

"The Four Houses of TESL": A Letter and A Response

A Reader Writes

Dear Editor:

In the July 1985 *TESL Reporter*, which I recently received, Harry Krasnick ("The Four Houses of TESL") purports to survey four disciplines (psychology, linguistics, sociology and anthropology, and literature) in an effort "to bring into sharper relief the several distinct conceptualizations of TESL which can be found among practitioners."

Aside from the fact that such a project should not be squeezed into a four page article, even to clarify an issue "in some small way," Krasnick violates several basic precepts of clear thinking and professional scholarship:

(1) His article, belying its title, is structured to close with a discussion of the future of only one of the "houses," literature, but ignores the future of any of the others.

(2) He singles out and selectively quotes from two recent articles, one a full-scale, detailed review of the most recent anthologies of short stories for ESL students, to conclude that "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." Considering that the bibliography of articles and books on TESL and literature written both in the U.S. and abroad is extensive (ERIC has its own print out of these references), two brief paragraphs on two recent articles seem insufficient to draw such a general conclusion.

(3) Krasnick contradicts himself. He criticizes the house of psychology because "... we find very few TESL practitioners who themselves were trained in psychology," but, discussing literature, he remarks, "One reason for this [the considerable influence of literature within TESL] may be the fact that a substantial number of practitioners, as noted above, received their first training in English (not in ESL)." As more people receive degrees in ESL or Applied Linguistics, remarks Krasnick, "...perhaps the influence of the house of literature will wane."

(4) Krasnick uses snippets from writings on TESL and literature to establish false dichotomies between those who say literature uses language which can aid language acquisition and others who say literature uses language different from everyday speech. These concepts do not inherently conflict.

These four points demonstrate some but not all of the typical and most dangerous flaws in Krasnick's piece. If he had spent more time reading about literature and TESL by some of the many fine scholars and writers in the field, and reading more of literature itself, he might then be able to provide the needed perspective he sought to give us.

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The Author Responds

TESL Reporter subscribers who have not read my article may not know what to make

of Professor Sage's assortment of ill-founded complaints because he is careful to avoid the major issue which the article deals with. Let me tell the story in plain English.

TESL practitioners with literature backgrounds want ESL learners to share their enthusiasm for Great Literature. This is only human. The painfully obvious problem, however, is that many learners lack the cultural background necessary to understand (and appreciate) that literature. What the literature proponents have tried to do is turn this into a virtue, in effect maintaining that literature must surely develop cultural awareness in the learner because literature cannot be appreciated without it!

Since most of us dare not question the value of literature for fear of being labeled "uncultured," literature teachers have managed to sneak their own favorite subject matter into the ESL curriculum virtually without having to fire a single shot (acting as *de facto* academic advisers for ESL learners in the process).

All TESL practitioners are concerned with the question of what content is of greatest

value for learners. I had hoped to encourage those who are not intimidated by the "culture vultures" to give careful thought to the role of literature in TESL by illustrating the inconsistent things said about its proponents.

In the "snippets" I quoted in the article, we find one proponent claiming that literature provides comprehensible language input, and another admitting that the language of literature differs from everyday speech. (If so, why choose literature as a source of input?) In the second example, one proponent holds that studying literature increases cultural awareness, while the other one advises that cultural awareness must come before the study of literature. (Professor Sage sees no inconsistencies here.)

I regret that Professor Sage had no positive contribution to make which might have helped to clear up this confused state of affairs. I suppose that searching for nits to pick in my article was the easiest thing to do under the circumstances. Readers, though, should decide for themselves.

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