

TESL Curriculum: The Foundation Is What Counts

By WILLIAM D. CONWAY

Mary Pope's Letter to the Editor in the Fall number of the **TESL Reporter** has struck a responsive cord in me. I would like to comment on her letter, her situation, and problems and, in doing so, comment on the problems faced by nearly all who teach English as a second language in foreign countries.

In TESL conventions and meetings there are always many who want to know the "What" and "How" of TESL--the little magic tricks and lesson plans that will solve complicated problems. Rarely are the answers forth-coming, and when they are offered, they're often in the Teslese of linguistics and psycholinguistics. Mrs. Pope, you have my sympathy on this point; it's difficult to know which way to jump. My comments, many of which refer to matters well beyond the authority of a single classroom teacher, may seem equally remote, but I hope this won't be the case.

I'd like to talk about those Tahitians who learn many English language skills in one year and often outperform their new Tongan classmates who have had the "advantage" of nine years of English in your school system. First, let's ask, "How can such a situation be?"

It appears to me that your Tahitians find themselves far from home in a linguistic community where most people speak Tongan and where English is the language of those holding power--the teachers, administrators, and church leaders. This small (I image "select") group has a tremendous need to fit in, to be accepted, just as a one year old child has a tremendous urge to communicate his needs to his parents and society. When this need is fulfilled, when they can get along well with their fellow students and can communicate with the white leaders, they probably cease to improve, or at least drop to an acquisition rate similar to their Tongan classmates.

There is a worthwhile lesson to be learned here for teachers everywhere. Students learn best those things that interest them, that are

important and relevant to them personally--other things receive only grudging or partial attention. Think back to your years in elementary school and in high school; did you really learn much when you weren't interested? You, like the rest of us, developed techniques to cope with the school situation--you tuned teachers in and out as you felt like it; you learned what you had to to relieve the pressure of adults.

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What I'm getting at are several basic points that need to be settled in your program, in any program that attempts to reach large general masses of students (as opposed to a select few), before one ever approaches the details of TESL methodology as they relate to specific in class problems.

- 1) What educational goals have led to the development of your present curriculum? Have they been carefully considered and are they appropriate, particularly from the point of view of the students, their community, and their needs?
- 2) What can you do to create the sort of situation that makes students feel something is personally important to them and therefore worth learning?

(Please remember the level of skill you and I gained in our second language classes when we were in school.)

You indicate that in your school English is taught in all twelve grades and, some what in contradiction, you indicate that all your firepower, your trained teachers who can provide good linguistic models, are in the upper grades. I can see how this situation could arise when the number of qualified teachers is limited. As you recognize, this

situation is a natural to produce kids with poor English language habits and lots of resistance to any further language drill and study. You, as a competent language model, have a nearly impossible job in attempting to unteach, stimulate, and then teach English.

Why should you try to teach all of them English if your manpower and financial situation can't provide the right kind of total program? Even more basically, one might ask if English training is what Tongan kids need? Or at least, is it so important to their lives and their future that they must spend twelve years on the subject? Will most of your students go to college? Will most of them have jobs that require more than a minimal degree of English language ability? Is this twelve year curriculum perhaps a misguided version of the American dream of equal education for all? Is this, perhaps part of the philosophy that led to the concept of "a typical American High School" placed in the South Pacific to bring "these" poor people up to be more like us? Isn't there something else that might be of more benefit to them? Could you teach them much more about their own country, people, and problems, and then introduce them to English in the 6th or 7th grade where you can provide the proper manpower? I can still remember being given the assignment to teach in American Samoa even though the students read on the 6th grade level and knew less than I about their own country.

While providing the mass of your students education that is relevant to them and their society, take some of those that appear to have the greater potential for success and concentrate some resources here. It isn't democratic, but it might work. Let them be the ones that get you status with high scores on the higher leaving examination.

What can you do about this second point of making the learning situation one which is personally important and meaningful to your students? Much of this problem can be solved by skillful curriculum design. A first step would be to get a citizen's committee for your school made up of local Tongan citizens from all walks of life, English speaking and otherwise, and give them real power to advise the administration and to get into the school those things that **they** want in the school. Make sure that the parents come to feel that this is **their** school. This can work. It can also do a lot to get away from the arrogance and paternalism

that seem to linger around schools that are white operated, motivated, and designed (Yes, we have good intentions.)

As an example consider the Rough Rock School in the Navajo Nation that has an all Navajo School Board with total power to run the school. Recently, they instituted a program in the school to train traditional Indian medicine men. Seem ridiculous? Maybe. I see it as an honest attempt by these people to preserve their cultural history and heritage. They recognize that they're in the 20th century and they want to fit into it as 20th century Indians rather than as the poor white Indian we have so often created as we've plundered their society in our well-meaning way.

A school that has some of the imprint of the wisdom of the parents of your students--one where they have a real say--may become a place where Tongans go because it is part of them, meaningful to them and their parents, not because it is an external pressure imposed on their culture by the great white father. This may help. Certainly it is honest and may remove some of the hypocrisy by which we operate, and it may also help reduce the generation gap that we must be creating by separating parents from school while elevating the kids above them educationally.

How do Mormon missionaries who are nineteen and twenty manage to learn a language so well in just two years? They've got a real reason. I can't tell you how to get your students turned on; but it is the key to learning any subject.

I believe that TESL can almost take care of itself, naturally, if we can get the curriculum in line with the needs of the individuals, the community, and the country in which they live. If the curriculum is vital and real to them, they'll learn the language, maybe in spite of you. With a meaningful curriculum, maybe so many won't be waiting for a quota number so that they can become citizens in some European country.

Correction on ENGLISH TEXTBOOK SURVEY

The title for the Rojas book on page 15 was left out. The corrected entry should read:

Rojas, Pauline M. and staff. **Fries American English Series**, E J H C A

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