



ESL Programs in the 21st Century: Trends and Challenges

By Deborah Osborne

Looking back over the past century, the field of ESL has a lot to be proud of. From modest beginnings- impromptu English classes organized for “foreigners” at the start of the 20th century- our field has seen immense growth, not just quantitatively but also qualitatively. Our programs have provided an essential service for an ever-expanding population of eager English language learners; and we have always risen to the challenge professionally, pedagogically, scientifically, and programmatically. However, even while reflecting and sometimes even setting pedagogical trends, we have also had to face significant challenges along the way. That certainly is still the case... But let us begin by taking a quick look at where we’ve been, before we contemplate the playing-field as it changes beneath our very feet.

Our Intellectual Heritage

The earliest university-based English language programs began pre-World War I at institutions such as Columbia (Teacher’s College). “English as a Second Language” as a field did not yet exist, formally, and even the broader field of language instruction hadn’t advanced much (at least in the United States) since the 19th century. The Grammar Translation method dominated the stage- until early 20th century developments in linguistics, a growing number of non-English-speaking immigrants, and the urgent and immediate needs of wartime language courses combined to stimulate change and development. Post WWII, linguists Robert Lado and Charles Fries at the University of Michigan were instrumental in the development and dissemination of the Audiolingual Method, which was prominent until the 1960s. In the 1970s, psychologists and educational specialists developed such innovative methods as Total Physical Response, The Silent Way, Community Language Learning, and Suggestopedia. The 1980s saw the growth of approaches – again prompted by advances in linguistics, psychology, and education – which emphasized a holistic view of language (the Whole Language approach, as well as content and task-based instruction), and the communicative nature of language (the Communicative Language and Natural approaches). By the 1990s experienced ESL teachers and leaders in the field came to the conclusion that rather than any one technique, approach or philosophy, classroom instruction should be based on an eclectic (but informed) mix of principles, applied according to the instructor’s experience, judgement and skills; that is, whatever worked best. (Some call this “refined eclecticism.”) Some of these principles, as found in Richards and Rodgers (2001), are, for instance, “Make learners the focus of the lesson,” “Teach learning strategies,” “Develop learners’ confidence,” etc. (p. 251).

The point is - however odd some of our former practices might seem in hindsight (remember Cuisenaire rods?), practices within the discipline of ESL have always been grounded in the latest developments in the fields of psychology, education, and linguistics. Just as these fields continually

evolve, so too does ESL. A typical TESOL degree now contains obligatory core courses in the nature of language (introductory linguistics), language and culture, classroom methodology, and of course a practicum. So, while ESL is an eminently 'practical' discipline, it is knowledge-based and stands upon theory.

Our Development as a Profession

When I began to train as an ESL teacher in the 1970s, I was taught *not* to depend upon textbooks, but rather to develop my own materials and use whatever (or whoever) was around in the environment. In any case, at that time there were far fewer teacher resources than there are at present. In addition, the M.A. TESOL degree did not exist; the Cambridge certificate was not yet available; most of us at that time had linguistics, education, or English degrees- or no degrees at all. Those were the times when, if you spoke English, it was assumed you could teach it, and not just in Peace Corps situations, either. Now, however, it is difficult to find a job in the tertiary sector in the U.S. without the aforementioned Masters degree; a Ph.D. is now available in the field and is desirable. In the K-12 system teachers are now trained and certified in ESL when they teach English language learners. Most university-level ESL jobs require not only a high degree of expertise in teaching but also contributions to service and appropriate professional development, including research and publishing.

The formation in 1966 of a national professional organization, TESOL, contributed towards the development of academic and professional best practices in the industry. Several highly-regarded professional journals have come into being, including the TESOL Quarterly. If a program seeks accreditation, which actually became obligatory in December 2010 for ESL schools not included within the blanket accreditation of a university, the process is comprehensive and arduous, whether one chooses ACCET or CEA. In other words, from rather loose beginnings, ESL has become a standards-based discipline dedicated to rigor and characterized by high expectations of its practitioners.

Our "Place"

ESL programs exist in every context they are needed- in the workplace, in the K-12 school system, in colleges and universities, in refugee and immigrant services. The forms they take are myriad, and a full description is beyond the scope of this discussion. Likewise, providers differ in nature in that some ESL classes are offered by for-profit, proprietary companies, who may have stand-alone centers, or may be affiliated with an institution of higher learning, while others are "home grown" (i.e. developed and run by college or university personnel). Most in-house university programs are Intensive English Programs, or IEPs. Even among these, there is much variation as to where they find their "home" – i.e., in an academic or non-academic division – how their faculty are categorized, and how students are viewed. Interestingly enough, in the tertiary setting at least, despite the academic and professional standards mentioned above, ESL programs are sidelined and marginalized more often than not. This phenomenon has been discussed in a recent article (please see the Summer 2015 issue of CEQ) and will not be gone over in detail here. Suffice it to say that, when faculty of other disciplines are aware at all that an ESL program exists on their campus, they often consider ESL "remedial," ESL students are

sometimes the subject of discrimination in mainstream college classes, and ESL faculty or “academic staff” are rarely placed on tenure track (indeed, few are the programs where this is even a possibility). As such, many ESL instructors suffer part-time or adjunct status. This is the case despite the fact that ESL programs tend to be healthy generators of revenue and provide a valuable service for degree-seeking students whose English proficiency is not sufficiently advanced for admission. The disrespect and disinterest shown towards ESL programs has left them in a uniquely vulnerable position...Which, as we will shortly see, has helped create an opportunity for new players to enter the scene.

New Challenges

In 2014, *Open Door* reported a total of 886,000 international students studying in the U.S., which contributed \$27,000,000,000 to the economy. The obvious fiscal value of these full-fee-paying international students is especially significant when viewed in the context of other important factors, which include years of downturn in government support for education, increased competition for students, a rising tide of outsourcing and private-public partnerships (PPPs) in the university setting, the internationalization phenomenon, and, finally, the lack of visibility and the vulnerability of ESL in general that has left the field open for for-profit corporate partners to exploit an obvious opportunity.

The “pathway” approach, wherein international students who have almost, but not quite, achieved the level of English proficiency needed to enter a degree program are given ESL support while taking first-year courses, actually has been part of the ESL scene for years. Several university ESL programs such as the University of Arizona, Drexel University, and the University of Delaware possess their own highly successful pathway programs. However, corporate providers have also been present for some time: Navitas, one of the earliest such companies, offered its first program in 1984 in Australia. Others such as Kaplan, INTO, StudyGroup, Cambridge Education Group, and Shorelight have since become contenders. Australia’s market is now saturated, but companies are aggressively moving into the U.K. and North American markets. In the U.K., for example, the first corporate pathway program began in 2005; now there are 54. In the U.S., the first pathway program was inaugurated in 2008. There are presently over 30, and the number is growing yearly.

Corporate providers present several advantages to universities. They self-finance, and even sometimes provide buildings and new facilities. They offer access to a wide network of agents for recruitment purposes, and can in most cases do everything from hire instructors to develop curriculum, thus relieving the university of those responsibilities. In exchange, the university signs a multi-year contract and surrenders a percentage of tuition income. On the face of it, such arrangements seem to present a win-win scenario. However, the success and the integrity of such programs depend upon many things. For instance, many in the ESL community worry about issues such as the oversight of overseas agents, the quality of staff hired and of the curriculum developed, and the maintenance of admissions standards. There is the truly unfortunate and dismaying fact that programs run by these companies have obliterated established ESL programs. It does not help that in most cases the establishment of these corporate pathways programs typically engenders confusion, fear, and resentment on the part of the existing ESL faculty at these institutions. Because these companies typically

approach the upper administration and proceed top-down, accurate information is often at a premium. The result in many cases has been a great deal of faculty turnover, and the subsequent loss of competent and qualified personnel.

Perhaps most tellingly, there is also the philosophical disconnect between the “corporate” mindset – where activity is profit-driven, the customer is always right, and primary responsibility is to the shareholders – and the “academic” mindset which is driven by an abiding concern for learning, students’ academic progress and welfare, and the dissemination and creation of knowledge. Distrust and misunderstanding of each other’s motives are common. It ought to be mentioned that there need **not** be this discordancy between corporate providers and ESL programs, but certainly building a relationship where the strengths of each party can combine to construct a successful pathway represents a significant challenge.

With the world the way it is, English instruction will be important, and needed, for some time to come. The field of ESL will continue to improve and innovate as it always has. As the institutions we serve change, however, we may find our jobs changing in tandem. Especially at the tertiary level, as universities search for ways to keep their doors open, it will most probably be essential to remain alert and try to ensure that our talents and expertise are on prominent display to those in decision-making positions. Forging relationships with other faculty, difficult as it may be at times, will be useful in this regard, as well as contributing towards greater visibility and (much-deserved) respect. It is to be hoped that ultimately our characteristically open and tolerant minds and attitudes and our unique talents will prevail for the good of our students, the probity and integrity of our programs, and the advancement of the field.

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