

# THE ART OF CHANGE IN ESOL OR HOW TO CREATE AN ELEPHANT

**By Larry E. Smith**

Recently I read of a man who, as a sculptor, creates amazingly lifelike figures of elephants. When asked how he did it, he replied, "I just take a big rock and chip away until I've eliminated everything that doesn't look like an elephant." At first I found his answer merely humorous; perhaps even flippant, but later I began to realize that he had offered a clue for successful change in ESOL.

Many of us in ESOL are not satisfied with our present "state of the art" and desire change. Our professional journals frequently have articles like, "New Directions in Language Learning" and "Let's Change Our Base of Operations." We continue to seek better and more appropriate methods, books, and teacher training techniques. I say "we" because I am a part of this search.

As you are well aware, there are many things we don't know in language learning and language teaching. We don't know how people learn languages—first or second. We don't even know if people who learn more than one language learn them in the same ways. We don't know if all people go through the same stages in language learning—some faster than others—or if each person has his own individual learning strategies. We don't know if one skill (reading, writing, speaking, or listening) should precede another or if they should be taught in some integrated fashion. We aren't sure if we get better results by teaching the language directly or by teaching a subject like math in the language. No doubt, you can give me other examples like these. With all this ignorance, it is little wonder that our profession is in a state of confusion.

Of course experiments have been done and are being done to provide us with clues

to the answers of these questions. Frequently however the results offer us conflicting evidence. I don't mean to imply by this that we need fewer language experiments. We should continue to seek solid empirical evidence as guideposts; however we need not wait until a consensus is reached on these questions before we begin to implement change.

I am suggesting that looking at existing programs with a felt desire for change, we begin by chipping away those things which don't contribute to a good ESOL program. Let me describe a situation. In an Asian secondary school we find the students required to "take" (I didn't say study or learn) English three hours a week. According to the written policy of the school, the main objectives of English instructions are: 1) To help the learner acquire the skill to communicate in English, orally and in writing. 2) To help the learner acquire the skill to read for information and enjoyment. 3) To enable him to use English in commerce and industry. 4) To provide him a window to the English speaking world. There are between 45-50 students in each class.

The teachers are like teachers everywhere; some are competent, others are not. Most of them cannot carry on a conversation in English with a native speaker except of the most superficial kind. i. e., "Where do you live? How many brothers and sisters do you have? What is your favorite sport? Can you use chopsticks?" They have difficulty in understanding these same questions if asked by a native speaker because their opportunity for such an exchange is so limited. Most teachers cannot write a descriptive essay or a friendly letter in English with any originality. They can read and translate. Traditional grammar rules seem second nature and their penmanship is almost always outstanding. Most

of them have never left their country and very few read novels, short stories, or plays in English for pleasure. They frequently watch American and British movies and some of them listen to the Voice of America and BBC news broadcasts.

Like the teachers, the textbooks are many and varied. Some are very old and were used by the teachers when they were students. Others are experimental in nature. Some seem to stress speaking (pronunciation and dialog memorization) while others tell of the life of Mark Twain and Sir Walter Raleigh with exercises for translation. The students in the first year classes seem fairly interested while the seniors are quite evidently bored. Classroom activities consist of "Repeat after me." "Translate the passage for us to hear." "Copy these sentences in your notebooks." and "Write your paragraph on the board." Grammar rules and literary excellence are often discussed in the native language. When asked why they are teaching English or what the objectives are for a semester or

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a particular class, most teachers act as if those are irrelevant questions. The students know why they are there. English is required and in order to pass the college entrance examination they must be able to read and translate as well as know some rather esoteric grammar rules. Of course some students realize that 85% of them will not pass the examination and would rather be doing almost anything else than studying English.

In a situation like this, where do we begin the chipping process? The analogy of the elephant's creation from a rock is pretty good here. The task is enormous. The resistance for change is hard and solid. If you aren't careful, you can damage the entire piece of work. We shouldn't try and accomplish too much with each blow. Slowly and with caution the work should begin and continue. It will take patience

and skill. I suggest we begin by chipping away some of the objectives. It's not that they aren't worthy goals but with only three hours a week, they are impossible. We may not be able to erase them from the policy handbook but we can erase them from our minds and thereby ease some of the frustration of never being able to reach our goals. I would certainly delete objective 3) "To enable him to use English in commerce and industry." I would keep objective 1) "To help the learner acquire the skill to communicate in English, orally and in writing," but with modifications. I would "chip" the emphasis on pronunciation since that is a weak area for teachers, accent the need for listening comprehension in communication, chip away at the correctness syndrome for speaking and writing and put a sharper edge on getting one's message across. Objective 2) "To help the learner acquire the skill to read for information and enjoyment," is one I would use to defend "fun in the classroom," as well as an emphasis on the art of taking tests. We would read the newspaper for editorials, advertisements, want ads, and news articles when we "read for information" in addition to office memos and business letters. We would discuss the grammar rules as well as the organizational strategy for each one. For objective 4) "To provide him a window to the English speaking world." I would chip away some of the classroom activities like "Repeat after me." and "Copy this in your notebooks." and replace them with a Dick Via production or a visit to a Saturday matinee followed by a classroom discussion. Popular English and American songs might even be sung and discussed. I'd consistently chip away at the idea that English should be a required subject and that the entrance examination system is the most practical one. I would, however, be extremely careful with these issues because the potential for marring the entire figure is very great.

The effective implementation of change is an art. It is a slow process. The need for change in our profession is urgent and yet because of its immenseness, it is sometimes difficult to know where to begin. I would encourage us, beginning where we are, to chip away those things which we are confident impede us in our English teaching/learning experience.