TESL

Teaching English as a Second Language

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THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE — SECOND LANGUAGE DISTINCTION

by Albert H. Marckwardt

A language that is as widespread as English throughout the various continents of the globe fulfills many different roles in the countries in which it is used. Over a long period, the term "foreign language" was used quite indiscriminately to characterize the status of English in a situation where the bulk of the population were native speakers of some other language. It is significant, perhaps, that a national advisory group organized in the United States in 1961 chose to call itself the National Advisory Council on Teaching English as a Foreign Language, and for which the acronym NACTEFL came into use. Only a few years later, the professional organization of teachers of the subject, which finally came to fruition in New York City in 1966, decided to call itself TESOL, Teachers of English as a Second or Other Language. Since that time, the use of the word *second* has gradually overtaken the use of *foreign* to characterize the status of English as a non-native language. In many ways this is an unfortunate development since it tends to obscure an important difference which could be indicated by a discriminating use of the two terms, a distinction which has been maintained in British usage for some years.

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Let us begin by considering the status of English in a number of countries which, though now independent, were once colonies of one or another English-speaking nation. Examples come to mind readily enough: Ghana, Nigeria, the Philippines. In many of them English is still the language in which part or all of the business of government, especially the national government is carried on: parliamentary debates, the written statutes and government reports, the conduct of the courts.

It may be the language in which all or many of the commercial transactions are conducted. It may also figure significantly in such ceremonial functions as church services and public celebrations. It is usually wholly or in part the language of instruction in the schools, in addition to being one of the subjects of study. And in this connection, emphasis is placed equally upon the mastery of all four of the language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In fact, the aim of the educational system is often that of establishing a fairly widespread bilingualism. And finally, some of the literature produced in the country may be written in English.

When the use of English in a country fulfills the conditions which have just been outlined, we speak of it as a second language. Actually, the term is applicable in a dual sense. Chronologically considered, it is a second language since almost everyone will learn either a local language or the native national language first. Functionally considered, it is a second language in that it becomes an additional and essential communications resource.

One may contrast the foregoing situation with countries and educational systems where English may be said to occupy the position of a foreign language, not unlike the status of French in all but a very few parts of the United States. In general we look upon the acquisition of a fair working knowledge of French as a desirable or laudable cultural achievement. Or even more fundamental, we may consider the knowledge of French or some other foreign language to be a valuable and an essential component of a liberal education--something that liberates the individual from the confines of a single language, from a single structuring of experience. On the other hand, a knowledge of French is by no means necessary for anyone to function politically, commercially, or professionally in this country.

Although French has been cited here for purposes of illustration, there is nothing that points inevitably to a particular language to be studied. From the point of view of the purposes which have been mentioned, it could as well be German, Spanish, Italian, or Russian. It is the language-learning experience and achievement rather than the specific language that is important. The foreign language is rarely, if ever, the language of instruction in the schools. In general, what has been said of French in the United States applies equally to English in Japan, in the Latin American countries and in most of Europe. It is a foreign and not a second language.

In circumstances such as these, it is evident that general bilingualism is not a contemplated goal, valuable as it may be in individual cases. The native language is expected to remain dominant. Reading is probably the skill that will be used most extensively under these circumstances, except for those who engage in foreign travel. Except for this latter point, the classical languages could fulfill the educational function that has been specified just about as well as the modern foreign languages, and in fact they did just that over a long period in the past.

At one time all of the study of English throughout the non-English speaking world was conceived as falling into one or the other of the foregoing categories, ESL or EFL. Just recently an additional concept has been recognized as well, that of a library language or language of study. There are countries, for example, where English is not at all an official language, nor is it the language of instruction in the primary and

secondary schools. Yet it plays a larger role than merely that of a foreign language. It serves the purpose of a "window to the world," to employ a phrase used by Nehru.

In countries such as Thailand, for example, the Thai language serves quite satisfactorily for affairs which are of purely local or national concern. Yet the moment the interests of the intellectual and scientific community are extended into the international sphere, one of the languages of wider communication must serve as the vehicle. To put the situation into concrete terms, not long after the appearance of a new book written in English and dealing with microbiology, geophysics, or survey research techniques, it is likely to be translated into Japanese. The possibility of its being translated into Thai is very remote. For one thing, the market is not sufficient to justify the cost, and for another, the Thai are not yet certain that their vocabulary can be successfully adapted to many of the current scientific disciplines. In short, such groups of students and scholars need to be able to read technical English.

But that is not the whole story. If it were, the term *library language* would be descriptively adequate. We must realize, however, that in order to keep up with this expansion of knowledge, some students and indeed some of the professionals will have to study abroad. Foreign scholars knowledgeable in these fields will undoubtedly be brought into the country. Unquestionably, they will have to lecture in English. This adds to the reading skills already specified, that of aural comprehension. Students in seminars or study groups will have to respond to their instructor in his own language, which demands a speaking knowledge. They may be asked to prepare papers and reports, and if any publishable scholarship comes out of the venture, it will have to be written in English.

This poses the necessity for a command of all four of the language skills. The demand for this kind of competence is not as extensive as it would be in a country where English is a second language in that a smaller portion of the population is affected and the range of subject matter is considerably restricted. Nevertheless, within these limits, a high degree of competence is required, and certainly far more than just a reading knowledge. For this reason the term *language of study* seems to characterize the situation much more precisely than *library language.*

Like most schemes of classification, this one is open to the charge of oversimplification. Not everything is as neatly cut and dried as it has been presented here. In certain instances, India for example, English has the status of a third rather than a second language. And although India, like the Philippines, is firmly committed to bilingualism,unlike the Philippines, English is not necessarily contemplated as one of the two languages of the duo. In Japan, English has not only the status of a foreign language, but virtually that of a mandatory foreign language rather than one of a number of freely available possibilities. In short, although these three categories are useful to a degree, we must remember that every country presents a set of circumstances peculiar to itself, which in turn affects not only the place of English in the educational system but the motivation, the goals, and the methods of teaching the language as well.

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