
The Four Houses of TESL

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The immediate stimulus for this article was the writer's amazement upon realizing the extent to which his own personal conception of what TESL is differs from that of others working within the same profession. A book review of two ESL-oriented literature collections (Leki 1984) and an article describing the use of poetry in the literature component of a college class in composition for ESL-speakers (McConochie 1985) reveal an understanding of TESL which is almost totally opposite from the writer's view. The existence of such divergent viewpoints within a field on so basic a question as the very nature of the undertaking itself can be interpreted as being indicative of the discipline's present state of development. My purpose, however, is not to bemoan the current state of affairs, but to attempt to clarify it in some small way. The goal of such elucidation is to bring into sharper relief the several distinct conceptualizations of TESL which can be found among practitioners.

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The discipline of TESL can easily be understood not as a specific discipline *per se* but rather as a focus or area of interest. Thus, we find studies of linguistic aspects of TESL, psychological and sociological factors in TESL, curriculum in TESL, and so on. The field is more than Balkanized--it never had any unity in the first place. The multiplicity of approaches in TESL can be seen as stemming from the many specific concerns which have been identified. For instance, the functional-notional approach grows out of the concern for linking linguistic form with semantic category or

communicative purpose; the audio-lingual approach results from a concern with fluency and pronunciation; and the communicative approach is a response to sociolinguists' analyses of the relationships between the individual speaker and the sociocultural and/or interactional context. Again, this state of affairs paves the way for the criticism that the field of TESL lacks direction, that its development has been nothing more than an unplanned and uncoordinated series of attempts to accommodate perspectives and insights borrowed from cognate disciplines such as psychology or linguistics.

At the same time, the diversity within TESL can be attributed in part to the existence in the profession of a number of fairly distinct *pre-existing orientations* brought to the situation by practitioners. The point in referring to these orientations as "houses" is to suggest that practitioners' viewpoints represent, not the culmination of wide-ranging study and practical experience in the world, but rather academic training in specific disciplines. This implies that it is not at all coincidental that, for example, many practitioners place a high value upon literature in TESL--it is because they themselves were trained in literature before becoming involved in TESL. The four houses of TESL represent particular academic orientations which are carried over into TESL, and we may ascribe to these houses the several identifiable conceptualizations of TESL found in the professional literature. The wide range of emphases found within TESL, then, results from both (a) the lack of widespread agreement as to what TESL is, and (b) the existence of strongly influential prior training in the background of many TESL

practitioners. Everybody connected with TESL--but particularly teacher trainees--should be cognizant of the existence of the four houses of TESL and their effects upon curriculum and instruction in ESL.

The House of Psychology

The house of psychology has given us the habit-formation theory of second-language learning, studies of the effect of short- and long-term memory on language learning, and studies of the effects of affective factors in language learning. The house of psychology is notable, however, for the small number of classroom teachers it has bequeathed to TESL. That is, while books and articles written from a psychological point of view have guided practitioners all along, we find very few TESL practitioners who themselves were trained in psychology. The house of psychology, while it has many admirers, is not a populous house. Moreover, ESL teachers have been rather quick to abandon psychology for other approaches. Psychology nevertheless qualifies as one of the houses because of the extent to which practitioners do subscribe to at least some of its tenets. For example, it cannot reasonably be maintained that factors such as attitude and affect do not influence language learning (especially language learning in a small-group setting).

The House of Linguistics

The house of linguistics is perhaps the strongest house. Its members seem to be everywhere. English is a language, and linguistics is the study of language. The influence of Chomsky, while not long-lived, showed the readiness of the profession to recognize the relevance of the linguistic viewpoint. Currently, the field of applied linguistics--that is, applied to TESL--is represented by many carefully done studies of the development of learners' second language, the input they receive, characteristics of native-nonnative-speaker

interaction, and so on. In other areas of linguistics, we have of course seen relevant inquiries into conversational implicature, compliments, and various sociolinguistic considerations. The house of linguistics is strong because it has many members, and because it is widely believed that TESL is indeed merely an application of linguistics. (If it is part of linguistics, it *is* linguistics.) The status of linguistics within TESL is raised further by the fact that linguistics is a "hard science," that is, it employs positivist assumptions and procedures: phenomena are classified, counted, measured, and predicted. A greater number of TESL practitioners can claim linguistics backgrounds than seems to be the case with psychology; and, as stated above, it is felt that graduate training in TESL is in fact a type of linguistics training.

The House of Sociology and Anthropology

Next comes the house of sociology and anthropology. It is undoubtedly the least appreciated of the four, although its members may equal in number those of the house of psychology. Social science theory and research has given rise to the emerging discipline of intercultural communication, a field which, like TESL, represents an area of concern as much as a distinct discipline. However, despite the fact that ESL learners, when they engage in conversation with native speakers of English (and with ESL learners from other countries), are by definition participating in intercultural communication, the house of sociology and anthropology has remained a "poor relation" within TESL. This is surprising in that, just as TESL can be viewed as applied linguistics, descriptive linguistics and sociolinguistics originally developed within the context of anthropology. In addition, sociology has long dealt with areas of prime importance regarding individuals who move into new sociocultural contexts, for example, acculturation, re-socialization, and

impression management. Only the work of Harvey Sacks and his colleagues, which focused on conversation and rules of speaking, has had any appreciable impact upon TESL. The almost palpable lack of interest in anthropology and sociology on the part of many ESL teacher trainees suggests that the situation may be slow to change, notwithstanding the considerable agreement within TESL that training in these areas should constitute a part of the teacher training curriculum.

The House of Literature

The last house of TESL is the house of literature. One factor in this house's strength is the number of ESL teachers whose undergraduate--and, in many cases, graduate--training was in English (that is, in composition and English literature). The claims of relevance to TESL which can be made on behalf of literature are based largely on the fact that literature is made up of language (literature *is* language). More than that, it is felt, literature represents *good language*. Hence we encounter the phrase "great literature" (and, in the same category, "classical music," "serious drama," "good restaurants," and, in general, "the finer things in life"). The high social value placed on literature leads many people to assume that the study of literature must be beneficial for ESL students. Literature "exposes" the students to the best that our culture has to offer. The belief is that ESL students--indeed, all students--will be uplifted by reading great literature.

The strength and high status of the house of literature has two sources. First, as noted, within the TESL profession we find a large number of individuals whose original career plan was to teach English, that is, composition and literature. Their claim to relevance for their discipline is, like that of the house of linguistics, rooted in what seems to be an integral relationship between their discipline and TESL. In fact, they

might claim that the sole difference is that in TESL the students' language ability is sub-standard. The self-legitimizing character of the house of literature may explain why its members have shown such great loyalty to their discipline within TESL: its presumed value for students is unaffected by changes in theories of learning or curriculum and instruction. Second, the high social status of literature in society generally (as part of the finer things in life) gives to the house of literature a level of respectability which is denied to the other houses. Thus claims that the study of literature benefits ESL students apparently need never be proven because the inherent value of literature *per se* is beyond question.

The House of Literature and the Houses of Behavioral Science

The four-fold grouping discussed above permits another distinction to be made, between literature, on the one hand; and the behavioral sciences--psychology, linguistics, and sociology/anthropology--on the other. To recapitulate what was argued in the preceding section: the house of literature can claim for itself a close association with one of the finer things in life ("great literature"); a focus which can be identified closely with TESL itself (that is, composition instruction); and a historical linkage with language learning, in the study of (a foreign) language for the purpose of gaining access to the literature of the target culture.

As for the sciences, they offer a number of perspectives which bear directly on how languages are learned, under what conditions they are best learned, what language is used for, and, indeed, what language is. One major difference between the behavioral sciences and the tradition of literature is that the sciences are concerned with everyday uses of language, for example, the development of language skills in non-formal environments as well as in formal settings,

the role of language in interpersonal interaction, and so on.

Appreciating literature is a respectable pursuit for those who have learned a language. There are frequent attempts to show that literature also has a role to play in promoting the development of language skills in the learner, but for the most part these attempts share a major flaw: the usefulness of literature in language learning is assumed on the basis of the high status ascribed to literature itself, whereas it ought to be *demonstrated*. Again, the thinking seems to be, "Of course literature has relevance for ESL learners--creating literature is the highest goal to which a writer can aspire!"

The Future of Literature in TESL

At the present time, literature still has considerable influence within TESL. One reason for this may be the fact that a substantial number of practitioners, as noted above, received their first training in English (not in ESL). As the proportion of ESL teachers who have received graduate degrees specifically in TESL or applied linguistics increases, perhaps the influence of the house of literature will wane. If indeed literature has an important role to play in teaching ESL, then by all means it deserves our support. If not, then we will be doing our students no disservice in calling for a more appropriate assessment of the benefits available from the study of literature in TESL.

The single most important need in (re-) assessing the place of literature in TESL, I think, is to require that claims made on behalf of literature be subjected to the same criteria which are used with respect to the other houses of TESL. For instance, Leki (1984:734) asserts that "literature provides comprehensible language input which can contribute to language acquisition," while McConochie, another advocate of the use of

literature in TESL, admits that "In great literature, however, we find words and grammatical structures that differ significantly from those of everyday speech" (1985:126).

The same can be said of the role of literature in culture learning in TESL. McConochie (1985:125) holds that "the study of literature increases a reader's awareness and understanding of the culture from which the literature derives," while Leki (1984:729) acknowledges that "pre-reading activities should be provided to insure that the cultural assumptions of ESL students and those of the writer are similar."

It is a tribute to the secure position of the house of literature in TESL that it apparently need not account for inconsistent claims made on its behalf. Literature has been TESL's sacred cow for too long.

References

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