

Two Letters from England

David Howard

I: Life is But a Simulation

In May the Journal received a junkmail packet from Robert Seatter, "ELT Promotion Controller" for the Publishing Division of Cambridge University Press. The cover letter is Mr Seatter's 'promo' for the "enclosed presentation copy" of Ideas (Leo Jones 1984). He calls it, "a stimulating collection of absorbing activities designed to improve the listening and speaking abilities of students at the level of the Cambridge First Certificate of English examination."

The most outrageously insulting claim made for Ideas is that it "contains... simulated-authentic recordings." In the first place, Ideas does not contain any recordings at all. The cassettes that the text makes copious reference to, and that would of course be indispensable for a minimally informed Journal review (which is what Seatter explicitly solicits), are "contained" only as an accessory listed on the book jacket, where their price is not given.

Much more disturbing than the lie is the contempt CUP's ELT controller shows for human reason. Never mind referring to something that does not really exist (the allegedly enclosed cassettes); Seatter refers to something that could not exist, even in theory, in any possible world.

Philosophers who talk about 'possible worlds' like those of dreams or fictional imagination, agree that there could be a possible universe inhabited, for example, by giant, Presbyterian-Martian squirrels. None, however, could contain tall-short people, square circles or simulated-authenticity. What is real cannot at the same time be simulated; what is simulated cannot at the same time be the real thing - any more than Sunday can be

Tuesday. This is the case in Cambridge, on Mars or in a fairy tale. A simulated-authentic recording is rather like a fictional, true story; real, imitation leather; or 100% pure, contaminated air. "Possible worlds" are governed by the principles of logic that make human thought and communication possible. The rest is not silence but, in communication theory, 'noise'; in plain language, nonsense. If Seatter does not strike us as being out of his mind and 'authentic simulation' as impossible as "I'll see you yesterday," it is only because Information, Inc. (of which the advertising industry is a major shareholder) has assaulted us so long with this kind of discourse that we no longer can defend ourselves against it. This is exactly what Big Brother does with the language Orwell called 'Newspeak' in 1984.

Although after 'square circles' (or in Orwell's terms "love is hate, war is peace"), almost anything is anticlimactic, Seatter does not hesitate to spew forth additional nonsense. This time it is tautology. Ideas is "a stimulating collection of absorbing activities" that (in the next sentence) "contains motivating and enjoyable tasks." Unless you make an obvious distinction (that escapes me) between "stimulating activities" and "motivating tasks," we are up against a set of activities A that is A. In other words, A group of 'ideas' (or texts, pages, activities) is (nothing less than!) ideas. Ideas are ideas. Apples are apples. Wednesday is not Thursday; it is Wednesday! That is the most sympathetic interpretation available for Mr Seatter. Actually, I think it is a bit worse. He seems to be saying the equivalent of, "This is my car which contains my car" or "This house has a kitchen which contains the kitchen." A set - A whose members "include" itself. Mindboggling!

Seatter is also just plain repetitive. We get a "wide variety of texts" and a "wide range of photos, advertisements, maps and drawings." All in the same sentence. One wonders just how vast a range and variety of 'motivating, stimulating, absorbing, enjoyable tasks and activities' you can stuff into 113 drastically overpriced pages. Again, Seatter would never get away with these statements if we were not already so used to absurd exaggeration in advertising. One thing is to lie about something that supposedly happened

far away in time and space; quite another to make stupid claims that are immediately refuted by the evidence in hand.

In the same vein (and the same sentence) we learn that Ideas has a "highly visual presentation." Now, in ordinary English 'visual' as an adjective means something you see, as opposed to say 'non-visual' phenomena which might be aural,-something you hear. 'Highly aural' might mean 'loud'. Is "highly visual" then dazzling? Like gazing into the sun? Giving the author the benefit of the fairly substantial doubt,¹ perhaps by "highly visual" he means, of high resolution, with a great deal of intense color,-something like that. If we want to make the best possible case for Seatter, maybe he meant to say, 'with a wealth of exceptional illustrations'. Why wouldn't he say it that way then? But even assuming that Mr Seatter does not want to say the impossible again, but merely has serious deficiencies in expressing his 'ideas', then the "highly visual" claim is just another lie. The truth is that Ideas has substandard to run-of-the-mill photos, maps, etc. And they are all black and white.

I hope it is clear that criticizing CUP's moronic hype, which also appears on the jacket cover in more or less the same words,² should in no way reflect on Prof. Jones' book. Although I do not really have time to give this "ideal preparation" (yes, it is still the same sentence) "for the oral/aural parts of the First Certificate examination" the attention it surely deserves, I do not doubt that Jones has ideas. Good ones! Nor do I doubt that, given the right conditions, they could help students pass the Cambridge exam (assuming they have invested the requisite fortune in previous training and pre-paid the exam fees to the same Cambridge address).

¹I have heard statements like, "He's a very visually oriented child" which are to mean something like, 'more sensitive to' or 'more appreciative of' visual phenomenon than the average child.

²Which suggests that Mr Seatter has no reservations about signing his name to another staff writer's idiocy.

Nor do I question the possibility that these students might even learn some English while they're at it.

Of course, there are also plenty of Mexican authors with first-rate 'ideas' on English teaching. Their materials are available for less than half the price, and you can even pay for them in pesos.

If you get the smart 'idea' that nobody has the inside dope on the exam that "well-established ELT authors" do, you have probably read the right hidden persuader between the lines. But even assuming that Cambridge writers are the only really qualified people to teach you how to pass the exam their firm designs, markets and administers (ethical issues aside for the moment), does anyone really believe those certificates are worth more than the paper they are printed on? I do not mean to imply that the student's effort is meaningless, but rather that the 'certificate' certifies nothing. Or virtually nothing compared to what consumers are led to believe it will get them. A teaching job, after all the certificates are accumulated and paid for? I would not be surprised to learn that the advanced or teacher's (or whatever it is called) Cambridge exam is required for a teaching position at institutes wired right into the whole Cambridge textbook, exam and curricular instruction network. If such systems exist they are certainly unethical, probably illegal³ and clearly unaccredited by Mexican educational authorities. As far as the Mexican public school system goes, along with all the private but 'incorporated' (accredited) schools and the autonomous, university-affiliated educational institutions, all foreign standardized proficiency exams (Cambridge, TOEFL, Michigan or whatever) are meaningless. That should go without saying. Or should we assume that Mexican educators are unqualified to evaluate Mexican students, that Mexican employers are unqualified to evaluate prospective employees?

³ See Ley Federal de Trabajo and Ley Federal de Educación.

Can't anything nice be said for MEXTESOL's present from CUP? Maybe. After all, Cambridge University is unquestionably one of the world's foremost centers of higher learning. CUP publishes superb books in many fields, a number of which would be of real interest to Journal readers. Unfortunately, they never send any of those. Just the 'hot off the press' textbooks. Guess why. On the other hand, at least they send something. As a writer I am not interested in reviewing any textbook, although other Journal reviewers may be. Be that as it may, most publishers stopped sending review copies some time ago. Riddle number two: guess when. You got it! Right after the big peso devaluation. As they say back home, "There's no such thing as a free lunch." And since the petrodollars stopped flowing so rapidly, Mexico ceased to be a good investment risk. Presumably, free samples are for privileged (paying) customers only. So much for the selfless aid of non-profit educational institutions. A glance at the remaining Journal advertisers will show some exceptions to the 'party's over' trend.

II: Renegotiating Mextesol's Foreign Debt

Our second piece of junk mail from across the sea, may be just as repugnant as the first. You decide. This letter, dated June 1, is from the subscription department of the Language Studies Unit of the University of Aston in Birmingham. It is short enough to quote in full:

Dear Mr Howard,

After going through our records, I have noticed that on 16 January 1984 you were sent an inspection copy of our journal "Reading in a Foreign Language", Volume 1, Number 1, 1983.

As yet we have not received your subscription of £9.00⁴.

⁴For two issues a year that's about 1100 pesos per issue.

Perhaps you could look into this matter for me, and either subscribe (sic) or return the journal as soon as possible.

(signed)

Caroline Etchells

Nasty, eh? Payup, creep, or gimme back my merchandise. And I mean now! Readers of the Journal may recall that this Birmingham publication was favorably reviewed in our last issue. But that is irrelevant here. The point is that neither I nor any other Journal staff member ever requested an "inspection copy" of Reading in a Foreign Language.

The real story is this: last year I invited Professor John Swales (of Birmingham University) to lecture at the Instituto Politécnico Nacional. He was kind enough to accept. Afterwards, over lunch, we discussed the MEXTESOL Journal and other publications. Mr Swales asked if I would be interested in having a look at the journal on reading that his university was publishing. Since he had already given away the copies he had brought to teachers who had attended the MEXTESOL Annual Convention, he promised to mail me one as soon as he returned to England. It arrived, as Ms Etchells observes, sometime in early January.

Swales has probably never heard of Etchells, and Leo Jones has probably never heard of his Promotion Controller. That would speak well of both scholars but ill of their respective universities which, if they are anything like almost all others I have dealt with, attended and worked for, tend to boast of the 'unity and integrity of the academic community.' I remember one dean who was kind enough to inform me with the standard pious smile and erudite gaze, "The University of California is not, you realize, General Motors."

Finally, in the hope that Etchells and Seatter are not really the functional illiterates their all-too authentic texts lead me to believe they may be, I shall reply briefly to each:

Mr Seatter: CUP has been publishing important works since 1584. That is 400 years of excellence. It deserves more respect. Less bullshit.

Ms Etchells: If you send a self-addressed stamped envelope, I will gladly waive my option to "subscribe" and return your journal "as soon as possible." That will probably cost you the equivalent of £9.00 in airmail postage, but I suspect your interest in profits is, paradoxically, as great as your interest in scholarship. I have seen enough bureaucratic prose (and read enough Franz Kafka) to know that your priority must be Following Established Procedures, whatever the cost may be in logical consistency (call it common sense). Mindlessness has never really been something to lose sleep over for people with a vocation for keeping files in order. Despair for them is misplacing a paperclip or not cleaning out the pencil sharpener regularly.