobiographical writing. Richmond provides a valuable contextualisation as a preface to each individual piece of writing. In his short but incisive introduction he summarises the trajectory of Rosen's work:

In fact, within the parabola of Harold's writing, thought and activity can be seen a change—often an angry change, expressed in defiant terms—from the essentially forward-looking, ground-gaining, progress-making tone of his early work which saw clearly what was wrong with the territory into which he had come, and what needed changing, to the bitter but never defeated realisation that ground gained is not ground won for ever; that the forces of ignorant, retrospective reaction can and will take that ground back, given that they have the power to do so (p3).

This parabola reflects a political context which stretches through the 1960s and 1970s, a period of innovation and progress in education and specifically

English teaching, through to the sustained attacks on comprehensive provision of the Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair years. This assault was signalled by James Callaghan in his infamous speech at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1976 which fired the starting gun for a full-frontal offensive against “progressivism”.

The constraints of a short review of this nature make it impossible to do justice to the whole of this collection and I will only be able to discuss a few of the articles that most resonated with my own development as an English teacher in inner city schools and colleges. But it is important to make one key initial observation. The inclusion of Rosen’s personal writing makes this volume a joy to read and was a real eye-opener for someone like me who was acquainted only with his work on linguistic theory and the development of English teaching in schools. The story of comrade Rosie Rosen, Harold’s mum, and her incursion into County Hall to do battle with bureaucracy to get young Harold a place in school is at once hilarious, and also revealing of Rosen’s pedigree. Like mother, like son.

The section on “The Politics of Language and English Teaching” is characterised by its interventionist critique of a range of government initiatives into the teaching of English during the Thatcher years. The successive attempts to impose a “model” of English that had to be transmitted to pupils by teachers is described in Rosen’s inaugural professorial lecture as a combination of “mystification”, “oppressiveness”, “subordination” and “control”. His forensic response to the myriad government inquiries and committees combines an understanding that the definition of “English” is a political as well as a linguistic endeavour.

But pride of place should go to an earlier article that had immense impact on teachers of English in the inner cities. Indeed, my first encounter with his work was Rosen’s critique of the theories of Basil Bernstein published as *Language and Class* in 1972. It is not an exaggeration to say that this almost “samizdat” pamphlet, reprinted in this collection, became the rallying point for a whole generation of English teachers who were committed to the education of working class children. Bernstein had attempted to shift the arguments about the failure of working class pupils in conventional educational terms away from discussions of “intelligence” and on to “language”. Richmond describes it succinctly: “The language which these children inherited from their families and their upbringing equipped them badly for dealing with the abstractions, the conceptualisations, the generalisations and the distinctions which were the stock in trade of the conventional curriculum” (p20). This inability, which supposedly led to their underachievement, was because they operated in a “restricted code” of language while “middle class” children operated in an “elaborated code”. The dualism of the two codes rapidly became the received wisdom of the educational establishment.

Rosen took issue with this very static and mechanical definition of class in relation to language as well as arguing that there was no linguistic analysis or rationale that could justify such a crude binary characterisation. He contended that language was itself a weapon of political control:

Much of the language which the working class encounter in their daily lives is transmitted to them through a variety of agencies not under their control, which deploy a language designed to mystify, intimidate and to create a sense that the present arrangement of society is immutable...the linguistic capital of the dominant culture is persistently overvalued and that of the dominated culture persistently undervalued (p26).

And that Bernstein's theory omits the language of the organisations created and maintained by the working class themselves. Rosen not only demolishes Bernstein's stereotyping of "class", but also deploys Pierre Bourdieu to argue that Bernstein's sociology of language tends to ignore the social conditions from which that system of attitudes arises and which orders, among other things, the structure of language. The irony is that Bernstein had written an important article in *New Society* entitled "Education Cannot Compensate for Society" before he went on to publish his distinctly compensatory model of language. According to Bernstein, because "working class" language was deficient working class pupils had to be inducted into the "elaborated code" in order to achieve. Rosen's pamphlet concludes with reference to the real research into working class language by William Labov in *The Logic of Non-Standard English*, a seminal text which demonstrated that young black children in the Lower East Side of New York were more than capable of conceptualising and generalising their conditions in language.

The section on "The Role of Language in Learning" includes Rosen's essay on "The Politics of Writing" which contains a trenchant critique of genre theory—a more sophisticated version of the deficit model of language. Rosen argues that in any form of writing there is a tension between what you wanted to say and what you knew were the expectations of how you should say it. Genres—forms of discourse or kinds of writing—were described in a way that eliminated this tension. The proponents of genre theory argued that different kinds of writing are fixed, formalised and codified, hence the learning of genres involves an increasing loss of creativity on the child's part and a subordination of the child's creative abilities to the demands of the genre. This gloomily deterministic view had clear implications for teachers and, in later years, underpinned Blair's literacy strategy. The overriding need for schools is the induction of the child into this closed system. Rosen acknowledges that genre theory understood that all forms of literacy are part of a child's socialisation, but its determinism negated the possibility of these

forms being subverted or undermined. Rosen argues in a much more dialectical way that:

The legitimised forms of writing are in fact constantly being eroded and undermined—and not just by children—just as are other powerful social norms, the family, for instance. Writing is a site of conflict, and ferocious play goes on within its boundaries. Old forms die out and new ones appear, others are in a state of flux (p351).

In other words, written language is as much an arena of struggle as any other aspect of society. Rosen draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* which argues that there are two forces at work in language—centripetal and centrifugal. The former pulls us towards a centre of prescribed norms while the latter pulls us away from the normative centre.

This analysis lies at the heart of Rosen's pedagogy. The starting point for any teaching of English has to be respect for the language of the child, not the established language practices of society. While we cannot totally escape the centripetal pull we must not accept its immutability:

On the contrary, it is necessary to insist again and again on the need to disrupt the authoritative voice with the unheard voices of our students, to help them engage in the difficult struggle (so difficult for all of us) to articulate, develop, refine and advance their meanings as against the mere reproduction of the words of the textbook, the worksheet, the encyclopaedia and the guides (p356).

In an era when government directives go to the ridiculous lengths of obsessing about the correct shape of the tail on a semi-colon as used by 11-year-olds, Rosen's rallying call can still inform the teaching of English. Despite the constraints that are imposed on teachers there is still room for oppositional practices. This indispensable volume of Rosen's writings can act as an inspiration to all. It should be required reading not just for pleasure (and there is much here that is immensely pleasurable) but as a guide to action that is theoretically rooted and politically trenchant.