

The "T" in TESL

Julie Vallance, University of Guam

In the rapid growth of the TESL field, some of the most basic issues have been left relatively undeveloped. The "T" in TESL means teaching, and while it comes before ESL, so to speak, in the name of our profession, it seems to occupy last place in terms of appreciation. This article offers a viewpoint on the meaning of "teaching" which may shed some light on some current issues of great importance.

Komisar (1969) distinguishes three uses of the term "teach": occupation; enterprise; and act. As an occupation and as an enterprise, TESL is indistinguishable from teaching in other subject areas. At the level of "act," however, the term "teaching" becomes problematic for ESL curriculum and instruction.

Komisar's analysis reveals three senses in which "teach" is used at the level of acts. Learning donor acts contribute to the production of learning on the part of the student; examples are reinforcing, drilling, and so on. Learning-enhancing acts are those which are intended to put the learner in a learning-receptive state. Finally, intellectual acts are those which are intended to produce learning, such as introducing, demonstrating, citing, proving, and so on. Komisar regards intellectual acts as central to teaching, and their defining feature is intentionality. The intention is not directly to "create learning," but to create some form of awareness, or what Komisar calls "uptake," in the student.

At present, the teaching of ESL places great emphasis on learning donor acts and learning-enhancing acts, and relatively little

on intellectual acts. When intellectual acts do occur in the ESL classroom, they are usually incidental to the task at hand (for example, conveying a grammar point or introducing a language function). Intellectual acts are not the "highlight" of the lesson, because the teaching of ESL is generally viewed as closer to training than to teaching. Language learning in the modern ESL classroom is not viewed as an intellectual pursuit, and subject matter is treated primarily as a vehicle for stimulating language production on the part of the student. It is not surprising, then, that the content of most ESL courses is generally of a disjointed and superficial nature. The emphasis is on "getting the students to talk."

Origins of the View of Language as a Set of Skills

As is well known, there has been a long succession of theoretical bases for second-language teaching. Each one was at first adopted unquestioningly and later largely abandoned. The first method was traditional grammar-translation, the way in which classical languages were taught. The emphasis was on reading and writing, and the learning of classical languages was viewed as a thoroughly intellectual pursuit. Later, behaviorism gave rise to the Direct Method or the audiolingual approach, which viewed language as a set of habits. The approach stressed spoken language, and utilized drills and reinforcement activities. Again, this theory proved to be of limited value because no real internalization of language rules took place.

Chomsky's theories of generative transformational grammar led to a view of second-language teaching in which teachers helped students to become conscious of grammatical rules and to internalize these rules through use. The problem with this approach is that not all grammatical rules are known and that rules tend to be learned and internalized unconsciously. This view also ignored all of the social constraints upon language. It focused on language within the individual, ignoring language's essential communicative function.

The latest trends in ESL curriculum come out of the field of sociolinguistics, which focuses on language as a vehicle for communication in a social world. The Functional/Notional approach isolates and teaches those language forms deemed necessary to "help the student survive" (for example, asking for help, asking for clarification, stating a preference). This approach sees TESL as a matter of imbuing the student with certain sociolinguistically appropriate skills. ESL curricula now tend to place great emphasis on social interaction as both means and end in language learning. The problem with this approach is that its proponents, in their eagerness to promote natural language acquisition, view language as a set of skills, rather than as an instrument of thought.

The Skills Orientation in ESL Teacher Training

Courses for the training of ESL teachers often reflect the current "anti-intellectual" orientation of the field. Applied linguistics and theoretical linguistics, once seen as essential to the education of a good ESL teacher, are gradually disappearing from the curriculum, to be replaced by more courses in methodology. Textbooks offer a number of widely differing methodologies, generally

with little empirical or theoretical justification. Prospective ESL teachers are advised to take an "eclectic" approach to selecting methodology, meaning that they should choose whatever will best suit the apparent needs or preferences of their students and even the teachers' own personalities. The trend has reached such proportions that one teacher-in-training taking a graduate course in ESL curriculum recommended--in all seriousness--dispensing with ESL professionals altogether and hiring instead elementary school teachers, who "know how to get people to talk." It is clear that, from this perspective, TESL is seen as an enterprise that is relatively free of intellectual activity.

The "Incompleteness" of the Skills Orientation

To see the full implications of teaching ESL as a set of social skills, we should return to Komisar's definition of the term "teach." His list of intellectual acts includes "introducing," "proving," "defining," "indicating," "rating," and "appraising," as well as a host of others. These are, in essence, the acts which an individual speaking any language must be able to perform in order to think and act rationally with regard to the world in which he lives. To isolate and teach only those language functions which relate to superficial kinds of social interaction is to teach only the tip of the iceberg, linguistically speaking. The only intellectual acts which are used "intentionally" (to use Komisar's term) in the ESL classroom are those which are seen as relating to the students' physical and social well-being. Other intellectual acts, although they may arise in the context of the classroom, are generally viewed as irrelevant to language learning.

The impact of this "skills" orientation to language learning can be seen in so-called "academic" ESL courses. Instead of assisting students to use language as an instrument of thought, these courses focus on "writing skills" and "reading skills," which generally are pursued through exercises concerning sentence structure and punctuation, or reading passages with questions about content to be answered at the end--in other words, grammar, syntax, and reading comprehension. The emphasis is on the most superficial aspects of reading and writing rather than on the creative intellectual processes involved in the written expression of ideas or the comprehension with some critical awareness of the written ideas of others. The students are never given the opportunity to utilize or develop their intellectual abilities. The question must be asked: Is it possible for a student to acquire language as an incomplete set of skills and to use it effectively as an instrument of thought?

The Integration of Language With Subject Matter

One solution to the problems of the current "skills" orientation in TESL is to integrate the teaching of language with the teaching of subject matter. The teaching of most subject areas includes, as a matter of course, the intellectual acts discussed by Komisar. Subject matter can be structured in such a way as to anticipate and control the language demands (see Mohan 1985). This would, ideally, end the attempt to teach the forms of language in isolation from meaningful content. Thus, the teaching of language would no longer be a shallow enterprise which must create empty categories such as "writing skills" or forms without content such as "language functions."

It should be pointed out that the problems of ESL curriculum are not new to language teaching. Kelly, in *Twenty-Five Centuries of Language Teaching* (1969:396-397), discusses the "cyclical" nature of approaches to language teaching:

In language teaching, three broad aims can be distinguished: the social, the artistic (or literary), and the philosophical. The first aim demands that language should be regarded as a form of social behavior and a type of communication. The artistic aim treats language as a vehicle for creativity, demanding both appreciation of creative activity and creative activity itself. . . . The philosophical aim demands training in analytical techniques and often confuses linguistics with language teaching. At each period in history one of these has become predominant, generating its own approach to method

It may be that, until the nature of language is more adequately understood and a complete and integrated theory of language learning is generated, the field of ESL curriculum and instruction will continue to suffer from serious shortcomings.

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