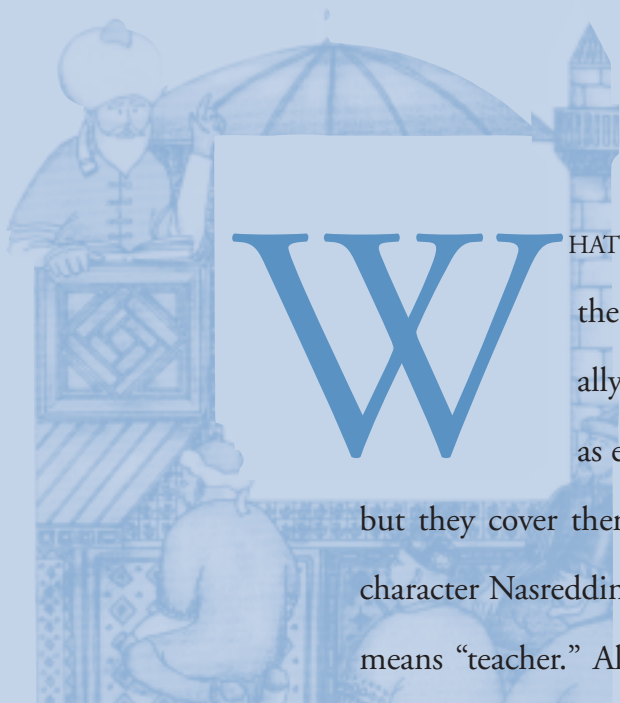


Nasreddin Hodja and the Importance of Context



WHAT CAN A 15TH CENTURY WISE MAN POSSIBLY HAVE TO SAY ABOUT the current state of English language teaching? Quite a lot, actually, if we are imaginative when reflecting on the issues we face as educators. The tales of Nasreddin Hodja date back 600 years, but they cover themes that never die. According to Kabacali (1997), the folk character Nasreddin Hodja was born in Turkey in the 1400s.¹ The name Hodja means “teacher.” Although there are varying accounts of the Hodja’s birth and background, there is no disagreement about what kind of person he was. He was a man of great wit and intelligence, and his stories cover a broad range of humanity. They may reveal the foibles of individuals or the shortcomings of society; they may even criticize the state and point out differences between social classes. The Hodja’s tales usually end on a happy note, with a lesson to be learned or a moral. Over the years, as is common in the folk tradition, these stories have been told and retold, embellished and revised.

So what can this wise man say about issues in English language teaching in the year 2002? In the following three stories, the Hodja provides lessons on the importance of context, the need for multiple perspectives, and the role of the teacher.²

Nasreddin Hodja story 1

One day a foreign scholar came to Aksehir and asked to talk to the wisest man in the city. The villagers took him to the Hodja. When they met, the foreigner took a stick and drew a large circle on the ground. The Hodja looked at the circle, took the stick, and drew a line across the middle of the circle. The foreigner drew another perpendicular line, dividing the circle into quarters. The Hodja gestured as though he were taking three of the sections and leaving the fourth. The foreigner then put his fingers together, faced them toward the ground, and shook them. The Hodja raised his hand to the sky and stretched out his fingers.

When the meeting was over, the foreign scholar explained, "Your Hodja is very smart. When I indicated that the Earth was round, he responded that an equator divides it. When I divided the Earth into four sections, he said that three quarters of it is water. When I asked him what causes rain, he told me that water evaporates, vapor rises, then clouds form and turn into rain."

The villagers asked the Hodja what happened during the meeting. He answered, "That glutton! He told me he had a pan of baklava. I said that he couldn't eat it alone and that I would eat half of it. Then he asked me what I would do if he divided it into four pieces. I told him that I would take three of them. Then he said, 'Let's sprinkle nuts on it.' I said, 'Fine, but you can't bake baklava on a weak fire; it has to be strong.' He felt defeated and went away."³

Context

Are the foreign scholar and the Hodja communicating or miscommunicating? Because of their different backgrounds and perspectives, they interpret the text, which in this case is a drawing on the ground, and each other's gestures in very different ways. Their feelings also affect how they interpret the text. The Hodja may be so hungry he sees the drawing as baklava, while the foreign scholar sees it as a scientific description. I chose this story to illustrate the importance of context in any act of communication.

Each of us grows up in a unique social, cultural, and historical context. We are born into a particular family, in a particular country, and attend a particular school in a particular educational system. This socio-cultural context is part of who we are and affects how we think and act. Thus culture is not something outside of ourselves that we learn, but something that we form as we interpret life around us.

Each of our classrooms is affected by the larger socio-cultural setting outside of it. The way we teach and the way we learn reflect our lives outside of school, including where we were born, where we have lived, where we have gone to school, even how our families have interacted. As teachers, these aspects of our lives are inextricably linked to how we think and act, which in turn affect the way we teach and interpret our students' behavior.

Within the language classroom, the immediate setting can also affect the way students interpret written or oral texts. As teachers, we should ask ourselves: How is the student feeling? Is the student hungry today? Is he or she angry? Who is sitting next to whom? Does he or she want to be in the class? What happened before class began? Are the desks in a row or in a circle? Contextual issues such as these affect the way our students interpret and respond to our teaching and to their classmates.

In a foreign language class, students and teachers usually share the same native language and the same expectations of an educational system. In a second language setting, however, the students in a given class probably do not have a language in common other than the target language, and they may not have similar expectations or prior educational experiences. In fact, the foreign language teacher may have an advantage over the second language teacher because she has a better understanding of her students' expectations and backgrounds. In both second and foreign language classrooms, however, the unique social, cultural, and historical background of each student and teacher affects the way each teaches, learns, responds to, and interprets others.

Nasreddin Hodja story 2

The Hodja saw a group of ducks in the lake. He tried to catch one but couldn't succeed, so he sat by the lake and took out a loaf of bread from his saddlebag. He broke the bread into pieces and

started dunking them into the water and eating them. A passerby saw the Hodja and asked him what he was eating. The Hodja dunked another piece and said, "Duck soup."

Multiple perspectives

In this story, the Hodja begins to make duck soup in the traditional way by trying to



catch a duck. He then reflects on the impossibility of his situation and views it from a new perspective. Although no one else might view the Hodja as having soup, to the Hodja himself, the lake is soup. Sometimes we need to be imaginative and get outside our usual perspective, and thereby, vary our way of perceiving things.

The theory of multiple intelligences, as developed by Gardner (1983), calls for us to view intelligence differently than we have in

the past and instead take a new, multiple perspective. Traditionally, intelligence has been defined in terms of linguistic and mathematical abilities. Gardner gives us a much more comprehensive view of intelligence. His list includes not only linguistic and logical/mathematical abilities, but also five other types of intelligence: spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.⁴

Spatial intelligence refers to abilities that enable us to find our way around our environment and form mental images of physical objects. Musical intelligence helps us perceive and create pitch and rhythm. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence enables us to be athletic or work dexterously with our hands. Interpersonal intelligence helps us to be empathetic toward others and to understand what they feel. Intrapersonal intelligence enables us to understand ourselves and develop a sense of self-identity.

In language classes, we can provide students with opportunities to express themselves in multiple and creative ways. The teacher could, for example, ask students to draw a house plan in order to practice vocabulary and, in doing so, help develop their spatial intelligence. The teacher could also include a time for singing songs or doing jazz chants to tap into students' musical intelligence.

Nasreddin Hodja story 3

One day the Hodja went to the pulpit to give a sermon. "Dear congregants," he said, "do you know what I will be talking about today?" The members of the congregation replied, "No, we don't." The Hodja said, "If you don't know, then how can I speak?" and he walked away. The next day, he again went to the pulpit and said, "Dear congregants, do you know what I'm going to talk about?" This time the congregation was ready with an answer. They replied, "Yes, we do." Then the Hodja said, "If you already know, then there's no need for me to talk about it." Again he left the pulpit. The members of the congregation decided that if the Hodja asked the same question again, half of them would say "yes" and half of them would say "no." The next day when the Hodja came, they were prepared. When the Hodja asked if they knew what he would talk about, they said, "Some of us do, and some of us don't." "In that case," said the Hodja, "let those who know tell those who don't." And once again he left the pulpit.

Teaching

What can we say about the role of the Hodja in this story? At first he doesn't speak because his audience has no knowledge. Next he chooses not to speak because his audience has all the answers. Finally he asks the congregants to teach each other. The Hodja is certainly not taking the role of a traditional teacher. But is he being a learner-centered teacher? Is he encouraging pair work? Or is he abdicating his responsibility as a teacher?

I think we can say the Hodja is a learner-centered teacher. He is encouraging his listeners to be independent, to critically analyze information, and to take responsibility for their own learning. Sometimes the concept of being learner-centered is mistakenly viewed as meaning that teaching is not required. However, being learner-centered does not mean that the teacher can leave the classroom, rest, or ignore her students. Rather, it's an active process of understanding who the students are and how they learn best. It encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning, but the teacher is still responsible for what students need to learn and for helping them learn effectively. The teacher is an integral part of the classroom, someone who makes careful decisions about how to teach based on careful evaluation of her students' needs.

Conclusion

I conclude with a final story about Nasreddin Hodja.

The villagers asked the Hodja, "Sir, in the morning some people go this way and some go the opposite way. Why?" The Hodja answered, "If all the people went in the same direction, the Earth would lose its balance and topple over."

The Hodja's message can be applied to language teaching. It tells us that differences among

people are to be expected and that these differences provide balance. When we acknowledge and appreciate the various backgrounds of our students, their multiple abilities, and differing perspectives on teaching and learning, we can achieve balance in our classes and increase our effectiveness as teachers.

Notes

1. Other sources identify him as an Uzbek. In Uzbek his name is written "Hodja" but in Turkish it is "Hoca." The pronunciation, however, is similar.
2. This article is adapted from a presentation given at the annual conference of the Uzbekistan Teachers of English Association in Tashkent in November 1998, and at the Bilkent University MATEFL Program Symposium in Ankara, Turkey in December 1998.
3. This excerpt and the others in the article are adapted from Kabacali (1997).
4. In a later publication, Gardner (1999) proposed two other intelligences, bringing the total to nine. Naturalist intelligence is the ability to perceive and understand living things and ecological systems. Existential intelligence refers to one's capacity to comprehend the most fundamental aspects of human existence, such as life and death, love, spirituality, the cosmos.

References

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"WHERE IN THE WORLD IS...?"
A CAPITAL CITY PUZZLE
Answer to puzzle on inside back cover:
1. Tokyo, Japan; 2. Warsaw, Poland; 3. Athens, Greece; 4. Ankara, Turkey; 5. Oslo, Norway; 6. Paris, France; 7. Cairo, Egypt; 8. Washington, U.S.A.; 9. Rabat, Morocco; 10. Bonn, Germany; 11. Amman, Jordan; 12. London, England



A CROSSWORD PUZZLE
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